School Psychology Review
1999, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 365-377

Learning in Urban Blight: School Climate and Its Effect on the School Performance of Urban, Minority, Low-Income Children

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between school climate and children's academic and social development in the early elementary school years, controlling for maternal education and family resources, and to determine whether factors underlying school climate influence those outcomes. Data were gathered longitudinally from the kindergarten through second-grade years. Children and families participating in the study were low-income, minority, and living in chronically poor urban neighborhoods. Both parent and teacher perspectives of children's school functioning were used with parents reporting on school adjustment and teachers reporting on academic competence, social skills, and problem behaviors in the classroom. Achievement in reading and mathematics were measured with standardized tests. Results indicate that overall school climate and the teacher-student relationship significantly predict school adjustment. Underlying school climate factors also significantly predict social skills in first and second grades and mathematics and reading achievement scores in first grade.

Problems in school climate are prevalent in urban, low-income districts and are concomitant with problems in student achievement and socialization. Children who attend urban schools in low-income areas consistently show the lowest academic achievement and the poorest social skills development in the country, and the schools they attend have the lowest ratings of school climate (Bernstein, 1992). This condition has afflicted the urban centers of this country's large manufacturing cities for generations. For instance, a survey conducted by Columbia Teachers College in 1935 for a large northeastern city school board reported findings relevant for many urban schools today: bathrooms "indescribably unclean," school buildings in "significant decline," reading and mathematics taught in "an exceedingly formal and isolated manner" (p. 69), with school personnel less educationally qualified and frequently absent (as cited in Anyon, 1997). Yet, much of the research accomplished to date of the problems of achievement for poor, urban children has focused upon the influence of their families; for instance, on family-related issues such as non-optimal parenting (Pianta, Smith, & Reeve, 1991; Steinberg, Elman, & Mounts, 1989), social isolation (Roggman, Moe, Hart, & Forthun, 1994), or unemployment (Jackson, 1994; McLoyd, Jayaratne, Cebello, & Borquez, 1994).

The literature certainly supports the assertion that risks and protections provided by the family context influence the development of children and that the chronically poor urban environment wreaks havoc on families' abilities to support their children, physically and psychologically (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, Liaw, & Duncan, 1995; McLoyd, 1990; Sameroff & Seifer, 1983). However, responsibility for teaching children in urban environments cannot be assigned to families, to children, or to schools individually because families, children and schools combined comprise a system of multiply determined interactions with each entity influencing the others (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). This systems model precludes assigning blame to one entity

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for the educational outcomes of children and allows the understanding of a distribution of risks and protections contributing to children's school performance across all entities.

It becomes important to understand those aspects of school environments that support or hinder children's development independent of the effects of the family context. Schools, too, provide both protection and risk for children's development. Especially for urban children from chronically poor families, the school environment may be an even more important context for development when the toll of poverty upon the family context is considered. Chronic poverty, however, exacts a toll upon schools, too.

The problems of chronically poor school districts are complex and intractable. The broader issues of poverty in our urban communities negatively affect both students and schools; the direction of their influence (from community to school, school to student, student to school) is multidirectional. However, it has been shown that as school staff take steps to improve the climate of the school, the academic and social outcomes for children improve (Edwards, 1993; Killin & Williams, 1995). School climate, then, is an important determinant of a child's school success. School success is an important precursor to success in life, especially for children growing up in urban poverty where few avenues for success are available.

The term "school climate" is defined differently by different researchers, who sometimes use it as an umbrella term to describe the extent to which discipline problems affect a school. Sometimes the term refers to psychological factors in the school context affecting student learning and general well-being. Other times it refers to school management issues that influence staff attitudes and effectiveness. The current study defines school climate comprehensively as perceptions of the physical and psychological school environment, including relationships among and between administration, teachers, parents, students and the community at large; instructional and extracurricular management; the condition of the school building and grounds; and the encouragement of the development of academic and social values among students (Kelley et al., 1986). The measurement of these aspects of school climate represent an inclusive understanding of the concepts because discipline, psychological well-being, and school management are inherent in the relationships between administration, teachers, parents and students. The purpose of this article is to determine if school climate as defined is related to children's academic and social development.

There is a dearth of research about the influence of an overall measure of school climate on children's social and academic outcomes. Some studies, however, indicate that certain aspects of school climate affect children's school achievement; for instance, teacher perceptions of schools as work environments (Moos, 1987), aggregate student characteristics (Moos & Trickett, 1979), teacher expectations of the students and school resources (Entwistle & Hayduk, 1988), educational theory and curriculum (Ross & Smith, 1994), school-based management techniques (Edwards, 1993), and faculty trust (Tarter, Sabo, & Hoy, 1995). It stands to reason that factors underlying school climate impact children and that some factors have more impact than others. However defined, school climate is an aggregate of many variables that interact in multiple and complex ways to impact child development (Reynolds, 1989).

The current study will specifically address the relationship between school climate and children's school performance by using a parental rating of school climate and examining its effect on children's outcome measures. School climate is operationalized by the parental opinion of the school, which defines the family-level rating of the school; it is not an objective rating. Children's school adjustment is rated by the parent and children's social skills and academic competence are rated by the classroom teacher to accommodate for different perspectives on the children's school functioning. Achievement scores are direct assessments of children's achievement assessed with a standardized measure. Moreover, these analyses will address this issue longitudinally from the kindergarten year through the second-grade year.

School climate is a potential risk to children's optimal development and would be expected to interact with other risks found in an urban, low-income environment to impact children's outcomes. This study will consider the effect of the interaction of risk factors from the family context such as parental education and family resources with school climate and the factors underlying school climate on children's school outcomes.

The objectives of this study are summarized by the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between the parents' perception of school climate and children's academic and social outcomes?
2. How much of the variance in children's outcomes can be attributed to school climate, controlling for other important family-related factors?
3. How does this relationship change during the first three years of elementary school?
4. Are there specific aspects of perceived school climate that relate to children's outcomes?
5. Does the relationship of these factors to children's outcomes change during the first three years of elementary school?

Method

Participants

The participants are all families of children who attended Head Start for their preschool year. These families and children are being followed by a local site of the National Head Start/Public Schools Transition Demonstration Project. Data were collected during the spring of each school year. The kindergarten year sample size was 189. Due to attrition, the sample size for the first-grade year was 172 and for the second-grade year was 152. Approximately 80% of the children were African American, 18% were Hispanic, and 2% were Caucasian. The research setting was a northeastern urban center with a population of approximately 80,000.

Approximately 40% of the parents reported educational attainment of a high school diploma, GED, or better. Just more than 30% of the parents responding to the interview were employed. Almost 40% of the children lived in a family structure in which their mothers were single heads of households.

Data Gathering

All of the measures administered to the families were incorporated into one Family Interview Questionnaire, which was used for data gathering for the larger project. The family interview was conducted at a Head Start office or at the family's home during the early to late spring of each year. Interviewers were trained by the National Project staff to administer the measures using standardized procedures, and all interviewers were retrained yearly. The Family Interview Questionnaire could be completed in about 45 minutes. Each family received $20.00 as reimbursement for any expenses incurred.

The children attended 15 schools within the city limits and were placed within 40 different classrooms during the kindergarten year. During the second-grade year the children were attending schools in 60 different classrooms. Data gathered from the children's teachers were taken from a measure incorporated into a teacher questionnaire. Teachers were not reimbursed.

Measures

School climate, the independent variable, is measured with the parent form of the School Climate Survey (Modified) Form A (Kelley et al., 1986), which indicates parental opinions about nine dimensions of school climate. The measure uses 46 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). This is a well-known measure used in many school districts around the country to provide feedback to administrators as they plan and attempt school improvement. However, there have been no studies linking this measure of parental perceptions of school climate to actual objective measures of school environments.

A factor analysis on the current sample second-grade data using principal components analysis and varimax rotation indicated a 5-factor solution. The five factors are comparable to the following original subscales: Teacher/Student Relationships, Administration, Security and Maintenance, Student Academic Orientation, Parent and Community-School Relationships. These five factors will be used in the current set of analyses. Items were removed due to insufficient loadings or loadings greater than .30 on more than one factor. Factor loadings greater than 35 are required for item inclusion.

To determine whether parents' perceptions of school climate are different from teachers' perceptions, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted on school climate data from the first-grade year. Results indicate that parents' and teachers' perceptions of school climate do not differ, $t(235) = -1.4$, $p < .17$; parents $M = 3.87$, $SD = .46$, teachers $M = 3.77$, $SD = .58$. To further determine whether or not parents' and teachers' perceptions of school climate differ within a school, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted by school. After dropping two schools with only one or two participants, school group totals were small (between 8 and 32 participants

per school), making the results tenuous. However, results indicate that of the 13 schools tested, parents' and teachers' perceptions of school climate were significantly different at only three of the schools, with parents scoring higher at those three schools: School A, $t(21) = 4.26, p < .000$, parents $M = 4.06$, $SD = .45$, teachers $M = 3.19$, $SD = .50$; School B, $t(16) = 3.67, p < .002$, parents $M = 4.15$, $SD = .38$, teachers $M = 3.48$, $SD = .39$; and School C, $t(16) = 3.12, p < .01$, parents $M = 3.87$, $SD = .38$, teachers $M = 3.33$, $SD = .34$.

Cronbach's alpha as an indicator of internal consistency for the overall survey, taken from current sample data and using only the 25 items included in the five factors, are as follows: .92 for kindergarten; .95 for first grade; .90 for second grade. Factor alphas range from .72 to .88 for kindergarten, .81 to .90 for first grade and .85 to .88 for second grade. (See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and Table 2 for items and loadings on the factors.)

Dependent variables include school adjustment as rated by the parent, academic competence and social skills as rated by the teacher, and children's achievement scores on standardized tests administered by trained research staff. Your Child's Adjustment to School (Reid & Landesman, 1988) measures a parent's perception of the child's academic and social adjustment to the school experience. The questionnaire includes 8 items on a 10-point Likert scale (0 = not much, 10 = a lot). Cronbach's alphas for kindergarten through second grade range from .81 to .83.

The Social Skills Rating System, Teacher Form (SSRS-T; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) measures a teacher's perception of the child's social skills development in the classroom in addition to the academic competence of the child. Additionally, the Problem Behaviors subscale of the SSRS-T was presented for the first time in second grade, and data from this subscale will be used. The social skills subscale includes 30 items on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often). The academic competence subscale includes 9 items on a 5-point Likert

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for School Climate Variables

	M	*SD*
Kindergarten (*N* = 189)		
Overall School Climate	3.96	.48
Teacher/Student Relationships	3.99	.56
Administration	3.87	.67
Security and Maintenance	3.93	.64
Student Academic Orientation	4.10	.51
Parent-Community and School Relationships	3.68	.87
First grade (*N* = 172)		
Overall School Climate	3.97	.50
Teacher/Student Relationships	3.98	.59
Administration	3.93	.75
Security and Maintenance	3.97	.70
Student Academic Orientation	4.10	.54
Parent-Community and School Relationships	3.69	.79
Second grade (*N* = 152)		
Overall School Climate	3.92	.43
Teacher/Student Relationships	3.90	.54
Administration	3.90	.72
Security and Maintenance	3.95	.67
Student Academic Orientation	4.05	.48
Parent-Community and School Relationships	3.66	.83

Table 2
School Climate Factor Loadings

Teacher/Student Relationships	
Teachers are patient when a student has trouble learning.	.75
Teachers understand and meet the needs of each student.	.70
Teachers are fair to students.	.69
Teachers make extra efforts to help students.	.66
Teachers explain carefully so students can do their work.	.62
Teachers give students the grades they deserve.	.60
Teachers in this school like their students.	.56
Teachers are willing to help students.	.56
Teachers treat each student as an individual.	.51
Teachers in this school are on the side of their students.	.47
Administration	
The administrators in this school are willing to hear student complaints and opinions.	.84
Administrators set a good example by working hard.	.75
Administrators set high standards and let teachers, parents and students know what the standards are.	.75
Administrators in this school talk often to parents and teachers.	.58
Security/Maintenance	
Teachers and other workers feel safe in the school building before and after school.	.81
Students usually feel safe in the school building.	.76
The school building is kept in good repair.	.65
Taking attendance and other tasks do not interfere with classroom learning.	.47
Student Academic Orientation	
In this school, students are interested in learning new things.	.73
Students here understand why they are in school.	.66
Students have a sense of belonging to this school.	.60
Students in this school have fun but also work hard.	.58
Students work hard to complete their school assignments.	.43
Parent and Community-School Relationships	
Community attendance at school meetings and programs is good.	.85
Parents and other members of the community attend school meetings and other activities.	.79
Most people in the community help the school in some way.	.74

scale, which corresponds to quintile rankings of the child's performance in comparison to his or her peers in the classroom (1 = lowest 20%, 5 = highest 20%). Reliabilities from kindergarten through second grade range from .95 to .96 for the social skills subscale and .95 to .97 for academic competence. The Problem Behaviors subscale includes 17 items on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = very often); there are three domains, Internalizing, Externalizing and Hyperactivity. Internalizing includes behaviors that may indicate sadness, loneliness and poor self-esteem; Externalizing includes aggressive behavior and poor temper control; Hyperactivity includes impulsive and excessive behaviors. Reliability for this subscale is .92.

Academic achievement is measured by the Woodcock-Johnson Achievement Tests, Subtests 22-25 (Woodcock & Johnson, 1989) administered individually to participant children by

trained research assistants. Children were tested in small rooms provided by the school and were given stickers for their participation. Two subscales, each assessing mathematics skills and reading, are combined into Broad Reading and Broad Mathematics clusters. The Broad Mathematics cluster includes Calculation and Applied Problems, which assess the ability to use simple counting and calculations to solve practical problems. The Broad Reading cluster includes the Letter-Word Identification and Passage Comprehension subtests. Standard scores are used in the following analyses. Reliabilities for internal consistency are calculated using Spearman-Brown split-half formula reported by age group as follows: for Broad Reading, the coefficients are .98 for 6-year-olds and .95 for 9-year-olds; for Broad Mathematics, the coefficients are .94 for both 6- and 9-year-olds.

One problem with the use of same source data for both independent and dependent variables is that perceptions may be related, and direction of effect is not clear. For instance, parents may perceive that the school has a better climate because their children are performing well in school. Use of temporal variables can address this problem, but more than two data points still do not insure direction of effect. To address this concern, a hierarchical linear regression analysis was conducted with second-grade overall school climate regressed onto second grade school adjustment, with kindergarten school adjustment controlled for by entering it in the first block, while the second-grade overall school climate score is entered in a second block. Results indicate that, even after controlling for kindergarten school adjustment, the effects of parents' perceptions of second-grade overall school climate still makes a significant unique contribution to children's school adjustment in the second grade, with the amount of variance explained increasing from 11% to 18% with the addition of the overall school climate variable, Adj $R^2 = .17$, $F(2,129) = 14.6$, $p < .000$, K school adjustment $\beta = .30$, $p < .000$; second-grade school climate $\beta = .27$ $p < .001$.

Other Measures

The following measures, presented to the families during the child's kindergarten year, contributed data for use in multiple regression analyses: Demographic Assessment (CIVITAN, 1990), a measure of parental education taken from this family demographics questionnaire; and Family Resource Scale (Dunst & Leet, 1987), a sum score representing family resources in terms of money, time and personal energy.

Results

Intercorrelations between school climate factors are presented in Table 3. Although there is no universal agreement on the degree to which intercorrelation between independent variables becomes a problem, intercorrelation between independent variables tends to reduce the statistical significance of the relationship of the independent variables to a criterion variable (Licht, 1995). These intercorrelations are higher than desired, but not critically so. Additionally, there is a weakening trend in the intercorrelations from kindergarten to second grade.

Correlational Analyses

Correlational analyses on the means of the overall school climate measure and school climate factors with child outcome measures by year are listed in Table 4.

Overall school climate is related to parents' rating of their children's school adjustment for all three years (kindergarten $r = .24$, $p < .000$; first grade $r = .38$ $p < .000$; second grade $r = .33$, $p < .000$). Four of the five factors contribute to this relationship for kindergarten and first grade (excluding the Parent and Community-School Relationship factor), while the Security/Maintenance factor also drops out in second grade.

Overall school climate is not significantly related to the kindergarten or second-grade teachers' rating of children's academic competence, however the Teacher/Student Relationship is significantly related for all three years (kindergarten $r = .18$, $p < .03$; first grade $r = .19$, $p < .04$; second grade $r = .19$, $p < .05$). Overall school climate is moderately correlated to first-grade academic competence scores ($r = .19$, $p < .04$) with the Teacher/Student Relationship factor contributing to the relationship significantly.

The relationship between overall school climate and children's social skills sum scores in the classroom approaches significance during kindergarten ($r = .15$, $p < .07$) with cooperation being significant ($r = .19$, $p < .02$) and self control approaching significance ($r = .16$, $p < .06$). For first grade, overall school climate is related to the social skills sum score ($r = .20$, $p < .03$) and

Table 3
Intercorrelations Between School Climate Factors

	1	2	3	4	5
Kindergarten					
1 Teacher/Student Relationships		.53**	.44**	.51**	.40**
2 Administration			.51**	.51**	.38**
3 Security/Maintenance				.58**	.51**
4 Student Academic Orientation					.42**
5 Parent and Community-School Relationships					
First grade					
1 Teacher/Student Relationships		40**	.42**	.54**	.33**
2 Administration			.54**	.47**	.42**
3 Security/Maintenance				.56**	.37**
4 Student Academic Orientation					.43**
5 Parent and Community-School Relationships					
Second grade					
1 Teacher/Student Relationships		56**	.29**	.53**	.22**
2 Administration			.33**	.51**	.31**
3 Security/Maintenance				.55**	.30**
4 Student Academic Orientation					.32**
5 Parent and Community-School Relationships					

**$p < .01$

the cooperation ($r = .19, p < .02$) and self control ($r = .18, p < .05$) subscales, while the assertiveness subscale approaches significance. Second-grade school climate does not seem to be related to social skills with the exception of the relationship between assertiveness and Teacher/Student Relationship ($r = .21, p < .03$).

Moderate relationships were found for academic achievement scores and school climate including the first-grade Parent and Community-School Relationship factor and Mathematics ($r = -.19$, $p < .02$) and second-grade Security/Maintenance and Reading ($r = .15$, $p < .07$), approaching significance.

Regression Analyses

Overall School Climate

The effect of overall school climate on children's outcomes, over and above the effects of parental education and family resources, was investigated. Hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted for each year using overall school climate regressed onto child outcomes controlling for parental education and family resources and controlling for kindergarten school adjustment for the first- and second-grade analyses. For each set of analyses, parents' level of education and family resources were controlled by entering them in the first block with kindergarten school adjustment for the first- and second-grade analyses, while the overall school climate score was entered in a second block.

Results indicate that overall school climate uniquely contributes to children's school adjustment for kindergarten through second grade with the amount of variance explained increasing from 8% to 10%. No significant relationships between overall school climate and any other dependent variable were found for any year (see Table 5).

School Climate Factors

A second set of hierarchical linear regressions for each year using the five school climate factors on child outcomes were conducted, controlling for parental education and family resources and kindergarten school adjustment for

Table 4
Correlations Between School Climate and Children's School Outcomes

	School Adjustment	Academic Competence	Social Skills	Achievement Scores
Kindergarten				
School Climate Overall	.24***		.15 Total .19* Cooperation .16 Self control	
Teacher/Student Relationships	**.27*** **	.18*	.18* Total .24***Cooperation .18* Self control	
Administration	.19**			
Security/Maintenance	.13		.15 Cooperation	
Academic Orientation	.17*			
Community Relationships				
First grade				
School Climate Overall	.38***	.19*	.20* Total .18* Cooperation .16 Assertiveness .19* Self control	
Teacher/Student	.43***	.19*		
Administration	.22***	.17	.22* Total .20* Cooperation .21* Self control	
Security/Maintenance	.24***			
Academic Orientation	.31***	.16		
Community Relationships				-.19* Math
Second grade				
School Climate Overall	.33***			
Teacher/Student Relationships	.38***	.19*	.21* Assertiveness	
Administration	.17*			
Security/Maintenance				.15 Reading
Academic Orientation	.28***		.20* Assertiveness	
Community Relationships			-.19* Assertiveness	

*** $p <= .001$; ** $p <= .01$; * $p <= .05$

the first- and second-grade analyses. For each set of analyses, parents' level of education and family resources were controlled by entering them in the first block with kindergarten school adjustment for the first- and second-grade analyses, while the five school climate factors were entered in a second block.

School adjustment. Results indicate that the contribution of the Teacher/Student Relationship and Administration factors to children's school adjustment approach significance in kindergarten. In first grade and second grade, the Teacher/Student Relationship contributes uniquely to children's school adjustment. Results are listed in Table 6.

Academic competence. The regression equation for kindergarten academic competence approaches significance, with the Teacher/Student Relationship predicting teachers' perceptions of academic competence, $F(7,125) = 1.91$, $p < .07$, Adj $R^2 = .05$, R^2 Chg = .07, $\beta = .23$, $p < .04$. First- and second-grade results are not significant.

Social skills. In kindergarten, the regression equation approaches significance, with the

Table 5
Overall School Climate Regressed on Children's School Adjustment

Dependent Variable	β	p	Adj R^2	R^2 Chg
K School Adjustment				
First Block			.01	
Family Resources	.12	.14		
Maternal Education	08	.29		
Second Block			.08	.08
Family Resources	.11	.14		
Maternal Education	.11	.16		
School Climate	.28	.00		
First Grade School Adjustment				
First Block			.31	
Family Resources	.19	.01		
Maternal Education	-.07	.35		
K School Adjustment	.52	.00		
Second Block			.40	.09
Family Resources	.15	.05		
Maternal Education	-.05	.48		
K School Adjustment	.46	.00		
School Climate	.31	.00		
Second Grade School Adjustment				
First Block			.12	
Family Resources	.10	.26		
Maternal Education	-.09	.34		
K School Adjustment	.36	.00		
Second Block			.22	.10
Family Resources	.05	.59		
Maternal Education	-.11	.19		
K School Adjustment	.31	.00		
School Climate	.33	.00		

Teacher/Student Relationship predicting cooperation, $F(7,123)$, $p < .09$, Adj $R^2 = .04$, R^2 Chg = .09, $\beta = .27$, $p < .02$.

For first grade, a negative relationship between the Teacher/Student Relationship factor and assertiveness approaches significance, $F(8,76) = 2.62$, $p < .01$, Adj $R^2 = .13$, R^2 Chg = .07, $\beta = -.23$, $p < .08$, while the Administration factor approaches significance and the Student Academic Orientation factor is related (negatively) to self control, $F(8,76) = 2.11$, $p < .05$, Adj $R^2 = .10$, R^2 Chg = .11, Administration β = .26, $p < .08$ and Student Academic Orientation β = -.31, $p < .04$.

For second grade, the Parent and Community-School Relationship and Urban Children School Communication factor uniquely contributes negatively to assertiveness, $F(8,69) = 3.2$, $p < .00$, Adj $R^2 = .19$, R^2 Chg = .15, $\beta = -.29$, $p < .01$.

No other results for the social skills overall score or subscales were significant.

Academic achievement. In first grade, reading achievement scores are predicted by the Teacher/Student Relationship factor, $F(8,105) = 2.83$, $p < .01$, Adj $R^2 = .11$, R^2 Chg = .07, $\beta = .22$, $p < .06$. No significant results were found for reading in the kindergarten or second-grade years.

Table 6
School Climate Factors Regressed on Children's School Adjustment

Dependent Variable	β	p	Adj R^2	R^2 Chg
K School Adjustment				
First Block			.01	
Family Resources	.11	.16		
Maternal Education	.08	.32		
Second Block			.09	.11
Family Resources	.10	.20		
Maternal Education	.09	.24		
Teacher/Student Relationships	.16	.09		
Administration	.18	.07		
First Grade School Adjustment				
First Block			.32	
Family Resources	.15	.06		
Maternal Education	-.06	.31		
K School Adjustment	.55	.00		
Second Block			.41	.11
Family Resources	.13	.08		
Maternal Education	-.06	.43		
K School Adjustment	.48	.00		
Teacher/Student Relationships	.28	.00		
Second Grade School Adjustment				
First Block			.13	
Family Resources	.10	.27		
Maternal Education	-.12	.21		
K School Adjustment	.36	.00		
Second Block			.25	.15
Family Resources	.05	.57		
Maternal Education	-.15	.10		
K School Adjustment	.34	.00		
Teacher/Student Relationships	.35	.00		

In first grade, mathematics achievement scores are predicted by the Teacher/Student Relationship and by the Security/Maintenance factors, and negatively by both Academic Orientation and Parent and Community-School Relationships factors, $F(8,105) = 3.2$, $p < .00$, Adj $R^2 = .13$, R^2 Chg = .14, Teacher/Student Relationship $\beta = .28$, $p < .02$, Security/ Maintenance $\beta = .25$, $p < .04$, Academic Orientation $\beta = -.27$, $p < .03$ and Parent and Community-School Relationships $\beta = -.21$, $p < .04$. No significant results were found for mathematics in the kindergarten or second-grade years.

Problem behaviors. There were no significant results for the problem behaviors overall score or for the subscale scores.

Discussion

This study has examined the relationship between parents' perceptions of school climate and children's academic and social development, controlling for maternal education and family resources for kindergarten through second grade. Specific aspects of school climate also were examined in relation to children's development during these years. The study sample is urban and low-income, predominantly black. School climate has been found to affect differentially black and white students (Alexander & Entwisle. 1988) with transition into the school environment

being more problematic for black children. It would seem especially useful, then, to determine what aspects of school climate support or hinder optimal school performance, specifically for young, urban, minority students.

The strongest findings for a relationship between school climate and children's academic and social development are found in parents' perceptions of their children's school adjustment. Both overall school climate and underlying factors, especially the Teacher/Student Relationship, show an increasingly important relationship to children's school adjustment through second grade. Evidence for the veracity of these findings is given by the teachers' ratings of children's social skills and academic competence. Teachers are reliable sources of information on children's functioning (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1984) and the use of two reporting sources for children's functioning– parent and teacher–provides more information across contexts on the construct of children's outcomes. Although parent report is used for both the school climate and children's school adjustment data, and the use of same-informant data may account for portion of the relationship between these variables, the teacher-reported data support parents' perceptions. Children's social skills in the classroom as reported by the teacher are related to school climate, especially cooperation in kindergarten and first grade, and assertiveness in second grade; and academic competence is moderately related to school climate, mostly through the Teacher/Student Relationship, for each year.

The results of the regression analyses indicate that overall school climate influences children's academic and social development, even after accounting for important family influences such as family resources and maternal education. The strongest findings indicate a strong and steady relationship between school climate and children's school adjustment, with variance explained increasing from 8% to 10% during the three years studied. In second grade, the Teacher/Student Relationship aspect of school climate actually accounts for 15% of the variance in children's school adjustment. The surprise here is not that the Teacher/Student Relationship is important to children's school experiences; this is widely understood, but that it has such an important influence upon the overall impression of the climate of the whole school for parents and that it contributes almost as much as the child's own history of adjustment to how well parents perceive their children to be currently doing in school.

The findings for first-grade achievement scores, with 7% of the variance in reading and 14% in mathematics accounted for by school climate factors, indicate that school climate, especially through the influence of the Teacher/Student Relationship can indeed influence school achievement as measured by direct assessments. Surprisingly, two of the factors, Academic Orientation and Parent and Community-School Relationship are negatively related to mathematics scores. This is unexpected, but perhaps for this sample is not totally unexplainable. This finding may be related to another phenomenon uncovered by previous research, that many of our highest mathematics achievers are members of our most stressed families (see Speer & Esposito, in press).

There are several limitations to this study. One is the fact that the school climate measure is one of parental perceptions and is not an objective measure of the actual conditions of the school. One may argue, however, that perceptions may actually be more important than an objective reality, especially in poverty-stricken urban school districts. Are the teachers' interactions with the students developmentally appropriate, or is it appropriate to be harsh to children in these schools? Is the building really in good repair, or is it the best that can be expected, given the community environment?

It is interesting that for the majority of the schools within this urban district, parent and teacher school ratings are not significantly different; though, the general trend in the data is for parents to rate the school climate higher than teachers. Although no measure of parental school involvement is available for this sample during the early elementary school years, it is known that urban, minority parents tend to display very low levels of parental involvement. Explanations range from parental apathy to cultural mismatch between schools and families to family distrust of institutions (Gomes & Mabry, 1991). This finding, although tenuous, may suggest that despite the fact that teachers are probably in a better position to "know" a school, parents do have information about the school. It should be remembered that the parents of this sample were all parents of children who attended Head Start for their preschool year; therefore, that experience may have prompted more parental involvement than would typically be expected.

The intercorrelations between the school climate factors are another methodological issue for this study. It is interesting, however, that these intercorrelations tend to fluctuate and weaken by second grade. This may indicate not that the factors are measuring the same thing, but that the constructs underlying school climate are related, especially as perceived by parents when they first are introduced to a school and that as the parents become more familiar with the school they are better able to differentiate the individual factors that support their overall impression of the school.

Despite these limitations, the results of the analyses on the school climate factors suggest that there are certain aspects of school climate that contribute to children's development more than others do. The most important factor associated with children's school adjustment is the Teacher/ Student Relationship. This finding indicates that urban parents acknowledge the importance of the relationship between their children's teachers and their children, and that they recognize the influence of that relationship on their children's school experiences. This is important to know, especially for school staff who wonder if parents notice or care about their children's school experiences. In fact, they do, and teachers' relationship with their children is what matters most to them. Other aspects of school climate, specifically the security and maintenance of the school, and the parent and community school relationship, contribute to the children's social skills in the classroom and to their academic achievement. Overall, school climate and aspects underlying school climate, influence children's development in addition to the influence of important family factors.

The need for change at the school district level to improve academic and social outcomes for low-income, urban children is paramount. However, for urban districts facing the multiple, interacting stressors of chronic poverty, the methods and techniques that would constitute best practice for them are not clear. With limited resources available, how can urban school districts effectively improve their contribution to children's school functioning and, therefore, children's future success? This research suggests that a focus upon the importance of the Teacher/ Student Relationship in the early elementary school years may benefit students not only directly, but indirectly as the nature of the relationships between teachers and students become part of the overall climate of the school. Training teachers and supporting them in their efforts to maintain positive interactions with children and their families, especially teachers of chronically poor, urban children who bring to the classroom so many overwhelming problems, may be the support children need to boost their potential for success.

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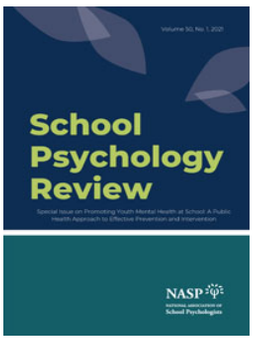

School Psychology Review

ISSN: (Print) 2372-966x (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uspr20

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To cite this article: Cynthia Esposito (1999) Learning in Urban Blight: School Climate and Its Effect on the School Performance of Urban, Minority, Low-Income Children, School Psychology Review, 28:3, 365-377, DOI: 10.1080/02796015.1999.12085971

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02796015.1999.12085971

Published online: 22 Dec 2019.