

Early adolescents' school functioning: Perceived risk and protective factors

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Presented at the Society for Research on Adolescence National Conference

March 6 – 9th 2008: Chicago, Illinois

Concern about the safety of school environments and interest in factors that promote school retention and connectedness prompt continued research on adolescents' school functioning. Further, the rise in school violence/shootings/threats (e.g., Long Island incident in July, 2007) make these topics not only salient but imperative to study in order to enhance the protection of all students. Many risk factors have been associated with negative outcomes for adolescents, among these are socioeconomic statuses, home environment, lack of parental involvement, peer pressure, and sensation seeking behaviors (Reininger et al., 2005). In contrast, parental involvement has been found to support school success at all grade levels (Hill & Taylor, 2004). In addition, the quality of peer/friend relationships has an influence on school adjustment and school-related behaviors and attitudes in both public school settings (e.g., Crosnoe, Erickson, & Dornbusch, 2002) and alternative schools (Coyle, Jones, & Dick, 2004). Peer relationships play a significant role in the overall adjustment and adolescent well-being, and the quality of peer relationships serves as a protective factor against victimization (Jensen-Campbell, Rex-Lear & Waldrup, 2006). Individual psychological factors are also likely to affect students' school functioning. Finally, knowledge of students' perceptions of risk and protective factors that affect their school experiences may assist in the continued development of safe, supportive school environments that facilitate meaningful and positive learning experiences.

This study has two main purposes: 1) to provide descriptive information about participants' perceptions of risk and protective factors associated with their school functioning; and, 2) to examine how the quality of peer relationships and specific psychological constructs (i.e., self-esteem, feelings of mastery) are related to school adjustment (i.e., positive and negative school-related behaviors, attitudes, and intentions, thereafter referred to as school BAIs) among early adolescents.

Study participants included 319 freshmen (158 males, 161 females) attending a large, suburban high school in a southwestern city in the US. Mean age of respondents was 14.77 years ($SD = .48$). Approximately 50% of the sample was Anglo/Caucasian, 37% Hispanic, 6.8% African American, 2.6% Asian, 1.3% American Indian, and 3.4% self-identified as "other". Surveys were group-administered at school and took approximately 25 minutes to complete. To obtain data related to study purpose 1, participants were asked the following five questions and instructed to rank the 3 most important reasons in relation to the question asked: 1) things that happen at school that make it hard to attend, 2) reasons why students have trouble doing well in their classes, 3) reasons why students may have a hard time getting along with others, 4) personal challenges that may make it hard to stay in school (e.g., problems at home, substance use, pregnancy) and, 5) things that help students to do well in school. Provided responses were intended to represent

individual (e.g., being shy, disliked by peers), familial (e.g., parental involvement), and school-based (e.g., teachers, curriculum) risk and protective factors. To examine the relations among the constructs listed under study purpose 2, correlations were run among the following variables: feelings of self-mastery (7 items, alpha = .69; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), self-esteem (25 items, alpha = .79; Cooper-Smith, 1967), peer relationship quality (15 items, alpha = .86; Akers, Jones, Coyl, 1998), positive school-related BAIs (10 items, alpha = .74), negative BAIs (6 items, alpha = .74), and extracurricular activity involvement: school sports and orchestra, band or school clubs (2 separate items, Akers, 1996).

Forty-four percent ranked problems at home as the #1 reason that made it difficult for them to stay in school. Approximately 25% of participants identified the following three concerns as the #1 risk factors for school adjustment: personal disinterest (school is boring), problems completing assignments, and difficulty understanding teachers. The top 3 protective factors ranked #1 were: liking their classes (30.3%), having good friends at school (21.7%), and parents helping with homework (19.4%, see Table 1).

Consistent with past research, peer relationship quality was correlated with positive school BAIs ($r = .21$), mastery feelings ($r = .30$) and self-esteem ($r = .16$). Positive school BAIs were correlated with mastery feelings ($r = .38$), self-esteem ($r = .36$), school sports' involvement ($r = .42$) and negative BAIs ($r = -.50$). School sports' involvement was correlated with self-esteem ($r = .27$) and mastery feelings ($r = .11$), but participation in orchestra, band and school clubs was not related to any of the key study variables (See Table 2).

These findings indicate that a combination of individual, familial, and school-based factors may be related to these early adolescents' school experiences and adjustment. Key findings from this study are: 1) personal disinterest and problems in and outside of school were the most highly ranked risk factors for freshman; 2) the most highly ranked protective factors included interest in classes, peer relationships, and homework assistance; 3) supportive peer relationships were positively related to school adjustment and psychological well-being. Involvement in school sports was also related to school adjustment and increased self-esteem. Some of these factors appear malleable; it may be beneficial for school counseling and retention efforts to include a focus on establishing and improving positive peer relationships, helping adolescents find their extracurricular "niche", and providing homework assistance and tutoring when parents cannot. Further research with more diverse adolescent samples may lead to the identification and confirmation of additional risk factors that could be addressed through school policy and intervention efforts.

Table 1. *Students' Perceptions of Risk and Protective Factors That Affect School Connectedness and Success*

Risk factors	% of responses for each rank		
	1	2	3
Problems at home	44.2	13.5	.3
School is boring	25.9	24.9	.7
Problems completing assignments	24.9	24.3	.7
Problems understanding the teacher(s)	24.3	26.9	.7
There's too much pressure to do well in classes	23.3	14.4	.9
Unable to get help with schoolwork	18.9	15.9	.7
School seems pointless	17.4	11.1	.7
School is not a safe place	13.1	7.2	.3
Protective factors			
Liking your classes	30.3	16.4	14.1
Having good friends at school	21.7	11.5	15.1
Parents helping with homework	19.4	6.6	14.8
Parents encouraging them	12.5	12.8	16.1
Parents being involved at my school	9.5	4.9	11.2
Getting good grades	8.9	16.4	21.4
Getting along with teachers	8.2	9.5	20.4

Note. 1 = 1st most important reason, 2 = 2nd most important reason, 3 = 3rd most important reason.

Sample sizes varied per question between n = 301 – 305.

Table 2. *Correlations Among Peer Relationship Quality, School BAIs, and Psychological Constructs*

	Positive BAIs	School sports involvement	Negative BAIs	Mastery Feelings	Self- Esteem
Peer Relationship Quality	.21**	-.03	-.07	.30**	.16*
Positive BAIs		.42**	-.50**	.38**	.36**
School sports involvement			-.11*	.11*	.27**
Negative BAIs				-.08	-.09
Mastery Feelings					.53**

Note: * = $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$, one-tailed tests

Sample sizes varied per variable between $n = 235- 310$.

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