

# Relationships between school climate and adolescent students' self-reports of ethnic and moral identity

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**Abstract** This article reports research into associations between students' perceptions of the school climate and self-reports of ethnic and moral identity in high schools in Western Australia. An instrument was developed to assess students' perceptions of their school climate (as a means of monitoring and guiding schools as they are challenged to become more inclusive and grapple with increasingly diverse populations) and administered to 4067 students, 63 % of whom were aged between 12 and 17 years, in eight schools. The same students also responded to a survey developed to assess ethnic and moral identity. Analysis of the data indicated strong, positive associations between the school climate and students' ethnic and moral identity. The results suggest that, for schools wishing to promote students' ethnic and moral identity, it would be beneficial to consider important elements of the school climate identified in the new survey.

**Keywords** Ethnic identity · Moral identity · School climate · What's Happening In This School? (WHITS) questionnaire

## Introduction

Australian schools, in recent years, have become increasingly diverse because of the vast array of push and pull factors, in terms of language, cultures and nationalities, and have generally been coping with these changes in an ad hoc way. In many schools, the notion of ethnic identity goes little deeper than the celebration of Harmony Day and, although the importance of this celebration should not be undermined, it only goes part way to helping students to flourish in a culturally-diverse school environment.

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Over the past decade, there has been an increasing number of studies of school climate in the US (largely in response to mass school killings), but there have been comparatively few studies undertaken in Australia, which has a disconcertingly high rate of adolescent self-harm and suicide (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). Moreover, past research provides evidence of links between adolescent suicide and ethnic identity (Langford et al. 1998; Smokowski et al. 2009; Stiffman and Davis 1990).

Given that much past research has provided evidence to suggest that the school climate is linked to a range of emotional and behavioural outcomes (Esposito 1999; Kuperminc et al. 2001; Loukas and Robinson 2004; Roeser et al. 2000; Wang et al. 2010), we undertook this timely investigation of relationships between the school climate and students' ethnic and moral identity. Therefore, our research aims were, firstly, to examine whether a school climate questionnaire and an ethnic and moral identity survey, both developed for the purpose of this study, were valid and, secondly, whether relationships existed between the school climate and student ethnic and moral identity.

To provide a backdrop to this study, the subsections below review literature related to, first, school climate and the field of learning environments and, second, ethnic and moral identity.

### School climate and the field of learning environments

The field of learning environments has its roots in the study of psychology and the work of Lewin (1936), who prompted a shift in the study of psychology from a focus on the individual to a focus on the process between individuals. Lewin's (1936) formula for human behaviour,  $B = f(P, E)$ , contends that the environment and its interaction with the personal characteristics of individuals are responsible for human behaviour. Murray (1938) extended the work of Lewin, declaring that Lewin's interest in the external determinants of behaviour overlooked the individual's drive or needs. In response, Murray (1938) developed a needs-press model in which included situational variables in the environment and which account for behavioural differences.

Murray (1938) also distinguished between *alpha press* (the environment as observed by an external observer) and *beta press* (the environment as perceived by people themselves). Therefore, Murray's needs-press model complemented Lewin's formula by depicting personality characteristics as goal oriented and environmental characteristics as external (either positive or negative to the personality needs of an individual). Later, Murray's concept of beta press was further divided by Stern et al. (1956) into *private beta press* (an individual's view of his or her environment) or *consensual beta press* (the collective view of a group as a whole). Stern (1970) advanced the existing framework by simplifying Murray's conceptual definitions. To Stern, 'needs' referred to organisational tendencies that appear to give unity and direction to a person's behaviour and 'press' referred to the phenomenological world of the individual—the unique and inevitable private view that each person has of the events in which the individual takes part (Stern 1970).

These pioneering studies paved the way for the development and rigorous validation of numerous robust learning environment instruments (Fraser 2012) and to the international spread of learning environment research to many countries around the world (Fisher and Khine 2006; Fraser 2007, 2012). To date, however, the range of validated instruments developed to assess the school-level environment has been somewhat limited, with few focusing on the climate of schools with diverse populations and involving the perspective of the student.

A school's culture has referred to its ethos or climate and, although there is no consensus on the definition of school culture, it is generally agreed that it involves a group phenomena based on the quality and character of school life and patterns of people's experiences (Cohen et al. 2009). For the purpose of this study, school climate refers to the quality and character of school life, including the norms, values and expectations that a school accepts and promotes (Brookover 1985). In turn, these create an environment that dictates whether the staff, students and parents feel safe (socially, emotionally or physically), welcome and respected.

Positive school climates have been found to be related to increased student engagement (Brady 2006) and improved academic achievement (Brookover et al. 1978; Esposito 1999; Hoy and Hannum 1997; MacNeil et al. 2009). In addition, past research has indicated that the school climate perceived by adolescents is a strong predictor of emotional and behavioural outcomes (Esposito 1999; Kuperminc et al. 2001; Loukas and Robinson 2004; Roeser et al. 2000; Wang et al. 2010). Research evidence supports the notion that changes in the school climate (particularly in terms of improved teacher–student relationships and improved discipline and order) can reduce behaviour problems (Gottfredson 1989; Wang et al. 2010) and help to create a safe school (Gottfredson 1989; Johnson and Templeton 1999; Sherman et al. 1997).

The culture of a school transmits specific socio-cultural values (usually those of the dominant group), often excluding other cultural features that are not in accordance with those values. By not recognising cultural differences, educational practices can “maintain, stress and legitimize social inequalities” for students from non-dominant or vulnerable sectors of society (Aguado et al. 2003, p. 50). As a result, many students can be denied the opportunity of achieving the same educational benefits as their peers from the dominant culture. In this respect, schools can promote academic success for students in the dominant group, while presenting barriers to students from non-dominant groups.

Given the importance of the school climate to student outcomes, we investigated the school climate, from the perspective of the student, and whether it is related to students' self-reports of ethnic and moral identity.

### **Ethnic and moral identity**

Self-identity, according to Erikson (1964), is embedded at the core of one's being and involves being true to oneself in action. Within the field of identity development, identity formation has been considered an important aspect of individual development and psychological well-being (Erikson 1980; May and Yalom 2004; Rogers 1961). Given that past intervention work supports the notion that it is possible to enhance processes that promote identity development, this study of the impact of school climate is important (Enright et al. 1983; Enright et al. 1984; Ferrer-Wreder et al. 2002; Markstrom-Adams et al. 1993). Our study included two facets of self-identity, namely, ethnic identity and moral identity, both of which are described below.

Definitions of ethnic identity vary depending upon the underlying theory that is embraced (Trimble and Dickson 2003). Whilst Phinney views ethnic identity as a starting point from which social identity is formed, Weinreich (1986) views identity formation as being situated in specific social contexts. As such, ethnic identity changes and varies according to particular social contexts. Ethnic identity according to Trimble and Dickson (2003), is both contextual and situational. Some conceptual approaches to ethnic identity have drawn on Tajfel's (1982) theory of social identity in which a person's social identity strongly influences self-perceptions and, as a result, should be the locus of evaluation. The

present study drew on Phinney's (2003, p. 63) definition of ethnic identity as a "dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity or sense of self as a member of an ethnic group". As such, ethnic identity is the sense of belonging that a person feels towards an ethnic group and the significance that the person assigns towards membership in that group (Phinney 1996).

Theorists have proposed that the development of ethnic identity might involve a stage-like progression (Cross 1991; Marcia 1966; Phinney 1989). It is suggested that an important stage is an encounter of prejudice that causes people to reconsider their original views and reshapes their interpretation of ethnic identity (French et al. 2000). Although research evidence has suggested that these consciousness-raising events can trigger adolescents into considering who they are and what it means to be a member of their ethnic group (French et al. 2000), the impact of the school climate (which has the capacity to shape the social context) on students' ethnic identity has not previously been investigated.

Whereas some studies have focused on the measurement of ethnic identity as the acquisition of a stable means of identifying the ethnic group which people feel that they can use to define themselves (Burtin et al. 2010; Nandi and Platt 2009), our measure of ethnic identity focused on the sense of belonging to a group and the attitudes and feelings that accompany this sense of group membership. It is suggested by social identity theorists that group identity is important to self-concept and that ethnic identity is one type of group identity that is central to the self-concept of ethnic minority groups (Roberts et al. 1999; Tajfel and Turner 1986).

Identity and the development of ethnic identity are aspects of adolescent development that, according to Phinney (1990, 1996), can have long-lasting consequences for individuals. In recent years, ethnic group membership is being viewed as a critical component of personal identity among adolescents (Wakefield and Hudley 2007). Research indicates that ethnic identity is related to adolescent mental health (Shi et al. 2008; Wakefield and Hudley 2007), delinquency and self-efficacy (Street et al. 2009) and a range of behavioural factors such as substance abuse (Gazis et al. 2010).

Past research has indicated that there is a positive relationships between the ethnic identity of adolescents and their self-esteem (Belgrave et al. 1994; Holmes and Lochman 2009; Phinney 1992; Phinney and Chavira 1992; Phinney et al. 1997; Wright 1985), behaviour (Holmes and Lochman 2009), identity differences between groups (Holmes and Lochman 2009; Phinney and Alipuria 1990; Rotheram-Borus 1989) and belonging and engagement (Faircloth 2009). Given the important role of ethnic identity in the development of adolescents, we investigated whether dimensions of the school climate were related to students' self-reports of ethnic identity.

Traditionally, moral development has been grounded in cognitive-development theory (Haidt 2001; Kohlberg 1981, 1984) and research has established that moral judgement helps to shape moral behaviour. Although moral judgements are likely to influence moral actions, moral identity also is a critical determinant of moral behaviour (Reynolds and Ceranic 2007). Clearly, the field of moral development has moved towards an identity model grounded in the social identity theory (Aquino and Reed 2002; Blasi 1984; Tajfel 1959, 1974).

In line with the consistency principle proposed by Erikson (1964), personal identity provides a need for an individual to be true to himself or herself and provides the impetus to act consistently with his or her identity. Given this drive, then, a strong moral identity would require an individual to act in a way that is moral. In line with this, Hart et al. (1998, p. 515) define moral identity as "a commitment to one's sense of self to lines of action that promote or protect the welfare of others". Blasi (1984) also suggests that, although an

individual's moral identity is unique, there exists a set of common traits that are likely to be central to most people's moral self-definitions. Research findings suggest that moral identity is dependent upon the level of social consensus (general social agreement about whether a particular action is deemed to be good or evil) associated with a particular moral involved (Jones 1991; Reynolds and Ceranic 2007). According to Reynolds and Ceranic (2007), there are issues that have high social consensus about what constitutes a moral (or immoral) act (such as rape) and those that do not (such as illegal parking). They argue that, if the degree of social consensus regarding an issue is higher, then the extent to which moral judgement is required is reduced. Given these research findings, it is likely that, by developing a school culture that includes a high social consensus related to students' moral behaviour, a school is well positioned to influence students' moral behaviour. Therefore, we investigated associations between students' perceptions of the school climate and self-reports of moral identity.

## Design and methods

### Sample

Our study involved a sample of 4067 students in eight schools (including all students who were present at each of the schools on the day of administration of the surveys). This sample was used both for the validation of the instruments and for investigating associations between the school climate and ethnic and moral identity. The sample was selected to be representative of schools in metropolitan Western Australia and included schools from a range of socio-economic areas and schools with differing student demographics. Of the 4067 students, 1971 were boys and 1850 were girls (246 students did not specify their gender) ranging from 12 to 17 years of age from grades 8 ( $n = 668$ ), 9 ( $n = 438$ ), 10 ( $n = 775$ ), 11 ( $n = 1117$ ) and 12 ( $n = 888$ ) (with 181 students not specifying their grade level). The students in this sample were made up of approximately 65 % who were born in Australia and 76 % who spoke English as their first language.

### Instruments

#### *Assessing school climate*

To assess students' perceptions of the school climate, we developed the What Is Happening In This School? (WHITS) questionnaire. The identification of the dimensions to be included in the WHITS involved a review of literature that helped to distil four aspects important for a positive school climate (Aldridge and Ala'i 2013):

- (1) *Social connectedness*: Social capital involves features related to the cohesiveness of groups including strong social bonds that provide the foundations for social connectedness (Dessel 2010; Kawachi and Berkman 2000; Wilkinson 1996). Increased social connectedness can lead to reduced social conflict and victimisation and increased tolerance of diverse cultures (Goldbaum et al. 2003; Kilian et al. 2007; Noonan 2005; Welsh 2000).
- (2) *School connectedness*: Refers to a student's sense of belonging within the school environment. Relationships within schools have a powerful influence on school connectedness (Rowe and Stewart 2009; Rowe et al. 2007). Research indicates that

students' sense of belonging promotes students' mental health and psychosocial wellbeing (Bond et al. 2007).

- (3) *Affirming diversity*: The school environment is a microcosm of society and provides numerous opportunities for students to learn about differences, conflict resolution and peaceful coexistence (Dessel 2010). However, past research also indicates that prolonged contact between diverse groups and the celebration of diversity (such as Harmony Day) are not sufficient to alleviate prejudice and break down barriers.
- (4) *Orderly environment*: Students' perception of their safety is an important aspect of the school culture (Cohen et al. 2009; Teddlie and Reynolds 2000). Having clear rules and order provides guidelines about interpersonal conduct and what is considered to be acceptable behaviour (Hernandez and Seem 2004; Wang et al. 2010).

Based on these four aspects, six constructs (Teacher Support, Peer Connectedness, School Connectedness, Affirming Diversity, Rule Clarity, and Reporting and Seeking Help) were developed. Data collected during our pilot study supported the translational (face and construct) validity and criterion (discriminant, convergent, concurrent and predictive) validity of the WHITS. A listing of the items contained in the final version of the WHITS is provided in Table 1.

#### *Ethnic and Moral Identity Scale (EMIS)*

Because another focus of our study was to monitor the ethnic and moral identity of students, we developed, validated and used the Ethnic and Moral Identity Scale (EMIS) to provide a snapshot of students' self-reports of these factors. In developing the scale to assess ethnic identity, it is acknowledged that there are different theories of ethnicity, each with different assumptions and, as a result, measurements (Trimble 2007). In the past, researchers have tended to work from either a primordialist principle, in which ethnicity is viewed as an innate or instinctive disposition, or an instrumentalist perspective, in which ethnicity is defined by social, rather than genetic, forces. In our study of the impact of the school climate on the students' sense of membership or belonging to their ethnic group (rather than determining what ethnic group they identify with—as with census items), we viewed ethnicity as being defined by social forces. This decision was driven by our hypothesis that the social context and safety structures created within the school would influence students' pride in and sense of belonging to their ethnic group. The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), originally developed by Phinney (1992), was used to help us to develop a scale to provide an indication of students' sense of ethnic identity. The original MEIM involves three constructs: affirmation/belonging (which is influenced by social identity theory and reflects commitment and belonging to, as well as pride in, one's ethnic group); ethnic identity achievement (the extent to which a person has achieved a secure and confident sense of his or her ethnicity); and ethnic behaviours (activities associated with group membership). We drew on this 14-item instrument to develop the 8-item scale that was used to assess ethnic identity. The items were worded to allow responding using a five-point frequency scale ranging from Almost Never to Almost Always.

Based on Erikson's argument that individuals will “strive to maintain consistency between conceptions of their moral self and their actions”, we concluded that, to provide an indication of students' moral identity, it was meaningful to identify a set of actions that might be related to the moral actions of a student (Aquino and Reed 2002, p. 1425). The

**Table 1** Factor analysis results, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach alpha coefficient), and ability to differentiate between schools (ANOVA results) for the WHITS

Item	Factor loadings					
	TS	PC	SC	AD	RC	RSH
<b>Teacher Support (TS) <i>At this school...</i></b>						
1. Teachers know my name	0.40					
2. Teachers try to understand my problems	0.78					
3. Teachers listen to me	0.74					
4. Teachers take an interest in my background	0.73					
5. Teachers treat me fairly	0.59					
6. Teachers support me when I have problems	0.81					
7. Teachers go out of their way to address my needs	0.79					
8. Teachers are willing to listen to my problems	0.79					
<b>Peer Connectedness (SC) <i>At this school...</i></b>						
9. I get along with other students		0.69				
10. I belong to a group of friends		0.79				
11. I make friends with students from different backgrounds		0.78				
12. I socialise with students from different cultures		0.88				
13. Students talk to me		0.88				
14. Students support me		0.89				
15. Students help me		0.87				
16. I feel accepted by other students		0.79				
<b>School Connectedness (SC) <i>At this school...</i></b>						
17. I look forward to coming to school			0.49			
18. I enjoy being at school			0.77			
19. I feel accepted by adults			0.78			
20. I feel included at school			0.80			
21. I feel welcome			0.40			
22. I am part of a community			0.84			
23. I am respected			0.76			
24. I am valued			0.84			
<b>Affirming Diversity (AD) <i>At this school...</i></b>						
25. My cultural background is valued				0.63		
26. Days that are important to my culture are recognised				0.81		
27. I am encouraged to understand the culture of others				0.65		
28. My background is known by students and teachers				0.68		
29. I am taught about the background of others				0.64		
30. Religious days that are relevant to me are recognised as being important				0.76		
31. My culture is understood				0.85		
32. My cultural background is respected by students				0.73		
<b>Rule Clarity (RC) <i>At this school...</i></b>						
33. The rules at this school are clear to me					0.77	
34. The school rules help me to feel safe					0.59	

**Table 1** continued

Item	Factor loadings					
	TS	PC	SC	AD	RC	RSH
35. School rules protect me					0.54	
36. The rules make it clear to me that certain behaviours are unacceptable					0.79	
37. I understand why the school rules are in place					0.80	
38. I know the school rules					0.78	
39. I am required to follow rules					0.75	
40. Teachers help me to follow rules					0.54	
Reporting and Seeking Help (RSH) <i>At this school...</i>						
41. I am able to report harassment to school officials						0.71
42. I am encouraged to report racism						0.75
43. I feel confident to talk to a teacher if I am harassed						0.74
44. I am encouraged to report bullying						0.80
45. I know how to report problems						0.78
46. I can report incidents without others finding out						0.80
47. It is okay to tell a teacher if I feel unsafe						0.76
48. I am able to seek counselling						0.69
% Variance	4.25	9.38	5.45	4.92	3.70	34.81
Alpha reliability	0.89	0.93	0.90	0.89	0.91	0.91
ANOVA (Eta <sup>2</sup> )	0.17*	0.05*	0.06*	0.17*	0.02*	0.01*

Factor loadings <0.40 have been omitted from the table

The sample consisted of 4067 students in eight schools

The eta<sup>2</sup> statistic (which is the ratio of 'between' to 'total' sums of squares) represents the proportion of variance explained by school membership

\*  $p < 0.01$

moral identity scale was developed in order to monitor the impact, over time, of an increasingly supportive school climate that values cultural diversity as part of students' moral identity. The 8-item scale which was developed to measure moral identity, therefore, focused on students' empathic concern or, otherwise stated, their other-orientation.

## Analysis and results

### Validation of the What's Happening In This School? (WHITS)

The data collected from 4067 students from eight high schools in Western Australia were analysed to provide evidence of the validity and reliability of the 48-item, 6-scale WHITS when used at the high-school level and with all students enrolled in each of the schools. We conducted principal axis factoring followed by oblique (direct oblimin) rotation (selected because the factors in the set of school climate scales are expected to be correlated, Coakes and Steed 2000). We used the conventional cut-off criterion of 0.40 (i.e. each item should load on at least 0.40 on its own scale and no other scale) for the retention of any item. All 48 items of the WHITS were found to satisfy these criteria and, therefore, all items were



retained in their original scales. Table 1 provides the wording and factor loadings for all items in the WHITS. The percentage of variance varied from 3.70 to 34.81 % for different scales, with the total variance accounted for being 62.51 %.

The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach alpha coefficient) for different WHITS scales ranged from 0.89 to 0.93 with the individual as unit of analysis (reported at the bottom of Table 1). An analysis of variance (ANOVA), with class membership as the independent variable, was used to determine whether each WHITS scale was able to distinguish between the perceptions of students in different schools. The results, reported at the bottom of Table 1, indicate that each WHITS scale differentiated significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) between schools. The  $\eta^2$  statistic (a measure of the proportion of variance accounted for by school membership) ranged from 0.01 to 0.17 for different WHITS scales. Overall, results suggest that the WHITS was valid and reliable when used with high schools students in Western Australia.

### Validation of the Ethnic and Moral Identity Scale (EMIS)

EMIS data collected from 4067 students in eight high schools in Western Australia were analysed in the same way as the WHITS data. Table 2 provides, for each item, the wording and factor loadings and, for each scale, the percentage of variance, Cronbach alpha coefficient and results of ANOVA for school membership differences (the ability of each scale to distinguish between the self-reports of students in different schools).

Principal axis factoring followed by varimax rotation (selected because the scales were not expected, theoretically, to overlap) indicated that, without exception, every item had a factor loading of at least 0.40 on its own scale and no other scale. The percentage of variance was 46.82 and 19.08 %, respectively, for ethnic identity and moral identity, with the total variance accounted for being 65.90 %.

The internal consistency (Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient) was 0.91 and 0.94, respectively, for ethnic identity and moral identity. To ascertain whether each EMIS scale was able to differentiate between the self-reports of students in different schools, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated for each scale. The ANOVA results indicated that both scales were able to differentiate significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ) between the perceptions of students in different high schools. Overall, the results of the analysis suggest satisfactory reliability and validity for the EMIS when used with high school students in Western Australia.

### Associations between school climate and ethnic and moral identity

To investigate associations between students' perceptions of the school climate and their self-reports of ethnic and moral identity, simple correlation and multiple regression analyses were used. The simple correlation analysis of relationships between each of the two outcomes (ethnic identity and moral identity) and each of six school climate scales (Teacher Support, Peer Connectedness, School Connectedness, Affirming Diversity, Rule Clarity, and Reporting and Seeking Help) provided information about bivariate associations. The results reported in Table 3 show that all 12 simple correlations between a school climate scale and an identity scale were positive and statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Multiple regression analysis of the joint relationships between each moral identity or ethnic identity and the set of six school climate scales provided a more parsimonious picture of the joint influence of correlated climate dimensions on ethnic and moral identity and reduced the Type I error rate associated with the simple correlation analysis. To

**Table 2** Factor analysis results, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach alpha coefficient), and ability to differentiate between schools (ANOVA Results) for the EMIS

Item	Factor loadings	
	Ethnic identity	Moral identity
Ethnic identity (EI)		
49. I am proud of my ethnic group	0.79	
50. I participate in the customs of my ethnic group	0.78	
51. I am proud of the accomplishments of my ethnic group	0.78	
52. I have a strong attachment to my ethnic group	0.74	
53. I am happy to be a member of my ethnic group	0.71	
54. I am honoured to belong to my ethnic group	0.63	
55. I spend time finding out about my ethnic group (e.g. history, traditions and customs)	0.82	
56. I feel good about my ethnic background	0.79	
Moral development (MD)		
57. When I see someone having a problem, I offer to help		0.79
58. I speak up when someone is bullied		0.82
59. When I see someone being picked on, I try to stop it		0.86
60. I try to stop my friends from spreading rumours about others		0.87
61. I am happy for other students when they do well		0.88
62. I feel that other students are happy for me when I do well		0.88
63. I help other students when they are experiencing a problem		0.62
64. I am concerned when other students are having problems		0.85
% Variance	46.82	19.08
Alpha reliability	0.91	0.94
ANOVA ( $Eta^2$ )	0.02*	0.03*

$N = 4067$  students in eight schools

Factor loadings  $<0.40$  have been omitted from the table

The  $eta^2$  statistic (which is the ratio of 'between' to 'total' sums of squares) represents the proportion of variance explained by school membership

\*  $p < 0.01$

interpret which individual scales made the largest contribution to explaining variance in student moral and ethnic identity, the regression weights were examined to see which ones were significantly greater than zero ( $p < 0.05$ ). The regression weight describes the influence of a particular environment variable on an outcome when all other environment variables in the regression analysis are mutually controlled. Table 3 reports the results of the multiple regression analyses.

Table 3 also shows that the multiple correlation was statistically significant for both identity ethnic identity and moral identity. Five of the six WHITS scales uniquely accounted for a significant amount of variance in student ethnic identity (Peer Connectedness, School Connectedness, Affirming Diversity, Rule Clarity, and Reporting and Seeking Help) and all six WHITS scales were all statistically significantly and independently related to moral identity. It is noteworthy that all of these statistically significant univariate and multivariate relationships were positive, thus confirming a positive link

**Table 3** Simple correlation and multiple regression analyses for associations between ethnic and moral identity and dimensions of the WHITS

Scale	Ethnic identity		Moral identity	
	<i>r</i>	$\beta$	<i>r</i>	$\beta$
Teacher Support	0.30*	0.01	0.42*	0.04*
Peer Connectedness	0.31*	0.11*	0.43*	0.20*
School Connectedness	0.31*	0.13*	0.51*	0.16*
Affirming Diversity	0.43*	0.24*	0.45*	0.10*
Rule Clarity	0.34*	0.07*	0.49*	0.11*
Reporting and Seeking Help	0.35*	0.08*	0.54*	0.27*
Multiple Correlation ( <i>R</i> )		0.49*		0.65*

*N* = 4067 students in eight schools

\*  $p < 0.01$

between the school climate variables and student self-reports of ethnic and moral identity. The results suggest that students who perceived a positive school climate were more likely to report more positive ethnic and moral identity.

## Discussion

This article reported our investigation of, firstly, whether a school climate questionnaire and an ethnic and moral identity survey, both developed for the purpose of this study, were valid and, secondly, whether relationships existed between the school climate and student ethnic and moral identity. The sample included 4067 students (all of whom were enrolled in a group of eight high schools in Western Australia).

We developed the What's Happening In This School (WHITS) questionnaire to assess students' perceptions of the school climate. The WHITS (based on an extensive review of literature) assesses characteristics shown to be predictors of a positive school climate (with an emphasis on safety and inclusivity), namely, social connectedness, school connectedness, inclusivity and safety. The WHITS provides a means by which school personnel can monitor reform efforts aimed at increasing the inclusivity and safety of their school climate. In addition, two scales were developed and used to assess students' ethnic and moral identity. The results, reported in this article, strongly support the validity of the WHITS and the scales for assessing ethnic and moral identity when used with this sample of students.

Although some past research has suggested a link between school climate and a range of student behavioural outcomes (Anderson et al. 2008; Brookover et al. 1978; Cohen et al. 2009; Vyskocil and Goens 1979), there also could be a link between school climate and the development of students' self-identity. This study revealed some interesting tentative relationships between students' perceptions of school climate and their self-reports of ethnic identity and moral identity. For example, we found a statistically significant and positive relationship between the extent to which students feel a sense of belonging (school connectedness) and their moral and ethnic identity. Similarly, a school climate in which students perceived positive relationships with their peers (social connectedness) was linked with both ethnic and moral identity. These strong positive associations suggest that it is time well spent for schools to focus on building these aspects of the school climate because they are likely to help students to develop positive ethnic and moral identity. In addition to

these interesting specific results, the present research suggests overall that the school climate could be a strong influence on students' development of ethnic and moral identity.

Early intervention with adolescents, particularly school-wide intervention, is worthwhile and can lead to improvements in a range of mental health, behavioural, emotional and prosocial outcomes (Kilian et al. 2007; Rickwood et al. 2007). The strong positive links between the school climate and adolescent students' self-reports of ethnic and moral identity suggest that the WHITS could be useful for monitoring and guiding school improvement efforts. The easily-obtained snapshot of students' perceptions can be used to reflect on and make decisions about aspects of the school climate that could be improved.

Although school climate is acknowledged as a determinant of the mental health and psychosocial well-being of young people (Hall 2010; Karvonen et al. 2005; Nabuzoka et al. 2009; Rutter 2003; Torsheim and Wold 2001a, b), there has been limited research into the salient psychosocial features of the school climate that could influence these outcomes. Although we investigated two important aspects related to student well-being, there is much scope for future research into other factors related to student wellbeing (such as resilience) that might be influenced by the school climate.

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