



School-based social capital: The missing link between schools' socioeconomic composition and collective teacher efficacy



Barbara Belfi^{a, *}, Sarah Gielen^a, Bieke De Fraine^a, Karine Verschueren^b, Chloé Meredith^a

^a Center for Educational Effectiveness and Evaluation, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Dekenstraat 2, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium

^b Center for School Psychology, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Tiensestraat 102, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium

H I G H L I G H T S

- Links between school SES, school-based social capital, and CTE are investigated
- Data of 183 schools are studied using multilevel structural equation modeling.
- Effects of school SES on CTE are mediated by school-based social capital.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates whether the established association between school socioeconomic composition and collective teacher efficacy (CTE) is possibly mediated by teacher staffs' perceptions of school-based social capital. For this purpose, data from 183 primary schools in Flanders (Belgium) gathered between 2006 and 2008 are examined by means of multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM). The findings indicate that the relationship between school socioeconomic composition and CTE can indeed be explained by the level of school-based social capital as perceived by the teacher staff, even when school prior achievement, school ethnic composition, and school size are controlled.

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1. Introduction

Ever since the famous 1966 Coleman report concluded that “the social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student's own social background, than is any school factor” (Coleman et al., 1966, p. 325), school socioeconomic composition has been a popular research topic in the field of educational effectiveness research (EER; Hattie, 2002). This topic has also been of interest to politicians around the world who fear that large proportions of socioeconomically disadvantaged students in schools will have a detrimental effect on the educational trajectories of all students attending such schools. Particularly in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, where

socioeconomic segregation in schools is very high as compared to other Western countries, disparities in school socioeconomic composition have been a major cause of concern (Jacobs, Rea, & Teney, 2009; OECD, 2010). The socioeconomic composition of primary schools is believed to be particularly important for student achievement, as compared to the socioeconomic composition of secondary schools and schools for higher education, as primary school entrance introduces most children to a more diverse social system for the first time in their lives. Until that point, children spend most of their time within narrow family and community environments, which are often socially homogenous (Benner & Crosnoe, 2011). From both a practical and policy perspective, it is important to learn more about those specific characteristics of socioeconomically disadvantaged primary schools that are related to student achievement and are under the control of national educational policy or local school management. One such school characteristic is collective teacher efficacy (CTE). CTE refers to teachers' collective perception that teachers in a given school make an educational difference for their students over and above the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 16 325747; fax: +32 16 325859.

E-mail addresses: barbara.belfi@ppw.kuleuven.be (B. Belfi), sarah.gielen@ppw.kuleuven.be (S. Gielen), bieke.defraine@ppw.kuleuven.be (B. De Fraine), karine.verschueren@ppw.kuleuven.be (K. Verschueren), chloe.meredith@ppw.kuleuven.be (C. Meredith).

educational impact of their homes and communities (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). It has repeatedly been found that socioeconomically disadvantaged schools are characterized by lower levels of CTE (Bandura, 1993; Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Goddard, LoGerfo, & Hoy, 2004; Hoy, Sweetland, & Smith, 2002; Parker, 1994) and that lower levels of CTE, in turn, are related to lower levels of school-level student achievement (Bandura, 1993; Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Knoblauch & Woolfolk Hoy, 2008; Moolenaar, Slegers, & Daly, 2012).

Although the positive relationship between school socioeconomic status (SES) and CTE is well documented, the mechanisms that explain this relationship are less well understood. A better understanding of these mechanisms may be valuable for both policy makers and practitioners, as it would inform them on how to increase teachers' confidence in their capability to increase student achievement in low-SES schools. In the present study it is proposed that school-based social capital could serve as a potential mechanism that mediates the relationship between school SES and CTE. In this study, school-based social capital is operationalized as teachers' collective perception of the social relationships among students, parents, and teachers within the school environment and the social resources that are transmitted through these relationships, such as trust, support, norms, and values (Goddard, 2003). The whole idea behind linking school-based social capital to CTE is that good quality teaching does not only involve teachers as actors. Rather, it is believed to be a social process in which teachers need the cooperation and support of students and parents in order to obtain the desired results (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). In other words, the collective teacher perception of their efficacy (CTE) may be higher in schools with positive relationships among teachers, students and parents (school-based social capital).

It has been demonstrated that the higher a school's average SES, the more likely it is that teachers, parents, and students will experience beneficial relationships with each other (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Therefore, improving school-based social capital may be especially promising for increasing CTE in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools. In contrast to the more 'fixed' school SES, school-based social capital can be influenced, to a certain extent, in pursuit of an increased level of CTE. By focusing on school-based social capital as a malleable school construct to increase CTE in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools, this article makes a significant contribution to the growing literature base supporting the importance of social relationships for a multitude of educational outcomes. Moreover, to our knowledge, this study is the first to examine the relationship between school SES and CTE through the lens of teacher staffs' perceptions of their school's social capital.

In what follows, we first provide an overview of the literature on the relationships between school socioeconomic composition, teacher staffs' perceptions of school-based social capital, and CTE. Drawing on this literature overview, we propose our hypotheses and conceptual model. Next, the conceptual model is tested through multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM). Finally, based on the results, suggestions for practitioners and policy makers are offered, and directions for further research are proposed.

2. Literature overview

2.1. Teachers' collective efficacy in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools

Collective efficacy "represents a group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action

required to produce given levels of attainment" (Bandura, 1997, pp. 447–478). Applied to the educational environment, collective teacher efficacy refers to "the judgment of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute the courses of action required to have a positive effect on students" (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000, p. 7). As such, collective teacher efficacy (CTE) differs from personal teacher efficacy in that it refers to teacher judgments regarding the effectiveness of the teaching of the teacher staff as a whole, rather than teacher judgments of the teaching effectiveness of an individual teacher (Goddard et al., 2004).

Research has indicated that teachers in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools frequently perceive their teacher staff as being less effective in making an educational difference to their students than teacher staffs in more socioeconomically privileged schools (Bandura, 1993; Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Goddard et al., 2004; Hoy et al., 2002; Parker, 1994). There are several plausible explanations for this. First, schools with a socioeconomically disadvantaged student population are characterized by a myriad of factors that set them apart from schools with a more privileged student population and that might be related to CTE, such as lower student achievement levels, more student behavioral problems, lower levels of parent involvement, high student mobility rates, chronic student absenteeism, and a poorer physical environment (Knoblauch & Woolfolk Hoy, 2008; Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). These challenging circumstances increase the complexity of the teaching job and may in turn affect teachers' collective perceptions of their efficacy in making an educational difference. Second, teachers in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools have been found to have lower educational expectations of their students than do teachers in more socioeconomically privileged schools (Thrupp, 1999; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011). These lower educational expectations may also hamper the beliefs of teachers in low-SES schools regarding their collective efficacy in making an educational difference to their students. For example, Rubie-Davis (2007) found that teachers' expectations of students determine the way that teachers behave in the classroom. Research has demonstrated that as a result of lower levels of CTE in low-SES schools, teacher staffs are less willing to exert extra effort in their job, which in turn, has a negative impact on school wide student achievement (Ross & Gray, 2006; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2000). It is therefore vital that the negative link between school SES and CTE becomes mitigated.

2.2. The potential importance of school-based social capital for teachers' collective efficacy in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools

As has become clear in the previous paragraph, CTE is a highly context-specific construct: teachers in high-SES schools generally display higher levels of CTE as compared to teachers from low-SES schools (Bandura, 1997; Goddard et al., 2004; Hoy et al., 2002; Parker, 1994). The mechanisms that explain the relationship between school SES and CTE are however not self-evident. In the present study it is proposed that school-based social capital might mediate the relation between school SES and CTE. Over the last two decades, there has been an increasing interest in social capital as a mechanism for understanding sociological and socioeconomic phenomena. Social capital theory posits that social relationships provide access to social resources that can be exchanged, borrowed, and leveraged to achieve goals (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Putnam, 2000). As applied to the school setting, social capital theory holds that strong social relations in the school environment can result in the exchange of valuable social resources such as trust, support, norms, and values

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