2009

Seeking the Sense of Community: A Comparison of Two Elementary School's Ethical Climates

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Kay A. Keiser and Laura E. Schulte

Abstract

School climate is created through the combined culture of the adults and students within a school – both the culture they share as an organization and the diverse cultures they bring from home. This study compared the school climate of two elementary schools, one urban and one suburban, by measuring 179 fourth and fifth grade students' and 65 teachers' perceptions of their schools' ethical climates. The Elementary School Ethical Climate Index (ESECI) was utilized to factor perceptions into *teacher to student, student to teacher/learning environment,* and *student to student* interactions. For each of the ESECI subscales, two-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted with a respondent factor (student or teacher/staff) and a community type factor (urban or suburban). While both the urban and suburban schools reported positive perceptions of school culture by students and teachers, the urban teachers were significantly less positive than their suburban peers in *student to teacher/learning environment* and *student to student* interactions, and also significantly less positive than their urban students. Results emphasize the importance of evaluating the culture of the school in an intentional, thorough manner by asking all groups for perceptions of school climate and utilizing what is uncovered to strengthen the sense of community.

Key Words: ethical climates, elementary schools, sense of community, students, teachers, learning environments, urban, suburban, cultures, perceptions

Introduction

As school leaders seek ways to improve schools and districts, creating a positive school climate is essential. Increasing academic performance, enhancing social and emotional skills, and even retaining quality teachers are all related to positive school climate, but trying to understand the complex patterns and subtle norms which create that climate can be perplexing (Belenardo, 2001; Osher & Fleischman, 2005). While containing elements of school safety, environment, teaching, and learning (Cohen, 2007), the heart of school climate may be defined as "the quality and consistency of interpersonal interaction within the school community that influences children's cognitive, social, and psychological development" (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997, p. 322).

It is through these interactions that relationships are formed and a sense of community arises. Belenardo (2001) identifies the elements of a sense of school community as shared values, commitment, a feeling of belonging, caring, interdependence, and regular contact. Perceptions of the school community will vary among individuals, but as they identify with their school and their role in the culture, common features of the group norms become evident (Griffith, 2000; Royal & Rossi, 1999).

Schools that display the shared values of fairness, justice, respect, cooperation, and compassion have a positive sense of community, supporting and motivating both teachers and students (Bushnell, 2001; Furman, 1998; Keiser & Schulte, 2007; Noddings, 1992; Osher & Fleischman, 2005; Schulte et al., 2002; Schulte, Shanahan, Anderson, & Sides, 2003).

Thus by evaluating school climate through the lens of ethical principles, higher quality relationships and a sense of school community may emerge (Noddings, 1988, 1992). The five ethical principles include: respect for autonomy (allowing a person to act independently); nonmaleficence (doing no harm to others); beneficence (benefiting others); justice (treating others fairly); and fidelity (being faithful and trustworthy). At the heart of these principles lies respect for persons (Kitchener, 1984, 1985). In an earlier study (Keiser & Schulte, 2007), we described the development and validation of the Elementary School Ethical Climate Index (ESECI), which will be used in this study to measure the ethical climate of two elementary schools.

While the sense of community resides in the culture and relationships within the school, associations from the surrounding neighborhood may also have an effect (Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2007; Vieno, Perkins, Smith, & Santinello, 2005). Schaps, Lewis, and Watson (1997) found generally that schools serving low-income students demonstrated a lower sense of classroom community than those in more affluent neighborhoods but that remarkable exceptions

exist. While urban and rural school climates have been studied (Esposito, 1999; Little & Miller, 2007; Osher & Fleischman, 2005; Patchen, 2006; Patterson et al., 2007; Warren, 2002), the role that the surrounding culture plays in school climate continues to deserve attention.

Research Questions

We addressed the following research questions during this study: (1) What are elementary school student and teacher/staff perceptions of the ethical climate of their school? (2) Are there differences between elementary school student and teacher/staff perceptions of the ethical climate of their school based on the community socioeconomic status?

Method

Participants

Fourth and fifth grade students and teachers/staff from an urban and a suburban elementary school participated in the study.

Urban School

At the urban school, 74 out of 92 students (40 fourth and 34 fifth graders) participated in the study. Fifty-three percent of the students were males, and 47% were females. The ethnicity of the students included 41% Caucasian Americans, 36% African Americans, and the remainder were Hispanic, Native, or Asian Americans. Approximately 63% of the students at the urban school qualified for free or reduced lunch at the time of the study. At the urban school, 43 out of 60 teachers/staff participated in the study. Of the teachers/staff responding, 97% were females, and 95% were Caucasian. The majority (71%) of the teachers/staff were 50 years of age or younger, and 67% had taught at the surveyed school for more than 3 years.

Suburban School

At the suburban school, 105 out of 110 students (59 fourth and 46 fifth graders) participated in the study. Of the students, 47% were males, and 53% were females. Approximately 96% of the students were Caucasian Americans, and 16% qualified for free or reduced lunch at the time of the study. At the suburban school, 22 (100%) teachers participated in the study. Of the teachers, 77% were females, and 100% were Caucasian. The majority (64%) of the teachers were 50 years of age or younger, and 77% had taught at the surveyed school for more than 3 years.

Data Collection Procedures

At both schools, students completed the Elementary School Ethical Climate Index (ESECI) in their classrooms, and the teachers/staff completed the ESECI during a teacher/staff meeting. The data collection procedures are documented in our previous article about the development and validation of the ESECI:

> The survey information included (a) a cover letter that explained the purposes of the study and informed the students and teachers/staff that participation was voluntary and that responses would be anonymous, (b) demographic questions used to describe the students and teachers/staff, and (c) the ESECI. Before distributing the survey information, we received approval from the principal at the schools, each school district's research personnel, and the university's research review board. We received a signed consent form from the parent(s) of each student who participated in the study. The participants responded to the ESECI items by giving their perception of their school's ethical climate based on their experiences and/or the experiences of their peers. They considered how true each ESECI item was in their school using the following response scale: 1 = rarely or never true, 2 = seldom true, 3 = sometimes true, 4 = often true, and 5 = usually or always true. (Keiser & Schulte, 2007, p. 77)

Instrument

The 38-item ESECI assesses the ethical climate of an elementary school across five ethical principles: respect for autonomy; nonmaleficence; beneficence; justice; and fidelity (Keiser & Schulte, 2007; see Table 1). The ESECI items apply the five ethical principles within three types of interactions and relationships between students and teachers, specifically *teacher to student* (i.e., how teachers interact with and relate to students), *student to teacher/learning environment* (i.e., how students interact with and relate to teachers), and *student to student* (i.e., how students interact with and relate to other students; Brown & Krager, 1985; Kitchener, 1984, 1985; Schulte et al., 2002). The ESECI item development and content validity procedures ensure that the ESECI is an appropriate instrument for measuring the ethical climate of elementary schools. In our validation study (Keiser & Schulte, 2007) we found that the ESECI subscales, *teacher to student*, *student to teacher/learning environment*, and *student to student,* had acceptable reliability coefficients (using Cronbach's alpha) of .96, .89, and .87, respectively.

Table 1. ESECI Items Listed by Subscale

Elementary School Ethical Climate Index Item
Teacher to Student
1. Teachers praise students for excellent work.
2. Teachers help students improve their study habits.
3. Teachers make students feel safe.
4. Teachers treat all students with respect.
5. Teachers encourage students to ask appropriate questions.
6. Teachers give students the chance to practice what they learn.
7. Teachers are well prepared.
8. Teachers are positive role models for students.
9. Teachers respect the differences of all students.
10. Teachers set high expectations for good behavior.
11. Teachers are available to help students.
12. Teachers help students with special needs.
13. Teachers return assignments in a reasonable amount of time.
14. Students who have questions about assignments feel free to talk to their teachers.
15. Teachers help students when they have a problem.
16. Teachers encourage cooperation among students.
17. Teachers grade assignments fairly.
18. Teachers allow students to express their ideas.
19. Students can depend on their teachers.
Student to Teacher/Learning Environment
1. Students follow directions.
2. Students perform their personal best on their school work.
3. Students are respectful to teachers.
4. Students actively participate in class activities.
5. Students pay attention during class.
6. Students learn from their mistakes.
7. Students are trusted by their teachers.
8. Students cooperate with their teachers.
9. Students enjoy learning from their teachers.
10. Students treat their teachers fairly.
11. Students respect things that belong to their classmates.
Student to Student
1. Students help their classmates even if it means more work for themselves.
2. Students encourage their classmates to do their best.
3. When working in a group with their classmates, students do their fair share of the work.
4. Students treat their classmates with respect.
5. Students stick up for classmates who are being picked on by others.
6. All students are accepted by their classmates.
7. Students will get help if they see others in a fight.
8. Students feel free to stand up for what they believe, even if it's not popular.

Data Analyses

We conducted the following statistical analyses to investigate the differences between student and teacher/staff perceptions of each school's ethical climate based on the community socioeconomic status:

1. We summarized the respondents' perceptions of the ethical climate of their school by calculating mean scores for each of the ESECI subscales.
2. For each of the ESECI subscales, we conducted two-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with a respondent factor (student or teacher/staff) and a community type factor (urban or suburban). A .05 level of significance was employed.

Results

Student Perceptions of Their School's Ethical Climate

Urban School

Students' perceptions of *teacher to student* interactions and relationships (M = 4.47, SD = 0.67) were the most positive with ratings of often to usually true. Their perceptions of *student to teacher/learning environment* (M = 3.92, SD = 0.71) and *student to student* (M = 3.90, SD = 0.78) interactions and relationships were positive with ratings of often true.

Suburban School

Students' perceptions of *teacher to student* interactions and relationships (M = 4.49, SD = 0.44) were the most positive with ratings of often to usually true. Their perceptions of *student to teacher/learning environment* interactions and relationships (M = 3.99, SD = 0.54) were positive with ratings of often true. Their perceptions of *student to student* interactions and relationships (M = 3.69, SD = 0.67) were somewhat positive with ratings of sometimes to often true.

Teacher/Staff Perceptions of Their School's Ethical Climate

Urban School

As reported in our previous study (Keiser & Schulte, 2007):

> …teacher/staff perceptions of *teacher to student* interactions and relationships (M = 4.33, SD = 0.46) were the most positive with ratings of often to usually true. Their perceptions of *student to teacher/learning environment* interactions and relationships (M = 3.54, SD = 0.50) were somewhat positive with ratings of sometimes to often true. Their perceptions of *student to student* interactions and relationships (M = 3.26, SD = 0.51) were the least positive with ratings of sometimes true. (p. 83)

Suburban School

Teacher perceptions of *teacher to student* interactions and relationships (M = 4.63, SD = 0.43) were the most positive with ratings of often to usually true. Their perceptions of *student to teacher/learning environment* interactions and relationships (M = 4.03, SD = 0.47) were positive with ratings of often true. Their perceptions of *student to student* interactions and relationships (M = 3.75, SD = 0.60) were somewhat positive with ratings of sometimes to often true.

Differences Between Student and Teacher/Staff Perceptions of the Ethical Climate Across Schools

Table 2 lists the means and standard deviations of the ESECI subscales for the students and teachers/staff broken down by school.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of the ESECI Subscales for the Students and Teachers/Staff Broken Down by School

Teacher to Student Subscale			
Respondent	*School*	*Mean*	*SD*
Student	Urban	4.47	0.67
	Suburban	4.49	0.44
Teacher/Staff	Urban	4.33	0.46
	Suburban	4.63	0.43
Total	Urban	4.42	0.60
	Suburban	4.51	0.44
Student To Teacher/Learning Environment Subscale			
Respondent	*School*	*Mean*	*SD*
Student	Urban	3.92	0.71
	Suburban	3.99	0.54
Teacher/Staff	Urban	3.54	0.50
	Suburban	4.03	0.47
Total	Urban	3.78	0.66
	Suburban	4.00	0.52
Student to Student Subscale			
Respondent	*School*	*Mean*	*SD*
Student	Urban	3.90	0.78
	Suburban	3.69	0.67
Teacher/Staff	Urban	3.26	0.51
	Suburban	3.75	0.60
Total	Urban	3.67	0.76
	Suburban	3.70	0.65

Teacher to Student

The two-way ANOVA comparing student and teacher/staff perceptions of *teacher to student* interactions and relationships across the two elementary schools indicated that the interaction between respondent and school and the main effect for respondent were not statistically significant, $F(1, 240) = 3.491$,

p = .063; F(1, 240) < 0.0005, p = .998, respectively. However, the main effect for school was statistically significant with a small effect size, F(1, 240) = 4.086, p = .044, d = 0.17 (see Table 3). This significant main effect indicated that the student and teacher/staff perceptions of *teacher to student* interactions and relationships at the suburban school (M = 4.51, SD = 0.44) were slightly more positive than those at the urban school (M = 4.42, SD = 0.60). At both schools, students and teacher/staff perceptions of *teacher to student* interactions and relationships were very positive with ratings of often to usually true.

Student to Teacher/Learning Environment

The two-way ANOVA comparing student and teacher/staff perceptions of *student to teacher/learning environment* interactions and relationships across the two elementary schools indicated that the interaction between respondent and school and the main effect for school were both statistically significant, F(1, 240) = 5.391, p = .021; F(1, 240) = 10.06, p = .002, respectively. The main effect for respondent was not statistically significant, F(1, 240) = 3.688, p = .056 (see Table 3).

To follow-up the statistically significant interaction between respondent and school, simple main effects tests were conducted. The simple main effects tests comparing respondents at each school indicated that at the suburban school there was not a statistically significant difference between students (M = 3.99, SD = 0.54) and teachers (M = 4.03, SD = 0.47) in their perceptions of *student to teacher/learning environment* interactions and relationships with positive ratings of often true for both groups, F(1, 240) = 0.067, p = .796. In contrast, at the urban school the simple main effects tests indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of students (M = 3.92, SD = 0.71) and teachers/staff (M = 3.54, SD = 0.50) with student ratings of often true and teacher/staff ratings of sometimes to often true, F(1, 240) = 11.227, p = .001, d = 0.63. Urban student ratings were more positive than urban teacher/staff ratings (d > .40) on the following ESECI *student to teacher/learning environment* items:

- Students perform their personal best on their school work.
- Students are respectful to teachers.
- Students learn from their mistakes.
- Students treat their teachers fairly.
- Students respect things that belong to their classmates.

The simple main effects tests comparing schools for each group of respondents indicated that there was not a statistically significant difference between urban (M = 3.92, SD = 0.71) and suburban (M = 3.99, SD = 0.54) student perceptions of *student to teacher/learning environment* interactions and relationships with ratings of often true for both urban and suburban students, F(1,

240) = 0.719, p = .397. In contrast, the urban teacher/staff (M = 3.54, SD = 0.50) perceptions of *student to teacher/learning environment* interactions and relationships were significantly less positive than the suburban teacher perceptions (M = 4.03, SD = 0.47) with urban teacher/staff ratings of sometimes to often true and suburban teacher ratings of often true, F(1, 240) = 10.075, p = .002, d = 1.01. The urban teacher/staff ratings were less positive than the suburban teacher ratings (d > .40) on all ESECI *student to teacher/learning environment* items except "Students enjoy learning from their teachers."

Student to Student

The two-way ANOVA comparing student and teacher perceptions of *student to student* interactions and relationships across the two elementary schools indicated that the interaction between respondent and school and the main effect for respondent were both statistically significant, F(1, 240) = 11.509, p = .001; F(1, 240) = 7.832, p = .006, respectively. The main effect for school was not statistically significant, F(1, 240) = 1.815, p = .179 (see Table 3).

To follow up on the statistically significant interaction between respondent and school, simple main effects tests were conducted. The simple main effects tests comparing respondents at each school indicated that at the suburban school there was not a statistically significant difference between students (M = 3.69, SD = 0.67) and teachers (M = 3.75, SD = 0.60) in their perceptions of *student to student* interactions and relationships with ratings of sometimes to often true for both groups, F(1, 240) = 0.147, p = .702. In contrast, at the urban school the simple main effects tests indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of students (M = 3.90, SD = 0.78) and teachers/staff (M = 3.26, SD = 0.51) with student ratings of often true and teacher/staff ratings of sometimes true, F(1, 240) = 23.910, p < .0005, d = 0.99. Urban student ratings were more positive than urban teacher/staff ratings (d > .40) on all of the ESECI *student to student* items except "Students will get help if they see others in a fight."

The simple main effects tests comparing schools for each group of respondents indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between urban (M = 3.90, SD = 0.78) and suburban (M = 3.69, SD = 0.67) student perceptions of *student to student* interactions and relationships with ratings of often true for urban students and sometimes to often true for suburban students, F(1, 240) = 4.164, p = .042, d = 0.29. Urban student ratings were more positive than suburban student ratings (d > .40) on the following ESECI *student to student* item: "When working in a group with their classmates, students do their fair share of the work." For teachers/staff the simple main effects tests were also statistically significant with urban teacher/staff (M = 3.26, SD = 0.51) perceptions of *student to student* interactions and relationships less positive than

the suburban teacher perceptions (M = 3.75, SD = 0.60), $F(1, 240) = 7.499$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.88$. Urban teachers/staff gave ratings of sometimes true, while suburban teachers gave ratings of sometimes to often true. Urban teacher/staff ratings were less positive than suburban teacher ratings ($d > .40$) on all of the ESECI *student to student* items except "Students encourage their classmates to do their best" and "All students are accepted by their classmates."

Table 3. Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) and Simple Main Effects Tests Results of the ESECI Subscales

Teacher to Student Subscale					
Source	Sums of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Respondent	<0.0005	1	<0.0005	<0.0005	.998
School	1.120	1	1.120	4.086	.044
Resp. by School	0.957	1	0.957	3.491	.063
Error	65.767	240	0.274		
Student to Teacher/Learning Environment Subscale					
Source	Sums of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Respondent	1.257	1	1.257	3.688	.056
School	3.430	1	3.430	10.060	.002
Resp. by School	1.838	1	1.838	5.391	.021
Resp. at Suburban	0.023	1	0.023	0.067	.796
Resp. at Urban	3.828	1	3.828	11.227	.001
School at Student	0.245	1	0.245	0.719	.397
School at Teacher	3.435	1	3.435	10.075	.002
Error	81.821	240	0.341		
Student to Student Subscale					
Source	Sums of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*p*
Respondent	3.582	1	3.582	7.832	.006
School	0.830	1	0.830	1.815	.179
Resp. by School	5.264	1	5.264	11.509	.001
Resp. at Suburban	0.067	1	0.067	0.147	.702
Resp. at Urban	10.936	1	10.936	23.910	<.0005
School at Student	1.905	1	1.905	4.164	.042
School at Teacher	3.430	1	3.430	7.499	.007
Error	109.771	240	0.457		

Discussion

While generalizations to other schools and communities may not be made from the results of two schools, it was interesting to note that in both the urban and suburban schools studied, teachers did not mirror student perceptions of the school climate. In reviewing Table 2, every subscale was higher for urban students' responses than their teachers. In the suburban school, students' scores were lower on all subscales than their teachers. There were significant differences in *student to teacher/learning environment* and *student to student* subscales

in the urban school. On the other hand, for the staff of the suburban school the difference from students was not statistically significant. Generally, more suburban school teachers live in the community and culture that they teach in than do teachers in urban schools, which might account somewhat for these results (Gehrke, 2005; Patterson et al., 2007; Warner & Washburn, 2004).

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for suburban, middle-class teachers to hold negative beliefs about students in urban schools. Gilbert's (1997) study found that preservice teachers viewed urban students as "unmotivated, unwilling, and disruptive participants in schooling" (p. 93). This led to beliefs that urban schools need strict discipline and basic skills curriculum. Warren's (2002) interviews with teachers showed that teachers believed that students' cultures were deficits and that teachers lacked the confidence and determination to overcome differences and work with urban students. Teachers' expectations thus become a broader social force and a powerful influence on students (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004). If staff members hold negative perceptions of students, this can lead to a less positive climate, as staff holds the ability to shape the school culture (Gehrke, 2005).

As the perceptions of the staff leads to self-fulfilling prophesy (Diamond et al., 2004; Lumsden, 1997), higher as well as lower perceptions of school climate by the adults can have adverse effects upon the students. If, as in the suburban school, teachers see the climate as more positive, then strategies that could improve students' sense of community may be ignored as unneeded. Even when a positive community seems to be without problems, exclusionary, homogenizing, and coercive forces may be masked if all members are not invited to report their views (Bushnell, 2001).

Implications for Action and Further Study

Further study needs to be conducted on the interaction of socioeconomic status and the relationships that create the school's sense of community. In this study, the lower income neighborhood of the urban school did not seem to have a major influence upon the school climate, as students and teachers both reported their perceptions to be positive. Successful schools are able to create a positive climate by sustaining caring connections, providing positive behavioral supports, and teaching social and emotional skills (Oscher & Fleischman, 2005). As Noonan (2004) affirms:

> If there is a common thread to creating a positive school climate, it is the importance of relationships – student to student, teacher to student, teacher to family, administrator to staff, school to community…and our ability to teach our students how to develop supportive relationships of their own is as essential a skill as math and reading. (p. 65)

Therefore, it is not enough for school leaders to informally assess school climate. Without an accurate, ongoing measure from all school groups, assumptions can lead to a distorted sense of community. While Cohen (2007) states that over 90% of school leaders believe that school climate needs to be evaluated, it is not enough to rely upon feelings or intuition to estimate it. Whatever measure that is selected should be valid and reliable, seeking the perceptions of all school groups, and moving beyond issues of increasing school safety and appreciating diversity to seeking a sense of feeling connected within the school community.

Once climate is assessed, action is imperative. School leaders may build upon strengths through reexamining school traditions to foster a sense of community, through promoting school-wide activities that celebrate learning, through pairing older and younger students, and through encouraging service (Benton & Bulach, 1995; Schaps et al., 1997). Self-awareness and self-reflection by both the teachers and students can lead toward cultural proficiency (Gehrke, 2005; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999). By following a plan with both short-term goals and long-term benchmarks to develop a positive school community, not only can the academic environment improve, but trust, respect, and caring can become the ethical foundation for our students and our future.

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