The Importance of School Culture and Climate

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A great deal of work has been devoted to understanding the culture and climate of schools, from Kindergarten through high school. The purpose of much of this work has been to identify what makes a strong school environment that has a positive impact on student achievement. To this end, many researchers have generally agreed on what defines school culture and climate and what aspects of these are important factors in predicting student success.

Defining School Culture and Climate: Related, yet Different

Although seemingly overlapping, school culture and climate are conceptualized as separate constructs of school environment. Culture is generally defined as the values, beliefs, norms, traditions, and underlying expectations of the school environment (Higgins-D’Alessandro & Sadh, 1998; Keefe & Kelley, 1990; Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003; MacDonald & Dorr, 2006). Climate, on the other hand, refers to the views or perceptions of the school culture held by those who are important to the school environment (Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003; Keefe & Kelley, 1990). These individuals typically include teachers, administrators, school staff, students, parents, and community stakeholders.
Culture and climate are related, yet different. Both are part of the overall school environment, which is made up of components important to how a school operates and provides services. The Figure below presents the context of school environment and the role both culture and climate play.

**Figure. School Environment Context and Components**

School environment represents the “social, academic, and emotional contexts of the school” and is influenced by the broader community context (Lunenburg, 2011, pg 5). Each of the components presented
in the Figure are interrelated constructs in the school environment, meaning the way in which each is viewed, valued, and carried out depends on how each other component is viewed, valued, and carried out. In this Figure, school culture, which helps determine what is expected in school, plays an important role along with other aspects of the environment, such as the physical space of the school building, characteristics of students, the roles and responsibilities of school staff, and educational practices. Climate is then represented by the perceptions of the environment and culture. These perceptions provide clues as to how the school is viewed and what practices and protocols are considered priorities.

**Why Do We Care about School Culture and Climate?**

In addition to understanding the influence of effective teaching practices and student abilities on academic outcomes, it is important to recognize the importance of school culture and climate on school performance. Researchers have found that aspects of school culture and climate predict indicators of student performance, like grade point average, respect for authority, and satisfaction with school (Higgins-D’Alessandro & Sadh, 1998). Generally speaking, creating a positive school climate creates the optimal conditions for teaching, learning, and school bonding (Lunenburg, 2011).

More specifically, school climate has been found to mediate the relationship between school and classroom inputs (e.g., student and teacher characteristics, organizational structure, and operational procedures and policies) and student outcomes (e.g., satisfaction and performance; Keefe & Howard, 1997; Lunenburg, 2011). What this means is that climate is an important characteristic that explains how school structures and characteristics influence student performance. Further, climate has been found to predict the expectations teachers hold for student progress, the type and availability of school resources, and student attitudes about school and motivations to learn (Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003). Taken altogether, improving climate by increasing the emphasis on academics, developing reward systems for student participation and learning, enhancing effective teacher practices, and fostering positive student-teacher relationships can have almost as great an influence on academic achievement as student abilities alone (Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003).

**What Does a Healthy School Culture Look Like?**

A healthy school culture is one in which the climate is viewed as maximally supportive and contributes to positive student outcomes and overall school effectiveness (Griffith, 2003). Research on models
of climate has found that schools focused on staff training and mastery of job skills, concern for employee wellbeing, teamwork, and cooperation among teachers and students are more likely to have teachers who are satisfied with their jobs and demonstrate quality teaching practices. In these climates, students are more likely to perform well.

**What is the Goal of a Healthy School Culture?**

Without doubt, the goal of a healthy school climate is school effectiveness, many times gauged by student satisfaction and achievement. Schools in Arizona have a number of standards by which their effectiveness is measured. Given the focus of these standards on academic achievement, one could argue that the ultimate goal of schools should be college and career readiness. After all, formal education is viewed universally as the foundation for preparing youth for postsecondary education and career success. Researchers have found several aspects of school climate and culture that support the goal of college and career readiness, such as shared expectations of high student achievement aligned with student career goals, availability of challenging and rigorous coursework, timely and quality school counseling, effective instruction, availability of useful information, and consistent promotion of academic success and postsecondary opportunities for all students (Gurantz & Borsato, 2012; MacDonald & Dorr, 2006; Schneider, 2007). Notably, many of these aspects are consistent in general with healthy, strong school cultures and beliefs about what constitutes an effective school.

**Next Steps...Building a School Culture with the Goal of College and Career Readiness**

This paper provided an overview of school culture and climate, how they are defined, and why they are important concepts to understand in light of school effectiveness. Also discussed was building upon aspects of a healthy school climate in order to reach the goal of college and career readiness. The next paper in this series will focus in depth on how development of a healthy school climate can lead to a school culture focused on college and career readiness, along with strategies schools could use to direct efforts toward college and career readiness.
References


