



## To the means and beyond: Understanding variation in students' perceptions of teacher emotional support

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### ABSTRACT

Student perceptions of the classroom environment are used as a policy-relevant marker of teacher quality. Yet the influences on students' perceptions are less well understood. We examined (a) whether individual-level factors (achievement goals, perceptions of their previous classroom, and teacher ratings of ability) were associated with students' perceptions of teacher emotional support, and (b) whether classroom observations of teacher unfairness/unfriendliness predicted systematic within-classroom variation in students' reports of emotional support. Multilevel analysis of 1303 students in 80 7th grade mathematics classrooms indicated that students' perceptions of their 6th grade teacher, mastery orientation, and the teacher's perceptions of ability predicted end-of-the-year perceptions of emotional support. Although the observed level of teacher unsupportiveness did not predict mean-level of emotional support, students' perceptions of their teachers were more variable in classrooms observed as higher in unfairness/unfriendliness. Investigating heteroskedasticity highlights the importance of using methods for understanding variability in students' perceptions of the classroom.

### 1. Introduction

Students' views of their interactions with teachers and their classroom experiences more generally are increasingly used to evaluate a teacher's effectiveness (see Kane & Cantrell, 2012; Wallace, Kelcey, & Ruzek, 2016). Students' classroom climate perceptions provide unique information about a teacher's instructional practice that is difficult to glean from other sources. Yet, evidence suggests that classroom climate perceptions vary considerably among students within the same classroom (Lam, Ruzek, Schenke, Conley, & Karabenick, 2015; Miller & Murdock, 2007; Schweig, 2014), calling for more definitive research about how students form these perceptions before they can be used as policy-relevant indicators of teacher quality. For instance, since prior evidence indicates that 10 to 20 percent of the variance in students' perceptions of the classroom climate is due to differences between classrooms (and often much less; see Schenke, Lam, Conley, & Karabenick, 2015; Lam et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2016; Wallace et al., 2016), most of the variation in students' perceptions exists *within* classrooms. Accordingly, the present study examined within-classroom variation in student reports of classroom climate—a largely unexplored topic in teacher quality and educational psychology research more

broadly. We focus on students' perceptions of their teacher's unfairness and unfriendliness—a construct conceptually related to emotional support which is an important classroom climate construct consistently associated with students' academic outcomes (e.g., Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012; Ruzek et al., 2016; Schenke et al., 2015).

Early studies of student motivation placed considerable importance on individuals' subjective experiences of their environment in influencing behavior, tending to utilize students' subjective reports of climate over more “objective” measures (e.g., observations). An early manifestation of this approach was used to describe how classrooms or teachers effect change, either through *alpha press*—“the press that actually exists, as far as scientific inquiry can determine it”—or *beta press*—“the subject's own interpretation of the phenomena that he perceives” (Murray, 1938, p. 122). A further distinction describes *private* and *consensual* beta press as perceptions that are held by the target individual and those that are shared by members of that group, respectively (i.e., students in the same classroom; see Stern, Stein, & Bloom, 1956). Consistent with a social-cognitive perspective, Ryan and Grolnick (1986) described the *functional significance* of the environment—the meaning an individual ascribes to the environment—as

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being more important than measures of the actual environment, which includes reports by trained observers.

Whereas theory and empirical evidence suggest that students' personal motivation influences their classroom perceptions (see Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan, & Midgley, 2002, pp. 21–53), empirical investigations often implicitly assume that students' perceptions of their environment influence their motivation (see Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004; Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Most studies do not test for the possibility that an individual's motivation influences their perceptions (cf., Ruzek et al., 2016). In sum, a disconnect exists between earlier theoretical perspectives and contemporary practices when modeling student perception data, which does not distinguish the extent that students' reports are reflective of the classroom climate (i.e., situation-driven) versus their own tendencies or worldviews (i.e., person-driven).

We examine four potential influences on students' perceptions of the classroom climate as operationalized in this study by the dimension of emotional support: (1) students' personal motivation, (2) a teacher's perceptions of the student at the beginning of the school year (to examine how differential perceptions of students' ability relates to student perceptions of emotional support), (3) students' perceptions of their previous classroom—suggesting that students carry “experiential baggage” (Maehr & Midgley, 1991) that shapes later classroom perceptions, (4) external observations of teacher unfairness/unfriendliness, and (5) the importance of within-classroom variance of students' perceptions. Critically, we examine whether external observations (often considered a more “objective” measure of classroom climate) predict class average levels of students' perceptions of teacher emotional support.

### 1.1. Teacher emotional support

Classrooms are important contexts for supporting students' social-emotional well-being. One way classrooms can support students' social-emotional well-being is by providing an emotionally supportive classroom environment. Emotional support is a feature of teacher-student interactions that promotes students' social and emotional functioning and their learning (National Research Council, 2004; Pianta & Hamre, 2009; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). Teacher emotional support, variously measured, is a consistent predictor of important academic outcomes, including social-emotional learning (e.g., Merritt, Wanless, Rimm-Kaufman, Cameron, & Peugh, 2012; Reyes et al., 2012), motivation, and engagement (e.g., Reyes et al., 2012; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Ruzek et al., 2016; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008), and academic achievement (e.g., Roorda et al., 2011). The research evidence on emotional support permeates into educational practice, with measures of teacher and classroom quality incorporating emotional support scales (e.g., Danielson, 2011; Fergusson, 2010; Pianta, Hamre, Hayes, Mintz, & LaParo, 2011). Further, emotional support is an important predictor of such learning-related behaviors as students' help seeking (Karabenick & Sharma, 1994; Ryan & Shim, 2012; Schenke et al., 2015), their positive attitudes towards academics (Pianta et al., 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Shim, 2012) and their positive behavioral outcomes (Pianta et al., 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Though students' perceptions of emotional support are influenced by the classroom practices they are exposed to, classroom practices alone are insufficient to explain why there is considerable within-classroom variation in students' perceptions of that support. Specifically, even within the same classroom students may interpret the classroom climate (e.g., teachers' praises and goal-related messages) quite differently due to differences in students' prior classroom and other experiences (Ames, 1992; Brophy, 1981). This perspective acknowledges that within-class variability in student perceptions of the classroom climate are partially a function of students having different classroom experiences (e.g., through grouping practices, differential

teacher treatment), but also bringing different prior experiences and expectations with them to new classrooms. Thus the role of the individual in constructing meaning from and about their experiences cannot be discounted (e.g., Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988; Weinstein, 1989). This perspective supports the finding that student perceptions are quite stable across years even when students are exposed to different teachers and different classroom practices (see Wang, 2012).

### 1.2. Student motivational orientation

We use achievement goal theory—a perspective dominant in the study of academic motivation—as an indicator of students' motivation (Ames, 1992; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007). Achievement goals are situation-specific goals that individuals have for a given task (Ames, 1992; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Wolters, 2004). Two broad types of goals are identified: mastery goals and ego (or performance-oriented) goals. Students with a mastery orientation use internal standards to judge success and focus on mastering material and developing task competence. Mastery goals promote learning outcomes because students are directed towards meaningful, deep understanding (Dweck & Leggett, 1988); mastery goals are linked with higher task value, interest, effort, persistence, and intrinsic motivation (Pintrich, 2000; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Keys, Conley, Farkas, & Duncan, 2012; see Hulleman & Senko, 2010 for review). In contrast, ego-oriented goals are informed by external standards to judge success, focusing on relative ability or performance (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The outcomes associated with such goals are more equivocal as compared to mastery goals (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007).

Research on student motivation typically assumes that a student's environmental perceptions determine their motivation (Ames, 1992; Elliot, McGregor, & Gable, 1999; Murayama & Elliot, 2009; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). However, some research has demonstrated that students' motivational tendencies, such as their personal achievement goals, are related to their perceptions of the classroom (see Kaplan et al., 2002, pp. 21–53; Karabenick, 2004). Researchers have noted the need for more studies that examine the sources of student- and classroom-level variation in students' classroom perceptions (Miller & Murdock, 2007; Urdan, 2004; Wolters, 2004). In line with recommendations from Wolters (2004), this study examines the degree to which student-level differences in classroom perceptions stem from differences in teacher-student interactions or from basic beliefs students hold that may influence their classroom perceptions.

### 1.3. Teacher's perceptions of students

A teacher's perception of the student may influence how students view their teachers, which is consistent with literature on self-fulfilling prophecies (Jussim, 1989), whereby a teacher's expectations of the student, even when arbitrarily assigned, influences a students' achievement. When teachers have higher expectations for their students, students often do better than when teachers have lower expectations for their students (Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Sibley, & Rosenthal, 2015), which some have explained through the teacher's differential treatment of the student (Brophy & Good, 1970). This relationship highlights a broader idea that a teacher's perceptions of the student may influence a student's subsequent behavior and/or achievement. That said, research on self-fulfilling prophecies is equivocal (Wineburg, 1987), with small effects that may be temporary and/or reflect a teacher's accurate appraisal of a student's present ability (Jussim & Harber, 2005).

### 1.4. Using classroom observations to predict student perceptions

Observations of classrooms conducted by an external, trained rater reflect the perspective that a classroom's climate is a measurable shared

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