

**Thematic Paper****School environment as a mediating variable between family support and social wellbeing in high school students****Guadalupe Refugio Flores-Verduzco<sup>1</sup>, Blanca Silvia Fraijo-Sing and César Octavio Tapia-Fonllem***University of Sonora, Sonora, Mexico*

Educational institutions are crucial environments to promote students' wellbeing. This introduces major challenges into the processes of executing and evaluating programmes such as the ones focused on achieving bullying-free schools. The concept of social wellbeing that is used throughout the present paper is associated to the subjective sense of action in the social construction and understanding of reality. The primary objective was to examine the relationship between Family Support (FS) and Social Wellbeing (SW) of high school education students in the state of Sonora, Mexico, as well as the effect of potential mediation of the School Environment (SE). This research was carried out with a cross-sectional sample of 265 teenagers (average age = 16 years old, SD=1.35), who responded to a self-report scale developed for this research study. The structural model has shown a high predictive power of SE as a mediating variable between FS and SW. Furthermore, both immediate contexts of students, i.e. family and school, were found to be relevant to their emotions and SW, which translates into a lower probability of being a victim of bullying. Therefore, we discuss a concept of SW seen from a perspective related to emotions, where material, economic, and/or monetary factors are not a priority.

**Keywords:** social wellbeing, school environment, family support, bullying, emotions

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**Introduction**

The last decade has seen a rise in the amount of research on children and young people's social wellbeing in several parts of the world (Smith & Diekmann, 2017). Childhood development ecology highlights the diverse

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environments of children and young people as sources of personal development and social wellbeing (González-Bueno et al., 2010).

Various research projects have underlined the positive effect that social support from parents, teachers, and peers have on self-conception, self-efficacy, school participation, academic performance, school adjustment, academic competence, satisfaction with life, satisfaction with school, and wellbeing (King et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2019). This last concept has been understood as the absence of negative conditions and feelings that also include personal growth (Keyes & Waterman, 2003). However, as individuals are integrated in social structures like family and school, they are faced with endless social tasks and challenges such as bullying (Arslan et al., 2020). Thus, we understand social wellbeing as the personal experience of the conditions and functioning within social contexts (Keyes, 1998). Nevertheless, from the aforementioned studies, only few have approached the study of existing relationships between variables related to the perceived support of family, school environment, and social wellbeing of teenagers in a complex, multi-variate model.

#### *Theoretical perspectives of the studied variables*

Transactional theory of environmental psychology (Ames, 1951) highlights the constant, mutually influencing exchange between the person and its environment when exercising a dynamic, creative, and active role in the perceptive process. The theory assumes that this bidirectional relationship comprises the basis of personal behaviour and development. Therefore, the person perceives the environment and construes it relation to the principles acquired through the environmental experience. Thus, schools are not only spaces where teenagers acquire academic ability, but also environments where they form relationships with other people, develop their personality, and experience various aspects of social functioning, which is why the school environment is a factor that can contribute to their wellbeing (Bücker et al., 2018).

The concept of school climate is a multidimensional construct that refers to the perceptions, thoughts, and values that members of a school community build through the relationships that develop within it (Thapa et al., 2013). The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends a scenario approach that conceptualizes schools as health promoters, which has led to various programmes that provide positive psychosocial environments, like the ones that focus on preventing bullying and other forms of violence and abuse (Langford et al., 2015). Moreover, the parenting processes in the family set a resounding example of the bidirectional relationships between learning, environmental experiences and the integral development of teenagers, which might generate unavoidable effects on vulnerability or resilience (Dahl et al., 2018).

Social Wellbeing has been addressed from the theoretical model of Keyes (1998), which distinguishes three fields to measure positive mental health: (a) emotional wellbeing (in terms of positive affections), (b) subjective wellbeing (related to life satisfaction), and (c) social wellbeing. The latter construct is measured with a subjective psychological perspective and composed of five dimensions that place the person in a network of social contexts and relations. This helps in the assessment of aspects associated with social coherence, integration, contribution, revision, and acceptance. This daily interaction in diverse contexts

encourages the emergence of emotions that are, mostly, socially conditioned (Sun et al., 2020), thus enabling the understanding of world experiences.

To this end, the Control-Value Theory of achievement emotions (Pekrun, 2006) allows for the identification of the presence, precedents, and effects of emotions in the school environment. Its main premise is that the assessment that students perform on their own actions, as well as their past and future results, are fundamental in the activation of achievement emotions that are related to learning activities. These emotions will depend on the feeling of control (of lack thereof), as well as on the importance or value that the person assigns to educational tasks (Pekrun 2006; Sun et al., 2020). Combining these two theories with Transactional Theory results in a socio-cognitive perspective that represents an integrated alternative to the study of emotions in education. This perspective includes personal and contextual aspects and is linked to academic behaviours and results (Ames, 1951).

### *Conceptualization of family support, school environment, and social wellbeing*

The school environment is a multidimensional construct that can be defined as the set of relationships that appear between the members of a school community. It is determined by structural, personal, and functional factors that exist in the educational institution (Subsecretaría de Educación Media Superior, 2013). Interdisciplinary analyses have allowed for the recognition of particular social elements that contribute to the building of learning environments favourable for different groups of people (Reyes et al., 2012). This is done by recognizing that an environment of mutual respect is beneficial because it provides psychological comfort, eases students' worries, and facilitates cognitive process while promoting a dynamic interaction where social wellbeing prevails (García-Ael & Morales, 2018).

The two main research areas of wellbeing are those relating to subjective and psychological wellbeing. Both concepts are theoretically related as they study the same psychological process, but use different indicators to evaluate it. Subjective wellbeing refers to the overall balance that people make about their lives and the emotional experience derived from it. Psychological well-being emphasizes personal development, and issues related to achieving desired goals (Keyes et al., 2002). The two constructs emphasise wellbeing from an individual perspective. Emotional wellbeing links to the subjective experience of feeling good, in harmony and tranquility (Shotton & Burton, 2018). Thereupon, to study wellbeing it is vital to associate it with social contact and interpersonal relationships, enabling a more complete evaluation of the conditions necessary for human development. Corey Keyes developed the concept of social wellbeing, which was defined as 'the assessment of the circumstances and functioning inside society' (Keyes, 1998, p. 122). This conceptualization suggests a decentralization of the human being, where factors are no longer evaluated only from a perspective centered on the individual, but within a broader social context (Keyes & Waterman, 2003).

As a result, to assess family support in this study, we have selected a group of variables that measure communication, motivation, supply of resources for education, participation of parents in educational topics, and the evaluation they perform on their children's educational achievements (Dahl et al., 2018; Kamaryati &

Malathum, 2020). To assess the school environment, three dimensions were selected, namely (a) School Functioning, which highlights the organization of the continuous process that allows the members of a school to have a perception of belonging and security; (b) Social Relationships based on the building of effective relationships with schoolmates; and (c) Teaching Practice, since the primary behaviours of school education take place inside a classroom that is influenced by the effectiveness of the teaching through recognition, effort, motivation, and teaching strategies (García-Ael & Morales; Reyes et al., 2012; Subsecretaría de Educación Media Superior, 2013). Lastly, two dimensions were developed to assess Social Wellbeing, derived from Keyes's theory: social contribution, which is measured by the academic commitment of students, and coherence, integration, revision, and acceptance components, assessed using the feelings related with them (e.g., social revision is related to feelings of confidence) (Keyes, 1998; Keyes & Waterman, 2003).

### *Bullying and social wellbeing*

Bullying is considered a risk factor in development that affects the health, quality of life, and the physical and subjective wellbeing of children and adolescents (Langford et al., 2015). This multidimensional, multicausal phenomenon refers to reiterated, intentional, and harmful behaviours of aggression and intimidation (physical, verbal, and/or psychological) between peers (Arslan et al., 2020). Recently, it has also been manifesting in social networking sites, namely 'cyberbullying' (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). Bullying is characterized as being structurally systemic, historic in character, and present when there are conflict relationships within the school (Saucedo-Ramos & Guzmán-Gómez, 2018).

For the past 10 years in Mexico, there have been warnings that schools are at risk of bullying, discrimination, theft, drug use, fighting, and destruction of school equipment and property. These factors give rise to negative results in students' academic achievement, while at the same time they hamper democratic school relationships and generate stress, which can have serious effects on their health (Hansson et al., 2020). This has been confirmed recently by the report 'La Educación Obligatoria en México 2019' (Compulsory Education in Mexico 2019), that states that one in four high of school students has been subject to verbal aggression by their peers, teachers, or school staff. Furthermore, 15.9% claimed to have been victims of theft, 15.3% of defamation, and 11.1% of physical aggression (Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación, 2019).

Victims of bullying experience negative consequences that become important risk factors to their wellbeing (Arslan, 2020), general adjustment (Felix et al., 2009) and life satisfaction (Miranda et al., 2019). Despite there being many studies about bullying in schools, few have determined the association between bullying and social wellbeing from a transactional perspective. Most of them have been addressed from ecological models such as Bronfenbrenner's (1977), who highlights the importance for the study of environments beyond the immediate ones, and the way that the individual relates to them. Despite this, in transactional models there is a greater degree of precision in the search to understand how people and their

environments operate together in reciprocal process that incorporates bidirectional influences (Sameroff, 2009).

### *Present Research*

The main objective of this study was to determine the type of association that exists between Family Support, School Environment, and Social Wellbeing amongst high school students in Mexico (Bentler, 2006). To do so, we developed three hypotheses:

H<sub>1</sub>: The social wellbeing of students is positively and significantly affected by family support and school environment.

H<sub>2</sub>: School environment is positively and significantly affected by family support.

H<sub>3</sub>: School environment has a mediating effect in the relationship between family support and social wellbeing.

## **Method**

### *Design and sample for the study*

Out of a total of 265 participating students attending four schools in this research, 18% were from the city of Nogales, 22% from Hermosillo, 32% from Guaymas, and 28% from Ciudad Obregón. 24% were freshmen, 50% were sophomores, and 26% were seniors. The average age of students was 16 (SD= 1.35); and there were 52% female and 48% male students. Initially, cities were chosen in a non-random fashion. Afterwards, schools were selected by a sampling framework and then we proceeded to formally contact the corresponding authorities for approval and assignment of groups (Hernández et al., 2014).

### *Instrument*

We developed a self-completed scale designed for the purpose of this study, validated with 148 high school students from two different schools in the state of Sonora. The scale was developed by experts (Escobar-Pérez & Cuervo-Martínez, 2008), with the participation of three teacher-researchers in education and psychology. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranged from .83 to .87, with a general alpha value of .90, indicating high internal consistency for the instrument (Streiner, 2003). Respondents are requested to circle the number that best represents how they value various areas under study. It consists of 27 items divided into three subscales:

*Family Support* ( $\alpha = .84$ ) is composed of five items with Likert-type answers ranging from 0 (*very bad*) to 4 (*excellent*) (e.g., "Talking with my family about how I am doing at school"; "Motivation from my family to keep studying").

*School Environment* ( $\alpha = .83$ ) consists three dimensions: (a) School Functioning, (b) Teaching Practice, and (c) Social Relationships, adding up a total of 11 items with the same type of answers and range as the previous subscale (e.g., "our concerns, doubts, and/or recommendations are taken into consideration")

(school functioning); “Security related to school violence” (social relationships); “Actions to solve behaviour problems” (teaching practice)).

*Social Wellbeing* ( $\alpha = .87$ ) comprises of Academic Commitment and Emotions in School. Academic Commitment is measured with three items in the same Likert-type scale as the previously mentioned ones (e.g., “Having good school performance (grades”). Emotions in School consists of eight items valued with a semantic differential scale ranging from -2 to 2 (-2 = *very*, -1 = *lightly*, 0 = *neither*, 1 = *lightly*, 2 = *very*) (e.g., “Unhappy (-2) – Happy (2),” where, for every word pair, respondents circle the option that better expressed how they felt at school at the time. The values on the right of the scale (1 and 2) referred to positive emotions (such as happy), while values on the left (-1 and -2) referred to negative emotions (such as unhappy). A choice of 0 expressed a neutrality in that specific emotion (DeVellis, 2016).

### *Data Analysis*

Cronbach’s alpha coefficient were computed to evaluate the internal consistency of each scale and subscale. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the sample’s sociodemographic characteristics, as well as for each of the scale items. In addition, subscales were calculated with an arithmetic median to perform a correlation analysis using Spearman’s correlation coefficient (Zar, 1972). Structural Equation Modeling Software (EQS) was used to perform a Confirmatory Factorial Analysis (CFA) via a Structural Equations Model (SEM) of first and second order. To test if the data represented a multivariate, non-normal distribution, there was an analysis of Mardia’s normalized coefficient (West et al., 1995). To determine the model’s adjustment, we calculated the goodness of fit between the inclusive and restrictive models by contrasting them with a Satorra-Bentler’s Chi-square test ( $s_B X^2$ ). Other used adjustment indices were the  $s_B X^2$  proportion to the degrees of freedom (df), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the Bentler-Bonnet Non-Normal Fit Index (NNFI), and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI). Structural models considered also explained variance (R<sup>2</sup>) (Bentler, 2006; Hu & Bentler, 1999, Satorra & Bentler, 2001). Furthermore, *t* values associated to structural coefficients between variables were analyzed for the level of significance ( $t > 1.96, p < .05$ ).

## **Results**

*Correlations.* Table I shows that the strength of association between the various factors under study is significant and moderate to weak (Coolican, 2005). School Functioning is moderately related to Teaching Practice ( $r=.55; p<.01$ ) and Social Relationships ( $r=.51; p<.01$ ). Likewise, Teaching Practice was found to be a fundamental factor to students’ commitment ( $r=.31; p<.01$ ) and emotions ( $r=.38; p<.01$ ). When looking at the family role in students’ wellbeing, it was found that family support (students’ feeling that they are being listened when talking about how they are doing at school, family’s instrumental support, motivation, and value of academic achievements) was found to be significantly related to their perceived emotions ( $r=.48; p<.01$ ) and academic commitment ( $r=.40; p<.01$ ). Additionally, perceived emotions are also affected by the social

relationships at school ( $r=.40$ ;  $p<.01$ ). Having friends and classmates who provide emotional support, socializing with friends and peers, and feeling free of school violence, are vital for feeling good at school.

Table I. Means, standard deviations, and correlations between dimensions of the study.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. School Functioning	2.22	.838	1					
2. Teaching Practice	2.76	.719	.55**	1				
3. Social Relationships	3.01	.762	.43**	.51**	1			
4. Family Support	3.23	.798	.23**	.40**	.36**	1		
5. Academic Commitment	2.97	.688	.21**	.31**	.29**	.40**	1	
6. Emotions in School	2.93	.794	.27**	.38**	.40**	.48**	.34**	1

Note: \*\*  $p<.01$ .

*Hypothesis testing.* Using structural equation modelling we tested the relationship between the predictor variable (Family Support) with the mediating variable (School Environment) and the outcome variable (Social Wellbeing). The relationship between Family Support and Social Wellbeing becomes non-significant (total mediation) or reduced (partial mediation) when adding the mediator variable (School Environment) in the model (Baron & Kenny, 1986). On another note, goodness of fit determines if the model is correct and useful for the proposed purposes (Bentler, 2006). The model shows adequate goodness-of-fit indices ( $\chi^2=309.98$  [298 df],  $p>.05$ ; CFI=.99, NNFI=.99; RMSEA=.012) and significant  $t$  values associated to the structural coefficients between the variables ( $t > 1.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that School Environment has a positive, significant influence as a mediating variable between Family Support as perceived by students and their Social Wellbeing.

Figure 1 shows, in parentheses, the structural coefficients and explained variance ( $R^2$ ) of the direct effect models. The numbers not in parentheses correspond to the mediating effect model. Results shows that all associations were significant. The relationship between Family Support and Social Wellbeing had a structural coefficient of .75 and an explained variance of 57% in absence of the mediating variable School Environment. Nevertheless, when the mediation variable was included, the relationship remained significant, which discards a complete mediation process and guarantees a partial mediation size by reducing the structural coefficient of the direct relationship between the predictor and the outcome variable. This means that the relationship between Family Support and Social Wellbeing can be explained by other factors (other than School Environment). The explained variance of the mediation model increased to 68% (compared to 57% in the direct effect model), which indicates that School Environment as a mediating variable explains approximately 68% (11% more) of the relationship between Family Support and students' Social Wellbeing.

Furthermore, the weights or factorial loads that allowed to establish the correlation between the variables had adequate values (Brown, 2015). Within the School Environment indicators, the ones that had

more semantic weight were those that related to bullying, namely, strategies for solving bullying and violence (.78), security related to these two phenomena (.63) and the actions teachers take to solve behaviour problems (.76). This result underscores how relevant these School Environment factors are for students' Social Wellbeing. In Family Support, the indicator with the highest load was that of family motivation to keep studying (.80). In Social Wellbeing, emotions in school represented the factor most related to the construct (.74). In this subscale, the indicator scale "Frustrated (a) – Satisfied (a)" had the most semantic weight (.73), which reveals that the school satisfaction will increase when students feel motivated by their family and are in a school environment that is free of bullying and violence.

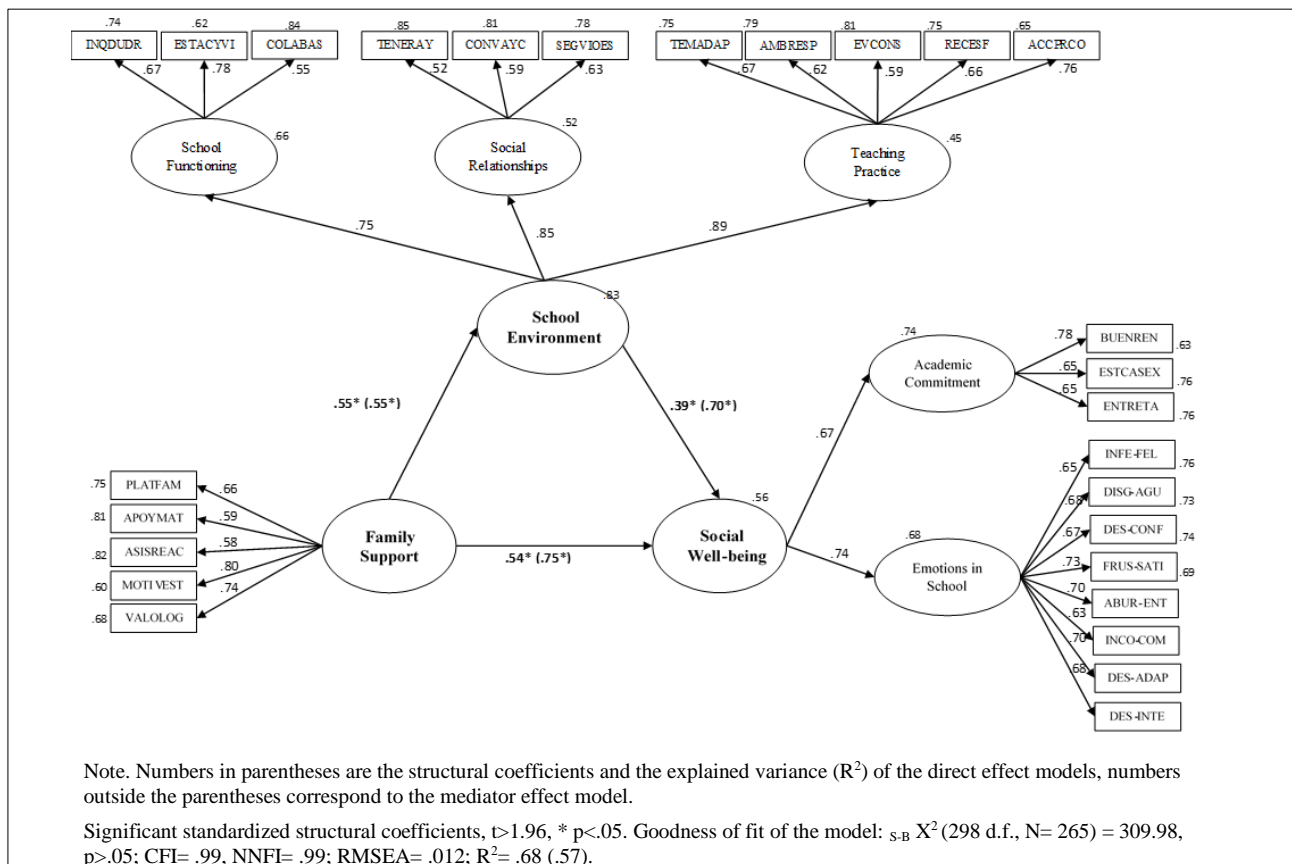


Figure 1. Structural model of school environment as a mediator of family support and social wellbeing in high school education students

## Discussion

In this study we found that the School Environment dimensions that have a greater influence on students' Social Wellbeing are Teaching Practice and Social Relationships, which coincides with other research that indicates that the classroom environment is essential for students to develop respectful relationships with other school members and to prevent acts of school violence (García-Ael & Morales, 2018; Varela et al., 2019). Likewise, Family Support plays an important role in young peoples' experiences in their school environment and, without a doubt, is also paramount for their social wellbeing (King, et al., 2017; Miranda et al., 2019).



The first hypothesis stated that Social Wellbeing is positively and significantly influenced by School Environment and Family Support. This prediction was supported by the data, as both associations presented an explained variance of over 49%, with Family support presenting the higher value. Motivation of family to keep studying was the indicator with the highest factorial saturation, followed by the assessment of their educational achievements and feeling they are listened when talking about how they are doing at school. In the school context dimensions, the factors with the highest impact on Social Wellbeing were perceiving a secure environment, free of bullying and school violence, where their concerns, doubts, and recommendations for school improvement were taken into consideration.

These results generally match the ones obtained by King et al. (2017) who found that parents' closeness was related to a sense of belonging to the family. This predicted higher levels of wellbeing and lower levels of depression symptoms in different types of families (stepfamilies, families with two biological parents and single-parent families). Similarly, studies have found that the connection between parents and children, family cohesion, and family support are negatively correlated with anxiety and depression in teenagers (Boutelle et al., 2009), and positively related to motivation, school behaviour, and attendance (Luo et al., 2013). In this respect, the social support of the family is paramount to teenagers' wellbeing in contemporary society. It has also been observed that family support enhanced the relationship and the children's trust in their families and thus played a significant protective role against victimization by peers (Ashrafi, et al., 2020).

The second hypothesis in this study, namely that School Environment is positively related to Family Support, has also been supported. Family Support explained 30% of students' perception about their School Environment. This is in line with the research of Malecki & Demaray (2003) who found that parental support was related to students' adaptation. Other studies have found that family support provides positive emotional associations that improve children's wellbeing and mental health (Mata et al., 2018; Warner, 2010). Consequently, this confirms the importance of Control-Value theory (Pekrun, 2006), which states that evaluations about the control and importance of learning processes are influenced by social factors such as family and school, and these environments shape emotions in the same way that students' emotions have an impact on their social environment (Mata et al., 2018).

In the third hypothesis, we hypothesized that School Environment has a positive and significant mediating effect on the relationship between Family Support and students' Social Wellbeing. A partial mediation has been confirmed and explained a further 11% of the relationship. This goes in accordance with the research of Gutiérrez & Gonçalves (2013), who pointed out that family support and teenager's self-esteem had positive direct effects on their life satisfaction. They also found that significant indirect effects of school and family support on subjective wellbeing were mediated by school satisfaction. Similarly, Tomás et al. (2020) found a strong link between family support and students' wellbeing, which was significantly mediated by school adjustment. Similarly, their wellbeing was also positively affected by two more sources of support, namely teachers and friends, who are also included in the subscale of School Environment.

In this study, we identified which aspects of Family Support and School Environment have an influence on students' Social Wellbeing. Those related to bullying development were found to be the most significant. Presently, in Mexico, there are studies about contexts, perceptions, discourses, and school practices related to bullying and violence, which are seen as multifactorial, multicultural, and multicausal phenomena (Agüero, 2020). According to Ames's (1951) Transactional theory, the experience that people have about their various contexts will cause a different perception of the environment than those who have different experiences. Thus, negative school and family environments may cause teenagers to have a lower perception of control of their circumstances and emotions, which can generate psychological and social problems that affect their overall academic performance and wellbeing. This reiterates the relevance of schools considering students' concerns, doubts and recommendations, as well as implementing strategies to address bullying and school violence.

The findings of this study indicate that the structural model has shown a high predictive power of School Environment as a mediating variable in the relationship between Family Support and Social Wellbeing amongst high school students. Even though the effect of this mediation was partial, this is to be expected, since theoretical and empirical evidence shows that family support is a crucial factor in all stages of development (Yang et al., 2019). The implications of the present study point towards a concept of social wellbeing as a socio-personal construct that does not demand an overcrowding of resources, material goods, or a high socioeconomic level. It is vital, however, to have bullying-free relationships which promote positive emotions in the various aspects of social wellbeing as proposed by Keyes (1998). Various studies confirm that social support networks have a significant role in wellbeing in all stages of life (Bojanowska & Zalewska, 2016).

### **Limitations, implications, and future directions**

One of the limitations of the present study is its spatial-temporal situation context, this being a cross-sectional study, undertaken in a determined point in time and in four cities in one state in Mexico and with a limited sample, so its findings may not be transferable to different geographical locations. Additionally, without a longitudinal study to assess the temporal relationship between variables, a causal relationship cannot be established. It is important to replicate the study with different randomly selected samples to increase the validity and confidence in the results (DeVellis, 2016). However, the analysis of the relationships between the variables in a structural model with mediating effects can be considered a strength. Therefore, this study underlined a pattern of relationships between the constructs that might allow for its use as a precedent for other research focused on analyzing these variables in adolescent students.

Furthermore, the hypothetical model evaluated in this study is only one of several possible alternatives. This portrays the viability to propose other models that are capable of adding new explanations and other variables, such as the ones related to the consequences of bullying and the physical aspects of the school environment that might have an impact on students' social wellbeing. In addition, it will be important to include sociodemographic data such as age and gender, since different studies have found that the perception

of social support and wellbeing is affected by these factors (Tomás et al., 2020). Likewise, female students and students aged 15 and over are the groups most vulnerable to bullying (Andrés et al., 2018) and it is recommended that future studies include these variables in their investigation.

On another note, other implications for school environment and teaching practices may be derived from this study. Students have reported aspects of the school environment that have an impact on their social wellbeing and how their emotional experiences are related to the role of the educational institutions they are in, their social relationships, and teaching practices. The school design should be considered to prevent harassment and promote the safety and wellbeing of everyone in the school community. Other aspects to be considered are the importance of fostering students' participation in this design and the constant verification of the school environment's conditions through the observation and dialogue of everyone involved. It is also recommended that teachers develop strategies that nurture a respectful environment among everyone, motivate and recognize the effort that students make, and solve behaviour problems through positive and constructive feedback. Additionally, school violence is hardly reported by victims because of fear of the aggressor and mistrust of the school anti-bullying procedures amongst other reasons. In Mexico, studies on school violence or victimization experiences are usually focused on people over 18 years of age (UNICEF México, 2019). Thus, it is important to undertake more studies amongst younger students and implement educational programmes focused on building healthy contexts that allow for students' expression of emotions and experiences. Finally, the results underline the importance of the family in educational processes and students' social wellbeing. Therefore, it is paramount to implement public and educational policies that foster active and effective participation of parents in students' learning and development.

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