

Running Head: SAFE SOCIAL CLIMATE BOOSTS ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Does a Safe Social Climate Boost Academic Achievement?

A Discussion of Literature Demonstrating the Relationship Between Peer Aggression, School  
Connectedness, Pro-Social Skill Development, and Academic Achievement.

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### Abstract

The hypothesized positive correlation between school climate and academic achievement is supported through a review of literature examining the relationship between academic achievement and (a) addressing peer aggression, (b) increasing school connectedness, and (c) developing pro-social skills. The results from 22 research studies and scholarly reviews demonstrate significant reciprocal relationships between peer aggression, school connectedness, and achievement. Pro-social skill development also shows promising influence as a predictor of academic success and a tool for bolstering current achievement levels. These conclusions strongly support a positive relationship between school climate and academic achievement. Recommendations are for school administrators and policy makers to include safe social climate initiatives as an effective strategy for increasing student achievement.

## Does a Safe Social Climate Boost Academic Achievement?

### A Discussion of Literature Demonstrating the Relationship Between Peer Aggression, School Connectedness, Pro-Social Skill Development, and Academic Achievement.

A positive and safe social climate within the school can yield a number of positive corollary effects including, but not limited to: perceived safety, graduation rates, school connectedness, academic achievement, student motivation, teacher retention and satisfaction. (Basch, 2010; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005; National School Climate Council, 2007; Yoon, Barton, & Taiariol, 2004). Negative corollary effects of a safe school climate include: decreased teacher-student conflict, teacher victimization, student victimization, delinquency, absenteeism, disciplinary referrals, and student risk behavior engagement (Basch, 2010; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005; Stipek & Miles 2008; Wilson, 2004; Woods & Wolke, 2004).

On a basic level, it seems like a relatively logical notion: When students feel safe, they are more able to pay attention in class, stay engaged, and garner motivation for going school thus bolstering academic achievement. However, as this education specialist in the area of aggression and school climate has been finding out recently, not many schools and even less government-run education departments and agencies are willing to place any stock in an argument stating that in today's standards and achievement driven educational milieu, there are grounds for an aggression prevention program to be an efficient use of school minutes and also claim to increase student achievement. While it cannot be argued that the driving objective of any education system is to prepare students to meet rigorous, outcome driven standards, the purpose of this literature review is to posit that a necessary prerequisite for academic achievement is the establishment and maintenance of a safe social climate within a school. To support the

hypothesis, this review will examine three different elements necessary for a safe social climate and their relationships with academic achievement: (a) addressing peer aggression, (b) increasing school connectedness, and (c) developing pro-social skills.

### *What Does a Safe Social Climate Within a School Look Like?*

According to The Ophelia Project (2006), “A safe social climate is an environment where people are protected, respected, encouraged and held accountable for their actions. It also fosters inclusion, healthy relationships and civility” (“What We Believe,” para. 2). Safe social climates list specific positive normative beliefs that are embraced by all members and regulated through self- and peer-accountability. Prevention and intervention strategies are developed to reduce aggression and promote respect and civility. Members who violate the normative beliefs are aware of the consequences that may exist for failure to maintain a safe social climate and then take steps necessary to ensure other members of the group that the violation will be avoided in the future.

Schools take great care to establish rules and policies in an attempt to govern the climate of the student body and personnel. School climate is broadly defined as, “the quality and character of school life” (National School Climate Council, 2007, p. 5). School climate is a result of the normative beliefs within a school that drive attitudes, decision making processes, leadership styles, teaching practices, and learning strategies among the administration, faculty, staff, student body, and parents within a school system. Basch (2010) recommended,

To the extent that the school’s social climate is characterized by respect, empathy, cooperation, and tolerance of differences and different opinions, students will be more likely to feel connected and to succeed academically and socially. The climate should create expectations for high academic standards, establish acceptable norms and rules of conduct,

[...] and create and enforce fair policies for dealing with aggression if and when it occurs.

The climate should also stress the importance of and exemplify empathy and caring in interpersonal interactions between and among students and school staff (p. 35).

Thus, safe social climates within schools encompass a number of different elements, all of which directly influence the quality and character of student life. Cohen and Geier (2010) suggested four essential areas of focus for school climates, (a) safety, (b) relationships, (c) teaching and learning, and (d) the institutional environment. Given the above definitions of a safe social climate and school climate, it can be generalized that a safe social climate within a school embodies positive normative beliefs that encourage respect and civility among all members, develops leadership and personal growth, embraces diversity, and advocates accountability. Three initiatives that schools can embrace to help bring about a safe social climate are (a) addressing peer aggression, (b) increasing school connectedness, and (c), developing pro-social skills.

### *Addressing Peer Aggression*

Stipek and Miles (2008) have suggested that, “aggressive behavior probably affects achievement in more than one way, and that the relationship between aggression and achievement is very likely reciprocal” (p. 1741). In this chicken and the egg style conundrum, researchers have sought to determine what comes first, poor academic achievement or peer aggression and how these variables interact to influence each other. Glew et al. (2005) concluded that overall achievement scores for bullies, victims, and bully-victims (someone who experiences both roles) were significantly lower when compared to bystanders. Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, and Perry (2003) found that academically poor students (averaging “D” grades or less) were victimized more average or proficient students. Whether the poorly performing students are

aggressing because they are poor students or the students are poorly performing because they are aggressed upon, it is clear there is some relationship between aggression and academic performance.

Additionally, student self-reports have acknowledged this link noting that aggression, including cyberbullying, in and out of school can affect school behavior and performance (Nansel et al., 2001; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, and Perry (2003) asserted, “Young people mistreated by peers may not want to be in school and may thereby miss out on the benefits of school connectedness as well as educational advancement” (p. 315). What is suggested through these studies is that peer aggression is not isolated to a single situation or context and extends into all aspects of students’ everyday lives including achievement.

A commonly hypothesized link between aggression and achievement is the role of student engagement. A student who is distracted by aggression cannot pay attention in school or be engaged in learning activities and as a result achievement suffers (Basch, 2010; Cohen 2006; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Glew et al., 2005; Klem & Connel, 2004; National School Climate Council, 2007; Stipek & Miles, 2008; Woods & Wolke, 2004). Bishop et al. (2005) specifically noted that “... since harassment influenced engagement and homework completion it has indirect, negative effects on GPA” (p. 249). As the level of student engagement drops with increased peer aggression, academic proficiency suffers.

Other sources (Klem & Connel, 2004; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003) have posited that aggression leads to withdrawal and/or absenteeism that in turn are demonstrated to be negative influences on achievement. While again, the route may not be direct, there is evidence that levels of peer aggression effects these other critical elements that have direct and well evidenced influence on student achievement.

Engagement and absenteeism may not be the only bridges between aggression and achievement. In analyzing the social structures of classrooms, Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, and McKay (2006) found that aggressive students who increased the social status and popularity experienced significant declines in both unexplained absences and GPA. Further exploring the context in which peer relationships and experiences with aggression influenced academic behaviors, Schwartz, Gorman, Dodge, Pettit, and Bates (2008) found:

Peer victimization was predictive of declines in GPA over two school years for children who did not form friendships with peers who were below the classroom mean on aggression.... aggressive friends can have negative implications for the functioning of frequently bullied children” (pp. 10-11).

Simply put, victimized students with aggressive friends tend to perform worse over time compared to students who have nice friends.

While the relationship between levels of aggression among students and academic achievement can be subject to a number of inter-related factors including, but not limited to, engagement, attendance, and relationships with aggressive peers, it is evident that there is a correlation warranting the attention of school personnel who wish increase student achievement. The degree to which aggression may negatively influence the performance of students should be considered among school administrators as they analyze efficacy of academic programs within their schools.

### *Increasing School Connectedness*

According to Blum and Libbey (2004a), “school connectedness refers to the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals” (p. 231). In the “Wingspread Declaration on School Connections,” the criteria for positive outcomes

of school connectedness were listed and agreed upon by a group of educational leaders and policy directors who convened to review and discuss the body of literature on school connectedness (Blum & Libbey, 2004b). The first impact of increased school connectedness is academic performance, followed closely by incidents of fighting, bullying, and vandalism. Firstly, this highlights yet another corollary link between aggression and achievement. The reciprocal relationships and interactions between aggression, achievement, and connectedness are illustrated in Figure 1. Secondly, this lays ground for a case that developing a safe school climate and increasing school connectedness can result in higher academic achievement. The National School Climate Council (2007) asserted that “school connectedness is a powerful predictor of adolescent health and academic outcomes” (p. 6).

As with aggression and achievement, “It seems that there are reciprocal relationships between the psychological climate and safety of schools and students’ feelings of connectedness” (Basch, 2010, p. 34). Simply, increasing connectedness makes the school feel safer and a safe school increases connectedness. Additionally, the same corollary effects of student engagement, attendance, and the quality of peer relationships that were noted in linking aggression and achievement are also noteworthy in linking connectedness and achievement (see Bishop et al., 2004; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004; National School Climate Council, 2007).

### *Developing Pro-social Skills*

Pro-social skills such as storytelling, role playing, emotional literacy, empathy, perspective taking, civility, and conflict resolution are core components of a safe social climates. Effective development, maintenance, and refinement of pro-social skills can have profound influences on student academic achievement. As a key element in many social-emotional learning [SEL]

constructs, pro-social skill development has been a predictive factor in academic success, a tool to augment student achievement, and a protective mechanism against delinquency and failure.

The following conclusions strongly support this argument:

- “Early prosocial behavior strongly predicts subsequent level of academic achievement, even after controlling for variation in early academic achievement” (Caprar, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000, p. 304).
- “The average [student] would demonstrate an 11-percentile gain in achievement if they had participated in an SEL [Social Emotional-Learning] program. ... Effects nevertheless remained statistically significant for a minimum of 6 months after the intervention” (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, 2011).
- “Even if academic performance is the primary concern, there may be value in investing time and effort in children’s social experiences and skills. Positive social skills and relationships might serve as important protective mechanisms against academic failure...” (Stipek & Miles, 2008, p. 1740).

As mentioned by Stipek and Miles pro-social skills, while not typically an area of direct instruction especially as schools focus heavily on academic measures of success, are a valuable asset to any educational institution. Payton and colleagues (2008) completed an extensive review of 317 different studies of initiatives in SEL and pro-social skill development. Their conclusions strongly support SEL initiatives:

Although some educators argue against implementing this type of holistic programming because it takes valuable time away from core academic material, our findings suggest that SEL programming not only does not detract from academic performance but actually increases students’ performance on standardized tests and grades. ... The average student

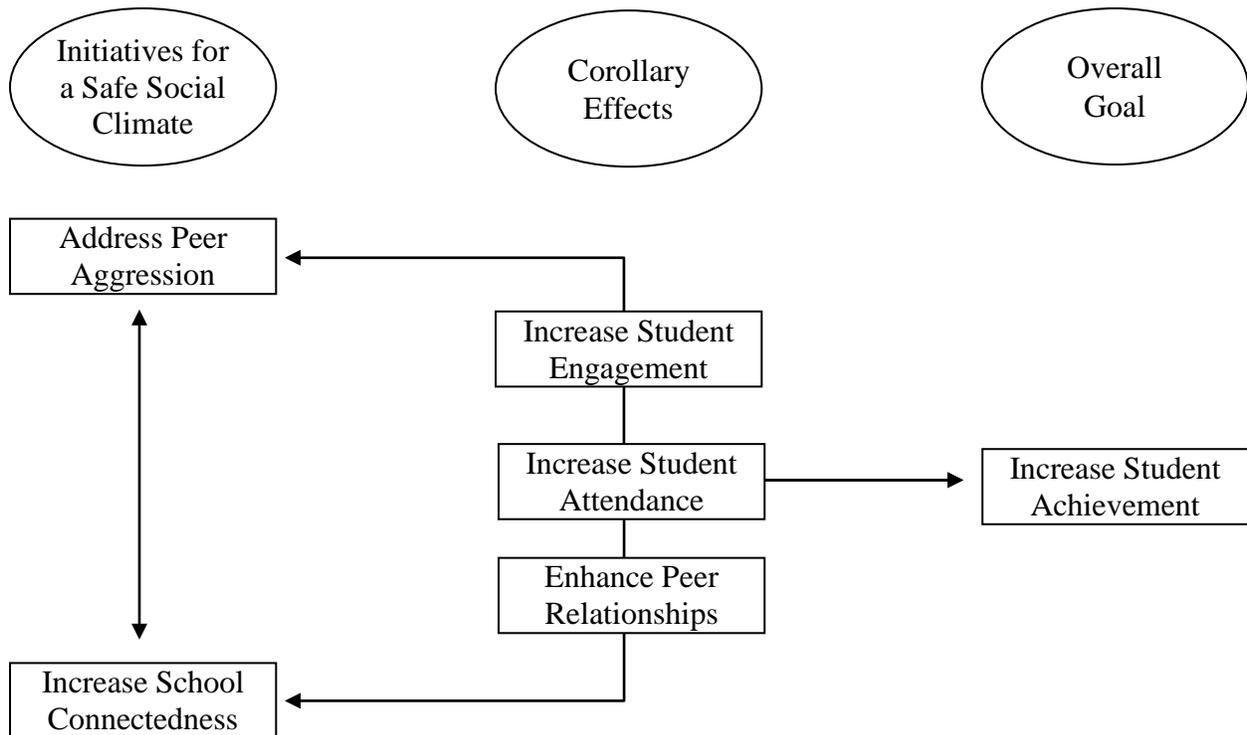
in an SEL intervention class gained 11 to 17 percentile points on academic test scores compared to the average student in a control class (Payton et al. 2008, p. 16).

This type of gain cannot be ignored as proof positive that SEL and pro-social skill development are effective tools in raising student achievement.

### *Conclusion and Recommendations*

While the reasoning for specific relationships may be unclear or hard to pinpoint in a linear fashion, the reciprocity and corollary effects among aggression, connectedness, engagement, absenteeism, peer relationships, and achievement have been demonstrated to be statistically significant and reliable. These elements, combined with the development of pro-social skills all point to the strong suggestion that a safe social climate does, in fact, support and improve student achievement. Yoon, Barton, and Taiariol (2004) asserted, “Creating a school environment that guarantees physical safety and psychological security is an important task to promote academic, social, and emotional competences” (p. 314).

It is my recommendation that school administrators and policy makers effectively initiate efforts to establish safe social climates within their school. Not only does a safe social climate foster a supportive and inclusive environment, it also fosters an academically thriving student body. In the current state of American education driven by standardization and high stakes testing, it is important to not overlook or dismiss the benefits of taking the care to deliberately structure and maintain a safe social climate within schools. School administrators and faculty need specific training in safe school initiatives. Students also need instruction in pro-social skill development and all members of the school community need to establish positive normative beliefs as well as mechanism for maintaining accountability and ensuring prolonged success in a safe school climate.



*Figure 1. Illustration of the reciprocal relationships between aggression, school connectedness, and achievement. Addressing peer aggression and increasing school connectedness influence each other in a reciprocal relationship in that focusing on one initiative invariably yields results in both areas. Successfully addressing each of these elements has also resulted in significant increases in the corollary effects of student engagement, attendance, and peer relationships. All variables have demonstrated an ability to generate increases in overall student achievement levels as well as reciprocally increasing the other associated variables.*

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