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Classroom risks and resources: Teacher burnout, classroom quality and children's adjustment in high needs elementary schools

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ABSTRACT

The current paper presents two related sets of findings on the classroom context in high needs elementary schools. First, we investigated change over one school term in teacher burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment) and classroom quality (emotional and instructional support, organization) and assessed the degree to which burnout and classroom quality co-varied over the term with each other and with aggregate externalizing behaviors (average child externalizing behaviors in the classroom). These analyses describe the classroom context in which the children are nested. Second, we examined change over one school term in children's social adjustment (relationship quality with teachers and friends) and academic adjustment (school engagement, literacy skills) and assessed how adjustment co-varied over time with child externalizing behaviors and was predicted by teacher burnout, classroom quality and aggregate externalizing behaviors. These models were tested with a sample of low-income, ethnically diverse children in kindergarten to grade 3 and their teachers. The children and teachers were assessed three times over one school term. Personal accomplishment co-varied positively with overall classroom quality. Reciprocally, classroom organization co-varied positively with overall teacher burnout. Aggregate externalizing behaviors co-varied positively with depersonalization and negatively with personal accomplishment and overall classroom quality, including emotional support and organization. In turn, teacher burnout interacted with aggregate externalizing behaviors to predict change in child social and academic adjustment. Alternatively, classroom quality interacted with aggregate and child externalizing behaviors to predict change in child social and academic adjustment.

1. Introduction

Calls from educational and developmental science to better understand the strengths and challenges in high needs elementary schools have focused attention on process-oriented characteristics of classrooms that can enhance or undermine the instructional environment and, in turn, children's social and academic adjustment (Brophy & Good, 1986; Emmer & Stough, 2001). High needs schools are those that have a high proportion of low-income and ethnic minority children and that are located in neighborhoods with a high degree of social vulnerability but are not necessarily located within the inner core of the city. Of concern, high needs schools are over-represented by low-income and ethnic minority children who are at the highest risk of academic failure. While these children are

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most in need of a high quality educational experience they unfortunately appear to be getting the poorest quality experience (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Locasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2009; Pianta et al., 2005).

In high needs schools, teachers may be overwhelmed by job-related stressors that can elevate feelings of job-related burnout (Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012) and undermine the quality of classroom instruction (Locasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). Feelings of burnout may also co-occur with poorer instructional quality (Byrne, 1994; Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2008). In these settings there is also a risk that aggregate externalizing behaviors (average child externalizing behaviors in the classroom) will be high (Kellam, Ling, Merisca, Brown, & Ialongo, 1998; Pas, Bradshaw, Hershfeldt, & Leaf, 2010; Thomas, Bierman, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2006) and may predict teacher's feelings of burnout and classroom quality (Alvarez, 2007; Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995; Dicke et al., 2014; Kokkinos, Panayiotou, & Davazoglou, 2005).

In turn, teachers' feelings of burnout and classroom quality may predict short-term change in children's social and academic adjustment in early elementary school (Downer, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Klusmann et al., 2008; Pakarinen et al., 2010; Thomas, Bierman, Powers, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2011; Yoon, 2002). The adverse effects of teacher burnout on child adjustment may be particularly likely in the context of aggregate and individual child externalizing behaviors (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Bradshaw, Schaeffer, Petras, & Ialongo, 2010; Chang, 2004; Mercer & DeRosier, 2008; Stormshak et al., 1999; Thomas et al., 2011). On the other hand, the positive effects of classroom quality on child adjustment may be particularly apparent in the context of aggregate or individual child externalizing behaviors (Downer et al., 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

The current study investigated change in teacher burnout and classroom quality in high needs schools and, in turn, tested how these interact interacted with both aggregate and individual child externalizing behaviors to predict change in children's social and academic adjustment. The first set of models examined change over one school term in teacher burnout and classroom quality and investigated how these co-occured with levels of each other and with aggregate externalizing behaviors. These models describe the classroom context in which our sample of children was nested. The second set of models examined change over one school term in children's social and academic adjustment and assessed how teacher burnout and classroom quality interacted with aggregate and individual externalizing behaviors to predict change in child adjustment. Next we review theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence that set the stage for our focus on teacher burnout and classroom quality and, in turn, on child social and academic adjustment.

2. Theoretical perspectives on the classroom and child adjustment in high needs schools

Comparison of teacher, classroom, and child phenomena in high needs schools to these phenomena in schools with less vulnerable student populations can illustrate the degree of social vulnerability in high needs schools. Nonetheless, there is substantial variability in these phenomena within high needs schools (Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010; Jones, Brown, Hoglund, & Aber, 2010; Locasale-Crouch et al., 2007). Investigation of within-group variability in these phenomena in high needs school settings (rather than focusing on differences between groups of low and high needs populations) can help to illuminate under what conditions teachers in high needs schools experience job-related burnout, their classrooms are characterized as supportive and organized, and children show more competent social and academic adjustment.

Ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), dynamic systems (Tseng & Seidman, 2007), and developmental systems (Sameroff, 2000) perspectives guide our overall focus on teachers, classrooms, and children. Together, these theories draw attention to the developmental significance of the settings within which children develop, the variability in setting-level characteristics, and to the potential for setting-level processes to interact with each other and with child-level phenomena to affect the developmental course of children's adjustment (Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2008; Sameroff, 2000; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). We also draw from job demands–resources theory (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) to propose that when classroom settings are highly demanding, such as those with high aggregate externalizing behaviors, teachers may experience more job-related burnout and their classroom instruction may be compromised (Brouwers, Tomic, & Boluijt, 2011; Dicke et al., 2014). In turn, negative classroom settings may undermine children's adjustment (Pakarinen et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2011; Yoon, 2002) whereas supportive classrooms settings may enhance children's adjustment (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011; Downer et al., 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

3. The classroom setting: teacher burnout and classroom quality

Dynamic systems (Tseng & Seidman, 2007) and job demands–resources (Demerouti et al., 2001) frameworks guide our focus on social characteristics in the classroom setting and predictors of change and variability in these characteristics. According to these perspectives, the overall quality of relationships among children and adults (e.g., emotional and instructional support), daily routines and activities (e.g., organization, child and teacher engagement in class activities), and norms (e.g., job-related burnout, aggregate externalizing behaviors) are proposed to be key classroom social processes that operate as a dynamic system over time.

3.1. Teacher burnout

The work of Maslach and colleagues (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001) stimulated research on job-related burnout among teachers. Burnout is characterized along three dimensions that reflect feelings of job-related emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being depleted emotionally by job-related demands. Depersonalization reflects cynicism toward children and colleagues and detachment from the job. Personal accomplishment