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The effects of school climate on student self-concept

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The effects of school climate on student self-concept

Abstract

School organization and climate compete with many contemporary forces for influence on the development of students; self-concept. Self-concept, which begins to develop at birth, acts as a filter which educational experiences will alter, for good or ill. Purkey, Abdel, and Cage (1983) reported that "inviting" or "disinviting" messages inform the child of his or her abilities, values, and autonomy, or the lack thereof. Every experience the child has and every interpretation he or she makes of that experience influence the development of the child's self-concept. Purkey and Novak (1988) suggested self-concept, then, is each individual's perception of his or her personal world. Good self-concept is little more than the memory of inviting acts, which are accepted, extended, and successfully acted on.

THE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE ON STUDENT SELF-CONCEPT

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School organization and climate compete with many contemporary forces for influence on the development of students' self-concept. Self-concept, which begins to develop at birth, acts as a filter which educational experiences will alter, for good or ill. Purkey, Abdel, and Cage (1983) reported that "inviting" or "disinviting" messages inform the child of his or her abilities, values, and autonomy, or the lack thereof. Every experience the child has and every interpretation he or she makes of that experience influence the development of the child's self-concept. Purkey and Novak (1988) suggested self-concept, then, is each individual's perception of his or her personal world. Good self-concept is little more than the memory of inviting acts, which are accepted, extended, and successfully acted on.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of school climate on students' self concept. The paper will explore determinants of self-concept, evaluating the effects of external and internal variables on self-concept, determining the relation between school climate and student self-concept, and determining the principals' role in improving school climate.

The Influence of School Climate

Numerous factors have influence on the development of student self-concept. The climate established in today's schools is an essential part of student self-concept development. A healthy school climate is one which exhibits trust, respect, involvement, chances for social and academic growth, high morale, and collegiality (Taylor, 1989). Johnson, Dixon, & Robinson (1988) defined school climate as individual autonomy; the degree of structure imposed upon the position; reward orientation; and consideration, warmth, and support. School climate also involves many other factors such as teacher motivation, teacher-pupil relationship, student attitudes toward school, building maintenance, community support, administrative leadership, and athletic successes.

Lunenburg (1983) referred to contemporary schools as either "humanistic" or "custodial." He reported that humanistic schools are schools where students learn through cooperative measures with teachers, where there is flexibility in status and rules, where self-discipline is substituted for strict teacher control, and where teachers and students are willing to accept responsibility for their actions. Custodial schools are concerned with the maintenance of order.

Power is unilateral and students must accept the decisions of teachers without question. Misbehavior is viewed as a personal affront, and punitive sanctions are enforced.

Due to the shared control, students are likely to perceive the "humanistic" school as the more attractive. Lunenburg also found that the more custodial the student control ideology of the school, the lower the student's perception of his/her motivation with respect to tasks faced in the classroom situation and the lower their composite self-concept as a learner.

In light of this fact, Frymier (1987) suggested school climate in effective schools is manifested in an ethical commitment by staff members to help students learn. The relationships among the people in effective schools are positive, helpful, honest, and rewarding. Teachers like students. Students like teachers. Principals like students. Students like the principals. Teachers and administrators like one another, work harmoniously together, and are honestly concerned about other people's welfare. Even though school climate may be positive, other variables enter into determining student self-concept--external variables which operate outside the school.

Parental Influence on Self-Concept

One such variable is the most immediate determinant of self-concept, namely, the home. The family's influence on an individual child is very important. In order for the child to develop a healthy sense of self, parents and children must develop a relationship of respect and interest which acts as an emotional shelter for the child. Parents who are too strict, insufficiently protective, or overly critical, may interfere with the attainment by their children of a mature self-concept. Often parental inability to recognize developmental needs of a child conflicts with a teacher who demonstrates that ability. Attributes of the child's success as a student commonly form the nucleus of the disagreement and cause conflict in the child's self-concept. This disruption causes anxiety and affects the achievement level of the child, lowering the child's self-esteem and resulting self-concept. Because self-concept is learned beginning in the home, the child is capable of attaining a learned "helplessness," especially if both parents are involved in service oriented jobs (Beane, 1986). This common situation allows parents little contact with their children, leaving children vulnerable to a modern world of discontinuity and

disbelief, a process of which educators should be aware.

Ideally, the role of the parents should be to enhance school climate. Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee (1989) claimed parents from all socioeconomic levels bring to schools valuable insights and unique perspectives, which serve to enhance home-school relationships, student behavior, and academic achievement. Parents may be used in planning school social events, fundraising activities, or may participate in classroom, lunchroom, playground, office, library, and material preparation activities.

Historically, Folkner (1974) found that during the elementary school years children move from instability toward increasing stability, acquiring educational skills and knowledge coinciding with social skills gained through experiences with adults. Without such experiences, children are in jeopardy of developing a concept of low self-esteem in the classroom. In support of that conclusion, Beane (1986) found that learners with clear self-concept and positive self-esteem tend to participate more, have higher school completion rates, exhibit more prosocial behavior, and demonstrate greater academic achievement than do peers with unclear or negative

self-perceptions. Although these characteristics consistently hold with high self-concept students, they may change with the onset of another out-of-school determinant, adolescence.

Adolescent Influences on Student Self-Concept

Adolescence brings on a whole new view of the self which is highly related to appearance. With their acquisition of abstract thinking, adolescent students focus attention on others' perception of them. A historical distinction can be made by comparing studies by Thomas (1971) and Emmett (1959). Thomas found that 10 - 11 year olds emphasized physical, moral, social, and academic aspects of their social development. On the other hand, Emmett's 11-15 year olds emphasized personality, life goals, social attitudes, physical aspects, school, home and family, and material possessions. Adolescents are highly sensitive of their self-image. Beane (1986) concluded that growth spurts, the appearance of secondary sex characteristics, and other attributes related to pubescence transform the individual into a physical self quite different from that of children. For example, it is quite common to find eleven or twelve-year-old girls dissatisfied with their physical selves.

Adolescents' self-image, as perceived through peers, teachers, scholastic successes, and the like, determines the level of their self-concept. Consequently, Keefe (1986) stated that schools must become more personalized for students. If this is to take place, using teachers as student advisors is a must. As a result, of that device, teacher-student relationships are strengthened, and advisors are able to help students make better decisions about school program, career and college choices, and ordinary school adjustment. The relationship between teachers and students becomes a highly supportive and mutually satisfying one. School climate improves and student and teacher performance is enhanced. A number of other studies have indicated a positive relation between self-concept and achievement, although high self-evaluation depends on the student's perception that his/her capacities are adequate to his/her goal achievement. In 1985 West discovered that reading and mathematics achievement was higher in schools where there was parental involvement and where teachers and the principal had high expectations of students.

Academic Influences on Student Self-Concept

Academic achievement and positive self-concept formulation is more important to teenage boys than

girls (Thomas, 1973). As grade level changes occur from grade school to junior high or junior high to high school, girls become more anxious, peer relationships decrease, and academic self-images decline. Boys tend to use academic and athletic achievement as instruments of acceptance by peers. The stronger their academic or athletic performance, the more attention they receive from peers.

There is little doubt that performance and self-concept are correlated. Student limitations on achievement are based on how students perceive themselves through significant others. This "looking glass" concept defines the male's capacity to achieve goals. At this stage, the development of interpersonal relationships and the influence of significant others is important. Success or failure determine the relationship between self-concept and achievement. According to Bachman & O'Malley (1986) the most important determinant of self-concept of academic ability is actual ability. They agree that actual ability may be enhanced and improved when young, but even when exposed to much positive feedback as a teenager, it is one's actual abilities, not the self-concept, that make the difference as an adult. But that does not negate the fact that, according to

Marsh & Parker (1984), the early formation of a child's self-image as a good student is probably more important in terms of later schooling than are small differences in his/her absolute level of achievement.

The type of school attended, the socioeconomic background of student, the choice of school program, teacher-pupil relationships, traditional or modern approaches to learning and teaching, and out-of-school activities are all related to the academic self-concept development of students (Thomas, 1973). In today's world, there should be only one type of school, those which account for individual differences of students, as compared to the traditional school in which the student is expected to adjust to the school. Far too many schools use punitive approaches to educate their students, which only leads to the development of poor self-concept and negative attitudes toward learning.

As an alternative to this, Barker (1986) recommended the small school. He stated "There exists in the small school a sense of pride, attitude, sense of personal possession, involvement on the part of the students, parents, teacher, administration, and community residents." People residing in small communities generally have a feeling of extreme closeness. Schools there are referred to as "our

school." Klein (1985) supported this notion, stating students in smaller classes typically receive more individual attention from the teacher; pay more attention to their studies; the curriculum takes on greater depth, breadth, and richness; and discipline problems are diminished. Glass (1982) also, suggested that class size is strongly related to pupil achievement and small classes are more conducive to improved pupil performance than larger classes. Small classes provide more opportunity to adapt learning programs to individual needs. Pupils in small classes generally have more interest in learning and teacher morale is usually higher. All too often, schools are places where students face failure, rejection, and daily reminders of their limitations.

Teacher Influences on Student Self-Concept

Teacher style can influence student self-concept. Marsh & Parker (1984) found that student ratings of their own self-concepts are substantially correlated with: (a) teacher ratings of student self-concepts, (b) results of academic ability tests, and (c) teacher ratings of academic ability. It is fact that teachers group students according to performance on academic tests, and students perceive groupings and feel they can't improve. Teachers who employ classroom criteria

unattainable by all students breed personal insecurity in students and low self-concept. A teacher's expectations can diminish a child's image of him/herself. Dwinell & Higbee (1989) argued that high school GPA and standardized test scores may not be the most accurate predictors of success. They contended that admitting college freshmen based on these factors alone overlooks the importance of self-concept and motivational issues. Administrators and faculties must consider individual needs of students, which may require adapting student skills to their style of teaching. Faculties must use a wide variety of strategies to communicate ideas to students, such as visual aids or opportunities for interaction in dyads or small groups. Educators need to recognize their impact on students and channel it through peers to students.

Silvernail (1986) submitted that there is a positive relationship between cognitive learning and those classes students perceive as cohesive, satisfying, environmentally rich, and difficult. Conversely, he reported negative relationships between achievement and those classes perceived as exhibiting student apathy, friction, cliquishness and favoritism. Many teachers see self-concept in different terms than

students and lack useful understandings of it. Teachers who study student self-concept can incorporate into their role the behavior believed appropriate to the healthy development of their pupils' self-concept. A teacher might make a special effort to give an exam which is very simple to students who are working hard, but who feel unable to compete with others in class. Students' perception of a teacher's feelings toward them correlates significantly with students' self-image. Students must perceive themselves as competent in the eyes of the teacher in order to feel confident and competitive within the classroom.

Fox, Peck, Blattstein, & Blattstein (1983) found support for this idea when they reported that a student's within-class coping skill will positively affect that student's individual evaluation of the teacher. Students must formulate a positive relation between suspected teacher perception of themselves and their perceived capacity to compete in order to develop a sound self-concept.

School Climate Improvement Plan

School climate has been described in a variety of ways: typologies and classification systems have been devised. However, descriptions of school climate do not tell school administrators what to do or what not

to do to improve school climate (Keefe, Kelley, & Miller 1985). Gottfredson & Hollifield (1988) offered these steps to planning school improvement: begin diagnosis and assessment, formulate goals and objectives, examine the research on potential programs, identify obstacles and resources, make a formal plan for school improvement, and specify quality control standards.

In order to improve the quality of life in a school the learning environment must change. Frymier (1987) explained that a number of propositions should be considered by those who are concerned about working for significant improvements in the schools of today. The propositions which should be reviewed include: decentralization, public school/college collaboration, a reconceptualization of teaching, the importance of interest in a subject matter topic, and a reconceptualization of curriculum. These areas could be used in laying the groundwork for improvement of school climate, but may not necessarily be the answer. The secret is the commitment of the school's effective leader, the principal, to improvement. As stated by Keefe (1989), climate does not define effectiveness, it only helps to predict it. Satisfied teachers and

parents mean purposeful schools; satisfied students mean successful schools.

Implications for Principals

The principal holds the key to improving school climate. The centers of strong schools are strong and effective principals who are fair, consistent, capable, and visible (Swymer 1986). Student self-concepts are affected by teacher self-concepts, which are affected by the principal. A positive school climate is created when a principal is visible. A principal who is visible walks through the building and knows what is going on. He/she is interested in what is going on in each classroom and how information is being communicated to students. School climate is improved by managing the school by mingling with staff and students. Discipline is at a minimum due to constant monitoring. The principal knows that students have individual differences and establishes positive rapport with each student accordingly. Persistent positive feedback to students and staff causes high morale.

In summary, there are a variety of external and internal factors influencing student self-concept. The purpose of this study is not to measure each factor individually, but simply determine if a positive or negative correlation exists between school climate and

student self-concept. Clearly there is a relationship, but the effect that school climate has on student self-concept is very difficult to measure because of a number of intervening variables. An example of the inability to measure such variables can be seen in a study conducted in 1984 at Boulevard High School in Detroit. Stavros & Moore (1985) reported that staff and students at the school felt positive about academic programs and least positive about the administration. They also rated morale as positive, but student activities as negative. The staff felt the school environment was unsafe, which was supported by students not participating in after school activities. The staff did like the building and its appearance. The study showed that the staff had low expectations of student performance, but students felt they were learning all they could and were learning a lot in most or all of their classes. The differing views of students and staff were caused by unreliable instruments used to measure expectations and unreliable self-report scales. Another cause sighted was that students had fewer reference groups than the teachers. The above causes only add to the point that there are just too many variables involved in attempting to

measure the effects of school climate on student self-concept.

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