Comparing Student and Personnel Perceptions of the School Environment

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Perceptions of School Environment

Perceptions of the school environment are influenced by the supportive behaviors of those individuals who work and study there, including students, teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. Prior research has documented systematic differences in the reports of students and personnel regarding their school climate and experiences. Comparing the perceptions of students and personnel among CSSI schools can provide meaningful insights about the school environment and highlight important differences in how these groups experience the student-teacher-school relationship. This report specifically examines differences in student and personnel survey responses using the first wave of data from the UMSL CSSI project.

School personnel data were collected during wave one (2016-2017). With the approval of principals at participating schools, we distributed an online survey that was completed by administrators, teachers, counselors, and other personnel who routinely interact with students in their schools (Table 1 includes sample characteristics). The respondents tended to be teachers who were female, white, and had worked at the same school for more than 10 years. The UMSL CSSI Fact Sheet #1, "Overview of the UMSL Comprehensive School Safety Initiative – 2018", provides a description of the Wave 1 student data used in this report.
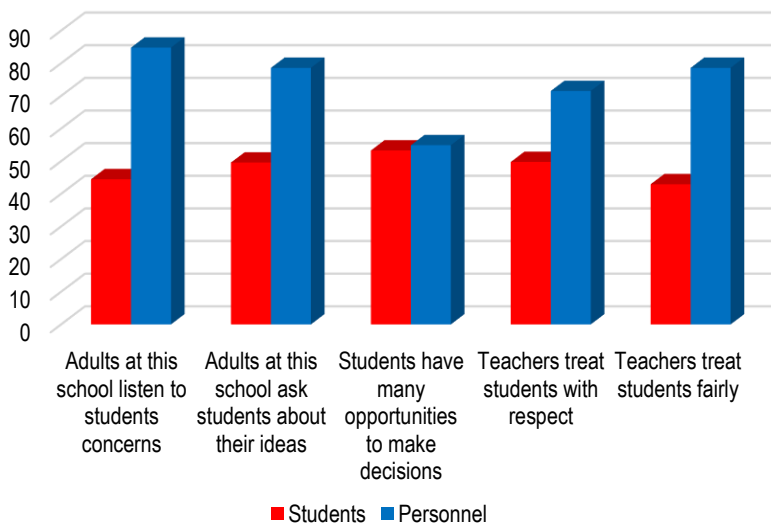
Personnel-Student Relationship

The personnel-student relationship represents a critical component of a supportive school environment. Supportive relationships between students and school personnel are associated with benefits such as higher levels of teacher efficacy and higher levels of student academic achievement. In order to fully examine how the school environment functions, we must consider the perspectives of all parties involved. We compare personnel and student responses

Table 1. Personnel Sample Characteristics

	Full Sample N=409	
	N	%
Sex		
Male	97	26
Female	279	74
Race/Ethnicity		
White	292	79
Black	62	17
Other	16	4
Primary Job Assignment		
Teacher	333	87
Administrator	12	3
Other	38	10
Grade level taught		
6th grade	46	14
7th grade	84	26
8th grade	72	22
Multiple Grades	124	38
Total years at this school		
<1 year	49	13
1-2 years	46	12
3-5 years	68	18
6-10 years	85	23
>10 years	127	34

indicating their level of agreement with five survey items on personnel-student relationships in the school. Figure 1 compares the average percent of students and personnel in a school who either agreed or strongly agreed with each item. For each of the items, we see that students expressed lower levels of agreement than did school personnel.

Figure 1. Percent Agreement with Perception Items

Bar chart legend: ■ Students ■ Personnel

Categories: Adults at this school listen to students concerns; Adults at this school ask students about their ideas; Students have many opportunities to make decisions; Teachers treat students with respect; Teachers treat students fairly

- Average levels of personnel-perceived support are significantly higher than student-perceived support, demonstrating that personnel perceive that they are providing more support than perceived by students
- Students and personnel express the most agreement on perceived support regarding students' opportunities to make decisions in the school; 53% of students and 55% of personnel agree with this item
- Students and personnel show substantial disagreement regarding adults listening to students' concerns. The vast majority of personnel (85%) agree that adults listen to concerns, while only 44% of students agree

Perception across Schools

To compare perceptions of the personnel-student relationship across the 12 middle schools, we created a composite measure of perceived support within schools by combining the five survey items depicted in Figure 1, scores ranged from 1-5 (5 perceiving most support). For all schools combined, the average student score was 3.3 and the school personnel score was 3.8. Next, we calculated student-perceived support and personnel-perceived support scores for each of the 12 middle schools.

Figure 2 presents student- and personnel-perceived support by school (labeled 1-12). There is considerable variability for the level of support across schools as well as the pattern of personnel-perceived support compared with student-perceived support. With respect to the variation in the level of support, schools 1, 10, and 12, for instance, have student scores of approximately 3.0 while schools 3, 7, and 8 have student scores around 3.5. Similar variation across schools exists for the school personnel. The size of the gap between student and personnel perceptions also varies between schools. For instance, in school 3, we see the largest gap with a student score of 3.7 and a personnel score of 4.4. In contrast, there is greater agreement between students and personnel in school 7 where the students' average score is 3.5 and the personnel score is 3.8. In subsequent reports we will examine the extent to which these differences in perceptions of support are related to school safety (e.g., victimizations, bullying, and avoidance behaviors) or other identifiable factors.

Figure 2. A Comparison of Perceptions by School

Bar chart legend: ■ Students ■ Personnel
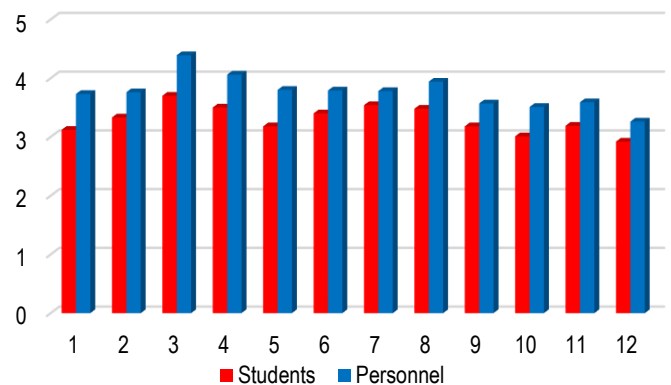
Implications

Both the absolute levels of support as well as the gap in the perceptions of support are important considerations to schools. The finding that teachers and students assess their school climates similarly is informative. In schools where students report an above average school climate relative to students at other schools, so do the school personnel. Thus, for schools with low average levels of support, programs and initiatives to increase student-teacher collaboration in the classroom can promote the overall perceptions of supportive school environments. The differences in personnel and student reports of level of support, particularly regarding issues of fairness and communication, indicate that personnel should consider focusing on increasing ways for students to voice their concerns in a fair and respectful way, beyond the current efforts.