Who is the top dog? An Investigation of Fifth Graders’ Social Adjustment Across School Contexts

Nicole R. Brass and Allison M. Ryan
Combined Program in Education and Psychology, University of Michigan

Background
The transition from elementary to middle school can lead to academic and social declines (Eccles et al., 1993). One explanation for these declines is the top dog-bottom dog phenomenon (TDBD) – that the oldest students in their school have more positive school experiences than the youngest students in their school (Schwartz et al., 2016). Sixth graders who were top dogs in their elementary school reported better social adjustment than sixth graders who were bottom dogs in their middle school (Cook et al., 2008). Researchers speculate that top dogs experience a more positive environment because they have more opportunities for leadership and greater familiarity with their school. Yet, this has not been empirically tested. The present study developed a novel leadership measure to examine this as a potential explanation for the TDBD.

Research Questions
1) Are there differences in 5th grade students’ social adjustment based on their top dog status at their school?
2) Do top dog students perceive more opportunities for leadership at their school than bottom dogs?
3) If so, can these perceptions help explain differences in students’ social adjustment?

Measures
Surveys were administered in Spring 2019. Students responded how true each statement was for them (1 = not at all true, 5 = very true).

School Belonging (Goodenow, 1993) I feel like a real part of my school. (5 items, α = .81)
School Safety (CCSR, 2011) I feel safe in my classrooms. (4 items, α = .88)
Top Dog Perceptions: Leadership (Developed for this study) I am a leader at this school. Other students look up to me. I am a role model at my school. (3 items, α = .86)

Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Dog Students</th>
<th>Bottom Dog Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 Elementary Schools Kindergarten – 5th gr.</td>
<td>2 Middle Schools 5th – 8th gr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 258 5th graders</td>
<td>N = 274 5th graders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N = 532 5th grade students</td>
<td>51% girls; 85% White; 43% Free/Reduced Lunch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences in Social Adjustment between Top Dog and Bottom Dog Students

Results & Conclusions
Fifth graders who attended a K-5 Elementary school (top dogs) reported greater school belonging and school safety than fifth graders who attended a 5th-8th grade middle school (bottom dogs). These effects were significant after accounting for differences contributed by gender, minority status, socioeconomic status, and individual achievement (state standardized test scores).

As expected, top dog fifth graders reported greater perceptions of leadership than bottom dog fifth graders. This was assessed with a novel measure developed for this study that showed excellent scale reliability.

Mediation analyses revealed that leadership perceptions fully mediated the relation between school type and school belonging and partially mediated the relation between school type and school safety.

Taken together, our findings suggest that leadership is an important component of the top dog-bottom dog phenomenon. Future intervention efforts could support students’ opportunities for leadership, so students can feel like top dogs even if they are not the oldest in their school.

For more information about this study, contact: nrrausch@umich.edu