How does the classroom learning environment affect children’s mental health?

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Research Problem & Data
Children spend much of their time in educational institutions, but we know little about effects of the school environment on their mental health. Classrooms can be taxing places for young children as they face new and often difficult demands, potentially surrounded by poor infrastructure or distracted teachers and disruptive students. Since school quality is linked to the socioeconomic and racial-ethnic statuses of children, classroom stress may pose greater challenges for some groups than others.

Milkie and Warner consider how classroom conditions affect the emotional and behavioral health of first grade students. Using data from a national sample, the authors examine how classroom features affect first graders’ learning (e.g., attentiveness), externalizing (e.g., fights), interpersonal (e.g., forming friendships), and internalizing (e.g., anxiety, sadness) problems.

Key Findings
- Children in classrooms with inadequate material resources experience worse outcomes on all four emotional and behavioral measures.
- Children whose teachers feel they are not respected by colleagues exhibit more emotional and behavioral problems.
- Race differences are complex. For example, a teacher’s perceived lack of respect from colleagues is linked with more interpersonal problems for black children, while lower learning standards result in more externalizing problems for white children.

Policy Implications
Policymakers often consider per student expenditures, school finance reform, and school culture in terms of their effects on academic outcomes. This study provides evidence that access to material resources, such as textbooks, adequate heat or air conditioning, computers, and art supplies are also important for children’s mental health. Policy directives typically measure school quality and teacher effectiveness by the extent to which they improve students’ test scores. Of equal importance may be the ways in which schools impose stress or enrich the daily experiences of children.

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