

The Relationship between Students' Psychological Sense of Community in the Classroom, Aggressive Behavior, and Academic Competence

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The devastating effects that bullying has on children have been well established through a large number of studies. Fewer studies, however, have focused on trying to understand the factors associated with being a bully. The present study examines the relationship between students' psychological sense of community in the classroom, their self-perceptions, and their aggressive behavior towards others. We examined 74 children (ages 11-14) in a rural school setting in the southeastern U.S. by administering a survey at the end of their academic year. We found that students who reported aggressing toward their classmates had significantly lower psychological sense of community in their classroom and significantly lower sense of academic competence. Moreover, when the type of aggressive behavior was taken into account, we found that low academic competence was significantly associated with higher levels of relational aggression as well as physical aggression. The findings of our study provide important information that can help us understand how to reduce aggressive behavior and bullying in the schools and classrooms. More specifically, our findings suggest that—in addition to helping aggressive children learn how to control aggressive appraisals and behavior—we should also help these children improve their academic performance and scholastic competence and their sense of community in the classroom.

Keywords: academic competence, classroom, psychological sense of community, relational aggression, school.

Introduction

Psychological sense of community (PSC) has its origins in the development of the field of community psychology. It was developed in an attempt to define and quantify the community cohesion and integration that develops from membership in a community. Seymour Sarason first defined it as:

"The perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure". (Sarason 1974: 157)

According to Sarason, while there may be phenotypic differences in the types and variety of communities and people, a psychological sense of community

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transcends these differences and points to the genotypic similarities across ages, races, societies, and community settings. The psychological need for being a part of a community is a fundamental need that all humans have. All humans are aware of the presence or absence of the psychological sense of community. We luxuriate in its presence and despair in its absence (Sarason 1974).

Gusfield (1975) described two dimensions in our understanding of community. One dimension is territorial, defined by geographical boundaries such as school, city, and neighborhood, while the other dimension is relational, defined by the nature and strength of human relationships. While both dimensions can and do coexist, it is often possible to have a relational community that is created by common interests or common goals without having geographical proximity. Geographical proximity in itself, on the other hand, is not sufficient for creating a sense of community. A set of conditions have to be in place before individuals can feel a psychological sense of community.

The psychological sense of community can also be thought of as comprising the "I-sense" and "We-Sense" dimensions (Newbrough and Chavis 1986). The I-sense differentiates one from the collective group, while the We-sense considers one as a member of a collective group. These two senses are reciprocal, each requires the other, and together they comprise the sense of community. This approach is congruent with Vygotsky's perspective on the pivotal role that social influences play in individuals' psychological activity (Wertsch et al. 1993).

Components of PSC

McMillan and Chavis (1986) worked on ways to make Sarason's theory (Sarason 1974) operational and therefore testable. They proposed four criteria for defining a sense of community: a) membership, b) influence, c) integration and fulfillment of needs, and d) shared emotional connection. They defined *psychological sense of community* as a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to each other and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. *Membership* is defined as a feeling of belonging and acceptance, of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. Personal investment and boundaries are important elements of membership. *Influence* is defined as a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group, and of the group mattering to its members. Influence is bi-directional. *Integration and fulfillment of needs* is defined as a feeling that the needs of individuals will be met by the community, as well as a feeling that the needs of the community will be met by the individual. *Shared emotional connection* is defined as an emotional bond that gradually builds as members of a community share events that require an investment of time, energy, and effort (McMillan and Chavis 1986).

While Sarason coined the term in 1976, and a few studies attempted to measure sense of community (Doolittle and McDonald 1978, Glynn 1981), it was not until the mid-80s that researchers began systematically analyzing and empirically validating the construct of a psychological sense of community and

the conditions that make it possible.

A central question is how the concept of a psychological sense of community is different from the concept of social support. Pretty et al. (1996) note that the concept of a psychological sense of community goes beyond social support in providing a perception of the social environment at the system level. Social support, on the other hand, has traditionally involved perceptions of the social environment at an individual level that focuses on specific networks and specific individuals within this environment (Felton and Shinn 1992). Consequently, a sense of community can exist even in the absence of tangible social support, with individuals having a sense of being part of a community that will be there for them if need ever arises. Conversely, a sense of community may remain even though the specific individuals that constitute the community may change.

The importance of a psychological sense of community has been demonstrated in studies examining adults in neighborhood communities (Chavis and Wandersman 1990, Davidson and Cotter, 1993, Perkins et al. 1990), adults in work places (Pretty and MacCarthy 1991, Pretty et al. 1992), and young adults and adolescents in universities and schools (Pretty 1990, Pretty et al. 1994).

Results from Pretty's work on adolescents' sense of community indicate that both neighborhood and school sense of community scores are significantly and negatively correlated with loneliness, with the school sense of community exhibiting the strongest relationship with loneliness, supporting the hypothesis that, at least for adolescents, a lack of school sense of community seems to be strongly related to feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Sense of community was also associated with higher levels of happiness and coping efficacy, and with lower levels of worry. In all age groups of early adolescents, a psychological sense of community was positively correlated with social support (Pretty 1990, Pretty et al. 1996).

PSC in Classroom and School Settings

While approaches to sense of community vary somewhat in terms of focus and content, an increasing number of researchers are identifying bonding to social environments, such as schools, that provide norms opposing high-risk behaviors and enable the acquisition of skills to live according to these norms as a factor instrumental in increasing students' resiliency (Morrison and Morrison 1994). School communities that provide students with school and/or classroom sense of belonging and educational engagement and support have been found to be most effective in retaining high-risk youths and have been associated with students' school motivation, interest, and expectations of success in academic work (Goodenow 1993, Wehlage et al. 1989). Several studies have demonstrated students' sense of school and/or classroom community as being associated with higher levels of happiness and coping efficacy, social skills, intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, academic self-efficacy, liking of school, and interest in academic activities (Battistich et al. 1995, Schaps et al. 2004, Pretty 1996). Bateman et al. (1999) found that sixth grade students in constructivist collaborative learning environments reported significantly higher levels of a. having their needs fulfilled

by their class environment, b. having influence in their learning process, and c. feeling like valued members in the class. Bateman (2002) found that students' psychological sense of community in the class was positively associated with higher levels of academic achievement, higher levels of prosocial behavior and prosocial skills, higher levels of feeling safe in the school and in the class, and higher levels of self-esteem. Researchers also found that psychological sense of community was a significant predictor of students' mastery learning orientation in the classroom, in which students challenge themselves to tackle difficult problems, show persistence in the face of failure, and become resilient learners (Bateman 2017).

Aggression and Victimization in School Settings

The negative effects that aggression and victimization have on children have been well-established by a large number of studies. Children who are aggressive suffer from social and psychological adjustment problems such as peer rejection, and internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. Being a bully at school can have negative effects that can be long-lasting such as low academic achievement, increased chances of dropping out of school, drug and alcohol abuse, delinquent behavior, and criminal behavior (Mathieson and Crick 2010). Children who are victimized are at higher risk for a host of social and psychological problems such as low self-esteem, peer rejection, anxiety, depression, and low academic achievement (Crick et al. 2002).

Aggression And victimization take many different forms based on the types of behaviors that are used to inflict harm, as well as the reasons behind an aggressive act. In terms of types of behaviors that are used to inflict harm, in this study we examined physical and relational types of aggression. *Physical aggression* is defined as behavior causing or threatening physical harm toward others. *Relational aggression* is defined as behavior that harms someone's relationships, social status, or self-esteem. In terms of the reasons behind an aggressive act we examined aggression as proactive and reactive.

Finally, in our research we considered physical and relational types of victimization. *Physical victimization* is defined as the victimization of children using physical harm or the threat of physical harm. *Relational victimization* is defined as the victimization of children through harming their relationships, social status, and self-esteem. Examples of physical victimization are being pushed, being hit, being threatened by physical harm. Examples of relational victimization are being excluded or ignored by peers, being the victim of negative rumors and gossip, and being put down (Crick et al. 2002).

Aggression, Victimization, and PSC in the School and Classroom

A limited number of studies have examined constructs that are conceptually similar to psychological sense of community such as sense of belonging. Researchers have found that students who were reactively aggressive reported lower sense of belonging (Rose et al. 2015). Researchers have also found that school norms influence students' direct and indirect aggression intentions (Busching and Krahe 2015, Nipedal et al. 2010). Research also suggests that higher levels of school belonging, in addition to high levels of family connectedness, are associated with lower levels of aggression (Duggins et al. 2016). However, no research to date has focused on students' psychological sense of community in the school and class as defined by the McMillan and Chavis model (1986) and its relationship to relational and physical aggression and relational and physical victimization.

Perceptions of Self-worth

The development of a sense of self is a central component of our developmental trajectory. It begins during infancy and it continues throughout one's life. The sense of self is comprised of—among other things—a general sense of self in addition to a sense of competence in a variety of areas, areas that change over one's developmental trajectory both in terms of importance as well as in terms of content. There is, therefore, an increased recognition in developmental psychology that the definition of self—in addition to a global sense of self-worth—can also be conceptualized as related to multiple dimensions of life-experiences. Harter (2012) has defined the following five dimensions of self-perception as being critical to the development of children: scholastic competence, athletic competence, social competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct. In this research, we utilized two of these dimensions: scholastic competence and athletic competence. Scholastic competence refers to a child's perceived ability to do well with schoolwork. Athletic competence refers to a child's perceived ability to do well in sports. Global self-worth refers to a general perception of the self, how well children feel about themselves and how happy they are about the way they are leading their lives (Harter 2012). In our study, we also utilized global self-worth as one of the dimensions of the definition of self.

Athletic Competence, Participation in Sports and their Relationship to Students' Well-Being in School Settings

Existing research in schools suggests that athletic competence is associated with higher levels of acceptance by peers, higher social status among peers, and more acceptance by peers (Harter 2012). Boulton and Smith (1994) found that children who were victimized by their peers reported lower levels of athletic competence. One would therefore expect that children with high academic competence would have a higher sense of community in their school and

classroom since they would tend to be more valued and more influential members of the classroom community. Students who participate in sports were found to have higher levels of self-esteem, positive adjustment, and higher levels of social skills. In addition, shy children who participated in sports reported reduced levels of anxiety and shyness after participating in sports (Findlay and Coplan 2008).

Scholastic Competence, Academic Achievement, and their Relationship to Students' Well-Being in School Settings

A large number of studies have linked low academic achievement to a number of problem behaviors such as aggression, school dropout, smoking, and drug use (Card et al. 2008, Hinshaw 1992). Existing research suggests that aggressive children have lower levels of social competence and academic achievement (Chen et al. 2010). Aggressive behavior during the pre-school years was found to be a significant predictor of problems with academic achievement during school (Brennan et al. 2012). Aggressive school-aged children have been found to spend significantly less time engaged in academic learning when compared to other children (Shinn et al. 1987). Yang et al. (2014) in a longitudinal study, found that academic achievement serves to protect children who have psychological difficulties from becoming aggressive. In terms of gender differences, researchers found that for girls, relational aggression was negatively associated with academic performance while for boys, physical aggression was negatively associated with academic performance. Research also suggests that victimization was negatively associated with academic performance for both boys and girls (Risser 2013). Taylor et al. (2007) found that low scholastic self-concept was associated with a greater likelihood of aggressive behavior in schools when compared to the students that had a higher scholastic self-concept even after controlling for actual scholastic performance (as measured by students' GPA). The relationship between childhood scholastic self-concept and academic performance is also associated with behavioral outcomes in young adults (Forest-Bank and Jenson 2015). Blakely-McClure and Ostov (2016) found that higher levels of relational aggression during middle childhood were associated with lower levels of academic competence. They also found that higher levels of relational aggression were associated with higher levels of athletic competence during adolescence. Children who were perceived by their peers as academically competent were also seen as being more advanced in their judgement-of-fairness skills and therefore were reported by their peers to be more competent in solving interpersonal problems in an effective and fair way (Vandiver 2001).

The Present Study

The present study had three major hypotheses. Our first hypothesis was to examine the relationship between four types of aggressive behavior and students' scholastic competence and global self-worth. Based on previous research we

hypothesized that students who reported higher levels of aggressive behavior (relational and physical) would have lower levels of scholastic competence and global self-worth. Our second hypothesis was that students who had a high psychological sense of community in the classroom (PSCC) would have higher levels of scholastic competence, athletic competence, and global self-worth. Our third hypothesis was that students who have high levels of athletic competence will also have—in addition to higher levels of PSCC—higher levels of global self-worth. Finally, we were interested in exploring the unique contribution that PSCC, scholastic competence, and global self-worth would make in students' aggressive behavior.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were students from a middle school serving students in grades 3-8. The school was located in a rural southeastern community in the United States. The average age of the participants at the time of the survey administration ranged from 11 years old to 14 years old.¹

Procedure

Researchers distributed letters describing the study along with consent forms and return envelopes for students to take home to their parents or legal guardians. Only students whose parents or guardians had returned a signed consent form participated in the study. The paper-and-pencil survey was administered to students in the school cafeteria by three researchers during the school day. Prior to the administration of the survey, researchers described the survey to the students and solicited verbal assent to participate from the students. Students were then trained on how to answer the Perceived Competence Scale for Children using the protocol included in the scale administration instructions. After training, students completed the survey in approximately 35 minutes. During the administration of the survey students were able to ask clarifying questions by raising their hand and having one of the three researchers come next to them and address each individual question. No monetary compensation was given to the students who participated in the survey. Researchers did however give each student a pencil, an eraser, and a note pad at the beginning of the survey.

Materials

The paper-and-pencil survey used in this study was comprised of a number of measures. In this paper, we present findings from each of the following three measures:

¹ Researchers were not provided with the individual age of each student. Rather, researchers were provided with the average age of the participants per grade. Consequently, participants' individual ages were not used in subsequent analyses.

1. Psychological Sense of Community in the Class (PSCC) (Bateman, 2002). This Likert-type scale is comprised of 24 questions with answer choices ranging from "1" (never) to "4" (very often/a lot). Example items: Everyone is an important part of the class; In my class, we help each other learn; I feel I belong in this class. Reliability for this scale, as measured by Cronbach's *alpha* ranged from $\alpha=.77$ to $\alpha=.84$ (Bateman et al. 1999)
2. Relational Aggression and Victimization scale adapted from the Relational Aggression, Victimization and Romantic Relationships Scale (Linder et al. 2002). We adapted this scale for our study by excluding all romantic relationship items. The adapted scale is comprised of 38 items with answer choices ranging from "1" (Not at all true) to "7" (Very True). Example items: I have been pushed or shoved by people when they are mad at me; A friend of mine has gone "behind my back" and shared secrets about me with other people; When someone has made me angry, I have reacted by hitting them. Reliability as measured by Cronbach's *alpha* ranged from $\alpha=.64$ to $\alpha=.78$ depending on the subscale (Crick & Crottepper 1995)
3. The Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter 1982). We used items measuring scholastic competence, athletic competence, and global self-worth (three of the five categories of competence). The reduced scale was comprised of 18 items with answer choices ranging from 1 (representing the least adequate self-judgement) to 4 (representing the most adequate self-judgement). Example items: "Some kids feel that they are very good at their school work BUT Other kids worry about whether they can do the school work assigned to them."; "Some kids do not do well at new outdoor games BUT Other kids are good at new games right away". Reliability statistics for each subscale as measured by Cronbach's *alpha* range from $\alpha=.78$ to $\alpha=.89$ depending on the sample (Harter 2012)

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The sample was comprised of 74 participants from the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. Of the 74 participants one participant did not provide gender information. Of the remaining 73 participants, 42.5% (31) were male and 57.5% (42) were female. In terms of race, seventy-three participants were Caucasian, and one participant was Hispanic. In terms of grade, 29.2% (21) of the students were 5th-graders, 22.2% (16) of the students were 6th-graders, 20.8% (15) of the students were 7th-graders, and 27.8% (20) of the students were 8th-graders (two participants did not provide grade information).

Table 1 depicts the means and standard deviations for PSCC, Scholastic Competence, Athletic competence, General Self Worth, Relational Aggression, Physical Aggression, Relational Victimization, and Physical Victimization.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Participants' PSCC, Domain-Specific Competences, Global self-worth, Aggression, and Victimization

| Variable | N | M | SD |
|--------------------------|----|------|------|
| PSCC | 74 | 2.72 | .49 |
| Scholastic Competence | 71 | 2.80 | .59 |
| Athletic Competence | 71 | 2.76 | .69 |
| Global Self Worth | 71 | 3.2 | .60 |
| Relational Aggression | 74 | 2.29 | .96 |
| Physical Aggression | 74 | 2.19 | 1.29 |
| Relational Victimization | 74 | 3.36 | 1.55 |
| Physical Victimization | 74 | 2.72 | 1.51 |

Gender Differences

We conducted a series of independent sample T-tests to test for gender differences for all dependent variables. There was a significant difference in the mean level of relational victimization reported by males ($M=2.86$, $SD=1.23$) and by females ($M=3.67$, $SD=1.66$); $t(71)=3.68$, $p=.025$. These results suggest that females report being victims of relational aggression more often than males. There was also a marginally significant difference in the mean level of physical aggression reported by males ($M=2.53$, $SD=1.30$) and by females ($M=1.97$, $SD=1.24$); $t(71)$, $p=.069$. These results suggest that males report engaging in physical aggression more often than females.

Correlations between Variables

In order to investigate the relationship between variables we conducted bivariate correlation analyses (see Table 2).

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations between Competence, PSCC, Aggression, and Victimization

| Measure | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|---|-------|-------|-------|---|
| 1. PSCC | — | | | | | | | |
| 2. Scholastic Competence | .25* | — | | | | | | |
| 3. Athletic Competence | .35** | .23 | — | | | | | |
| 4. Global Self-Worth | .34** | .20 | .49** | — | | | | |
| 5. Relational Aggression | - | - | -.12 | - | — | | | |
| 6. Physical Aggression | -.15 | -.29* | .01 | - | .64** | — | | |
| 7. Relational Victimization | - | -.05 | -.14 | - | .34** | .23* | — | |
| 8. Physical Victimization | -.11 | -.11 | -.17 | - | .27* | .31** | .37** | — |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Based on previous research we had hypothesized that students who reported higher levels of aggressive behavior (relational and physical) would have lower levels of scholastic competence and global self-worth. Results suggest that relational aggressive behavior was negatively correlated with PSCC and scholastic competence. Physical aggressive behavior was negatively correlated with scholastic competence but was not significantly correlated with PSCC. We also found that PSCC was correlated with athletic competence, scholastic competence and global self-worth.

Regression Analysis

In order to explore the unique contributions that PSCC and scholastic competence make to predicting students' relational aggression we performed a stepwise regression analysis (See Table 3)

Table 3. *Summary of Stepwise Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Students' Relational Aggression (N=71)*

| Variable | Step 1 | | | Step 2 | | |
|--|----------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | β | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | β |
| Scholastic Competence | -.54 | .19 | -.33** | -.43 | .19 | -.26* |
| PSCC | | | | -.52 | .23 | -.26* |
| <i>R</i> ² | | .11 | | | .17 | |
| <i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> ² | | 8.29** | | | 5.26* | |

p*< .05. *p*<.01

Results suggest that both scholastic competence and PSCC were predictors of relational aggression.

Discussion

In terms of gender differences, we found that girls reported higher levels of relational victimization than boys. An examination of the mean ratings, however, also suggests that, while girls were victimized relationally more often than boys, boys also reported being victimized relationally. We also found a marginally significant difference between boys' and girls' physical aggression, with boys reporting higher levels of physical aggression. Both findings are consistent with existing research (Crick and Crotpemper 1995). We did not, however, find significant gender differences in the area of relational aggression. In our study boys and girls displayed similar levels of relational aggression. Our finding reflects the present status of the literature in which findings about gender differences related to relational aggression are inconsistent, with some studies finding a significant difference in this area while others do not (Card et al. 2008).

Results offer partial support for our hypotheses. *More specifically, our first hypothesis, was that students who reported higher levels of aggressive behavior (relational and physical) would have lower levels of scholastic competence and*

global self-worth. Our results suggest that relational and physical aggression were negatively correlated with scholastic competence we did not however find a significant correlation between either type of aggression (physical or relational) and global self-worth. One explanation for these findings is that global self-worth is associated with a general feeling of well-being and accomplishment that extends beyond school and encompasses other aspects of a child's life such as family, and community outside the school; therefore, one's aggressive behavior in school is not a main component of one's self-worth. Another explanation supported by existing research suggests that a lack of relationship between global self-esteem and aggression can be attributed to higher levels of narcissism exhibited by children who are aggressive that lead to higher self-worth ratings (Taylor et al. 2007).

Our second hypothesis was that students who had a high psychological sense of community in the classroom would have higher levels of scholastic competence, athletic competence, and global self-worth. Results supported our second hypothesis. More specifically, we found that psychological sense of community in the classroom was correlated with scholastic competence, athletic competence, and global self-worth (See Table 2). Children who feel that they are valued members of the classroom community and who value their peers, who feel that their needs are met and who meet the needs of their peers, who feel that they are influential and are also influenced by their peers, also report doing well in school academically and athletically, and feeling better about themselves and their lives overall. Our findings provide support for the argument that the quality and nature of the environment in which children learn (in this case their class climate and peers) is strongly associated with their sense of competence in the corresponding domain-specific dimensions (scholarly and athletic) as well as their global sense of competence (global self-worth). This provides support for the pivotal role that contextual factors play in children's development of sense of self and self-concepts as well as in children's achievement (Wertsch et al. 1993).

Our third hypothesis was that students who had a high level of athletic competence would also have higher levels of global self-worth. Results supported our third hypothesis. We found that athletic competence was positively correlated with global self-esteem ((See Table 2). Our findings support existing literature that has associated higher levels of athletic competence as linked to successful involvement in sports and to higher levels of self-esteem in young children (Wagnsson et al. 2014).

Finally, in terms of understanding the unique predictive ability that PSCC and scholastic competence had on relational aggression we conducted a stepwise regression analysis using PSCC and scholastic competence as the independent variables and relational aggression as the dependent variable (see Table 3). Our findings suggest that PSCC has predictive ability above and beyond the predictive ability that scholastic competence has. In other words, both scholastic competence and PSCC can contribute to the reduction of relational aggressive behavior. Our findings are consistent with a theoretical approach that considers the psychological sense of community in the school and classroom to be a basic

need all children have and an important component in children's successful adjustment to school (Sarason 1974).

Conclusions

Our findings offer support to the significance of contextual factors and more specifically to the important role that students' psychological sense of community in the classroom has in helping us understand children's aggressive behavior, victimization, and competencies (global and domain-specific). We have also demonstrated the importance of examining different types of aggression (physical and relational) since, while these two types of aggression are inter-correlated (See Table 2), they are also uniquely associated with other aspects of a student's experience (e.g., psychological sense of community in the classroom is negatively associated with relational aggression but not with physical aggression).

Our study has several limitations. Our sample is relatively small and lacks diversity. Lack of racial diversity and relatively small samples are limitations due to conducting research in remote rural areas of Southern rural Appalachia. Because of these factors (small schools, lack of racial diversity) these areas have been traditionally under-represented in research. It is however critical for us to try to conduct research in these areas in order to understand the factors that contribute to students' aggressive behavior, lack of academic achievement, truancy, and other maladjustment problems. Future research in other geographic areas can increase sample size and racial diversity. Future research can also employ a longitudinal design that will enable us to examine the relationships between these variables over time.

Another limitation is that our data are based on students' self-report. Previous research however has demonstrated that students' self-report measures of domain-specific competences (i.e., athletic competence and scholastic competence) correspond very closely to teachers' and parents' ratings (Cole et al. 1997). We are therefore confident in the validity of our measures. Future studies however could expand data collection to include ratings from parents, teachers, and peers.

While we cannot infer causality from our findings (they are correlational in nature) we suggest that programs aimed at reducing relational aggression in the classroom should focus on increasing students' academic competence (e.g., through tutoring lessons) but should also aim to increase students' sense of community in the classroom. In other words, a program aimed at reducing relational aggression should address the problem on both the individual (Del Rey et al. 2016) and the community level. While other community-level factors that can contribute to students' relational aggression were not measured in our research (quality of home environment, neighborhood, etc.) we suggest that helping create a positive classroom community in which all students feel they are valued and in which all students' needs are met can help decrease students' relational aggression toward their peers.

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