

Original Paper

School Climate and Student Behavioral Problems

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Abstract

In recent decades, the world's scientific and professional literature has been increasingly interested in contextual factors at the school level that support the academic and psychosocial outcomes of schooling. One of the constructs that is considered to be the key to improving the overall development of students is school climate. Although the available empirical material abounds in evidence of the effects of school climate on the academic and psychosocial outcomes of education, this link continues to attract the attention of researchers.

The aim of this paper is to systematically consider the connection between school climate and student behavioral problems. Upon having an insight into numerous studies dealing with the issue, one can notice the connection between different forms of externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems, along with the indicators of a negative school climate, such as: vaguely set rules of conduct, teachers who do not motivate nor monitor students' work and progress, lack of disciplinary measures, teaching without the use of modern forms and methods of work, inadequate reward for student achievements, negative classroom climate, bad relationships, poor cooperation with parents, etc.

It is quite certain that the school environment, along with all its characteristics, climate and the way its is organized, directly or indirectly contributes to a specific manner of behaving. In addition to identifying school climate as a factor associated with various forms of externalized and internalized problems in student behavior, we must underscore its importance in reducing and preventing behavioral problems.

Keywords

school climate, behavioral problems, relationships, prevention

1. Introduction

Even though there is no generally accepted definition of school climate nor a uniform position on its dimensions, most authors agree that school climate is a multidimensional and complex construct, which refers to the quality and character of school life (Đurišić & Žunić Pavlović, 2021). Based on a review

of the literature, we can realize that most researchers single out three dimensions of school climate, which are as follows: the physical dimension (the way the school building and classroom look, the size of the school, etc.), the social dimension (the quality of interpersonal relations of all players of the school community, fair and equal treatment of students by teachers and other employees, etc..) and the academic dimension (the quality of teaching, the expectations of teachers in terms of student achievements and progress, etc.) (Loukas, 2007).

The initial research on school climate began in the 1950s, which focused on the school organization, employee productivity and identification of the characteristics of efficient schools. In the late 1970s, the focus of researchers' attention shifted to the connection between school climate and success achieved at school and student accomplishments (Brookover et al., 1978; Purkey & Smith, 1983). The connection between school climate and motivation, commitments to school and school obligations, participation in curricular and extracurricular activities, student engagement, etc. was also reviewed. The research that followed focused on the connection between school climate and different forms of behavioral problems, such as aggression, violence and criminal behavior (Gottfredson et al., 2005; Welsh, 2000; according to Đurić & Popović Čitić, 2011).

The aforementioned studies showed that students' perceptions of school climate were significantly related to student behavioral problems, emphasizing the link between school context and psychological and emotional functioning of students, as well as that a positive perception of school climate was a strong protective factor in behavioral problems.

In modern dimensional systems, the division into two categories of behavioral problems is widely accepted: externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001), which will be used in this paper. Externalizing behavioral problems refer to insufficiently controlled and other directed behaviors, which involve conflicts with other persons and social norms and which are detected, whereas internalizing behavioral problems are concealed and cause difficulties to the person who has them (Achenbach, 1995). Unlike externalizing behavioral problems, which are open and clearly visible, internalizing behavioral problems often go unnoticed, especially in the school environment. Within the framework of externalizing problems, two syndromes were singled out: the syndrome of aggressive behavior and the syndrome of violating the rules of behavior. The former syndrome encompasses various forms of oppositional behavior and aggression, while the latter one encompasses only non-aggressive antisocial behaviors (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001). Internalizing problems include three syndromes: anxiety-depression, withdrawal-depression and somatic complaints.

The school environment has a significant role in the etiology and prevention of behavioral problems in students, given that students staying at school on a daily basis develop their personality, form their attitudes and views of the world, etc. That is why it is important to perceive the connection between school climate and problems in student behavior. A positive school climate not only plays a significant role in creating a healthy school atmosphere that is important for the achievements of both students and school staff, but, according to numerous studies, it is also the basis for reducing various problems in

student behavior. The influences of school climate are expressed in all phases of the prevention of behavioral problems, starting from the school's readiness to initiate, support and implement prevention programs to the evaluation and effects of program implementation. A positive school climate is a basic prerequisite for developing a system of preventive action and building a safe school environment (Jovanović, 2015).

Further in this paper, the results of relevant research on the connection between school climate and problems in student behavior will be presented. Particular attention will be devoted to the connection between specific dimensions of school climate and problems in student behavior. Presentation of the results of the research should contribute to a better understanding of the construct of school climate, or of the dimension and its connection with the manifestation of problems in student behavior. It is also expected that the focus of the school's role will be on various activities and interventions that the school should undertake in order to prevent the emergence of problems in student behavior.

2. School Climate and Externalizing Behavioral Problems

By gaining an insight into numerous studies dealing with the issue, one can notice the existence of a connection between school climate and externalizing behavioral problems (Kuperminc et al., 2001; Somersalo et al., 2002; Suldo et al., 2012). The above studies showed that students' perceptions of school climate were significantly related to externalizing behavioral problems, highlighting the link between school context and psychological functioning of students, as well as the fact that a positive perception of school climate was a strong protective factor in behavioral problems.

Apart from externalizing behavioral problems, research on the related phenomena was presented, such as: school violence (Barnes et al., 2012; Brookmeyer et al., 2006; Gregory et al., 2010; Steffgen et al., 2013), disciplinary measures (Gregory et al., 2011), substance abuse (Kitsantas et al. 2004), truancy (Claes et al., 2009).

Barnes and associates (2012) examined the impact of school climate on the manifestation of school violence. The results of the research showed that the level of violence was lower in schools where school climate was assessed as positive. More specifically, a significant statistical correlation was observed between physical and verbal violence and school climate. In addition to the connection between school climate and school violence, Brookmeyer and associates (Brookmeyer et al., 2006) pointed out the important role of school climate in reducing school violence, underscoring that school climate was a very important protective factor. Following a large meta-analysis of the studies on the relationship between school climate and school violence, Steffgen and associates (Steffgen et al., 2013) reached the following results: they found out a medium-sized connection between the perception of school climate and violent student behavior, while the relationship between other indicators of school climate (school size, level of education) and violent behavior was not established.

By enlarging the concept of authoritative parenting style and authoritative running of classes, Gregory and associates (Gregory et al., 2010) conducted one of the first researches in which the concept of

authoritative school climate was used, which implied a complementary relationship between the structure (consistent and fair application of rules) and support (caring and helpful attitude of teachers towards students), which included social dimension factors. The authors examined the relationship between the factors of structures and support, as well as those between safety and violent behavior of students. The findings indicated positive perceptions of the dimensions of structures and support among students with lower levels of violence and higher levels of the sense of safety at school. Namely, positive and supportive relationships with teachers encouraged students to seek help, influenced the development of positive behavior, affected the development of a non-violent climate, promoted student autonomy, etc.

Gregory and associates (Gregory et al., 2011) pointed to the significant connection between school climate and disciplinary measures imposed on students. The results of the research showed that the rate of disciplinary measures implemented was considerably higher at schools where school climate was perceived as negative and where a low level of support and respect for students was recorded.

Kitsantas and associates (Kitsantas et al., 2004) examined in their research the relationship between community safety, school climate, substance abuse and school safety through student perceptions. The results of the research showed that the strongest predictors of students' perception of safety and psychoactive substance abuse included the environment in which students lived, community safety and school climate, while the weakest predictors of students' perception were the measures taken by the school to improve safety in the school environment.

Claes and associates (2009) pointed to the connection between school climate and being absent from school classes. Namely, the results of their research showed that school climate and the level of parental involvement in the life and work of the school had a great impact on truancy. Schools with a positive school climate, which supported a cooperative relationship between the school, parents and students, had a notably lower rate of truancy.

In this section of the paper, we will try to point to the connection between the dimensions of school climate (physical, social and academic ones) and different forms of externalizing problems in student behavior

In the aforementioned study, Barnes and associates (Barnes et al., 2012) pointed to the connection between physical, social and academic dimensions of school climate and school violence (physical and verbal harassment, carrying and use of weapons, physical assault and sexual harassment). The results of the research showed that there was a significant connection between each mentioned dimension of school climate and all mentioned forms of violence, while the connection between school climate and physical and verbal harassment was the strongest.

Kuperminc and associates (Kuperminc et al., 2001) examined in their research the connection between physical, social and academic dimensions of school climate and externalizing behavioral problems. The results of the research indicated the connection of all three dimensions of school climate with externalizing behavioral problems, with the highest degree of connection being between social

dimension and externalizing problems. The dimensions of the relationship between students and teachers and honesty were singled out as the most important predictors of externalizing problems, the indicators of which were the existence of norms, goals and values, equal treatment of students by teachers, etc.

Brand and associates (Brand et al., 2003) conducted an extensive research aimed at pointing to the link between externalizing behavioral problems and physical, social and academic dimensions of school climate. Negative peer relationships at school were singled out as the strongest predictors of problems in student behavior. More specifically, higher levels of behavioral problems, cigarette, alcohol, and psychoactive substance use and positive attitudes correlated with lower levels of teacher and peer support, commitment to school and school obligations and with higher levels of school safety issues.

Way and associates (Way et al., 2007) examined the relationship between school climate, its physical and social dimensions and problems in student behavior (behavior that violates the rules). The results of their research indicated a correlation between externalizing behavioral problems and the following indicators of school climate: teacher support, peer support, student autonomy and consistency in school rules. Namely, the decline in the level of these indicators was associated with a higher level of problems in student behavior.

Goldstein and associates (Goldstein et al., 2008) stressed in their work the connection between physical and social dimensions of school climate and relational aggression, which involved the manipulation of social relations for the purpose of destroying social relations, reputation or social status. The authors reached the conclusion that relational aggression was a predictor of the perception of school climate. Namely, students who were exposed to relational aggression at their school did not feel safe there and perceived school climate very negatively.

Sanchez Fowler and associates (Sanchez Fowler et al., 2008) pointed in their research to the connection between the social dimension of school climate, more specifically to the relationship between teachers and students and externalizing behavioral problems. The results of the research showed that externalizing behavioral problems and prosocial behavior of children at the kindergarten had a significant impact on the quality of the teacher-student relationship in the third grade. Students who had higher scores on the scales that measured externalizing behavioral problems had a lower quality of relationship with their teachers. The authors pointed out that externalizing behavioral problems had a strong impact on the relationship between teachers and students, more precisely that they negatively affected the quality of relationships and increased conflicts between them.

Hughes and associates (Hughes et al., 1999) pointed in their research to the connection between social dimension of school climate, more precisely to the relationship between teachers and students and aggressive behavior of students. The results of the research indicated that the quality of the relationship between teachers and students could be considered as an important predictor for the manifestation of aggressive behavior of students. Namely, at schools where a higher level of student aggressive behavior was recorded, the quality of the relationship between teachers and students was assessed as negative.

Mihen and associates (Meehan et al., 2003) examined during their two-year study the connection between social dimension of school climate, the relationship between teachers and students and peer relations and aggressive behavior of students. The authors pointed out that negative relationships between teachers and students could be considered as a significant predictor of aggressive behavior, while relationships between peers failed to show a significant impact on the manifestation of aggressive behavior.

O'Connor and associates (O'Connor et al., 2011) examined the relationship between social dimension of school climate, the relationship between teachers and students and externalizing behavioral problems. The authors reached two main conclusions. Firstly, quality and positive teacher-student relationships proved to be a significant predictor of fewer externalizing problems. Secondly, quality and positive teacher-student relationships could be considered as significant protective factors, which contributed to the prevention and reduction of externalizing behavioral problems. Schools should, therefore, focus prevention programs on the development of positive teacher-student relationships.

Downer and associates (Downer, 2007) pointed to the link between social and academic dimensions of school climate and externalizing problems. School climate was assessed through the following indicators: the quality of classroom interactions and the quality of teaching and teachers' instructions. The results of the research showed that at the schools where a lower level of quality interactions in the classroom was noted (work in larger groups, insufficient engagement of students and teachers, insufficient commitment of teachers to individual needs of students, unclear work instructions, etc.) a higher level of externalizing student problems was also noticed. The authors pointed out that the quality of classroom interactions, teaching and teacher instructions was a significant predictor of the manifestation of externalizing problems.

Wang (Wang, 2009) examined in his research the relationship between social and academic dimensions of school climate and problems in student behavior (behavior that violates the rules). The results of the research indicated a connection between the following indicators of school climate: school structure, autonomy and responsibility, support and assistance provided by teachers, participation in decision-making and behavior that violates the rules. Namely, students who rated climate at their school as negative had higher scores on the scale that measured the behavior syndrome by which the rules were violated.

Stewart and Suldo (Stewart & Suldo, 2011) examined the relationship between the academic dimension of school climate, through the indicator of social support provided by teachers and peers and externalizing problems. The results of the research showed that social support was a significant predictor of externalizing problems. Students who had stronger support from their teachers perceived school climate as positive and had a low level of externalizing behavioral problems.

3. School Climate and Internalizing Behavioral Problems

Upon carrying out an analysis of research in this area, one may spot the existence of a link between different forms of internalizing problems in behavior and school climate and its indicators (Hung, 2011; Jia et al., 2009; Kuperminc et al., 1997, 2001; LaRusso et al., 2008; Loukas & Robinson, 2004; Somersalo et al., 2002; Suldo et al., 2012). It must be mentioned that the number of these researches was considerably smaller than the researches dealing with the connection between school climate and externalizing behavioral problems..

In addition to internalizing behavioral problems, research on the following related phenomena was presented: anxiety disorders (Liu, 2012), depressive disorders (Jia et al., 2009; Loukas & Robinson, 2004; Wang, 2009; Way et al., 2007); emotional difficulties (Resnick et al., 1997); somatoform disorders (Lohre et al., 2010); psychosomatic disorders (Modin & Ostberg, 2009).

Liu (Liu, 2012) dealt in his research with the relationship between school climate and anxiety disorders. The results of the research pointed to a negative correlation between students' perceptions of school climate and anxiety disorders. More precisely, the indicator of school climate - relations (teacher-student and student-student) proved to be the most important predictor of anxiety disorders.

Jia and associates (2009) pointed in their research to the connection between school climate and depressive disorders. The results of the research showed that students' perceptions of school climate were positively correlated with students' self-esteem, self-confidence and school achievements, but were also negatively correlated with depressive disorders.

Resnick and associates (Resnick et al., 1997) pointed out that school climate had a constant impact on students' emotional health. The authors pointed in their research to the connection between school climate and students' emotional difficulties. The results of their research showed that students' attachment to school had the greatest impact on their emotional difficulties.

Lohre and associates (Lohre et al., 2010) pointed to the connection between somatoform disorders and school climate. The authors examined the relationship between specific indicators of school climate and the feelings of sadness, anxiety, stomach issues and headaches. The results showed that loneliness was strongly and positively linked with the feelings of sadness, anxiety and headaches.

Modin and Ostberg (2009) examined the relationship between school climate and psychosomatic disorders (anxiety, depression, somatic complaints). The results of their research showed that teacher support had a significant impact on the manifestation of students' psychosomatic disorders. Namely, students who had higher scores on the scales that measured psychosomatic disorders had a lower level of teacher support too.

We will try to point in this section of the paper to the connection between the dimensions of school climate and different forms of internalizing problems in student behavior.

In addition to the link between school climate and externalizing behavioral problems, Brand and associates (2003) examined the relationship between school climate (all three dimensions) and students' anxiety and depressive disorders, too. The results of the study showed the following: lower levels of

depressive and anxiety disorders correlated with higher levels of teacher support, commitment to school and school obligations, positive peer interactions and lower levels of safety issues, while higher levels of depressive disorders were associated with higher levels of safety issues at school.

Saldo and associates (2012) pointed in their research to the connection between school climate (all three dimensions) and internalizing behavioral problems. They pointed out that the most important predictors of internalizing problems were the following: parental involvement, order and discipline, the availability of school resources and activities, as well as the way the school building looked and how it was maintained.

Way and associates (2007) examined in the above-mentioned study the relationship between physical and social dimensions of school climate and depressive disorders. The results of the research indicated the existence of a correlation between the negative school climate, through all included indicators (teacher support, peer support, student autonomy and consistency in school rules) and through more frequent manifestations of depressive disorders in students.

Franco and associates (2022), too, examined the impact of physical and social dimensions of school climate on students' internalizing problems. The findings suggested that social relations and trust and support were important predictors of internalizing problems. Namely, students who assessed the above-mentioned indicators of school climate as positive showed a low level of internalizing problems.

Barriga and associates (2002) conducted research on the connection between the academic dimension of school climate and internalizing problems. The results of the research showed that school achievements and educational support were important predictors of internalizing problems. Students who had poorer school performance and inadequate educational support displayed a high level of internalizing problems.

O'Connor and associates (2011) examined the connection between the social dimension of school climate and the manifestation of internalizing problems in student behavior. The research revealed that quality and positive relations between teachers and students proved to be important protective factors, which contributed to the prevention and reduction of internalizing behavioral problems.

Stewart and Suldo (2011) examined in the above-mentioned study the connection between the academic dimension of school climate, through the indicator of social support of teachers and peers, and internalizing behavioral problems. The results of the research showed that social support was a significant predictor of internalizing behavioral problems. Students who had stronger support from their peers perceived a positive climate as positive and had a low level of internalizing problems, while teacher support had not shown to have a significant impact on the perception of school climate and the manifestation of internalizing behavioral problems.

Apart from examining the relationship between school climate and the behavior that violates the rules, Wang (2009) examined in his research the connection between school climate or social and academic dimensions and symptoms of depressive disorders. The results of the research indicated a connection between school climate and its indicators, which were as follows: school structure, autonomy with

responsibility, support and assistance provided by teachers and participation in decision-making, on the one hand, and depressive disorders on the other. Namely, students who rated the climate in their school as negative, had higher scores on the scale that measured depressive disorders. The author pointed out that the teacher support indicator stood out as an important protective factor in depressive disorders of students.

4. Conclusion

By summarizing the presented empirical data, the following assumptions can be made:

1. School climate influences the manifestation of externalizing and internalizing problems in student behavior;
2. There is a connection between all three dimensions of school climate and externalizing and internalizing problems in student behavior;
3. The most important predictors are as follows: the way the school looks, the availability of resources, safety, school structure, consistency in school rules, autonomy, participation in decision-making, school relations, support, teaching, work instructions and parental involvement.

The findings on the connection between various problems of students and the identical dimensions of school climate are as follows: the academic, social and physical dimensions can serve as a basis for proposing the measures and activities that can be applied in the school environment for the purpose of improving school climate and preventing behavioral problems. Some of the activities and measures that can be implemented with this goal in mind are the following: the development of special school programs that will include numerous and diverse teaching and non-teaching activities intended for students, which are in accordance with their interests and abilities; the development of the activities aimed at creating a motivational climate with an emphasis on learning, skills development and personal advancement; continuous monitoring of student progress; providing continuous and professional support and assistance to students and teachers; increased involvement of parents and the community in school teaching and extracurricular activities, etc. It is important to note that all these measures and activities require hard work, adequate planning and participation of all players in the school environment.

The quality of school climate is related to the quality of life, work and interaction of students at school. Continuous monitoring of school climate, its measuring and its improvement can have a preventive effect on the development of externalizing and internalizing problems in student behavior.

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