Examining classroom influences on student perceptions of school climate: The role of classroom management and exclusionary discipline strategies ☆

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ABSTRACT

There is growing emphasis on the use of positive behavior supports rather than exclusionary discipline strategies to promote a positive classroom environment. Yet, there has been limited research examining the association between these two different approaches to classroom management and students' perceptions of school climate. Data from 1902 students within 93 classrooms that were nested within 37 elementary schools were examined using multilevel structural equation modeling procedures to investigate the association between two different classroom management strategies (i.e., exclusionary discipline strategies and the use of positive behavior supports) and student ratings of school climate (i.e., fairness, order and discipline, student–teacher relationship, and academic motivation). The analyses indicated that greater use of exclusionary discipline strategies was associated with lower order and discipline scores, whereas greater use of classroom-based positive behavior supports was associated with higher scores on order and discipline, fairness, and student–teacher relationship. These findings suggest that pre-service training and professional development activities should promote teachers' use of positive behavior support strategies and encourage reduced reliance on exclusionary discipline strategies in order to enhance the school climate and conditions for learning.

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1. Introduction

Schools are charged with providing a safe and supportive environment for learning (Epstein et al., 2008). Consequently, there is increasing interest in factors associated with positive school climate and conditions for learning. One factor that has been shown to influence students' perceptions of school climate is the classroom environment (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). While there has been considerable attention paid to structural aspects of the classroom environment, such as student–teacher ratio (Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003), other aspects of the classroom context may also influence the students' perception of the environment. For example, the way in which the teacher manages the classroom and uses different types of disciplinary strategies, such as office discipline referrals, likely influences students' school climate perceptions. Having an enhanced understanding of classroom factors that influence students' perceptions of climate may inform school improvement initiatives and programs aiming to promote positive outcomes for students and staff.

1.1. Variation in perceptions of school climate

School climate is recognized as a critical element of a successful and effective educational environment (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003). School climate has been defined as shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions

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between students, teachers, and administrators and set the parameters of acceptable behavior and norms for the school (Emmons, Comer, & Haynes, 1996; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997). It is a product of social interactions among students and teachers, is influenced by educational and social values, and has been shown to relate to social situations within classrooms and to the school as a whole. School climate has been linked with academic achievement and performance (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Griffith, 1999), student misconduct, aggression, and behavioral problems (Battistich et al., 1995; Kuperminc et al., 1997; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006; Wilson, 2004), adjustment problems (Kuperminc et al., 1997), and social and personal attitudes (Battistich et al., 1995). Poor perceptions of school climate also have been linked with low student engagement, truancy, school dropout, delinquency, and bullying behaviors (see Bradshaw, O'Brennan, & McNeely, 2008; Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2009; Wilson, 2004).

There is a growing body of research documenting variation in perceptions of school climate by individual-level factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and age. Among students, girls tend to perceive greater consistency and fairness in school rules, whereas minority students tend to report less favorable attitudes toward academics (Battistich et al., 1995; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). Also, it is likely that teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding the school environment would influence their students' attitudes. Extant research indicates that among elementary school teachers, being male or an ethnic minority has been linked with less favorable perceptions of the school environment (Bevans, Bradshaw, Miech, & Leaf, 2007). Similarly, younger teachers, who tend to have less teaching experience, may feel less supported or effective at their job, and therefore may perceive the environment less favorably than their more experienced colleagues (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Koth et al., 2008). Thus far, it is unknown exactly how teachers' perceptions of the environment shape students' attitudes about school climate, but it is important to consider both student and teacher characteristics when assessing school climate.

1.2. Classroom contextual influences

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological theory suggests that factors at multiple levels may influence student perceptions of the school environment. For example, indicators of social disorganization at the school and classroom levels have been inversely related to perceptions of school climate (Bevans et al., 2007; Birnbaum et al., 2003; Bradshaw, Sawyer, et al., 2009; Braham, 2004; Mijanovich & Weitzman, 2003; Mitchell, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2010; Plank, Bradshaw, & Young, 2009). In contrast, several studies have shown that effectively managed classrooms are associated with positive academic performance and fewer behavioral problems (Arbuckle & Little, 2004). Classroom management includes both maintaining control over students through the use of discipline and promoting positive environments that foster academic learning and appropriate behavior (Little & Akin-Little, 2008). Classroom management is a common target for classroom-based programs aiming to increase positive student behavior and academic performance (Epstein et al., 2008), but it may also improve students' perceptions of the climate.

Even teachers in well-managed classrooms occasionally have to address student discipline problems. A common disciplinary strategy employed by teachers is the use of exclusionary discipline strategies, such as office discipline referrals (ODRs) or suspensions. ODRs are events in which a staff member observes a student violating a school rule and submits documentation to the administrative leadership, who then delivers a consequence (Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004; Pas, Bradshaw, & Mitchell, 2011). Exclusionary discipline strategies typically include the immediate removal of the student from the classroom, as the student is typically sent to the principal's office in an effort to try to stem the problem behavior. As such, the use of this exclusionary discipline strategy is likely perceived as punitive by students; however, some students may be rewarded by such practices if they are motivated to avoid or escape from the classroom (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). In fact, some research suggests that students attribute their peers' misbehavior to their teachers' usage of punitive strategies (Miller, Ferguson, & Byrne, 2000). In addition, students in classrooms with more misbehavior reported more punitive and aggressive discipline strategies (Lewis, 2001), which suggests an escalating feedback loop between student misbehavior and their teachers' punitive or exclusionary discipline strategies.

The use of exclusionary disciplinary strategies is often associated with confrontational student–teacher interactions, which could promote more negative views of school climate for all students. For example, Nelson and Roberts (2000) found that an average of four negative confrontations occurred between the student and teacher prior to the student receiving an ODR and that these confrontations could continue as a consequence of making an ODR. Similarly, a cross-cultural study by Lewis, Romi, Qui, and Katz (2005) documented a significant association between the teachers' use of "coercive" discipline strategies and students' misbehavior. Students who engaged in higher levels of disruption and problem behavior perceived their teachers' disciplinary behavior to be more aggressive. It appears that students' provocative behavior evoked higher levels of anger in their teachers, which resulted in teachers' use of reactive and aggressive disciplinary strategies. This finding suggests that teachers' use of reactive and exclusionary discipline strategies could negatively impact students' perceptions of their relationship with the teacher and the classroom context. Research also suggests that exclusionary discipline strategies may only temporarily reduce problem behaviors, but they do not fully alleviate the problematic behavior or prevent the onset of other behavior problems (Sugai & Horner, 2006; Sugai, Todd, & Horner, 2000).

Consequently, there has been a shift from the use of exclusionary discipline strategies to the use of positive, proactive classroom management strategies, such as establishing consistent behavioral expectations and reinforcing those expectations (Epstein et al., 2008). Classroom-based strategies that actively teach and reward positive behavioral expectations have been shown to be effective at reducing behavior problems, and in turn, may improve the classroom climate (Sugai et al., 1999). However, additional research is needed to examine how positive classroom management strategies and reduced reliance on exclusionary discipline strategies relate to students' perception of the school climate. Such research may identify a potential mechanism by which positive behavior support and the use of exclusionary discipline strategies influence school climate.