

# **Implications for School Administrators of the Perceptions of School Culture and Climate in Selected Public Secondary Schools in Alabama's River Region**

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## **Abstract**

In this study, the researchers examined the culture and climate of selected middle and high schools in Alabama's River Region. Teachers and administrators from nine middle and eleven high schools completed two electronic surveys: (a) the School Culture Survey (SCS) and (b) the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaires (OCDQ-RM/OCDQ-RS). The results were analyzed using SPSS and based on responses to the SCS from 100 middle school stakeholders and 95 responses to the OCDQ-RM. The researchers discovered no statistically significant difference in the perception of school climate and culture between middle and high school stakeholders. The researchers chose this demographic region because currently, there is no known research on culture and climate specific to the counties in this region of the state. Additionally, multiple schools in various districts are listed on the state's Under-Performing Schools List. The researchers found that the climate in participating middle schools is more collaborative. Therefore, the researchers determined that middle schools in this region have more open climates than high schools. After compiling the analytics, the researchers reported the findings and recommended that school leaders employ strategies to increase the trust levels between teachers and administration.

*Keywords:* School Climate, School Culture, Student Achievement, School Leadership, Stakeholder Perceptions

Culture and climate are the central nervous system of any organization and the determining factor of its thoughts, behaviors, and, ultimately, the outcomes (Schuneman, 2019). Some consider school culture and climate among the top influencers that affect student achievement outcomes, especially during a worldwide pandemic (Panchal et al., 2021). The failure to produce and provide quality schools that promote high academic standards, appropriate leadership, and collegiality among staff members (Hoy et al., 1991) has shortchanged America's students, schools, and school systems. This breach results from schools and districts' negligence in fostering and supporting student success and achievement. Federal and local governments have acknowledged this and responded by enacting specific legislation intended to address educational needs. One of the first major education legislative acts was The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). There have been subsequent reauthorizations of this bill to include the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA).

The elements of culture and climate are separate and distinct constructs; however, according to an article by AES Impact (2020), they are codependent, and "one drives and determines the other" (p.1). Culture affects every aspect of school and every educational process, while climate directly influences the mental health, the social and emotional well-being of students, staff, and administrators (Maxwell et al., 2017). In an attempt to improve academic environments and student achievement, the absence or inattention to school culture and climate is a major concern contributing to the detriment and decline of education nationally.

The purpose of this quantitative study was to assess and describe the factors of culture and the dimensions of climate in secondary public schools located in central Alabama from the viewpoint of school administrators and teachers. The researchers emphasized the importance of understanding and differentiating between the definitions of culture and climate and how each element contributes to successful student achievement, allowing education policymakers, school administrators, and classroom teachers to be more proficient and effective in their professional practices. Most importantly, clarifying this distinction and the need for both elements will create a path to greater student achievement and diminish the performance gaps between races, genders, and social classes. Gruenert and Whitaker (2017) define "climate" as the entire school's attitude, expressing that it is a mutual feeling within a group and is evident when members have similar reactions to certain stimuli. Schweig, Hamilton, and Baker (2019) contradicted this notion claiming that climate is based on individual perceptions. The authors provide an empirical analysis that supports the simultaneous existence of multiple climates in the academic setting to support their belief. He further refutes Gruenert and Whitaker's (2017) viewpoint by stating that group members possessing varying perceptions of the climate will respond differently to the same stimuli. Alternatively, "culture" is the unspoken and often unconscious norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals held and observed by group members. Thus, culture is established over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges (Retnowati et al., 2018; Peterson & Deal, 1998).

## **Review of Literature**

### **School Climate**

Many researchers express an unwavering agreement on two essential premises: 1) there is an identified set of factors that determines school climate and 2) students benefit in many ways from positive school climates (Kwong & Davis, 2015; Santikian, 2011; Smith et al., 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). While the school climate is defined by the beliefs of school stakeholder groups, such

as parents, students, teachers (ScholarChip, 2020), others define it differently (Owens & Valesky, 2015). Lindahl (2011) refers to school climate as stakeholders' perception about the school's leadership in cooperation with the working environment. Owens and Valesky (2015) suggest that climate is the characteristic of the entire organization; however, understanding these characteristics is the key to defining climate.

According to The National School Climate Council (2021), school climate considers the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on students, parents, and school personnel's behavior patterns as they experience school life; it also reflects on the norms, values, goals, teaching and learning practices, interpersonal relationships, and organizational structures. Additionally, AES Impact (2020) defines school climate as the atmosphere that permeates the organization and generally exemplifies the actions, thought processes, and experiences of stakeholders such as students, teachers, and administrators. The National School Climate Center (NSCC) conducted a research study. It revealed that "school climate includes major spheres of school life such as safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the environment as well as larger organizational patterns (e.g., from fragmented to shared; healthy or unhealthy)" (p.1).

According to Deal and Kennedy (1982), Renato Taguiri's 1968 taxonomy describes climate's characteristics in four dimensions: ecology, milieu, social system, and culture. He suggests that the four dimensions engage in a high-powered relationship within the confines of the organization. Subsequently, the organization is engaged in an identical relationship with its external environment. The first dimension is ecology, and it refers to the physical design of the organization. For example, in a school, this would include the facilities size, quality of the building, desks, chairs, elevators, chalkboards, and anything used to conduct organizational activities. The second is the milieu, which is associated with the social description of people within the organization. The milieu includes characteristics, socioeconomic status, salaries, morale, influences, self-efficacy, and job skills. The third is the social system; it encompasses the hierarchical structure of the organization – the way the school is organized from administration to subordinates. Culture is the final dimension mentioned by Taguiri. He stated that culture refers to the assumptions, values, norms, belief systems, way of thinking, history, myths, visible and audible behavior pattern of an organization (Owens & Valesky, 2015).

## **School Culture**

Sparks (2019) asserts that school culture is the "just how things are" attitude of school stakeholders. Deal and Kennedy (1982) described culture as "the way we do things around here". Gun and Caglayan (2013) proclaimed that culture is an intangible but mighty factor that can promote continuous improvement efforts and strengthen teaching and learning; conversely, it has the potential to derail these elements and the totality of the school. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) agree that there are varying definitions of culture, as they identified more than 150 in their research. Norman (2019) cited Deal and Peterson (2009), who proclaimed that culture is the traditions, values, and beliefs that are deeply rooted and formed over time and shared among the stakeholders in the organization. These traditions, values, and beliefs are typically accepted and practiced by newcomers to the organization and contribute to forming one of the six culture types defined by Gruenert and Whitaker (2015) as collaborative, comfortable, contrived collegial, Balkanized, fragmented, and toxic.

## **Culture and Climate: The Leadership Factor**

*The Principal's Role in Shaping School Culture* is an informative report published by Deal and Peterson (1990). School leaders, such as principals, can influence their staff and students. The perceptions of each group are subject to change based on each stakeholder group's perception of the principal's competency level (Grobler et al., 2012). Leading and fostering a positive culture and climate are imperative for administrators, especially during the global pandemic and a move to hybrid or virtual instruction.

When the instructional leader successfully creates a pleasant school climate, stakeholders fare better physically, socially, and emotionally (ScholarChip, 2020). Teacher and student perceptions of school are influenced by safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the school's processes. Perception also includes the physical educational environment (Santikian, 2011; Smith et al., 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). School officials who attempt to identify any activity that takes place in their buildings that is not associated directly or indirectly with climate and culture would find their efforts futile (Horton Jr., 2018; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000; Wang, Hartel, & Walberg, 1997). The most critical job of the instructional leader is to ensure that the school has a positive climate and culture. School administrators who can unify a faculty, clearly communicate, and reinforce a vision effectively enough that others are convinced to accept and embrace it, have achieved success in creating a positive culture and climate (Mosley et al., 2014).

## **Methods**

The researchers collected data for this quantitative study using the SCS and the OCDQ RM and RS. A descriptive research design was employed based on the advanced number of previous studies that employed this design. The researchers implemented a descriptive normative survey design, which allows them to use surveys made to reflect a normative sample or condition for comparison to local results (Calmorin, 2001). Teachers and principals with a minimum of three years of experience were invited to participate in the study. The surveys were accessible to participants via email utilizing a link forwarded by the researchers, and participants responded to each item on the instruments using a Likert scale. Surveys sent to middle school stakeholders included the OCDQ-RM (34 items) and the SCS, while the OCDQ-RS (50 items) and the SCS (35 items) were sent to high schools. A follow-up email was sent to building leaders to encourage participation.

According to Hoy, Tarter, and Kottkamp (1991), the detailed questionnaires measure school climate and the openness of principal and teacher behaviors. The subtests include teacher collaboration, collaborative leadership, professional development, unity of purpose, collegial support, and learning partnership. The participant response rates varied and ranged from 0% to 100% of each school's staff who met the participation criteria. The researchers used independent samples t-test as the statistical analysis to definitively support whether a difference in mean scores exists in the SCS responses from middle and high schools.

**Table 1**

*OCDQ-RM (Middle School) and OCDQ-RS (High School) Teacher and Administrator Participant Response Rate*

School	Participants	Response Rate	School	Participants	Response Rate
RM 1	10	45%	RS 1	12	67%
RM 2	7	16%	RS 2	9	90%
RM 3	28	100%	RS 3	11	23%
RM 4	3	38%	RS 4	16	18%
RM 5	7	14%	RS 5	20	43%
RM 6	3	25%	RS 6	16	35%
RM 7	6	14%	RS 7	14	35%
RM 8	6	75%	RS 8	1	0.02%
RM 9	21	48%	RS 9	1	0.02%
RM 10	2	13%			
MS11	1	0.01%			

The data in the chart indicated the number of participants at each school and the percentage of eligible participants. RM (Middle Schools) RS (High Schools)

### **Analysis**

The study was guided by the overarching question: What is the overall culture and climate in middle and high schools in Alabama's River Region? The researchers were able to determine the following:

- When assessing climate in high schools, Directive Behavior had the highest standardized score (579.92), indicating that principal leadership in high school is perceived as rigid and domineering.
- Engaged Teacher Behavior received the lowest standardized score (345.45), denoting that teachers exhibited low levels of pride and did not enjoy working together or supporting each other.

- The openness index score of 456 indicates that the behaviors associated with open school climates did not occur regularly. According to Hoy (2020), the school climate openness index provides a score to establish how willing the faculty is to express their perceptions of climate in their organization.
- When assessing climate in middle schools, Directive Principal Behavior had a standardized score of 679.17, which is higher than 97% of the schools represented in the normative sample, suggesting that middle school teachers perceive leadership as rigid and overpowering.
- The lowest standardized score for middle schools was Disengaged Teacher Behavior (395.87), lower than 84% of the schools represented in the normative sample. According to the data, stakeholders are less inclined to agree that teachers are disengaged and lack focus. Teachers were pleased with the level of administrative support, and they closely monitored teacher activity.
- The teacher openness index for middle schools was 539 and denotes that stakeholders' perceptions of climate are above average compared to the normative sample population.
- Professional and collegial relationships between teachers exist. Teachers are devoted to student success and connected to the vision and mission of the school.
- When assessing culture in middle and high schools, the data revealed that Professional Development was the highest-scoring factor, signifying that high school stakeholders perceive their professional learning as sufficient to meet their professional needs. There was no statistical difference in the perceptions of middle and high school stakeholders concerning this factor.
- The Learning Partnerships factor for middle school received the lowest mean score, surmising the stakeholders are more undecided than inclined to believe that common expectations for student performance exist in their schools. Middle school stakeholders rated Learning Partnerships the lowest factor, which suggests that middle school stakeholders' perceptions were closer to "undecided" than they were to "agree" when referencing teacher and parent relationships.

Using the SCS, the researchers conducted an independent samples *t*-test to understand if a statistically significant difference exists between the perceptions of middle and high school stakeholders. The confidence interval was set at 95%, indicating that alpha is 0.05. All factors show significant differences between the means of middle and high schools except for professional development. This suggests no differences in how principals and teachers in middle and high schools in Alabama's River Region perceive professional development. All SCS factors show a significant difference between middle and high school stakeholders except professional development. Perceptions for this factor were relatively the same. The OCDQ-RS determined that the morale in high schools was less than favorable, instructional time and tasks were not protected, and teachers failed to maintain winsome relationships among themselves. The OCDQ-RM revealed that middle school teachers in the River Region had a mean for Restrictive Principal Behavior lower than the normative sample, indicating that middle school teachers view their principals positively. They feel supported and not burdened by busywork.

Due to limited teacher participation in this study, the information obtained is subject to a lower accuracy rate than studies with greater participation. The data from the OCDQ-RS was gathered by surveying 100 high school and 95 middle school teachers and administrators from schools located in Alabama's River Region. High schools had an average climate score lower than

the normative sample. Supportive Principal Behavior and Directive Principal Behavior had mean scores slightly higher than those of the normative sample. High school teachers perceived their building-level principals as supportive and apprehensive about the health of the organization.

Nonetheless, the Teacher Behaviors: Engaged Behavior, Frustrated Behavior, and Intimate Behavior all had mean scores lower than the normative sample. These findings proved encouraging to the researchers considering the study was conducted at the height of a worldwide pandemic. According to research by Panchal et al., 2021, adults are experiencing a drastic decline in the state of their mental health. The stress levels were exacerbated as the educators moved, without warning, to online and hybrid instructional methods. It is reasonable to deduce that the results of a global pandemic would have some effects on education and could account for the diminished morale of high schools.

### **Conclusion**

The researchers provided valuable insight into stakeholders' perceptions of culture and climate in middle and high schools in Alabama's River Region by conducting this research study. The review of the literature supports the premise that positive culture and climate are essential to school success. The implications were based on the findings of this study, and the researchers determined that stakeholders should devise a strategic plan that will facilitate educators in becoming more familiar with the definitions and impact of culture and climate on educational outcomes, including but not limited to student achievement. School leaders at the high school level should work to be more supportive of teachers and increase the level of professional autonomy. Furthermore, school leaders should include components of culture and climate when writing mission and vision statements to ensure that the most important factors are addressed when planning for positive outcomes. The implementation of these recommendations will foster positive change in professional practices, which creates climate. Subsequently, when these positive behaviors are increased and sustained for extended periods, the result will be an improved culture.



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