POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE: CONCEPT, CHARACTERISTICS AND RATIONALE

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Abstract

There has been a continuous increase in the number of calls for schools that promote safety and enhance academic freedom. Since the turn of the 21" century and as a signatory to the Education for All (EFA) document of the United Nations, the search for possibilities for improving Nigerian educational provisions as a platform for improving students' performance which it is believed, will produce the needed impetus for improving her economy has become quite expedient. The knowledge that the extents to which teachers are able to perform their professional tasks and learner are able to achieve is determined by a matrix of factors that pervade the environment of the school which are both physical and psychosocial. These factors, though subtle, are responsible for the perceivable atmosphere or climate of a school and determine the psychological, social, and ambiance of the school. This paper discusses the concept of positive school climate, what characterizes it, and the rationale for fostering, and encouraging positive school environments in Nigeria. Some recommendations for improving the climate in Nigerian schools were made.

Introduction

Nigeria as a nation is in search of solutions to the numerous problems bedeviling her education system. One of such problems is the poor achievement and high dropout rate before the end of the 9th year of schooling. As a signatory to the Education for All (EFA) document of the United Nations, the search for possibilities to improve her education and consequently her economy is quite expedient. There is therefore a growing interest in what happens in the school and how the learners and the teachers feel while in the school. The present realities of our educational experience are that schools are becoming more and more dangerous zones for both teachers and students. The rate of hooliganism, cultism, bullying, kidnap, and even nonchalance has started to make schools and schooling uninteresting to both staff and students. The recent kidnap of over 200 school girls in Northern Nigeria has introduced a new dimension to security issues in our schools. The call for safe schools and more attention to the provision of physical and psychosocial environments that increase learners' and teachers' safety in the school has been on the increase. Research has shown that student achievement is essentially influenced by an integrated set of factors that play in the school, notable among them being the teacher, the teaching methods employed, the

environment where learning is made to occur, and how the learner perceives himself in the milieu.

Achievement results over the years in all levels of education have been on a steady decline. Various governments at different times and levels have introduced and implemented strategies to effect improvement but to no avail. Some of the strategies include the extension of the length of the school day (for example in Delta state), the introduction of compulsory after-school lessons, the division of schools into 2-tiers, increase in the number of school subjects to include literacy and numeracy subjects (eg reading, writing, mental etc). However, blind eyes have been turned to issues of physical infrastructure, motivation of staff and students, and the general pervading atmosphere of the school which informs what school connotes to a child and its impact on his psyche. These issues are couched in what is referred to as school climate.

The environment of the school is a place where educators and learners congregate to take part in learning activities (Ahmad, Osman, Halim & Noh, 2014). The environment created during these activities is regarded as an important component in the teaching and learning process. Therefore the environment must not only be conducive but also safe and adequate for such interaction to take place. It should also support interaction and guarantee the freedom needed for all individuals and groups. The learning environment (physical and psychosocial aspects) should in combination with the pedagogy being used by the teachers, support the learning needs of students and their teachers. Learning environment' refers to the tone, ambiance, or atmosphere created by a teacher through the relationships developed within the classroom and the way in which instruction is delivered (Aldridge, Fraser & Ntuli,2009). Learning environment studies over the years have explored students' cognitive and affective learning outcomes as well as how they correlate with students' perceptions of their classroom psychosocial environmental characteristics (Fraser & Fisher, 1982; Haertel, Walberg & Haertel,1981; McRobbie & Fraser, 1993). These studies have made a remarkable impact on educational innovations, practices, and the role of individuals in creating the right atmosphere in the school. The reasons are not farfetched. A better understanding of the variables that affect learning and schooling gives insight into improving achievement and productivity among students which is the ultimate aim of schooling and education.

Definition of concepts
Before delving into the discussion, there is need to understand the major terms in this discourse.

1.   School Climate: It is a psychosocial construct that refers to the physical, psychological, and human factors that pervade a particular environment and determine the overall performance and relationship that exist in it. It is thus the

physical and social atmosphere within which other factors exist. School climate by extension refers to the atmosphere (physical, psychological, and social) of the school which influences or determines the experiences and the achievement of the objectives of the school. Hoy (2008) sees school climate as "the atmosphere, ethos, tone, ideology, community, personality, or milieu of a school". Howard, Howell, and Brainard (1987) conceptualize school climate as a "school's atmosphere for learning" and includes the feelings people have about the school; whether it is a place where learning can occur.

Policy/Program Memorandum No. 145, of 2012 of the United States of America defined school climate as "the learning environment and relationships found within a school and school community". The introduction of the community highlights the importance attached to the role of the home and the community/society in shaping and determining the tone of the school. Since the school is a segment of society, its impact and contribution towards the achievement of the school's goals and objectives should not be underestimated.

Other definitions of school climate include Davis and Peck (1992) who see it as "how one feels about the school and the people involved in the school" while Lindelow, Mazzarella, Scott, Ellis, and Smith, (1989) defined it as "how people feel about their experiences in the school." Efforts to reach an agreement as to what should constitute school climate were made in April 2007 in a consensus meeting of the American National Center for learning and citizenship Education Commission and the National school climate Center at the Center for Social and Emotional Education(Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Pickeral, 2009; Gangi, 2008). The meeting, while covering existing gaps in school climate knowledge and understanding, identified four major areas of functioning that summarize school climate. They are:

1.   Physical safety
2.   Relationship of those in the school environment viz: - teachers, parents, students, and other staffers of the school.
3.   Teaching and learning methods
4.   Physical environment of the school

These major areas constitute the elemental blocks that set the tone of the school and determine the physical and psychosocial health of the school as an entity. Freiberg (2009) explains:

> *the elements that makeup school climate are complex, ranging from the quality of interactions in the teachers' lounge to the noise levels in hallways and cafeterias, from the physical structure of the building to the physical comfort levels (involving such factors as heating, cooling, and lighting) of the individuals and how safe they feel. Even the size of the school and the opportunities for students and teachers to interact in small groups both formally and informally add to or detract from the health of the learning*

environment. The support staff cafeteria workers, bus custodians, and office staff- add to the multiple dimensions of the school climate.
The literature reviewed by Gangi (2011) revealed that school climate studies over the years have indicated that poor school climate manifest in:

1. high absenteeism (Reid,1983),
2. high suspension rates (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles,1982),
3. higher school drop-out rates (Anderson,1982) and
4. low school completion rate.

School dropouts in turn have been found to face a higher risk of unemployment, poverty, poor health, and involvement in criminal activities and criminality (Barton, 2005). Schools with poor school climate indices experience more bullying, violent clashes among students and between students and teachers as well as academic distractions of different types and magnitudes. On the other hand, studies have also revealed that a conducive school climate promotes better attendance, higher morale (Bryk &Driscoll,1988), and more academic effectiveness (Borger et al., 1985, Shindler, et al., 2009), while self-worth, confidence, pride, mutual respect, and trust are fostered (Kaplan & Geoffroy,1990; Kelley, Thornton & Daugherty, 2005). It means that the way schools are organized and the atmosphere that pervades the school set the tone for the extent to which the objectives of the school could be realized.

Bisong, Oden, and Bassey (2013) defined School climate ethos or prevalent atmosphere in the school as that which is enhanced by the level of interpersonal relationship among pupils, and also with their teachers, and evident in a fulfilled sense of belonging and esteem, and ability to love, work, play and have peace of mind. The school culture, which results from a school climate prevalent in a school, refers to the general beliefs, attitudes, and patterns of expected and acceptable behavior that a school upholds, including a conducive physical environment. There are physical standards of infrastructure and facilities recommended by UNICEF for a school. When such are absent, then conducive physical climate could be said to have been compromised.

Positive school climate: Positive school climate by extension refers to a physically, socially, and psychologically healthy condition of the place where both staff and students spend a substantial portion of their time (Howard, Howell, and Brainard, 1987). The National school climate center (2012) sees positive school climate as the "quality and character of school life" and identified major areas of school life that collectively or individually affect school climate as:

1. Safety and the feeling of safety of all in the school
2. Teaching and learning effectiveness

3.   Nature, forms, and extent of relationships that exist among students, between teachers, between students and teachers, and between teachers and parents of their students.

4.   The environment of the school where learning occurs and the classroom which is the setting for teaching and learning activities.

A positive school climate, therefore, is said to exist when all members of the school community (students, teachers, school administrators, ad-hoc workers, adjunct staff, parents, etc) feel safe, included, accepted, and when there is a deliberate intention and effort to promotes positive behaviours and interactions within and between all and sundry. Equity and inclusion are important principles and ingredients 'in a positive school. A positive learning and teaching environment is essential for student achievement and well-being.

Research shows a direct link between students' success and the school environment in which learning takes place. Students are more motivated to achieve high academic success and to realize their full potential in schools that have a positive school climate, where they feel safe, included, and supported and their social and emotional needs satisfied.

Characteristics of a positive school climate

A school with a positive climate will possess the following characteristics which are perceived, felt, and experienced from the atmosphere of the school.

1.   Students, staff members, and parents feel safe, are safe, included in decision-making processes, and accepted not just as stakeholders but as an integral part of the school management and administrative system.

2.   All members of the school community demonstrate respect, fairness and kindness, equity, and justice in their interactions and 'decisions. These attitudes build healthy relationships that are free from discrimination and harassment.

3.   Students are encouraged to demonstrate positive leadership and act as role models in their school community – for example, standing up against and condemning issues such as bullying, stealing, cultism, lateness, disobedience, and other negative vices.

4.   Students, staff members, parents, and community members engage in an open and ongoing dialogue. All partners are actively engaged;

5.   Principles of equity and inclusive education, such as strategies for students and staff related to bullying and harassment prevention and intervention and awareness-raising are reinforced across the curriculum;

6.   The learning environment, instructional materials, and teaching and assessment strategies reflect the diversity of all learners;

7.   Every student is inspired and given support to succeed in an environment of high expectations.

Haynes, Emmons, Ben-Avie, & Comer (1996) in Lehr and Christenson (2002) identified the following as elements that characterize a supportive school climate to include

- **Achievement motivation:** individual's belief in his/her ability to learn and willingness to learn.
- **Collaborative decision-making:** Involvement of Parents, students, and staff actively in decisions making on matters affecting the school and welfare.
- **Equity and fairness:** Equity in issues of ethnicity, gender, race, and disability.
- **General school climate:** Evidence and feelings of trust and respect within the school community.
- **Order and discipline:** Students display appropriate behavior in the school setting.
- **Parent involvement:** Parents participate frequently in school activities.
- **School-community relations:** The community is supportive and involved in the life of the school.
- **Dedication to student learning:** Teachers actively motivate students to learn by the methods, strategies, and techniques they employ in teaching.
- **Staff expectations:** Staff expects that students will succeed in school and in life.
- **Leadership**: The principal effectively guides the direction of the school, including creating a positive climate.
- **School building:** The physical appearance of the school building reflects respect for the school and community.
- **Sharing of resources:** All students have equal opportunity to participate in school activities, materials, and equipment.
- **Caring and sensitivity:** The principal shows consideration for the students, parents, and school staff.
- **Student interpersonal relations:** There is a high level of caring, respect, and trust among students in the school.
- **Student-teacher relations:** There is a high level of caring, respect, and trust between students and teachers in the school (Lehr & Christenson, 2002).

Why create a Positive School Climate
Positive school climate has been associated with the following:
1. **Link with achievement and improved learning outcomes:** An effective school is one in which all the components of the school work harmoniously towards achieving the goals of the school and the collective and individual aspirations of the learners and teachers. A major index of an effective school is a

positive climate which has consistently been identified as a determinant of academic success.

2. **The school environment influences and shapes the attitudes of students to learning and development:** Evidence exists that shows that the way a learner perceives the school environment influences his/her attitude towards school and participation in learning activities. Many studies found a relationship between a positive climate and improved student learning outcomes since such environments are not only conducive but also inspiring and motivating. For example, it is more likely that students will have higher achievement, more positive self-concepts, improved behavior, and higher aspirations when the climate of the school is positive.

3. **School climate is an alterable variable that can affect various outcomes:** Apart from the school climate variable, other factors that affect learning that are learner-related cannot be manipulated or altered. They include learner IQ, socio-economic standard, health condition, ability level, and age. It is therefore an important component that teachers can harness for improving the quality of school life.

4. **Maintaining a positive school climate is a preventative measure rather than a reactive or remedial or corrective one:** When rules are taught and obeyed, a successful work environment is created for both students and teachers. A positive school climate is a prerequisite condition that facilitates a successful work or learning experience. The result is effective communication and reduced incidences of disruptive behaviors. Teachers, therefore, spend less time in corrections and character remediation, and enforcing disciplinary measures and will have enough time to plan and implement learning activities.

5. **Positive school climate enhances the development of leadership qualities and the identification of desirable qualities in learners:** Individuals are able to exist in their true and proper nature.

Dimensions of Research in school climate and learning environment

Research efforts that seek to understand the relationship between the effect of classroom environments on learning and achievement have been active since the middle of the 20th Century. Murray (1938) assessed the learning environment of the school from the perspective of a detached observer (alpha press) and that of a milieu inhabitant (Beta press). His study proposed a needs-press model in which the environment and the individual were analogously represented in common terms (Fraser, 1998). In the model, personal needs were used as a construct to define motivational personality characteristics that provide individual tendencies to pursue a goal while environmental press which is external to the individual either supports or frustrates the expression of the internalized needs. Murray's needs press model developed from Lewin's (1936) field theory which expressed that there is a strong interaction between the environment and a person's personal characteristics to determine behavior.

This interaction expressed that there is a strong interaction between the environment and a person's personal characteristics to determine behavior. This interaction was expressed mathematically as $B = f(p, E)$ where B (behavior) is a function (f) of a person (P) and the environment (E) Murray's ideas were extended by Stern, Stein, and Bloom (1956) to include idiosyncratic views an individual has about his environment (private beta press) and shared views of members of a group (consensual beta press). The rise of investigations into school psychosocial climate is traceable to studies in organizational climate in cooperate business world in which Halpin and Croft (1963) used the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ) to study the health of businesses. Stern (1970) used the College Characteristics Index (CCI) for a similar investigation within the school system. Other studies within the school environment and social climate research domain as grouped by Fraser (1998) include:

1. Association between student outcomes and environments such as Fraser and Fisher (1981), Walberg and Haertel (1981), McRobbie and Fraser, (1993), and Wong and Fraser (1996). Other studies focused on cooperative learning and group outcomes as well as educational productivity.

2. Use of Environment perception as a criterion variable. Examples of such studies are those that evaluated educational innovations (Fraser, Williamson, and Tobin, 1987; Khoo & Fraser,1997) and students and perceive the existing organizational climate. The result showed that there is a significant positive relationship between organizational climate and job satisfaction among academics in Southwest Nigeria and that both vary together. It was also revealed that there exist differences in the way senior and junior staffs of those institutions perceive the climate of the institution teachers' perception of their preferred and actual environments (Fraser and McRobbie, 1995).

3. Others such as studies relating to an individual's performance outcomes in their preferred environment often called, person-environment fit studies.

School climate research in Nigeria

Studies on school climate in the Nigerian situation abound. Adeniji (2011) studied the relationships between the different variables of organizational climate and job satisfaction among academic staff in some selected private Universities in South-West Nigeria. The study also ascertained the causal effect of those related factors in organizational climate on satisfaction among academics and their impact on their academic excellence and if there are differences in the way senior academics and junior academics in relation to their job satisfaction. Teteh (1999), using an organizational climate questionnaire on teacher effectiveness and attitude to teaching investigated the organizational climate in Kogi State secondary schools and the level of teacher effectiveness and attitudes to teaching, as well as ascertaining whether School Proprietorship and organizational climate influenced teacher effectiveness and attitudes to teaching. Significant differences

were not found in any of the questions even when the organizational structure was adverse. Other studies in this direction are Adejumobi and Ojikutu (2013).

At the primary school level, Bisong, Oden, and Bassey (2013) assessed the sociocultural climate and learning by primary school pupils in Cross River state. Results revealed that the socio-cultural climate of learning has a tremendous impact on pupils' performance. It was discovered that most pupils tested on literacy and numeracy skills especially, performed below average, Moreover, teachers' responses confirmed that facilities in primary schools are in a very deplorable state, the facilities also show a very poor rating as they indicated. Recommendations include creating a congenial environment that can enhance effective teaching and learning and facilitate a cordial relationship between pupils and teachers, as well as providing all facilities and infrastructure that can motivate pupils to learn and enhance pupils' optimum performance. Another survey of 1153 primary schools' organizational climate and its effect on teachers' job performance in Ondo state carried out by Adeyemi (2008) found that most of the schools had a low but open type of organizational climate. There was however a low teachers job performance. A correlation was found between organizational climate and teachers' job performance in the study.

Conclusion

School climate is a subtle but powerful pointer to a school's health and ability to achieve the goals it is set up to achieve. It involves all that goes on in the school and how it affects communication, relationship, friendship, trust, discipline, accountability practices, rules, and the atmosphere of the school. The school climate is social, psychological, and physical. Its effect on performance by both teachers and learners has been documented by research. A positive school climate breeds positive attitudes and makes individuals to strive towards meeting their personal and group desires. The school is the bedrock of society. A healthy school climate will produce productive individuals for the workforce with high-performance levels and motivation. A positive school will ensure the safety of learners and teachers. Vices and disorder will reduce drastically and individuals will see themselves as integral members of the school community instead of aliens. All necessary facilities and infrastructure for work and learning will be provided for the smooth operation of the school. The final consideration in this conference then should be to evaluate the Nigerian school climate to determine how positive it is and suggest measures for improvement.

Recommendations

Since school climate has been shown to exert such influence on the quality and achievement level of both teachers and students in the school, ensuring and encouraging a positive climate is therefore very necessary in achieving the overall goals of the school by the parents, the teachers, and the students and the education system in general. The essence of establishing schools is that the products of the

school will be well adapted in helping to fulfill the desires of society. Issues related to the following should be given adequate attention in the Nigerian educational system.

1. Physical infrastructure should be upgraded and facilities for learning provided to enhance confidence and adequacy of learning in the schools. There should be strict adherence to classroom specifications and number/ class populations in both public and private schools before the schools are given the approval to operate. The poultry-type schools especially primary and secondary schools should be discouraged.

2. There should be strict adherence to the general environmental conditions of the school at all times. Sanitation and the provision of a playground and recreational facilities should be made matters of urgent importance in schools.

3. More regular retraining of teachers in the choice of a variety of instructional methods that promote interaction and active student participation should be organized. This will help teachers to adopt new strategies that are novel and learner friendly in their classrooms.

4. School administrators should ensure the safety of and sundry in the school and discourage every element of harassment of students, teachers, and other personnel in the school.

5. School administrators and teachers should involve students in activities that foster and promote friendship, healthy competition, interaction, and equity in task distribution and gender.

6. There should be freedom for learners to make decisions and to involve in decision-making that affects their lives in the school. The use of force, punishment, and authority should be moderated. In other words, schools should become a match towards democratization in decision-making since this improves rule compliance.
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