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Original article

Learning climate, academic competence, and anxiety during the transition to middle school: Parental attachment as a protective factor

Climat d'apprentissage, compétence scolaire et anxiété pendant la transition primaire-secondaire : l'attachement parental comme facteur de protection

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – The contribution of the learning climate and attachment security to students' academic competence and anxiety symptoms during the middle school transition has not been examined.

Objectives. – The main purpose of this prospective study was to examine the complementary contributions of these two contextual determinants. A second goal was to test the moderating effect of attachment security perceived by students in the relationship between the learning climate and both outcomes (academic competence, anxiety symptoms).

Method and results. – Participants were 627 students in Grade 6 (54% girls). Latent structural modeling analysis revealed that a mastery climate predicted higher levels of perceived academic competence perceived in the first year of middle school, although attachment security to the mother in Grade 6 predicted perceived academic competence and anxiety symptoms in the first year of middle school. A moderating effect was found, in which greater attachment security to the mother appeared to lessen the relationship between a performance climate and anxiety symptoms during the middle school transition.

Conclusion. – The results suggest that attachment security to the mother predicts perceived academic competence and anxiety symptoms during the middle school transition. Additionally, attachment security to the mother can moderate the potentially harmful effects of a learning climate emphasizing social comparison and performance on anxiety.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – La contribution du climat d'apprentissage perçu et de la perception de la sécurité d'attachement à la mère sur les perceptions de compétence scolaire et les symptômes anxieux durant la transition au secondaire n'avait pas encore été examinée.

Objectifs. – Cette étude prospective visait à examiner la contribution complémentaire de ces deux déterminants contextuels. L'effet modérateur de la sécurité d'attachement sur la relation entre le climat d'apprentissage et les perceptions de compétence et symptômes d'anxiété a aussi été exploré.

Méthodologie et résultats. – Un total de 627 élèves entre 11 et 12 ans (54 % filles) ont participé à cette étude. Les résultats des analyses en structure latente ont révélé que le climat de maîtrise augmente les perceptions de compétence scolaire en première secondaire, alors que la sécurité d'attachement à la mère en 6^e année prédit les perceptions de compétence scolaire et les symptômes d'anxiété en première secondaire. La présence d'un effet modérateur a également été décelée alors que les perceptions d'un climat d'apprentissage axé sur la performance augmentent l'anxiété durant le passage vers le secondaire, tout spécialement chez les élèves ayant perçu moins de sécurité dans la relation d'attachement avec la mère.

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Conclusion. – Ces résultats suggèrent que la sécurité d'attachement prédit les perceptions de compétence scolaire et les symptômes d'anxiété en période de transition scolaire, en plus d'atténuer les effets potentiellement néfastes d'un climat d'apprentissage centré sur la comparaison sociale et la valorisation des élèves plus performants sur l'anxiété.

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At the beginning of each school year, many young adolescents take an important step along their academic journey by entering middle school. In the province of Quebec (Canada), this step occurs after six years in the secure and familiar environment of elementary school. After these six years, young adolescents are introduced to a new world, called secondary school, where students perceive more pressure to succeed and adapt to school expectations, teaching practices, and social relationships (Duchesne, Ratelle, & Roy, 2012). These new conditions following the transition could influence the quality of students' adaptation (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Supporting school adaptation is essential to foster success. Studies indicate that school adaptation is a function of various personal and contextual resources. Two personal factors merit particular attention for preventing school adaptation problems during the transition to middle school: perceived academic competence (Wigfield, Byrnes, & Eccles, 2006) and anxiety (Roeser & Eccles, 1998). Several studies have indicated that students who perceive themselves as having low academic competence and feel more anxious tend to have lower motivation, engagement, and achievement (Duchesne, Ratelle, & Feng, 2014; Duchesne, Vitaro, Larose, & Tremblay, 2008; Guay, Marsh, & Boivin, 2003; Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2005).

School adaptation might also be influenced by two important social contexts stemming from the school and family environments (Gonida, Voulala, & Kiosseoglou, 2009; Xia, Fosco, & Feinberg, 2016). In this regard, the classroom learning climate and attachment security to parents are often considered as major sources of influence on academic competence and anxiety (Doyle & Markiewicz, 2005; Duchesne, Ratelle, Poitras, & Drouin, 2009; Givens Rolland, 2012). However, studies on these two contextual determinants of academic competence and anxiety have several limitations. First, the relative contributions of the learning climate and parental attachment in the context of the transition to middle school has yet to be examined. Second, assuming that these two variables make independent contributions, the relative magnitude of these contributions remains unknown. And third, we cannot exclude the possibility that the learning climate and attachment security interact in predicting changes in perceived academic competence and anxiety symptoms during the transition to middle school. This interactive effect remains untested.

To fill this gap in the literature, this prospective study had two objectives. The first was to examine the complementary contributions of attachment security to the mother in Grade 6 and the learning climate (i.e., mastery or performance climate classroom), in the first year of middle school, in predicting changes in perceived academic competence and anxiety symptom across the transition to high school. The second was to explore the moderating effect of attachment security and the learning climate on these two outcomes.

1. Perceived academic competence and anxiety in the transition to middle school

Perceived academic competence and anxiety symptoms are two personal characteristics well established in the field of motivation (Duchesne & Ratelle, 2010; Freiberger, Steinmayr, & Spinath, 2012; Ley & Young, 2001). Perceived academic competence refers

to students' subjective evaluations of their ability to perform and their beliefs about resources they need to do well (Bandura, 1986; Bouffard, Marcoux, Vezeau, & Bordeleau, 2003). As for anxiety, it is defined as a reaction to a real or anticipated threat, expressed via a complex system of behaviors cognitions, emotions, and physiological symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Weissman, Antinoro, & Chu, 2009). Studies have shown that perceived academic competence (or analogous constructs) and anxiety symptoms are closely related to the school experience. For instance, perceived academic competence has been associated with a stronger endorsement of mastery-approach goals (Elliot & Church, 1997; Maltais, Duchesne, Ratelle, & Feng, 2015; Poulin, Duchesne, & Ratelle, 2010) and, in certain cases, with the endorsement of performance-approach goals (Elliot & Church, 1997; Linnenbrink, 2005). On the other hand, anxiety has been positively associated with endorsing performance-avoidance goals (Duchesne et al., 2014; Elliot & Church, 1997; Linnenbrink, 2005; Maltais et al., 2015) and negatively with academic engagement, perseverance, and achievement (Duchesne et al., 2014; Guay et al., 2003; Marsh et al., 2005; Shen & Tam, 2008).

Other studies have considered changes in perceptions of academic competence and anxiety symptoms (or negative emotions) in the transition to middle school. Many found that perceived academic competence declined between the end of elementary school and the beginning of middle school (Eccles et al., 1989; Wigfield et al., 2006; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Others found greater stress and emotional problems during this period (Duchesne & Ratelle, 2014; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Urdan & Midgley, 2003). Some studies corroborate the notion that early adolescence is a period when anxiety symptoms could first appear (Hale, Raaijmakers, Muris, Van Hoof, & Meeus, 2008; Jones, 2013). In sum, research suggests that many youths are at risk for motivational (lower perceived academic competence) and emotional problems (greater anxiety symptoms) in early adolescence.

Studies that have examined positive and negative predictors of motivation and emotional well-being in young adolescents have identified two categories of contextual factors that must be taken into account: learning climate (Ames, 1992; Anderman & Patrick, 2012) and the parent-adolescent relationship (Epstein, 1989; Grolnick, Kurovski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2001). Surprisingly, there is very little information on the relative contribution of these two relational contexts. In line with past research (Duchesne, Ratelle, Larose, & Guay, 2007; Friedel, Cortina, Turner, & Midgley, 2007; Gonida, Voulala, & Kiosseoglou, 2009), we expect that taking into account both contexts will yield a deeper understanding of the role of the learning climate and parental attachment security in predicting perceived academic competence and anxiety symptoms. Such knowledge will provide the basis of preventive measures to be implemented in the transition to middle school by schools and families.

2. Learning climate, perceived academic competence, and anxiety symptoms

Achievement goal theory (AGT; Anderman & Patrick, 2012; Elliot, 2005) proposes a conceptualization of the learning climate in which learning is achieved through a mastery or performance goal

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