p-ISSN: 2184-2205 e-ISSN: 2184-3414 ISBN: 978-989-35106-6-7 © 2024
https://doi.org/10.36315/2024inpact032

SCHOOL CLIMATE – TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Multiple studies have suggested the importance of school climate in relation to various educational outcomes. Simultaneously, school climate is the indicator of the quality of school work, which is assessed during school self-evaluation and external evaluation. As teachers play a central role in shaping a positive school environment, this study aimed to explore their viewpoints and assess the extent to which the perception of school climate varies based on specific personal factors, including gender, ethnic background, professional experience and development. Participants were 385 teachers (Mage = 47.5; 66.5% female; 63.6% identified as Serbian (ethnic majority), 10.3% as ethnic minority, 11.4% as mixed ethnic background) from 19 secondary schools. In order to capture school climate as a multidimensional construct we used the Delaware School Climate Scale (DSCS) which consist of 9 subscales Teacher–Student Relations, Student–Student Relations, Clarity of Expectations, Fairness of Rules, School Safety, Student Engagement, Bullying, Teacher-Home Communications and Staff Relation. Teachers assessed each aspect of school climate on a 4-point Likert type scale. For determining personal variables a multiple-choice question was used. Beside descriptive statistics, t-test (for gender differences) and a one-way ANOVA was applied for comparing different groups of participants. Results show that teachers perceived overall school climate as relatively satisfactory (M = 3.2, SD = .42). The most positively rated aspect of school climate was teacher-student relation (M = 3.5, SD = .44), while the most negatively rated aspect was bullying (M = 1.9, SD = .60). Female teachers perceived student-student relation, school safety and student engagement more positively than male teachers. Additionally, novice teachers perceived teacher-student relation and staff relation more positively compared to highly experienced teachers, while experienced teachers perceived the presence of bullying to a greater extent. Teachers who received more professional training had higher scores on Bullying and lower scores on Expectations subscales. Serbian teachers had lower scores on Student engagement subscale than teachers of minority and mixed backgrounds. These results are relevant for school improvement and indicate that schools need to devote greater attention to important areas of school climate, including student-student relations, engagements and prevention of bullying.

Keywords: *School climate, teachers, professional experience, professional development, ethnicity*.

1. Introduction

School climate is a construct that has a long tradition of research in educational psychology due to its recognized importance for various educational outcomes, raging from enhancing student achievement to reducing problem behaviors, such as delinquency, bullying and victimization (e.g. Brand et al., 2003; Gottfredson et al., 2005; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Welsh, 2000).

Initial studies of school climate relied on instruments, theory, and methods from both organizational climate and school effects research paradigms (Anderson, 1982). Overtime, school climate was distinguished as a separate area of inquiry and other theoretical frameworks were used for studying school climate, such as Bio-ecological theory, Attachment theory, Social cognitive theory, Social control theory, etc. (for overview see Wang & Degol, 2015). As a result, multiple domains were included into the research of school climate.

Today it is clear that school climate represents a multidimensional construct that encompasses almost every aspect of the school experience, including the quality of teaching and learning, school organization, and the institutional and structural features of the school environment, as well as, most importantly, positive interpersonal relationships among school participants (Gonzálvez, Bacon, & Kearney, 2023; Grazia & Molinari, 2021; Thapa et al, 2013; Wang & Degol, 2015). Therefore, it is not

surprising that school climate has been conceptualized differently over the years, depending on which aspect or dimension of school climate was the research focus. For example, school climate is defined as ''the quality and consistency of interpersonal interactions within the school community that influence children's cognitive, social, and psychological development'' (Haynes, Emmons & Ben-Avie, 1997, p. 322) or as "the quality and character of school life", based on patterns of students, parents and school personnel's experiences with the school that affect their sense of social, emotional, and physical safety (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 182). Other researchers conceptualize school climate as shared norms, values, beliefs and attitudes that shape interactions and relations among students, parents and school personnel's, setting parameters of acceptable behavior in the school (Brookover et al., 1978; Esposito, 1999)

Although there is not a single list of factors that shape the quality and character of school life, over the last three decades educators and researchers have recognized that complex sets of elements make up school climate. For example, a review of research, practitioner, and scholarly writings (Cohen et al., 2009) suggests that there are four major areas that clearly shape school climate: safety, relationships, teaching/learning and the (external) environment. According to Wang and Degol literature review (2015), the multidimensionality of school climate is represented by following four dimensions: academic climate (overall quality of the academic atmosphere, including curricula, instruction, teacher training, and professional development), community (quality of interpersonal relationships within the school), safety (degree of physical and emotional security provided by the school, as well as the presence of effective, consistent and fair disciplinary practices), and institutional environment (reflects the organizational or structural features of the school environment). Beside relationships and safety, Bear et al. (2016) distinguished social support and structure as important dimensions of school climate. Social support refers to the extent to which adults and peers are responsive to children's social and emotional needs, exhibited by relationship-building qualities such as warmth, acceptance and caring, while structure refers to the extent to which adults present clear behavioral expectations and fair rules, enforce them consistently, and provide the supervision and monitoring needed to ensure the safety of students.

2. Objectives

As teachers play a central role in shaping a positive school environment, this study aimed to explore their viewpoints and assess the extent to which the perception of different aspects of school climate varies in relation to specific personal factors, including gender, ethnic background, professional experience and development.

3. Methods

To assess school climate, we utilized the Delaware School Climate Scale (DSCS), an instrument designed to evaluate various dimensions of school climate from different perspectives, including students, teachers, and parents (Bear et al. 2011, Bear et al. 2014a; Bear et al. 2014b). In this study, we used teachers' version of the DSCS consisting of 38 items in total and 9 subscales (Bear et al. 2016): (1) *Teacher – Student Relations* subscale assesses the extent to which teachers and other adults in the school are responsive to the emotional needs of students, as reflected in them caring about and listening to students when they have problems (e.g. Teachers listen to students when they have problems); (2) *Student–Student Relations* assesses the quality of student interactions, as reflected in students exhibiting respect, caring, friendliness and cooperation among one another (e.g. Students get along with one another) ; (3) *Clarity of Expectations* assesses the extent to which the school's behavioral expectations and rules are made clear to students (e.g. Students know how they are expected to act); (4) *Fairness of Rules* assesses the extent to which school rules and their consequences are viewed as fair (e.g. The consequences of breaking school rules are fair); (5) *School Safety* assesses the degree to which the school is viewed as safe by teachers/staff and students (e.g. Students feel safe in this school); (6) *Student Engagement* assess the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional dimensions of school engagement (e.g. Most students pay attention in class); (7) *Bullying* assesses school-wide bullying as a part of student-student relationships; (8) *Teacher–Home Communications* assesses the quality of teachers' communications with the parents/guardians of students, as seen in listening to their concerns, showing respect, and working with them to help to prevent and address student misbehavior (e.g. Teachers work closely with parents to help students when they have problems); (9) Staff Relation (e.g. Teachers, staff, and administrators function as a good team. Participants respond by indicating the degree of agreement to a given statement on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Disagree a lot, to 4 = Agree a lot). To obtain a comprehensive view of the school climate, the total school climate score is derived by combining scores across all subscales. The DSCS demonstrates high reliability for the total sum of raw scores, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 across grade levels, gender, and racial-ethnic groups.

To assess personal variables: gender, ethnic background, professional experience and professional development we utilized a multiple-choice question.

Participants were 385 teachers (M_{age} = 47.5; 66.5% female; 63.6% identified as Serbian (ethnic majority), 10.3% as ethnic minority, 11.4% as mixed ethnic background) from 19 secondary schools. The schools were selected from multiethnic regions with attention to the geographical distribution of schools, school size and educational profile, to ensure sample diversity. Teachers' participation in the survey was on a voluntary basis.

After performing descriptive statistics, we compared different groups of participants by using an independent sample t-test (for gender differences) or one-way ANOVA (for differences in professional experience, professional development and ethnicity). For multiple comparisons, the Tukey post hoc tests were applied.

4. Results

Descriptive statistics (Table 1) show that teachers perceived overall school climate as relatively satisfactory (M = 3.2, SD = .42) with highest satisfaction with teacher-student relation (M = 3.5, SD = .44) and clarity of expectation (M = 3.4, SD = .54). Teachers were less satisfied with student-student relation (M = 2.9, SD = .50), student engagement (M = 2.6, SD = .49), and especially bullying (M = 1.9, SD = .60).

Table 1. Perception of school climate – descriptives.

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teacher-Student Relation	385	2.00	4.00	3.46	.45
Student-Student Relation	383	1.20	4.00	2.86	.50
Clarity of Expectations	382	1.00	4.00	3.39	.54
Fairness of Rules	384	1.25	4.00	3.20	.58
School Safety	383	1.67	4.00	3.24	.51
Student Engagement	385	1.00	4.00	2.63	.49
Bullying	384	1.00	4.00	1.95	.60
Teacher- Home Communication	385	1.75	4.00	3.31	.51
Staff Relation	385	1.00	4.00	3.14	.72
Total school climate score	377	1.79	4.00	3.23	.42

The t-test (Table 2) reveals that male teacher have significantly higher scores on subscales student-student relation ($t(365)=3.12$, $p < .01$), school safety ($t(366)= 2.493$, $p < .01$) and student engagement ($t(367)= 2.172$, $p < .05$), while gender differences were not determined regarding other aspects of school climate.

Table 2. Gender and perception of school climate.

	Gender	n	M	SD	t	df	*p*
Student-Student Relation	Male	111	2.98	.54	3.12	365	.01
	Female	256	2.81	.48			
School Safety	Male	113	3.34	.50	2.49	366	.01
	Female	255	3.20	.51			
Student Engagement	Male	113	2.72	.46	2.17	367	.05
	Female	256	2.60	.50			

ANOVA with Tukey post hoc tests (Table 3) shows that novice teachers (up to five years of professional experience) perceive teacher-student relation ($F(3)= 3.063$, $p < .05$) and staff relation ($F(3)= 2.960$, $p < .05$) more positively, while the most experienced teachers (over 25 years of professional experience) perceive the presence of bullying to a greater extent ($F(3)= 3.734$, $p < .01$).

Additionally, ANOVA with Tukey post hoc tests shows (Table 4) that teachers who receive more professional training have higher scores on Bullying ($F(2)= 9.075$, $p < .001$) and lower scores on Expectations subscale ($F(2)= 4.352$, $p < .01$).

Table 3. Professional experience and perception of school climate.

	Professional experience	n	M	SD	df	F	*p*
Teacher-Student Relation	Up to 5	76	3.54	.44	3	3.06	.05
	6 -15	118	3.51	.42			
	16 - 24	126	3.39	.45			
	Over 26	63	3.39	.46			
Bullying	Up to 5	76	1.94	.65	3	3.73	.01
	6 -15	118	1.88	.58			
	16 - 24	125	1.90	.58			
	Over 26	63	2.17	.55			
Staff Relation	Up to 5	76	3.32	.63	3	2.96	.05
	6 -15	118	3.19	.70			
	16 - 24	126	3.05	.77			
	Over 26	63	3.03	.70			

Table 4. Professional development and perception of school climate.

	Professional development	n	M	SD	df	F	*p*
Clarity of Expectations	0	108	3.40	.51	2	4.35	.01
	1-24	142	3.46	.49			
	Over 24	109	3.25	.62			
Bullying	0	109	1.78	.58	2	9.07	.000
	1-24	142	1.97	.54			
	Over 24	110	2.12	.63			

Ethnic differences were determined regarding only one aspect of school climate (Table 5). ANOVA with Tukey post hoc tests showed that Serbian teachers assess student engagement as lower than teachers of minority and mixed background ($F(2)= 4.352$, $p < .01$).

Table 5. Ethnicity and perception of school climate.

	Ethnicity	n	M	SD	df	F	p
Student Engagement	Minority	40	2.85	.41	2	9.28	.000
	Serbs	245	2.58	.49			
	Mixed	44	2.83	.43			

5. Discussion and conclusions

Examining the school climate is important because it can indicate the aspects that need to be improved in order to provide an environment conducive to learning. In this research, we found that teachers are relatively satisfied with the entire school climate, but that the presence of bullying is a key aspect of the school climate that needs to be acted upon. This result is not surprising because teachers are more sensitive to notice the elements of peer violence in schools and to react to it. It was also found that teachers who receive more professional training or who have the most professional experience have higher scores on the Bullying subscale. It is possible that due to their knowledge and experience thay better notice and perceive what bullying is all about. One of the ways to prevent bullying is to improve peer relations, which is also an aspect of the school climate with which teachers are less satisfied. Additionally, from the teacher's point of view, another aspect of the school climate that should be improved is the engagement of students, which is in line with the generally widespread opinion of teachers that some students are insufficiently motivated for school learning.

The results show that female teachers have a more positive outlook on certain aspects of the school climate, such as relationships among students, student engagement and school safety, which should be further investigated.

When interpreting results obtained in this study, it should be kept in mind that teachers often report more favorable perceptions of learning environments and school climates than students, especially with respect to teacher–student relationships (Bear et al. 2016). It seems that this tendency is particularly pronounced among novice teachers who evaluate teacher-student relations (as well as staff relations) much more positively than experienced teachers. However, another possibility is that younger teachers actually establish better relationships both with students and colleagues.

In order to overcome some of the limitations of this study, it is necessary to examine the school climate from the perspective of both students and parents, not only teachers. Using the student, teacher and parent's surveys jointly will allow contrasting these different perspectives and increasing the validity of school climate assessment.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, Grant number 1518, Project title "Narrativization of ethnic identities of adolescents from culturally dominant and minority backgrounds, and the role of the school context" (-NIdEA) within the programme IDENTITIES.

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