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Classroom Climate

Classroom climate sometimes is referred to as the learning environment, as well as by terms such as atmosphere, ambience, ecology, and milieu. The Impact of classroom climate on students and staff can be beneficial for or a barrier to learning

Definitional Considerations

Classroom climate is a perceived quality of the setting. It emerges in a somewhat fluid state from the complex transaction of many immediate environmental factors (e.g., physical, material, organizational, operational, and social variables). Both the climate of the classroom and the school reflect the influence of a school's culture, which is a stable quality emerging from underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, and traditions. And, of course, classroom climate and culture both are shaped by the school's surrounding and embedded political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

Key concepts related to understanding classroom climate include (a) social system organization, (b) social attitudes, (c) staff and student *morale,* (d) power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures, (e) curricular and instructional practices, (0 communicated expectations, (g) efficacy, (h) accountability demands, (1) cohesion, 0) competition, (k) the "Fit" between key learner and classroom variables, (1) system maintenance, growth, and change, (m) orderliness, and (n) safety. Rudolph Moos (1979) groups such concepts into three dimensions for classifying human environments and has used them to develop measures of school and classroom climate Moos's three dimensions are

- Relationship -- 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.

- Personal development -- basic directions along which personal growth and self enhancement tend to occur.

- System maintenance and change -- the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change.

The concept of classroom climate implies the intent to establish and maintain a positive context that facilitates classroom learning, but in practice, classroom climates range from hostile or toxic to welcoming and supportive and can fluctuate daily and over the school year. Moreover, because the concept is a social psychological construct, different observers may have different perceptions of the climate in a given classroom. Therefore, for purposes of his early research, Moos (1979) measured classroom environment in terms of the shared perceptions of those in the classroom. Prevailing approaches to measuring 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).

Importance of Classroom Climate

Classroom climate is seen as a major determiner of classroom behavior and learning, Understanding how to establish and maintain a positive classroom climate is seen as basic to improving schools.

Research suggests significant relationships between classroom climate and such matters 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 (Fraser, 1998; Freiberg, 1999). 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

classroom climate may be greater on students from low-income homes and groups that often are discriminated against.

Given the nature of classroom climate research, cause and effect interpretations remain speculative. The broader body of research on organizational climate does suggest that increasing demands for higher achievement test scores and reliance on social and tangible rewards to control behavior and motivate performance contribute to a classroom climate that is reactive and over-controlling (Mahony & Hextall, 2000).

Promoting a Positive Classroom Climate

A proactive approach to developing a positive classroom climate requires careful attention to (1) enhancing the quality of life in the classroom for students and staff, (2) pursuing a curriculum that promotes riot only academic, but also social, and emotional learning, (3) enabling teachers to be effective with a wide range of students, and (4) fostering intrinsic motivation for classroom learning and teaching. With respect to all this, the literature advocates

- a welcoming, caring, and hopeful atmosphere;

- social support mechanisms for students and staff,

- an array of options for pursuing goals;

- meaningful participation by students and staff in decision Making;

- transforming a big, classroom into a set of smaller units that maximize intrinsic motivation for learning and are not based on ability or problem-oriented grouping-,

- providing instruction and responding to problems in a personalized way;

- use of a variety of strategies for preventing and addressing problems as soon as they arise;

- a healthy and attractive physical environment that is conducive to learning and teaching.

Role of the School Psychologist

Given the importance of classroom climate, the establishment and maintenance of a positive climate in every classroom must be a central focus of all school staff. School psychologists can play an increasing role by taking every available opportunity to work with teachers in their classrooms to increase teacher competence and provide collegial support. This means going beyond traditional consultation about classroom management strategies arid how to work with individuals manifesting behavior, learning, and emotional problems. School psychologists can be invited to spend increasing amounts of time in classrooms teaming with teachers to enhance classroom climate.

In addition, school psychologists can work with other student support staff to improve classroom climate by establishing and maintaining a positive school climate that promotes well being and addresses barriers to teaching arid learning (Adelman & Taylor, 1997). A major focus of this should be on developing school-wide programs that

- assist students and families as they negotiate the many school-related transitions

- increase home involvement with schools

- respond to, and where feasible, prevent crises

- increase community involvement and support

- facilitate students and family access to specialized services when necessary.

Conclusion

Classroom climate plays a major role in shaping the quality of school life and learning. Research has indicated a range of strategies for enhancing a positive climate. School psychologists can play a major role in ensuring schools strive to create such a climate.

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