Working Paper:

Climate, Culture & Community: Building a Positive School Climate for Young Adolescents

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Introduction

How do young adolescents experience their school and their place in it? Two key ideas are often discussed in answering this question – school climate and school culture. *School climate* refers to the *attitude* of a school and its effect on people's experiences of school life (i.e., interactions, relationships, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures between students, teachers, and administrators; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). S*chool culture,* on the other hand, can be thought of as the *personality* of the school and refers to the way teachers and other staff members work together based on the implicit set of beliefs, values, and assumptions they share. Much research has shown that school climate and culture are profoundly important to the social, emotional, and academic success of its students and staff (Kuperminc et al., 1997; Thapa et al., 2013). However, school climate has typically been viewed as more malleable: it is much simpler to change the attitude (i.e., climate) of an organization than it is to change its personality (i.e., culture). For this reason, this chapter hones in primarily on school climate, rather than culture, as a key focus for redesigning middle schools. This is consistent with recent state and national policies (e.g., *Every Student Succeeds Act*) reflecting a movement toward recognizing school climate as a distinct measure of school quality as part of their school improvement and accreditation systems (Hough, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2017).

As noted in Chapter 1, early adolescence is a remarkable developmental period for time for shaping positive youth trajectories. During early adolescence, students often undergo school transitions, and many students experience dramatic changes in academic performance and social‑emotional well‑being (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). As a result, empirical research has highlighted the importance of supportive developmental social settings, such as classrooms and schools during early adolescence (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Cappella et al. 2013; Delany-Brumsey et al.2014; Eccles and Midgley 1989; McCoy et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2013).

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments adopted a comprehensive model for understanding and evaluating school climate. This model was developed by a national panel of research and experts and includes the following domains (see figure 1):

- **Engagement**. Strong relationships between students, teachers, families, and schools and strong connections between schools and the broader community.

- **Safety**. Schools and school-related activities where students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and controlled-substance use.

- **Environment**. Appropriate facilities, well-managed classrooms, available school-based health supports, and a clear, fair disciplinary policy.

This model is inclusive of all grade levels and types of school settings. The current paper is framed after this model to examine the role of school climate and culture in ensuring the success of middle school students.
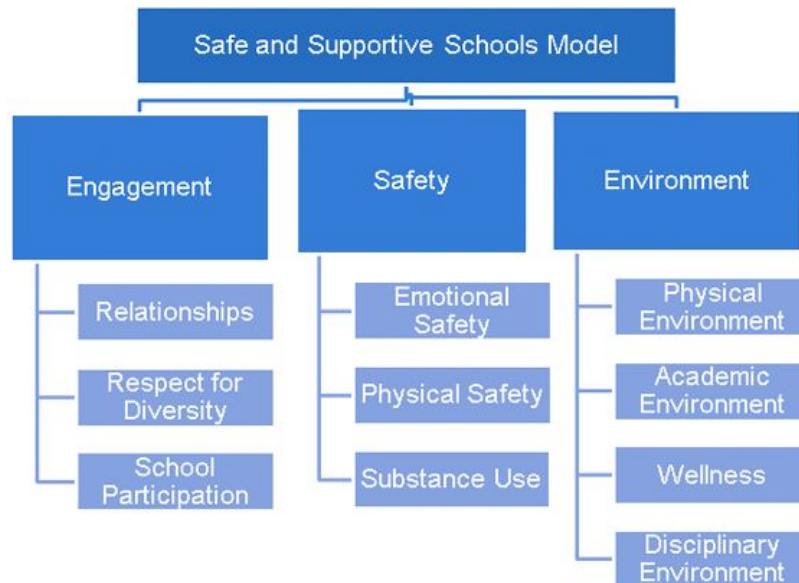
Engagement

Student Engagement

Student engagement is considered a malleable psychological state with behavioral, emotional, and cognitive features (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Student engagement is also considered to be a "nested" developmental process, meaning that students can engage in a specific learning activity in one moment in time, but this instance of engagement occurs in the context of how engaged they feel in their classroom, which is shaped by how engaged they feel at their school, and in turn their community (i.e., afterschool programs, church, extracurricular activities), all of which shifts over time with developmental changes in early adolescence. As such, student engagement is often viewed as the external manifestation of dynamic, motivational processes (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012) that can be facilitated or derailed by school and classroom environments (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Specifically, middle schools can motivate students to engage at school by providing resources and supports for meeting their core psychological needs. These core psychological needs include needs for *belonging* (i.e., to be connected to others), *competence* (i.e., to feel effective in one's interactions with the world), and *autonomy* (i.e., to experience oneself as the source of action; Deci & Ryan, 2001). Middle schools can meet these core psychological needs in the context of caring, warm, and supportive relationships with adults and peers (meeting belonging needs), structure and clear expectations (meeting competency needs), and meaningful opportunities for youth agency (meeting autonomy needs). An important critique of the early adolescence developmental research on student engagement, however, is that there is a lack of focus on processes that lead to disparate outcomes among historically marginalized youth (García Coll et al., 1996; Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Belonging. Middle schools seeking to support students' sense of belonging at school can focus efforts on proactive community-building and opportunities for building authentic student-teacher and peer-peer relationships one-on-one. One promising strategy for this can be universally applied in

classrooms through daily implementation of "Proactive Circles" (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). In Proactive Circles, students and the teacher face one another in a safe space to engage in open and honest conversations about topics related to positive and negative recent events, academics, social-emotional concerns, and the classroom context itself. During these circles, teachers and students practice the use of "Affective Questions" and "Affective Statements" which scaffold participants' engagement in appropriate expression of emotion and build a sense of connectedness and shared responsibility (Gregory et al., 2018). In the context of these circles, it is important to be sensitive and responsive to potential differences and similarities in participants' racial, ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds, applying principles of inclusion. Some research suggests that students from marginalized backgrounds may experience more discrimination in more diverse school settings (Seaton & Yip, 2009). Therefore, it is possible for some youth to feel social distance or exclusion based on identity characteristics that are not shared with their peers in the context of these circles. However, when well facilitated, more diverse circles may have potential to provide a forum for young adolescents to co-construct healthy racial and ethnic identities with peers, as discussed in Chapter 1 (Rivas-Drake et. al., 2017). Efforts to promote teachers' use of identity safe, culturally responsive, and equity-focused teaching practices may be promising strategies for bridging these experiential gaps in middle schools (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013).

Competence. Feeling a sense of mastery and competence academically and socially is critical to young adolescent success, particularly in navigating the uncertainties and instability that occurs in the transition to middle school. Students who feel academically capable have been able to engage in learning activities and achieve at higher levels during the transition to middle school (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Madjar & Chohat, 2017). Middle schools can support students meeting competency needs through provision of classroom goal-setting opportunities focused on mastery, challenging learning activities, academic tasks set with high expectations, and clear feedback on academic performance (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). The My Teaching Partner-Secondary intervention has been shown to improve teacher

–student interaction qualities in these domains, yielding improvements in student achievement in a randomized controlled trial (Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011).

Autonomy. What does youth agency look like in middle school? Empowering school settings for young adolescents scaffold opportunities for incrementally increasing access to shared power and decision-making, meaningful contribution to community, and mutual goal achievement (Kirk, Lewis, Brown, Karibo, Scott, & Park, 2017). One example of an empowerment model that has been applied more in high school contexts but could benefit sexual minority youth in middle schools are gay-straight alliances (GSAs). GSAs are school-based, youth-led clubs that partner sexual minority youth with and hetero/cis students in order to interrupt institutional and peer group heterosexism and support positive school climate experiences among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth and their allies (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) is another model with potential utility for supporting youth agency in middle school. YPAR can be used as a problem-solving technique that draws on adolescent expertise to improve school (or community) conditions that affect the lives, development, and well-being of youth (Ozer, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2018).

Family Engagement

Family engagement is a "process that seeks to change the institution one relationship at a time" (Soo Hong, 2011, p.50). Thus, family engagement is about so much more than parent-teacher conferences and homework support. Much of the scant literature related to family engagement has focused on increasing one component of family engagement, parent involvement. This research has highlighted the importance of parental involvement, if children are to do well in school (Ferrara, 2009; Gibson & Jefferson, 2006; Mapp, Johnson, Strickland, & Meza, 2008). For example, in a study of low-income children who were followed from birth through age 23, Englund and colleagues (2008) found that

parental involvement in middle school can positively impact future high school graduation (Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008).

While limited research documents *how to* successfully engage parents and families in the school environment, Hill and Tyson (2009) analyzed research findings from a collection of studies that describes what specific *types* of parental involvement are related to achievement in middle school. Through the analysis of data from 50 studies, Hill and Tyson found that parent involvement in the form of academic socialization was most consistently positively related to middle school student achievement. Academic socialization as related to parent involvement includes "communicating parental expectations for education and its value or utility, linking schoolwork to current events, fostering educational and occupational aspirations, discussing learning strategies with children, and making preparations and plans for the future (Hill & Tyson, 2009, p.742)." Interestingly, it is important to note that parental involvement in the form of homework assistance and supervising or checking homework was not consistently related with achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Though not developed specifically for middle schools parents, the Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT) program is a family-focused program for children and adolescents at risk for behavior problems and their families. BSFT fosters parental leadership, parental involvement, family communication, and culturally sensitive parenting skills. Studies of the BSFT has shown significant effects on improving adolescents' self-concept and self-control, the program also helps develop more positive and effective parenting practices (Szapocznik, Schwartz, Muir, & Brown, 2012).

Community Involvement and Engagement

In addition to family engagement, what happens before and after school in the greater school community is also important to middle school success. In general, community involvement in schools refers to the connection between schools and businesses, and formal and informal organizations and institutions in a community. Facilitating involvement of community organizations with schools has a

multitude of benefits to students, families, and the whole school (Sanders, 2001). For middle grades in particular, community involvement can help ease the transition period for students grappling with issues of authority, independence, and changing relationships with their families (Rutherford & Billig, 1995). For example, before- and after- school (i.e., out of school time) community programs provide students with additional academic programs (e.g., reading or math focused programs), specialty programs (e.g., sports teams, STEM, arts enrichment), and multipurpose programs that provide an array of activities (e.g., 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs; https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/ost.htm). Parents and families gain additional access to parenting workshops, GED and other adult education classes, family counseling, and family fun and learning nights around the community. Finally, the entire school often benefits from beautification projects or the donation of school equipment and materials or activities for school staff, such as professional development and classroom assistance (Sanders, 2003). Moreover, research has shown that out of school time programs have significant positive effects on middle school students' achievement in math and reading (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Lauer et al., 2006). Unfortunately, participation in afterschool programming declines in adolescence as teens get more autonomy in their after-school choices (Carver & Iruka, 2006).

Safety

Physical Safety

Due to recent and notable school shootings, the physical safety of students in schools is a specific area of concern for the public. However, national violence statistics show that schools are very safe (everytownresearch.org). School shootings account for a very small proportion of all gun violence each year, .05% (everytownresearch.org). Though there has been national discussion regarding increasing physical safety measures in schools, there is *little* evidence that many of these suggested measures (i.e., metal detectors, security cameras, or armed personnel) in schools are effective in preventing school

violence (Addington, 2009; Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010). In fact, research has shown that their presence negatively impacts students' perceptions of safety and even increases fear among some students (Bachman, Randolph, & Brown, 2011; Schreck & Miller, 2003). In addition, studies suggest that restrictive school security measures have the potential to harm school learning environments (Beger, 2003). It is also worth noting that while schools are predominately safe, research does show that student perceptions of violence occurring in communities and neighborhoods surrounding schools, can affect their attendance and academic performance (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Milam, Furr-Holden, & Leaf, 2011). Thus, community efforts to reduce violence and ensure the safe passage of students to and from school would contribute to adolescents perceptions of physical safety.

In another effort to increase the physical safety of young adolescents in middle schools, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Secret Service (Fein et al., 2002), the American Psychological Association (2013), and other national organizations have endorsed behavior threat assessment as an effective violence prevention strategy. "Threat assessment is a systematic approach to violence prevention in which threats are evaluated on a case-by-case basis to identify individuals who pose a serious threat of violence (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015, p.1)." In middle schools specifically, research shows that the use of a threat assessment approach to violence prevention is associated with lower levels of student aggression and a more positive school climate (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015). Threat assessment is also an attractive practice because it can serve as an alternative to typical disciplinary practices that are often biased towards students of color.

Emotional Safety

Everyday interactions with peers and adults in the school building are also an area to focus safety efforts. In middle school in particular, increased prevalence rates of bullying and aggression coupled with adolescent focus on peer relationships can threaten students' physical and emotional safety (Ttofi & Farrington, 2008). Persistent bullying has also been shown to have a negative impact on adolescents'

ability to learn (Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; Vaillancourt, Brittain, McDougall, & Duku, 2013).

Research shows that, across grade levels, the best way to address bullying is to stop it before it starts and

to create a school environment where rules and policies clearly describe how students are expected to

treat each other and convey that bullying is not acceptable (Opinas & Horne, 2006; Swearer, Espelage,

Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Training school staff and students to be able to accurately identify

bullying and effectively respond to bullying increases sustainability of bullying prevention efforts.

Additional recognized strategies for bullying prevention include intervening immediately, separating the

kids involved, and listening without blaming (stopbullying.gov). However, especially for early

adolescence, awareness of social status, sensitivity to dis/respect and insecurities related to puberty may

result in differences in the form and cause of bullying during this developmental period (Yeager, Fong,

Lee, & Espelage, 2015). Thus, a number of evidenced-based bullying prevention programs exist

specifically for middle schools (e.g., Second Step, Kiva, Roots of Empathy, Bully-Proof your School, the

Making Choices program, and Olweus Bullying Prevention Program; Ttofi & Farrington, 2008; Vreeman

& Carroll, 2007).

Frequently, bullying and harassment is directed at specific identity groups in schools (Advocates

for Children, Inc. 2005). If left unchecked, these behaviors will result in the social exclusion of and

discrimination against ethnic minorities, immigrants, the handicapped, LGBTQ and gender

nonconforming youth, or other groups. Therefore, preventing prejudice and negative intergroup attitudes

is assumed to be an appropriate strategy for reducing these problems and promoting more positive

intergroup relations, tolerance, and justice among students (Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014). Furthermore,

as noted in Chapter 1, early adolescence is a time when identity formation is occurring; adolescents may

be particularly attuned to the salience of gender and race or ethnicity. Coupled with the increasing

diversity in our schools, there is an urgent need to promote positive intergroup attitudes among students

and staff. Interventions aiming to promote intergroup attitudes and relations can be traced back to the

integrative school systems movement in the United States (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). More recently, while interventions have largely focused their efforts on elementary school children, these interventions have largely shown that psychological and education training programs for children and adolescents are successful at promoting intergroup attitudes and prejudice prevention (Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014). For adults in the school building, there is less evidence of successful programming (Bottiani et al., 2017). Promising interventions like GREET-STOP-PROMPT (Cook et al., 2018) and Double Check (Bradshaw et al., 2018) have shown some preliminary effects in reducing teacher bias, but more evidence is needed to verify their long term impact on adult intergroup attitudes and prejudice.

Finally, substance use can be viewed as a threat to the safety of schools. As described in Chapter 1, adolescence is a critical brain developmental window in which emotional dysregulation, increased reward sensitivity, and sensation seeking contributes to increased risk for substance use and addiction (Shadur & Lejuez, 2015). Monitoring the Future national survey data in 2017 showed that approximately 6% of 8th grade students reported past-year use of illicit drugs, other than marijuana (Miech et al., 2017). Life challenges associated with transitioning from childhood to adolescence can be difficult, particularly for youth with serious emotional disturbances and/or substance use conditions. Mental health challenges and substance use, including underage drinking and the illegal use of prescription and over-the-counter medications, significantly affect the health and well-being of middle school youth.

School-based programs to prevent substance use are common and effective because schools offer access to nearly all young people and classrooms provide an excellent setting for implementing preventive interventions (Botvin & Griffin, 2016). Among substance use programming, research shows the strongest evidence for comprehensive skills-building preventive interventions that address an array of shared psychosocial risk and protective factors associated with onset and escalation of substance use and related risk behaviors (such as aggression, delinquency, and school dropout; Botvin & Griffin, 2016). However, a recent systematic review of middle school-based substance use prevention programs revealed

a dearth of programs showing statistically significant results for schools implementing substance abuse

curricula (Flynn, Falco, & Hocini, 2015). The only significant findings were from Project Alert (Ringwalt

et al., 2009), a normative and resistance skills education program, which showed a significant reduction in

30-day use of alcohol in the intervention versus control schools.

Environment

Structural Environment

Research on school climate demonstrates the powerful effects of the physical and social structures

of the school on student achievement, positive behavior and development, and well-being in early

adolescence (Lindstrom Johnson, 2009; Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008). One critical consideration in

the environment of a school is grade configuration. Research for decades has consistently indicated that

students experience declines in engagement and achievement in school-to-school transitions from the

elementary to middle grades, as compared to students transitioning to middle grades within the same

school, as in K-8 school configurations (Alspaugh, 1998). School-to-school transitions to the middle

grades has been associated with disruptions in academic competence development and motivation, and

increased stress and depressive symptoms (Rudolph et al., 2001). Moreover, early adolescence in

particular appears to be a suboptimal time for a school transition; research suggests kids are better off in

the short- and long-term when such transitions are delayed, as in K-8 schools. For example, one study

found that earlier school transitions were linked to longer term negative impacts on GPA, whereas later

transitions had less lasting impacts (Blythe, Simmons, Carlton-Ford, 1983). This is consistent with the

bulk of the research, where many researchers see value and benefit in eliminating the middle school

transition altogether in favor of K-8 school configurations (Schwerdt & West, 2013). Other aspects of

how middle schools are structured can impact healthy development in early adolescence. For example,

early adolescent wellness can be facilitated in middle grades by setting school start times later in the

morning (e.g., closer to 9:00 than 7:00 in the morning; Wolfson, Spaulding, Dandrow, & Baroni, 2007),

which can support students in getting their recommended 8.5-9.5 hours of sleep (Carskadon, 2011).

Physical Environment

The school physical environment is another aspect of school climate that shapes not only whether

students have basic life needs met each day (i.e., hygiene, food security), but also their healthy

psychological development. Particularly as middle school students are entering a developmental stage

focused on their personal, academic, and social identities, and the complexity and intersectionality of

these identities, it is important to recognize the way in which the physical environment of a school can

shape how students feel in the space, what messages the environment communicates to young adolescents

about their identity, and its influence on their interactions with teachers and peers (Zandvliet &

Broekhuizen, 2017). For example, school buildings that support middle school students' (and their

teachers') basic daily needs for intact, clean, and sanitary facilities, safe drinking water, comfortable

temperatures, food security (i.e., through non-stigmatizing breakfast and lunch programs; Bhatia, Jones,

& Reicker, 2011) may communicate to students that their basic needs and the essential conditions for their

learning matter to the adults responsible for their care and education. On the other hand, in schools and

school districts where students' daily living needs may be threatened (e.g., as in Detroit Public Schools

lead contamination water shutdown in fall of 2018), it can signal to students during a sensitive period of

their identity development that there are limits on the extent to which they are valued (i.e., impacting

self-esteem), which in turn can impact the way in which students attribute meaning to various aspects of

themselves and their motivations regarding choices they can make at school (Spencer, 1997). Meeting

students' physiological needs in early adolescence can be seen, as in Maslow's (1954) influential theory,

as a prerequisite for meeting other needs and establishing the necessary conditions for learning.

Middle school students also have unique developmental needs for physical, emotional, and

identity safety that may be well-supported through resources within the school environment. For example,

school-based health centers may be well-positioned to support young adolescents through comprehensive primary, mental health, and reproductive health care and psychoeducation, particularly as they undergo a sensitive period of transition in their neuroendocrine and reproductive systems, as well as visible and concrete experiential changes (i.e., body morphology, menarche, pubarche, voice changes), that can heighten vulnerability to peer social constructions of puberty and affect their sexual and mental health as well as gender identity and sexual orientation development, as noted in Chapter 1. Given higher enrollment and utilization of school-based health centers among Black students and students without health insurance (Wade, Mansour, Guo, Huentelman, Line, & Keller, 2008), their presence at middle schools has been considered to promote health and health equity through increased access to care (McNall, Lichty, & Mavis, 2010); however, there is a paucity of research in particular on mental health and reproductive services offered by school-based health centers (Mason-Jones, Crisp, Momberg, Koech, De Koker, & Mathews, 2012), and there is little research examining peer mediation and peer counseling models for bullying and violence prevention, conflict mediation, and mental health promotion that may be particularly salient for middle schoolers (Cowie & Smith, 2009; Daunic, Smith, Rowand Robinson, Miller, & Landry, 2000).

Social Environment

Research on school climate in early adolescence also suggests the importance of clear and supportive discipline policies and practices for meeting young adolescents' core psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Clear, proactive, and positively-stated rules and consequences are a necessary foundation for supportive school discipline in middle schools. Traditional school discipline paradigms continue to be premised largely on exclusion (i.e., removal from classrooms and schools through office disciplinary referrals and suspensions) as a punishment to deter future misbehavior, despite consensus in the field that these tactics are ineffective (APA, 2008). In middle school in particular, exclusionary tactics may undermine a needed sense of belonging as young adolescents navigate their social positioning and

identity development. From a racial identity development perspective (Phinney, 1989), it is also important to consider the harmful effects of racialized utilization of exclusionary discipline practices (i.e., the Black-White discipline gap; Anyon et al., 2016; Bottiani et al., 2017; Voight et al., 2016). Frameworks for promoting positive and supportive school discipline as non-exclusionary alternatives include Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS, Sugai & Horner, 2002) and restorative practices (Gregory et al., 2018), which have been shown to reduce the use of exclusionary practices, although they have not been shown to significantly close racial gaps in school discipline (Bradshaw et al., 2011; Gregory et al., 2018). Recommendations for addressing these gaps particularly in middles schools may be to draw upon young adolescents' burgeoning sense of meaningful opportunities and autonomy by tapping students themselves to help shape and influence supportive discipline practices in their schools (Day-Vines et al., 2008), potentially applying YPAR models discussed in the Engagement section of this chapter. In addition, teacher professional development and coaching to directly address bias during disciplinary encounters in the classroom and promote culturally responsive teaching are promising practices (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Cook et al., 2018).

A key challenge in improving the environment as we reimagine middle schools, however, is that the essentials of a positive school environment are often contingent upon ecological factors, systems, and resources beyond local control. For example, school funding shortfalls are often driven by property tax-based school funding models, as discussed in greater depth in Chapter X. School physical environments commonly reflect the conditions and norms of their surrounding neighborhoods. For example, it may be more likely to find schools with trash on the floors in neighborhoods where littering is normative (USDOE, 2018). Broken windows theories of neighborhood disorder (e.g., Wilson & Kelling, 1992) suggest that people will infer lower norms for appropriate behavior from visible signs of lower levels of investment in the area (i.e., the presence of litter, broken windows, graffiti, cigarette butts, substance use paraphernalia, and other tangible signs of deterioration). Research applying broken

windows theory in 33 urban public middle schools in Maryland found that physical indicators of disorder were directly linked to social disorder (i.e., fighting among students, physical abuse of teachers, possession of weapons, bullying behaviors, arson, and substance abuse; Plank, Bradshaw, & Young, 2009), even when controlling for other factors related to social cohesion.

This research suggests the potential benefits of interventions to clean, repair, and restore physical spaces at school. For example, research applying principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED; Cozens, 2008) suggests that violence incidence can be lowered through intervention to improve the physical space. In middle schools, these improvements may include student- and community-led restoration and repairs, space design to increase natural monitoring and reduce anonymity, and enhancements to students' sense of ownership of spaces identified as dangerous "hot spots" (in lieu of imposition of external controls such as police and cameras; Astor & Meyer, 2001). One way to enhance students' sense of ownership of spaces that may be particularly effective in middle schools is through youth engagement in solutions to reclaim such spaces. For example, cultivation of community gardens (Berezowitz et al., 2015, Ozer, 2007), presence of youth art in halls and stairwells, and commissioning of youth and community-led murals and other permanent artwork for the school may be promising strategies (Wilson, 2018). The extent to which it is possible to invest in additional physical resources and facilities to support the whole child, including their physical activity (e.g., playing fields, natatorium, track; Davison & Lawson, 2006) and artistic expression (e.g., theater/auditorium, musical instruments, audio/visual equipment) this can further promote educational attainment and healthy development (Lewellen et al., 2015; Summerset-Ringgold et al., 2015).

Conclusion

School climate is a critical and malleable feature of middle school life that affects the extent to which early adolescents engage whole-heartedly in learning. Positive and healthy school climates can support students' core psychological needs for emotional connection to peers and adults in the building,

competency development and a sense of mastery as they learn, and their growing sense of independence and autonomy as they transition towards adolescence. Three school climate domains of engagement, safety, and environment were highlighted in this chapter, along with evidence-based and promising interventions that have potential to improve school climate during this critical developmental period.

Key Takeaways & Implications for Practice

- School climate is nationally recognized as a distinct measure of school quality and has effects on the interactions, relationships, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures between students, teachers, and administrators.

- Middle schools can increase student engagement in school by supporting their sense of belonging, feelings of competence, and increasing student opportunities for autonomy.

- While finding successful ways to increase family and community engagement with schools are sometimes challenging, it is a critical pathway to increasing mutual access to resources for students, families, and teachers.

- Restrictive school security measures have the potential to harm students' sense of emotional safety in school learning environments. Instead, investing finite resources in promoting student emotional safety through bullying prevention, social emotional learning, and mental health services is recommended.

- The physical environment of a school can promote or hinder conditions for learning and student physical health through provision of basic resources (e.g., clean, and sanitary facilities, safe drinking water, comfortable temperatures, food security). It may also communicate how valued students' needs are to adults responsible for their well-being, which may have lasting impacts given students' emerging sense of identity and social position in early adolescence.

- Clear, proactive, and positively-stated rules and consequences are a necessary foundation for supportive school discipline in middle schools.

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