



Original article

Feelings of Safety at School, Socioemotional Functioning, and Classroom Engagement


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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Classroom engagement is a key indicator of student motivation, learning potential, and the eventual probability of persisting to high-school completion. This study investigated whether feeling unsafe at school interferes with classroom engagement and simultaneously considered whether this association is mediated by poorer student well-being in the form of experiencing symptoms of depression and demonstrating aggressive behavior problems.

Methods: Data were from the Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development, an ongoing study that began in 1998 with a population-based cohort of 2,120 Quebec 5-month-old infants. Structural equation modeling was used to test the central hypothesis that concurrent youth self-reported feelings of a lack of safety at school are associated with poorer teacher-reported student classroom engagement (at age 13 years) and the mediating role of emotional and behavioral problems. The model controlled for concurrent measures of victimization, the school safety climate, and earlier measures of students' academic adjustment.

Results: The findings support the central hypothesis that youth who feel safer at school are also more engaged in the classroom ($p \leq .05$). Students who felt safer demonstrated less depressive symptoms, but this only partly explained the association between feeling safe and being engaged.

Conclusions: Increasing student feelings of safety at school (e.g., by reducing victimization, improving the overall school and neighborhood safety climate) is likely to represent an effective strategy for promoting classroom engagement. Such interventions could also contribute to future academic achievement and high-school completion and decrease symptoms of mental health problems among youth.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTION

Youth who feel less safe at school are less engaged in the classroom, in part due to increased symptoms of depression. Given the prohibitive role of feeling unsafe for mental health and academic success, interventions should target the overall school climate and broader sociophysical environment.

How well youth do in high school is not entirely dependent on intellectual ability. Rather, being engaged or productive can be more important for individuals' eventual academic and

professional success [1,2]. Classroom engagement is a key indicator of student motivation, learning potential, and the eventual probability of persisting to high-school completion [3,4] and reflects the ability to remain on-task and successfully adapt to the demands of the classroom environment. An engaged student works autonomously, follows directions, completes tasks on time, and works cooperatively with classmates. School ecology frameworks identify the school environment as contributing to

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promoting and supporting student engagement, academic success, health, and well-being [5–8]. Feeling unsafe at school has been linked to a range of academic outcomes such as lower academic achievement [9,10], lower school engagement (i.e., student commitment, attitudes, and feelings towards their studies and school), and truancy [11]. Yet, little research has considered how feeling unsafe may come to affect students' ability to remain on-task and adapt to the demands of the classroom. Feeling unsafe at school may interfere with student classroom engagement by contributing to poorer student well-being [12] in the form of emotional problems such as experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression [11]. Feeling unsafe may also contribute to engaging in risky and aggressive behaviors [13], that are detrimental for classroom engagement [14]. As such, these emotional and behavioral problems may negatively impact youths' ability to remain engaged in the classroom. Although youth may come to feel less safe if they experience victimization at school, feeling unsafe also results from exposure to unfavorable school environments (e.g., high incidence of school violence) and from exposure to unfavorable school-neighborhood and residential-neighborhood environments (e.g., social and physical disorder, such as loitering and graffiti) [15–20]. Because youths' own appraisals of stressful factors are statistically and clinically important predictors of health and well-being outcomes [21,22], feelings of safety likely play a distinct role in classroom engagement independent of victimization and the overall school safety climate.

Research has yet to consider the direct and indirect associations between youths' feelings of safety at school and their level of engagement in the classroom. This study tests the central hypothesis that feeling less safe at school is associated with poorer classroom engagement. The study also considers symptoms of depression and physically aggressive behavior as mechanisms linking feeling unsafe to poorer classroom engagement. These associations are expected to hold even when adjusting for the school's objectively measured safety climate and youths' experience of victimization. Structural equation modeling was used to simultaneously test the hypothesized direct and indirect associations with classroom engagement. The models also control for students' earlier indicators of academic adjustment (i.e., student classroom behaviors, achievement), which have been established as conceptually and empirically distinct factors contributing to classroom engagement [14]. Finally, we also control for age, sex, and family socioeconomic status.

Methods

Data

This study draws on data from the Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development, an ongoing study that began in 1998 with a population-based cohort of 2,120 Quebec 5-month-old infants and their parent or primary caregiver. Details on sample selection and procedure have been published elsewhere [23]. Data were collected annually, except for in 2007 and 2009. In the initial cohort, 49.1% of youth were girls and 72% of youth were defined by their parent or primary caregiver as being Canadian. From school entry onward, informed consent was obtained from the child, parents, and Language (French) or Math teachers. Questionnaires were administered predominantly in French, reflecting the linguistic distribution of the province of Quebec, Canada. This study received approval from the ethics review

boards of the Institut de la statistique du Québec and the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Sainte-Justine.

Data were from the most recent wave, collected in 2011 when youth were aged 13 years. This data point represents the age at which youth in Quebec begin their first year of secondary school (Grade 7) and the first measure of feelings of safety in secondary school. Because of attrition, this wave of the study included 1,234 youth, representing a 58% retention rate. Control measures for academic adjustment were collected in 2010 when youth were aged 12 years (N = 1,355) and in their last year of primary school.

Outcome and predictor variables

Classroom engagement (age 13 years). After having observed the child for approximately 6 months, teachers reported the extent to which students demonstrated the following behaviors in the class: (1) listened attentively; (2) followed directions; (3) finished their work on time; (4) worked autonomously; and (5) put a lot of effort into their work (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always; Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). The mean of items was taken to represent classroom engagement. Similar measures have previously been used to represent classroom engagement in Grades 1 through 6 [24,25].

Feeling safe at school (age 13 years). Youth reported to what extent they agreed with the statement "I feel safe at my school" (1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Unsure, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree). Similar measures have been validated in previous research examining the association between feelings of safety at school, sociodemographics, neighborhood predictors, and health and well-being [20,26–28].

Victimization (age 13 years). Youth reported how often since the beginning of the school year they had experienced the following at school: (1) a youth called you names or said mean things to you; (2) a youth from your school prevented you from being in their group; (3) a youth from your school pushed, hit, or kicked you; (4) a youth from your school said mean things about you to other youth; and (5) a youth from your school mocked or laughed at you (1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Often, 4 = Very often). For the analyses, each item was used as an observed indicator of a latent variable representing victimization. Each item loaded significantly on the factor (all p values $\leq .001$). Mean victimization is reported in Table 1.

Unsafe school climate (age 13 years). Teachers reported to what extent they agreed that (1) students do not feel safe; (2) there are areas that students are afraid to go to; (3) there are areas that staff do not like to go to; (4) staff does not feel safe; (5) staff are afraid to intervene in violent situations; and (6) students are easily bullied (1 = Completely disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Somewhat disagree, 4 = Somewhat agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Completely agree; $\alpha = .87$). If teachers responded to at least four of these items, a mean response was calculated and then rescaled as a continuous score ranging from 0 to 10.

Mediators

Symptoms of depression (age 13 years). Youth self-reported, with the guarantee that their answers would be kept confidential, to what extent they felt the following ways over the past 6 months: (1) you are unhappy or sad; (2) you are not as happy as other

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