



INFORMATION RESOURCE

About School and Classroom Climate

(<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolclassroomclimate.pdf>)

Climate is a key concept in planning to enhance the quality of school life, teaching, learning, and support. School and classroom climate sometimes are referred to as the learning environment or the supportive learning environment, as well as by terms such as atmosphere, ambience, ecology, milieu, conditions for learning. (Note: Sometimes the terms climate and culture are used interchangeably, but the concepts are not the same.)

School and classroom climate influences classroom behavior and learning. The impact on students and staff can be beneficial or another barrier to learning and teaching. Understanding the nature of school climate is a basic element in improving schools. Implied is the intent to establish and maintain a positive context that facilitates classroom learning. In practice, school and classroom climates range from hostile or toxic to welcoming and supportive and can fluctuate daily and over the school year.

School and classroom climate are temporal, and somewhat fluid, perceived qualities of the immediate setting which emerge from the complex transaction of many factors. In turn, the climate reflects the influence of the underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, and traditions that constitute the school culture. And, of course, the climate and culture at a school are affected by the surrounding political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

Related concepts for understanding school and classroom climate are social system organization; social attitudes; staff and student morale; power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures; curricular and instructional practices; communicated expectations; efficacy; accountability demands; cohesion; competition; *fit* between learner and classroom; system maintenance, growth, and change; orderliness; and safety. Moos (e.g., 1979) groups such concepts into three dimensions: (1) Relationship (i.e., the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment; the extent to which people are involved in the environment and support and help each other); (2) Personal development (i.e., basic directions along which personal growth and self-enhancement tend to occur); and (3) System maintenance and change (i.e., the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change).

Prevailing approaches to measuring school and classroom climate use (1) teacher and student perceptions, (2) external observer's ratings and systematic coding, and/or (3) naturalistic inquiry, ethnography, case study, and interpretative assessment techniques (Fraser, 1998; Freiberg, 1999). Because the concept is a psychological construct, climate in a given school and classroom can be perceived differently by observers. With this in mind, Moos (1979) measured classroom environment in terms of the shared perceptions of those in the classroom. The National School Climate Council (2007) recommends that school climate assessments focus on four dimensions: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment – using surveys that encompass the perceptions of students, parents and guardians, and school personnel.

Analyses of research suggest that school and classroom climate are significantly related to matters such as student engagement, behavior, self-efficacy, achievement, and social and emotional development, principal leadership style, stages of educational reform, teacher burnout, and overall quality of school life. For example, studies report strong associations between achievement levels and classrooms that are perceived as having greater cohesion and goal-direction and less disorganization and conflict. Research also suggests that the impact of school and classroom climate may be greater on students from low-income homes and groups that often are discriminated against.

Given the correlational nature of school and classroom climate research, cause and effect interpretations remain speculative. The broader body of organizational research does indicate the profound role accountability pressures play in shaping organizational climate (Cohen, 2006; Cohen, et al., 2009, 2010; Mahoney & Hextall, 2000). Thus, it is likely that the increasing demands for higher achievement test scores and control of student behavior contribute to a school climate that is reactive, over-controlling, and over-reliant on external reinforcement to motivate positive functioning.

Increasing interest in enhancing school climate is reflected in the establishment of the National School Climate Center and the U.S. Department of Education's initiative for Safe and Supportive Schools. See

- >the brief School Climate Research Summary posted on the National School Climate Center website – http://nsc.csee.net/effective/school_climate_research_summary.pdf
- >the National School Climate Standards – <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php>
- >the U.S. Dept. of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grant program which aims to provide the resources for systems to measure school climate and safety at the building level and to help intervene in those schools with the greatest needs. <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/safesupportiveschools/index.html>

Note: The National School Climate Council (2007) offers the following definition:

"School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of people's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices, and organizational structures."

"A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits and satisfaction from learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment."

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Also, see the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on School Climate
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm>

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS at UCLA

The center at UCLA is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

We are appreciative to Jonathan Cohen for his input in improving this resource.

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