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AUTHOR Jorde-Bloom, Paula
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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the dimensions of organizational climate as they relate to early childhood work environments. It reports the results of a study involving 629 early childhood workers representing 65 nonprofit and for-profit, center-based programs. The focus of the inquiry was to determine in what ways the 94 administrators and 535 teachers surveyed differed in their perceptions of organizational practices. Results of the data analysis show statistically significant differences with respect to how administrators and teachers view ten dimensions of organizational climate. In eight of the ten dimensions, the differences were significant at $p < .01$. Program administrators consistently rated organizational climate more favorably than did teachers. Research on differential climate perceptions in other work settings is summarized. A review of studies supporting the importance of implementing practices that promote perceptual congruence is provided. A five-page reference list is included. (Author)

CLOSING THE GAP: AN ANALYSIS OF TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING

By

Paula Jorde-Bloom
National College of Education
2840 Sheridan Road
Evanston, Illinois 60201
(312) 256-5150 ext. 2251

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Running Head: ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the dimensions of organizational climate as they relate to early childhood work environments. It reports the results of a study involving 629 early childhood workers representing 65 nonprofit and for-profit, center-based programs. The focus of the inquiry was to determine in what ways the administrators (N=94) and teachers (N=535) differed in their perceptions of organizational practices. Results of the data analysis show statistically significant differences with respect to how administrators and teachers view all ten dimensions of organizational climate. In eight of the ten dimensions, the differences were significant at $p < .01$. Program administrators consistently rated organizational climate more favorably than teachers. Research on differential climate perceptions in other work settings is summarized along with a review of studies supporting the importance of implementing practices that promote perceptual congruence.

Introduction

There has been a great deal of interest in recent years in measuring the dimensions of organizational climate as they relate to the quality of work life for individuals in different work settings. Several instruments have been developed that assess climate indicators in business and industry (Seashore, Lawler, Mirvis, & Cammann, 1983; Nash, 1979; Bowditch, 1982) and in elementary and secondary educational settings (Gottfredson, 1984; Halpin & Croft, 1963; Likert, 1977; Moos, 1979; Wilson, 1984).

To date, however, little attention has been given to the situation-specific demands of early childhood work environments as they relate to overall organizational climate. The funding structure, decision-making hierarchy, methods of supervision, delineation of roles, and the nature of the work in preschool and child care programs are quite different than other work environments (Jorde-Bloom, in press). This has diminished the practical utility of using other organizational climate instruments to monitor and change the early childhood work setting.

This paper will first provide an overview of the dimensions of organizational climate as they relate to early childhood work environments. It will then detail the results of the data analysis regarding differences in climate perceptions of the administrators and teachers who work in early childhood settings. Finally, it will summarize research on differential climate perceptions and the importance of implementing practices that promote congruence.

Conceptual Framework

Organizational climate is made up of the collective perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and values of the individuals in a particular work setting. It is a composite of the personalities that come together and the leadership that guides them. Organizational climate is a relatively enduring global perception of the perceived "quality" of the characteristics or attributes of the organization (Tagiuri, 1968; James & Jones, 1974). It is influenced both by the structural components of the organization and the interactions between the individuals who work in the environment (Anderson, 1982; Schneider & Reichers, 1983). This is not to imply, however, that organizational climate is unidimensional. Many different organizational practices or variables contribute to the summary perception people have of their work environment (Moos, 1976; Jorde, in press).

It is important to emphasize that organizational climate is based on the subjective interpretation of events in a setting. These may or may not be congruent with objective reality. The subjective perceptions of workers are important to understand, though, because the way individuals interpret or "filter" events can be more important than objective reality. Individuals act toward events and objects on the basis of the meaning these things have for them (Halpin & Croft, 1963). Thus, workers will perceive reality differently depending on their role in the organization, their value orientation, and the context of each situation.

Organizational climate must also be distinguished from one's psychological climate or job satisfaction (James & Jones, 1974; Newman, 1977; Schneider, 1983). Psychological climate (job satisfaction) refers to the individual's evaluation of conditions existing on the job and the degree

to which those conditions meet individual needs and expectations (Jorde-Bloom, 1986a). Organizational climate, on the other hand, describes conditions that exist in the work setting based on the collective perceptions of workers.

The ten dimensions delineated in Table 1 arise from a practical sense about how organizations differ and are consistent with present theoretical knowledge about individual and group behavior in organizational settings.

Insert Table 1 about here

Methodology

Sample

This study involved 629 early childhood workers representing 65 nonprofit and for-profit, center-based programs in 25 states. The sample included 32 males and 597 females. It included 94 individuals who held administrative positions (supervisor, director, or assistant director) and 535 individuals who held teaching positions (head teacher, teacher, or assistant teacher). All subjects worked minimum of 20 hours per week at their respective centers. Of the total sample, 395 were employed full-time. Program size ranged from 20 to 329 students with a mean size of 86 students.

Instrumentation

The Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (Jorde-Bloom, 1986c) was used to assess perceptions of current climate along ten dimensions

(collegiality, professional growth, supervisor support, clarity, reward system, decision making structure, goal consensus, task orientation, physical environment, and innovativeness). Both empirical and conceptual criteria were used to determine the choice of items and subscales included in this questionnaire. Content validation was achieved through a Q-sort by early childhood professionals. A total of 739 early childhood workers were used in the standardization and norm referencing of the instrument.

As an assessment tool, the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey demonstrates adequate psychometric characteristics (Jorde-Bloom-1986c). Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for the subscales range from .65 (physical setting) to .84 (supervisor support) with an overall internal consistency of .93. Two month test-retest reliability on the instrument was calculated for 80 individuals. The test-retest reliabilities are all within an acceptable range, varying from a low of .60 (clarity) to a high of .93 (decision making structure). Analysis of variance procedures indicate that all ten subscales significantly discriminate among centers ($p < .001$). The subscale intercorrelations range from .15 to .78 suggesting that the dimensions measure different though related characteristics of the organization. These results provide support for the utility of assessing organizational climate along a number of different dimensions instead of one unidimensional continuum.

The Early Childhood Work Environment Survey consists of 100 items to measure the ten dimensions of organizational climate. The questions are presented in a yes/no (true/false) format. For each of the items, the subject is asked to indicate agreement with a specific statement. The possible range of scores for each subscale is 0 to 10. For unfavorable

statements, the scoring is reversed. Thus, a low score on any subscale represents negative perceptions, and a high score represents favorable perceptions.

Subjects were also asked to complete a brief questionnaire eliciting information about their level of education (scored 1 - 8, from high school diploma to doctorate), years of experience in the field of early childhood education, number of years (or months) in their current position, hours of employment, and salary range (scored 1 - 9, depending on level).

A final section of the survey focused on workers' professional orientation. This section included questions regarding their involvement in professional organizations, how frequently they attended outside workshops and conferences, the number and type of educational journals and magazines they read, and if they considered their current position "a career" or "just a job." The possible range of scores was 0 to 20, with a low score indicating minimal involvement in professional activities and a high score indicating a strong professional orientation.

Data Collection Procedures

Questionnaires were mailed to each participating center during the Spring of 1985. A staff representative was selected to distribute a survey and return envelope to each employee. Anonymity of individual responses was emphasized. The average response rate within centers was 87% of the total number of employees.

Results

Table 2 presents a frequency distribution of administrators and teachers by level of education and salary. Table 3 provides the means, standard deviations, and range of scores for the remaining background characteristics included in this study. The prototypical profile of teachers and administrators that emerged from this study is consistent with previous research on early childhood workers (NAEYC, 1986; WCAEYC, 1986).

It was not surprising to find that the administrators and teachers included in this study were dissimilar in many respects. The administrators ranged in age from 20 to 64 with a mean age of 36. Ninety percent of the administrators were female. Seventy-three percent held a bachelor's degree and 37% had achieved a master's degree. They averaged nine years in the field of early childhood education and five years at their current position. Of those administrators who worked full time, more than half earned over $17,000 per year. The mean professional orientation score for the administrators was 8.89 out of a possible 20.

The teachers in this sample ranged in age from 16 to 68 with a mean age of 30. Ninety-seven percent were female. Only 38% of the teachers held a bachelor's degree. They averaged five years in the field of early childhood and three years at their current position. Of those teachers who worked full time, only 36% earned over 11,000 per year. The mean professional orientation score for this group was 4.20 out of 20.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

Analysis of variance procedures were used to discern if there were statistically significant differences in the background characteristics of these two groups. In all categories (age, education level, years in early childhood education, years on the job, salary, and level of professional orientation), these two groups were significantly different ($p < .0001$).

Table 4 presents the means and standard deviations for the ten dimensions of organizational climate by center and by role within centers.

Insert Table 4 about here

A comparison of mean scores for the ten dimensions shows that worker's perceptions of the dimension evaluating opportunities for professional growth was consistently rated the lowest by both teachers ($M = 4.23$, s.d. 2.22) and by administrators ($M = 5.89$, s.d. 2.25). Staff expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of inservice training, support for pursuing advanced degrees, and limited opportunities to go to professional conferences. Teachers and administrators both rated their centers the highest on the dimension of innovativeness (teachers, $M = 7.38$, s.d. 1.99; administrators, $M = 8.65$, s.d. 1.68). They uniformly felt their centers emphasized creativity and implemented changes and needed.

Interestingly, univariate correlational analyses failed to demonstrate a significant relationship between the size of the organization (as measured by the total student population and by total number of staff) and any of the ten dimensions of climate except for

collegiality ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$). The larger the center, the lower workers rated team spirit, cooperation, and group cohesiveness. Low to moderate negative relationships were observed between employee turnover (as measured by attrition during the previous year) and five dimensions of organizational climate (collegiality, $r = -.25$; goal consensus, $r = -.28$; physical setting, $r = -.27$; decision making, $r = -.18$; reward system, $r = -.16$).

One-way analyses of variance procedures were employed to assess differences in organizational climate as perceived by administrators and teachers. The data show statistically significant differences with respect to how these two groups view all ten dimensions of organizational climate. In eight of the ten dimensions, the differences were significant at $p < .01$. The early childhood program administrators in this study consistently rated climate dimensions higher than teachers. Table 5 details the results of the analysis of variance regarding perceptions of organizational climate by role in the organization.

Insert Table 5 about here

A separate analysis of variance was conducted using only those subjects who were employed full time. In all dimensions, the differences between administrator and teacher perceptions were even stronger (collegiality, $F = 12.29$, $p < .0005$; professional growth, $F = 47.95$, $p < .00001$; supervisor support, $F = 9.58$, $p < .002$; clarity, $F = 28.31$, $p < .00001$; reward system, $F = 34.99$, $p < .00001$; decision making, $F = 31.82$, $p < .00001$; goal consensus, $F = 6.98$, $p < .009$; task orientation, $F = 10.77$, $p < .001$; physical setting, $F = 4.75$, $p < .03$; innovativeness, $F = 36.05$, $p < .00001$.

Discussion

Different Roles, Different Perceptions

The results of this study are disquieting, yet perhaps not so surprising in light of previous research in other work settings. A review of the literature on differential perceptions of individuals in a variety of work environments shows there are consistent patterns that emerge. In the organizational literature relating to business and industry, for example, individuals at different levels of the organizational hierarchy have consistently been found to hold different perceptions of organizational practices (Moos, 1976; Newman, 1977; Schneider & Reichers, 1983; Seashore, et al., 1983). In general, climate perceptions are more highly correlated for people in similar positions than for people in other positions. Moreover, those in managerial positions tend to view the agency more positively than their assistants.

In elementary and secondary educational environments, as well, similar patterns are evident. Teachers' and principals' perceptions of school climate have been found to be relatively independent (Anderson, 1982; Fox, 1974; Wiggins, 1972; Sweeney, 1980; Sanders & Watkins, 1983). Repeatedly, studies have shown that teachers and administrators do have different frames of reference and, consequently, different perceptions of school-related problems.

Reineke and Welsh (1975), for example, found significant differences in the way principals and teachers perceived the adequacy of teaching conditions. Principals tended to view conditions more favorably than teachers. Sandefur and Smith (1980) found that although teachers and principals generally agreed on which problems were serious, they differed

considerably in their perceptions of the magnitude of those problems. In a more recent study, Doan, Hewitt, and Morrow (1986) found that principals and teachers differed significantly on their ranking of instructional problems in the elementary setting. Finally, Ignatovich, Cusick, and Ray (1979) found strong differences in the values and belief patterns of principals and teachers regarding instruction. Teachers emphasized a humanistic orientation to instruction whereas administrators emphasized student achievement and test outcomes.

One might have hypothesized, however, that early childhood work environments would be different. In business and industry, as well as in elementary and secondary educational settings, a hierarchical model prevails where the delineation of titles, roles, and corresponding job duties is highly differentiated. In contrast, early childhood educators have long prided themselves in creating educational settings that are more egalitarian and participatory in nature, where shared space, shared responsibilities, and frequent interaction; between teachers and administrators is the rule of thumb.

In many early childhood settings the hierarchical lines of authority are often vague and the differentiation of responsibilities not sharply defined. Program directors wear many hats, managing the "business" aspects of the program, but also spending considerable time working directly with children along side their teachers (Sciarra & Dorsey, 1979). Whitebook and her associates (1982) found, for example, that aides, teachers, and directors all engaged in the same duties, despite differences in job title. The distinctions in responsibility were related more to the quantity of time spent performing these tasks than to the nature of the tasks themselves. While it is true that tension can

result because there are distinctions in title and pay without equal distinction in the actual work performed (Jorde, 1982), one might also assume that these overlapping domains of responsibility would result in a more shared perception of organizational climate. The results of this study suggest that is apparently not the case.

But why? Undoubtedly the reason for these differential perceptions is due to several complex and interrelating factors. The results of this study and supporting research conducted in other work settings suggest three important areas that need to be considered: the background characteristics of the two groups, the scope and nature of their roles, and the perceived control they have over their jobs.

If we look at the background characteristics of the administrators and teachers in this study, we see significant differences in age, educational level, experience, salary, and professional orientation. These differences may help explain why administrators and teachers perceive the "same" environment differently. Rogers (1983) uses the term heterophily to describe the existence of differences between individuals or groups of individuals. He points out that as groups become more homophilious, communication and understanding between them increases. Certainly, differences in education and experience can be potential barriers to a common perception of climate. On the whole, however, previous research has found that individual background characteristics in themselves are only minimally related to environmental perceptions (Moos 1974, 1976). Personality and background variables are only relevant through the mediating effects of role position (Moos, 1974, 1976).

The scope and nature of the administrative and teaching roles directly relates to the way time is allocated. The assumption that teachers and directors are in close contact and share similar experiences by their overlapping roles may be a flawed one. While the research in this area is limited, at least one study supports this conclusion. In his analysis of 35 child care centers, Neugebauer (1975) found that 83% of the directors spent no time working directly with children on a regular basis. Forty-three percent of the teachers in these centers felt that the director was not in "close touch" with what was happening in the classroom. Perhaps the roles of director and teacher are more distinct than previously assumed.

Clearly role differentiation is closely tied to perceived control. It is possible that this is why administrators as a group perceive organizational climate more favorably than their staff. The teachers in this study, for example, consistently reported "the director likes to make most of the decisions" and "people are sometimes asked for their opinion, but the decision has already been made."

There is some support for these findings from previous studies investigating early childhood work environments. Whitebook and her associates (1982) found, for example, that teachers had little power and control in making decisions affecting center life. On paper the decision making structure a program may look quite egalitarian; in reality, however, teachers perceive a strong hierarchical arrangement. Neugebauer (1975), as well, found that teachers consistently rated decision making more authoritarian than did directors. One half of the teachers in the large centers he surveyed and 42% of those in small centers indicated major decisions were made by directors without consultation.

The results of this study demonstrating that administrators consistently paint a "brighter" picture of center life than their teachers do, provides preliminary support for previous research in the area of locus of control. Locus of control refers to the extent to which an individual believes his or her behavior determines specific life events (Rotter, 1966; Lefcourt, 1981). Those with an "internal" locus of control tend to believe they are in control of their destinies and able to cause certain events. Persons with an "external" locus of control tend to believe that events are caused by factors beyond their control such as fate, luck, or powerful others. Where one falls on the external to internal locus of control continuum appears to be related to the degree of stress one perceives and how well one is able to cope with that stress (Parkay, Olejnik, & Proller, 1986). Additional research is needed to test the hypothesis that administrators and teachers in early childhood environments are significantly different in their locus of control and that their control orientation is related to their perceptions of organizational climate.

Closing the Gap

The results of this study have implications for the preparation and continuing professional development of early childhood personnel. Foremost, it suggests that administrators and teachers cannot assume that their view of the organization life is necessarily a shared one. Whether differences in perception arise from differences in background, the structure of roles and responsibilities, or the perceived control associated with those roles, it is clear that individuals do "filter" their perception of organizational practices depending on their position in the organization.

A perceptual mismatch between administrators and teachers may well have a detrimental effect on the quality of work life for staff and the quality of services they provide for children. Several studies at the elementary level have found, for example, that differences in perception can contribute to job dissatisfaction and organizational conflict (Fox, 1974; Hoyle, 1978; Sweeney, 1980). Goodlad (1983) found that the perceptions of principals in "more satisfying" schools was congruent with those of the teachers in these schools. Further, he reports that the level of satisfaction with the school as a workplace is an accurate predictor of several indicators of school effectiveness. At the early childhood level, Neugebauer (1975) found that teachers in high participation centers (those with shared decision making) consistently rated their centers more favorably in terms of team functioning than did teachers in low participation centers.

Identification of a perceptual mismatch between teachers and administrators is an important first step in beginning to structure opportunities to promote convergence in viewpoints on organizational practices. Recognizing that people have discrepant viewpoints can help individuals become sensitive to the reasons for these differences and the impact they can have on program functioning.

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Table 1
The Ten Dimensions of Organizational Climate

Dimension	Definition	Related Research
Collegiality	Extent to which staff are friendly, supportive, and trust one another. Measures the peer cohesion and esprit de corps of the group.	Little, 1982 Goodlad, 1983 Zahorick, 1984 Moos, 1976
Professional Growth	The degree of emphasis placed on personal and professional growth.	Joyce, et al., 1983 Fullan, 1982; Kent, 1985
Supervisor Support	Measures the presence of facilitative leadership that provides encouragement, support, and clear expectations.	Fleischer, 1985 Silver & Moyle, 1984 Purkey & Smith, 1982 Zigarmi, 1981
Clarity	The extent to which policies, procedures, and responsibilities are clearly defined and communicated.	Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982 Moos, 1976 Pettegrew & Wolf, 1982
Reward System	Concerns the degree of fairness and equity in the distribution of pay, fringe benefits, and opportunities for advancement.	Whitebook, et al., 1982 Adams, 1971 Stern, 1986 Nash, 1984
Decision Making	Measures the degree of autonomy given to staff and the extent to which they are involved in center-wide decisions.	Neugebauer, 1975 Whitebook, et al., 1982 Fox, 1974
Goal Consensus	The degree to which staff agree on the goals and objectives of the center.	Wilson & Firestone, 1985 Silver & Moyle, 1984 Fox, 1974.
Task Orientation	Measures the emphasis placed on good planning, efficiency, and getting the job done.	Moos, 1976 Nash, 1984
Physical Setting	The extent to which the spatial arrangement of the center helps or hinders staff in carrying out their responsibilities.	Phyfe-Perkins, 1980 Prescott, 1981 Weinstein, 1979 Steele, 1973
Innovativeness	Measures the extent to which the organization adapts to change and encourages staff to find creative ways to solve problems.	Jorde-Bloom, 1986b Berman & McLaughlin, 1978 Young & Kasten, 1980 Fullan, 1982

Table 2

Distribution of Administrators and Teachers by Education and Salary Level

Education	Admin N=94 %	Teachers N=535 %	Salary	Admin* N=84 %	Teachers* N=311 % **
High school	5.3	18.1	Under $5,000	2.4	7.4
Some college	18.1	29.5	5,000 - 7,999	1.2	22.5
Assoc. degree	3.2	14.0	8.000 - 10,999	3.6	32.8
Bachelors degree	18.1	24.7	11,000 - 13,999	15.5	25.4
Graduate classes	21.3	8.4	14,000 - 16,999	22.6	8.7
Master's degree	23.4	4.3	17,000 - 19,999	25.0	1.6
Post master's	8.5	.9	20,000 - 22,999	16.7	.3
Doctorate	2.1		23,000 - 25,999	8.3	
			26,000 or more	4.8	

* Full-time employees only
** Missing values = 1.3%

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Range of Scores for Background Characteristics of Administrators and Teachers

	Administrators (N=94)			Teachers (N=535)		
	M	S.D.	Range	M	S.D.	Range
Age	35.71	9.62	20 - 64	30.05	10.06	16 - 68
Years in ece	9.39	6.08	1 - 33	5.10	4.48	0 - 33
Years on the job	5.10	5.04	0 - 26	3.10	3.23	0 - 18
Prof orientation	8.89	4.63	0 - 20	4.20	2.67	0 - 16

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Ten Dimensions of Organizational Climate By Role and By Center

Subscale	Administrators (N=94) Mean	S.D.	Teachers (N=535) Mean	S.D.	Center (N=65) Mean	S.D.
Collegiality	7.31	2.40	6.63	2.36	6.85	1.56
Professional Growth	5.89	2.25	4.23	2.22	4.53	1.63
Supervisor Support	7.89	2.01	7.25	2.19	7.30	1.25
Clarity	8.09	2.23	6.82	2.65	7.11	1.73
Reward System	7.07	1.67	5.78	2.05	6.04	1.12
Decision Making	8.23	1.58	6.84	2.35	7.06	1.32
Goal Consensus	7.55	1.77	7.05	2.17	7.16	1.15
Task Orientation	7.45	1.69	6.80	2.12	6.97	1.17
Physical Setting	7.85	1.98	7.34	2.30	7.40	1.40
Innovativeness	8.65	1.68	7.38	1.99	7.61	1.15

Table 5

Analysis of Variance by Role

Subscale	Means Admin	Means Teacher	MS Between	MS Within	F	Significance*
Collegiality	7.31	6.63	36.47	5.62	6.49	.011
Professional Growth	5.89	4.23	221.18	4.95	44.64	.00001
Supervisor Support	7.89	7.25	32.55	4.69	6.94	.009
Clarity	8.09	6.82	127.60	6.74	18.93	.00001
Reward System	7.07	5.78	128.28	3.97	32.57	.00001
Decision Making	8.23	6.84	154.31	5.61	30.61	.00001
Goal Consensus	7.55	7.05	20.23	4.49	4.50	.034
Task Orientation	7.45	6.80	33.32	4.26	7.83	.005
Physical Setting	7.85	7.34	20.36	4.10	3.99	.046
Innovativeness	8.65	7.38	128.18	3.82	33.52	.00001

* df range from 1,623 to 1,606 depending on missing values