ABSTRACT

RELATIONS BETWEEN FAMILY COHESION AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE AMONG YOUTH LIVING IN POVERTY

by DeAngelo C. Gatlin

Research abounds that explores the impact of economic disadvantage on youth and their families. An increased likelihood of the development of assorted negative outcomes has been revealed, yet researchers have also presented various protective factors for these families. The current study employs a correlational research design to investigate (a) the relationship between family cohesion and social competence among a large and ethnoracially diverse sample of U.S. families living in poverty, and (b) the potential moderating role of grade level on that relationship. The Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES IV; Olson 2011) and Harter’s Perceived Competence Scale (Harter, 1985) were adapted to measure family cohesion and social competence. Results revealed that family cohesion was significantly and positively related to social competence among the sample. A regression analysis demonstrated that grade level did not significantly moderate the relationship between family cohesion and social competence. Practical implications and future research directions are provided.
RELATIONS BETWEEN FAMILY COHESION AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE AMONG YOUTH LIVING IN POVERTY

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Introduction

In public schools throughout the country, the number of students who live in poverty is steadily increasing (Templeton, 2011). In fact, the majority of students in public schools qualify for and participate in programs providing free and reduced lunch to students in need. Poverty is an important issue in that its impact manifests at school, home, and in the community (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). In the classroom, for example, it is sometimes the case that teachers come from middle-class backgrounds and accordingly view the world through a similar lens. Presumably, students from impoverished backgrounds have a starkly different view of the world than the teachers educating them in their classrooms. Regarding home and community contexts, some researchers assert that conditions within neighborhoods affect youth development via parenting and other processes involving family dynamics (Caughy et al., 2012). Rather than viewing poverty solely as a number, Templeton (2011) suggests that poverty is a combination of complex social and financial issues that includes the following: the absence of living wages and affordable housing, means of transportation, availability and affordability of child care and quality education, and access to health care. In terms of determining who is considered to be living in poverty, the United States generally relies on what are called absolute measures of poverty, which are based on how much money a family earns (Seccombe, 2007). According to Templeton (2011), it is not solely having little money. Instead, it is a mindset that permeates decision-making processes in everyday life.

Theoretical Framework

The family and environmental stress perspective is the framework guiding this research (Magnuson & Votruba-Drzal, 2009). There is evidence suggesting that parenting practices and the neighborhoods in which children and adolescents live are related to well-being from infancy through adolescence, such that well-being is promoted when neighborhood conditions reinforce positive parenting and family practices within the home. On the other hand, well-being may be obstructed when neighborhood conditions do not align with those practices. It is not surprising, therefore, that neighborhood characteristics – including economic disadvantage – are associated with the social competence of students (Caughy et al., 2012). Being economically disadvantaged has also been found to be associated with higher levels of social aggression and lower levels of social competence (Caughy et al., 2012). In addition, several studies show that living in economic disadvantage and impoverished neighborhoods is associated with higher degrees of family dysfunction, harsh and inconsistent parenting practices, and stress on behalf of parents (Bowen et al., 2002; Rankin & Quane, 2002; Simons et al., 2005). Taken together, this illustrates the complex nature of economic disadvantage as well as a couple of the mechanisms by which it affects those who live in such conditions.

According to Olson (2000), family cohesion is defined as “the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another” (p.145). This is often viewed as one aspect of the larger construct of family functioning. There is a paucity of research solely examining this facet of family functioning and its relationship to social competence, let alone among families living in poverty. More research is currently needed to address this. From research evidence on family instability, however, it is fair to reason that family processes among those living in poverty may be less cohesive as a result of the added stressors that they face (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010).
As previously stated, social competence is one of a growing list of domains found to be related to and sometimes impacted by poverty status. It refers generally to one’s ability to take and understand the perspective of other people across experiences and refer to those experiences when presented with social events in the future (Semrud-Clikeman, 2007). More specifically, it is one’s ability to be flexible when responding to others and handle the social challenges that come along with social interactions. It is important to note that other constructs such as social communication, social skills, and interpersonal communication are often components of social competence. The development of social competence arises from interactions between parent and child as well as peer relationships, and it influences social interactions throughout one’s life. In addition to the aforementioned constructs, Semrud-Clikeman (2007) suggests additional elements and skills that comprise social competence: language and conversational skills (which are learned from parents and teachers); sending and receiving emotional cues and messages; and the ability to learn, effectively manage one’s behavior, and work cooperatively and effectively with other people. It has also been asserted that social competence is made up of many facets of emotional competence. Denham (2006) views the two as inextricably linked, using the construct social-emotional competence to capture both.

The importance of social competence cannot be overstated. Socially, when a child forms friendships early on, is well-liked by his or her peers, and is able to form and maintain new friendships, he or she is more likely to form positive and appropriate relationships with teachers, have more positive perceptions about school, have higher levels of participation in school, as well as achieve academically higher than peers who are not as socially competent (Denham, 2006). According to Denham (2006), students who have lower social and emotional competencies may receive less acceptance from both school peers and their teachers. When viewing social competence as a developmental task, children who are able to maintain positive relationships with their peers are better equipped to handle social demands that are encountered later in life. Again, the importance of social competence must be viewed as an essential element of a child’s development. Navigating social situations is a task that emerges during infancy, and as a child gets older, the frequency and complexity of the interactions in those situations rapidly and significantly increase (Denham, 2006). Educators, parents, and researchers seeking to build social competence within children and adolescents must be aware of the developmental nature of social competence as they seek to understand and promote it among children and adolescents. 

**Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this research is to examine two variables -- family cohesion and social competence -- in the context of a sample of families living in poverty. This research will extend findings of previous research by including a more extensive range of students living in poverty, with students’ grade levels ranging from kindergarten to Grade 12. A fundamental goal is to fill some of the literature gaps regarding family cohesion and social competence among students living in poverty in order to better understand students, their families, and their needs.

**Definition of Key Terms**

It is necessary to know the following three terms in order to best understand the purpose of this research project:

a. *Poverty* — the United States Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) has established U.S. federal guidelines (2017) by which families are identified as being impoverished. Federal guidelines are based on pre-tax cash income that families bring in and are
according to the number of family members within the family unit. 2017 federal guidelines are based on 2015-2016 census data. Families are considered to be living in poverty if their income is at or below the amounts presented below in Table 1. While varied definitions of poverty exist, this definition is what the USDHHS uses for federal program eligibility decisions.

Table 1. 2017 U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of People in Family/Household</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Guideline by Income</td>
<td>12,060</td>
<td>16,240</td>
<td>20,420</td>
<td>24,600</td>
<td>28,780</td>
<td>32,960</td>
<td>37,140</td>
<td>41,320</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For families with more than eight people in the household, an additional $4,180 per person is applied. Since participants in the current study participate in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (to be explained later), this definition of poverty was selected. Note that, beyond the fixed income eligibility that are used for the federal poverty guidelines, poverty is discussed later in this study as an experience that may have an impact on family relations, learning outcomes, and other factors.

b. *Family cohesion* — the degree to which families are able to effectively interact, communicate, and be flexible to each other’s needs (Olson, 2000). This is also known as the “emotional bonding that family members have toward one another” (p. 145).

c. *Social competence* — the ability to establish, navigate, and maintain social relationships (Harter, 1985).

**Literature Review**

**Parenting and Families in Poverty**

The role of parents in the formation of family processes and subsequent development of competencies among their children cannot be understated. People who live in poverty are no exception to this phenomenon. Templeton (2011) suggests that many people unfamiliar with the complex nature of poverty erroneously assume that parents are to blame for problems among their families. The researcher asserts that it is faulty to place blame on, ignore, or be dismissive towards students’ parents (Templeton, 2011). It is essential to understand the daily lives of students and parents affected by poverty. Many parents have to secure and work multiple jobs, with the acquired pay often not being nearly enough to provide adequate support for their families. Templeton (2011) states that some of the negative (along with the positive) parenting practices among these families are often passed down from each generation to the next, perpetuating this cycle. Some students’ teachers may feel as though parents do not meet their expectations for parenting styles and techniques. Again, one should seek to understand parents’ perspectives by learning of their backgrounds and experiences. The resiliency that characterizes many of these families cannot be ignored.

In response to the challenges that occur due to living in impoverished conditions, children and adolescents may depend heavily on their social relationships with peers (Templeton, 2011). These relationships often serve the purpose of equipping students with social tools to better navigate their worlds. However, it can sometimes be the case that their relationships with others
are deleterious rather than beneficial (Templeton, 2011). Forming an unstable perception of their relationships with others can be one of the potential consequences, with some students having difficulties trusting others, feeling as though they do not belong (even sometimes within their own families), and forming friendships. Manifestations of conflict among members of one’s own family in the home setting have the potential to subsequently affect one’s ability to socially interact with others in a healthy manner. Family cohesion – the degree of warmth and responsiveness within a family – works in a two-fold way, being able to serve as a source of support when levels are high or being a detriment when levels of family cohesion are low. Evidence suggests that these family processes begin developing even before students enter school (Rispoli, McGoe, Koziol, & Schreiber, 2013).

**Peer Relationships and Social Competence**

There is evidence indicating that the development of social competence is multifaceted, arising from an interplay of factors such as family, school, and the traits children possess. Together, these factors influence the behavioral expressions of social competence (Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar, & Stollak, 2007). After investigating the relationship between social competence of preschoolers and family characteristics, classroom climate, and the behaviors of teachers, Brophy-Herb et al. (2007) found that some variables were more predictive of parent-rated social competence of students. Of those variables, socioeconomic status (SES) was one of the major predictors, such that parents of lower SES rated their children as being less socially competent than parents of higher SES. This is thought to be the case perhaps because of the absence of financial (and other) resources among families of low SES, which presents unique stressors to parents and their children. The higher the number of stressors reported by parents, the lower parents rated their children’s levels of social competence. In sum, according to the parents of students living in poverty, social competence is one potential area seen as being less developed and appropriate for interactions with peers in the school environment.

**Developmental Nature of Family Cohesion**

The nature of the relationship between children and adolescents and their parents has been heavily studied over the years. There is research indicating that older adolescents tend to view their families as less cohesive as compared with younger adolescents (Feldman & Gehring, 1988). Moreover, some researchers have investigated the role family cohesion serves – whether it serves as a risk factor or protective factor – as adolescents get older, with findings that the level of family cohesion reported decreases from sixth grade to tenth grade (Baer, 2002). Previous studies examining such research questions among students and families in poverty were not found in the literature. Coupling this research with the previously mentioned findings regarding family cohesion and social competence, it could be the case that the lowest levels of social competence will be observed among older youth. Again, since little to no published research addresses this question, it is thought that the present research will add to the literature.

**Link Between Family Cohesion and Social Competence**

It is clear from a review of the literature that few studies have examined relations between family cohesion and social competence. However, such studies do exist. In one study, Amato (1989) investigated several family processes (e.g., parent support, parental control, and high-quality sibling relationships) and their relationship with two types of competence – personal and social – among children and adolescents. Among the multiple family process variables
examined a key finding was that high family cohesion was significantly related to general competence, with general competence including many factors, such as self-control; self-esteem; life skills; social competence; independence; and reading ability (Amato, 1989). With regard to the current study, it important to point out that the studied sample in the Amato (1989) study was located in Victoria, Australia, and families were not described as being impacted by economic disadvantage. Additionally, only students in Grades 3, 4, 10, and 11 were included. In a similar vein, albeit with a considerably different sample, Leidy, Guerra, and Toro (2010) assessed the relationship among three variables in a sample of immigrant Latino families. The three variables were positive parenting, family cohesion, and child social competence. 99% of the parents and 32% of the children involved in the Leidy et al. (2010) study were born outside of the United States. The researchers found that family cohesion was a significant predictor of child social self-efficacy in their sample. The current study seeks to extend those findings within a relatively large sample of economically disadvantaged families in the Midwestern United States.

Rationale for the Present Study
The research base above explores three themes – the negative impact of poverty on parenting practices and family dynamics; how students of lower socioeconomic status interact and get along with their peers; ways in which family cohesion and social competence are linked; and potential changes in family cohesion as youth mature in age. As previously mentioned, the fundamental purpose of this research is to examine the relationship between two variables -- family cohesion and social competence -- among a sample of students whose families live in poverty. The larger purpose is to build upon previous research with the inclusion of a larger sample size and greater age range of students living in poverty.

Research Questions/Hypotheses
The following research questions and hypothesis will be examined by this study:

1. Is there a relationship between family cohesion and social competence among students living in poverty?
   a. Hypothesis: There will be a significant and positive relationship between family cohesion and social competence.

2. Does grade level serve as a significant moderator for the relationship between family cohesion and social competence, such that the relationship will be stronger for elementary students (kindergarten to grade 5) than secondary students (grades 6-12)?
   a. Hypothesis: Grade level (elementary or secondary) will serve as a moderator for the relationship between family cohesion and social competence, such that the relationship will be stronger for elementary students (grades K-5) than secondary students (grades 6-12).

Methodology

Research Design
A correlational research design was used for this study. This type of research examines the association – or relationship – between research variables, measuring the degree to which one variable is related to another. The predictor variable was family cohesion, while the outcome variable was social competence. Further analysis was completed with a moderator regression
analysis to test the second hypothesis, with grade level being examined as the moderator variable.

Participants

Participants in the study were 877 students served by the Butler County Success Program (BCSP) during the 2015-2016 academic year. Although there were 1,755 total students served by the BCSP during this time frame, only 877 students consented to participate in the research aspect of the project and had data on the variables of interest (family cohesion, social competence, and grade level). The BCSP is specifically designed to address the needs of students and families living in poverty. Approximately 45 schools within seven school districts in a Midwestern state are sites in which the program is implemented. As part of the program, community school liaisons assist families by providing access to basic needs (e.g., transportation, childcare, healthcare, and family cohesion). The goal of the BCSP is to promote positive outcomes among students and their families by meeting their basic needs. The program’s referral process includes staff referrals, in which school staff members such as community-school liaisons, classroom teachers, school counselors, and school psychologists refer families to the program. Another type of referral within the BCSP is a self-referral, whereby families independently connect with the program and seek assistance. With the referral process associated with the BCSP, a purposive sampling technique was employed. All families qualified for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and subjects were selected according to their qualification and participation in the TANF program. Note that data used for this study was extant, coming from the BCSP database, which contains a considerable number of variables. The extant data contained responses from teachers and parents on an adapted questionnaire that adopted two measures – Harter’s competence scale (Harter, 1985) and the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scales IV (Olson, 2011).

The ethno-racial makeup of the sample was as follows: 58.2% Caucasian American/White; 19.1% African American/Black; 13.2% Hispanic/Latino; 7.2% Multiracial; 1.0% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander; 0.4% Asian; and 0.2 American Indian or Alaskan Native. In terms of the sex of participants, 54.8% of the sample was male and 45.2% of participants were female. Participants ranged in age from 5 to 20. Poverty status was separated into three categories, with 79.6% of participants’ families living up to 99% below the federal poverty cutoff, 15.3% of families living between 100% to 149% below, and 5.1% of families living between 150% to 200% below the federal poverty line.

Instrumentation

A shortened version of the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES IV; Olson 2011) was used to measure family cohesion. This scale measures the degree to which families are able to effectively interact, communicate, and be flexible to each other’s needs, and it also is a measurement of how close families are. It is appropriate for use with all types of families. All items are measured on a five-point Likert scale from “Does Not Apply to Me (0)” to “Strongly Agree (4),” with each of the points representing agreement with the item’s corresponding statement. Sample items for this scale include the following: “The members of my family feel very close to each other,” “Family togetherness is very important for my family,” and “In my family, we express love to each other.” A few reverse-scored items are also included: “In my family, we often don’t talk to each other about how to solve problems.” and “In my
family, we don’t talk to each other when we are angry.” Cronbach’s alpha for the seven family cohesion items used in this study was .78.

An adapted version of Harter’s Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter, 1985), which measures three domains of children’s competence – cognitive, social, and physical – was completed by parents and teachers and serves as the social competence measurement. It is appropriate to administer the scale for the purposes of assessing children and adolescents. As with the previously mentioned scale, a five-point Likert scale from “Does Not Apply to Me” to “Strongly Agree” is utilized. Following are sample items from the scale: “(Child’s name) is really easy to like,” “(Child’s name) usually does things by himself/herself,” and “(Child’s name) finds it hard to make friends,” with the latter being a reverse-scored item. Cronbach’s alpha was .74 for the three social competence items used for this study.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Longitudinal data have been collected for the BCSP over the past several years. Pre-test data collected for the 2015-16 academic year were cleaned and analyzed for the purposes of this study. SPSS was the statistical software used for performing analyses of the study’s variables. Specifically, a Spearman Rank-Order Correlation was performed to calculate the correlation coefficient between family cohesion and social competence. The correlation coefficient, which ranges from -1 to 1, is a measurement of the association or relationship between variables. A positive correlation coefficient indicates that the included variables either increase or decrease together. As one variable increases or decreases, the other follows suit. This in contrast to a negative correlation coefficient, in which the variables move in opposite directions, with one variable increasing and the other decreasing. A correlation of zero means no relationship exists between the variables. To analyze the potential moderator of school level, a moderator regression analysis was performed.

Six assumptions were tested due to the fact that data analysis for the second hypothesis included a moderator analysis. The first assumption is that the dependent variable has to be measured on a continuous scale – either an interval or ratio variable. The dependent variable in the current study, social competence, was measured on a five-point Likert Scale of “Does Not Apply to Me” to “Strongly Agree” and was coded as an interval variable within the dataset. The second assumption is that there must be two or more independent variables, and those variables are required to be either continuous or categorical. The two independent variables tested for the second hypothesis using a moderator analysis were family cohesion (a continuous variable) and grade level (a categorical variable). Third, another assumption critical for the data analysis is that there must be independence of observations, and this was examined via the Durbin-Watson statistic in the data output. The Durbin-Watson value was between 1.5 and 2.5, thus the data was not autocorrelated. The fourth assumption is that there has to be a linear relationship between the dependent variable and each independent variable, and also the dependent variable and independent variables together. Fifth, there must be no evidence of multicollinearity – having two or more independent variables with a significantly high correlation among each other. This assumption was not met, according to the variance inflation factor found for the interaction term and grade level variable, which indicated markedly high multicollinearity. Moreover, tolerance values were found to be below .01. The sixth and final assumption is that there should be no significant outliers among the dataset. The absence of any outliers within the dataset supported the final assumption being met.
Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each variable, which included the mean, median, standard deviation, and range (see Table 2). The mean family cohesion score was 3.32, indicating that the mean response fell between “Strongly Agree” and “Agree.” The mean score for the composite variable for social competence was 2.83 reflecting that the mean response was between “Agree” and “Disagree.”

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Cohesion Scores</td>
<td>903</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Competence Scores</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first research question was, Is there a relationship between family cohesion and social competence among a sample of students who live in poverty? Results of an analysis of the data’s normality indicated that the data were not normally distributed. Thus, a non-parametric Spearman Rank-Order correlational analysis was performed to assess the relationship between the mean family cohesion score and mean social competence score. The correlation was both significant and positive, \( r = .190, N = 877, p < .01 \). As a result, the null hypothesis that no relationship exists between these two variables is rejected. The correlational analysis indicates that family cohesion is significantly and positively related to social competence among the sample. Further, the coefficient of determination \( r^2 = .045 \) indicates 45% shared variance between family cohesion and social competence.

The second research question was, Does grade level have a significant moderating effect on the relationship between the two variables of family cohesion and social competence? A moderator analysis was conducted to examine whether grade level moderated the significant, positive relationship discovered between family cohesion and social competence. In the first step of the hierarchical linear regression, two predictors were entered: grade level and family cohesion. The model was statistically significant, \( F(2, 414) = 9.81, p < .05 \) and explained 4.5% of variance in social competence (see Table 3). After entry of the family cohesion and grade level interaction term at Step 2, the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 4.6%. Introduction of the interaction term of family cohesion and grade level resulted in a loss of 0.1% of variance in social competence and revealed a non-significant moderating effect, \( \Delta R^2 = .00; F(1, 413) = .346; p > .05 \).

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Social Competence (N = 883)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$B$</td>
<td>$SE\ B$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$B$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Cohesion</td>
<td>.343*</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.195</td>
<td>.199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade Level</td>
<td>.155*</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>.097</td>
<td>-.225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion x Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>.194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p \leq .05$

**Discussion**

**Interpretation of Findings**

The primary hypothesis of this study centered on the prediction that, among a sample of children and adolescents living in poverty, there would be a significant relationship between family cohesion and social competence. Second, it was hypothesized that if the relationship does exist, grade level would serve as a moderator of that relationship. Study results established that there was a significant, positive relationship between family cohesion and social competence. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that family cohesion and other family processes are associated with general competence – personal and social (Amato, 1989). Overall, this finding suggests that economically disadvantaged families with higher levels of family cohesion may, in turn, produce and shape youth who have higher levels of social competence.

While support for a significant, positive relationship between family cohesion and social competence was discovered, further analysis revealed that grade level did not have a significant moderating effect on that relationship. This suggests that, although family cohesion and social competence are largely related among our sample of children and adolescents living in poverty, there is not a significant difference when comparing elementary students to secondary students. Findings in this study that family cohesion and social competence are related are not altogether surprising, given the limited but existing research evidence supporting that relationship among samples that differed from the sample in the current study (Amato, 1989; Leidy et al., 2011). However, this study extended those findings with its large sample size and broadened scope of participants belonging to more than one ethno-racial group.

The discovery of a non-significant moderating effect of grade level on the relationship between family cohesion and social competence was not expected, with prior research supporting differing social needs and pursuits between children and adolescents (Santrock, 2013). Regarding social development, Santrock (2013) asserts that adolescents – in comparison to children – may seek out and depend more upon their friends rather than their parents for meeting social needs (e.g., reassurance, intimacy, and companionship). Additionally, adolescents have a tendency to report personal and intimate details to their friends as opposed to their parents. However, in this study there may be many reasons why grade level was not found to serve as a significant moderator. It is necessary to reiterate that the fifth assumption previously explained in the Methodology section was not met. It may be that the
multicollinearity violation contributed to the lack of statistically significant findings for the second hypothesis. As well, it is worth highlighting that there was a notably uneven distribution of elementary and secondary students. Students in the elementary grade level group – those who ranged from kindergarten to grade 5 – represented 68.8% of the sample, whereas 31.2% of the sample was made up of students in the secondary grade level group, students who were in grades 6 to grade 12 at the time of data collection. Readers and practitioners alike are cautioned not to take these findings to indicate that family cohesion is of negligible importance for adolescents (including those in economically disadvantaged families), however. It is possible, and even likely, that the dynamics of family cohesion manifest in ways that were simply not captured in this study.

Limitations of the Study

Several factors must be addressed that may have potentially impacted the findings of this study. Foremost, it is important to note that the study’s sample, while relatively large in number, was limited to youth who live in the Midwestern United States. This prevents the supported findings from being generalized to youth beyond the identified region. Another limitation is that the questionnaires completed by participants’ parents were created based on questions that came from pre-existing scales. It is possible that this may have influenced quality of the data collected. Third, as previously mentioned, when examining the second hypothesis that grade level would serve as a moderator variable, there was an uneven distribution of students in the elementary and secondary grades. Further, it is necessary to consider the fact that survey data on family cohesion and social competence was based on reports from students’ teachers and parents. That is, students’ own perceptions were not included. This may have added particular restrictions when considering adolescent participants in the sample, who possibly have more developmentally sophisticated capacities of understanding their families and peers. Finally, although pre-test (i.e., before BCSP intervention) data were used in this study, some participants were served by the BCSP the year prior. Therefore, it is impossible to determine how families’ participation in the BCSP the year prior may have impacted the observed relationships between the study’s variables. Although the aforementioned factors were unavoidable for the purposes of this study, they must be considered.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study are useful for practitioners who serve children and adolescents who live in neighborhoods and communities impacted by poverty. While it was not surprising to find that family cohesion within a child’s family unit is related to his or her social competence, this study underscores the importance of the potential utility of family-school collaboration. As researchers and practitioners evaluate current family-based supports and create new interventions, it may be an ideal practice to design those interventions according to characteristics of the population receiving the interventions.

Manz and McWayne (2010) posit that social competence interventions can be effective in building the social competencies of low-income children. The researchers point out that prevention and early intervention are paramount, with children as young as preschool age being able to benefit from social competence interventions. Emotion regulation, effective communication with peers, perspective taking, problem solving, conflict resolution, and the development of positive peer relationships are seven foci that can be included in such prevention and intervention efforts (Manz & McWayne, 2010). To further promote positive outcomes,
school-based practitioners should encourage and recruit members of students’ families to be involved in all phases of the intervention, including selection, development, implementation, and modification or elimination (Manz & McWayne, 2010). Moreover, partnership with programs such as Head Start and mental health agencies is also recommended. With or without those partnerships, school-based practitioners (e.g., preschool teachers, school counselors, and school psychologists) who provide intervention should be culturally competent professionals with the knowledge, experience, and flexibility to work with diverse student populations.

**Directions for Future Research**

The present study provided support for the link between family cohesion and social competence among youth who live in poverty. To date, this may be the first study of its kind to do so for the given sample. Future researchers may want to extend supported findings to make findings more suitable for targeted application efforts. Although this sample contained a large number of students, the study did not differentiate students from suburban, urban, and rural environments. As researchers and practitioners evaluate current family-based interventions and create new interventions of the like, it may be key to design those interventions according to characteristics of the population receiving the interventions. Moreover, it is important to consider the potential differences in availability and utilization of resources across the primary types of school environments. In order to more fully understand the relationship between family cohesion and social competence, it may be worthwhile to examine potential differences according to family structure. For example, does the relationship differ according to factors such as the number of family members who comprise the family unit, whether one has a single-parent or two-parent household, and the degree of social support available to the family? Those are but a few of the key questions future researchers are encouraged to give consideration as the current study’s established relationship is more thoroughly investigated.
References


