



Key Concepts

- ◆ The four major factors that shape school climate are relationships, teaching & learning, environmental-structural, and safety.
- ◆ Students need to believe that teachers care about them as learners and as people.
- ◆ Effective and respectful classroom management is perceived positively by all students—this is a shared negotiation and responsibility of all members.
- ◆ High expectations and high response to student needs creates the safest and most positive classroom environment.
- ◆ Ongoing professional development and support is necessary to create a culture of consultation and community building.
- ◆ Codes of conduct that focus on punitive consequences are less effective than programs to respond early to students' mental health and behavioural needs.



Creating Positive Learning Environments: A Review of the Literature



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School climate has been described as the essence of the school; a positive school climate fosters students' learning and development and contributes to feelings of social, emotional and physical safety. There is considerable evidence to suggest that positive learning environments lead to increased student motivation, better mental health and overall wellbeing and higher academic achievement. A complex set of factors contribute to positive school climates and to student success. This review summarizes recent research on four of these factors and makes recommendations for practice at the classroom and system level.

Teacher-student relationships play a significant role in student's perception of the classroom environment. Students need to believe that the teacher cares about them as a learner and as a person. A teacher who was able to maintain control of the classroom and manage disruptions in a firm yet respectful way is important. For at-risk students these relationships were especially vital in keeping them connected to school and learning. Strong relationships contribute to the development of relational communities within each classroom and school. A sense of community enables youth to feel safe and take greater risks in terms of their thinking and learning. Classroom management in relational community classrooms is a shared negotiation and responsibility of all members. Also, home-school connections enrich many aspects of learning, and schools need to create school climates that welcome and value parents as partners in their child's education.

Classroom management has been the focus of much research over the years. Creating orderly classrooms that promote healthy socialization creates an environment that is comfortable for students and conducive to learning. An authoritative teaching style characterized by high expectations combined with responsiveness to student needs is seen as the most effective means of ensuring students feel safe. Predictability and caring behaviour coupled with strong leadership lead to higher student engagement and mutual respect in the classroom. Professional development is an essential component necessary to providing teachers with adequate resources and support to develop the kinds of classrooms that students need. Opportunities to meet with colleagues and share alternative teaching methods and creative relational responses to challenging behaviour can be of great value in creating inclusive learning environments. Positive school climate depends heavily on committed and supportive leadership from the board and school levels to implement and sustain policies and practices.

The environmental-structural dimension operates primarily at the school level and effects trickle-down to the classroom for both students and teachers. This includes school design, adequate space and materials, inviting aesthetic quality, natural light and a controlled noise level create a tranquil sensory environment with fewer distractions. The move to block scheduling is seen as providing greater opportunity for more authentic and deeper learning opportunities and for minimizing time lost to transitions.

In order to have positive learning experiences, students must feel physically and emotionally safe. Policies that focus on zero tolerance, discipline and exclusionary practices have not been effective in changing unwanted behaviour. Coordinate programs that teach the desired behaviour and socially appropriate responses and reactions within a caring framework have led to decreases in bullying. Codes of conduct need to promote caring and orderly behaviour and clearly define expectations and consequences in a non-punitive way. The availability of mental health services and responsiveness of teachers and schools to emotional and behavioural needs that lead to early intervention can reduce the need for many exclusionary consequences. Positive Behaviour Support is one program that aims to change the school environment using positively focused principles and practices and has been shown to improve student outcomes.

Relationships and proactive approaches are key to the development of positive learning environments and play a part in any policies and programs to address behaviour or social needs. With the appropriate knowledge, skills and preparedness, educational stakeholders can work collaboratively to create a positive learning environment.

“Relational community style classrooms require a shift regarding approaches to classroom management from one that is ‘teacher-controlled to [one that is] shared-controlled; from an individual responsibility to shared responsibility; from a business atmosphere to a family atmosphere; from a negative view of children’s motivations to a positive view; from extrinsic consequences to explanation, support, guidance, induction, and persuasion; from enforcing rules to building trust by meeting students’ needs”

-Hutchinson, 2009 and Watson & Battistich, 2006.

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