The Psychology of School Climate

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By

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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment to improve
the world.
—Anne Frank

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PREFACE

This book was written as an outgrowth of curiosity and impatience. Many people have become impatient with school reform and school improvement efforts and the assembly line of articles and books on the topic that fail to mention school climate, much less the importance and vital nature and necessity of school climate, not only as an essential component of school reform and school improvement, but also as a necessary strategy for maintaining excellent schools and providing healthy and safe schools for all students. Many struggling schools were at some time in the past good schools. What happened to them? Some experts claim that the schools declined because of changing demographics. But that happens all the time and yet not all schools that experience demographic changes sink into failure or mediocrity. Is it possible that the quality of the school climate diminished over time in those schools, which negatively impacted expectations and student achievement outcomes? Research strongly suggests that educators and policy makers have a lot to learn about the importance of school climate for school safety, social and emotional development, and academic success.

With the growing body of research regarding school climate it is important to study the research and understand how the psychology of school climate and how the elements of school climate can be viewed from a population-based perspective, as well as understanding the impact of school climate on individual students. This review of school climate research includes hundreds of articles and research papers of different perspectives from around the world in numerous cultures.

School climate is becoming a science of education and psychology that must be studied further in order to understand the dynamic nature of learning environments, to identify elements that support or threaten the learning environment, and to learn how to improve the conditions for learning in all schools.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"School climate is like the air we breathe; it tends to go unnoticed until something goes wrong."
—Jerome Freiburg[1]

In 1851, Henry David Thoreau wrote, "What's the use of a fine house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?"[2] The same could be said of a child and his school: what's the use of a child motivated to learn if there are no tolerable schools to put him in? Mark Twain often wrote about the interaction of his literary characters with their environment - on a raft, in a classroom, in a newspaper office, in a saloon, and countless other places. In his book, *Follow the Equator*, Mark Twain wrote, "It is your human environment that makes climate."[3] Throughout the history of literature and world history and embedded in man's search for peace and purpose, a person's environment plays a central role. Silva Cartwright said that the quest for peace begins in the home, in the school, and in the workplace.[4]

School climate as a whole is more than the sum of its parts. Kurt Lewin's work on Gestalt psychology comes from the concept of "gestalt," which in German literally means "form, shape."[5] From his study of gestalt, Lewin developed the Field Theory, an approach to the study of human behavior that was the genesis of social psychology and one of the first, if

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[1] Jerome Freiburg, *School Climate: Measuring, improving and sustaining healthy learning environments* (Falmer Press, 1999).

[2] Henry David Thoreau. The quote was written by Thoreau in a letter to his friend Harrison Blake on May 20, 1860. Retrieved from Henry David Thoreau Archives, http://www.digitalthoreau.org/.

[3] Mark Twain, *Following the Equator* (Hartford: The American Publishing Company, 1897).

[4] Silva Cartwright, New Zealand Judge and Statesman. Quote taken from a speech given to judges at a conference in New Zealand in 1991.

[5] Calvin S. Hall, review of "A Dynamic Theory of Personality," by Kurt Lewin, *American Journal of Psychology*, 48, no. 2 (1936): 353-355. doi:10.2307/1415758.

not the first, scientific reference to organizational climate. He pursued the study of causal relationships between and among those things that influence human behavior across the traditional boundaries of various sciences, including a person's environment. In his 1935 publication, *A Dynamic Theory of Personality*, Lewin wrote, "Every psychological event depends upon the state of the person and at the same time on the environment, although their relative importance is different in different cases."[6] Lewin developed a formula that highlighted the interaction between a person and the environment: behavior is a function of both person and environment: b=f (P,E). This is a simple and yet complicated description of the interaction and interplay between people of all ages and their environments. Schneider, Bowen, Ehrhart, and Holcombe claim that Lewin's work on social climate offered the first definition of organizational climate and its influence on people.[7] They wrote that organizational climate "is a gestalt that is based on perceived patterns in the specific experiences and behaviors of people in organizations." They added, "…The sense people make of the patterns of experiences and behaviors they have, or other parties to the situation have, constitutes the climate of the situation."

People move each day from one climate to another, sometimes even within the same organization. When a person leaves work or school and rides a bus home, that person is leaving one climate and entering another one; even the bus has a climate. Climate is so pervasive to be ubiquitous; it's everywhere. The climate at work, school, playgrounds, restaurants, places of worship, and other places constantly interacts with our personalities, beliefs, fears, expectations, and physical and mental health and affects our lives in powerful ways.

School climate is a widely used term that some have cautiously tried to define as falling within the Input-Output theories typically used to describe business environments and economic systems because schools input resources that influence student outputs (outcomes), such as student achievement.[8] Others, however, view school climate as less of a business

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Benjamin Schneider, David E. Bowen, Mark G. Ehrhart, and Karen M. Holcombe, "The Climate for Service: Evolution of a Construct," in *Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate,* eds. Neal M. Ashkanasy, Celeste P.M. Wilderom, and Mark F. Peterson (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000), 21-36.

[8] Tamika LaSalle, "Cultural and Ecological Considerations within the Context of School Climate" (dissertation, Georgia State University, 2013).

or economic system and more of a cultural system.[9] The difference is significant because the cultural system model focuses on correlations and causation that are determined by relationships, interactions, and the psycho-sociological interplay of human behavior within a social system. Researchers and theorists have also added the ecological theory to the study of school climate using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory to,

> Describe the nature of interactions ranging from immediate contexts (i.e., family and school) to overarching institutional patterns and cultural influences (i.e., political policies and social structures). The microsystem compasses the interactions, activities, and social roles that take place between the individual and their immediate environment (e.g., home or school). The mesosystem is described as the interrelations among two or more microsystems that influence the developing person. For example, for a student, the mesosystem may include the interactions between home and school demonstrated as shared decision-making between parents and teachers.[10]

Researchers developed a Cultural-Ecological Model predicated on the position that student outcomes are impacted by social and emotional experiences that shape their interaction with and response to elements not only within schools, but extended to the study of influences outside of the school, such as the neighborhood and family.[11] The research included in this book on the psychology of school climate is based in large part on the Cultural-Ecological Model, but with the view of multiple school and community settings from around the world.

School climate refers to the characteristics of a school's environment that, according to Brand, influences students' academic and social development.[12] The quality of teacher-student relationships and student-student

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[9] Carolyn S. Anderson, "The Search for School Climate: A Review of Research," *Review of Educational Research,* 52, No. 3 (1982): 368-420, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1170423.

[10] Tamika P. LaSalle, Joel Meyers, Kristen Varjas, and Andrew Roach, "A Cultural-Ecological Model of School Climate," *International Journal of School and Educational Psychology*, 3, no. 3 (2015): 157-166. doi:10.1080/21683603.2015.1047550.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Stephen Brand, Robert Felner, Anne Seitsinger, Amy Burns, and Natalie Bolton, "A Large Scale Study of the Assessment of the Social Environment of Middle and Secondary Schools: The Validity and Utility of Teachers' Ratings of School Climate, Cultural Pluralism, and Safety Problems for Understanding School Effects

relationships, academic achievement and support for learning, how connected students feel to the school, the safety and security students experience in school, and the physical surroundings of the school building and campus are dimensions of school climate. The National School Climate Center defines school climate as, "The quality and character of school life as it relates to norms and values, interpersonal relations and social interactions, and organizational processes and structures." [13] What does that mean? If students do not feel safe at school, do not feel welcomed at school, do not receive respect and are not given opportunities to learn, cannot connect with others or engage in conversations, cannot learn from their mistakes, do not interact with peers and adults, do not have opportunities to be creative, and seldom feel safe and secure, they will not meet their social and academic potential, and they will not develop emotionally, mentally, physically or learn positive social lessons that are essential to their overall well-being and full intellectual and social development. Loukas (2007) wrote,

> School environments vary greatly. Whereas some schools feel friendly, inviting, and supportive, others feel exclusionary, unwelcoming, and even unsafe. The feelings and attitudes that are elicited by a school's environment are the school climate. Although it is difficult to provide a concise definition for school climate, most researchers agree that it is a multidimensional construct that includes physical, mental, social, and academic dimensions. [14]

According to James and Jones, climate is an experientially based description of what people see and feel is happening to them in an organizational situation: practices, policies, procedures, routines, norms, interactions, and consequences. [15] As we explore our memory palace, our recollection of the school experience and the thoughts and feelings that permeate those memories, we are reliving school climate. What evokes our thoughts and mental pictures and almost visceral feelings of school is from

and School Improvement," *Journal of School Psychology*, 46, no. 5 (2008):507-535. doi:10.1016/j.jsp.2007.12.001.

[13] National School Climate Center, *What is School Climate and Why is it Important?* (New York: NSCC, 2015), www.schoolclimate.org.

[14] Alexandra Loukas, "What is School Climate?" National Association of Elementary School Principals, *Leadership Compass*, 5, no. 1 (2007, Fall): 1-3, https://www.naesp.org/resources/2/Leadership_Compass/2007/LC2007v5n1a4.pdf.

[15] Lawrence R. James and Allen P. Jones, "Organizational Climate: A Review of Theory and Research," *Psychological Bulletin*, 81, no.12 (1974): 1096-1112. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0037511.

our experiences with school climate. Adding the physical, social, and academic dimensions noted by Loukas to the experientially based descriptions listed by James and Jones, together they form the basis for describing and understanding the powerful and lasting impact of school climate.

Way, Reddy, and Rhodes found that a positive school climate improves a wide range of emotional and mental health outcomes, because all of the following matter: the school's physical appearance; orderliness, comfort and safety; the types, frequency and quality of the interaction between and among students and teachers and staff; the quality of instruction and the appropriateness of instruction; the availability of physical, academic, and social emotional resources.[16] Understanding more about these elements is essential to understanding the importance of school climate on the lives of children. John Dewey says, "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself."[17] What students and teachers face in school each day because of school climate is indeed "life itself."

So much of the importance of school climate is linked to human motivation, and the elements that motivate people. Motivation is what causes people to act. It is the process that moves people to meet their needs, react to challenges, respond to fear, and drives them to engage with others or a task or become detached. In an article by Pretorius and de Villiers, they wrote,

> For the development of healthy schools, with specific focus on academic emphasis, it is recommended that learners' lack of motivation be investigated; that school projects be introduced for the improvement of learner achievement (mastery); that motivation be stimulated, and that educator training on the impact of educator expectations on learner achievement be developed. It follows from these conclusions that perceptions of school climate are important because they may have a positive or negative impact on the implementation of change in schools, and on educators' job satisfaction, motivation, productivity and well-being in general, as well on learners' motivation and ability to achieve.[18]

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[16] Niobe Way, Ranjini Reddy, and Jean Rhodes, "Students' Perceptions of School Climate During the Middle School Years: Associations with Trajectories of Psychological and Behavioral Adjustment," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 40 (2007): 194-213. doi:10.1007/s10464-007-9143-y.

[17] John Dewey. "Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal," *The Philosophical Review*, Volume 2 (1893).

[18] Stephanus Pretorius and Elsabe de Villiers, "Educators' Perceptions of School Climate and Health in Selected Primary Schools," *South African Journal of Education*, 29, no. 1 (2009): 88-99. doi:10.1590/S0256-01002009000100003.

   Motivation cannot be separated from one's environment. Motivation cannot be discussed or considered without also connecting the person with his environment. Motivation experts identify three major components of motivation: activation, persistence, and intensity.[19] Activation is what initiates a behavior; persistence is the continuing effort toward a goal (positive or negative); and intensity is the vigor, concentration, and determination to pursue a goal (positive or negative). The definition of school climate in real terms provides a good measure of the important interaction between environment and motivation. If a student does not feel safe at school, what behavior is motivated? Most likely, the student is motivated to avoid school, or more precisely, to avoid students that he perceives are a threat, or perhaps certain parts of the school building threaten the student's sense of safety and security. The motivation shifts from positive behavior to a survival outcome–a more basic motivation to survive by avoidance. If a student feels isolated in his school environment, where the school climate does not encourage positive student interaction where bullying and intimidation, for example, are more the norm than the exception, the student's motivation is to limit interaction with classmates and avoid the normal risk-taking that is part of learning how to develop social skills. The student may frequently complain of headaches or other psychosomatic complaints, and may ask his parents if he can transfer to another school. This component of motivation–persistence is often related to a negative school climate and the strong motivation to persistently seek another option, another school with a different school climate, for example. In extreme cases, the motivation and persistence, driven by the activation of fear, frustration, and perhaps even anger, can motivate students in a hostile school climate to seek relief through retribution or self-destructive behavior.

   If adults are asked to recall their school experiences, their school experience recollection can be a visceral recall, depending in large part on the memory of their school's climate. Seldom will an adult recall courses or class schedules, but they will recall the condition of the school, how many friends they had or did not have, the smell of the school, how they felt walking into the school, the interactions between students and the attitude of the teachers and other staff members, and whether they felt connected with anyone at the school. Those retrievals from memory are school climate-based. That is how profound school climate is on the formation of

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[19] Don H. Hockenbury and Sandra E. Hockenbury, *Discovering Psychology*, 5th ed. (New York: MacMillan, 2010).

personality and motivation, and, thus, academic and social emotional outcomes. Maurice wrote, "All over the world, educators are recognizing that creating a school culture and climate that genuinely engages and supports all students is essential to increasing students' achievement and preventing students from dropping out."[20]

In William Ouchi's book, *How Good is Your School*, a successful high school principal answered the question "How do you tell a good school?" with this:

> From the moment I approach the outside of a school, I begin to notice things. Is the school clean? Did the custodian clean the hallways? Does the security guard or other staff members greet me warmly? Do they know their role and procedures? Are there parents in the school–do they look happy to be there and engaged? Are the kids smiling? What's the tenor of the building? Do the secretaries have the 'disease' where they look down, not at you?[21]

The principal describes in realistic terms the dimensions of school climate. Schools with high suspension rates, poor student and staff attendance, low parent participation, little community involvement, and which are both unclean and unsafe are schools that will not benefit from school improvement strategies unless they include means and efforts to change the school's climate for students and teachers.

In his book, *The Management of a City School*, Arthur C. Perry wrote,

> The order, the industry, and the culture of our schools, though indirect and often unconscious, are yet efficient and ever-present moral influences which we cannot well overestimate. Granting this, it is evidently incumbent upon the principal to develop in his school a maximum of morally effective order, industry and culture.[22]

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[20] Maurice J. Elias, "School Climate that Promotes Student Voice," *Principal Leadership*, 11, no. 1 (2010): 22-27, http://www.nassp.org/Content.aspx?topic=School_Climate_That_Promotes_Student_Voice.

[21] William Ouchi, *Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).

[22] Arthur C. Perry, *The Management of a City School* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908).

In 1916, when John Dewey declared education is life itself, he also pointed out the importance of the social group and the individual's need and necessity to be a part of the social group in a meaningful and interactive way.[23] The social climate in the group environment could shape the individual for a lifetime, according to Dewey. In 1961, Emile Durkheim, the imminent sociologist, expanded on Dewey's social connectivity when he wrote,

> We see in the organization of the family the logically necessary expression of human sentiments inherent in every conscience; we are reversing the true order of facts. On the contrary, it is the social organization of the relations of kinship which has determined the respective sentiments of parents and children.[24]

It was also in 1961 when John Michael referred to the social organization's impact on decision-making and career choices.[25] He made the connection between the climate of a school and the likelihood that students from schools with a positive school climate (defined as schools with adults who supported, academically challenged, and nurtured students) would attend college. Michael cited the research at that time showing the prediction of college attendance was tied to student ability and family background. But he also noted that the number of students attending college varied among high schools. According to Michael,

> Some schools seldom produce a college-bound senior, while others contribute a disproportionately large number of seniors to the college rolls. The fluctuation of college-entrance rates from school to school is not adequately explained by inspecting variations in the individual attributes, ability and family background. Rather, the amount of college attendance is related to the high school's characteristics.[26]

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[23] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916).

[24] Emile Durkheim, *Moral Education: A Study in the Theory and Application of the Sociology of Education*, trans. by Everett K. Wilson and Henry Schnurer (New York: The Free Press, 1961).

[25] John A. Michael, "High School Climates and Plans for Entering College," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 25, no. 4 (1961): 585-595, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2746294.

[26] Ibid.

The crosswalk between child development elements, such as social emotional learning and school climate, is important to understanding the impact of the learning environment on children. In the 1960s at Yale School of Medicine's Child Study Center, James Comer discussed the significance of environment on children. He wrote, "The contrast between a child's experience at home and those in school deeply affects the child's psychosocial development and this in turn shapes academic achievement."[27] To study this relationship, the Center worked with two low income elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut with a history of poor student achievement, significant student discipline issues, and poor student attendance. One of the first strategies they utilized was to form a team at each school that included teachers, parents and the principal; and later a mental health worker was added. The management team, the equivalent of a school climate team, made decisions on issues related to academics, behavior, social interaction programs, and school operations. Within a decade, the two schools were topping national averages in student academic achievement, primarily because school climate improved, which resulted in lower truancy rates, fewer discipline problems, and more focus on the needs of all students through universal screening and the identification of the individual needs of students–the Pyramid Model (a systematic decision-making process that provides levels of support matched to the level of student needs).[28] The results captured national attention and the two schools became examples of social emotional learning and provided a strong nexus between social emotional learning and the climate of the school.[29]

From this work, the K-12 New Haven Social Development program was founded to advocate for a framework that allows schools to incorporate social emotional learning into schools as part of school climate development. The researcher found that the effectiveness of social emotional learning can be impacted negatively by a school's climate. Conversely, efforts to improve relationships and the operations of a school can increase

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[27] James Comer, Yale School of Medicine's Child Study Center, 1960. http://childstudycenter.yale.edu/. Dr. Comer is the Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine's Child Study Center, and has been a Yale medical faculty member since 1968. During these years, he has concentrated his career on promoting a focus on child development as a way of improving schools.

[28] George W. Noblit, Carol E. Malloy, and William Malloy, *The Kids Got Smarter: Case Studies of Successful Comer Schools* (Hampton Press, 2001).

[29] Ibid.

opportunities for children to feel connected at school–where they do not feel socially or emotionally isolated. From the efforts to promote social emotional learning and improving school climate, the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded.[30] It has supported several projects to use what is known about social emotional learning to develop prevention programs for mental health, substance abuse, and violence, with a focus on healthy choices, healthy relationships, and healthy environments. According to CASEL,

> Social emotional learning involves the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions."[31]

Social emotional learning that is effective should include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and effective interaction with the surroundings (climate), according to CASEL. All of these elements are essential components and results of a positive school climate. Sometimes the effects of school climate get lost in the discussions of social emotional learning, but the relationship is too important to ignore or omit; it is a symbiotic relationship.

The importance of social emotional learning was taken to a higher level of interest by the widely popular book written by Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, in 1995.[32] Goleman made the connection between social emotional learning and one's environment: "The emotional brain responds to an event more quickly than the thinking brain."[33] He also captured the critically important element of understanding the early impact on children: "Emotional intelligence begins to develop in the earliest years. All the small exchanges children have with their parents, teachers, and with one another carry emotional messages."[34] The number and quality of these exchanges are frequently determined by the climate of the school

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[30] Tim Shriver, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 1994. www.casel.org. In 1994 CASEL was founded following a series of meetings with researchers, practitioners and child advocates about children's social and educational development.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York, Bantam Books, 1995).

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

and home and how effectively or ineffectively children interact with and understand their environments they encounter every day, everywhere. This becomes even more critical for children who have mental health issues; for example, students experiencing post-traumatic stress from complex trauma come to the school setting with possibly underdeveloped executive functions in the prefrontal cortex, which makes them more likely to be negatively affected by a school climate that does allow children opportunities to connect with others, engage in school activities and functions, and build relationships with other students and adults in the school. Therefore, their propensity to replace "thinking" with "doing" and reacting instead of responding increases the likelihood of failure in school and a disproportionate number of discipline referrals.

The field of organizational psychology has for many years addressed the culture of the workplace, and its dynamic effect on employee morale, productivity, and retention. For reasons not clearly understood, this recognition of workplace culture has not been transferred to schools in a widespread, meaningful way, which is unfortunate because much can be learned from organizational psychology. Many of the business turnaround models and strategies and the stories of these successful efforts have and continue to focus on changing or improving the workplace culture, which in turn affects the behavior and productivity of employees. Thompson and Luthans offer the seven characteristics of culture that can be applied to school place culture and climate: (1) culture = behavior; (2) culture is learned; (3) culture is learned through interaction; (4) subcultures form through rewards; (5) people shape the culture; (6) culture is negotiated; (7) culture is difficult to change.[35] According to Thompson and Luthans, people in the workplace learn and display behavior that they are exposed to on a regular basis–negative or positive. How employees interact with one another is often determined by how the supervisors interact with the employees, and that interaction has the "subordinate" effect–where the negative behavior and attitude is pushed down the ranks of the organization, creating a negative climate that results in a lack of comradeship and mutual support in the organization. The organizational psychology model offers an explanation of how subcultures are created in organizations. All individuals have needs and some of the basic needs are belonging, interacting, and receiving feedback from others. If a person does not feel like he be-

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[35] K.R. Thompson and F. Luthans, "Organizational Culture: A Behavioral Perspective," in B. Schneider (Ed.), *Organizational Climate and Culture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

longs and only interacts with a small number of colleagues or friends, and there is either no feedback or negative feedback from supervisors or other colleagues or friends, the person feels driven to find a subculture of like individuals. These subcultures can over time undermine the strength of the organization. Another way of explaining this is to understand the relationship of culture and climate: culture is the behavior of people in the organization and climate is why they behave that way. This applies to any type of organization or institution, including schools. This explains in large part why students gravitate to cliques and even gangs that represent the subculture of a school.

Many of the organizational psychology components are reflective of Albert Bandura's work in social psychology. In a landmark study, Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila Ross found that 88 percent of the children who viewed adults strike and kick a doll imitated the aggressive behavior, and eight months later 40 percent of the same children reproduced the violent behavior observed in the doll experiment.[36] Bandura developed the Triadic Responsibility Model that triangulated overt behavior, personal factors, and the environment.[37] The environment component of the triad includes the physical surroundings of the individual that stimulates, stifles, or otherwise influences the behavior and attitude of individuals. Bandura's triad has been referred to as reciprocal determinism. Lee describes the interaction of the triad components:

> Reciprocal determinism suggests that individuals function as a result of a dynamic and reciprocal interaction among their behavior, environment, and personal characteristics. Personal characteristics include one's thoughts, emotions, expectations, beliefs, goals, and so forth. Behavior is conceptualized as a person's skills and actions. Lastly, environment is considered to be a person's social and physical surroundings. All three systems interact with one another; therefore, a change in one will influence the others as well. Reciprocal determinism indicated that people do have a say in their future, because of reciprocal interactions.[38]

Reciprocal interactions suggest that changing a person's environment significantly can trigger changes in personal characteristics and behavior.

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[36] Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila Ross, "Transmission of Aggression through Imitation of Aggressive Models," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 63, (1961): 575-582, http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Bandura/bobo.htm.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Steven W. Lee, *Encyclopedia of School Psychology* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2005).

Research on school climate and issues directly related to school climate abound in several countries and in many settings, from small schools to large schools. The purpose of the research review is to better understand the dynamics of school climate, including operationally defining school climate and the impact of school climate on students and teachers both in the academic domain as well as the social emotional domain. In *A Review of School Climate Research*, Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, and Higgins-D'Alessandro categorize the research on school climate into the following categories, or what they referred to as the "dimensions of school climate": (1) Safety, (2) Relationships, (3) Teaching and Learning, (4) Institutional Environment, and (5) the School Improvement Process.[39] An extensive review of international research on school climate suggests 12 research dimensions of school climate*:*

1. Student Achievement
2. Social Emotional
3. Connectedness
4. Teachers
5. Leadership
6. Student Discipline and Safety
7. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
8. Physical Health and Activities of Students
9. Institutional Environment (School Building and Grounds)
10. Assessment of School Climate
11. Racial and Ethnic Climate
12. Population-Based Effects of School Climate

In addition to these primary dimensions of school climate research, there are other unique research sub-dimensions that offer valuable insights into school climate, such as alternative educational settings and dropout prevention; racial issues; the influence of community on school climate; social emotional development; sexual orientation; and others.

Jerome Freiburg, author of *School Climate*, wrote: "School climate is like the air we breathe–it tends to go unnoticed until something is seriously

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[39] Amrit Thapa, Johnathon Cohen, Shawn Guffey, and Amy Higgins-D'Alessandro, "A Review of School Climate Research," *Review of Educational Research*, 83, no. 3 (2013): 357-385. doi:10.3102/0034654313483907.

wrong."[40] When school climate goes wrong, students and school staff members suffer the consequences. Whether it is the result of a sudden tragic event or the long-term ill, insidious effects of a negative school climate, the impact on students, parents, and staff members can be devastating. Educators, teachers, and leader training universities and colleges, parents, child advocates, public education advocates, and other stakeholders need to understand and learn about the importance and influence of school climate on children from preschool to secondary school and even at the postsecondary level.

A positive school climate can help all students by stabilizing the school environment and creating a norm of safety, security, engagement, and positive relationships. A positive school climate can also help students such as gifted and talented children reach new heights, help children with mental health issues discover care and support from peers and adults, and help children of all ages, ethnic groups, and family backgrounds find a place in their world that is stable, secure, welcoming, supportive, and with high expectations. However, teachers and school administrators are not often provided with a thorough understanding of the dynamics and importance of school climate.

Christopher Peal wrote about the challenge facing school principals with regard to learning about school climate:

> With so much to read and to digest, it is easy to become overwhelmed. The average principal could spend a year pouring through mountains of available data, studying the implications of assessment results, and graphing their intricacies in multicolored Excel files. Add a few hours a day to devote to reading the latest research, a couple more days to attend a workshop or conference, and the school year has slipped away.[41]

It is important in this book to recognize the needs of the reader and therefore to review important research on school climate in a summative and explanatory manner that will help readers understand the dimensions of school climate, the influences of school climate, the interactions of school climate and social emotional development, the measurement of school climate, and how measures can be taken to improve school climate.

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[40] Jerome Freiburg, *School Climate: Measuring, Improving and Sustaining Healthy Learning Environments* (Philadelphia: Routledge-Falmer, Taylor and Francis Group, 1999).
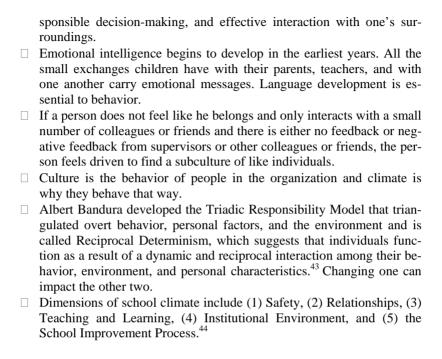
[41] Christopher Peal, "In the Real World: The Big-ness of School Climate," *Leadership Compass*, 5, no. 1 (2007): 1-2.

It is also important to understand how other elements of school climate influence child development and academic success.

Chapter One: School Climate Introduction
Summary Points

☐ Every psychological event depends upon the state of the person and at the same time on the environment, although their relative importance depends on circumstances.

☐ People move each day from one climate to another, even within the same organization.

☐ The climate at work, school, playgrounds, restaurants, places of worship, and other places constantly interact with our personalities, beliefs, fears, expectations, and physical and mental health and affect our lives in powerful ways.

☐ School climate is a widely used term that refers to the characteristics of a school's environment that influences students' academic and social development.

☐ Motivation is what causes people to act. It is the process that moves people to meet their needs, react to challenges, respond to fear, and drives them to engage with others or a task or become detached.

☐ Motivation cannot be discussed or considered without also connecting the person with his environment. Motivation experts identify three major components of motivation: activation, persistence, and intensity.

☐ The crosswalk between child development elements, such as social emotional learning and school climate, is important to understanding the impact of the learning environment on children.

☐ Yale School of Medicine's Child Study Center study found that social emotional learning and school climate are interrelated.[42]

☐ The effectiveness of social emotional learning can be impacted negatively by a school's climate, and conversely the effort to improve relationships and the operations of a school can increase opportunities for children to feel connected at school–where they do not feel socially or emotionally isolated.

☐ Social emotional learning that is effective should include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, re-

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[42] George W. Noblit, Carol E. Malloy, and William Malloy, *The Kids Got Smarter: Case Studies of Successful Comer Schools* (Hampton Press, 2001).

sponsible decision-making, and effective interaction with one's sur-
roundings.

☐ Emotional intelligence begins to develop in the earliest years. All the
small exchanges children have with their parents, teachers, and with
one another carry emotional messages. Language development is es-
sential to behavior.

☐ If a person does not feel like he belongs and only interacts with a small
number of colleagues or friends and there is either no feedback or neg-
ative feedback from supervisors or other colleagues or friends, the per-
son feels driven to find a subculture of like individuals.

☐ Culture is the behavior of people in the organization and climate is
why they behave that way.

☐ Albert Bandura developed the Triadic Responsibility Model that trian-
gulated overt behavior, personal factors, and the environment and is
called Reciprocal Determinism, which suggests that individuals func-
tion as a result of a dynamic and reciprocal interaction among their be-
havior, environment, and personal characteristics.[43] Changing one can
impact the other two.

☐ Dimensions of school climate include (1) Safety, (2) Relationships, (3)
Teaching and Learning, (4) Institutional Environment, and (5) the
School Improvement Process.[44]

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[43] Bandura, Ross, and Ross, "Transmission of Aggression," 575-582.
[44] Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, and Higgins-D'Alessandro, "A Review of School Cli-
mate Research," 357-385.

CHAPTER TWO

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

> "Creating school cultures and school climates that genuinely engage and support all students is essential to increasing student achievement."
> —M.J. Elias and N.M. Haynes[1]

Thirty years of research on student achievement indicated that teachers, school leaders, parent involvement, nutrition, language, social emotional development, and many other factors positively and negatively relate to student achievement outcomes. Student achievement and school climate have also been linked together-sometimes in a causal nexus and sometimes in a correlational nexus. Research on student achievement and school climate includes both causation and correlation across different types of schools, different populations of students, and in different cultures.

MacNeil, Prater, and Busch studied the effects of school culture and climate on student achievement.[2] The sample included 29 schools located in a suburban school district in Texas. Academic test results from 24,684 students were used as the bases for the school climate ratings. Teachers in the schools rated school climate using the Organizational Health Inventory (OHI).[3] The researchers developed a method to investigate whether stu-

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[1] M.J. Elias and N.M. Haynes, "Social competence, social support, and academic achievement in minority, low-income, urban elementary school children," *School Psychology Quarterly*, 23, no. 4 (2008): 474-495.

[2] Angus MacNeil, Doris Prater, and Steve Busch, "The Effects of School Culture and Climate on Student Achievement," *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, 12, no. 1 (2009): 73-84, http://donnieholland.wiki.westga.edu/file/view/school+culture+climate+%26+achievement.pdf.

[3] Wayne K Hoy, and John A. Fedman, "Organizational Health: The Concept and Its Measure," *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 20 (1987): 417-435.

dent achievement at the school level in different levels of academic per-
formance, recognized as Exemplary, Recognized, and Acceptable, differed
based on school climate elements, as measured by the following 10 dimen-
sions of the OHI:

1. Goal focus is the ability of persons, groups, or organizations to
   have clarity, acceptance, and support of goals and objectives.
2. Communication adequacy is when information is relatively distor-
   tion free and travels both vertically and horizontally across the
   boundaries of an organization.
3. Optimal power equalization is the ability to maintain a relatively
   equitable distribution of influence between members of the work
   unit and the leader.
4. Resource utilization is the ability to involve and coordinate the ef-
   forts of members of the work unit effectively and with a minimal
   sense of strain.
5. Cohesiveness is when persons, groups or organizations have a clear
   sense of identity. Members feel attracted to membership in the or-
   ganization. They want to stay with it, be influenced by it, and exert
   their own influence within it.
6. Morale is when a person, group, or organization has feelings of
   well-being, satisfaction, and pleasure.
7. Innovativeness is the ability to be and allow others to be inventive,
   diverse, creative, and risk-takers.
8. Autonomy is when a person, group, or organization can maintain
   ideals and goals as well as meet needs whilst managing external
   demands.
9. Adaptation is the ability to tolerate stress and maintain stability
   while being responsive to the demands of the external environment.
10. Problem-solving adequacy is an organization's ability to perceive
    problems and solve them using minimal energy. The problems stay
    solved and the problem-solving mechanism of the organization is
    maintained and/or strengthened.

The OHI's 10 dimensions are consistent with the elements that define
school climate. In the study, there were three academic achievement levels
that reflected the levels of student outcomes: Exemplary schools are high
achievement schools, based on standardized assessments; Recognized
schools are schools performing at or above student achievement expecta-

tions; and Acceptable schools are those meeting minimal student achievement performance levels.[4] The results of the study found significant differences on all 10 dimensions of the OHI. The Exemplary schools outperformed Acceptable schools and showed positive trends in each of the OHI dimensions. There was a significant difference in the student achievement levels between Exemplary and Recognized schools. Also, there was a statistically significant difference between Recognized and Acceptable schools' student achievement and school climate, with Recognized schools out-performing Acceptable schools on OHI dimensions, especially on Goal Focus and Adaptation. According to the researchers, the findings of this study "suggest that students achieve higher scores on standardized tests in schools with healthy learning environments."[5] The dimensions of a highly engaging and safe and supportive school climate are essential elements that allow students to maintain the interest and motivation level necessary to be successful in school.

Haynes, Comer, and Hamilton-Lee studied the effects of a school improvement program on student achievement, as well as on other factors, such as student, teacher, and parent perceptions of school and classroom climate and student attendance.[6] Additionally, the study considered whether school climate could be enhanced through parental involvement. The study included 306 randomly selected students in Grades 3 through 5 from 14 elementary schools. It also included 98 teachers and 276 parents. The results indicated that school improvement as measured by student achievement is strongly dependent on the impact of teachers and parents and their perceptions of school climate. The schools that implemented school improvement programs that involved teachers and parents in efforts to improve school climate showed significant improvement in student academic outcomes. Student and parent perceptions of the classroom and school climate in schools that did not implement school improvement programs with strategies to improve school climate were significantly more negative. School and classroom climate improvement were an important component of overall school improvement programs. Also, those schools that linked school improvement with school climate showed significantly

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Norris Haynes, James P. Comer, and Muriel Hamilton-Lee, "School Climate Enhancement through Parental Involvement," *Journal of School Psychology*, 27, no. 1 (1989): 87-90. doi:10.1016/0022-4405(89)90034-4.

greater improvement in student achievement and attendance, especially when parents and teachers were involved in school improvement efforts.

In a study by McEvoy and Welker, the relationship between antisocial behavior, academic failure, and school climate was examined.[7] The researchers stated that,

> Researchers have demonstrated a strong correlation between antisocial behavior and academic failure among students. Yet current educational programs designed to modify one or both of these patterns of conduct tend to be limited in at least two fundamental ways. First, they tend to treat conditions associated with academic achievement as separate from those associated with violent or other antisocial behavior. Second, they often focus narrowly on modifying selected cognitions or personality characteristics of the individual (e.g., changing attitudes and beliefs). Yet both antisocial behavior and academic failure are context specific: each occurs within a climate in which conditions can be identified that reasonably predict problematic behavior and can be modified to reduce such behavior.[8]

The researchers used the epidemiological model of predictability and determinants to convey the essential components of the distinction between the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs being dependent on the ability to correctly, significantly, and efficiently modify school climates to impact academic achievement and reduce antisocial behavior identify. They found that a shared vision between and among teachers, staff members, and leadership was important to a positive school climate. This led to a collective expectation of attitude and behavior that supported student achievement. The researchers suggested that student achievement improvements were dependent on elements of a positive school climate and both were dependent on a shared vision of the school that addresses the needs of the students, teachers, and staff.

In a study of school climate that touched on school climate in a socio-economically depressed school, it was found that school climate depended significantly on teacher beliefs and other related factors. The authors of the study, Brown and Medway, looked at a school effectively serving African-American students in a South Carolina school system that produced posi-

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[7] Alan McEvoy and Robert Welker, "Antisocial Behavior, Academic Failure, and School Climate: A Critical Review," *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 8, no. 3 (2000): 130-140. doi: 10.1177/106342660000800301.

[8] Ibid.