Background

- School connectedness relates to how students perceive they are supported, respected, valued and involved in the school environment (Goodenow, 1993).
- Students who feel connected to school are more likely to have positive health and academic outcomes (Bond et al., 2007; Dornbusch et al., 2001; Shochet et al., 2007).
- Some research suggests that low SES negatively influences school connectedness (Bonny et al., 2000; Ingersoll, 1999), leading us to question whether these positive outcomes related to school connectedness might also be impacted by SES.
- Recent research has found that the relationship between school connectedness and nonspecific psychological distress is stronger among low SES youth (Sampaşa-Kanyinga & Hamilton, 2016). However, to the author’s knowledge the relationship between school connectedness and depressive symptoms has not yet specifically been examined.

Objective

Primary Objective: To examine the relationship between school connectedness and depressive symptoms in a large, diverse community sample of early adolescents.

Secondary Objective: To investigate whether adolescents’ perceived SES moderates this relationship.

Methods

Participants

- 1,009 7th and 8th grade students from five middle schools in the New England region of the United States
- 51% Girls
- 51% Non-Hispanic White, 20% Hispanic, 9% Black or African American, 3% Asian, 14% Multi-Racial/Ethnic, and 3% other race/ethnicity
- Age: M = 12.5 years, SD = 0.71, Range = 11-15 years

Procedures

- Adolescents completed surveys at school in the Fall of 2016
- Movie passes were given to adolescents upon completion

Measures

- The School Connectedness Scale (SCS; Levine et al., 1994) (α = .78)
- The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (SSS; Goodman et al., 2001)
- The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children (CES-DC; Weissman, Orvaschel, & Padian, 1980) (α = .91)
- High Risk for Major Depression: CES-DC score ≥ 15

Analytic Plan

- Regression models
  - Independent variable: school connectedness scale score
  - Dependent variables: depressive symptoms total score, being at high risk for major depression (CES-DC ≥ 15)
  - Moderator: SES
  - Covariates: age, gender, race/ethnicity

Results

Table 1. School Connectedness and Total Depressive Symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Δ R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived SES</td>
<td>-0.92***</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Connectedness</td>
<td>-6.41***</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES x SCS</td>
<td>0.41**</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. School Connectedness and the Likelihood of Being at High Risk for Major Depression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome Variable</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>95% CI (B)</th>
<th>R²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived SES</td>
<td>0.91*</td>
<td>0.84 – 0.99</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Connectedness</td>
<td>0.44***</td>
<td>0.37 – 0.53</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES x SCS</td>
<td>1.15**</td>
<td>1.03 – 1.29</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adolescents reporting higher levels of school connectedness had lower levels of depressive symptoms and had lower odds of being at high risk for major depression, adjusting for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and perceived SES.

Conclusions

- School connectedness may be an important protective factor against elevated depressive symptoms, especially for students of lower perceived SES.
- It is possible that lower SES adolescents have greater psychosocial stressors at home and in their neighborhood environment, making the school an especially salient protective context.

Implications

- Findings underscore the importance for school systems to keep their students connected, engaged and valued, especially attending to students of lower perceived SES.
- Future research should evaluate these relationships prospectively and examine factors that contribute to students feeling connected to their school.

This research was supported by The Alvord Foundation.