WHAT IS AN OPTIMAL SCHOOL CLIMATE?

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Teaching and learning are not possible in a climate of disorder and poor discipline. Many studies have proven that when suitable educational measures are taken, disciplinary problems and violence level can be decreased.

Keywords: Climate school, mutual respect, social standards, personal security, violence, achievements.

CE ESTE UN CLIMAT ŞCOLAR OPTIM?

Procesul de predare şi învăţare nu ar fi posibil într-un climat dezordonat şi cu o disciplină deficitară. Multe studii au dovedit că, fiind luate măsurile educaţionale potrivite, problemele privind disciplina şi nivelul de violenţă se reduc semnificativ.

Cuvinte-cheie: climat şcolar, respect reciproc, standarde sociale, securitate personală, violenţă, realizări.

A school climate is characterized by the feelings of pupils and school team regarding the school environment, over time. What is meant here is the sense of convenience and security in the environment, a feeling that the environment supports learning and teaching and that it is well organized. It can be said, therefore, that a school climate is a reflection of positive or negative emotions towards a school environment and that it might have a direct or indirect effect on studying and its results.

The climate in an educational institution is a key factor which affects the creation of an environment that develops personal security and a sense of affiliation, value and respect alongside with social values such as responsibility for the community members and reduction of violence, hurting one's fellows and risk behaviors.

In order to create an optimal educational climate, an overall system strategy must be implemented that is planned, consistent and long-term, which relates at the same time to the creation of a safe climate, to promotion of mental welfare and to establishing a way of life that promotes affiliation, involvement and responsibility and to handling the reduction of violence and risk behaviors on an overall system level and individual level concurrently [1].

An optimal climate in a school serves as a basis for prevention of violence; an optimal educational climate allows for physical protection, mental health, moral development, study functioning and acquisition of skills and values of citizens in a democratic country. In-depth educational processes that promote mental welfare can prevent instances of violence and reduce the need for punishment.

Creating a safe climate in a school is a task mutual to all members of a school community and the community a school is locate in. It is vital to create cooperation between all relevant factors: the educational team, the administrative team, the assisting alignment, pupils, pupils' parents and factors in the community and the city. The more pupils and parents experience themselves as partners to the processes of creation of an optimal school climate and recognize their mutual responsibility, the higher would be their willingness to maintain and implement these processes.

Thus, what is an educational climate and what meaning does it possess? How should we define an educational climate and according to what?

In this paper, educational climate would be defined, as well as what is an optimal educational climate? What affects a creation of optimal educational climate? And what is the contribution of an optimal educational climate to those in it, and how can an optimal educational climate be created in school?

This paper would clarify the relevant answers from a literature review, if possible, in order to arouse caring and consideration of the subject of school climate and encourage principals, teachers and education personnel to try as much as possible to create an optimal educational climate in schools that would eventually benefit the effectivity of behavior and achievements of pupils in school.

Definition of educational climate

The term "school climate" is certainly not new; however, it is doubtful whether most education personnel, that use it presently, know its exact meaning. In the past, this term has almost exclusively been the domain of the higher class, those expected to handle the pedagogical ills of one institution or another.

The first researchers of the term of organizational climate were psychologists, and therefore the term of climate has been treated as the "personality" of the organization. Later on, the term of climate has been developed in a school context. Fridman in this spirit [5] has determined that a school climate can be resembled with "outlines of the school personality: as personality describes an individual, thus climate defines the essence of an institution". Others defined school climate as a final product of the activities of groups operating within it – pupils, teachers, principals – that direct their actions towards the achievement of a balance between organizational, personal, and systematic aspects in a school. Such a balance includes mutual values, social beliefs and social standards [7].

Amongst the variety of definitions of the term in professional literature, many of them include components that exist in the definition of Sackney, 1988 [2]: quality that is achieved over time of the internal environment of the school that:

(a) Is experienced by its members (pupils, teachers, administrators, secretaries, counselors).

(b) Affects their behavior.

(c) Can be described in terms of values, norms and beliefs that related to the being of the institution.

It would be mentioned that this definition is relevant to an institution in general and does not necessarily describe specific parts in it (such as a climate of a given class).

In the definition of Tagiuri 1968 [2] of a "school climate", there is a clear division of fields: "school climate" according to him is a complex of environmental qualities that include:

(1) Ecology – physical and material components.

(2) Atmosphere – the social dimension of people.

(3) The social system – social relations between people in an organization.

(4) Culture – system of beliefs, values, cognitive structures and meanings within a school.

As of the end of the 70's, various researchers prefer the use of various names to define it. For example, Deal 1985 [2] prefers the term "school culture", whereas Rutter et al. 1979 [2] – prefer "school ethos". Nonetheless, their definitions do not significantly exceed the definitions mentioned as follows. These definitions mainly relate to the dimension of achievement and overall-social dimension of life in school. On the other hand, throughout the years, two patterns have been created with slightly different emphases in their relation to the term "school climate". These are the patterns of "democratic climate" and "progressive climate" that relate to what is termed in our places "progressive education" [11]. The first specifically emphasizes the inclusion of pupils in decisions related to them; whereas the second to the informal study atmosphere customary in those institutions and to teacher-pupil relationships.

The most comprehensive definition of school climate has been phrased by Tagiuri and Titwin [6]: the quality of internal environment of an organization, as experienced by its members. This environment affects their behavior, and it can be described in terms of a certain collection of organizational characteristics [12].

The term "school climate" is extensive and has many definitions. One of the common definitions in the literature presently is of the American Center of School Climate and the Center of Learning and Citizenship of the Educational Committee in the US:

"*School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. It is based on patterns of school life experiences and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices and organizational structures."* [10. p.5].

Optimal educational climate

Development of optimal school climate is the basis of educational, social and moral work in school. Optimal educational climate in a school is a condition for learning and development of all those attending the educational establishment (pupils, teachers and parents). The school is responsible for the personal, cognitive, emotional, social and moral development of pupils. The educational team has the ability and commitment to promote an educational climate. Improvement of study achievements of pupils is related, as well as conditional, to optimal climate. "A climate in an educational establishment is a key factor that affects the creation of environment which develops personal security and sense of affiliation, value and mutual respect" [4].

According to what has been maintained in the CEO's circular of 2009 [4], effective schools excel in a positive climate and are capable of handling social, organizational and pedagogical problems. An optimal school climate constitutes the foundation of learning-teaching processes and affects the satisfaction and cooperation of staff and additional members of an organization: pupils and parents.

Arhard claims, that a key component of "environment" of children and adolescents, in which there is an optimal educational climate is an educational establishment that allows its pupils to make the most out of their study potential, which develops and promotes in its pupils an ability to withstand stressful situations, which enhances creativity, instills values of tolerance of the different, trains for cooperation, interpersonal communication and ability to learn and develop optimally [1].

Claims that a positive and optimal climate is characterized by seeking achievement and output, principal's consideration and teachers' team enthusiasm of doing and creating, supportive atmosphere, organizational efficiency, order and structuration. It is also a situation in which management style is based on openness, coaching by personal example, rewarding the teachers' team as well as inclusion of teachers in decision making, which would greatly assist in climate development [3].

"A school climate in general is related to pupils' perception of their school, their behavior in class and their relation to study and offered activities as part of school" [10. p.76]. Arhard [2001] mentions that the study findings reveal a correlation between pupils' perceptions and their feelings regarding school climate and between the developing of negative or pathological behaviors. Arhard adds that "as pupil's feelings are directed to a large degree by the extent of fulfillment of their basic and optimal needs, there is significance to the fulfillment of these needs within the school". An optimal climate is "an educational climate which allows for pupils to reach proper study achievements while taking into consideration their emotional, social needs and responding to them" [1].

It is expected that intimate encounters and fertile dialogue between a teacher and a pupil and between pupils would have an effect beyond study achievements, and that it would be felt also in the change of a school climate in a decrease in level of violence in a school and in tightening up of relationships between pupils and teachers, and as a result the school would become a supporting study environment that allows for each pupil to progress on an educational-study sequence in his class, both in transition from one class to another and in transition from the Primary education stage to the post-Primary education [8].

The Israeli educational system puts a pupil and his needs, at least on a declarative level, in the center of educational work. A school aspires towards an optimal educational climate within it that allows a pupil to reach proper study achievements while taking into consideration his emotional and social needs and responding to them [1].

Influencing factors

The key factors affecting school climate with its various types are how a school is organized and the style of its management. The way a school is organized – a gradient or systematic structure, centralized or decentralized, affects pupils and teachers. In a hierarchical-centralized organization, dictates are received from above. In such an organization, teamwork in a school is deficient, and there is a feeling that in a school that delegates authorities and promotes team work amongst teachers: "a planned and orderly organizing of teachers for mutual work as a team and the character of such work, or on the other hand, a lack of such organizing, is what designs the quality of life of teachers and pupils alike, in a school".

Educational climate is affected by many factors. In veteran schools in which a school climate is already formed, the components of climate are stable and are kept over time, so that a change in the general atmosphere is almost nonexistent, and mostly, it is as well difficult to bring about an initiated change in cases such an intention exists.

According to the researcher Moos, (1979) [9] the influencing factors can be grouped into various categories:

• **Physical factors:** the architectural form of a school and its size – the appearance of a school and its level of accessibility to resources affects the feelings, functioning and outputs of the team and pupils; its size affects the variety of study subjects and social involvement.

• **Management style:** affects the school atmosphere, it is within the power of a principal to improve or harm school climate. The leadership style of a principal affects the school norms and what takes place in each class. There are principals who encourage achievements. They visit classes a lot, create incentives for high achievements and evaluate teachers according to the study achievements, to a large degree according to the average score of pupils' matriculation exams. On the other hand, there are principals who emphasize processes not less than outputs; they give attention to the welfare of pupils and to social targets. School climate affects the expectations of teachers and these affect the class norms, pupils' perceptions and their achieve-

ments: "the expectations of teachers are determined not only according to the perception of their pupils' of their skills and the level of support in teaching they might receive from their colleagues, their perception regarding the willingness of a principal and the team to assist them in the pedagogical effort".

• **Social norms:** behavior norms of employees and pupils stemming from pressure from management, the visible and hidden pressures leveled at pupils; for example, in theoretical schools the pressures are aimed at intellectual development.

• Factors of preservation of the system and its products, clarity of rules, teacher's proficiency and innovation.

• **Socio-economic level of children:** affects amongst other things their perception of independence and freedom of choice. The meaning is the ethnic and familial background of pupils. Each pupil arrives with some charge regarding behavior in class. The expectation of all pupils can change throughout study; however, they affect the formation of initial norms.

• **Teacher's behavior:** his behavior in class and the reciprocal relations between a teacher and pupils, sense of involvement, sense of affiliation and support of the teacher. The meaning is his expectations, leadership style and the teaching methods implemented by the teacher.

• Professional relation and interaction within the team.

• Effectivity of the teamwork.

• Personal development factors and the rate of purposefulness of pupils and teachers, purposes and competitiveness.

• **External environment:** pupils' parents – parents' representation acts towards a significant change in fields that seem important to them in the school life; school and community relations – the community has interests of its own such as identity, purposes, ideology, and hence its effect upon the school climate can be positive and constructive or inhibitive [9].

Summary

This paper has a main purpose of clarifying to education people that it is in their power to lead towards a creation of an optimal educational climate by understanding of the principles of an optimal educational climate and by the understanding of the term more profoundly in order to resolve problems that exists within the school climate such as violence and low study achievements.

In the research literature, there are various approaches to defining the term of educational climate, whereas a combination between these approaches leads to a characterization of an educational climate as a qualitative aspect of school environment as it is experienced by pupils, teachers and parents. In light of this, it appears that a school climate is a combination of emotions and inner thoughts in the school both on a class level and on a school level that are described by management, teachers and pupils.

A school attests itself to be an educational establishment aspiring at excellence in study achievements, and that considers the nurturing of learning and life skills of a transferring pupil, a value of significance. It emphasizes the granting of a feeling of a "warm" and loving home for pupils, and concurrently requires them to follow its customary rules. A culture that respects pupils and parents allows for the existence of educational, meaningful processes that presumably do not abandon a pupil upon his completion of study, but stay with him. Therefore, the standards of school culture and climate reflect the expectations from schools for the study environment that is social, safe, supportive, egalitarian and aesthetic that allows for a personal-social-moral development of study. These standards express:

• The commitment of an organization to provide for an empowering environment.

• A linkage between an individual at his best and between the system at its best.

• A balance between organizational and personal aspects.

There is a correlation between educational climate in a school and variables such as:

✓ Study achievements

✓ Pupils' attitude towards school

✓ Level of violence in a school

✓ Involvement in risk behaviors

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