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The relation of classroom climate to adolescents' countering hate speech via social skills: A positive youth development perspective

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Abstract

Introduction: Hate speech is a current challenge for schools around the globe. At the same time, students worldwide stand up to hate speech by countering it. Guided by a positive youth development perspective, the present study investigated the direct and indirect associations between classroom climate (environmental assets), social skills (personal assets), and countering hate speech (as a proxy of thriving) among adolescents.

Methods: The sample included 3225 students in grades 7–9 (51.7% self-identified as female) from 40 schools in Germany ($n = 1841$) and Switzerland ($n = 1384$). Students completed self-report questionnaires that assessed classroom climate, three facets of social skills (i.e., perspective-taking, prosocial behavior, assertiveness), and counterspeech.

Results: The results of the 2-(1-1-1)-1 multilevel mediation analysis revealed that classroom climate (L2) and the three facets of social skills (L1) had a direct positive effect on counterspeech (L1). Furthermore, classroom climate (L2) also had a direct positive effect on the three facets of social skills (L1). Finally, classroom climate (L2) had an indirect positive effect on counterspeech (L1) via all three aspects of social skills (L1).

Conclusion: The findings highlight that successful anti-hate speech programs may entail a combination of environmental and personal factors for increasing adolescents' active contribution to an inclusive and discrimination-free classroom environment where hate speech is not tolerated.

KEYWORDS

adolescents, classroom climate, counter speech, hate speech, schools, social skills

1 | INTRODUCTION

The term hate speech refers to any harmful communicative form of expression (e.g., words, graffiti, comments on social media, images) that deliberately promotes, justifies, or disseminates hatred or prejudices toward particular social groups and minorities (e.g., LGBTQI+ people, people of color; Kansok-Dusche et al., 2022). Although research investigating hate speech among adolescents is increasing, adolescents are mainly studied from a deficit-related perspective by primarily focusing on risk factors and consequences of being a perpetrator or victim (e.g., Lehman, 2019; Wachs & Wright, 2021; Wachs, Gámez-Guadix, et al., 2022). Adolescents can, however, also play a positive role when it comes to hate speech. This might be the case when adolescents show moral courage by countering hate speech (counterspeech). Counterspeech is defined as a form of citizen-based response to hateful content to discourage it, stop it, or provide support for the victim by, for example, pointing out logical flaws in the hateful content or using facts to counteract misinformation (Garland et al., 2022). Due to the lack of

research on counterspeech among adolescents, factors explaining counterspeech and their interplay are poorly understood. To this end, we investigate the direct and indirect associations among classroom climate (environmental factors), social skills (personal factors), and counterspeech. A larger goal of the present study is to contribute to a shift in the current narratives in hate speech research away from a deficit-based perspective to a strength-based perspective directed by the positive youth development (PYD) framework (Lerner, 2017). The findings might help develop empowering prevention programs that enable adolescents to be confident in handling hate speech incidents and inform teachers on how to create a positive classroom environment to promote PYD.

1.1 | Understanding counterspeech through the lens of the PYD approach

Until the early 1990s, the deficit perspective in youth research prevailed (Lerner et al., 2009). That is, adolescence was one-sidedly perceived as a period of life in which challenges outweigh opportunities. Since then, youth research has seen a paradigm shift, according to which a more optimistic picture of development opportunities during adolescence has been drawn (Lerner et al., 2009). The central idea of the PYD framework is that every young person has the strength and potential to develop positively, which must be discovered and promoted (Lerner et al., 2009). In this context, the concept of thriving was introduced, which describes a process of change in which young people emerge into adulthood and society with positive psychosocial adjustment. Proximal indicators that young people develop positively in terms of thriving are, for example, school success, mental health, contributing to the positive enhancement of themselves, others, and society, appreciation of diversity, and helpfulness (Lerner, 2017). Lerner (2017) links the concept of PYD directly to the discourse on civic engagement by highlighting the role of "contribution" as a central indicator of thriving. Contribution refers to the actions of a young person for their good (e.g., the ability to influence their development actively) and for the good of their family, peers, social environment (e.g., classrooms), and the institutions of society (e.g., schools). We understand engaging in counterspeech as a proxy for thriving because it can be understood as an indicator of democratic identity, a commitment to other people in need, being socially responsible, and making a positive contribution to the classroom environment as part of adolescents' societal microsystem.

1.2 | Classroom climate and social skills as developmental assets of counterspeech

Young people can thrive through the availability of developmental assets. Developmental assets represent strengths and qualities and consist of environmental assets (e.g., positive classroom climate, family support, caring neighborhood) and personal assets (e.g., social skills, commitment to learning, etc.; Lerner, 2017). In the current study, we consider classroom climate as an operationalization of environmental assets and social skills as an operationalization of personal assets.

Classroom climate is an umbrella term comprising various dimensions such as a physical dimension (e.g., the appearance of the classroom), an academic dimension (e.g., monitoring student progress), and a social dimension (e.g., quality of interpersonal relationships; Loukas, 2007). One aspect of the social dimension is group cohesion within the classroom. Group cohesion refers to the sum of students' feelings about their classmates. In a classroom with high group cohesion, students share the same values, support each other, and care about one another (Shapiro, 1993). Therefore, it can be assumed that in classrooms with high group cohesion, hate speech might be less likely and counterspeech more likely to occur if students violate social norms of fairness, helping, and mutual respect. Indeed, initial hate speech research documented that peer norms in classrooms favoring hate speech are related positively to the occurrence of hate speech within classrooms (Ballaschk et al., 2021; Wachs, Wettstein, Bilz, & Gámez-Guadix, 2022; Wachs, Wettstein, Bilz, Krause, et al., 2022). In addition, other research confirmed that a positive classroom climate is positively linked to adolescents' engagement in counterspeech (Wachs, Castellanos, et al., 2023). These findings align with research that revealed that classroom climate was negatively related to aggressive and externalizing behavior (Thomas et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2020) and group-focused enmity (Eckstein et al., 2021). Moreover, other studies found that classroom climate was positively associated with defender behavior in bullying (Bistrong et al., 2019) and school civic behavior (e.g., involvement in solidarity campaigns; Encina & Berger, 2021).

Social skills are conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that reflects knowledge, abilities, and behaviors that facilitate interaction and communication with others in a socially acceptable way (Kanning, 2003). This study focuses on the following facets of social skills: perspective-taking, prosocial behavior, and assertiveness. First, perspective-taking refers to the ability to perceive a situation or understand other people's thoughts, beliefs, or emotions from an alternative point of view (Davis, 1983). It seems reasonable to expect that adolescents need the ability to understand how a person targeted by hate speech thinks or feels to decide whether they intervene by countering hate speech. Taking another person's perspective into account might be especially important when hate speech targets an outgroup member because the person who engages in counterspeech must be able to perceive the incident from an alternative point of view without being a member of this particular social group. Second, prosocial behavior can be understood as voluntary and purposeful behaviors intended to help and benefit another person (Eisenberg et al., 2015). Adolescents who engage in counterspeech want to help peers overcome

interpersonal assault or distress. However, adolescents need the knowledge and abilities to collaborate and support others to achieve this goal, suggesting a positive link between prosocial skills and counterspeech. Finally, assertiveness refers to the ability to initiate conversations, stand up for oneself or others in conflictual situations, and be self-assured and confident without being aggressive to defend a particular point of view (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976). Countering hate speech is related to the direct and open expression of personal beliefs while considering the rights of others involved in the situation. In addition, assertive adolescents were found to be more popular among peers, reported more social support from peers, and showed higher levels of competencies in peer conflicts than less assertive adolescents (Borbely et al., 2005; Eskin, 2003). Therefore, assertiveness might be positively linked to counterspeech.

Empirical evidence for the essential role of social skills for adolescents who engage in counterspeech is scarce. However, research among adolescents found that social-emotional skills (e.g., empathy and moral engagement) were negatively related to hate speech perpetration (Wachs, Bilz, et al., 2022). Another study showed that perspective-taking and openness to diversity were negatively associated with offline hate speech perpetration in schools (Kansok-Dusche et al., 2023). More recently, research showed that adolescents who feel empathy for victims of hate speech were more likely to engage in counterspeech than adolescents with low levels of empathy (Wachs, Castellanos, et al., 2023; Wachs, Krause, et al., 2023). These findings align with research from related fields that found evidence of a positive correlation between social skills (i.e., self-control, empathy, assertion) and defending behavior in bullying episodes (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2019; Jenkins & Tennant, 2022; Jenkins et al., 2016). Likewise, another study found that parent-reported deficits in children's social skills (i.e., cooperation and prosocial behavior) were linked to lower levels of child-reported defender behavior when witnessing bullying (Perren et al., 2012). Extending this line of research, we investigate the association between three facets of social skills (i.e., perspective-taking, prosocial behavior, assertiveness) and counterspeech.

1.3 | Social skills as mediators in the association between classroom climate and counterspeech

According to the PYD framework, environmental or personal assets alone are insufficient to initiate thriving in young people. Instead, it often requires an interplay of environmental and personal assets to enable young people to thrive (Lerner, 2017). An example of such an interplay might be the association between classroom climate and the development of social skills. Adolescents in classrooms where most of their classmates show caring behavior, respect, and commitment are more likely to adopt prosocial norms and develop social skills than students in classrooms with an adverse classroom climate (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Luo et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). Less is known about the direction of the association between classroom climate and social skills, and theoretically, a bidirectional association can be assumed. However, a recent longitudinal study revealed that school climate predicted higher social skills (i.e., prosocial behavior) 1 year later but not vice versa (Luengo Kanacri et al., 2017). Building on the reviewed literature and the theoretical assumptions put forward by the PYD framework, we expect social skills to mediate the relation between classroom climate and adolescents' engagement in counterspeech.

1.4 | The present study

Not much is known about the correlates of counterspeech among adolescents. Utilizing the PYD framework, the present study aims to add to the current knowledge by investigating the direct and indirect context–person associations between classroom climate (environmental asset), social skills (personal assets), and counterspeech (as a proxy measure of thriving). Based on previous research, we expect that:

Hypothesis 1: *Classroom climate would be positively related to counterspeech.*

Hypothesis 2: *Social skills would be positively associated with counterspeech.*

Hypothesis 3: *Classroom climate would be positively and indirectly associated with counterspeech via social skills.*

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

Participants included 3225 adolescents from Germany (57.1%; $n = 1841$) and Switzerland (42.9%; $n = 1384$). Participants were in grades 7–9 (7th grade: 33.2%; 8th grade: 35.6%, 9th grade: 31.3%). Regarding gender, 46.1% self-identified as male, 51.7% self-identified as female, 2% self-identified as gender diverse, and 0.2% did not indicate their gender. Overall, 62.8% had no

immigrant background. Regarding socioeconomic status (SES), 30.8% of adolescents reported living in families of low affluence, 35.8% in families of medium affluence, and 32.4% in families of high affluence. Due to missing values, the SES could not be established for 0.9% of all participants. Demographic characteristics of the German and Swiss subsamples are reported in the appendix (see Supporting Information: Table S1).

2.2 | Procedure and sampling technique

The educational authority of the two Federal States of Berlin and Brandenburg and the University of Potsdam Ethics Committee approved this study. Data were collected in Germany and Switzerland between October 2020 and April 2021. In Germany, trained researchers administered a tablet-based questionnaire during a school lesson. Participants in Switzerland received emails with an access code to complete the survey on their own devices during a school lesson.

The German sample of schools was selected using a stratified and randomized probability-proportional-to-size sampling scheme (Yates & Grundy, 1953). Schools were stratified by federal state and type of school (e.g., nonacademic track or grammar secondary school). Swiss schools were selected using a contrastive sampling scheme based on the local density of immigrant backgrounds (e.g., high/low number of immigrants) and urbanicity (e.g., rural/urban). The final sample of 100 schools (Germany: $n = 76$, Switzerland: $n = 24$) received phone calls and emails informing them of being selected to participate in the study. School recruitment ended once the sampling plans were achieved. The school-level participation rate was 40% across the entire sample, with 40 schools (Germany: $n = 18$, Switzerland: $n = 22$) agreeing to participate. Several German schools declined to participate, citing COVID-19 pandemic-related issues (e.g., lack of resources and high regional infection rates).

The German sample was composed of students (7–9th grade) enrolled in two randomly selected classrooms per grade at each school. The Switzerland sample consisted of all students in grades 7th to 9th at each school. A total of 264 classes (Germany: $n = 106$; Switzerland: $n = 158$) were invited to participate, of which 236 chose to participate (Germany: $n = 98$; Switzerland: $n = 138$). The response rate at the classroom level was 89% across all schools (Germany: 92%; Switzerland: 87%). Of the 5836 eligible students (Germany: $n = 2495$; Switzerland: $n = 3341$), 3560 students (Germany: $n = 1841$; Switzerland: $n = 1719$) participated in the study. The student response rate was 61% overall (Germany: 74%; Switzerland: 51%). Because only the Swiss sample included mixed classrooms (e.g., a classroom with students from 7th and 8th grade), we excluded 335 Swiss students from 21 classes to avoid mixed-grade classrooms being confounded with being from a Swiss school. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents/educators of the participants and participants themselves.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Classroom climate

The quality of students' relationships with their classmates was measured using a three-item scale (e.g., *Most students in my class are friendly and supportive*; Currie et al., 2014). Response options were on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *absolutely disagree* to *absolutely agree*. Cronbach's α was .81, 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.79, 0.83] and McDonald's ω was 0.82, 95% CI [0.80, 0.83].

2.3.2 | Social skills

Participants' self-reported ability to handle social interactions effectively was measured by three subscales which we adapted to the classroom context (Jurkowski & Hänze, 2014). Perspective-taking was measured with a three-item scale (e.g., *I can imagine how a classmate feels when he/she is insulted*). Cronbach's α for this scale was 0.72, 95% CI [0.70, 0.74] and McDonald's ω was 0.72, 95% CI [0.70, 0.74]. Prosocial behavior was measured with a three-item scale (e.g., *If something bad has happened to a classmate, I cheer the person up*). Cronbach's α for this scale was .80, 95% CI [0.78, 0.81] and McDonald's ω was 0.81, 95% CI [0.79, 0.82]. Assertiveness was measured with a five-item scale (e.g., *When we discuss, I can easily get my classmates excited about my suggestions*). Response options were on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *never* to *always*. Cronbach's α was .85, 95% CI [0.84, 0.86] and McDonald's ω was 0.85, 95% CI [0.84, 0.86].

2.3.3 | Counterspeech

Participants were given a vignette describing a hate speech incident to measure counterspeech and were asked follow-up questions to assess their reactions to the vignette. Participants read: *Please imagine the following situation: At your school, a*

student makes public, insulting statements about people of a certain skin color or origin. Then the participants were asked, *What would you do in the situation described, or what have you done if you had experienced such a situation before?* Students then rated four items (i.e., *I tell the person that such statements are hurtful; I urge the person to stop doing it; I try to get the person to think by asking specific questions; I am saying that the person is spreading false information [fake news]*; Wachs, Castellanos, et al., 2023). Response options were on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Cronbach's α was .81, 95% CI [0.80, 0.82] and McDonald's ω was 0.81, 95% CI [0.80, 0.82].

2.3.4 | Control variables

Control variables included grade, gender, immigrant background, and SES. Gender (self-identifying as male, female, or gender diverse) was dichotomized into self-identifying as male or female. Students who self-identified as gender diverse were excluded from the study due to the small sample size ($n = 64$). We measured immigrant background by asking participants about the country of origin of their parents. Students were classified as having an immigrant background if at least one parent had been born outside Germany or Switzerland, which follows the official German definition of immigrant background (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022). SES was measured using the six-item Family Affluence Scale (FAS; Hartley et al., 2016). Additionally, a composite FAS score and category (i.e., low, medium, and high SES) was determined by examining participants' responses to items such as their family car(s), the number of bedrooms, bathrooms, and computers in the house, as well as holidays taken during the past 12 months.

2.4 | Data analyses

Between 1.1% (counterspeech) and 3.17% (assertiveness) of the data were missing. According to Little's MCAR test, the data were missing completely at random ($\chi^2 = 11.49$, $df = 9$, $p = .243$). Hence, the full information maximum likelihood approach (FIML) was used (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). A 2-(1-1-1)-1 multilevel mediation model, with students (Level 1) nested in classrooms (Level 2), was conducted in Mplus 8.7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). At Level 1, perspective-taking, prosocial behavior, and assertiveness as the independent variables and counterspeech as the dependent variable were included while controlling for gender, SES, and immigrant background. At Level 2, classroom climate as the independent variable and grade as the control variable were included. As previous research (Marsh et al., 2012) recommended, classroom climate was included at Level 2 rather than at Level 1 because this variable assesses the shared perceptions of classroom climate using items that refer to the classroom, not the individual.

Four steps were followed to conduct the multilevel mediation analysis. First, an unconditional model that included a random intercept only (Model 0) was run to estimate intraclass correlation coefficients. Second, a model that included control variables (i.e., gender, SES, and immigrant background) at Level 1 and grade at Level 2 as predictors of counterspeech, perspective-taking, prosocial behavior, and assertiveness was estimated (Model 1). Third, a model was run that included direct paths from classroom climate to perspective-taking, prosocial behavior, assertiveness, and counterspeech and direct paths from perspective-taking, prosocial behavior, and assertiveness to counterspeech (Model 2). Fourth, the three indirect effects of classroom climate on counterspeech via perspective-taking (indirect effect 1), prosocial behavior (indirect effect 2), and assertiveness (indirect effect 3) were added (Model 3).

A decrease in the Akaike information criterion (AIC) was used to assess the goodness of fit (AIC; Akaike, 1974). A model that reduces the AIC to at least 10 units concerning the previous model is considered superior (Burnham & Anderson, 2004). Variables were not centered as the effects of the mediator variables on the dependent variable were expected to be the same within and between classrooms (Preacher et al., 2011).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and intraclass correlation coefficients

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables and their bivariate correlations. As expected, statistically significant positive correlations were observed among classroom climate, perspective-taking, prosocial behavior, assertiveness, and counterspeech. According to the analyses from Model 0, the intraclass correlation coefficients were 0.18 for classroom climate, 0.08 for perspective-taking, 0.12 for prosocial behavior, 0.03 for assertiveness, and 0.08 for counterspeech. Therefore, the multilevel approach was justified. Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics of the study variables by country are reported in the appendix (see Supporting Information: Table S2).

TABLE 1 Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics of the study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Counterspeech	–				
2. Perspective-taking	0.35**	–			
3. Prosocial behavior	0.36**	0.62**	–		
4. Assertiveness	0.26**	0.35**	0.40**	–	
5. Classroom climate	0.15**	0.22**	0.28**	0.16**	–
M	3.29	3.37	3.81	3.13	3.85
SD	1.06	0.85	0.92	0.85	0.42
ICC	0.08	0.08	0.12	0.03	0.18

Abbreviation: ICC, intraclass correlation coefficient.

**$p < .001$.

3.2 | Direct and indirect effects of classroom climate on counterspeech

Table 2 presents the multilevel mediation model results. According to the AIC, Model 3 showed the best fit (see Table 2). Supporting Hypothesis 1, the positive direct effect of classroom climate on counterspeech ($B = 0.13$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.21], $p = .017$) was statistically significant. Supporting Hypothesis 2, perspective-taking ($B = 0.23$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.28], $p < .001$), prosocial behavior ($B = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.22], $p < .001$), and assertiveness ($B = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.23], $p < .001$) had a positive direct effect on counterspeech. Furthermore, classroom climate had a positive and direct effect on perspective-taking ($B = 0.42$, 95% CI [0.34, 0.50], $p < .001$), prosocial behavior ($B = 0.56$, 95% CI [0.46, 0.65], $p < .001$), and assertiveness ($B = 0.30$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.36], $p < .001$; see Figure 1). Finally, the indirect effects of classroom climate on counterspeech via perspective-taking ($B = 0.10$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.12], $p < .001$), prosocial behavior ($B = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.12], $p < .001$), and assertiveness ($B = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.07], $p < .001$) were statistically significant. Thus, confirming Hypothesis 3 (see Figure 1). In terms of control variables, girls were more likely to report counterspeech ($B = 0.23$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.28], $p < .001$), whereas SES and migration background were not associated with counterspeech. In addition, students from 7th grade were more likely to counter hate speech than students from 9th grade ($B = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.25], $p = .011$). We repeated the analyses by country. The findings supported the findings of the multilevel mediation model for both subsamples (see appendix, Supporting Information: Tables S3 and S4).

4 | DISCUSSION

We drew from a large sample of adolescents in the present study to examine counterspeech among adolescents. More specifically, we applied the PYD framework to investigate whether classroom climate (environmental assets) and social skills (personal assets) were positively associated with counterspeech (thriving). In addition, as postulated by the PYD approach, we examined the interplay between environmental and personal assets to understand thriving among adolescents, as evidenced by counterspeech. Thereby, we expand previous knowledge of counterspeech correlates, highlight adolescents' constructive role in hate speech incidents, and extend the theoretical grounding in hate speech research.

4.1 | Direct and indirect associations among classroom climate, social skills, and counterspeech

In agreement with our first hypothesis, we found a positive link between classroom climate and counterspeech. This finding is consistent with research that reported a negative relation between the quality of student–student relationships, aggressive behavior, and group-focused enmity (Eckstein et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2011). The finding also supports research that showed a positive association between a positive classroom atmosphere and standing up for victims of bullying and civic behavior in schools (Bistrong et al., 2019; Encina & Berger, 2021). Our finding extends previous literature that documented that peer norms within classrooms favoring hate speech are related positively to hate speech perpetration (Ballaschk et al., 2021; Wachs, Wettstein, Bilz, & Gámez-Guadix, 2022; Wachs, Wettstein, Bilz, & Krause, et al., 2022).

Supporting our second hypothesis, we found a positive association between three facets of social skills and counterspeech. These findings indicate that counterspeech is facilitated by a variety of skills, such as the ability to understand how other people think and feel, the ability to collaborate and give support, the ability to stand up to others in conflictual situations, and

TABLE 2 Results of the multilevel mediation model.

Predictor	Mediator	Outcome	Model 1 Estimation (SE) [CI 95%]	*p*	Standard estimation	Model 2 Estimation (SE) [CI 95%]	*p*	Standard estimation	Model 3 Estimation (SE) [CI 95%]	*p*	Standard estimation
Direct effects											
Classroom climate		Counterspeech				0.13 (0.05) [0.04, 0.21]	.020	0.14	0.13 (0.05) [0.04, 0.21]	.017	0.20
Classroom climate	Perspective-taking					0.42 (0.05) [0.33, 0.50]	<.001	0.34	0.42 (0.05) [0.34, 0.50]	<.001	0.79
	Perspective-taking	Counterspeech				0.23 (0.03) [0.19, 0.28]	<.001	0.18	0.23 (0.03) [0.19, 0.28]	<.001	0.19
Classroom climate	Prosocial behavior					0.54 (0.06) [0.44, 0.64]	<.001	0.36	0.56 (0.06) [0.46, 0.65]	<.001	0.85
	Prosocial behavior	Counterspeech				0.17 (0.03) [0.12, 0.22]	<.001	0.22	0.17 (0.03) [0.12, 0.22]	<.001	0.14
Classroom Climate	Assertiveness					0.28 (0.04) [0.21, 0.35]	<.001	0.31	0.30 (0.04) [0.23, 0.36]	<.001	0.89
	Assertiveness	Counterspeech				0.19 (0.03) [0.14, 0.23]	<.001	0.15	0.19 (0.03) [0.14, 0.23]	<.001	0.15
Indirect effects											
Classroom climate	Perspective-taking	Counterspeech							0.10 (0.01) [0.07, 0.12]	<.001	
Classroom climate	Prosocial behavior	Counterspeech							0.09 (0.02) [0.06, 0.12]	<.001	
Classroom climate	Assertiveness	Counterspeech							0.05 (0.01) [0.04, 0.07]	<.001	
Control variables										<.001	
Gender^{girls}		Counterspeech	0.37 (0.04) [0.31, 0.44]	<.001	0.18	0.24 (0.04) [0.17, 0.30]	<.001	0.12	0.24 (0.04) [0.18, 0.30]	<.001	0.12
Gender^{girls}	Perspective-taking		0.28 (0.03) [0.22, 0.33]	<.001	0.18	0.28 (0.03) [0.22, 0.34]	<.001	0.18	0.29 (0.03) [0.24, 0.34]	<.001	0.18
Gender^{girls}	Prosocial behavior		0.51 (0.04) [0.46, 0.57]	<.001	0.30	0.51 (0.04) [0.46, 0.57]	<.001	0.31	0.52 (0.03) [0.46, 0.58]	<.001	0.30
Gender^{girls}	Assertiveness		−0.15 (0.03) [−0.20, −0.10]	<.001	−0.09	−0.15 (0.03) [−0.20, −0.09]	<.001	−0.09	−0.15 (0.03) [−0.20, −0.10]	<.001	−0.09

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Predictor	Mediator	Outcome	Model 1 Estimation (SE) [CI 95%]	*p*	Standard estimation	Model 2 Estimation (SE) [CI 95%]	*p*	Standard estimation	Model 3 Estimation (SE) [CI 95%]	*p*	Standard estimation
Immigrant background^{yes}		Counterspeech	−0.05 (0.04) [−0.12, 0.02]	.258	−0.02	−0.02 (0.04) [−0.08, 0.04]	.612	−0.01	−0.02 (0.04) [−0.08, 0.04]	.608	−0.01
Immigrant background^{yes}	Perspective-taking		−0.03 (0.03) [−0.08, 0.03]	.381	−0.02	−0.03 (0.03) [−0.08, 0.03]	.426	−0.02	−0.01 (0.03) [−0.06, 0.05]	.877	0.00
Immigrant background^{yes}	Prosocial behavior		−0.09 (0.04) [−0.15, −0.03]	.016	−0.05	−0.08 (0.04) [−0.14, −0.02]	.023	−0.05	−0.06 (0.03) [−0.12, −0.01]	.073	−0.03
Immigrant background^{yes}	Assertiveness		−0.01 (0.03) [−0.07, 0.04]	.721	−0.01	−0.01 (0.03) [−0.07, 0.05]	.739	−0.01	−0.01 (0.03) [−0.06, 0.05]	.818	−0.01
SES		Counterspeech	0.01 (0.01) [−0.01, 0.02]	.318	0.02	−0.01 (0.01) [−0.02, 0.01]	.334	−0.02	−0.01 (0.01) [−0.02, 0.01]	.387	−0.02
SES	Perspective-taking		0.00 (0.01) [−0.01, 0.02]	.582	0.01	0.01 (0.01) [−0.01, 0.02]	.478	0.02	0.01 (0.01) [−0.01, 0.02]	.489	0.02
SES	Prosocial behavior		0.00 (0.01) [−0.01, 0.02]	.879	0.00	0.00 (0.01) [−0.01, 0.02]	.830	0.01	0.00 (0.01) [−0.02, 0.01]	.845	0.00
SES	Assertiveness		0.04 (0.01) [0.03, 0.06]	<.001	0.11	0.04 (0.01) [0.03, 0.06]	<.001	0.12	0.04 (0.01) [0.02, 0.05]	<.001	0.10
7th grade		Counterspeech	0.11 (0.07) [−0.01, 0.23]	.119	0.18	0.15 (0.06) [0.05, 0.25]	.010	0.18	0.15 (0.06) [0.05, 0.25]	.011	0.24
8th grade		Counterspeech	0.06 (0.07) [−0.06, 0.17]	.420	0.09	0.11 (0.06) [0.01, 0.20]	.069	0.12	0.10 (0.06) [0.01, 0.20]	.076	0.17
7th grade	Perspective-taking		−0.09 (0.06) [−0.18, 0.00]	.093	−0.08	−0.09 (0.05) [−0.17, −0.01]	.070	−0.07	−0.09 (0.04) [−0.16, −0.01]	.051	−0.16
8th grade	Perspective-taking		−0.07 (0.05) [−0.16, 0.01]	.169	−0.07	−0.07 (0.05) [−0.15, 0.02]	.184	−0.06	−0.06 (0.05) [−0.14, 0.01]	.164	−0.12
7th grade	Prosocial behavior		−0.12 (0.06) [−0.22, −0.01]	.069	−0.08	−0.11 (0.05) [−0.19, −0.03]	.032	−0.08	−0.11 (0.04) [−0.18, −0.03]	.017	−0.17
8th grade	Prosocial behavior		−0.12 (0.06) [−0.22, −0.01]	.067	−0.08	−0.11 (0.05) [−0.20, −0.02]	.052	−0.07	−0.10 (0.05) [−0.18, −0.02]	.034	−0.16
7th grade	Assertiveness		−0.08 (0.04) [−0.15, −0.01]	.069	−0.10	−0.07 (0.04) [−0.14, −0.01]	.063	−0.09	−0.07 (0.04) [−0.13, −0.01]	.059	−0.22
8th grade	Assertiveness		−0.06 (0.04) [−0.13, 0.02]	.209	−0.07	−0.05 (0.04) [−0.12, 0.02]	.237	−0.06	−0.05 (0.04) [−0.11, 0.02]	.250	−0.14

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Predictor	Mediator	Outcome	Model 1 Estimation (SE) [CI 95%]	*p*	Standard estimation	Model 2 Estimation (SE) [CI 95%]	*p*	Standard estimation	Model 3 Estimation (SE) [CI 95%]	*p*	Standard estimation
Goodness of fit											
AIC			30,033.81			29,238.81			29,024.71		
R^2			3.4%			16%			17%		

Note: AIC Model 0 (random intercept only) = 40,379.46. Reference categories for control variables are "male" for gender, "no" for migration background, and "9th grade" for grade.

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike information criterion; CI, confidence interval; SES, socioeconomic status.

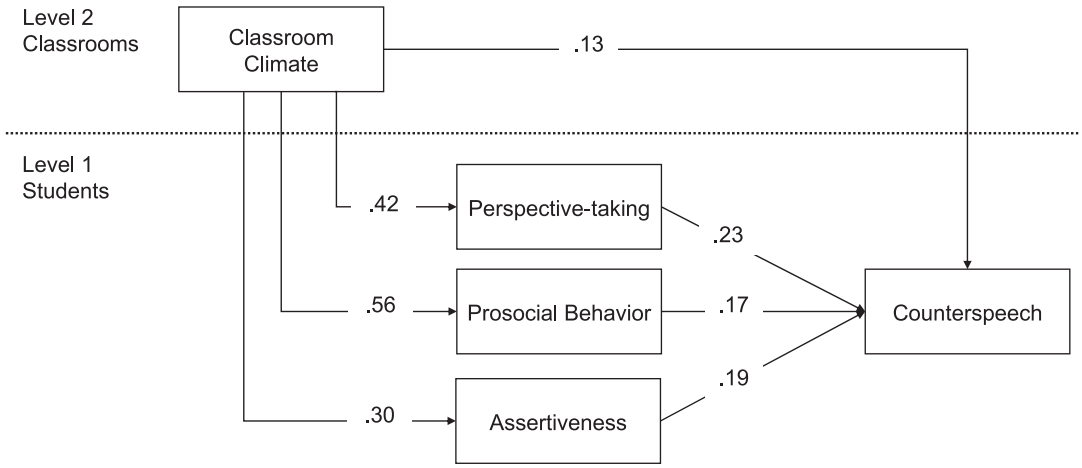

FIGURE 1 Direct and indirect associations between classroom climate, social skills, and counterspeech. Statistically significant unstandardized coefficients are displayed.

the confidence to be able to defend and fight for their own beliefs. With these findings, we could extend previous hate speech research stating a negative association between social-emotional skills and hate speech perpetration (Kansok-Dusche et al., 2023; Wachs, Bilz, et al., 2022) and research that found a positive association between empathy and counterspeech (Wachs, Castellanos, et al., 2023; Wachs, Krause, et al., 2023). Our findings also align with related research on similar associations in bullying (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2019; Jenkins & Tennant, 2022; Jenkins et al., 2016; Perren et al., 2012).

Finally, we found evidence for the indirect effects of classroom climate on counterspeech via social skills, supporting our third hypothesis. These results align with previous research, highlighting the classroom context's crucial role in developing social skills (Eisenberg et al., 2015; Luengo Kanacri et al., 2017; Luo et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020). Furthermore, the present study extends the current knowledge of the complex interplay between classroom climate and social skills in explaining counterspeech. In particular, the findings indicate, in agreement with the PYD framework, that both environmental and personal factors and their interplay must be considered to understand what adolescents motivate to stand up to hate speech by countering it.

4.2 | Limitations and future research

There are several limitations of the current study and implications for follow-up research. First, the present study was based on a cross-sectional design. Thus, any claims about the temporal ordering of classroom climate, social skills, and counterspeech cannot be determined. Longitudinal and experimental research is required to comprehend these variables' temporal order. Second, we measured only group cohesion, one facet of school climate. Future research should consider additional aspects such as teacher–student relationships and democratic classroom climate (e.g., acceptance of diversity). Third, the present study is based solely on self-reports. Follow-up research could reduce the risk of self-reporting biases by employing peer nominations to measure counterspeech. Using peer nominations has a long tradition in, for example, bullying research and has been proven useful (e.g., Volk et al., 2017). Also, such instruments would allow us to conduct social network analyses to understand hate speech dynamics and the influence of norms within the classroom. However, future research must first develop valid and reliable instruments for measuring hate speech through peer nominations. Finally, we only addressed a small section of the classroom climate: classroom cohesion. Research going forward should investigate further facets of school climate (e.g., inclusive classroom climate, student–teacher relationships). In addition, more research is needed to study other environmental contexts (e.g., family, neighborhood, online world) and the interplay among those contexts and personal assets to further understand counterspeech among adolescents from a PYD perspective.

4.3 | Practical implications

Several practical implications for anti-hate speech prevention programs can be drawn from the current study. Adolescents' ability to counter hate speech does not develop en passant. In particular, the present study showed that adolescents might benefit from cohesive peer-to-peer relationships and social skills to be confident in handling hate speech incidents. Teachers, as socialization agents, play a crucial role in fostering a positive classroom climate (Sriklaub et al., 2015). Hence, it seems vital

to equip teachers with the skills they need to develop a classroom environment that allows students to bond and fosters an atmosphere of support and cooperation. At the same time, education in schools must address the root causes of hate speech by implementing civic education, human rights, peaceful conflict resolution, critical consciousness lessons, and encouraging lively discussions about political events and potential solutions to societal problems. In terms of counterspeech, students need to be educated on how to notice the difference between free speech and hate speech, to point out logical flaws in a hateful statement (e.g., sensitization for improper generalizations) without being offensive, to use facts to counteract misinformation and to develop strategies to support the targeted person. However, to date, there is only limited knowledge of how such skills can be conveyed (Seemann-Herz et al., 2022). One exception is the theory-based and empirically evaluated prevention program "HateLess. Together against hatred." HateLess has shown to be effective in increasing adolescents' empathy toward victims of hate speech, their self-efficacy in dealing with hate speech incidents, and their engagement in counterspeech (Wachs, Krause, et al., 2023). HateLess incorporates intergroup contact interventions (e.g., indirect contact via stories and movies about social outgroup members), knowledge-based intervention (e.g., providing information about minorities, democratic values, and principles), and individual skill acquisition (e.g., empathy training). Follow-up research is needed to understand whether HateLess also positively impacts the classroom climate and social skills investigated in the present study.

5 | CONCLUSION

The present study utilized multilevel mediation analysis to investigate the direct and indirect associations between classroom climate, social skills, and counterspeech in a large sample of adolescents. The findings confirmed a positive link between classroom climate, social skills, and counterspeech. Moreover, we found evidence for indirect effects between classroom climate and counterspeech via social skills. Hence, prevention programs should address a positive classroom climate and, at the same time, improve adolescents' social skills. The present findings are encouraging as it shows how we can move toward a strength-based perspective in hate speech research. Nonetheless, the study also raises the need to discuss the questions on a societal level of whether it is morally justified to demand young people engage in counterspeech. To affirm this question, it becomes crucial that schools and we as a society provide young people with the proper settings and support, they need for competent handling of hate speech incidents.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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