Introduction to Improving School Climate for Minoritized or Marginalized Students

Lindsay M. Fallon

Patrick Robinson-Link

Margarida Veiga

University of Massachusetts Boston

Fallon, L. M., Robinson-Link, P. & Veiga, M. (in press). Introduction to improving school climate for minoritized or marginalized students. In T. La Salle (Ed.). *A Primer for Creating Positive School Environments for Minoritized and Marginalized Youth.*

Author Note

The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences supported this research through Grant R324B170010 to the University of Massachusetts Boston. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education. Address correspondence to Lindsay M. Fallon, Department of Counseling and School Psychology, 100 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125. Email: lindsay.fallon@umb.edu

Abstract

Critical theorists contend that power distributed within social institutions (e.g., schools, school districts) is inequitable, favoring those in dominant social groups. The oppression experienced by minoritized or marginalized youth impacts students' experience in school and their educational outcomes (Proctor, 2016). To disrupt this oppression, educators should take action to promote a positive school climate in a manner that prioritizes the needs and outcomes of minoritized and marginalized students. This requires an understanding of school climate as a construct and the sociopolitical forces that shape it. This chapter briefly expands on the discussion provided in Section I to offer such a conceptualization and lay the foundation for Section II. Inclusive in this chapter is a general overview of strategies used in schools to promote school climate for minoritized and marginalized youth prior to subsequent chapters in which this topic is addressed for specific racial and ethnic groups.

Introduction to Improving School Climate for Minoritized or Marginalized Students

Critical theorists contend that power distributed within social institutions (e.g., schools, school districts) is inequitable, favoring those in dominant social groups (e.g., individuals who are non-Hispanic White; Liang et al., 2019). The oppression experienced by minoritized or marginalized youth impacts students' experience in school and their educational outcomes (Proctor, 2016). To disrupt this oppression, educators should take action to promote a positive school climate in a manner that prioritizes the needs and outcomes of minoritized and marginalized students. This requires an understanding of school climate as a construct and the sociopolitical forces that shape it. This chapter briefly expands on the discussion provided in Section I to offer such a conceptualization and lay the foundation for Section II. Inclusive in this chapter is a general overview of strategies used in schools to promote school climate for minoritized and marginalized youth prior to subsequent chapters in which this topic is addressed for specific groups.

Conceptualizing School Climate for Minoritized and Marginalized Populations

Although the first documented use of the term "school climate" is credited to New York City principal Arthur Perry's book entitled *Management of a City School*, school climate was not studied systematically until the 1960s. Private companies, interested in maximizing the productivity of their workforce, began to focus efforts on what was called "organizational climate research" (Zullig et al., 2010). Interested in applying these emerging techniques in schools, Halpin and Croft (1963) developed the Organizational Climate Descriptive

Questionnaire to examine the impact of school's organizational climate on student outcomes. The focus of these early school climate studies tended to be on observable characteristics of the school such as the condition of the facilities or access to resources (Anderson, 1982).

The 1990s and early 2000s saw growing concern around safety in U.S. schools. The term "school violence" emerged in 1992 as a reference to a broad range of behaviors (e.g., use of controlled substance abuse, verbal and physical aggression, possession of weapons, threats of violence, participation in gangs) considered risky or harmful not just to students and staff but to the learning process itself (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). Despite school crime rates decreasing from 1992-1998 (Cooper, 2003), the American public became increasingly concerned with the "safety and order narrative," which positioned schools as increasingly dangerous places that required intensive intervention to maintain safety and order (Skiba, 2015).

In 1994, President Clinton reauthorized the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act, which included provisions that linked federal funding to mandated reporting about student behavior and the adoption of zero-tolerance policies (Cooper, 2003). The goal of this legislation was to improve school safety by removing any student who posed a threat from the school community (Skiba, 2015). Interest in the topic of school climate steadily increased following several tragic school shootings in the 1990s and the release of the first school crime and safety index in 1998 (Kaufman et al., 1998). In 2010, U.S. Department of Education invested $38.8 million in Safe and Supportive School (S3) grants to support the analysis of school climate and development of interventions to reduce substance use and improve school safety (Darling et al., 2018). Since then, interest in the topic of school climate has increased substantially each year.

Recently, interest has turned to how school climate can be leveraged to promote equitable outcomes for minoritized and marginalized youth. Racially and ethnically minoritized youth tend

to report that they feel unsafe in schools, lack trusting relationships with adults in the school building, and perceive a negative school climate (Voight et al., 2015). This is problematic given that research suggests that a greater sense of school connectedness is associated with higher graduation rates, lower suspension rates, and lower suicide rates for minoritized and marginalized youth (e.g., Tomek et al., 2018). Results from research have also identified malleable factors that negatively impact minoritized youth's perception of school climate. These include mismatches between student-teacher identities (La Salle et al., 2020) and high student-teacher ratios (Mitchell et al., 2010). In schools in which minoritized and marginalized youth report more favorable school climate, educators and school staff are reported to incorporate opportunities to learn about students' cultures and explicitly respect racial and ethnic diversity (Voight et al., 2015). This may be particularly critical given the systemic racism and oppression minoritized and marginalized students face in schools. We explore this in greater detail in the following section.

Influences on School Climate for Minoritized and Marginalized Students

Systemic racism has long impacted the educational experiences of minoritized and marginalized students. Systemic racism is distinguished from both interpersonal racism (racism occurring within the context of relationships) and institutional racism (racism occurring within the context of a single institution) by its focus on how interlocking institutions, policies, and practices work together to deny opportunity and justice to racial and ethnic minoritized individuals (Gee & Ford, 2011). The scope and page limits of this chapter do not allow for a full and complete description of systemic racism in public K-12 education in the U.S. However, our brief discussion of injustices related to school funding, curricular norms, school staffing, and school discipline should be viewed as an interconnected and mutually reinforcing system

requiring intentional work to dismantle. While much of the following discussion focuses on systemic racism, we believe that applying a systemic lens to school climate issues impacting other groups such as LQBTQIA+ students and students with disabilities will also lead to more nuanced, comprehensive, and informed school climate interventions.

Inequitable School Funding

Schools serving racially and ethnically minoritized students often receive less funding than schools serving White students, even after considering the income level of schools and districts (Sosina & Weathers, 2019). Less funding impacts the ability to fund a safe school building (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018), extracurricular activities (e.g., music, art, sports; Snellman et al., 2015), special education services (Needham & Houck, 2019), and highly qualified staff (Baker & Weber, 2016). Inequitable school funding can be linked directly to a long history of residential redlining, racial restrictive covenants, and, more recently, the targeting of Black and brown neighborhoods with subprime mortgages (Rothstein, 2017). The net effect of these policies is systematic undervaluing or loss of homes for Black Americans and a corresponding decrease in the local tax base available to fund neighborhood schools. This is devastating within a system wherein approximately 45% of school funds come from local sources (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Although several states (e.g., Maryland; Wiggins, 2020) are currently undergoing legislative battles to make school funding formulas more equitable, this problem will likely persist in places where educational budgets largely depend on local property taxes (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018).

The link between decades of underfunding for schools with larger proportions of economically and racially marginalized students and school climate is most evident in the physical condition of schools serving marginalized communities. For example, school districts

with higher enrollments of economically and/or racially minoritized students often contain school campuses with inadequate HVAC systems, large numbers of portable buildings, and poorly maintained lighting and walls (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018). While the physical condition of buildings is clearly linked to early definitions of school climate emphasizing directly observable characteristics of school facilities (Anderson, 1982), school funding inequities impact additional areas related to broader conceptions of school climate such as student-teacher ratios (Mitchell et al., 2010), the retention of high-quality teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), and adequate funding for extracurricular activities that promote school connectedness for youth (Martinez et al., 2016).

Lack of Representation in Curriculum and Teacher Workforce

In addition to chronic school underfunding, most students are educated with core curricula that fail to incorporate the cultural wealth and assets of those from minoritized and marginalized groups. For example, teaching of Black history is often limited to descriptions of slavery and the Civil Rights movement (Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019). Similarly, LGBTQIA+-inclusive content is often isolated from core content areas and not integrated into primary course lessons (Snapp et al., 2015). The current failure to include the voices of minoritized and marginalized groups in school curricula echoes several historical periods. For instance, Indian Boarding Schools forcing Native American students to unlearn their own culture and language for the sake of assimilation laid the groundwork for more recent initiatives such as English-only movements wherein legislators pushed to remove bilingual education from schools (Macedo, 2000). Given that race, gender, sexuality, and language form a significant part of one's identity, it is safe to assume that minoritized and marginalized students feel less affirmed when attending schools with curriculums that are not representative of their identity.

In addition to school curricula that fails to honor the experience of minoritized and marginalized students, the teaching workforce is disproportionately White (79%) despite just 47% of U.S. students identifying as White (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). To partially understand this disparity and its consequences, it is important to examine the assumptions underlying the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the impact those assumptions had on Black teachers and students. Broadly speaking, desegregation orders required many more Black students to bus across cities to White schools than vice versa (Bell, 1989) while largely ignoring the moral imperative to provide adequate resources for the schools that Black students already attended (Milner et al., 2016). This focus on moving Black students to schools with White students reflected an assumption that Black schools run by Black teachers and administrators were inherently inferior (rather than lacking resources) and that Black students would "benefit from being in class with" White students and teachers (Milner et al., 2016, p. 23).

Assumptions of Black inferiority embedded in the implementation of *Brown* led to the firing of large numbers of Black teachers, the movement of the most highly regarded Black teachers to newly integrated schools, and the demotion of Black principals to more subordinate roles largely focused on the discipline of Black students (Milner et al., 2016). These decisions have had a long-standing and detrimental effect on Black students who are rarely taught by Black teachers despite the positive academic effects of such an experience (Gershenson et al., 2016). The lost academic opportunities documented by Gershenson et al. (2016) may be connected to the fact that Black students without access to Black teachers have fewer opportunities to connect with role models who understand their experiences in ways that White teachers, however well-intentioned, cannot (Milner et al., 2016). This experiential gap may also

manifest itself within the *hidden curriculum*, or the informal connections to culture and student experience weaved throughout classroom instruction (Milner et al., 2016). In short, if we view school climate from a cultural-ecological lens (LaSalle et al, 2015), we can see the impact of broad social forces and government policies, such as the systematic exclusion of Black teachers, on important aspects of school climate such as school connectedness and cultural acceptance (LaSalle et al., 2020). Based on these considerations, we cannot wait for government policy to rectify the lack of diversity in the teacher workforce and must act now to promote culturally responsive teaching and leadership to improve school climate for students who are disproportionately taught by teachers with differing life experiences and social identities.

School Discipline Disparities

Systemic racism has perpetuated disproportionality related to exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., suspension and expulsion) for minoritized and marginalized students. This has implications for school climate. For example, suspensions are disproportionately issued to Black students as early as preschool, especially for offenses such as disrespect or insubordination (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). This was made even more explicit within a study by Wright (2016) who showed that Black boys in the state of Ohio received school punishment at 11.5 times the rate of Asian American boys and almost twice the rate of the next most punished group, Black girls. At the school-wide level, Welch and Payne (2010) found that the percentage of Black students in a school was a strong predictor of the extent to which the school relies on exclusionary discipline. In addition to the negative individual student consequences resulting from exclusionary discipline (Cholewa et al., 2018), frequent use of exclusionary discipline results in more negative student perceptions of order, discipline, and fairness within their schools (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013).

Beyond the statistics, there is evidence suggesting that minoritized and marginalized students know they are being treated unfairly. For example, Carter Andrews et al. (2020) conducted focus groups with a diverse group of middle school students and found that many racially and ethnically minoritized students viewed their school's discipline practices as racist, culturally biased, and lacking clarity. For example, minoritized and marginalized students frequently reported that they felt singled out for punishment in situations where other students (often White students) misbehaved in similar ways. Additionally, students reported that their experiences of feeling singled out for punishment based on race was coupled with shaming practices, such as yelling or publicly announcing their punishment to the entire class. Findings such as these warrant a call for improving school climate for minoritized or marginalized students. We provide recommendations and strategies next.

Efforts to Improve School Climate for Minoritized or Marginalized Students

In the chapters to follow, authors will describe ways to improve school climate for students from specific minoritized or marginalized groups. This chapter offers a broader overview of strategies to promote school climate. Specifically, below is a brief review of relevant literature pertaining to implementation of (a) culturally relevant and affirming schoolwide interventions and supports, (b) using data-based decision making to guide efforts to advance equity, (c) collaborating authentically with families and community members to accentuate cultural wealth and assets, and (d) providing comprehensive, high-quality, impactful teacher professional development to affect change.

Schoolwide Interventions and Supports

Schoolwide intervention and supports to promote positive school climate have been implemented for decades. Although there are a multitude of frameworks and intervention

options, more commonly implemented supports include social-emotional learning (SEL; McCormick et al., 2015), anti-bullying programs (Gaffney et al., 2021) trauma-informed practices (Blitz et al., 2020), and restorative justice (RJ; Augustine et al., 2018). Each of these frameworks and intervention approaches have an emerging literature base supporting its impact on students (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2021), staff (McIntosh et al., 2021) and family members' (Vincent et al., 2021) perceptions of school climate, specifically minoritized or marginalized students.

One framework with a more established evidence base is schoolwide positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2020). Schoolwide PBIS is a prevention-oriented multi-tiered system of support framework aimed at promoting prosocial behavior in school and community contexts. Tier 1 practices (e.g., explicitly teaching behavioral expectations) are intended to support all individuals' (e.g., youth) success, whereas Tiers 2 and 3 incorporate targeted and more intensive behavioral interventions scaled to the level of student need. There is a dearth of research examining students' perceptions of school climate and schoolwide PBIS, specifically the perspectives of minoritized or marginalized students. However, it stands to reason that favorable perceptions of school climate may be more likely if implementation of PBIS is seen as culturally relevant, affirming, and reflective of student voice (Heidelburg et al., 2021).

In a recent study of school climate perceptions among Latine middle school students (Romero & O'Malley, 2020), results from analyses supported providing students with authentic opportunities for sharing their voice and aid in school decision-making to promote agency and self-determination. The authors also offered concrete examples of how to make schoolwide PBIS feel more relevant by including representation from students' culture to define and teach

behavioral expectations (e.g., by including multilingual materials, incorporating symbols of students' cultural heritage) (see McIntosh et al. in the current volume).

Integration of student voice and shared decision-making can redistribute power more equitably in school spaces. Additional examples include educators asking students about their preferences for recognition, including if and how they would like to be praised and acknowledged for meeting shared expectations. Students may express their preferences using a preference assessment or recommend acknowledgement procedures to educators. Also, educator responses to challenging behavior in school might be framed as instructional (versus punitive), focused on repairing harm and recommitting to shared expectations. This will likely involve educators listening deeply to student concerns and communicating transparently with family members and other vested partners. These efforts will likely contribute to a safer, more productive learning environment, with more positive perceptions of school climate for youth from marginalized or minoritized identities. Ultimately, it is important that the design and implementation of schoolwide systems of intervention and supports (such as schoolwide PBIS) affirms students' identities, reflects students' cultures, and centers racial equity (Fallon et al., 2021).

Data for Decision-making

Centering racial equity is especially critical for data-based decision-making in school contexts. Data-based decision-making has become a priority in schools due to the emphasis on accountability incorporated into federal legislation such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) reauthorized in 2015 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) most recently revised in 2004. Data can be disaggregated by demographic variables (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) so that educators and school leaders can understand the experience of individuals from

minoritized or marginalized groups and make targeted decisions. For instance, in a recent study, researchers who sought to examine perceptions of students identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual had significantly lower perceptions of school climate than heterosexual students (La Salle, et al., 2019). Examination of disaggregated data can inform a more nuanced understanding of data trends and concerns, leading school staff to design well-aligned, effective interventions and supports in response. Subsequent chapters will provide additional details as to how disaggregating data to drive targeted decision-making can support minoritized or marginalized students.

Collaboration with Families and Community Members

Efforts to improve school climate should be situated in an ecological model that acknowledges the influence of a student's family and community in addition to an individual's identity. Such efforts include engaging in authentic collaboration with families and community members to activate community cultural wealth. Educators might do this by establishing systems to support ongoing, transparent, bidirectional communication between home and school, as well as prioritizing shared goal setting, decision-making, and accountability among vested partners (e.g., parents, teachers). Data collected could be sourced from school staff, students, and family members and be triangulated, improving accuracy of information gathered. This can support more strategic and focused decision-making (see chapter on Data Triangulation in current volume). Furthermore, family members from minoritized backgrounds can join (or co-lead) school climate teams charged with interpreting data and devising steps toward collective action. Educators might also partner with community personnel (e.g., cultural brokers, liaisons, organizers) to center the needs of the community in their school climate promotion efforts.

Teacher Professional Development

Professional development is critical for educators to (a) learn about disparate outcomes related to school climate for students from minoritized and marginalized groups, (b) consider their own biases and participation in systems that perpetuate inequities and system racism, (c) disrupt deficit thinking about students and families, (d) focus on developing and sustaining positive relationships, and (e) work to improve school climate to promote equity (Flores & Kyere, 2020). School leaders and school community members might develop a comprehensive plan for ongoing professional development (i.e., not a one-time training) that ensures training opportunities for staff match the organization's desired outcomes (such as improving perceptions of school climate among youth). Ideally, a trained facilitator can lead professional development in which teachers are asked to reflect on their personal beliefs, internalized stereotypes, and interactions with students (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). Such a facilitator might be able to best lead sessions and articulate that learning may come with discomfort, but such discomfort may be necessary to dismantle oppressive school conditions and enact change. In subsequent chapters, efforts to provide professional development, training and support to staff working with youth from minoritized or marginalized groups will be described.

Conclusion

This chapter offers an introduction to the influences on school climate for minoritized and marginalized students. Specifically, systemic racism is maintained in schools by oppressive policies (e.g., those contributing to inequitable school funding) and practices (e.g., those that contribute to disproportionality in school disciplinary actions). Factors such as a mismatch between student and teacher identities (La Salle et al., 2020) as well as high student-teacher ratios (Mitchell et al., 2010) can contribute to a lack of trusting relationships, contributing to negative perceptions of school climate. Broadly, there are many paths forward to improve school

climate and create safe, supportive, affirming spaces for all youth, particularly minoritized or marginalized students. Although these supports will be discussed in the chapters to follow, key strategies include (a) leveraging culturally relevant and affirming schoolwide interventions and supports, (b) using data-based decision making to guide efforts to advance equity, (c) collaborating authentically with families and community members to accentuate cultural wealth and assets, as well as (d) provide comprehensive, high-quality, impactful teacher professional development to affect change.

Resources

1. **Website:** Urban Institute's Office of Race and Equity Research https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/office-race-and-equity-research
2. **Book:** *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (2nd Edition) by Gloria Ladson-Billings
3. **Podcast:** The Leading Equity Center's Leading Equity Podcast https://www.leadingequitycenter.com/podcast

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