

RESEARCH

Chandaria Research Centre

**MEASURING STUDENT EXPERIENCE FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES:  
SCHOOL CLIMATE; DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND  
INCLUSION; AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**



CHANDARIA  
RESEARCH CENTRE  
BRANKSOME HALL

**Measuring student experience from multiple perspectives:**

School climate; diversity, equity and inclusion; and social-emotional learning



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Schools are systems that are microcosms of the world around us. They recreate structures, norms and beliefs that are widespread in society at large; this includes, among other things, reproducing systems of oppression (Donoghue, 2022). Schools have the potential to be transformative spaces that lead students of all identities (related to race, culture and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability and neurodiversity) to find their voice and thrive (Mitra, 2008).

The sense of care, belonging and representation that diverse communities feel in a given school setting provide important information on how programs, policies and practices can be created or changed to help students flourish. As articulated by Zelinski and Villenas (2020), “school climate is comprised of the structural and relational elements that make up each school’s learning environment” (para. 4). In school climate research, insight into a school’s culture is gained by asking questions about sense of safety, fairness and relationships with adults and peers (Bradshaw et al., 2014).

An equity-minded school recognizes the power and value in analyzing school climate from different perspectives and identity markers (Voight et al., 2015). If we look at student experiences through an identity lens, we may begin to ask important questions about existing structures and systems that might make students feel unseen, unheard or uncared for. This examination also provides an opportunity for all school stakeholders (students, teachers, employees and parents) to work together to recognize where inequities exist in the school system and to identify what actions can be taken to dismantle them (Thapa et al., 2013).

School climate research can include surveys, observations and policy reviews. When this research is equity informed, it gets to the heart of the beliefs and realities that underlie a child’s experiences in an institution. Results can also unmask where racism, homophobia, classism and other forms of exclusion operate in the daily practices and organizational structures of a school.

**THIS BRIEF ADDRESSES  
THREE KEY QUESTIONS:**

- 1** What is school climate research and why is it important?
- 2** What are the components of effective school climate research?
- 3** How do school climate, diversity, equity and inclusion, and social-emotional learning fit together?

## WHAT IS SCHOOL CLIMATE RESEARCH AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

School climate can be understood as “the quality and character of school life,” and is based on “the patterns of people’s experiences of school life; it reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures that comprise school life” (National School Climate Council, 2010, p. 2). A growing body of empirical research suggests that a positive and sustainable school climate fosters youth development, academic achievement, and the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for students to become responsible and productive members of society. Additionally, a positive school climate reduces student drop-out and increases employee satisfaction and retention, which is why researchers increasingly aim to understand what constitutes a positive and sustainable climate and how to implement it (National School Climate Council, 2010). **When these experiences are filtered through the eyes of different demographic groups, school climate research becomes a tool for measuring the quality of diversity, equity and inclusion at a school.**

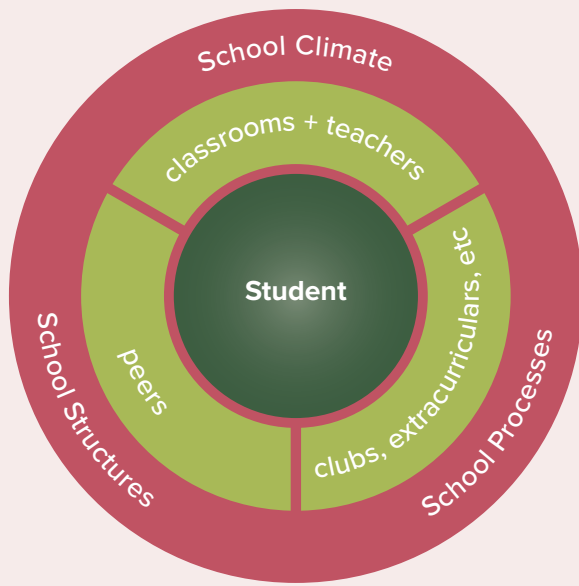
Research suggests that a positive school climate is essential to helping diverse students thrive, and that healthy relationships with teachers, fair application of school rules, and representation in the curriculum are some of the most important factors in cultivating a positive school climate for such students (Thapa et al., 2013). Examining school climate through a diversity, equity and inclusion lens allows schools to see which areas of school life affect the development and well-being of all students and employees, including those with marginalized identities. Finally, school climate research should be based on the collective perceptions of both the adults and students within the school (Rudasill et al., 2018).

One useful framework for understanding the components of school climate is the Systems View of School Climate (Rudasill et al., 2018), which focuses on measuring the affective and cognitive perceptions of students and employees in regards to social interactions, relationships, safety, values and beliefs (see Fig. 1). Students are understood to be at the centre of nested and interactive contexts that work to support or detract from their school experience, starting with their relationships and interactions in the most immediate settings of the classroom, peer groups, and clubs, and moving into the broader context of the school. The school-level context has additional climate elements such as institutional values and beliefs and physical and emotional safety, in addition to other structural and process components that are not part of school climate but affect the day-to-day experiences of students and employees.

*“A positive school climate requires supportive relationships and an open embrace of all the differences embodied in school community members across dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender and ability status.”*

The demographic makeup of the school population (e.g., gender, race, etc.) is collected in order to disaggregate the experience of school climate (as it relates to relationships, values, safety, etc.) by relevant demographic groups. As such, students and staff of diverse demographics will have different insights and experiences of school climate. Therefore, a school’s attention to the experiences of marginalized groups will help the institution move toward improving its culture and be more just, equitable, inclusive and representative of social diversity.

## ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS OF SCHOOLS



*\*Additionally, students are part of external systems (family, community, etc.) that can influence their experiences at school.*

**Figure 1:** Ecological systems of schools based on Rudasill et al.'s (2018) Systems View of School Climate framework

### • Sense of physical and social-emotional safety:

- Safety and discipline are often related to a sense of fairness and social-emotional well-being
- Unsafe school climates have a strong causal relationship with instances of violence and bullying within the school (i.e., violence leads to lower perception of safety; ineffective or unfair policies and rules lead to lower perceptions of safety and higher incidence of violence and bullying)
- Perceptions of the effectiveness of rules and discipline are central to the school climate

## SCHOOL STRUCTURES

### • Teaching, instruction and curriculum:

- Teachers have opportunities for professional development and collaboration
- Teachers foster a positive climate by co-creating a discipline structure, ensuring students are psychologically safe to take risks, and establishing classroom norms
- Teachers monitor and adjust the school climate based on student needs
- Diverse students see themselves represented in the curriculum

### • Leadership:

- Strong positive relationships between all school stakeholders (students, teachers, non-teaching employees, parents, community)
- Leaders advocate for the school within the community
- School resources are distributed equitably to ensure positive perceptions of school climate

### • Physical environment:

- Highlighting student achievements and examples of school pride in the physical school environment can signal shared values and beliefs
- Preservation and maintenance of school property can help shape student and employee perceptions of school climate

## SCHOOL PROCESSES

- Include formal processes and informal norms that govern decision making, hierarchies, teaching assignments, tracking and documentation
- Examples include human resources, admissions, or marketing and communication practices

## SCHOOL CLIMATE

### • Shared beliefs and values:

- Most important to the essence of school climate
- Describes the engagement, trust, expectations and belief in the capacity of students, shared by students and employees at the school
- Emphasis on academic excellence is a core belief, as well as a shared understanding of what is considered fair
- Social expectations based on beliefs about social identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, culture) may be observed in school climate

### • Relationships and social interactions:

- The quality of relationships between different school groups (teachers, non-teaching employees, students, parents, etc.) reflect the engagement, beliefs and values of the members
- The degree to which supports are available to students; a sense of trust, cooperation and openness that informs social interactions
- Peer culture is key to understanding school climate and can manifest in different ways such as social rejection, bullying or integration



## SCHOOL CLIMATE, DEI AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

Finally, a positive school climate is realized through a whole-school approach to social-emotional learning (SEL). Teaching SEL to students requires explicit instruction and modelling by adults in the school so that everyone feels safe, included, and engaged in leading healthy and fulfilling lives (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). When this is done intentionally, students develop the intra- and interpersonal skills required for SEL, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022). The aim of teaching these skills is to help students adopt values that are grounded in respect and appreciation for the identity and perspective of others.

Similarly, a positive school climate requires supportive relationships and an open embrace of all the differences embodied in school community members across dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender and ability status (Zelinski & Villenas, 2020). Healthy school climate predicts the social-emotional well-being of students (The Pennsylvania State University, 2018); indeed, measures of school climate can help to assess the effectiveness of school-wide SEL initiatives. Such measures often include items that assess teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, fairness of rules, clarity of expectations, school safety, school-wide engagement, and school-wide bullying (Bear et al., 2016). Taken together, a schoolwide approach to SEL that deliberately addresses school climate and pays attention to the experiences of diverse students is best positioned to help all students thrive.

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## JOURNAL REFLECTION:

What is a concrete example of how school climate has affected a student, family, or a co-worker I know?

In my view, our main area of focus in improving school climate should be:

We should focus on this because:

How has my understanding of school climate changed or was enhanced by looking at it through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion? What questions do I still have?

Actions I can take to make a difference in my students' or colleagues' experience of school climate:

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Access	Description
	<p><b>We're Not All Average:</b>  <b><u>Reconceptualizing School Climate to Acknowledge Diverse Student Experience in Schools</u></b>  (Merrill, L. et al., 2021)</p> <p>According to the report, school climate measures provide greater insight into the individual experiences of students rather than the functioning of the school as a whole. The authors recommend that measures and interventions should focus on subgroups that encounter disparities and emphasize the significance of establishing trust between students and adults.</p>
	<p><b><u>Creating Safe, Equitable, Engaging Schools: A Comprehensive, Evidence-Based Approach to Supporting Students</u></b> (Osher, D. et al., 2018)</p> <p>This edited volume compiles research from 31 American Institutes for Research (AIR) experts with actionable strategies for creating a positive school climate. The link includes access to all the tools listed in the book to help implement restorative practices, cultural responsiveness, and SEL.</p>
	<p><b><u>Advancing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a Lever for Equity and Excellence</u></b> (CASEL, 2020)</p> <p>This report covers 5 key insights from CASEL about how to use SEL as a lever for equity in schools. For each key insight, they provide examples of current best practices, additional considerations, and reflection questions.</p>
	<p><b><u>Equitable Practices Hub</u></b> (Pennsylvania Department of Education (2023)</p> <p>This is a rich resource that provides guidance in every sphere of equitable practice in education, including general practices, building self-awareness in educators and students, building equitable data practices, family/community engagement, academic equity and disciplinary equity. All resources are based on the foundation of building social-emotional skills of students and adults. Each section of the hub provides curated resources that are useful at the school/district, classroom and individual levels.</p>
	<p><b><u>School Climate Improvement Action Guides</u></b> (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2023)</p> <p>This resource provides action guides for a variety of stakeholders, to help them play their part in improving school climate. There are toolkits for school leaders, instructional and non-instructional staff, students, families, and community partners.</p>

