

The Climate of Large Secondary Schools: A Report on the Perceptions of Students, Teachers, and Parents in Northeast Thailand

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Abstract

To date, research on school climate has been conducted almost exclusively in the United States and other Western countries. Nevertheless, findings from these studies have been used to develop school improvement policies in many developing countries. For example, the educational reform policies contained in Thailand's National Education Act 1999 and the Ninth National Education Development Plan (2002-2006) are based, in large measure, on research on effective school climates.

Within the context of school climate research conducted primarily in Western national contexts, the purpose of this study was to assess the climate of large (more than 2,500 students) secondary schools in Northeastern Thailand. Specifically, the study focused on an analysis of data gathered from students, teachers, and parents. With respect to students, the objective was to determine the degree to which students believe (1) they can collaborate with teachers to design learning activities, (2) they have opportunities for self-expression, and (3) teacher behaviors reflect a "student-centered" school climate. With respect to teachers, the objective was to examine teachers' perceptions of (1) the school's organizational "health," (2) the school's physical environment, and (3) the principal's leadership style. With respect to parents, the objective was to examine their perceptions of 19 climate-related factors at the school site.

Keyword: school climate, perception, student, teacher, parent

Background

Freiberg and Stein (1999) suggest that school climate is the "heart and soul" of a school. Climate is the "essence" of a school that leads children, teachers, administrators, and staff to "love" the school and to look forward to being there each school day. Studies of organizations have distinguished between school climate and school culture. In general, climate refers to the behavior of individuals within an organization, while culture refers to the values and norms that characterize the organization. Some researchers suggest that school culture is a dimension of school climate (Heck & Marcoulides, 1996; Hoy, 1990). Additionally, "effective" and "ineffective" schools have been found to have different climates, and the effects of climate factors on achievement can be very powerful (Anderson, 1982). As a result,

enhancing climate factors is typically identified as a key target for change and improvement of schools.

Purpose and Objectives

The study focused on an analysis of data gathered from students, teachers, and parents. With respect to students, the objective was to determine the degree to which students believe (1) they can collaborate with teachers to design learning activities, (2) they have opportunities for self-expression, and (3) teacher behaviors reflect a “student-centered” school climate. With respect to teachers, the objective was to examine teachers’ perceptions of (1) the school’s organizational “health,” (2) the school’s physical environment, and (3) the principal’s leadership style. With respect to parents, the objective was to examine their perceptions of 19 climate-related factors at the school site.

Perspectives

In a general sense, climate is a metaphor. The term “school climate” evokes metaphors (a family, tribe, community, and so on) that convey a feeling of well-being, health, safety, openness, and caring—in short, a climate conducive to learning and growth. School climate is the quality of a school that creates healthy place for learning, nurtures children’s and parent’s dream and aspirations, stimulates teachers’ creativity and enthusiasm, and elevates all of its members. Most importantly, school climate is the special quality of a school that allows the voices of the children and youth to be heard. (Roger & Freiberg, 1994)

Ideally, school climate should be measured from multiple perspectives, so that each person responsible for the education of children and youth can see how healthy the learning climate is and what needs to be changed or sustained. At the heart of school improvement, regardless of national setting, is an understanding of the learning climate.

Methodology

Identification of Sample

The population consisted of 381 large secondary schools (has more than 1,500 students) in Northeastern Thailand. Krejcie and Morgan’s table for selecting a sample at a significance level of 0.05 was used. In addition, schools were selected by using stratified random sampling according to their proportion in the Northeast Educational Region. In this manner, a sample of 191 schools was identified.

Instrumentation

The researchers developed a climate rating scale questionnaire (CRSQ) in two steps. First, the researchers conducted a content analysis of the National Education Act 1999 and the *Ninth National Education Development Plan (2002-2006)* to identify climate-related elements embedded in these important pieces of legislation. Second, the researchers synthesized school climate inventories developed by Creemers and Reezigt (1999), Fraser (1999), Hoy and Felman (1999), and Hall and George (1999).

The CRSQ consisted of three versions, each containing items based on a 5-point Likert scale. Version 1 presented student respondents with five items that focused on collaboration with teachers to design learning activities, seven items that focused on opportunities for self-expression, and ten items that addressed the degree to which teacher behaviors reflect a “student-centered” school climate. Version 2 presented teacher respondents with six items that focused on the school’s organizational “health,” nine items that focused on the school’s physical environment, and ten items that focused on the principal’s leadership style. Version 3 presented parent respondents with 19 items keyed to climate-related factors gleaned from the researchers’ analysis of school reform legislation in Thailand and a synthesis of research on school climate.

Using a panel of six Thai professors of educational administration, the resultant three-part CRSQ was analyzed to determine construct validity and content validity. In addition, the CRSQ was pilot tested with 30 respondents not included in the final sample. In this manner, an overall reliability of .8765 was obtained for the CRSQ.

Data Collection and Analysis

During the data collection phase, CRSQs were sent by mail to administrators at the 191 schools contained in the sample. Each school administrator was asked to randomly identify three students, three teachers, and three parents to complete the CRSQ. After follow-ups at each school, 167 complete sets (i.e., Versions 1-3) of the CRSQ were returned, for a return rate of 87.43 percent.

Data were analyzed by computing basic descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations. The values of the means were interpreted according to the following: 1.00-1.50 = “very low”; 1.51-2.50 = “low”; 2.51-3.50 = “moderate”; 3.51-4.50 = “high”; and 4.51-5.00 = “very high.”

Results

Student Perceptions

The analysis of data gathered from students yielded the results presented in Table 1. Overall, the CRSQ means suggest that the students perceive their schools as reflecting a “high” to “moderate” degree of the climate-related factors.

Table 1 Student Perceptions of School Climate

<i>CRSQ Item</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Collaborative Development of Learning Activities		
1. Student usually helps teachers plan what he/she is going to learn	3.06	0.87
	3.43	0.85
2. Student usually helps teachers decide how well he/she is taught	4.12	0.82
3. Student usually helps teachers decide which activities are best for him/her	4.03	0.78
4. Student usually helps teachers decide how much time he/she spend on activities	3.65	0.68
5. Students usually helps teacher assess his/her learning in the classroom		
	3.78	0.81
Opportunity for Self-Expression		
1. Student usually gets the chance to talk to other students	4.23	0.89
2. Student usually explains his/her ideas to other students	3.06	0.76
3. Student usually asks other students to explain their ideas	3.42	0.69
4. Student usually asks the teacher “Why do I have to learn this?”	3.76	0.74
5. Student usually asks questions about the way he/she is being taught	3.64	0.85
6. Student usually complains about activities that are confusing	4.01	0.91
7. Student usually complains about anything that prevents him/her from learning	4.23	0.89
	3.67	0.87
Teacher Behaviors		
1. Teachers show a relaxed attitude and do not “act superior”	4.23	0.87
2. Teachers create a safe atmosphere	4.11	0.74
3. Teachers make students feel free to ask and answer question	3.67	0.81
4. Teachers encourage students to engage in discussions	4.01	0.86
5. Teachers involve all students in the learning process	3.98	0.76
6. Teachers value student participation	3.67	0.92
7. Teachers act according to rules when students break the rules	3.65	0.76
8. Teachers provide a rich learning environment and stimulate learning by discovery	3.26	0.84
9. Teachers are not constantly talking	3.54	0.87
10. Teachers show respect for all students	3.47	0.92
	3.75	0.81

Teacher Perceptions

The analysis of data gathered from teachers yielded the results presented in Table 2. Overall, the CRSQ means suggest that the teacher perceive their school's organizational "health," the school's physical environment, and the principal's leadership style as reflecting a "high" to "moderate" degree of the climate-related factors.

Table 2 Teacher Perceptions of School Climate

<i>CRSQ Item</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
School Organizational "Health"		
1. Teachers respect others who perform well	3.89	0.76
2. Teachers identify with the school	3.12	0.85
3. Teachers accomplish their job with enthusiasm	3.67	0.81
4. Teachers do favors for each other	3.23	0.92
5. Teachers are protected from unreasonable community and parental demands	3.01	0.84
6. The morale of teachers is high	2.96	0.79
7. There is a feeling of trust and confidence among the staff	2.94	0.87
8. Academic achievement is recognized and acknowledged by the school	3.98	0.85
9. Extra materials are available if requested	2.89	0.77
10. The principal is willing to make changes	4.02	0.83
11. This school is not vulnerable to outside pressure	2.79	0.83
12. The school is open to communication with the public	3.10	0.85
	3.63	0.78
Physical Environment of the School		
1. Necessary materials are available in the classroom	2.68	0.86
2. Learning materials are looked after by teachers	2.81	0.82
3. Schoolyard is divided for younger and older students	2.89	0.79
4. No trash is on the schoolyard	3.75	0.87
5. Wastebaskets are emptied regularly	3.86	0.92
6. Playground equipment is safe for student	3.68	0.94
7. Corridors and eating areas are clean	3.84	0.86
8. Students assist in the maintenance of the school	3.62	0.87
9. Student work is displayed on classroom walls	2.96	0.91
	3.53	0.87
Principal's Leadership Style		
1. Principal discusses school problems in an innovative way	4.21	0.87
2. Principal knows a lot about teaching and curriculum	2.87	0.82
3. Principal shares many ideas for improving teaching and curriculum	2.56	0.85

4. Principal knows a lot about programs and innovations	3.61	0.82
5. Principal keeps everyone informed about procedures	2.98	0.86
6. Principal provides guidelines for efficient operation of the school	3.77	0.89
7. Principal is primarily concerned about how teachers feel	3.56	0.87
8. Principal is willing to make changes	3.69	0.91
9. Principal chats socially with teachers	2.98	0.84
10. Principal has a clear picture of where the school is going	3.92	0.83
	3.72	0.84

Parent Perceptions

The analysis of data gathered from parents yielded the results presented in Table 3. Overall, the CRSQ means suggest that parents, like students and teachers, perceive a “high” to “moderate” degree of climate-related factors in 19 areas synthesized from research on school climate.

Table 3 Parent Perceptions of School Climate

<i>CRSQ Item</i>	<i>mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. School provides a variety of activities for students	3.45	0.87
2. School is clean and safe	3.67	0.86
3. School assigns the right amount of homework	3.67	0.88
4. School provides necessary instructional materials in the classroom	2.98	0.91
5. School encourages parental involvement	2.97	0.93
6. School lets parents know how their children are doing	3.06	0.79
7. School staff responds promptly to parental concerns	3.11	0.84
8. School motivates students to learn	3.78	0.83
9. School staff works as a team to improve the school	2.45	0.79
10. School communicates what is happening at the school to parents	2.56	0.92
11. Teachers encourage students to do their best	3.56	0.91
12. Teachers expect children to learn	3.98	0.89
13. Teachers expect children to work hard	3.57	0.87
14. Parents have access to the principal	3.78	0.86
15. Parents are asked to help the school with planning and/or decision making	2.54	0.85
16. Parents can discuss their children’s progress with teachers	3.11	0.91
17. Students are well behaved at	3.56	0.94
18. Students respects the school staff	3.48	0.82
19. Students enjoy classes	3.99	0.81
	3.51	0.85

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that, in general, the climate of large secondary schools in Northeast Thailand is “high” to “moderate” with respect to research-

identified variables that contribute to strong, positive school climates. Students' perceptions of the degree to which they can collaborate with teachers on the development of learning activities had the highest overall mean (3.78)—a promising finding, in light of recent national mandates in Thailand to implement student-centered, constructivist-oriented approaches to teaching.

The preceding positive results notwithstanding, the current study suggests that policies should be strengthened (or new policies developed) to address the following aspects of a school's organizational "health": teacher morale, confidence levels among staff, availability of extra instructional materials, and vulnerability to outside pressures. With respect to the school's physical environment, the following should be addressed: availability of materials in the classroom, looking after learning materials, dividing the schoolyard into areas for younger and older students, and displaying students' work throughout the school. Regarding the principal's leadership style, the following should be addressed: knowledge of and ability to improve teaching and curriculum and chatting socially with teachers. Lastly, with respect to the perceptions of parents, the following should be addressed: school staff working as a team to improve the school, allowing parents to help with school planning and/or decision making, and improving school-home communication.

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