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How school climate relates to chronic absence: A multi-level latent profile analysis

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ABSTRACT

Chronic absence is a significant problem in schools. School climate may play an important role in influencing chronic absence rates among schools, yet little research has evaluated how school climate constructs relate to chronic absence. Using multilevel latent profile analysis, we evaluated how profiles of student perceptions of school climate at both the student and school level differentiated school-level rates of chronic absence. Participants included 25,776 middle and high school students from 106 schools who completed a district administered school climate survey. Students attended schools in a large urban school district where 89% of 6th through 12th grade students were African-American and 61% were eligible for the federally subsidized school meals program. Three student-level profiles of perceptions of school climate emerged that corresponded to “positive,” “moderate,” and “negative” climate. Two predominant patterns regarding the distribution of these profiles within schools emerged that corresponded to the two school-level profiles of “marginal climate” and “climate challenged” schools. Students reporting “moderate” and “negative” climate in their schools were more likely to attend schools with higher chronic absence rates than students reporting that their school had “positive” climate. Likewise, “climate challenged” schools had significantly higher chronic absence rates than “marginal climate” schools. These results suggest that school climate shares an important relation with chronic absence among adolescent students attending urban schools. Implications for prevention and intervention programs are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. How school climate relates to chronic absence: a multilevel latent profile analysis

Chronic absence is a significant risk factor for school dropout and is closely associated with academic underachievement, delinquent behaviors, and limited economic opportunities (Kearney, 2008a). Across seven states surveyed, Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) found that 6% to 23% of youth were chronically absent in the past year; overall, it has been estimated that 5 to 7.5 million students are chronically absent across the country (United States Department of Education [DOE], 2014). A new federal policy, Every Student, Every Day, provides support for initiatives that involve multiple federal agencies to address and reduce chronic

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absenteeism (DOE, U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and U. S. Department of Justice, 2015). Further, chronic absence was added as a school performance metric in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), which is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act or No Child Left Behind Act. Although this represents an increased focus on the problem of chronic absence and an awareness of the complexity of its determinants, more research is needed to better understand the correlates of chronic absence (Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon, 2013) and identify effective ways to reduce chronic absence (Kearney, 2008b).

Given the links school climate has with socio-emotional wellbeing and academic achievement, improving students' perceptions of school climate may be an important intervention strategy for increasing attendance. School climate is a widely recognized predictor of students' social functioning and emotional health and fosters an environment conducive to improved academic functioning (Astor, Benbenishty, Zeira & Vinokur, 2002; Payne, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 2003). Literature suggests that key aspects of school climate, including student connectedness with school, engagement in school activities, and perceptions of school safety, may be important determinants of attendance (Chen & Weikart, 2008; deJung & Duckworth, 1986; Hughes, Gaines, & Pryor, 2015). The purpose of the current study was to identify groups of students with similar perceptions of school climate and to determine how their perceptions are related to chronic absence, controlling for school characteristics. This person-centered approach has the potential to identify effective strategies for targeting students at risk for chronic absence.

1.2. The harmful effects of chronic absence

A student is identified as chronically absent when they miss approximately 20 school days or at least 10% of school days during an academic year, whether for excused absences, unexcused absences, or suspensions (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). The concerns associated with chronic absence are well-documented and include serious academic, mental, and physical health problems for youth (Maynard, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Peters, 2012). Chronic absence is associated with decreased academic achievement, increased rates of special education referral, and grade retention (Kearney, 2008b).

Youth who are chronically absent often experience externalizing and internalizing problems. For example, youth who are chronically absent engage in increased rates of delinquent behaviors, such as violence, risky sexual behaviors, and alcohol, marijuana, tobacco, and other substance use (Chou, Ho, Chen, & Chen, 2006; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011). Chronic absence is strongly related to other mental health concerns as well, such as increased risk for suicidal behavior, anxiety, and depression (DeWit, Karioja, Rye, & Shain, 2011; Vaughn et al., 2011). The effect of chronic absence is cumulative with research showing that a persistent pattern of chronic absence across multiple years of school is related to poorer outcomes (Connolly & Olson, 2012).

Harmful consequences also extend to other students at the school. Students who are chronically absent require additional attention from teachers when they are present at school to address their learning and social needs (Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014). Thus, classrooms may move at a slower pace and become less engaging, detracting from the educational experiences of other students (Gottfried, 2013). Further, students who are chronically absent are more likely to have behavioral issues (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003; Farmer et al., 2003), which may contribute to a more negative classroom environment by modeling disengaged behavior and demanding more attention from the teacher. The limited empirical studies of the adverse effects of chronic absence suggest that chronic absence affects both youth who are absent and who attend school.

1.3. Factors related to chronic absence

Numerous factors that contribute to chronic absence have been explored, including student characteristics, environmental characteristics, and the interaction between the two. One potentially overarching correlate of chronic absence may be poverty (Zhang, 2003); students who receive assistance from Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) programs are three times more likely to be chronically absent from school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Homelessness, housing instability, family obligations such as caring for younger siblings or elderly family members, and lack of a safe path to school are poverty-related barriers that prevent students from consistently attending schools (DOE, 2004; Henry, 2007; Reid, 2005). Additionally, a subset of children is chronically absent due to persistent or lifelong illness or injury. Students with chronic health conditions living in poverty may be more likely to miss school due to lack of access to physical and behavioral health care as well as poor transportation that may interfere with attention to medical needs (Kearney, 2008a).

Students who are struggling academically, socially, and behaviorally may also increasingly become absent from school if schools are unable to meet their needs. Ineffective school discipline and lack of appropriate or engaging instruction perpetuate chronic absence. Similarly, structural features of the school may also be relevant, such as the type of school and the student-to-teacher ratio (Kearney, 2008a). As students transition to middle school and again to high school, the level of support and higher expectations for autonomy decline as youth move from a single classroom structure to switching classes for each subject area and the number of students each teacher interacts with during the day increases. For youth who are not ready to assume this level of responsibility, this shift may lead to chronic absences for middle school students with social and academic vulnerabilities with escalating increases in chronic absence during high school (DeWit et al., 2011; Eccles et al., 1993). Similarly, students are more likely to drop out of larger schools, again highlighting the importance of connectedness to teachers and peers (Lee & Burkam, 2003).

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