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The Impact of School Climate on Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents face a rising prevalence of mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and self-harm. Schools, as central social institutions, play a pivotal role in either supporting or undermining students' mental well-being through their environments, relationships, and institutional norms collectively described as *school climate*. This paper examines how school climate, including factors like teacher-student relationships, peer support, bullying, student engagement, and institutional safety, influences adolescent mental health outcomes. Drawing from international and UK-based studies, the research highlights both individual-level and population-level mechanisms through which school climate affects psychosocial development. It critically examines the limitations in current metrics and inconsistent empirical findings while proposing practical strategies for improving school climate, including stakeholder engagement, positive behavioral supports, and leadership development. Ultimately, the paper calls for evidence-informed policies that recognize the school environment as integral to promoting mental health and resilience in young people.

Keywords: School climate, Adolescent mental health, Educational environment, Bullying and peer support, Teacher-student relationships, Positive behavioral interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Social and emotional problems affect many children and young people, particularly anxiety related to school, friends, and family. In England, these mental health issues are a major cause of disability in childhood and adolescence. Supporting mental health is crucial in government policy, with schools as potential settings for mental health promotion. Schools can influence children's mental health through their community connections. In schools with extended mental health services, disadvantaged students reported higher externalising behaviour problems, indicating that certain environments may negatively impact mental health. Research highlights how school climate affects mental health, with both healthy and chaotic environments influencing student well-being. School climate encompasses the quality of school life, including physical, social, and academic environments, as well as the norms, values, and expectations that shape students' experiences. A positive school climate fosters a sense of security and caring relationships. It involves safety, respect, mutual understanding, and a focus on learning and collaboration among all participants. Studies indicate that a positive school climate enhances children's and adolescents' psychosocial development, builds social and emotional skills, and reduces engagement in risky behaviours. It is associated with better health, mental health outcomes, and academic performance. Therefore, both parental support and a positive school climate are essential for adolescents' well-being [1, 2].

Understanding School Climate

School climate is a broad term that incorporates teacher, student, and family perceptions of the environment in a school. Findings indicated that a positive school climate, defined as safe and supportive places for students and teachers, develops an optimal teaching and learning environment that fosters positive youth development and enhanced learning. School climate in elementary schools can positively influence student outcomes, specifically student achievement. Research shows that a school's climate has serious implications for emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for students. Educators have

acknowledged the importance of school climate for many years. However, systematic study of school climate began in the 1950s with the development of assessment tools. As recently as a decade ago, an online version of these measures was developed and made available to schools, and the National Center for School Engagement began to develop a school climate database. Survey initiatives regarding this issue arose on both the state and national levels. However, school climate measures were not included in state accountability programs. According to educators, school climate reflects the climate around the classroom, and it's comprised of student, parents, and teacher perceptions on how the climate in the school feels overall. In addition to the completion of educational and psychological tests, a school climate survey should also take place. Educators can use the findings, expectations, and recommendations revealed by the survey results. The findings of prior studies indicated that when conducting assessments in the classroom, observations by the experts were deemed to be the most effective; however, student views on the climate were ignored and they were excluded from this process [3, 4].

Definition of School Climate

School climate encompasses the quality and character of school life, involving safety, relationships, teaching practices, and the surrounding environment. International reviews emphasize its multifaceted nature and the need for instruments that capture its nuances in different country contexts. However, there are limited tools available, especially focusing on the social climate within schools. In this study, school climate is defined as students' perceptions of cohesion, bullying, teacher support, and peer support. Cohesion reflects positive relationships characterized by social connectedness and commitment, enhancing attendance, motivation, engagement, and a sense of belonging, promoting academic success and well-being. Bullying victimization involves harmful acts with power imbalances, adversely affecting students' mental health through trauma and social isolation. Supportive teacher relationships are documented to positively impact student engagement, academic achievement, and social-emotional learning skills that guard against behavioral difficulties. Peer support, defined as supportive friendships among students, similarly influences engagement and achievement while reducing bullying behaviors, depression, and suicidal thoughts [5, 6].

Components of School Climate

There are things that might be looked at to establish aspects of a more positive school climate. One would be the degree of students' and teachers' participation in defining school rules and setting behavioral expectations. Strong disciplinary measures taken and a permit for corporal punishment are indications of a negative school climate. The degree to which relationships between teachers and peers are respectful and trustful could also be elucidated. This would encompass issues such as whether teachers listen to students, are sympathetic, are interested in their lives, allow for personal talks, or at least acknowledge warnings of distress, and whether teasing, ridicule, or humiliating comments to or about peers take place. Another consideration could be whether students cooperate in collaborative projects and whether they help one another in difficult situations. Lastly, students might be asked if they feel safe with respect to physical and emotional bullying techniques. Existing studies have mostly measured one or a few dimensions of school climate. In addition, the composition of each item could be viewed as the individual experiences of students, teachers, parents, or principals. School climate could also be measured at a higher aggregation level by combining the individual perceptions at each stratum. This higher-aggregation approach requires each questionnaire's items to be sufficiently equivalent in meaning across strata. Another consideration would be country-specific characteristics. National key indicators for a positive school climate could include the availability of support teams, well-structured guidelines for assessing 'problematic' teachers, an appraisal system evaluating teachers on the basis of peer teachers' feedback, and opportunities for teachers to participate in work discussions. The degree of security and safety in the way teachers address students' misbehavior could also be included as an important reference point for measuring school climate [7, 8].

Measuring School Climate

To operationalize the school climate described previously, a measure was developed based on the literature and interviews with educational leaders. Principal Campbell and other school leaders provided feedback that was used to refine the school climate measure. Four broad dimensions of school climate with multiple subdimensions were identified. These dimensions were classified based on the school climate elements identified by the National School Climate Council (NSCC). Four aspects of school

climate identified during the data collection process fell within the NSCC dimensions: educational environment, community environment, safety environment, and institutional environment. The educational environment described the overall quality of the academic atmosphere and the use of time at school; the community environment described the quality of interpersonal relationships with the school and communication and social interactions among students and staff; the safety environment represented the degree of physical and emotional security provided by the school and discipline; the institutional environment reflected the organizational or structural features of the school environment and school policies and practices. These four dimensions encompass features of the school environment that influence student cognitive, behavioral, and psychological development. The school climate measure contained 85 items on a Likert-type scale reflecting a five-point range of responses, from low to high quality regarding school climate. A multi-method and multi-source approach to assessing school climate is recommended to obtain a comprehensive perspective of the school environment. Each of the aforementioned dimensions can be operationalized separately and adapted for other stakeholders. Since educational leaders were the focus in this study, the educational environment assessment is presented [9, 10].

Mental Health in Adolescents

Depression, anxiety, and self-harm are increasingly recognized as some of the most prevalent and concerning mental health issues that significantly affect adolescents in today's society. In the United Kingdom, there has been a striking and dramatic rise in rates of self-harm among young individuals over the past decade, which is raising a growing alarm among parents, educators, and mental health professionals alike. This alarming trend is capturing the attention of countless adults who are responsible for the well-being of these young people. Furthermore, there exists a significant gap in our understanding of how the transition from primary to secondary school interacts with and may be linked to the emergence of these challenging and often distressing mental health issues. This lack of clarity and insight into the relationship between educational transitions and mental health emphasizes the urgent need for a far more profound investigation into the various factors that contribute to these rising rates, particularly during this crucial period of development in a young person's life. We must delve deeper to explore the underlying causes and possible interventions that could help alleviate these pressing issues faced by adolescents as they navigate through these formative and often turbulent years that shape their identities, futures, and overall well-being. The time has come for action and increased awareness to support our youth effectively [11, 12].

The Relationship between School Climate and Mental Health

The literature on school climate's influence on mental health proposes two pathways. First, a positive school climate can enhance individual mental health by promoting student engagement and social-emotional skills. In environments with supportive teacher-student relationships and opportunities for student participation, students are likely to feel a sense of belonging, fostering engagement and the development of important emotional and social skills necessary for mental health. Second, school climate can affect population-level mental health through 'herd effects,' where students in positive climates are surrounded by peers with better engagement and social abilities. This context increases the likelihood of developing supportive relationships and coping mechanisms for stress, even if schools do not directly influence students. Despite these theories, empirical evidence supporting the benefits of positive school climate on mental health is limited. While negative associations exist between school climate and issues like violence and smoking, connections to mental health outcomes are weaker. The lack of concrete measures assessing school climate may contribute to this gap. Effective metrics should encompass student engagement, peer relations, teacher-student rapport, social skills, and overall perceptions of the school climate. These factors may also be influenced by existing mental health challenges among students, complicating the causal relationships between school climate and mental health. Some credible research indicates a potential influence of school climate on mental health, yet systematic reviews and other studies have found no significant connections between supportive school environments and suicidal thoughts, although they suggest that reduced tolerance for bullying correlates with adverse outcomes. Thus, at a population level and in certain scenarios, the beneficial impact of school climate on mental health may not be evident [13, 14].

Case Studies

This case study focuses on understanding associations between school climate and mental health outcomes in England using a longitudinal study of adolescents aged 12 to 16. A cohort of students was formed in 2009, and they were first followed up in 2010. Similar questions were asked in both surveys about school climate (focused exclusively on the students) and mental health. School climate was measured using the positive school climate index constructed from scales measuring the quality of teacher-student relationships, student participation in school decisions, and "engaging teaching." A health-related quality of life index was generated, and depressive symptoms, self-harming, and suicidal thoughts and attempts were measured using the SCL-6D and individual items from the present study. Overall, this study will improve understanding of the mental health impacts of school climate by investigating crucial questions regarding population rather than linked data, by estimating longitudinal associations, and addressing some of the limitations of prior US studies. It will have implications for the optimization of school climate interventions and the avoidance of unintended adverse mental health outcomes. The second study examines the association between dimensions of school climate in middle school and the social and emotional health of 3rd graders. Support for school climate influence was strongest for the extremes of the school climate dimension based on the perspective of 2nd-grade students. Educational attainment was significantly and positively associated with the attention to social and behavioral indicators of classroom climate in first-grade classes. Conversely, schools with a more positive social and organizational climate in 2nd grade produced students with lower emotional problems in 3rd grade. The findings suggest reciprocal influences between school climate and educational attainment, which is worth looking into. However, school climate and educational success should be measured with rigorous indices [15, 16].

Strategies for Improving School Climate

There are a myriad of factors that come together to create a positive school climate, and these same factors are keys to improvement. School leadership greatly shapes the climate and effectiveness of a school. A safe and nurturing school climate begins with a caring principal, and success cascades down through the school. A change in leadership can result in changes in school climate. Therefore, it is imperative that new principals are adequately trained and supported to continue school reform efforts. In schools where staff turnover rates are high, the overall climate may suffer, and additional resources may have to be dedicated to supporting a new group of staff. Staff training in understanding school climate is key to improving it. A good first step is to focus on the concept of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). When teachers understand the connection between expectations, behavioral interventions, school climate, and achievement, they can take ownership of sustaining a caring environment necessary for academic success. There must be an understanding from the ground up that positive school climate is a four-pronged effort that must be made simultaneously: creating buy-in from all stakeholders, doing a needs assessment, developing and implementing an action plan, and collecting data to update and improve the plan. Steps to improve and sustain a positive school climate must include frequent communication among all stakeholders, student and teacher assessment of school climate, and systematically following a plan to improve it. All stakeholders must share responsibility for a school's climate plan. Family, community, and organization input is vital, but teachers, students, custodians, and administrators must all have ownership in the plan and a stake in it to ensure it is enforced. Nothing is more demoralizing than school completely shifting direction after it has been negotiated that a certain plan would be followed. Protecting instructional time and improving curriculum must also be consistent with a school's climate plan [17, 18].

Policy Implications

The shift in responsibility for the health of young people from family to school, particularly in setting the emotional climate of the school, is often considered necessary for the promotion of mental health and wellbeing. In the UK, the establishment of multi-agency partnerships to promote the mental health of children and young people epitomised this shift and precedes the extensive current interest in this area. Court rulings in the UK have extended the legal duty of care of schools to include a positive duty to prevent bullying as part of an overall duty of care towards students. Policy developments have favoured an emphasis on the prevention of social exclusion and on building emotional resilience among young people. Consequently, schools are increasingly expected to provide environments that are perceived to be

warm and friendly, where young people feel safe and secure, within which supportive contacts with students occur, and where the characteristics of good parenting are replicated. However, the research evidence underpinning the policy was either thin and descriptive or inconclusive, with evidence supporting, but equally, evidence refuting, schools as environments for the promotion of mental health. It is ethically and politically difficult to advocate, on the basis of weak data, that some schools are safe and address the health concerns of young people and therefore deserve educational funding, while others are unsafe and fail to protect the welfare of young people and should be penalised. Given the uncertainty surrounding schools as effective environments for the promotion of adolescent mental health, the present study aimed to test whether school climate is associated with self-reported measures of mental health. Researchers' operating definition of school climate comprised the psycho-social and physical environments of schools, such as the quality of teacher-student relationships, bullying, and the maintenance of order and discipline [19, 20].

Future Directions for Research

Future directions for research include longitudinal studies to improve understanding of the mechanisms of school climate, public health policies that can improve school climate, the impact of school climate interventions on mental health, and the public health impact of specific school climate policies. School climate is a potentially modifiable public health determinant of adolescent mental health. They use multiple secondary data sources, including linked survey measures of school climate and adolescent mental health from a representative, longitudinal sample of young people in England. This will mitigate the caveats that surround existing studies of school climate and adolescent mental health. The impact of school climate on mental health is examined, as well as looking at which aspects of school climate impact mental health. However, a future direction for this research could be longitudinal studies to improve the understanding of these mechanisms. Possible mechanisms of association could include changes to peer relationships, behaviour, and theory of mind. It may also be that school climate protects against the impact of risk factors outside of school. Understanding the mechanisms will be useful for public health policies that can improve school climate. Interventions to improve school climate are prevalent in English schools. Understanding the impact of school climate interventions on mental health would help improve the cost-effectiveness of these policies. It could also help inform the design of promising new interventions. The research could examine the public health impact of school climate interventions to identify effective policies that support new funding for existing interventions or the development of new interventions. Better-informed health systems would improve the health of adolescents [21, 22, 23].

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study underscore the significant, though complex, relationship between school climate and adolescent mental health. A positive school climate characterized by strong interpersonal relationships, participatory decision-making, and a safe physical and emotional environment has been shown to enhance psychosocial outcomes and academic success while reducing the risk of depression, anxiety, and behavioral issues. However, gaps in measurement tools, inconsistent research findings, and the contextual nature of school experiences mean that blanket assumptions about school impact must be made with caution. Effective change requires coordinated action: school leaders must be trained to foster positive climates, teachers and students should participate in shaping their environments, and policymakers must ground interventions in robust, multi-method research. As schools become increasingly recognized as critical arenas for mental health promotion, the challenge lies in balancing ethical responsibility with empirical evidence, ensuring that every student can thrive in a safe, supportive, and engaging educational setting.

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