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Title: The Influence of Principal Leadership and School Context on Students' Perceptions of School Connectedness

Text:

An important but often overlooked factor in children's behavioral and academic outcomes is their social connectedness with adults at school. Prior research indicates that social connections to teachers can protect against academic problems (Catalano et al., 2004) and health compromising behaviors (McNeely et al., 2002; Blum et al., 2005). Although not widely studied, organizational theory suggests that students' perceptions of school connectedness may be influenced by interactions between principals and teachers, as well as among teachers. More specifically, the way in which teachers are treated by their administrators or other teachers may indirectly influence the way in which teachers interact with their students. The current study examined the extent to which the quality of the working relationships among teachers and with principals in addition to student-student relationships and student gender, race/ethnicity, and age are associated with student perceptions of student-teacher interactions. Having an enhanced understanding of the organizational factors influencing student perceptions of connectedness can guide school improvement and universal prevention efforts. We examined school climate data from 1,928 fifth graders and organizational health data from 95 of their classroom teachers. Multilevel path analysis revealed that female students rated their interactions with teachers more favorably ($B=3.50, p<.01$), and that student-student interactions were positively associated with student-teacher ratings ($B=.37, p<.001$). In contrast, being older ($B=-2.30, p<.01$) and African-American ($B=-6.23, p<.001$) were associated with lower ratings of student-teacher interactions, which suggests that teachers should reach out more to these students to promote more positive student-teacher interactions. We also found that teacher-reported collegial leadership (i.e., relationships between principals and teachers) had a positive effect on student reports of student-teacher relationships ($B = 3.95, p<.01$), which suggests that teachers' perceptions of their principal's support may influence the quality of their own interactions with their students. It was somewhat surprising that students' perceptions of connectedness appeared to be more influenced by the school principals, who presumably have an indirect influence on daily student interactions, than the more proximal influences of teacher-teacher relationships. These findings highlight the potential significance of targeting the principals' interactions with teachers as an avenue for improving students' perceptions of connectedness, as well as the overall health and climate of the school. Additional implications for prevention research and programming will be discussed.

Theme Groups: 1 Key social relationships

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