

IDENTIFYING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE MODERATING ROLE OF ETHNIC
IDENTITY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL CLIMATE AND SELF-
ESTEEM FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

by

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(Under the Direction of Sycarah Fisher, Ph.D.)

ABSTRACT

African American youth are known to experience sharp declines in self-esteem throughout school, which has been found to be significantly influenced by their perceptions of school climate. Considering these perceptions, ethnic identity has been identified as a protective factor to protect youth against several risk factors through adolescence. However, little is known about how ethnic identity plays a role in the relationship between school climate and self-esteem and whether this relationship differs by gender. The current study examined the influence of an individual's ethnic identity on the relationship between their perceptions of school climate and self-esteem. Results revealed that positive perceptions of connectedness and safety, and high levels of ethnic identity, were linked to positive self-esteem outcomes. Furthermore, ethnic identity was also found to positively moderate the relationship between peer connectedness and self-esteem for African American girls.

INDEX WORDS: ethnic identity, African American youth, school climate, self-esteem

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem is regarded as a primary indicator of personal, social, and future life outcomes (Steiger et al., 2014), with several factors, such as school climate, identity development, and social experiences that influence self-esteem trajectories (Moksnes & Espnes, 2013; Orth & Robins, 2014). Given the importance of self-esteem on later life outcomes, it is critical to investigate the experience of youth who struggle with self-esteem development. Such knowledge could then inform intervention efforts. Research asserts that African American youths' negative perceptions of their school climate (Coelho et al., 2020; Lester et al., 2015; Parris et al., 2018) are related to the school environment, rules and expectations, and peer relationships, which can then hinder self-esteem development. Considering the known relationships between negative school climates and self-esteem, it is important to identify protective factors that serve as a buffer in navigating these developmental trajectories. One such protective factor is ethnic identity. Ethnic identity has been found to protect against negative experiences and contribute to higher levels of self-esteem (Bracey et al., 2004). Despite the known relationships between school climate and self-esteem, limited research has examined the moderating role of ethnic identity on this relationship and no research has examined how these relationships might differ by gender. Further, research has focused primarily on high-school youth and has not examined the unique experiences of early adolescents in middle school. The purpose of the present study was to examine the moderating role of ethnic identity on the

relationship between school climate and self-esteem in a sample of middle school youth. The study also assesses whether these relationships differ by gender.

Literature Review

Theoretical Orientation

The current study is grounded in the Integrative Model of Development for Minority Children, a conceptual framework that addresses the diversity and strength of minority populations, while simultaneously incorporating and emphasizing the essential factors for understanding the growth and development of minority children and their families (Coll et al., 1996). This framework deviates from traditional frameworks of development because it presents both considerations of social position and social stratification constructs as essential components of the model rather than secondary considerations for children's development. This theoretical model was selected as the guiding framework because of its integration of culture, ethnicity, and race as core formulations to the development of young children. As noted by Rose et al., (2019), this developmental framework places keen emphasis on the understanding of imperative factors that influence the growth and development of children from minority groups. Within this model, Coll et al., (1996) address eight major constructs thought to influence the developmental processes for children of color. These constructs are social position variables (e.g., race, social class), social stratification mechanisms (e.g., racism, discrimination), segregation, prohibiting/inhibiting environments (e.g., schools, neighborhoods), adaptive culture (e.g., traditions and cultural legacies), child characteristics (e.g., age, temperament), family (e.g., structure and roles), and developmental competencies (e.g., social, emotional). The current study incorporates the elements of social position (e.g., ethnic identity and gender), promoting and

inhibiting environments (e.g., school climate), child characteristics (e.g., age), and developmental competencies (e.g., self-esteem).

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a global construct deemed highly important in clinical, developmental, and social psychology research. Several definitions of self-esteem exist within the literature.

Rosenberg (1965; 1995), defines self-esteem as an individual's positive and negative attitude towards themselves along with the thoughts and feelings about one's overall self-worth.

Sedikides & Gregg (2003) operationalize self-esteem as an individual's subjective appraisal of self-worth, feelings of self-respect and self-confidence, and overall positive or negative views of the self. The development of self-esteem begins during early childhood and adolescence with noted trajectories that span out into adulthood. As a result of the mental, physical, and emotional changes associated with adolescence, research has regarded that specific developmental period and time frame as critical for self-esteem development (Birkeland et al., 2012; Meeus, 2016).

An individual's self-esteem during adolescence is thought to serve as an underlying mechanism for one's overall future life outcomes. Higher levels of self-esteem are often associated with positive social and life outcomes (i.e., successful relationships and good job performance); whereas negative self-esteem can be associated with poor social relationships and mental health outcomes (Marshall et al., 2014; Orth & Robins, 2014; Steiger et al., 2014).

Several trajectory studies have noted that self-esteem tends to increase during adolescence as a result of various factors such as identity development, academic performance, and peer relationships (Greene & Way, 2005; Madhere, 1991; Marshall et al., 2014; Orth & Robins, 2014; Steiger et al., 2014). However, for many youth, the transition to middle school has been identified as a key factor in self-esteem declines (Adams et al., 2006; Coelho et al., 2020; Diseth

et al., 2014; Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). Morin et al., (2013), specifically noted that middle schools play a crucial role in adolescent self-esteem development, and “adolescents experiencing a mismatch between developmental needs and socialization experiences at school may internalize the idea that their needs are unworthy of attention and develop chronic feelings of low self-esteem” (2013, p. 2).

Despite the abundance of literature on self-esteem characteristics, influences, and trajectories, limited focus has been placed on identifying self-esteem differences within ethnic groups. When examining cultural differences within self-esteem, several studies indicated that African American youth often reported higher levels of self-esteem than other racial groups (Bachman et al., 2011; McClure et al., 2010; Sprecher et al., 2013), and experienced the least declines in self-esteem (Erol & Orth, 2011; Greene & Way, 2005). Yet, research also suggests African American youth experience troubling self-esteem outcomes with a sharp decline in self-esteem as youth begin to transition into middle school (Coelho et al., 2020; White et al., 2014).

Studies have increasingly investigated gender differences related to self-esteem development and trajectories. However, these studies have yielded conflicting results regarding these differences. Initially, results presented by Greene and Way (2005), reported that gender differences were not present when examining how boys and girls experience self-esteem during adolescence. Other studies note that African American boys and girls report similar levels of self-esteem (Bachman et al., 2011; Martinez & Dukes, 1991). However, subsequent studies have challenged these claims. Numerous studies report that adolescent boys often report higher levels of self-esteem than girls (Adams et al., 2006; McClure et al., 2010; Moksnes & Espnes, 2013; Orth & Robins, 2014). Additionally, Perry et al., (2011) noted that adolescent girls often begin reporting lower levels of self-esteem during early adolescence. These differences might be

related to gender identity and socialization throughout adolescence and young adulthood (Adams et al., 2006).

Self-esteem literature has yielded varying results regarding gender and racial differences. Despite numerous studies indicating that African American youth tend to have higher self-esteem than youth from other cultures and ethnic groups, increased negative experiences are likely to cause steep declines during adolescence. Furthermore, research has noted that several factors can influence an individual's self-esteem trajectory, such as one's perception of school climate (Coelho et al., 2020; Harter, 2012).

School Climate

In recent years, studies in school climate research have focused on promoting positive, respectful, and safe academic environments (Anderson, 1982; Koth et al., 2008; Kuperminc et al., 1997; LaSalle et al., 2015; Rudasill et al., 2018; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). Positive school climates are known to yield positive student outcomes, have the potential to foster youth development, learning, and achievement (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; NSCC, 2007), and influence the quality of interactions between students, teachers, and parents (Wang & Degol, 2016). School climate, as defined by the National School Climate Center is “the quality and character of school life, as it is based on the patterns of an individual's experiences of school life, and reflects the norms, goals, values, impersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (NSCC, 2007, para. 1). Positive school climates are created to ensure that students, their parents, and the school staff can feel welcome, safe, and supported (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018). Moreover, these environments are expected to promote safe opportunities for cross-cultural interactions and friendships, learning, social, and

psychological well-being (Nishina et al., 2019). Thus, school environments should be inclusive for all students regardless of their ethnic background or the school's ethnic composition.

Schools are critical environments for aiding in the development of adolescent self-esteem (Hoge et al., 1990; Morin et al., 2013; Thapa et al., 2013). Prior literature has identified positive relationships between school climate and self-esteem during adolescence (Coelho et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2020; Greene & Way, 2005). For example, the results from Coelho et al., (2020), indicated that school climate was a significant individual predictor of self-esteem. Additionally, positive perceptions of school climate are more likely to buffer against declines in self-esteem. Similarly, Greene et al., (2005) and Fisher et al., (2020) reported that students with higher perceptions of school climate were also likely to report higher levels of self-esteem.

Unfortunately, the transition from elementary to middle school has been directly related to declines in self-esteem for adolescents (Diseth et al., 2014; Roeser et al., 2000). These declines are thought to be a potential result of academic and environmental changes (Eccles et al., 1993; Lester & Cross, 2015) or lack of engagement, connectedness, and support (Cardillo, 2013). These perceived negative experiences have been identified as potential threats that hinder academic motivation, positive mental health, and self-esteem outcomes (Amemiya & Wang, 2018; Wong et al., 2003).

In recent years, research has examined the experiences and perceptions of school climate for minority students (Parris et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022; Way et al., 2007). Results from the aforementioned studies indicate that African American students report lower perceptions of school climate than students from other ethnic groups. Despite the increase in diversity efforts being implemented, many schools are not creating or providing positive school climates for students from racial minority groups. These students often report lower feelings of

connection to their schools, causing declines in their perceptions of the school climate (Parris et al., 2018). Konold and colleagues (2017), suggest that the differences in school climate perceptions between African American and White youth might be attributable to the racial, achievement, and discipline gaps observed in schools. They further state that African American youth reported that teachers are less academically supportive, despite having high academic demands and expectations. Additionally, African American youth do not often perceive their schools as positive environments, which sets the stage for declines in their overall self-esteem (Bottiani et al., 2016). These declines might result from exposure to a host of negative experiences such as racism, segregation, lack of resources (Harris-Britt et al., 2007; Seaton et al., 2008; Wong et al., 2003), and academic disparities, violence, and juvenile delinquency (Madhere, 1991). For example, research has revealed that African American high school youth reported more experiences of racism and discrimination from their peers and adults (Hope et al., 2015; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004), and harsher disciplinary responses (Konold et al., 2017) than students from other ethnic groups. Consequently, African American youth are more likely to perceive a lack of safety and support in school, which has been found to negatively influence their academic achievement and disciplinary outcomes (Gregory et al., 2010; Voight et al., 2015). As a result of these experiences, African American youth have been found to develop their self-esteem under extremely difficult circumstances (Greene & Way, 2005). Yet, when African American youth feel safe and culturally supported by their schools, they reported having better teacher-student relationships, peer interactions, and a sense of belonging (Smith et al., 2020).

Regarding gender differences of school climate perceptions, the current literature is limited and inconsistent (Coelho et al., 2020; Suldo et al., 2012). For example, Way et al. (2007),

found that girls had higher perceptions of all dimensions of school climate at the start of middle school, but experienced sharper declines across the middle school years than did boys. However, Coelho et al. (2020) and Suldo et al. (2012), reported that school climate matters more to boys and they experience the sharpest declines in school climate over time.

Domains of School Climate

While the existing literature discusses the domains of school climate more broadly, the current study places special focus on the domains of school connectedness, school safety, and peer connectedness. These components of school climate have been observed to have a direct impact on youth's academic and self-esteem trajectories (Bachman & O'Malley, 1986; Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Kuperminc et al., 1997; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Roeser et al., 2000) and are further discussed below.

School Connectedness. Wang & Degol (2016), recognize school connectedness as the psychological state of attachment that students experience when they feel a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and bonding within the school. School connectedness can also be referred to as an individual's collective view of school attachment and bonding. Research has highlighted the importance of establishing secure connections between students, their peers, and their teachers. Several studies have reported significant positive relationships between school connectedness, self-esteem, and positive developmental outcomes (Foster et al., 2017; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Whitlock, 2006). For example, Foster (2017), reported that youth who felt connected to their schools had a positive overall adjustment, were less likely to develop mental health problems, and had higher levels of self-esteem, in comparison to those who did not feel a sense of connection within their schools. Additionally, McNeely et al., (2002) and Osterman (2000),

reported that students who feel connected also feel like they are essential members of their school's community.

Despite the positive relationships known between school connectedness and positive self-esteem outcomes, several studies have noted that African American youth do not often experience positive or high levels of school connectedness. Specifically, Parris et al., (2018) and Voight et al., (2015) found that African American youth reported having lower perceptions of school climate, mainly as a result of limited school-wide connections and adult-relationships. Thus, investigating the outcomes of positive connections within the school is critical for school climate research.

School Safety. School safety is referred to as the curated physical and emotional security provided by the school, as well as fair and appropriate order and discipline (Devine & Cohen, 2007; Furlong & Morrison, 2000; Wilson, 2004). Youth aspire for safe environments that are well-ordered, free from victimization, bullying, and violence. Scholars have noted that establishing these safe environments is critical for aiding in successful learning and student development (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). Feelings of safety and support within schools are highly related to youth's levels of self-esteem and overall school satisfaction (Fisher et al., 2020; Huebner et al., 2014). Furthermore, school climates that are perceived safe have been observed to have a positive influence on the health of the learning environment by yielding positive psychological outcomes for students and school personnel (Kuperminc et al., 1997; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, reports from school safety research have noted that many students do not feel physically and mentally safe at their schools because of increases in school violence, bullying, peer victimization, and harsher disciplinary actions (Astor et al., 2010; Cohen et al.,

2009; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Parris et al., 2018; Thapa et al., 2013; Voight et al., 2015).

Additional studies note that African American youth often report feeling unsafe at school due to a lack of overall support, less caring climates, and increases in discrimination (Bottiani et al., 2016; Hope et al., 2015; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004; Voight et al., 2015; Wong et al., 2003). These feelings surrounding concerns for safety have been recognized as potential causes for declines in adolescents' self-esteem (Valois et al., 2001). Therefore, it is vital to continue examining the importance of safe school environments that are likely to aid in positive self-esteem development.

Peer Connectedness. Changes in peer relationships and dynamics are central to adolescent development (Harter, 2012; Reitz et al., 2014). During adolescence, the role of peers becomes more important and influential (Jaworska & MacQueen, 2015; Reitz et al., 2014). The ability to establish peer connections is thought to be an important component of overall school climate that can precede positive academic and behavior outcomes (Wang & Degol, 2016). Particularly, quality peer connections and relationships have been found to increase self-esteem and emotional health (Birkeland et al., 2014; Colarossi & Eccles, 2003). On the other hand, the lack of peer connections can lead to increased aggression, victimization, and behavior problems (Elsaesser et al., 2012; Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008). According to Freeman et al., (2011), the need for connection between peers is highly critical for youth because the need for emotional support increases over time.

In sum, years of research have sought to examine the comprehensiveness of school climate and its impact on youth's social and emotional development. Despite the influx of literature on the importance of school climate for student's success, a dearth of literature exists on perceptions of school climate and self-esteem outcomes for minority students (Coelho et al.,

2020). Given the significant impact that school climate has on African American student's self-esteem, it is crucial to identify protective factors in this relationship, such as ethnic identity.

Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity is defined as a sense of belonging and attitude towards one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1992). As a part of an individual's self-concept, Tajfel (1981) noted that ethnic identity derives from the awareness of membership in a social group, combined with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. A strong sense of ethnic identity has been acknowledged as a protective factor against a myriad of racial and ethnic disadvantages (Neblett et al., 2012). Furthermore, literature over the past few decades has shown supportive evidence of how an individual's ethnic identity predicts future life outcomes (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Shi et al., 2008; Street et al., 2009). The aforementioned studies have noted how positive levels of ethnic identity have the potential to contribute to high self-esteem in the face of negative life experiences.

As an extremely critical component of adolescent development, several researchers have acknowledged positive relationships between ethnic identity and self-concept development, normative development, and positive youth adjustment (Arce, 1981; Cross, 1978; Erikson, 1968; Neblett et al., 2012; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Waterman, 1985; WHO, 2021; Williams et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2003). Several studies highlight the importance of positive perceptions and connections to one's ethnic group. Specifically, for promoting identity exploration (Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014; Phinney, 1989); resilience, self-esteem, and happiness (Bracey et al., 2004; Greene & Way, 2005; Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014; T. Smith & Silva, 2011); positive mental health and overall well-being outcomes (Shi et al., 2008; Street et al., 2009); serving as a protective factor in light of negative experiences (Neblett et al., 2012); and decreasing

externalizing and internalizing outcomes (Mandara et al., 2009; Serrano-Villar & Calzada, 2016; Wong et al., 2003). Conversely, youth with negative views or poor connections to their ethnic groups were found to have decreases in self-esteem development (Phinney et al., 1997); increases in risky and maladaptive behaviors (Beadnell et al., 2003; Smith et al., 1999); loneliness, and depression (Roberts et al., 1999)

Prior literature posits that African American youth are thought to thrive in the face of negative experiences when they have higher levels of ethnic identity (Greene & Way, 2005). For example, studies conducted by Phinney (1992) and Twenge et al., (2002) found positive significant relationships between ethnic identity and self-esteem in high school and college students. Additionally, a study conducted by Fisher and colleagues (2020), examined the relationship between the domains of school climate and self-esteem and the moderating role of ethnic identity in a sample of African American students in sixth to twelfth grade. In this study, they found that positive levels of ethnic identity had a positive influence on the relationship between school climate and self-esteem. The current study expounds the work conducted by Fisher et al., (2020) by placing a keen focus on students in sixth through eighth grade because of the importance of self-esteem development during early adolescence. This study also goes a step farther by examining the presence of gender differences on the relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity for African American youth.

Prior studies have examined the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem have yielded conflicting results when also accounting for gender differences. For example, Mandara et al., (2009), found that positive perceptions of ethnic identity were related to positive reports of self-esteem for boys, but not girls. Contrary to these findings, studies conducted by Adams et al. (2006), Bachman et al. (2011), and Turnage, (2004), reported that high school girls were found

to have high levels of global self-esteem when they achieved satisfactory levels of ethnic identity. Despite the conflicting results, gender plays a pivotal role in the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem for adolescents. It is important to continue examining the presence of these differences as it will improve our understanding of how self-esteem for each gender may be impacted by their levels of ethnic identity.

Overall, ethnic identity has been noted as a protective factor for various minority groups when faced with negative life experiences (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Fisher et al., 2017; Neblett et al., 2012; Phinney et al., 1997; Serrano-Villar & Calzada, 2016). Therefore, African American youth who report higher internalized levels of ethnic identity are likely to have positive physical, emotional, and social self-esteem and self-concepts. Yet, limited focus has been allocated to examining how ethnic identity can serve as a protective factor for African American youth's self-esteem in the face of negative school climate experiences. Additionally, limited studies have examined any gender-related differences when examining the relationship between perceptions of school climate, ethnic identity, and self-esteem.

Current Study

For youth from racial minority groups, ethnicity and gender can directly influence their perception of school climate and self-esteem (Parris et al., 2018). Though African American youth are more likely to endure negative experiences, research posits that their development of ethnic identity and connection to their ethnic group are safeguards in the light of these experiences (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Neblett et al., 2012; Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014). Several studies (Konold et al., 2017; Parris et al., 2018) have examined the relationship between school climate and self-esteem for African American youth; however, there is limited literature examining how levels of ethnic identity can influence this relationship. The purpose of the

current study is to contribute to existing literature by examining the protective role of ethnic identity against negative school climates and its influence on self-esteem outcomes for African American youth. Furthermore, the current study also adds to the literature by examining gender differences within these relationships. The following study addresses two research questions:

(1) What is the moderating role of ethnic identity on the relationship between school climate and self-esteem for African American youth? Based on the previous literature, we hypothesize that a strong sense of ethnic identity will help positively buffer against African American youth's negative self-esteem outcomes when exposed to negative school climates.

(2) Do gender differences exist when examining the moderating role of ethnic identity on the relationship between school climate and self-esteem for African American youth? Given the mixed nature of the literature, no directional hypotheses were developed.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Data for the current study were obtained from a large-scale cross-sequential educational survey called the Coordinated Community Student Survey (C²S²). This survey was developed by a team from a large Midwestern University. For the purpose of this study, specific items adapted from the survey were used to measure school climate, ethnic identity, and self-esteem constructs.

Participants & Procedure

The C²S² is a survey that assesses self-reported attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of students. Survey participants were recruited from 159 schools from across a large county in the Midwest of the United States. The survey was disseminated within the same schools during the spring over a 6-year period only to students who provided consent. Participant data from the Spring 2009 collection was utilized for the analyses of this study. The participants were 908 sixth through eighth grade students who self-identified as African American. Data from 908 participants were used in the final analysis after listwise deletion was used for participants with incomplete responses on items used within this study.

Measures

Coordinated Community Student Survey

The C²S² is a 208-item questionnaire that was developed by combining established measures and scales adapted from various national studies (e.g., Youth Risk Behavioral Survey; May & Klonsky, 2011) into a multidomain survey. The survey was conducted among youth to assess student perceptions of physical, social, and psychological functioning using reliable and

valid multi-item scales selected from public and peer-reviewed sources. Domains included in data collection for the larger study were school engagement, social support, mental health, prosocial and antisocial behavior, community engagement, ethnic identity, neighborhood and school characteristics, substance use, diet, and exercise. For the purposes of this study, only items related to the variables of interest were analyzed. These data included selected items related to school climate, ethnic identity, and self-esteem scales.

School Climate

Fifteen items from the C²S² were included in this analysis based on their relationship with school climate constructs (NSCC, 2007). Four of the items were relevant to school safety, eight items relevant to school connectedness, and three items relevant to peer connectedness were adapted from other school-related scales. This measure was validated in a previous study (see Fisher et al., 2020) for more details). Response options for school connectedness and peer connectedness ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The school safety response options ranged from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 4 (*a lot like me*). Cronbach's alpha scores for the current study were as follows: school connectedness = .67; school safety = .76; and peer relationships = .75.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was treated as the dependent variable in this analysis. The C²S² included an eight-item scale with questions related to self-esteem that were adapted from the validated 20-item State Trait Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). The eight adapted items were chosen as representative sample items with consideration for the age group and setting of the respondents from each of the following subscales: Performance, Social, and Appearance. Sample items include "I like who I am," "I think I am a good person," and, "I think I am very smart."

The participants responded to these items on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 4 (*a lot like me*). Cronbach's alpha reliability score for these eight items within the selected sample for this study was 0.80.

Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity was treated as the moderator variable in this study. Questions related to the construct of ethnic identity on the C²S² were from the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Roberts et al., 1999). This is a 12-item scale designed to measure ethnic identity affirmation/belonging and exploration. Sample affirmation/belonging items included "I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group" and "I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means to me." Sample exploration items included "I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group" and "I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership." Participants responded to these items on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The total ethnic identity 12-item scale used for this study had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, which is consistent with prior studies (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999).

Data Analysis

The starting sample for this study was 981. First, listwise deletion was utilized to include only participants who completed all survey items included in this study. Therefore, the final number of participants utilized in this analysis was $N = 908$. Intraclass correlation (ICC) estimates, and their 95% confidence intervals were calculated using SPSS version 25 to examine the proportion of variability attributed to the individual compared to the school due to the embedded structure of the data collection design. The ICC for the current sample was 0. Given this unusual ICC, means of the outcome variable (self-esteem) were examined across a random

selection of schools. These means were found to be within .09 of each other. This implies that the variability in ratings is likely attributed to individual differences rather than the school cluster characteristics. As a result, we did not account for nesting in our subsequent analyses. The interactions between school climate and ethnic identity variables on self-esteem were analyzed using the Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Macro Model 3 for SPSS. Prior to the analyses, descriptive statistics were examined, and bivariate correlations were conducted to better understand the relationship between the variables of interest.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1

Variables	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Ethnic Identity	908	2.84	.64	-				
2. School Connectedness	908	2.68	.49	.20**	-			
3. School Safety	908	1.84	.78	-.05	-.07*	-		
4. Peer Connectedness	908	1.57	.66	-.08*	-.07*	.30**	-	
5. Self-esteem	908	3.55	.47	.30**	.28**	-.26**	-.31**	-
Grade	908	6.92	.81					
Gender	908	1.55	.50					

Note: *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001

Moderated Moderation Analyses

A moderated moderation analysis was conducted to measure the interactions between school climate variables, ethnic identity, and self-esteem. The results from the moderated moderation are presented below by the following school climate areas: school connectedness, school safety, and peer connectedness.

School Connectedness

The model presented in Table 2 analyzes the moderating role of ethnic identity on the relationship between school connectedness and self-esteem. As displayed in Table 2, significant relationships were found when investigating the main effects. A significant main effect was observed between school connectedness and self-esteem ($b = .03, p = <.001$). Likewise, a significant relationship was found between ethnic identity and self-esteem ($b = .02, p <.001$). However, there were no significant findings identified when examining grade ($b = -.01, p = .66$) or gender ($b = .00, p = .97$). Following the examination of the main effects, the moderating effect of ethnic identity and the interaction between ethnic identity and gender was further investigated and did not yield any significant results.

Table 2

School Connectedness and Self-Esteem

<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE [95%CI]</i>
School Connectedness	.03	.00***	.00 [.02, .03]
Ethnic identity	.02	.00***	.00 [.01, .02]
Gender	-.00	.97	.03 [-.06, .06]
Grade	-.01	.66	.02 [-.04, .03]
School connectedness x ethnic identity	-.00	.14	.00 [-.00, .00]
School connectedness x ethnic identity x gender	.00	.68	.00 [.00, .00]
R ² .14			
Note: *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001			

School Safety

The next model presented in Table 3 examines the moderating role of ethnic identity on the relationship between school safety and self-esteem, when accounting for gender and grade. When examining the main effects, there were several significant findings. School safety significantly negatively predicted self-esteem ($b = -.04, p < .001$). Ethnic identity had a significant positive relationship with self-esteem ($b = .02, p < .001$). Finally, grade also significantly negatively predicted self-esteem ($b = -.04, p < .05$), such that students in higher grades experienced lower levels of self-esteem. Gender was not significant ($b = -.02, p = .49$). After examining the main effects, the moderating effect of ethnic identity was investigated and was not significant ($b = .00; p = .42$). The moderated moderation by gender was also non-significant ($b = .00; p = .78$).

Table 3

School Safety and Self-Esteem

<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE [95%CI]</i>
School safety	-.04	.00***	.01 [.05, -.03]
Ethnic identity	.02	.00***	.00 [.01, .02]
Gender	-.02	.49	.03 [-.07, .04]
Grade	-.04	.01*	.02 [-.08, -.01]
School safety x ethnic identity	.00	.42	.00 [.00, .02]
School safety x ethnic identity x gender	.00	.78	.00 [.00, .00]
R ² .14			
Note: *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001			

Peer Connectedness

Table 4 displays the results of the model that shows the moderating role of ethnic identity on the relationship between peer connectedness and self-esteem, when accounting for gender and grade. When examining the main effects, there was only one significant relationship present between the variables. A significant main effect was observed between ethnic identity and self-

esteem ($b = .01, p < .05$). Gender was not significant ($b = -.04, p = .14$). Following the examination of the main effects, the moderating effect of ethnic identity was examined and did not produce any significant results ($b = .00, p = .10$). However, the moderated moderation by gender was significant ($b = .01, p < .01$), indicating that the way ethnic identity works on the relationship between peer connectedness and self-esteem differs by gender.

Table 4

Peer Connectedness and Self-Esteem

<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE [95%CI]</i>
Peer connectedness	-.03	.24	.02 [-.07, .02]
Ethnic identity	.01	.02*	.01 [.00, .03]
Gender	-.04	.14	.03 [-.10, .01]
Grade	-.03	.08	.02 [-.06, .00]
Peer connectedness x ethnic identity	-.00	.10	.00 [-.01, .00]
Peer connectedness x ethnic identity x gender	.00	.00**	.00 [.00, .01]
R ² .18			
Note: * $< .05$, ** $< .01$, *** $< .001$			

Post-Hoc Analyses. To further examine gender differences, individual models were run separately for girls and boys and are presented in Tables 5 and 6. With regard to both genders, significant relationships were discovered between peer connectedness and ethnic identity. Lack of peer connectedness was found to have a significant negative relationship with self-esteem for both girls ($b = -.08, p < .001$) and boys ($b = -.05, p < .001$). Ethnic identity was found to have a significant positive relationship for both girls ($b = .02, p < .001$) and boys ($b = .02, p < .001$). Following the examination of the main effects, the moderating effect of ethnic identity was measured and produced varying results. More specifically, ethnic identity significantly moderated the relationship between peer connectedness and self-esteem for African American girls ($b = .01, p < .001$), indicating that ethnic identity buffers the negative effects of lack of peer connectedness on self-esteem. However, within this moderation, ethnic identity did not

significantly moderate the relationship between peer connectedness and self-esteem for adolescent boys ($b = .00, p = .75$).

Table 5

Peer Connectedness and Ethnic Identity: African American Girls

<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE [95%CI]</i>
Peer connectedness	-.08	.00***	.01 [-.09, -.06]
Ethnic identity	.02	.00***	.00 [.01, .02]
Peer connectedness x Ethnic identity	.01	.00***	.00 [.00, .01]
Grade	-.03	.20	.02 [-.07, .02]
R ² .22			
Note: *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001			

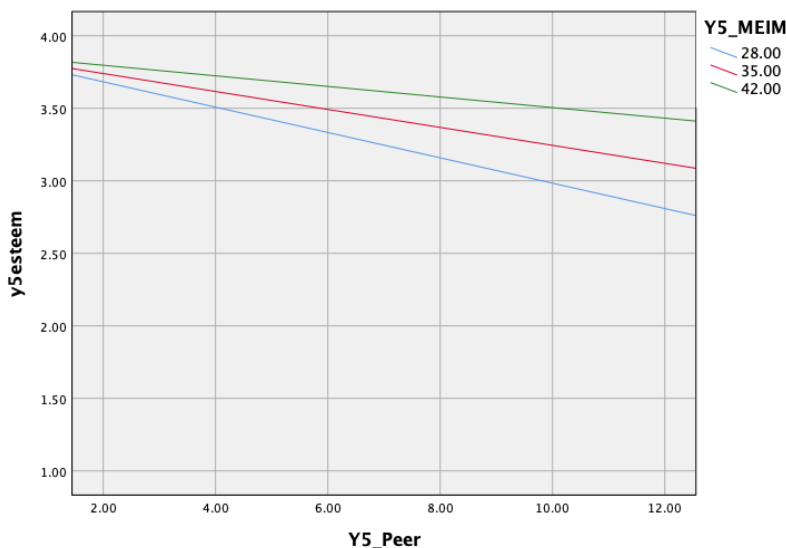
Table 6

Peer Connectedness and Ethnic Identity: African American Boys

<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>SE [95%CI]</i>
Peer Connectedness	-.05	.00***	.01[-.07, -.03]
Ethnic identity	.02	.00***	.00 [.01, .02]
Peer connectedness x Ethnic identity	.00	.75	.00 [.00, .00]
Grade	-.03	.24	.03 [-.08, .02]
R ² .13			
Note: *<.05, **<.01, ***<.001			

Figure 1

Interaction Graph: Self-Esteem Differences by Gender



CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

Adolescence is a pivotal time for self-esteem and identity development (Birkeland et al., 2012). As schools are a place where youth spend a great deal of time (Morin et al., 2013), school climate is also critical to their development and is associated with self-esteem and life outcome trajectories (Bear, 2020; Coelho et al., 2020). First, the current study examined relationships between school climate domains (e.g., school connectedness, school safety, and peer connectedness) and self-esteem. Out of the three models, only the domains of school connectedness and school safety were significantly associated with self-esteem. These findings are consistent with previous literature indicating that positive and supportive school climates lead to more positive social, emotional, developmental, and self-esteem outcomes (Parris et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2017; Thapa et al., 2013). Furthermore, consistent with our hypothesis positive relationships were also found between ethnic identity and self-esteem. These results are consistent with prior studies that indicate higher levels of ethnic identity are likely to yield higher levels of self-esteem (Fisher et al., 2020; Mandara et al., 2009). Next, we examined the moderating role of ethnic identity on the relationship between each school climate component and self-esteem.

School Connectedness. Consistent with prior research, the findings revealed that youth who experience strong feelings of connectedness to their school are more likely to have higher levels of self-esteem. (Foster et al., 2017). These results support the notion that established connections to various members within the school allow for students to feel that they are essential members of the school community (McNeely et al., 2002; Whitlock, 2006), in turn

boosting their self-esteem levels. Furthermore, previous studies reported that strong connection to one's ethnic group are known to buffer against negative or limited connections within the school for African American youth (Neblett et al., 2012; Phinney et al., 1997). However, contrary to prior research, our results indicated that connections to one's ethnic group did not moderate the relationship between school connectedness and self-esteem. This might be the result of the racial climate gap that minority students experience in their schools (Voight et al., 2015). Minority students observe these racial disparities (e.g., academics, discipline, and resources) and often report feeling less connected to their schools. Thus, acknowledging the connection to one's ethnic group might not always serve as a buffer for limited connections within the school based on the limited resources that these youth receive because of their ethnic background. Finally, no significant results were found when investigating the interaction between school connectedness, ethnic identity, and gender. The current finding adds to the previous literature that suggests that perceptions of school connectedness do not vary by gender (Loukas et al., 2006; Peng et al., 2023). Thus, regardless of gender, positive school connections are known to foster positive self-esteem and mental health outcomes.

School Safety. Negative relationships were observed between school safety and self-esteem. This finding indicates that youth who perceive their school environments to be unsafe often report lower levels of self-esteem. This finding is consistent with results from prior research, which suggests that unsafe schools are known to hinder optimal self-esteem (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015), academic, and mental health outcomes (Astor et al., 2001; Lester & Cross, 2015; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004). Within this analysis, grade was also examined as a covariate, and found to have a negative significant relationship with school safety and self-esteem. Thus, as grade increased, perceptions of school safety decreased. As youth progress

through school, they perceive their school environments to be less safe, which can exacerbate declines in self-esteem (Coelho et al., 2020; Lester & Cross, 2015). These changes in their perception of safety might be multifaceted, including changes in the school environment and classroom structure (e.g., larger classrooms and student populations; Lester & Cross, 2015; Peng et al., 2023), and increases in violence on and off school grounds (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). For many students, the academic changes related to school transitions and increasing grade levels (Coelho et al., 2020), along with increases in bullying, violence, and victimization (Astor et al., 2001; Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Voight et al., 2015) are likely to cause declines in overall self-esteem.

Similar to school connectedness, no significant relationship was found between school safety and ethnic identity. Furthermore, no significant results were found when we examined the moderating role of ethnic identity on the relationship between school safety and self-esteem. Prior research has acknowledged ethnic identity as a potential protective factor in the face of adversity or negative experiences (Phinney et al., 1997). However, the lack of significance in this interaction might be that African American youth do not feel safe in their schools which is coupled with increased exposure to violence, victimization, and harsh disciplinary practices (Hope et al., 2015; Parris et al., 2018). Finally, our analyses did not yield any significant results when examining the interaction between school safety, ethnic identity, and gender.

Peer Connectedness. No significant relationship was found when examining the main effects between peer connectedness and self-esteem. This outcome suggests that established friendships or the lack thereof do not impact the student's self-esteem. Moreover, this finding is inconsistent with prior literature, which posits that positive peer connections are known to bolster positive self-esteem outcomes (Wang & Degol, 2016). Several studies have reported that the

need for peer connections is vital for positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Additionally, a positive relationship was found when examining the main effect between ethnic identity and self-esteem. This outcome was found to be consistent with previous literature suggesting that African American youth with close ties to their ethnic group were more likely to have increased positive life and mental health outcomes (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). These results support our hypothesis that higher levels of ethnic identity can buffer against declines in self-esteem.

The interaction between peer connectedness, ethnic identity, and self-esteem did not yield any significant results. Based on this outcome, ethnic identity did not buffer against low levels of self-esteem that might have resulted from limited or no peer connections. Thus, youth with a close relationship to their ethnic group were not found to have higher levels of self-esteem despite the number or quality of peer connections they have established within the school. We further examined the presence of gender differences on the impact of ethnic identity on the relationship between peer connectedness and self-esteem. Our results indicated that gender differences were present within this relationship. Two separate model analyses were conducted to examine the nature of the moderated moderation of ethnic identity on the relationship between peer connectedness and self-esteem. Results from this analysis found that ethnic identity positively moderated the relationship between peer connectedness and self-esteem for African American girls, but not boys. These differences might be due partly to the value each gender places on peer relationships. When compared to boys, adolescent girls develop close relationships with peers earlier on and often rely on them for emotional support and preservation of their self-esteem (Kingery et al., 2011). Furthermore, African American girls have been observed to apply greater effort to their friendships (Rueger et al., 2010), and report higher levels

of peer support and connectedness (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Because ethnic identity positively moderated the relationship between peer connectedness and self-esteem for girls, it could be that ethnic identity provides young African American girls with a sense of confidence that helps them seek out and establish strong peer connections. Furthermore, research by Phinney et al, (1997) and Wong et al., (2003) highlighted that a strong sense of ethnic identity and connection to one's ethnic group has been observed as a protective factor for young girls with limited or no peer connections within the school.

Conclusion

Limitations of Existing Research

The results of this study should be carefully considered noting limitations present. First, the results of this study might not be reflective of the attitudes and perceptions of present-day middle-school students. Specifically, the sample for this study came from an older, secondary data set. Throughout the years, several aspects of school climate (e.g., connectedness and safety) have been impacted as a result of external circumstances. For example, lower perceptions of school safety have been reported based on increased bullying and violence within the school, communities, and online communities (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). When considering connectedness within the school, connectedness also might be limited and influenced by recent events such as COVID-19 and school closures. Second, the data collected for this study were centralized to one geographic region. The perceptions of these students are not reflective of students in other areas across the nation. Despite these limitations, the current study provides further insight to the perceptions of school climate for African American middle-school adolescents.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Findings from the current study contribute to research on the relationship between school climate and self-esteem by highlighting the role of ethnic identity on relationships. This study is unique in that it places keen focus on African American ethnic identity, and how identity can influence the relationship between perceptions of school climate and levels of self-esteem. This study also adds to the literature by examining relationships with an adolescent population. The current study continues to extend the body of research by examining the presence of gender differences within relationships. The results from the current study support the hypothesis that school climate and ethnic identity are both critical components to adolescent self-esteem development. With this knowledge, more research should be conducted to gather the perspectives of African American youth's perception of school climate and the impact it has on their overall mental health development and trajectories. Prior studies have reported limited consistent findings pertaining to gender differences within groups when examining school climate and self-esteem. Thus, future research should focus on examining the presence of gender differences within self-esteem and school climate research (Greene & Way, 2005).

Schools are responsible for creating positive and inclusive environments for all students, to aid in fostering their overall development and self-esteem (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Nishina et al., 2019). However, results from prior studies (Parris et al., 2018; Voight et al., 2015) indicated that African American students often report lower perceptions of overall school climate. Okeke (2014) reported that “emphasizing the strengths and rich cultural heritage and history of African Americans is a way to promote psychosocial adjustment and wellbeing among African American youth were key tenets of promoting self-esteem.” Therefore, schools can provide the cultural frames of reference to support ethnic identity development for minority

youth, in turn, resulting in higher levels of overall wellbeing and self-esteem (Nishina et al., 2019). Doing so might include providing more opportunities for youth to gather and create connections with various members of the school community. Schools can also offer more opportunities for ethnic identity exploration and conversation among students from all ethnic groups. Although students from racial minority groups tend to report lower perceptions of safety (Parris et al., 2018), schools can implement more methods of promoting safe, bully-free, and caring environments for all students.

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