



# Promoting an equitable and supportive school climate in high schools: The role of school organizational health and staff burnout

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## ABSTRACT

In response to persistent racial disparities in academic and behavioral outcomes between Black and White students, equitable school climate has drawn attention as a potential target for school reform. This study examined differences in Black and White students' experiences of school climate and explored whether indicators of school organizational health and staff burnout moderated differences in students' school experiences by race. Utilizing hierarchical linear modeling with a sample of 18,397 Black students ( $n = 6228$ ) and White students ( $n = 12,169$ ) and 2391 school staff in 53 schools, we found a consistent pattern of racial inequalities, such that Black students reported less positive experiences than White students across three indicators of school climate (caring  $\gamma = -0.08, p < .001$ ; equity  $\gamma = -0.05, p = .007$ ; and engagement  $\gamma = -0.05, p < .001$ ). In addition, we found significant, positive associations between aggregated staff-report of school organizational health and student-reported school climate (e.g., staff affiliation and student-perceived equity,  $\gamma = 0.07, p < .001$ ). Surprisingly, a number of school organizational health indicators were more strongly associated with positive perceptions of school climate among White students than Black students, translating into greater racial disparities in perceived school climate at schools with greater organizational health (e.g., supportive leadership by race on student-perceived engagement,  $\gamma = -0.03, p = .042$ ). We also found negative associations between staff-reported burnout and students' experience of equity, such that the racial gap was smaller in schools with high ratings of burnout ( $\gamma = 0.04, p = .002$ ). These findings have implications for educators and education researchers interested in promoting school social contexts that equitably support student engagement and success.

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## 1. Introduction

Attention to the issue of equitable school climate has emerged as educators endeavor to improve school climate for all students (Ross, 2013). In fact, school equity (i.e., respect for diversity, equitable treatment, and cultural inclusion) is considered a central dimension within several school climate frameworks (e.g., National School Climate Council (e.g., Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009); United States Department of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools (e.g., Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Lindstrom Johnson, 2014)). Equitable school climate may also be understood as the equitable distribution of students' experience of supportive

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school climate as a resource across diverse student groups. Relatively limited research has examined racial inequality in students' experience of supportive school climate; however, the available research suggests that Black students may experience less supportive relationships, perceive less equitable treatment, and feel less engaged at school relative to their White peers (Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Mattison & Aber, 2007).

One factor that may contribute to racial inequality in students' experience of school climate is school organizational health, which is defined as the capacity of schools to successfully adapt to a continually changing environment and new challenges (Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991; Miles, 1965). Several studies have examined the influence of school organizational health on teacher stress, job satisfaction, and teacher efficacy (Bevans, Bradshaw, Miech, & Leaf, 2007; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Mehta, Atkins, & Frazier, 2013) as well as on teachers' perceptions of students' behavior and teachers' use of disciplinary sanctions (Pas & Bradshaw, 2013; Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012). Unfortunately, few studies have examined the association between school organizational health and racial inequalities in students' school experiences.

The current study builds upon the school climate literature by examining whether staff perceptions of school organizational health and burnout differentially influence Black relative to White students' experience of school climate. We hypothesized that significant racial gaps would be found in student report of school climate, such that Black students would report lower ratings of supportive school climate relative to White students and that school organizational health and staff burnout would moderate these racial inequalities. Specifically, we expected school organizational health to be associated with fewer racial inequalities and staff burnout to be associated with greater inequalities. The issue of equitable school climate has implications for educational policies and programs aiming to enhance student engagement and reduce racial disparities in Black students' academic, social–emotional, and disciplinary outcomes at school (Aud et al., 2012; Latzman et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2011). Therefore, it is critical that educators uncover factors that could help to promote equitable school climate.

### 1.1. School climate and racial disparities in student engagement

Student engagement has been conceptualized as a multidimensional outcome of students' dynamic, reciprocal interactions within supportive relationships and social contexts that drive motivation (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Central to this concept of engagement is its focus on process; theory suggests that when students' core psychological needs are met by supportive school climates, students will in turn engage productively in school activities, but if their basic needs are unmet, students will either withdraw or act out (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). In fact, research confirms that schools with supportive climates tend to have more motivated students (Eccles et al., 1993), less student discipline problems (Cohen & Geier, 2010), and higher social–emotional wellbeing (Ruus et al., 2007; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006). Applying a disparities framework (Dankwa-Mullan et al., 2010) to this process, it follows that the inequitable distribution of students' experience of support at school could lead to disparities in student engagement and related behavioral and social–emotional outcomes. Indeed, research suggests not only that Black youth report lower ratings of support and connectedness relative to other marginalized groups (Furlong, O'Brennan, & You, 2011; Hughes & Kwok, 2007) but also that lower levels of support among Black students may contribute to racial disparities in engagement (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, submitted for publication).

Supportive relationships with adults at school may be particularly important for Black youth (Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007), who must navigate divergent cultural and ecological terrain between school, home, and neighborhood and cope with experiences of prejudice and differential treatment at school (Gay, 2002). Consistent, extensive evidence documenting racial gaps in school discipline exposure among Black youth in particular (e.g., Porowski, O'Conner, & Passa, 2014; Skiba et al., 2011) indicates that Black youth may experience differential treatment by school personnel. Furthermore, research suggests that perceptions of differential treatment and discrimination by school staff among Black youth may contribute to poor academic and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Bogart et al., 2013; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), including deterring student engagement (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012; Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009). Experiences of discrimination in the high school context during early and middle adolescence among Black youth may be particularly harmful, as this a key period when young people are beginning to develop their sense of racial identity (Phinney, 1989; Seaton, Yip, & Sellers, 2009). Conversely, research on school climate suggests that students' perceptions of equitable treatment and cultural inclusiveness at school may positively influence students' affective and academic engagement (Debnam, Lindstrom Johnson, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2014).

### 1.2. School organizational health, staff burnout, and racial inequity

An important consideration regarding racial inequality in students' experience of school climate is school organizational health. Considered a multidimensional construct, school organizational health often is considered to include staff perceptions of collegial leadership, trusting and supportive relationships between coworkers (Hoy et al., 1991; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Mehta et al., 2013), and personal connectedness to the school (O'Brennan, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2014). However, staff burnout is inversely associated with school organizational health (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer, 2011). Consistent with research linking school organizational health with lower teacher stress, elevated efficacy, and more positive perceptions of students (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Mehta et al., 2013; Pas & Bradshaw, 2013), it seems reasonable that school organizational health would also enhance staff capacity to effectively navigate ecological and cultural differences to support Black students. Thus, it follows that gaps would be smaller in schools with high, as compared to low, school organizational health, and larger in schools with high burnout. In the sections that follow, we more closely consider three indicators related to school organizational health (i.e., personal

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