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A large scale study of the assessment of the social environment of middle and secondary schools: The validity and utility of teachers' ratings of school climate, cultural pluralism, and safety problems for understanding school effects and school improvement ☆, ☆ ☆

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Abstract

Due to changes in state and federal policies, as well as logistical and fiscal limitations, researchers must increasingly rely on teachers' reports of school climate dimensions in order to investigate the developmental impact of these dimensions, and to evaluate efforts to enhance the impact of school environments on the development of young adolescents. Teachers' climate ratings exhibited a robust dimensional structure, high levels of internal consistency, and moderate levels of stability over 1- and 2-year time spans. Teachers' climate ratings were also found to be related consistently with students' ratings. In three large-scale samples of schools, teachers' climate ratings were associated significantly

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and consistently with students' performance on standardized tests of academic achievement, and with indexes of their academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional adjustment.

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The developmental ecology of schools has a marked impact on the academic achievement and adjustment of students (Felner & Felner, 1989). A wide array of aspects of the what Moos (1979) has called the “human milieu” or defining features of the social environments of these contexts may contribute to student growth and development including their characteristics as “behavior settings” (Barker, 1978) the levels of social support and connection/belonging that students experience (Shaps, 2003) and the organizational structure of the setting. Although many of these contribute strongly to the adaptation and performance of students, one of those elements of the school context that has appears to have particular import for student adaptation is students' own reports of their experiences of the contexts' social climate (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Fraser, 1985; Trickett & Moos, 1973).

Over more than 3 decades, studies of students' reports of their experience of the social climate of classrooms and schools have yielded consistent results relating both to the defining core dimensions of student experience that appear to be particularly salient to student adaptation, as well with regard to the broad range of cognitive, social, and behavioral impacts to which these student reports of experiences relate. Illustratively, an enduring issue in the measurement of educational climate concerns the nature of the underlying dimensional structure of students' experiences of the social environment. Illustratively, Moos (1979) and his colleagues have proposed that there are three overarching dimensions of social climate (i.e., Relationship, Personal Growth, and System Maintenance and Change dimensions), and that these broader dimensions are comprised of more directly observable and measurable sub-dimensions. Trickett and Moos (1973) developed the Classroom Environment Scale (CES) in an effort to create apply this framework to the educational experiences and outcomes of students. Studies of the dimensional structure of this instrument have yielded inconsistent results particularly in the structure of the sub-dimensions and overarching factors (Trickett & Quinlan, 1979; Manderscheid, Koenig, & Silbergeld, 1977; Nelson, 1984; Schultz, 1979; Walker & Richman, 1984). Most recently, building on this prior work as well that of others (e.g., Eccles & Midgely 1989; Anderman, 2002), Brand and colleagues (Brand, Felner, Seitsinger, Shim & Dumas, 2003) conducted a major exploration and revision of a measure of students' perceptions of the school environment that provides a reliable and more comprehensive assessment of climate dimensions that are related systematically to students' academic, behavioral and socio-emotional adjustment. Building on the work of Moos, Eccles, Midgely, Anderman, Schaps and others, Brand and colleagues (2003) developed an Inventory of School Climate for Students (ISC-S) that provided highly reliable scale scores and showed strong construct and predictive validity at the grade and school levels, across dense samples of over 300 middle and secondary schools. In addition to the prior dimensions of school climate explored, this work also incorporated

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