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An Analysis of Student and Parent Perceptions: School Climate Surveys for the Public Good

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to explore the climate data of 33 elementary schools in a large urban school corporation along with student academic achievement data to determine the relationship among student and parent perceptions of school climate when compared to actual student achievement as determined by the state-mandated achievement exam. Students (grades three to five) completing the instrument totaled 6,745 while 5,557 parents completed the instrument questionnaire. When the responses of students and parents from low-performing schools were compared to those at high-performing schools, no significant differences in their perceptions of school climate were observed. Issues regarding the nature and measurability of school climate and the impact on student achievement are discussed.

Introduction

The purpose of this project was to explore the climate data of 33 elementary schools in a large urban school corporation along with student academic achievement data to determine the relationship among student and parent perceptions of school climate when compared to actual student achievement as determined by the state-mandated achievement exam. Specifically, questionnaire

data was collected from students and parents at each elementary school site in the fall of the school year in regard to their perceptions of the school climate. This data was compared to student achievement data derived from state exam scores.

Literature Review

The topic of school climate has been explored using a multitude of variables, methodologies, theories, and models resulting in a confusing and ill-defined body of research literature. Often school climate “theory” has borrowed from the results of climate instruments developed for other venues like business and industry, college campus settings, or at times, total school system structures. The debate concerning school climate and its impact on student achievement is also tied to differences among researchers in theory base, variables to study, unit of measurement choices, and the validity of the subjective and qualitative data (Aldridge, Fraser, & Ala’i, 2011; Anderson, 1982; Bryk, Sebring, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010; Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; Valentine, 1992). Studying student behavior in schools, be it physical behavior (bullying, for example) or cognitive behavior as indicated by exam scores has always remained complex (Fraser, 2007; Huang & Fraser, 2009; Johnson, Stevens, &

Zvoch, 2007) and involves “ordering and conceptualizing a buzzing confusion of simultaneously existing, multilevel, mutually interacting variables” (Argyris, 1958, p. 501).

School climate research is clearly the stepchild of both organizational climate research and school effects research, having inherited instruments, theory, and methods from both research paradigms (Anderson, 1982; Schoen & Teddlie, 2008; Van Houtte, 2005). Tagiuri (1968) defined climate and atmosphere as summary concepts dealing with the total environmental quality within an organization. According to Tagiuri, the dimensions of an environment include its ecology (the physical and material aspects), its milieu (the social dimension concerned with the presence of persons and groups), its social system (the social dimension concerned with the patterned relationships of persons and groups), and its culture (the social dimension concerned with belief systems, values, cognitive structures, and meaning). Others including Moos (1979), Insel and Moos (1974), and Barker and Gump (1964) have focused on similar categorization devices in the past to conceptualize the human environment, or in some cases Barker and Gump (1964), who studied the effects of class size and student environment on student behavior and attitudes.

The issue of school climate, its definition and impact, remains elusive, but some agreement does appear to emerge in some of the research literature. Kalis (1980) suggested that schools do possess a school climate unique to each organization. Cusik (1973) suggested although school climate differences exist, they are difficult to describe and measure. School climate is influenced by student body characteristics (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1979), classroom processes (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), cognitive and affective behavior (Duke & Perry, 1978), and values (Vyskocil & Goens, 1979). Although these researchers suggested that understanding school climate and how it is defined will improve the understanding and prediction of student behavior, researchers cannot agree on either the possibility or desirability of identifying the specific factors that constitute positive school climate (Anderson, 1982).

The first systematic instrument to measure college environments, the CCI (College Characteristics Index), was developed by Pace and Stern (1958) followed eventually by the Classroom Environment Scale (CES) (Moos, 1979), and both the Learning Environments Inventory (LEI) and the My Class Inventory (MCI) (Walberg, 1969) from the Classroom Climate Questionnaire linked to Murry’s work in 1938. Also linked to Murry (1938) was the development of the My School Inventory (MSI) (Ellett & Walberg, 1979) and the Elementary School Environment Survey (ESES) (Sinclair, 1970). More recently, Wang and Holcombe (2010) and Aldridge, Fraser, and Ala’i (2011) have explored the relationships among middle school students’ perceptions of school environment, school engagement, and academic achievement. Based on self-determination theory (SDT) where student engagement is considered an outcome, Wang and Holcombe found that at the middle school level, students’ perceptions of school environment influenced their academic achievement directly and indirectly through three types of school engagement: school participation, identification with school, and the use of self-regulation strategies, which in turn, influenced students’ academic achievement, specifically during the eighth grade year.

Students who are emotionally, socially, and academically engaged in the school environment are more successful students. They attend school regularly, concentrate on learning, adhere to the school rules, and have fewer disruptive behaviors in general and as a result, generally get better grades and perform better on standardized tests (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Capar, & Pastorelli, 1996; Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Loukas & Robinson, 2004; Wang, Selman, Dishioh, & Stormshak, 2010). Disengaged students are more likely to perform poorly and engage in problem behaviors (Finn & Rock, 1997), and the persistence of disengagement is most acute during the middle and high school years (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006). Engagement has been defined most recently as a multidimensional construct

composed of three components: behaviors, emotions, and cognitions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003) and as a construct that is dynamically related within individuals and does not exist in an isolated process.

Social, instructional, and organizational climate of schools continues to be explored in terms of how each of these may impact student engagement and academic achievement (Eccles, Wigfield, & Scheifele, 1998; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007). However, the research remains unclear how these attributes of school environment influence the three types of engagement (school participation, school identification, and use of self-regulation strategies) simultaneously, nor which mechanisms within the school environment work to affect students' academic outcomes (Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

Although a clearer picture is beginning to emerge in regards to the impact of classroom and school climate on student achievement, questions still remain in regard to how individual and group level variables interact to create an environment conducive to student achievement. The central questions for this project were: (1) do students and their parents agree on the climate of their school, (2) do differences exist in low- and high-performing schools based on climate survey data, and (3) are student and parent perceptions of school climate related to student achievement?

Method

This project explored quantitative school climate survey responses of elementary school students (grades three to five) and responses of parents of children who attended these schools. Data was compiled from both students and parents in regard to their perceptions of the school climate at their specific school site. Parents completed anonymous questionnaires upon their visit to the school on a parent-teacher conference day in November, and students completed the anonymous questionnaires during a class time period scheduled during the fall semester. Both student and parent questionnaires could be completed in 3–4 minutes. Students responded to seven items on

a 5-point Likert scale with strongly agree and strongly disagree anchoring the extreme ends of the questionnaire, while parents responded to 11 items relating to their child's building climate. Only four items from the student survey and four items from the parent survey were eventually used for comparative purposes for this study (See Table 1 for a list of items). Each of these items were created by assessment personnel within the school corporation and then distributed to the local school sites.

This school climate data was compared to student achievement data available through the state department of education website, compared for accuracy against the local schools' student testing data, and then disaggregated and explored using comparative inquiry techniques based upon high-scoring (more than 50 percent of the student population passing both the math and English portions of the state exam) schools and low-scoring (less than 50 percent of the student population passing both the math and English portion of the state exam) schools.

The data sources for this project stem from a school climate survey that was distributed during the fall semester of the 2008–09 school year at 33 elementary schools of a large urban school corporation in the Midwest portion of the United States. Surveys were completed by students, parents, and teachers at each school site. Only the parent and student responses were reported and compared for this project. Students completing this survey totaled 6,745, while parents completing the survey totaled 5,557.

Annual standardized test scores required by the state for all students completing the state exam at each school site were also gathered as indicators of academically successful schools (more than 50 percent of students passing both the math and language arts portion of the exam) vs. those schools where less than 50 percent of students passed both portions of the state exam.

Results

Fourteen (14) elementary schools were identified as having less than 50 percent of their student population pass both the math and language portions of the state

mandated exam. Nineteen (19) schools were identified as having more than 50 percent of their student population pass both the math and language portions of the state mandated exam. Tables 2 and 3 provide parent perception responses from data from the school climate survey for both high- and low-achieving schools. Tables 4 and 5 provide student perception responses from data from the school climate survey from both high- and low-achieving schools. Table 6 provides a correlation matrix that compares student school climate perceptions, parent school climate perceptions, student academic performance, and socio-economic status as indicated by the percentage of the school population on free and reduced lunch.

When the data from the school climate survey was explored for students, there was no significant difference in student responses from high- and low-performing schools. Students from low-performing schools on average, ranked their school climate at a mean of 4.63, while students from high-performing schools ranked their school climate at a mean of 4.55 on the 5-point scale. Ironically, the lowest-performing school where less than 30 percent of their student population passed both portions of the state exam was the third highest scoring school on school climate based on the student perceptions of the school. When results from the parent survey were explored, similar results were found in that there was no significant difference among parent perceptions of school climate when high- and low-scoring schools were compared (parents at low-performing schools ranked their children's school at a mean of 4.67 while parents at high-performing schools ranked their children's school at a mean of 4.60 on the 5-point scale).

The correlation matrix in Table 6 does provide some limited insight into the data that was collected. A significant positive correlation ($r = .45$, $p < .01$) existed between positive student climate perceptions and higher socio-economic status. In addition, significant negative correlations existed among student academic performance and student climate perceptions ($r = -.49$, $p < .01$) and between student academic performance and socioeconomic status ($r = -.821$, $p < .01$). These findings

are consistent with earlier work that has suggested a strong relationship with economic status and student achievement (Barker & Coley, 2007; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, Yeung, & Smith, 1998; Peters & Mullis, 1997; Raver, Gershoff, & Aber, 2007). Logically it would follow that students with higher achievement success would also have more positive attitudes toward their school climate. The findings of this project support these assumptions. As student achievement increases or decreases, student school climate perceptions change based upon their academic experiences. Contrary to this finding, school climate perceptions of parents were not correlated significantly with their students' perceptions or with student academic performance or family socio-economic status.

The results suggest that both students and parents tend to rate the school climate at their particular school site as positive regardless of the academic performance of the students at that specific school site. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that although school climate surveys may provide some level of feedback for policy makers and administrators, they may not always be the best indicators or predictors of student academic performance.

Discussion

The literature is clear on the impact of school climate and the difficulty of collecting reliable and valid data that may indicate or predict student achievement (Cusik, 1973; Nichols, Nichols, & Kline, 2010). As Anderson (1982) suggested in her review of the literature on school climates, there may be a difference in the perceptions and even attempting to measure the climate in an elementary and secondary school building or an entire district, as opposed to a specific classroom itself. When completing climate surveys, parents and their children may be responding to the warmth, respect, or kindness that the teacher may provide in the classroom or a specific way they have been treated when they have visited the school, rather than a specific strategic academic plan that the district or school may be implementing to promote academic achievement.

It is worthy of additional exploration to consider why students and parents at low-performing schools on average would rate their schools higher on school climate when compared to students and parents at high-performing schools, even though this difference was not measurably significant. Certain characteristics of life within schools are recurring in the research in association with both school climate and achievement outcomes (Anderson, 1982). Continued exploration of school climate is needed to revise and develop instruments that can truly capture and predict the academic nature of classroom environments in high-performing schools with the goal of assisting students and parents in their efforts to understand the nature of schooling and to accurately reflect classroom and curricular environments that promote academic achievement.

Wang and Holcombe (2010) have recently explored adolescent student perceptions of schools in terms of environment, engagement, and academic achievement and at least at the middle school level, these school environment perceptions influenced their academic achievement directly and indirectly. Clearly, some types of school environments fulfill students' needs and promote greater academic and social engagement more effectively than others. Although beyond the scope of this project, exploring school environments that promote performance goals, mastery goals, autonomy, class discussions, and teacher social support may in fact encourage or undermine students' achievement and their sense of the school site as a supportive environment. For example, achievement goal structures created by schools and teachers influence student engagement because they affect students' confidence in their ability to master academic tasks and skills (Ames, 1992; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Similarly, schools that focus on comparison and competition, particularly in middle school, set the stage for a contradictory pattern of what students need in terms of a safe, supportive environment where they can develop their competencies without fear of embarrassment of failure.

Support for student autonomy involves students' perceptions that teachers provide opportunities to

participate in decision making related to academic tasks and school governance and input into class discussions (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998). These types of practices can promote student decision-making skills, regulate behavior, and eventually serve to encourage a sense of personal satisfaction and responsibility (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999). These are just a few examples of school environments that may work to support student autonomy, participation, and self-regulation strategies that ultimately may encourage greater academic achievement, and as a result, greater student perceptions of the school environment as an institution that supports and encourages, on multiple scales, their growth as individuals.

Limitations of the Project

Although a large sample of data was gathered for this project consisting of approximately 6,800 student and 5,600 parent responses, the limited variability in participant responses to the school climate items is problematic and encourages cautious interpretation. Originally, 18 questionnaire items for the school climate survey were generated by the central administration staff of the school corporation, and after a close review by the authors, only four student and four parent items were considered good predictors of school climate (see Table 1). Since collapsed data based upon individual school results was reported to the researchers by the school corporation, reliability indicators for the instrument items were not able to be computed. Given this caveat, students and parents overall rated their schools as positive environments. Even when low- and high-achieving schools were compared, ratings on the 5-point Likert type scale consistently ranged from 4.0 to 5.0. Although within the correlational interpretations of specific constructs, (i.e., SES, achievement performance) clear relationships appeared, the limited variability of responses again encourages cautious interpretation.

While student school climate surveys were distributed as an in-class activity, parent climate surveys were distributed during the days of fall parent-teacher conferences. Students

may have rated school climate more positively, particularly in the lower grade levels, as an attempt to please their teacher or as an academic exercise where they may have interpreted higher climate ratings as a reflection on their class grade. Parents on the other hand, may have generated biased positive responses toward school climate simply due to the fact that they appeared at the school for conference days where a strong positive correlation may exist between parents who appear at conference days and those who would tend to rate schools more positively. Negative-minded parents, who had less than positive attitudes toward their child's school, may in fact have failed to appear on conference day or may have felt that their ability to influence change was minimal if they are in fact dissatisfied with the school climate.

The present data mainly relies upon self-report information from parents and students in their perceptions of school climate, which potentially raises validity concerns. Students may be influenced by social demands to answer questionnaire items in a socially desirable direction in regard to their own behavior, their teacher's, or their schools. The future use of multiple sources of data collection (informants, principals, teachers, students, and parents) and making use of multiple methodologies (interviews, observations, surveys, analysis of behavioral data, etc.) may potentially provide a more robust, valid method of exploring school climate (Richards, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 1991; Roeser & Eccles, 1998). Clearly a host of other variables may potentially impact perceptions of school climate (family, peer group, and neighborhood); therefore, a more comprehensive and thorough investigation is warranted in the near future.

Conclusion

The results of this project suggest that parent perceptions of their child's school site were consistently positive, regardless of the overall academic achievement level of the school. Student perceptions were also consistently positive but, as already indicated, may simply be a reflection of an attempt to please the teacher or the overall positive nature of schools as compared to some of their individual home environments. It is important to note that the school corporation that has provided the data for this project has recently engaged an external vendor to develop and explore a future climate survey that would potentially provide more authentic, valid, and reliable feedback for the schools' constituents. Surveys that are currently used by school districts are sometimes fragmented (as was the case in the current project) and at times ad hoc without adequate planning or thought to the strategic impact or goal that may be supportive of the schools' agenda or long-term mission.

Although school climate surveys and other means of school indicators are critical for the public good and for current accountability expectations across the country, the wise and valid use of this feedback and the appropriate collection and analysis of this type of data are a precursor to improved relationships with local communities. In addition, with the effort to describe an accurate school climate, administrative and curricular changes can eventually be partially based on this feedback as long as the data can provide authentic information that will capture the essence of the school and the learning that is taking place within the environment.

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Appendix

Table 1

Student Items

1. The work I do in class makes me think.
2. My teachers expect me to do my best.
3. My teacher treats me with respect.
4. My teacher cares about me.

Parent Items

1. I feel welcomed at my child's school.
2. I am informed about my child's progress.
3. I am always treated with respect when I contact the school.
4. Overall, the school performs well academically.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Average Parent Perceptions at Low-Performing Schools
($< 50\%$ passing both Math and Language Arts)

School Site	% passing Eng/Math	% fr/red lunch	Welcome	Informed	Respect	School Performance	Mean Score	n
AD	33.3	89	4.77	4.66	4.85	4.45	4.68	74
AB	29.7	97	4.77	4.75	4.79	4.56	4.7	68
BL	40.5	89	4.74	4.82	4.76	4.50	4.71	34
FA	39.6	94	4.73	4.73	4.74	4.60	4.70	266
FO	47.4	79	4.63	4.48	4.60	4.39	4.53	182
MA	38.8	77	4.76	4.70	4.64	4.46	4.64	143
NE	48.1	91	4.78	4.75	4.72	4.65	4.73	77
PL	49.2	64	4.72	4.74	4.70	4.56	4.68	107
SA	44.9	91	4.66	4.70	4.78	4.39	4.63	83
SW	42.3	93	4.75	4.71	4.69	4.51	4.67	128
ST	49.3	84	4.75	4.77	4.67	4.62	4.70	114
WA	49.3	73	4.79	4.84	4.82	4.82	4.82	62
WY	49.3	73	4.79	4.84	4.82	4.82	4.82	62
NO	48.1	91	4.67	4.58	4.57	4.42	4.56	251
Mean/Totals			4.72	4.70	4.71	4.53	4.67	1722

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Average Parent Perceptions at High-Performing Schools
($> 50\%$ passing both Math and Language Arts)

School Site	% passing Eng/Math	% fr/red lunch	Welcome	Informed	Respect	School Performance	Mean Score	n
AR	56.3	40	4.68	4.68	4.60	4.57	4.63	211
BR	65.5	68	4.64	4.66	4.4	4.59	4.56	188
BU	83.3	44	4.53	4.48	4.59	4.61	4.56	145
CR	85.0	26	4.66	4.49	4.60	4.62	4.59	352
FR	56.1	78	4.75	4.59	4.75	4.54	4.66	308
GL	62.8	50	4.67	4.53	4.37	4.37	4.49	272
HA	58.3	57	4.69	4.48	4.56	4.42	4.54	262
HO	51.1	73	4.65	4.49	4.59	4.31	4.51	227
HR	65.1	48	4.61	4.50	4.47	4.39	4.49	181
HH	51.2	76	4.65	4.59	4.57	4.49	4.58	181
IN	52.0	79	4.73	4.71	4.71	4.66	4.70	127
IR	74.8	58	4.83	4.64	4.83	4.77	4.77	155
LI	61.1	69	4.69	4.59	4.61	4.38	4.57	182
LN	57.3	72	4.84	4.75	4.77	4.73	4.77	203
PR	55.7	66	4.64	4.45	4.59	4.36	4.51	176
ST	50.0	84	4.84	4.66	4.80	4.60	4.73	216
SH	54	46	4.81	4.70	4.79	4.55	4.71	151
WA	63.3	55	4.43	4.50	4.21	4.25	4.35	113
WE	62.4	60	4.70	4.64	4.62	4.52	4.62	185
Mean/Totals			4.69	4.59	4.60	4.51	4.60	3835

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Average Student Perceptions at Low-Performing Schools
(< 50% passing both Math and Language Arts)

School Site	% passing Eng/Math	% fr/red lunch	Think	Expect	Respect	Care	Mean Score	n
AD	33.3	89	4.56	4.88	4.78	4.82	4.76	138
AB	29.7	97	4.46	4.80	4.68	4.75	4.67	75
BL	40.5	89	4.47	4.76	4.63	4.67	4.63	212
FA	39.6	94	4.37	4.79	4.80	4.65	4.65	176
FO	47.4	79	4.19	4.78	4.45	4.59	4.50	291
MA	38.8	77	4.26	4.85	4.57	4.61	4.57	158
NE	48.1	91	4.32	4.83	4.62	4.60	4.59	90
PL	49.2	64	4.29	4.75	4.61	4.51	4.54	122
SA	44.9	91	4.51	4.85	4.49	4.63	4.62	112
SW	42.3	93	4.57	4.78	4.63	4.62	4.65	282
ST	49.3	84	4.50	4.86	4.80	4.70	4.72	143
WA	49.3	73	4.41	4.86	4.81	4.65	4.68	83
WY	49.3	73	4.22	4.73	4.58	4.55	4.52	193
NO	48.1	91	4.59	4.81	4.58	4.64	4.66	348
Mean/Totals			4.41	4.81	4.65	4.64	4.63	2423

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Average Student Perceptions at High-Performing Schools
(> 50% passing both Math and Language Arts)

School Site	% passing Eng/Math	% fr/red lunch	Think	Expect	Respect	Care	Mean Score	n
AR	56.3	40	4.16	4.81	4.55	4.66	4.55	232
BR	65.5	68	4.29	4.8	4.74	4.72	4.64	215
BU	83.3	44	4.44	4.36	4.32	4.48	4.40	25
CR	85.0	26	4.17	4.88	4.69	4.72	4.62	277
FR	56.1	78	4.20	4.77	4.55	4.55	4.52	218
GL	62.8	50	4.02	4.66	4.33	4.16	4.29	233
HA	58.3	57	4.02	4.80	4.51	4.58	4.48	248
HO	51.1	73	4.21	4.71	4.57	4.60	4.52	248
HR	65.1	48	4.35	4.77	4.56	4.60	4.57	359
HH	51.2	76	4.18	4.77	4.62	4.53	4.53	263
IN	52.0	79	4.59	4.94	4.84	4.88	4.81	175
IR	74.8	58	4.10	4.76	4.59	4.53	4.50	135
LI	61.1	69	4.15	4.77	4.57	4.59	4.52	259
LN	57.3	72	4.17	4.88	4.45	4.59	4.52	157
PR	55.7	66	4.20	4.79	4.52	4.65	4.54	192
ST	50.0	84	4.09	4.82	4.61	4.69	4.55	229
SH	54	46	4.12	4.88	4.73	4.76	4.62	162
WA	63.3	55	4.11	4.86	4.54	4.54	4.51	226
WE	62.4	60	4.37	4.88	4.71	4.77	4.68	469
Mean/Totals			4.21	4.78	4.58	4.61	4.55	4322

Table 6

Correlation Table Comparing Student Performance (Percentage of students passing both Math and English Standardized Exam, Student Perceptions, Parent Perceptions and SES)

	Performance	Student Perceptions	Parent Perceptions	SES
Performance	1.0	-.449**	-.264	-.821**
Student Perceptions	-.449**	1.0	.196	.450**
Parent Perceptions	-.264	.196	1.0	.296
SES	-.821**	.450**	.296	1.0

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level.