



Need-supportive teaching practices and student-perceived need fulfillment in low socioeconomic status elementary schools: The moderating effect of anxiety and academic achievement



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Self-determination theory
Basic psychological needs
Teaching practices
Academic achievement
Anxiety

ABSTRACT

Connell and Wellborn's Self-System Model of Motivational Development (SSMMD; 1991) posits that structure, autonomy support, and involvement from teachers influence their students' perceptions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. However, this model has rarely been tested in low socioeconomic elementary school students presenting academic and psychological difficulties. To fill this gap, this study examined whether student anxiety and academic achievement can moderate the association between teaching practices and student self-perceptions. A sample of 424 students and 45 teachers from five elementary schools located in low socioeconomic neighborhoods participated in the study over two consecutive years. Multilevel path analysis revealed that while most students felt competent and related to their teacher in highly structured and warm classrooms, anxious and low-achieving students benefited even more from teachers' structuring practices compared to their non-anxious or higher-achieving peers. Globally, our results partially support the application of the SSMMD for more vulnerable students.

1. Introduction

Children from disadvantaged or economically poor families are more likely to experience an array of problems. They present a higher risk of developing internalizing symptoms, such as anxiety symptoms, which can be even more severe than externalizing ones (Santiago, Wadsworth, & Stump, 2011; Smokowski et al., 2014; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Anxiety symptoms, such as excessive worries, fears, and pre-occupations, often develop around 8 years old (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Costello, Egger, Copeland, Erkanli, & Angold, 2011). As of this age, they can have many consequences on a child's life, especially in school, where anxiety tends to co-occur with academic achievement difficulties (Duchesne, Vitaro, Larose, & Tremblay, 2008; Van Ameringen, Mancini, & Farvolden, 2003). This is particularly true for students from disadvantaged families, who are more likely to experience both academic and anxiety problems (McLoyd, 1998; Wadsworth et al., 2008).

To overcome the negative effect of poverty and favor academic success for the most vulnerable children, researchers and school professionals must find effective ways to respond to the needs of all students. Self-Determination Theory states that all humans have three

basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Based on this theory, Connell and Wellborn's Self-System Model of Motivational Development (SSMMD; 1991) posits that teacher structure, autonomy support, and involvement in the classroom contribute to fulfilling these needs in every student. However, the associations between these teaching practices and student perceptions of the fulfillment of these needs have been mostly tested among well-functioning adolescents or young adults from the general population. They were rarely tested among elementary school children, and even less frequently among vulnerable students, such as children from disadvantaged families presenting symptoms of anxiety in conjunction with academic difficulties.

1.1. Need-supportive teaching practices and student-perceived need fulfillment

Many authors have sought to conceptualize the association between classroom context and student functioning, but few of them have addressed the issue from an ecological and integrative perspective. Based on Self-Determination Theory, Connell and Wellborn's motivational model (1991) suggests that teachers fulfill their students' self-

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2018.06.002>

Received 18 July 2017; Received in revised form 28 May 2018; Accepted 3 June 2018
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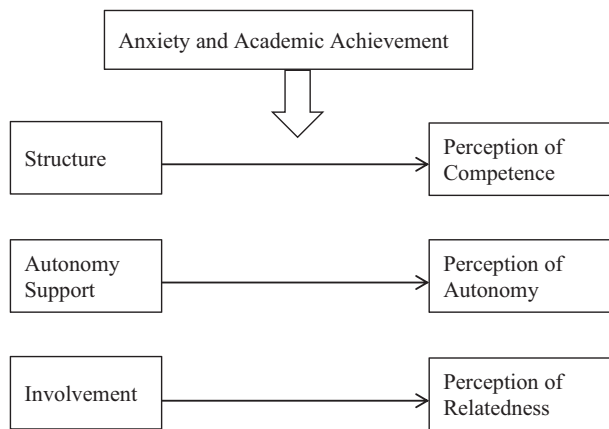


Fig. 1. Connell and Wellborn's Self-System Model of Motivational Development (1991) with the tested moderation.

perceptions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness through three practices: structure, autonomy support, and involvement (see Fig. 1). Teachers provide structure when they supervise activities, give their students feedback, and indicate clearly what is expected from students and the consequences of rule-breaking behaviors (Reeve, 2006a, 2006b; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Throughout the literature, more attention has been given to an examination of how teachers provide feedback on academic tasks than to the way they structure student behaviors and classroom functioning (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012). Yet, authors have shown that teachers' provisions of clear expectations as to the way students should behave and get organized in the classroom is of major importance. This would be particularly true during the elementary school years, when one teacher principally supervises students. A well-structured classroom environment can help them learn strategies to produce a desired outcome or avoid a negative one, and consequently feel more efficient and competent (La Guardia & Ryan, 2000; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007).

Teacher autonomy support pertains next to the way teachers motivate and engage their students in academic activities. Teachers who are autonomy supportive recognize, welcome, and accept students' emotions, thoughts, and actions, and support their self-regulation abilities (Reeve, 2006b, 2009). They also provide children with meaningful choices, take their opinions into account, and explain why classroom activities are important or useful, which helps students develop internal motivational resources (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Reeve, 2006b, 2009). Therefore, students feel more autonomous as they sense that their behaviors are driven by their own volition and reflect their needs, values, and personal beliefs (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006; Vansteenkiste et al., 2012). Intrinsic motivation and mastery goal orientation are highly associated with students' perception of autonomy, as both these concepts stem from the students' active interest and willingness to learn (Black & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Lastly, teacher involvement is seen when teachers are attuned to students, and invest time, resources and affection in their relationships with them (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The quality of a relationship between a teacher and a student is traditionally evaluated through warmth, proximity, affection given and felt, and openness of communication, as well as a lack of conflict or negative and problematic exchanges between teacher and student (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Pianta, 2001; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). According to the SSMMD, teachers who are involved in such high-quality relationships with students will meet their need for relatedness, making students feel significantly connected and cared for (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Taylor & Ntoumanis, 2007).

Associations between teaching practices and student self-perceptions proposed in the SSMMD (Connell & Wellborn, 1991) have been

established several times. For example, many cross-sectional studies of children and adolescents found direct positive associations between teacher structure and student perceptions of competence (Mouratidis, Vansteenkiste, Michou, & Lens, 2013; Tucker et al., 2002; van Loon, Ros, & Martens, 2012). The distinct associations between teacher autonomy support and student perceptions of autonomy, as well as between teacher involvement and student perceptions of relatedness have also been demonstrated either in cross-sectional or longitudinal studies (Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012; Košir & Tement, 2014; Lavigne, Vallerand, & Miquelon, 2007; Ruzek et al., 2016; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005; Tucker et al., 2002; van Loon et al., 2012). However, only one longitudinal and two cross-sectional studies using different samples of elementary, middle, and high school students have examined the simultaneous contributions of structure, autonomy support, and involvement on the three dimensions of student self-perceptions (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008; Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2005; Zhang, Solmon, Kosma, Carson, & Xiangli, 2011). Although these studies generally support the SSMMD, the use of aggregated scores did not allow them to examine the specific contribution of each teaching practice on each self-perception. More recently, an experimental study from Guay, Valois, Falardeau, and Lessard (2016) conducted on a sample of second-grade elementary school students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds indicated that training elementary school teachers to use structure, autonomy support, and involvement in their classrooms globally led to higher autonomous motivation in students. However, their aggregated measure of teaching practices was not associated with student perceptions of competence and relatedness.

1.2. The influence of teaching practices on vulnerable students' self-perceptions

Children from low socioeconomic status (SES) families represent a particularly vulnerable group of students in terms of academic and psychosocial outcomes (McLoyd, 1998; Santiago et al., 2011; Smokowski et al., 2014; Wadsworth et al., 2008). Low SES and low family income have both been linked to lower self-perceptions (Di Domenico & Fournier, 2014; González, Swanson, Lynch, & Williams, 2016; VanTassel-Baska, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Kulieke, 1994). In addition, students from low SES families are more likely to accumulate a variety of problems, such as anxiety symptoms and low academic achievement (Smokowski et al., 2014; Wadsworth et al., 2008). In turn, both these problems have also been separately associated with lower self-perceptions of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Buyse, Verschueren, Doumen, Van Damme, & Maes, 2008; Landon, Ehrenreich, & Pincus, 2007; Marcotte, Cournoyer, Gagné, & Bélanger, 2005; Marshik, Ashton, & Algina, 2016; Messer & Beidel, 1994; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Muris & Meesters, 2002; B. C. Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Ryan, Mims, & Koestner, 1983). Even though these factors have rarely been studied together, the literature indicates that the accumulation of these different risk factors could lead to worse outcomes, as they are associated with more physical and mental health problems, as well as school dropout (Wadsworth et al., 2008). Consequently, students from disadvantaged families who present both a high level of anxiety and a low level of academic achievement have a greater risk of presenting lower self-perceptions. As such, we can suppose that these vulnerable students may benefit even more than other low SES students from teaching practices that support their competence, autonomy, and relatedness, as these practices might play an important protective role against the greater risk of academic difficulties they face. Although this hypothesis has never been tested before, some indirect evidence supports this claim.

First, as described in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development, individual characteristics will interact differently with the characteristics of the context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

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