

Middle School as a Developmental Context for Emergent Citizenship

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Abstract : Civically engaged youth are critical to maintaining and/or improving the functioning of local, national and global communities and their institutions. The present study investigated how school climate and academic beliefs (academic self-efficacy and school belonging) may inform emergent civic behaviors (emergent citizenship) among self-identified middle school youth of color (African American, Multiracial or Mixed, Latino, Asian American or Pacific Islander, Native American, and other). Study aims: 1) Understand whether and how school climate is associated with civic engagement behaviors, directly and indirectly, by fostering a positive sense of connection to the school and/or engendering feelings of self-efficacy in the academic domain. Accordingly, we examined 2) The association of youths' sense of school connection and academic self-efficacy with their personally responsible and participatory civic behaviors in school and community contexts—both concurrently and longitudinally. Data from two subsamples of a larger study of social/emotional development among middle school students were used for longitudinal and cross sectional analysis. The cross-sectional sample included 324 6th-8th grade students, of which 43% identified as African American, 20% identified as Multiracial or Mixed, 18% identified as Latino, 12% identified as Asian American or Pacific Islander, 6% identified as Other, and 1% identified as Native American. The age of the sample ranged from 11 - 15 ($M = 12.33$, $SD = .97$). For the longitudinal test of our mediation model, we drew on data from the 6th and 7th grade cohorts only ($n = 232$); the ethnic and racial diversity of this longitudinal subsample was virtually identical to that of the cross-sectional sample. For both the cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses, full information maximum likelihood was used to deal with missing data. Fit indices were inspected to determine if they met the recommended thresholds of RMSEA below .05 and CFI and TLI values of at least .90. To determine if particular mediation pathways were significant, the bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals for each indirect pathway were inspected. Fit indices for the latent variable mediation model using the cross-sectional data suggest that the hypothesized model fit the observed data well (CFI = .93; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .05, 90% CI = [.04, .06]). In the model, students' perceptions of school climate were significantly and positively associated with greater feelings of school connectedness, which were in turn significantly and positively associated with civic engagement. In addition, school climate was significantly and positively associated with greater academic self-efficacy, but academic self-efficacy was not significantly associated with civic engagement. Tests of mediation indicated there was one significant indirect pathway between school climate and civic engagement behavior. There was an indirect association between school climate and civic engagement via its association with sense of school connectedness, indirect association estimate = .17 [95% CI: .08, .32]. The aforementioned indirect association via school connectedness accounted for 50% (.17/.34) of the total effect. Partial support was found for the prediction that students' perceptions of a positive school climate are linked to civic engagement in part through their role in students' sense of connection to school.

Keywords : civic engagement, early adolescence, school climate, school belonging, developmental niche

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