

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND WELLBEING IN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SERBIA – THE ROLE OF SCHOOL ETHNIC STRUCTURE

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Abstract. Systems View of School Climate (SVSC) theory defines school climate as physical, social and academic aspects of individuals' experiences in the learning environment. Positive school climate has been consistently associated with wellbeing. However, this perception is influenced by often-overlooked ethnic and cultural pluralities. Research points to the benefits of inclusive school practices in fostering ethnic identity, promoting resilience, self-esteem and sense of happiness. The present study examined students' perceptions of school climate and personal wellbeing in relation to the secondary school ethnic structure in Serbia. Data from 661 first and third graders (36% male, 48.3% female, 15.7% other/undisclosed) were gathered using the *Personal Wellbeing Index* and the *Delaware School Climate Scale*. Schools were categorized into those in which the majority belonged to the dominant ethnic group, a minority (Bosniak/Hungarian) or those with an equal representation of the dominant and minority groups. Results show that students perceived the school climate as moderately positive ($M = 59.58$, $SD = 9.44$, on a scale 21–84) and their overall wellbeing ranged from moderate to high ($M = 7.48$, $SD = 2.7$, on a scale 1–10), with a statistically significant positive correlation ($r = .29$, $p < .01$). In schools where the majority of students were Serbian, school climate was assessed more positively than in the other two school types ($F_{(2, 658)} = 5.7$, $p = .004$), with no differences regarding overall wellbeing ($F_{(2, 658)} = .177$, $p = .838$). Older and students with other/undisclosed gender perceived school climate and personal wellbeing more negatively. In line with previous studies, less positive assessment of school climate was characteristic for minorities, suggesting school climate often reflects values of dominant groups. Findings indicate that school ethnic structure should be taken into account in order to enhance the sense of belonging and safety for students of different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: school climate, wellbeing, ethnicity, students