



## School climate perception and adolescent adjustment

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### **Abstract**

According to theoretical framework of developmental contextualism (Goossens, 2006) school context play an important role in the development of adolescent: the variability in adolescent outcomes may be explained by the interaction between contextual factors and adolescent individual differences. Most studies have focused on how perceptions of school climate affect adolescent adjustment; in particular researchers evidence that the interpersonal, organizational and instructional climate of school influences students' adjustment across multiple domains (Way, Reddy, Rhodes, 2007; Brand et al., 2008). The project objective is to analyse the school climate perception and the adolescent adjustment in immigrant, double heritage and Italian students.

**Key words: school climate, adolescent adjustment, well-being, identity process.**

The development contextualism framework describes the different social systems associated with developmental matter or adolescent adjustment. Research on the relation between context and adolescent development has been driven by an awareness of increases in problem behaviours during adolescence and an interest in the role of contextual factors that may affect adolescent outcomes (Blyth, Leffert, 1995). According to Ostrom, Lerner, Freil, (1995) the developmental contextualism is intended to be a basic process of human development dealing with the change of relationship between adolescent and their context. In literature many contributions on this research topic are referred to ecological approach. The ecological perspective assumes that human development is a function of interactional processes between individuals and contexts and happens with progressively complexity in different contexts during significant periods of time or even across the life time. Adolescents develop at school with their relationships with peers, teachers and all actors involved in the educative community.

The ecology approach is relevant in two areas: school climate and school related stress. The developmental ecology of schools has a marked impact on the academic achievement and adjustment of students (Felner & Felner, 1989). A lot of aspects of the what Moos (1979) has called the "human milieu" or defining features of the social environments of these contexts may contribute to student growth and development.

Although many of these contribute strongly to the adaptation and performance of students, one of those elements of the school context that has appears to have particular importance for student adaptation is student's own reports of their experiences of the context's social climate (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; Fraser, 1985; Trickett & Moos, 1973). School climate is a complex and multidimensional construct encompassing the atmosphere, culture, values, resources, social network, and organizational, instructional, interpersonal dimensions (Loukas, Murphy, 2007).

The school climate is a relevant variable that, better than all other data, show the quality of relationships

among people at organizational levels. In literature this concept has been analyzed to highlight the direct relation to school performance and well being of students by indirect effects indicates that the perception of parents than the teacher. students affect on the pattern of adjustment in the transition from one level school to another (Esposito, 1999).

School environment regards environmental, organizational and relational conditions (Santinello Bertarelli, 2002). School climate is one of the elements that can modify the scholastic performances, the self-efficacy and sense of management in the learning situations (Urda, Schoenfelder, 2006). An important component of model "person-environment fit" linking school climate with psychological and behavioural adjustment is the adolescent's perceptions or experiences of the school environment rather than a more objective account of the school that is most relevant for understanding adolescents' adjustment and wellbeing (Way, Reddy, Rhodes, 2007).

The class can be understood as a community of exchange relating to issues related to knowledge and content but also as regards the well-being/ malaise of subjects, such situations have an impact on learning processes. A positive climate, as repeatedly shown in literature, promotes positive learning and the construction of knowledge shared between the different actors involved, students and teachers.

As Francescato Putton (1995) and Celi and Scuderi (2004) affirm the teacher is responsible for the existing climate in the classroom, he/she should create the conditions for developing a participatory and collaborative environment that stimulates students to the pleasure of learning. Indeed, in the process of learning the emotional aspect is as important as cognitive and reports the classroom is important to maintain a high level of motivation to learn and acquire skills. The class can and must become a place of confrontation of different positions for the talks, dialogue and enable everyone to develop their skills, both cognitive and relational. Why this happens play a fundamental role in both the school and teachers who encourage an environment in which to develop a positive climate.

Hay (1998), Moos and Tricket (2002) consider that the sense of belonging (membership) to the group and class at school is a particularly significant for the welfare and development of social competence is the ability to experience positive social conditions empathy and various ways of resolving conflicts can improve the quality of emotional development. The

same variable interfere in a positive way to overcome the conditions of stress as it is recognized that the quality of education may have the effect of creating or alleviate stressful situations individually (Kallestad et al., 1998, Torsheim et al. 2001a, Torsheim et al. 2001b). It is recognized that the climate and situations are some of the elements that can change aspects of motivation task (Urda, Schoenfelder 2006, Gilman and Anderman 2006, Appleton, Christenson, Kim, Reschly 2006) and change, thus positively or impairing the performance school, the sense of autoefficacia and management (mastery) of learning situations. Often the motivation is seen as a determined almost exclusively by individual characteristics, this leads to underestimate the influence of that context, however, may have a significant extent in setting positive attitudes towards learning (Manetti, Rania, Frattini, 2007).

Students perception of social climate have been found to be consistently associated with their performance on achievement tests and with multiple indices of their academic, behavioural, and social adjustment (Brand et al., 2008).

School climate has been identified as a key element in young people cognitive and social growth, for immigrated minors school experience is particularly important because it represents one of the main channels of participation and emancipation in the new society.

There is no single "normal" adolescent, there is no a singular adolescent experience, but multiple realities that cross a path of complex and variable growth, in relation to different contexts in which adolescents are included (Speltini, 2005). Adolescence has been recently defined "a challenge rich, at the same time, of opportunities and risks, to be overcome on one side by adolescent, through his own activities and choices, and on the other side by the social contexts, in fast modification, that act as frame to development" (Bonino, 2001). The relationship that adolescents establish with their "ecological" life context is central and can influence their chances of an optimal development, because on the one hand it can represent a resource for development and on the other a danger to avoid.

Well-being is not only depending on physical health or risk behaviour but also on own life satisfaction related to social relationship, self vision and general well-being (Santinello et al., 2005). Self-esteem is commonly considered a well-being index (Benjet, Hernandez-Guzman, 2001; Martinez, Dukes, 1997)

and adolescent psychological adjustment (Phinney, 1991).

The multiethnic characterisation, that the Italian context is assuming more and more justifies the community psychologists' attention due to the dynamics through which persons construct and define their shapes of identification, and to the identities derived from the belonging to specific cultural and national ethnic groups. Inside this conceptual framework, in last decade, has been more and more stated the construct of ethnic identity as an aspect of self acquaintance depending on the belonging to an ethnical group and to the believes, feelings and perceptions derived from that bond. Phinney (1990) assumes the ethnic identity as a complex meaning containing the following parameters: involvement and sense of belonging, positive evaluation, interest, knowledge and involvement in the social activities of the group.

Inside this conceptual framework, in last decade, has been more and more stated the construct of ethnic identity as a complex construct including a commitment and sense of belonging to the group, positive evaluation of the group, interest in and knowledge about the group, and involvement in social activities of the group (Phinney, 1990). In the literature the ethnic identity is considered as an important factor in the processes of well-being and self-esteem of adolescents (Blash and Unger, 1995; Phinney, Cantu, Kurtz, 1996; Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins, Seay, 1999; Umana-Taylor, 2004).

### Study objectives and hypotheses

This study examines the relationship among school environment's perception, well being and ethnic identity in Italian, double heritage and immigrant adolescents in order to analyse the possible differences. The research was conducted in a medium sized city in the northern Italy (Genoa).

The present work aims to investigate the five hypotheses and research questions presented below.

- 1) Some differences in the school climate's perception between Italian, dual heritages and immigrant adolescents; in particular immigrant adolescents would present more difficulties about academic performances;
- 2) some differences in well-being among the three groups considered;
- 3) some differences in ethnic identity among the three groups;

- 4) a correlation between school environment and well-being;
- 5) there are effects of school climate perception and ethnic identity on the dependent variable well-being.

### Method

#### Procedure

The same procedure was adopted for each class. The researcher handed out questionnaires in the classroom with the class teacher present. This helped to ensure uniformity of administration and eliminated the need to train teachers. Each student was given one copy of the survey instrument on his or her desk. The researcher read though all the instructions and, if necessary, reformulated the question in simpler terms. Students were allowed to ask for clarification about the questions and the researcher (not the teacher) answered such queries. The students were informed that their answers would be confidential; participation was subject to parental consent.

#### Measures

The questionnaire was composed of the following instruments:

##### *Socio-demographic information*

Socio-demographic variables included gender, age, school class, ethnicity, place of birth, time of permanence in Italy, linguistic competences, academic achievement, information about parents (ethnicity, age, place of birth, levels of education, job...)

##### *Scholastic Situation*

The scale is composed by 49 items organized in to nine dimensions including schoolmate relationship, teachers' relationship, school-related well-being, academic interest, method of study, parents' expectative, structural aspects, academic self-esteem, future employment (*Student Version, QSS-SV, Santinello, Bertarelli, 2002*).

##### *Well-being*

The scale (VSP-A, Vecu et Sante Percue de Adolescent, Simeoni, Sapin, Antoniotti & Auquier, 2001) investigates various dimensions of quality of life: vitality, physical and psychological well-being, relations with teachers, relations with parents, relations with friends, school performance, body image and leisure activities. The scale consist of 34 items; each item was answered on a 5-point Likert

scale, anchored at the ends from 1 (□not at all/never□h) to 5 (□very much/always□h). The time frame used was the previous 4 weeks. The test is consistent (Cronbach alpha 0.74.0.91). Content and construct validity are good. (Sapin, Simeoni, El Khammar, Antoniotti & Auquier, 2005).

*Ethnic identity*

Phinney’s (1992) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) scale was used to assess ethnic identity. The measure consists of 20 items organized in to four subscales including sense of belonging, identity achievement, ethnic behaviours and other orientation. Four-point scales were used, anchored with “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree”. Low scores indicate an unexamined ethnic identity, while high scores indicate an achieved ethnic identity status. Scores in the middle range represent exploration ethnic identity status.

**Participants**

This research is a part of a larger data collection project, demanded from regional politicians, which consisted of other measures with purpose to explore adolescents’ needs with respect to prevention.

The participants of the study are 348 subjects equally distributed between boy and girl. About ethnicity: the 26% are double heritage subject, 34% are immigrants and 40% are Italians (the Italians students are a randomly sample from the larger research that includes a large number of Italian students).

The ethnic identity category for each parent, as reported by adolescents, was used to determine group membership. The immigrants are from: 19.8% South America, 8.6% East Europe, 5.2% Africa, 0.6% North Europe. Most immigrants adolescent living in Italy from 3-6 years (41.2%), while most dual heritage adolescents living in Italy since birth (75%).

The mean age of the sample was 11.66 years. The sample is distributed in three groups regarding to school attendance: 42% of students belong at primary school, 33% at middle school and 25% at high school.

**Results**

*Descriptive analyses*

Regarding to academic performance the date show that immigrants have the failed students’ percentage more high (8%), follow double heritage (6.50%), than Italian student (3%). On the contrary, there is a significant decrease (F\*\* 14.53) about means in academic performances: Italians (3.59), double

heritage (3.53) and immigrants (3.15). This date prove that immigrant adolescents present more difficulties about academic performance than Italian and dual heritage students even if they have ratings higher than the sufficiency.

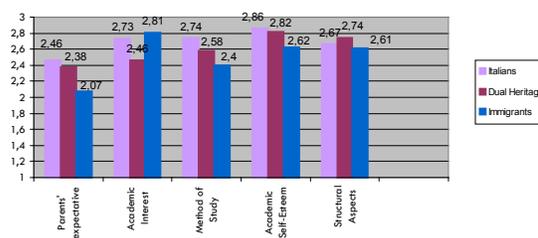
In table 1 are presented means, medians and standard deviations of the variables measured by the questionnaire.

Table 1 Means, Medians, Standard Deviations, Minimum and Maximum of Scholastic Situation (QSS-SV), Ethnic Identity (MEIM), and Well-being (VSP-A).

	QSS-SV	MEIM	VSP-A
Mean	24,47	60,46	103,99
Median	24,60	60,00	101
Std. Deviation	3,17	7,57	18,41
Minimum	16,40	40,00	69
Maximum	32,20	78,00	166

With regard to the QSS-SV scale emerge significant differences among three groups of students (F= 2.80\*\*). The Italians perceive a better climate at school, follow the dual heritage and immigrants students. Considered the subscale emerge some relevant date: parents’ expectative and academic self-esteem are more low in immigrants, on the contrary in this group is more high academic interest as show in the Figure 1.

Figure 1 Italians, dual heritage and immigrants’ student’s means in QSS-SV dimensions.

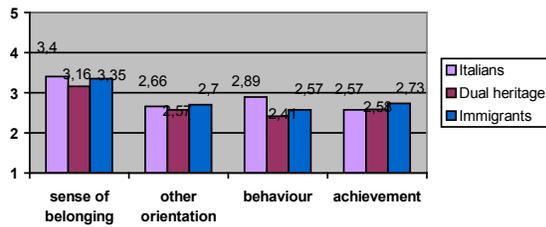


Furthermore there is a significant decrease (F=4.81\*\*) in overall dimensions from primary school (M= 25.10) to middle (M= 24.41) and high school (M= 23.65). In particular significant differences regard four dimensions: parents’ expectative (F= 5.86\*\*), teachers’ relationship (F= 4.87\*\*), academic interest (17.88\*\*), structural aspects (F=23.20\*\*).

For what concern MEIM Scale there are significant difference (F= 5.61\*\*) in ethnic identification among Italians, double heritage and immigrants’ means, in

particular the score more low is for double heritage (58.4) while for immigrants is 62.05 and Italians group is 60.42. Immigrant adolescents have higher ethnic identity, furthermore also dual heritage adolescents have lowest rate in the ethnic identification; the dimensions more critical are: sense of belonging and ethnic behaviour, as show in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Italians, dual heritage and immigrants' student's means in MEIM dimensions.



With regard to the VSP-A scale, the group that obtains a lower score is double heritage students (97.58) while Italians group obtain the higher score (108.02): the difference among three groups are significant ( $F= 8.40$ ). The four dimensions emerged by factor analysis (individual well-being =alpha .83; friendship = alpha .79; parent relationship = alpha .81; teacher relationship = alpha .76) shows significant difference among three group considered to relations with parents ( $F= 9.38^{**}$ ), friends ( $F= 7.44^{**}$ ), and teacher ( $F= 6.28^{**}$ ), who represent sources of social support, classically considered an important dimension of well-being; in particular double heritage group obtain the lower score in the three dimensions.

A comparison between male and female score's scale does not show any particular differences. The only meaningful result relates to friendship and teacher relationship in both dimensions girls shows higher scores. However, no significant differences were found between males and females with regard to general well-being. On the contrary, there are significant differences ( $F=40.12^{**}$ ) in overall well-being in primary ( $M= 113.89$ ), middle ( $M= 95.91$ ) and high ( $M= 98.20$ ) school means.

In particular there is a significant decrease ( $F=6.79^{**}$ ) in individual well-being dimension from primary school ( $M=3.51$ ) to high school ( $M= 3.28$ ); while in the social well-being (parents relationship,  $F= 48.77^{**}$ ; friendship  $F= 35.70^{**}$  and teachers relationship  $F= 25.32^{**}$ ) the scores are more low in middle school.

Correlation and regression model

Generally it can be affirmed that there are correlations between all the instruments used: QSS and MEIM (.233\*\*), QSS and VSP-A (.240\*\*). In particular correlations among variables dimensions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Correlation among school climate dimension and well-being and teacher relationship.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Classmate relationship	1										
2. Teachers relationship (teaching)	.177**	1									
3. Academic Interest	.177**	.505**	1								
4. Method of study	.079	.333**	.489**	1							
5. Parents' expectative	-.020	.146**	.019	.226**	1						
6. School-related well-being	.063	.283**	.313**	.327**	.320**	1					
7. Academic self-esteem	.176**	.211**	.272**	.292**	.284**	.344**	1				
8. Structural aspects	.119*	.416**	.461**	.194**	-.020	.238**	.111*	1			
9. Future employment	.202**	.244**	.257**	.165**	.081	.162**	.237**	.034	1		
10. Individual well-being	.269**	.119*	.138*	.068	.078	.290**	.290**	.174**	.084	1	
11. Teachers relationship	.031	.129*	.213**	.179**	.094	.081	.129*	.139*	.132*	.130*	1

\*\* p<.01; \*p<.05  
Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation that seem significant for the analysis are the relation between:

- individual well-being (VSP-A) and classmate relationship (QSS-SV;  $r .269^{**}$ ),.
- individual well-being and school- related well-being (QSS-SV;  $r .290^{**}$ ),.
- individual well-being and academic self-esteem (QSS-SV;  $r .290^{**}$ ),.
- teacher relationship (VSP-A) and academic interest (QSS-SV;  $r .213^{**}$ ),.
- teacher relationship and method of study (QSS-SV;  $r .179^{**}$ ),.

Table 3 proposes a linear regression model that considers individual well-being as dependent variable. The variables that affect the individual well-being are: school-related well-being, schoolmate relationship, academic self-esteem and other orientation. The regression model presented is significant and has a  $R^2 = .40$ . The school-related well-being is the best predictor of individual well-being ( $f\hat{A} = .20$ ,  $p <.001$ ) followed by the schoolmate relationship ( $f\hat{A} = .19$   $p <.001$ ), academic self-esteem ( $f\hat{A} = .16$   $p <.001$ ), other orientation ( $f\hat{A} = .13$   $p <.001$ ).

<.001), whereas they appear to be more moderate predictors.

Table 3 Linear regression model: individual well-being as dependent variable

	B	St. Error	Beta	t	R <sup>2</sup>
<b>Step 1:</b>					
School-related well-being	,195	,043	,270	4,518**	,27
<b>Step 2:</b>					
School-related well-being	,181	,042	,251	4,297**	,35
Schoolmate relationship	,199	,049	,237	4,069**	
<b>Step 3:</b>					
School-related well-being	,138	,045	,218	3,044**	,38
Schoolmate relationship	,183	,049	,191	3,745**	
Academic self-esteem	,112	,046	,153	2,408**	
<b>Step 4:</b>					
School-related well-being	,150	,045	,208	3,321**	,40
Schoolmate relationship	,162	,049	,193	3,289**	
Academic self-esteem	,119	,046	,162	2,578**	
Other orientation	,024	,011	,136	2,318**	

Further investigation has revealed as factors predictive of individual and social well-being achievement identity, school-related well-being and parents' expectative. Table 4 propose, in fact, a linear regression model that considers individual and social well-being as dependent variable The regression model presented is significant and has a R2 = .30. The achievement identity is the best predictor of individual and social well-being ( $f\Delta = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ ) followed by the size school-related well-being ( $f\Delta = .17$   $p < .001$ ) and parents' expectative whereas they appear to be a more moderate predictors.

Table 4 Linear regression model: individual and social well-being as dependent variable

	B	St. Error	Beta	t	R <sup>2</sup>
<b>Step 1:</b>					
Achievement identity	1,143	,392	,183	2,915**	,18
<b>Step 2:</b>					
Achievement identity	1,359	,389	,218	3,491**	,28
School-related well-being	6,331	1,867	,211	3,391**	
<b>Step 3:</b>					
Achievement identity	1,449	,389	,232	3,720**	,30
School-related well-being	5,138	1,948	,172	2,638**	
Parents' expectative	3,389	1,688	,131	2,008**	

**Conclusion**

In summary it's possible to note that, immigrant adolescents present more difficulties about academic performance and academic self-esteem. Furtherers there are differences, as we assume, among three groups considered in school climate's perceptions. Italian students have highest rate in school climate evaluation. Immigrant adolescents have lowest rate in parents' expectative but they have the highest rate in academic interest. The date has showed that Italian, dual heritage and immigrant students are different in ethnic identification: immigrant adolescents have higher ethnic identity, furthermore also dual heritage adolescents have lowest rate in the ethnic

identification. The dimensions more critical are: sense of belonging and ethnic behaviour.

As we assume that there are differences about well-being among three groups considered: double heritage adolescents have lowest rate in well-being scale in particular in relation dimensions (friendship, parents and teacher).

In conclusion the results underline that a high ethnic identification is related on a high well-being. This shows a critical situation for dual heritage adolescents. Dual heritage students would have identity problems and their ethnic identity would negative affect their well-being (Bracey et al., 2004).

According to Martinez e Dukes (1997), native adolescent have more high level of well-being but lower score about ethnic identification; these trends would be explained by less stress related on migratory processes and on belonging majority group (superior status).

Dual heritage adolescents, according to Brown (1990), presents a lower level of well-being that we can analyze in order to understand their complex background that influences their ethnic identity.

Individual psychological well-being is affected by the perception school climate in particular by relationship with schoolmates. Furthermore the other orientation is useful to understand intercultural relationship. On the contrary, the individual and social well-being is affected by ethnic achievement as a criterion guide for the social integration. Also parent expectations contribute to the definition of adolescent.

Research has suggested that school climate is correlated to student behaviour, academic performance, relational and psychological well-being for students. This issue has become even more pressing as changes in funding have necessitated that schools partner with community based organizations and social service agencies in order to find resources to address student needs and to promote positive youth development.

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