The protective role classroom climate plays on students' worry and negative peer relations: A multilevel examination

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INTRODUCTION

We need to understand the influence classroom climate has on children's well-being, as children spend many of their waking hours in the classroom. Previous researchers have primarily focused on evaluating overall school climate.[8] In particular, the social dimension of classroom climate, which includes peer relationships, has been understudied.[5] In addition, findings on the association between classroom climate and students' social-emotional functioning have been small and inconsistent.[15] To address this gap in the literature, this study investigated the association between the social aspects of classroom climate (e.g., cohesion, competition, and friction) and students' social-emotional distress (i.e., worry and negative peer relations).

Worrying and having negative peer relationships are highly prevalent among early and middle childhood[4,11], and can increase children's risk of developing anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions.[2,6,12]
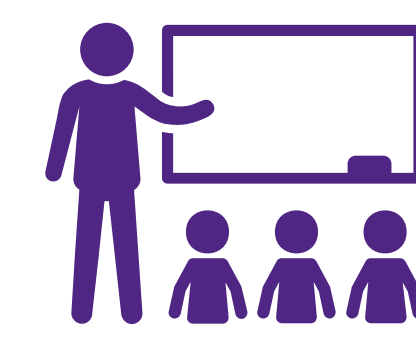
Further, positive classroom climate may be more important for some students than others, such as those affected by adversity. This is an important area of study as children who have experienced adverse events are more likely to develop social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, including problems with worrying and peer relationships.[1,9,10]

As such, this study explored the protective effects of classroom climate on vulnerable children at heightened risk for worry and peer problems, and those with low social-emotional functioning and high exposure to childhood adversity.

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Positive classroom climate = High cohesion and satisfaction

Negative classroom climate = High competition and friction

Worry = Nervousness and social evaluative concerns

Negative peer relations = Peer victimization

OBJECTIVES

1) To what extent do students' **individual characteristics** (i.e., social-emotional functioning, childhood adversity, and gender) predict their levels of **worry** and **difficulties with peer relationships**?

2) Does **classroom climate** predict students' levels of worry and difficulties with peer relationships, **over and beyond** their individual characteristics?
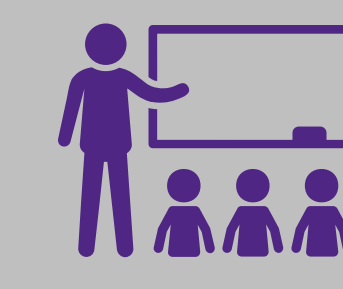
3) Do students with **lower levels of social-emotional functioning** and **higher exposure to childhood adversity benefit more** from a positive classroom climate?

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

429 Gr.3 Students
(M_{age} = 7.93, SD = 0.26; 50.1% girls; 65% White/Caucasian)

41 Classrooms
(Cluster size: M = 11 students, Range = 3 to 19 students)

19 Schools

PROCEDURE

Sept. Parent survey

Oct.-Nov. Child self-report surveys

Oct.-Dec. Teacher survey

VARIABLES

Classroom-Level (Level 2) Predictor

Classroom Climate (self-report My Class-Inventory – Short Form Revised; MCI-SFR[13])

Student-Level (Level 1) Predictors

1) **Social-Emotional Functioning** (teacher-report Social Skills Improvement System – Social Emotional Learning Edition; SSIS SEL[7])
2) **Childhood Adversity** (parent-report Child Life Challenges Scale; CLCS[14])
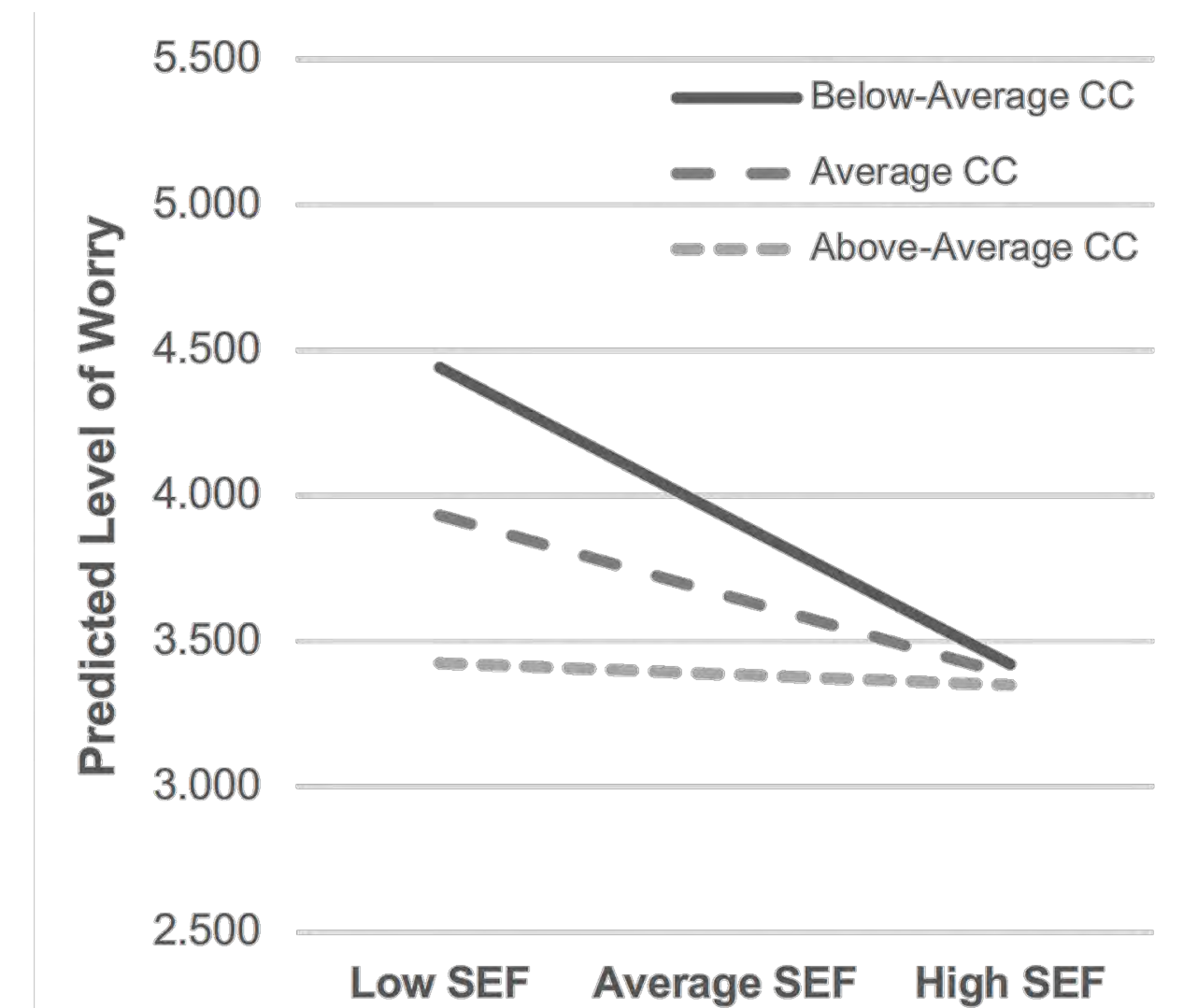3) **Gender** (0 = boy, 1 = girl)

Outcome Variables
1) **Worry**
2) **Negative Peer Relations** (self-report Feelings, Attitudes, and Behaviours Scale for Children; FAB-C[3])

DATA ANALYSIS

- Only the participants with data for all measures were used (N = 369; 86%)
- Multilevel modelling **(MLM)** was conducted in SPSS and Jamovi
- **Model 1:** Added level 1 predictors
- **Model 2a:** Added the level 2 predictor
- **Model 2b:** Added all variables
- **Model 3:** Cross-level interaction analyses

FINDINGS

MODEL 1: Relationships with Student-Level Predictors

MODEL 2a: Relationships with Classroom-Level Predictor

MODEL 2b: Added Impact of Classroom Climate

FINDINGS
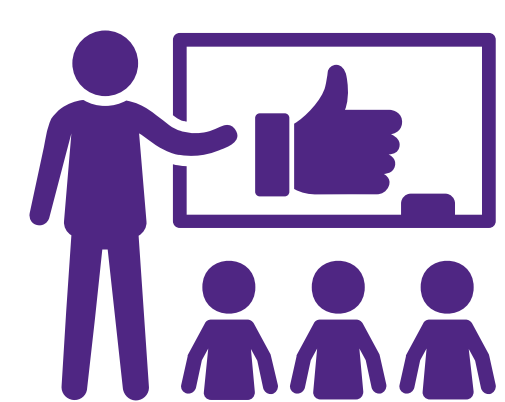
MODEL 3: Cross-Level Interaction Effect for Worry

Note. N (level 1) = 369; N (level 2) = 41; SEF = social-emotional functioning; CC = classroom climate; Below-Average CC = $M - 1SD$; Average CC = M; Above-Average CC = $M + 1SD$.
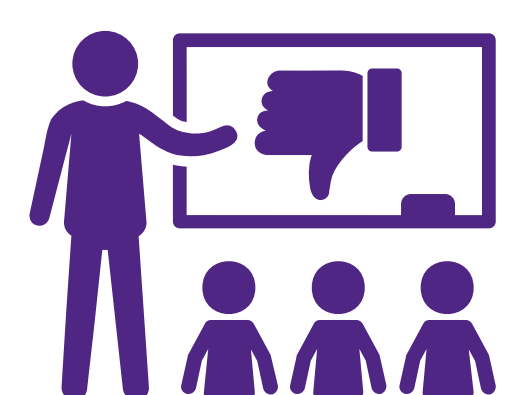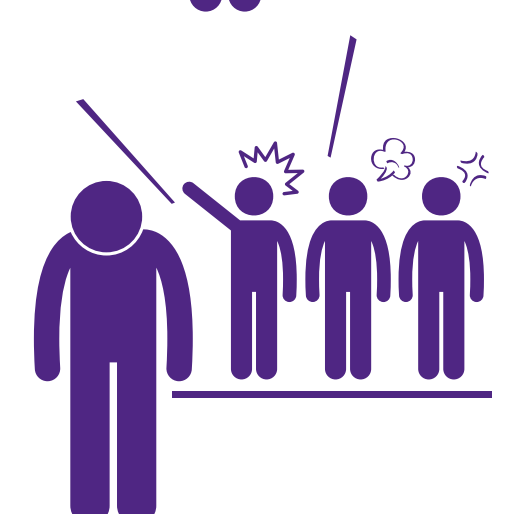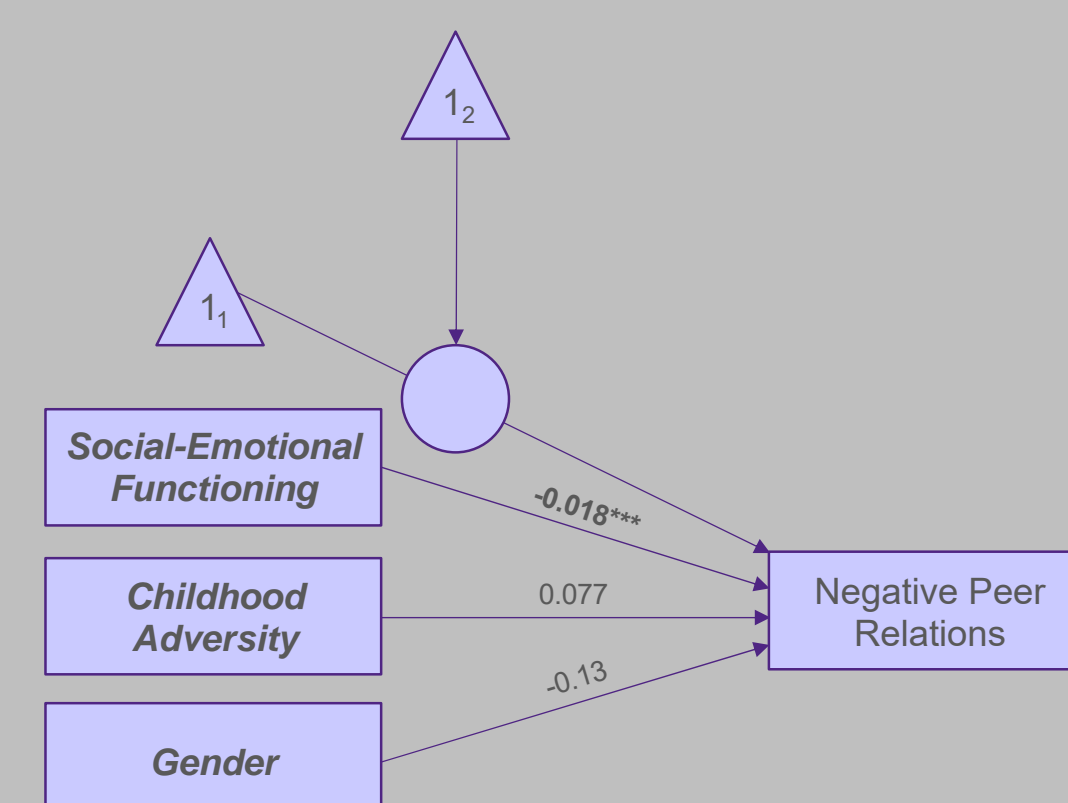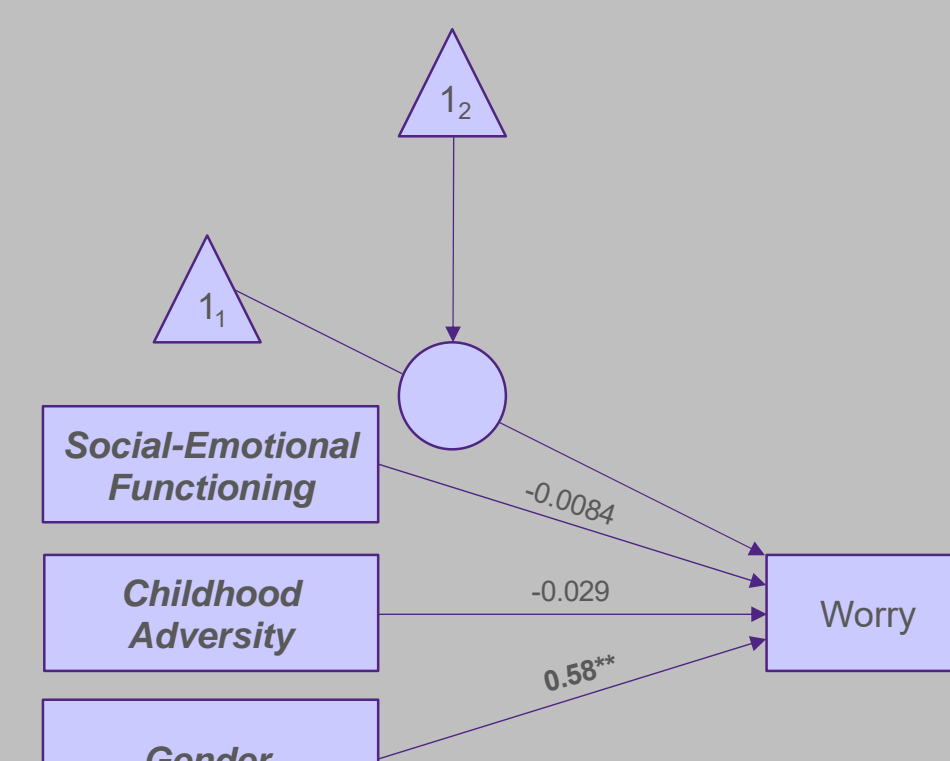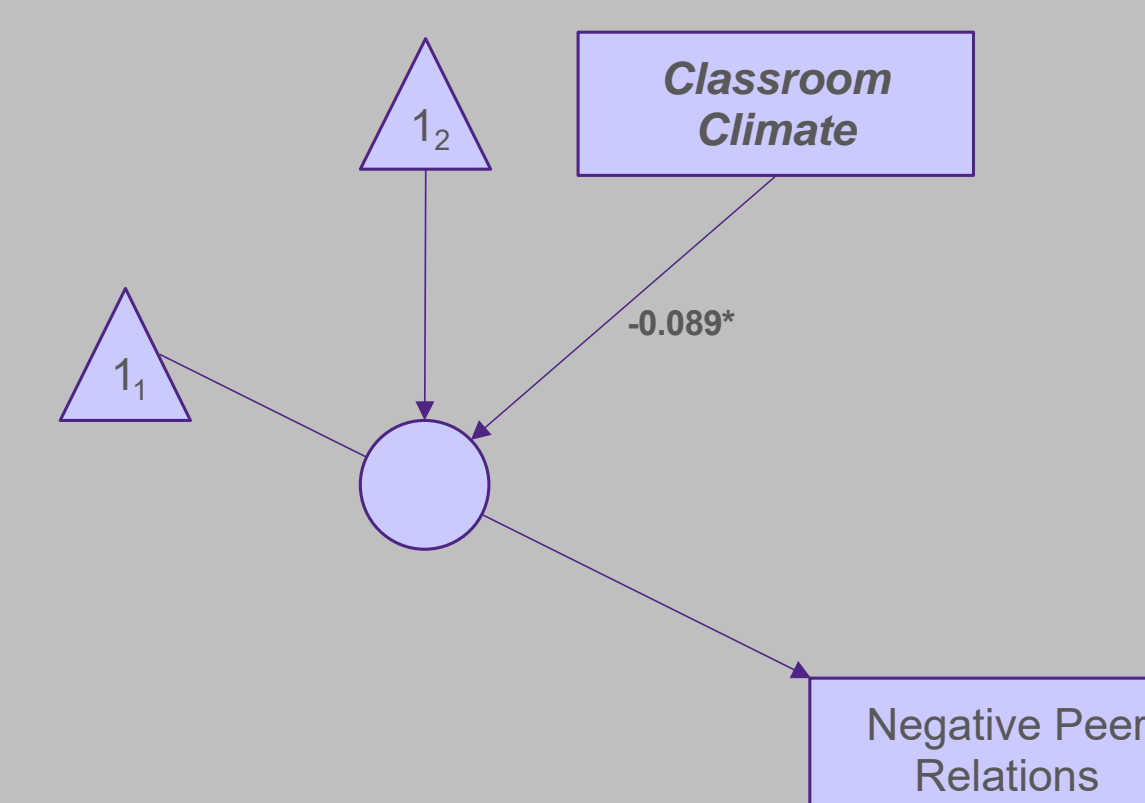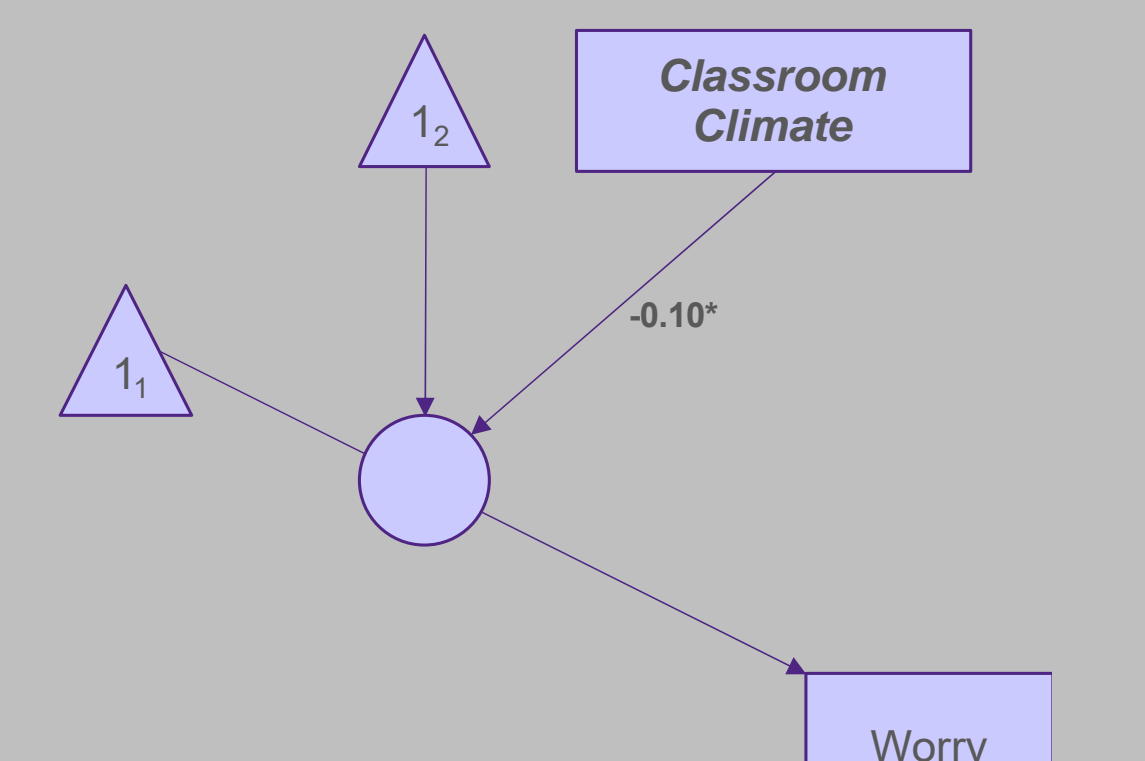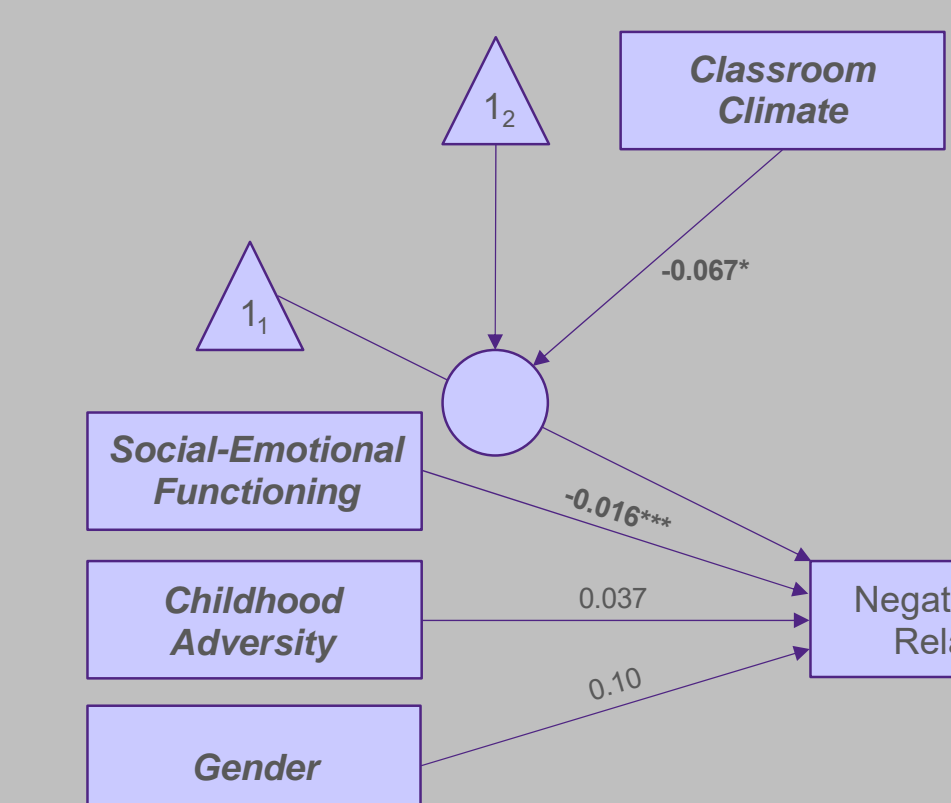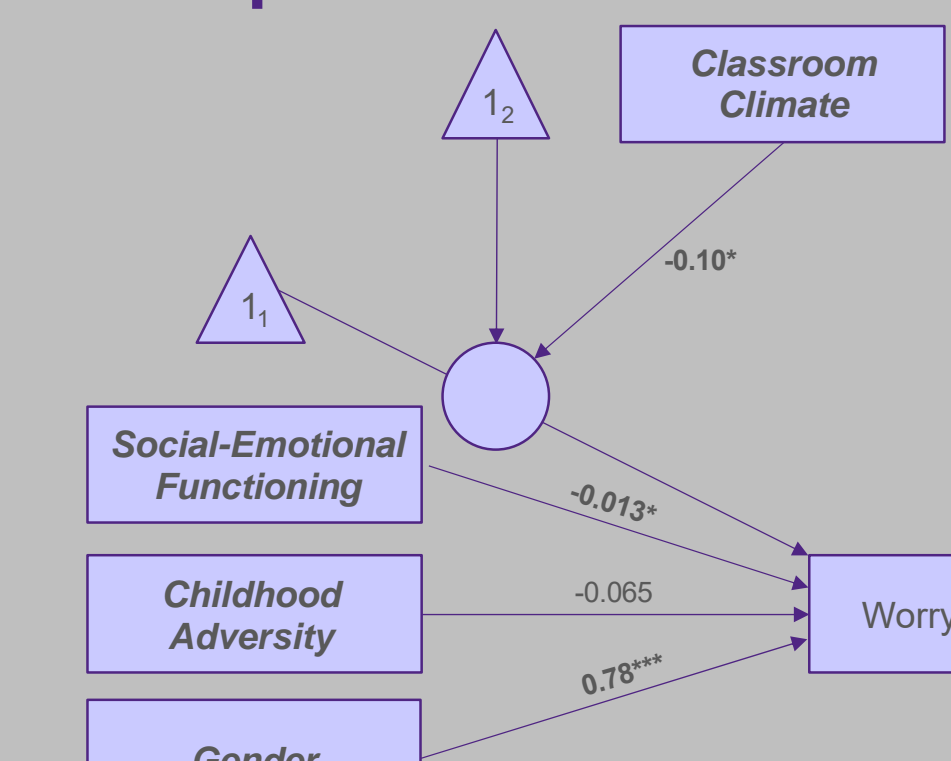
CONCLUSIONS

- **Model 1:** On average, students with higher social-emotional functioning had fewer problems with peer relationships. In addition, girls tended to have higher levels of worry than boys.
- **Model 2a:** Students in classrooms with more positive classroom climate tended to have lower levels of worry and fewer problems with peer relationships.
- **Model 2b:** After controlling for student-level predictors, classroom climate remained a significant predictor of worry and negative peer relations, and the associations remained nearly unchanged. Therefore, classroom climate exerted an over and beyond effect.
- **Model 3:** The buffering effects of positive classroom climate on students' levels of worry was especially beneficial for students with low social-emotional functioning.
- Childhood adversity did not emerge as a significant predictor of worry and negative peer relations. A possible explanation is that the CLCS did not accurately capture participants' childhood adversity.
- The study contributes to the current literature by demonstrating that classroom climate can serve as a protective factor for students with heightened risk for worry and peer problems and those with low social-emotional functioning. The findings highlight the importance of building safe and supportive classroom environments.

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS