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Socially responsible children: A link between school climate and aggression and victimization

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Socially responsible children: A link between school climate and aggression and victimization

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Abstract

Positive perceptions of school climate are associated with lower frequency of peer victimization and aggression in children. Understanding how school climate influences aggression and victimization is essential to guiding school-level interventions to enhance character strengths such as social responsibility. In this short-term longitudinal study, we test a theoretical model arguing that children's social responsibility mediates the links between their positive perceptions of school climate (comprised of authoritative disciplinary classroom structure, classroom support, and teachers' use of social-emotional learning [SEL] strategies) and changes in their reports of victimization and aggression, in a sample of Brazilian students in Grades 4 and 5 ($N = 1,850$). Findings gave some support to our model, particularly in the prediction of aggression. Children's perceived social responsibility mediated the effects of positive school climate in predicting declines in aggressive behaviors. Specifically, teachers' use of SEL strategies and classrooms with more structure and support predicted lower levels of aggression through increases in students' social responsibility. In addition, social responsibility mediated the association between teachers' use of social emotional strategies and declines in victimization. The direct effect of classroom support on victimization was also significant.

Keywords

Social responsibility, school climate, peer victimization

Aggression and victimization in schools are often attributed to behavioral problems or deficits in social skills that characterize the perpetrators or victims. However, individual behavior cannot only be explained at the individual level nor can it be fully explained by context. In line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, children's behaviors are built from the outside-in, that is through the relationships and values promoted by the context and internalized by the child (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), child behaviors are constructed both on the social level (interpsychological) and on the individual level (intrapyschological). Children are active participants in their development, and how they make sense of their environment influences their behaviors. In that light, contextual variables, such as school climate and teacher relationships, are powerful because they may influence an individual's character development (Lerner, 2018), including social responsibility (Macready, 2009). This study posits that the children's perceptions of social responsibility, defined as perceived obligations for helping others and for cooperative behaviors as a member of a group, is fostered by school climate and teachers' use of social emotional skills strategies. Social responsibility may be incompatible with aggressive and victimizing behaviors in elementary school children (Leadbeater et al., 2016; Leff et al., 2009; Menesini et al., 2003). Based on sociocultural theory, this article examines how the school context shapes student aggression and victimization by first shaping students' social responsibility.

childhood (Klein et al., 2012; Reaves et al., 2018; Wang & Dishion, 2012) and are associated with higher levels of school safety and lower frequency of peer victimization and aggression (e.g., Amaral et al., 2019; Corrigan et al., 2010; Gage et al., 2014; Gendron et al., 2011; Leadbeater et al., 2015). The importance of school climate and the ways that students conceptualize it appear similar across cultures (see LaSalle, 2018). School climate reflects layers of social-ecological influences from individuals, teachers, peers, school-level organization, families, and neighborhoods that may be targets for prevention (Mischel & Kitsantas, 2019; Reaves et al., 2018; Rudasill et al., 2018). Despite the extensive and growing literature on school climate in low- and middle-income countries such as Brazil (Larson et al., 2020), a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms behind how school climate influences aggression and victimization is essential to guide school-level interventions.

School climate is typically defined as the attitudes, beliefs, and values that make up the social environment within a school and it is demonstrated in the interactions between students, teachers,

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The Influence of School Climate

Positive perceptions of school climate have been consistently linked to fewer behavioral and emotional problems in middle

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administrators, and community members (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). Fair and equitable, authoritative discipline strategies, school organization (or disorganization), and quality of student–teacher relationships are dimensions of school climate that are consistently associated with fewer child problems in middle childhood (Amaral et al., 2019; Bear et al., 2014; Leadbeater et al., 2015). Measures of school climate often tap layers of social–ecological influences such as teachers, peers, school-level organization, and parents (Mischel & Kitsantas, 2019; Reaves et al., 2018; Rudasill et al., 2018). Schools with more authoritative climates, with both higher levels of support and structure, show lower levels of aggression and victimization (Amaral et al., 2019), and there is evidence that this association may be moderated by gender stereotypes due to teacher’s beliefs (Kokkinos et al., 2004) and also student’s help seeking when facing victimization (Eliot et al., 2010). Teacher’s socioemotional techniques may also be key to socializing students and preventing peer aggression and victimization. Social–emotional learning (SEL) techniques refer to teachers’ ability to scaffold students’ emotional and behavioral regulation using strategies such as perspective-taking conflict management skills (Bear et al., 2014). A meta-analysis revealed that socioemotional interventions are associated with positive social behaviors and fewer conduct problems (Durlak et al., 2011). Teachers’ efficacy in using SEL to solve day-to-day peer problems may also affirm the desirability of social responsibility—helping and caring for classmates.

Some research shows bidirectional, negative associations between children’s perceptions of school climate, particularly about fairness (including equal treatment of all students, equity in the distribution of resources, and quality of student–teacher relationships) and problem behaviors like peer aggression and victimization (Leadbeater et al., 2015; Nickerson et al., 2014). Research also shows that adolescents’ personal strengths (e.g., school connectedness, peer attachments, assertiveness) as well as school-level factors (teacher efficacy for dealing with bullying) mediate the association between school climate and peer aggression, bullying and victimization (Acosta et al., 2019; Espelage et al., 2014; Luengo et al., 2017). In this study, we suggest that children’s perceptions of their own social responsibility mediate their perceptions of school climate and declines in aggression and victimization. This framework is consistent with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory where the community context signals to children the values they should internalize which shape their behavior (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, a supportive, structured, and socioemotionally competent classroom can foster socially responsible students, which in turn prevents aggression and victimization.

Social Responsibility and Child Outcomes

Social responsibility is a value orientation centered on care and justice which is manifested in actions such as following rules for the good of the group, supporting others’ well-being, and trusting others for help (Wray-Lake & Syversen, 2011). It is a core educational goal that can bridge gaps in expectations that exist between personal dimensions (cognition, reading, math, competence, etc.) and community dimensions (social responsibility, cooperation) of child development (Serpell, 2011). Wray-Lake and Syversen (2011) argue that, beyond individual social skills and abilities, social responsibility implies feeling accountable for their own actions and seeing themselves as reliable prosocial agents. Social responsibility promotes compassion, tolerance, fairness, and

concern for the welfare of others prioritizing behaviors that favor the common good (Gallay, 2006; Serpell, 2011). Children’s socially responsible behaviors reflect their capacity to follow school and classroom expectations for caring and compassion that are modeled by significant others, communicated in concerns for others, and practiced by members of collaborative groups.

Social responsibility can operate to prevent problematic outcomes by enhancing behaviors and attitudes that are incompatible with negative outcomes (Leadbeater et al., 2016; Macready, 2009). For example, when children are more aware of the need to care for and help those around them, they feel a sense of belonging and safety in their schools. Expecting and supporting children’s social responsibility in the classroom may decrease peer aggression and victimization. Enhancing co-operative behaviors has shown considerable success in the reduction of aggression (Leadbeater et al., 2016; Leff et al., 2009; Menesini et al., 2003).

Some research suggests that the acquisition of social responsibility may contribute to self-regulation (and reduction of aggression) through the development and endorsement of communal attitudes and caring behaviors. With Canadian elementary school students, Leadbeater and colleagues (2016) found that teachers’ expectations for children’s social responsibility were associated with fewer reports of peer victimization across 2½ years. Previous research has focused on adult’s evaluations of children’s social responsibility but has not tapped children’s awareness of their own socially responsible behaviors. We extend previous research using a self-report measure of social responsibility.

The goal of this study is to understand how the school context can indirectly shape aggression and victimization experiences by fostering social responsibility in students. In this short-term longitudinal study, we hypothesize that children’s social responsibility mediates the links between their perceptions of school climate and changes in their reports of victimization and aggression, across 3 months in a large sample of Brazilian students in Grades 4 and 5 (see Figure 1).

Method

Participants

Of all of the children eligible to participate, approximately half provided parental consent ($n = 4,994$). Data were collected in August (T1) and October (T2) in 2019, and the data had to be pared down to students who had both assessments completed ($n = 2,309$), and the final analysis included 1,850 students whose data were available on all of the variables of interest. Most of the sample self-identified as White (42.7%), mixed-ethnicity (40.9%), indigenous (6.4%), Black (6.3%), and Asian (3.7%). Participants included in the final sample were children (48.30% boys) aged between 7 and 15 ($M_{\text{age}} = 9.81$, $SD = .96$) in fourth or fifth grade (288 classrooms and teachers). The wide range in age of this sample reflects the educational landscape of Brazil. In Brazil, the first 9 years of education are all considered elementary school, with 3 years of high school. Until the age of 17, education is compulsory in Brazil, but there are relatively high levels of grade repetition and abandonment compared with other countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). The rate of repetition at these grades in the southern region of Brazil is between 6% and 7%, and a little over 1% of children abandoning school per grade (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2016). Comprehensive educational data from the Southern region of Brazil

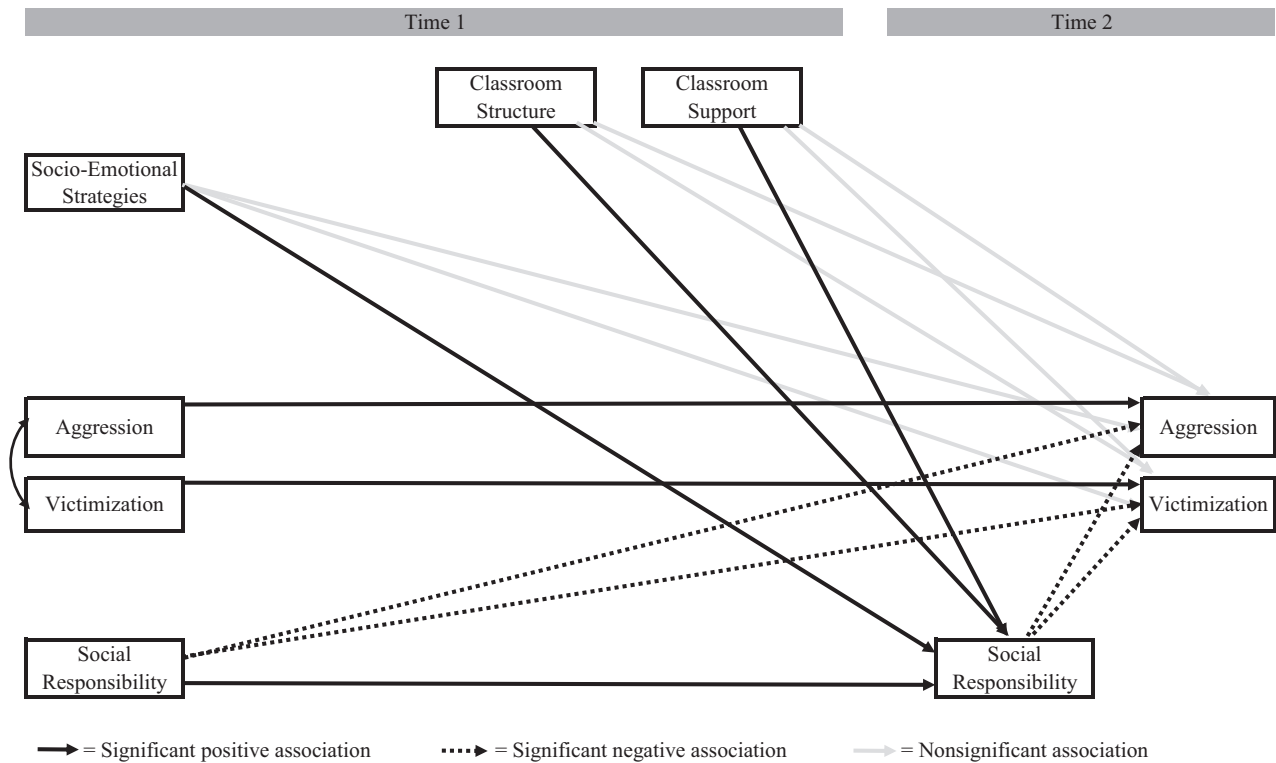


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the mediating role of social responsibility on school climate and changes in aggression and victimization.

reveal that approximately 15–18% of students ages 8 and 9 are not at the appropriate age for their grade in school (IBGE, 2010).

Procedure

Data were collected from 60 public and private schools recruited through a program to promote positive youth development and prevent peer victimization, involving the departments of education of five municipalities in the metropolitan area of Curitiba, Brazil. Both data points were prior to start-up of the program. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Federal University of Paraná (CAAE 15187219.3.0000.0102). Parents gave informed consent, and students assented to the survey. Students completed the questionnaires during class time with the guidance of a research assistant. All data were collected at schools during class time, the duration of data collection was approximately 40 min, and surveys were read aloud with a standardized script by a research assistant, while a second research assistant was available to support individual students. No incentives were provided for participation. Oral assent process was used with the students before administration of the classroom survey.

Measures

Demographics. Students self-identified their sex (male, female), race, and subjective social status. Race included the five categories on the Brazilian census but was dummy-coded as White (majority) and non-White (all other groups) for the purpose of this article. To measure subjective social status, the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status was used (Adler et al., 2000). Students viewed a picture of a ladder and were asked to select what rung on the ladder

their family was on in society. Students selected out of a scale of 1–10. This method is strongly correlated with psychological and physiological health outcomes among youth (Quon & McGrath, 2014).

School climate. Students' self-report of school climate was measured using the *Delaware School Climate Scales* (DSCS; Bear et al., 2014), which had been previously translated and validated in the Brazilian school system (Bear et al., 2016). Consistent with the authoritative theory (Baumrind, 1971; Bear et al., 2014), high levels of *support* (i.e., teacher–student relationships, student–student relationships, and respect for diversity; $\alpha = .86$; 14 items) and *disciplinary structure* (i.e., clarity of rules, fairness, and safety; $\alpha = .85$; 11 items) are signs of an authoritative school climate. All items were assessed on a 4-point Likert-type scale of *strongly disagree* (–2) to *strongly agree* (2) and were averaged for each dimension.

Socioemotional strategies. Student self-report of their teachers' use of socioemotional classroom strategies was assessed also from the DSCS subscale (Bear et al., 2014). It includes 6 items in a 4-point Likert-type scale (e.g., “Students are taught to understand how others think and feel”; $\alpha = .65$). All items were assessed on a 4-point Likert-type scale of *strongly disagree* (–2) to *strongly agree* (2) and were averaged.

Social responsibility. We adapted a measure of social responsibility (Leadbeater & Sukhawathanakul, 2011) that assessed teachers' expectations of students to tap students' awareness of their own socially responsible behaviors. The scale was translated into Portuguese and adapted as a self-report measure for the purpose of this

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among All Variables.

	M	Range	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. T1 Aggression	-1.41	-2, 2	0.72	—								
2. T1 Victimization	-0.91	-2, 2	1.14	.42	—							
3. T1 Social responsibility	0.94	-2, 2	0.62	-.24	-.10	—						
4. T1 Socioemotional strategies	0.93	-2, 2	0.78	-.21	-.10	.39	—					
5. T1 Classroom structure	1.25	-2, 2	0.68	-.30	-.16	.34	.46	—				
6. T1 Classroom support	1.22	-2, 2	0.63	-.30	-.24	.37	.45	.70	—			
7. T2 aggression	-1.75	-2, -1	0.25	.40	.23	-.18	-.15	-.21	-.21	—		
8. T2 Victimization	-0.93	-2, 2	1.16	.31	.61	-.08	-.09	-.13	-.21	.29	—	
9. T2 Social responsibility	1.03	-2, 2	0.63	-.31	-.15	.40	.33	.35	.39	-.28	-.13	—

Note. $N = 1,850$. All correlations are significant at $p < .01$.

study. The measurement was composed of 7 items (i.e., “I search for ways to help and include others”) and had an acceptable internal reliability ($T1\alpha = .568$ and $T2\alpha = .65$). Following the lower than expected reliability for this measurement between T1 and T2, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess measurement time invariance. To test for time invariance, a series of four cumulative models with increasingly restrictive parameter constraints were evaluated (*configural* model with no equality constraints, *weak* model where equality constraints were imposed on all corresponding factor loadings, *strong* model where additional equality constraints were imposed on all corresponding indicator intercepts, and *strict* model where further equality constraints were imposed on corresponding residual variances). Findings support strong invariance across time. See Supplemental Table S1 for details. Students rated it on a 4-point Likert-type scale of *strongly disagree* (-2) to *strongly agree* (2) and the values were averaged for a composite score.

Aggression and victimization. Aggression was measured through 7 items on aggressive peer behaviors such as “I push others” and “I spread rumors about others.” Victimization was measured through four self-report items such as “Other kids threaten to hurt me” and “Other kids call me names.” Both aggression and victimization were measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale of *never* (-2) to *always* (2) and both had strong internal reliabilities ($T1: \alpha = .79$, $\alpha = .81$; $T2: \alpha = .82$, $\alpha = .84$ for aggression and victimization, respectively).

Analyses

Using Mplus Version 8.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017), path analyses were used to examine the hypothesized pathways between teachers’ socioemotional strategies, classroom environment (structure and support), social responsibility, and aggression and victimization across time (see Figure 1). Given that aggression and victimization are correlated, mediation effects of social responsibility on the longitudinal associations between victimization and aggression at T1 and T2 were examined together to test for their independent effects. The model also accounts for T1 levels of social responsibility. Grade, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) were controlled for in all models. Indirect effects were also assessed in addition to interactions between the classroom variables. Interactions were then assessed between classroom-level variables and social responsibility. Interaction terms were created as the product of the two standardized predictors. Finally, using multigroup structural equations, we split the models by gender, grade, and ethnicity

to test for any differences in the associations. Pathways in the model were constrained for the groups based on gender, grade, and ethnicity and compared to an unconstrained model to determine whether there were differences in the estimates.

Results

Descriptives

Correlations among the variables, means, and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. As expected, victimization and aggression were moderately correlated ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) and each was moderately stable from T1 to T2 (aggression $r = .40$, $p < .001$ and victimization $r = .61$, $p < .001$).

Path Analysis

Analysis of the hypothesized mediation model fit the data well, $\chi^2(9) = 57.25$, $p < .05$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .98, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05, 90% CI [.05, .07], standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .01, and explained 20.20% of the variance in aggression and 40.20% of the variance in victimization. As shown in Figure 2, after controlling for demographic and T1 variables, significant pathways showed that changes in social responsibility were predicted by classroom structure ($\beta = .09$, $p = .005$), classroom support ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$), and teachers’ use of social emotional strategies ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$). Increases in social responsibility were associated with significant declines in aggression ($\beta = -.13$, $p < .001$), but not victimization. The direct effect of classroom support on declines in victimization ($\beta = -.10$, $p < .001$) was also significant, but classroom structure and support were not directly related to aggression.

Tests of the mediation effects. The mediating effects of social responsibility on the associations between classroom structure and support and social emotional strategies and aggression and victimization were significant for predictors of aggression but not victimization. Consistent with our theory, several mediating (indirect) effects were significant, though the magnitude were small. Specifically, T2 social responsibility partially explained the association between children’s perceptions of their teachers’ socioemotional strategies and T2 aggression (estimate = $-.01$, $SE < .01$, $z = 5.20$, $p < .05$). Social responsibility partially explained the association between children’s perceptions of their teachers’ socioemotional strategies and T2 victimization (estimate = $-.01$, $SE < .01$, $z = 2.65$, $p < .05$). The association between classroom

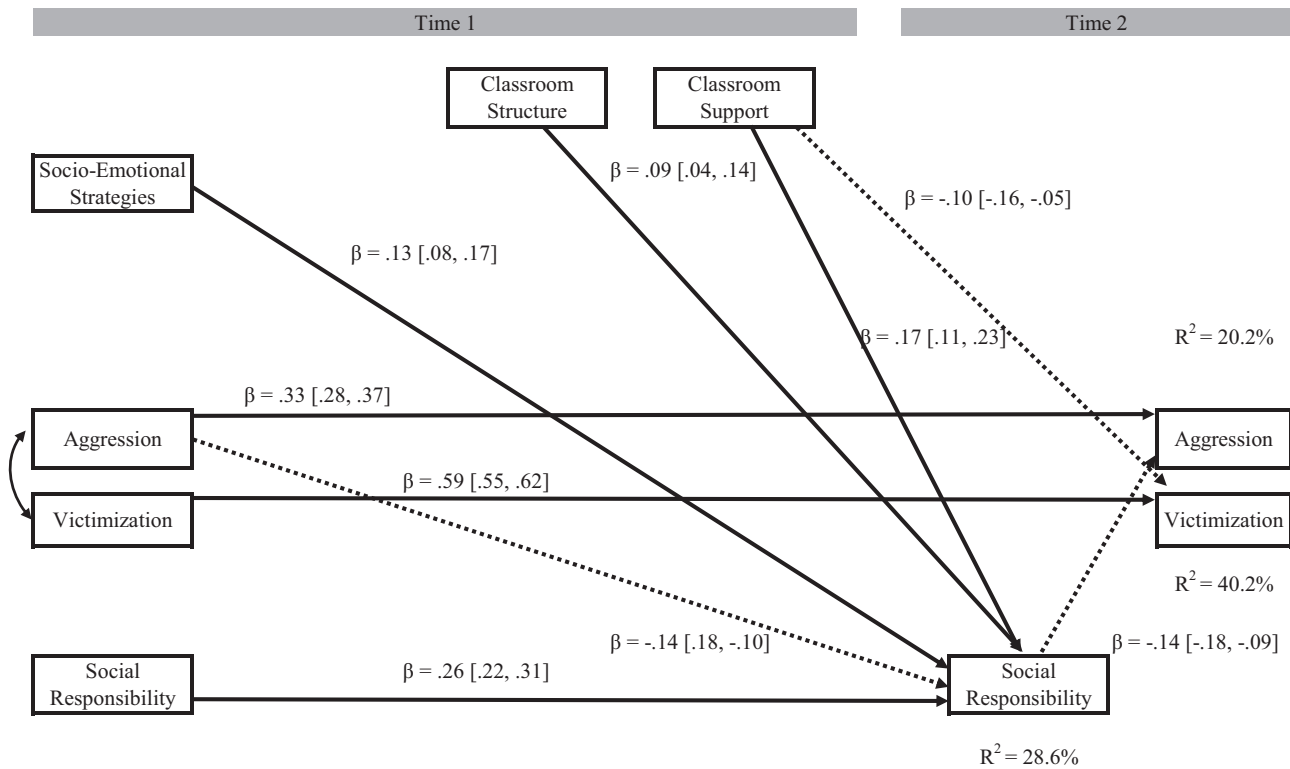


Figure 2. Structural equation modeling estimates of the mediating role of social responsibility on school climate and changes in aggression and victimization. Model fit: $\chi^2(9) = 57.25$, $p < .05$; CFI = .98, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [.05, .07], SRMR = .01. $N = 1,850$. Solid lines represent significant positive associations, while dashed lines represent significant negative association. Values in brackets reflect the 95% confidence intervals. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual.

support and aggression was also partially mediated by social responsibility (estimate = $-.01$, $SE < .01$, $z = 3.95$, $p < .05$), and the association between classroom structure and aggression was also partially mediated by social responsibility (estimate = $-.01$, $SE < .01$, $z = 2.54$, $p < .05$). For comparison to the fit of the mediation model, a model was fitted that assessed the associations between school climate variables on aggression and victimization without freeing the effects of social responsibility. The subsequent model that included the mediation effects was a better fitting model, $\Delta\chi^2(2) = 6.28$, $p = .043$.

Classroom structure, socioemotional strategies, and social responsibility interactions. Interactions were assessed between classroom-level variables and social responsibility. Classroom-level variables and social responsibility were both measured as continuous variables. Three interactions between the classroom-level variables emerged. Specifically, social responsibility was higher when children rated their teachers as high in socioemotional strategies and structure (estimate = $.07$, $p = .003$; Figure 3). In addition, social responsibility was also higher when children rated their teachers as high in socioemotional strategies and support (estimate = $.03$, $p = .042$; Figure 4). Lastly, at low levels of teacher socioemotional strategies, high classroom support was associated with more social responsibility (estimate = $-.09$, $p < .001$; Figure 5). These interactions explained an additional .60% of the variability in social responsibility.

Finally, one classroom variable interaction emerged on aggression. Namely, more social responsibility was associated with less

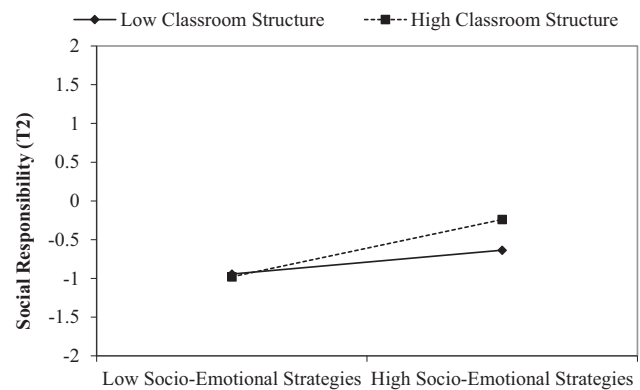


Figure 3. The moderating effect of T1 classroom structure on the association of T1 teacher socioemotional strategies with children's T2 social responsibility. Low and high classroom structure and socioemotional strategies were -1 and $+1$ standard deviations below and above the mean, respectively. $N = 1,850$.

aggression among classes higher in support (estimate = $-.10$, $p = .014$; Figure 6). The addition of the two-way interactions only explained an additional .30% of the variability in aggression. Three-way interactions were also tested, but no significant effects were observed. All told, the resulting model accounted for 29.2% of the variability in social responsibility, whereas it explained 20.5% of the variability in aggression and 40.2% of the variability in victimization. The final model was a good fit to the data,

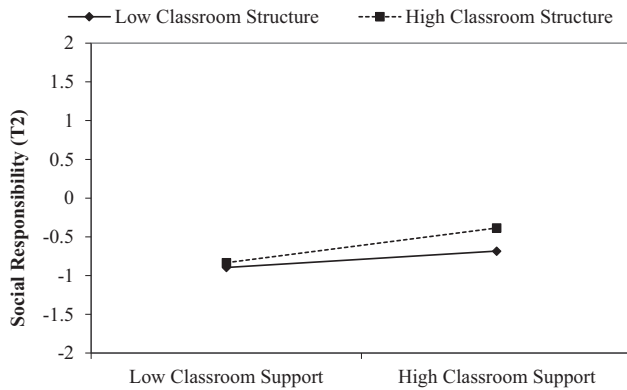


Figure 4. The moderating effect of T1 classroom structure on the association of T1 classroom support with children's T2 social responsibility. Low and high classroom structure and classroom support were -1 and $+1$ standard deviations below and above the mean, respectively. $N = 1,850$.

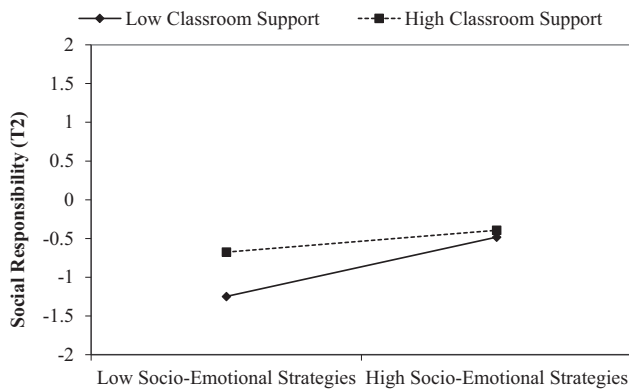


Figure 5. The moderating effect of T1 classroom support on the association of T1 teacher socioemotional strategies with children's T2 social responsibility. Low and high classroom support and socioemotional strategies were -1 and $+1$ standard deviations below and above the mean, respectively. $N = 1,850$.

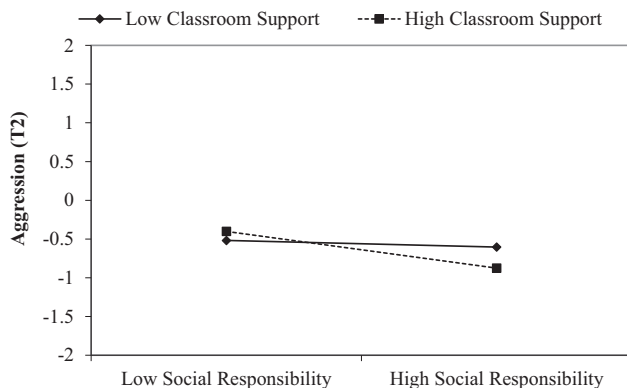


Figure 6. The moderating effect of T1 classroom support on the association of T1 child social responsibility with children's T2 aggression. Low and high classroom support and social responsibility were -1 and $+1$ standard deviations below and above the mean, respectively. $N = 1,850$.

$\chi^2(17) = 144.16, p < .05$, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .07, 90% CI [.06, .08], SRMR = .02.

Finally, using multigroup structural equations, we also split the models by gender, grade, and ethnicity to test for any differences in the associations. Each path was constrained in a step-wise manner to assess for a change in the model fit. A few paths did differ across groups (see Figure 7). Although some effects were stronger than others, only one effect meaningfully differed. Namely, classroom support was negatively associated with aggression among girls ($\beta = -.08, p = .040$) but not boys ($\beta = -.01, p = .889$). None of the multigroup comparisons between the unconstrained model and a model with the remaining main effects constrained were significant, suggesting that the other associations did not differ by gender, grade, and ethnicity, $\Delta\chi^2(22,21,23) = 27.30, 32.63, 16.00$, $ps > .05$, for gender, grade, and ethnicity, respectively.

Discussion

In this short-term longitudinal study, we examined a theoretical model arguing that children's social responsibility mediates the links between their perceptions of school climate and teacher techniques and changes in their reports of victimization and aggression, across 3 months in a large sample of Brazilian students in Grades 4 and 5. Findings gave some support to our model, particularly in the prediction of aggression. Children's perceived social responsibility mediated the effects of teachers' use of social emotional strategies and of classroom structure and support in predicting declines in aggressive behaviors. In addition, social responsibility mediated the association between teachers' use of social emotional strategies and victimization. The direct effect of classroom support on victimization was also significant, while a multigroup comparison revealed that classroom support was negatively associated with aggression for girls but not for boys.

The results demonstrate a balance between the role of context and personal agency. Teacher SEL strategies, classroom structure, and classroom support influence later aggression primarily through its influence on individual student social responsibility. These results demonstrate core principles of sociocultural theory, where values are built from the outside-in through relationships and context (Vygotsky, 1978). When teachers scaffold emotion regulation and conflict management skills, and schools give students a sense of order, predictability, and connection, students can endorse social responsibility, where they are motivated to follow rules and work for the good of the group. Students' internalized social responsibility serves as a possible sustainable mechanism to combat aggressive behaviors.

Social responsibility and socioemotional strategies were associated with less aggression but not with victimization. However, consistent with previous research (Espelage et al., 2014), stronger classroom support (responsive relationships) was associated with declines in reports of victimization. Moreover, classroom support was associated with less victimization, but only for girls, which may be due to gender stereotypes regarding aggressive behaviors (e.g., that boys are generally more aggressive), so that teachers may be less likely to intervene in peer victimization situations involving boys, while viewing externalizing problems as more problematic among girls, and thus more likely to provide support for girls (Kokkinos et al., 2004), who also may be likely to seek help when threatened (Eliot et al., 2010). The main effects of classroom support are particularly important to highlight because often people

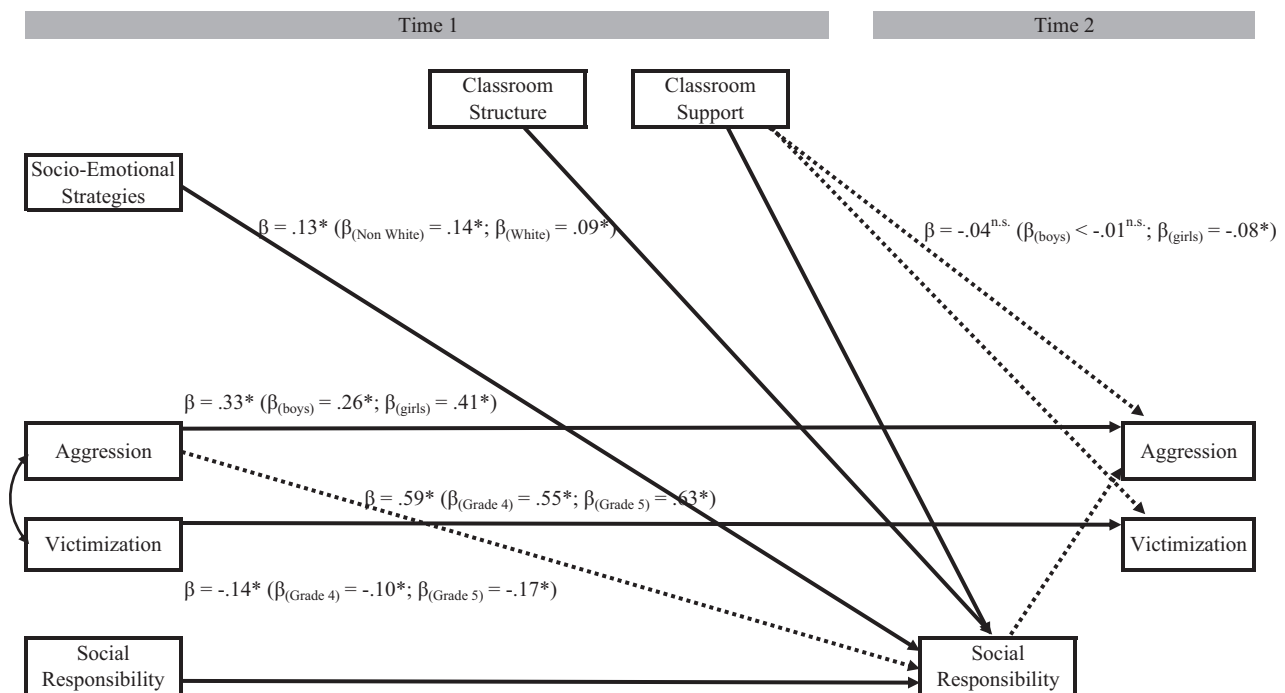


Figure 7. Differences between the structural paths in the final model based on gender, grade, and ethnicity. Model fit: $\chi^2(46-47) = 137.17-184.25$, $ps < .05$; CFIs $> .94$, RMSEAs $< .06$, 90% CIs [.04, .07], SRMRs $< .03$. $N = 1,850$. Solid lines represent significant positive associations, while dashed lines represent significant negative association. Values in brackets reflect the 95% confidence intervals. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual.

believe that stronger rule enforcement will bring peer aggression under control.

Results from this study suggest that a school's climate of structure alone does not contribute to lower peer aggression and victimization. If schools want to make structural changes to address victimization, they would do better to focus on their supportive climates (relationships) and focus their efforts toward creating an environment that fosters social responsibility. School climate of support and SEL strategies can equip students to resolve their own interpersonal disputes. Social responsibility was especially predictive of lower aggression when the school was high in support. This is consistent with sociocultural theory of the importance of context. When there is more support, student virtues of social responsibility are even more connected to diminishing classroom aggression. The significant interactions between support and structure are consistent with the authoritative school model and highlight the importance of holding children to a high interpersonal standard, but giving them all the supportive relationships and explicit socioemotional instruction to help them achieve those standards (Amaral et al., 2019; Bear et al., 2014).

Social responsibility can be scaffolded by emotionally supportive peers and adults and supportive school climates. As in many countries (Serpell, 2011), Brazil's educational system primarily emphasizes cognitive aspects of learning when assessing children's progress, rather than social emotional skills. This emphasis may be limited in terms of conveying the message that children can contribute to their peers, schools, and communities. The implementation of the Brazilian National Standards for Curriculum (2018) provides impetus for the adoption of socioemotional learning programs and resources. School-based programs can help provide the necessary tools to teachers and students to help promote socially

responsible norms and expectations. Some studies suggest school-based programs aimed at empowering children to be socially responsible leaders and bystanders are efficacious at preventing peer victimization (Leff et al., 2009; Leadbeater & Sukhawathanakul, 2011; Menesini et al., 2003). This study supports the goal of fostering social responsibility as a preventative measure against aggression and victimization. It is also valuable to mention that students' self-evaluations of social responsibility were not very high, giving themselves much room to grow and a promising area for intervention.

Strengths and Limitations

The participants in this study come from economically diverse families enrolled in elementary schools in Brazil, and there was a high attrition rate due to factors such as student mobility and absenteeism. In spite of a high attrition rate, this is a large longitudinal sample in an understudied population. This sample is diverse in ethnicity and SES and it assesses these constructs longitudinally, accounting for the malleability of constructs over a short period of time.

This is the first study to look at children's perceptions of their social responsibility and the impact of their perspective on aggression and victimization. This is both a differential and a limitation. According to Vygotskian theory (1978), the child is an active participant, and the child's perception of the environment is key to understanding their development. Indeed, this study found that the self-reported data explain a lot of the variance in the model. However, the reliability scores of the social responsibility measure are lower than ideal and more work must be done to enhance social responsibility measures to a Brazilian population.

Future research would benefit from examining the robustness of the proposed mechanisms through the use of data obtained over longer periods of time. As is, this study contributes longitudinal data and child perceptions of school climate, social responsibility, and aggression and victimization. However, a third time point would allow a more robust analysis of a true mediator variable across waves. Moreover, the mediation effects in the current study, though significant, were small in magnitude. Further replication would contribute to the robustness of these findings.

Implications and Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study reveals that school climate and teachers' use of socioemotional strategies do influence peer aggression and victimization behavior, and this effect mediated by increases in social responsibility. Program evaluations demonstrate the positive effects of interventions that target enhancing social responsibility as a mechanism to reduce peer victimization and aggression (Leadbeater et al., 2016; Menesini et al., 2003). Considerable evidence also demonstrates that improvements in school climate can reduce students' aggressive and victimizing behaviors (Michel & Kitsantas, 2019; Mitchell, & Bradshaw, 2013). The current study also suggests that a positive climate can foster social responsibility. When students abide by collective rules, learn to manage emotions and conflicts, interact prosocially with peers, and trust others to help them, they become part of a community that adopts positive approaches to address peer victimization. We need to consider moving beyond targeting deficits in children's SEL to include efforts to create school contexts that value them as contributing members of the classroom. Schools and teachers need resources and support to construct environments that foster social responsibility and encourage children's helping behaviors.


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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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