

Teacher Perceptions of School Climate

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Abstract

This article reports on the results of a non-experimental quantitative, causal relationships study that was conducted to determine if there was a difference in educators' perception of school climate based on the type of school at which they were employed. Researchers used some of the questions found in the Delaware School Climate Survey and divided the questions into three overall categories: school safety and security, love and belonging, and esteem and equity. Survey responses were also divided by the participants who worked in Title 1 schools and those who did not. While the results showed that overall school climate tends to be more positive in non-Title 1 schools, there is only a significant difference for the esteem and equity category. This is an important note for school and district leaders as they look for ways to enhance overall school climate.

Keywords

School Climate, Teacher Perceptions

1. Introduction

A trio of higher education professors wondered about teacher perceptions of certain elements of school climate. They developed a survey instrument that was based on some of the questions that were used in the Delaware School Climate Survey 2021-2022. They noted that the school climate survey was divided into three of Maslow's Levels-Safety, Love and Belonging, and Esteem (McLeod, 2025).

Safety needs were characterized by Personal security, Employment, Resources and Health and well-being based upon predictability and individuals' control in their lives. Love and Belonging, which includes friendship, intimacy, family and a sense of connection, is based upon interpersonal relationships, affiliating, connectedness, and being part of a group (McLeod, 2025).

Esteem, which is characterized by respect, self-esteem, recognition and freedom

is based upon a sense of self-worth, accomplishment, and respect (McLeod, 2025).

Based on that guidance, the research team saw school climate through the lens of three elements: safety and security, love and belonging, and equity and esteem, as they identified the survey items they felt would address those three elements in its relationship with school climate. The researchers also wondered if significant differences existed between the perceptions of teachers who work at Title 1 schools as compared to those who work at non-Title 1 schools.

2. Literature Review

While school climate has been defined in many different ways, for the purposes of this study, we looked at school climate through three elements: safety and security, love and belonging, and equity and esteem. In this literature review, we will talk about those three elements and the research related to each one. These elements align nicely with what the Aspen Institute (2020) identifies as conditions for learning. This study also looks at the differences in school climate issues at Title 1 schools and compares them to non-Title one schools, so existing research related to school climate in those two arenas will be addressed as well.

2.1. Safety and Security

Bradshaw et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive examination of the impact of school climate on school safety. In their literature review, they noted many studies that all reported similar findings—when the school climate is positive and welcoming, incidents of unsafe behavior such as fights and bullying decrease. However, one might wonder which factor precipitates the other? Does positive school climate lead to safe schools, or do safe schools lead to a positive school climate?

Steffgen et al. (2013) conducted a meta-analysis on research studies that examined the relationship between school climate and school violence. They defined school violence as “a wide range of behaviors that threaten and harm others emotionally and physically: ranging from intentional physical attacks including the use of weapons, gang violence and sexual assaults, to less serious behaviors like beating and slapping, to relatively harmless kicks and punches” (Steffgen et al., 2013: p. 300). They reported a moderate effect size.

School climate has been positively associated with multiple positive behavioral outcomes, such as academic achievement, but also inversely related to a number of negative behavioral indicators, like absenteeism, truancy, dropout, suspension, drug use, and aggressive behavior (Bradshaw et al., 2021).

Programs such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) have been used by districts and schools nationally to create an environment where negative or harmful behaviors are reduced and positive behaviors and engagement increase. Bradshaw et al. (2021) also reported through their meta-analysis that there is a growing number of studies that show a strong connection between successful PBIS implementation and positive school climate. “Schools with positive climates have less student discipline problems, fewer high school suspensions,

fewer student absences, higher student academic motivation and engagement, and overall psychological well-being” (Aspen Institute, 2020: p. 2).

2.2. Love and Belonging

Wong et al. (2021) conducted a study that showed strong evidence that students’ perception of several aspects of the school climate is associated with adolescent social-emotional health over time. “For all of the social-emotional health outcomes, authoritative disciplinary style (high support and high structure) at 10th grade was associated with substantially more favorable outcomes at 11th grade. For example, students who reported an authoritative school climate had more self-efficacy (0.40 sd points, $p < 0.001$), more grit (0.24, $p = 0.002$), lower depression (-0.27 , $p < 0.001$), less hopelessness (-0.26 , $p < 0.001$), less stress at school (-0.30 , $p < 0.001$) and less stress about the future (-0.24 , $p = 0.002$). Perceptions of school safety were also an important predictor and were associated with better social-emotional health outcomes” (Wong et al., 2021: pp. 3-4).

Bradshaw’s meta-analysis reported that many studies have found a positive relationship between the use of Social Emotional Learning programs (SEL) and school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Helping students to learn prosocial behaviors contributes to the overall school climate.

2.3. Equity and Esteem

In order to address equity, many schools use practices that reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, increase the use of restorative practices, and provide opportunities for students to build positive relationships with adults and take appropriate leadership roles at schools. These factors create opportunities for students to experience success (Aspen Institute, 2020). “Being responsive to culture and embracing culturally responsive teaching methods builds students’ brain power and creates stronger learning opportunities” (Aspen Institute, 2020: p. 2).

2.4. Title One v. Non-Title One

Stuckey (2019) examined student perceptions on the conditions of learning and found that there was no significant difference between the perceptions of the students at Title 1 schools as compared to the students at the non-Title 1 schools included in her study. She also examined parent engagement and high expectations for all students as two other related factors of school climate and found that there was a significant difference between the two kinds of schools.

Pangle’s (2022) doctoral study investigated whether teacher perceptions of school climate differed between Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools. She found that teachers in non-Title 1 schools reported significantly more positive perceptions of engagement and environment.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this non-experimental, quantitative, causal comparative study was

to ascertain if there was a difference in educators' perception of school climate based on the type of school at which they were employed. This research examined whether the pre-existing participants' characteristics, the independent variable of school employment, influenced the dependent variable, the educator's perception of the school climate. This study aims to determine if potential causal relationships exist between differences based on previous group memberships (employment at Title 1 or non-Title 1 schools). Due to the pre-existing nature of group membership, random assignment was not possible, and the independent variable cannot be manipulated. An important feature of the causal comparative design is the categorical structure of the independent variable, which divides the participants into two or more categories (Claxton & Barthlow, 2024). So, while we were able to look at the causal relationships to some degree, the nature of the sample made this process less concrete than originally planned.

Participants were recruited through an invitation to participate in an anonymous survey. The invitation was posted on social media sites. Teachers and administrators who were employed in K-12 settings were invited to participate by scanning the QR code or accessing the link. After agreeing to participate in the study, participants were able to access the research instruments. Data were collected using two instruments. The first was a demographic survey consisting of 5 questions. Although no personally identifying information was collected, these questions helped to generate a more thorough understanding of the sample while also dividing the participants' responses by their employment setting (Title 1 or non-Title 1). This instrument included information about the level of employment (elementary or secondary), the type of school (public or private), their position (classroom teacher or administrator), and the school's location (urban, suburban, or rural).

The second instrument was the Delaware School Climate Survey (Bear et al., 2011), which consisted of 39 questions divided between three categories: school safety and security, love and belonging, and esteem and equity. Each category contained 13 statements which the participants responded to using a 5-point Likert scale survey ranging from 1 Disagree Strongly to 5 Agree Strongly (See Appendix). The survey is available free to use and has demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients generally ranging from .75 to .97 for the three different subscales.

3.1. Participants

For this study, a small sample of 58 K-12 educators participated shared their responses. **Table 1** lists the demographic characteristics of the participants. The majority of the participants were public school classroom teachers who were employed on the elementary level in suburban schools.

3.2. Results

Unpaired two-tailed t-tests were computed based on the mean for each of the 39

Table 1. Demographic information of sample.

Characteristic	Title 1	Non-Title 1	Total
Employment			
Public	29	25	54
Private	2	2	4
Level			
Elementary	21	15	36
Secondary	10	12	22
School Setting			
Urban	9	3	12
Suburban	15	18	33
Rural	7	5	12
Position of Employment			
Classroom Teacher	22	17	39
Administration	9	10	19

statements from the non-Title 1 and Title 1 groups. The non-Title 1 group had a mean of 3.6832 with a standard deviation of 0.3604 compared to the mean of the Title 1 group of 3.3891 with a standard deviation of 0.4706. On the total survey, the non-Title 1 participants' overall mean for school climate is significantly more positive than the mean for Title 1 participants. The overall t -value is 2.89297. The p -value is 0.005165. The result is significant at $p < 0.05$.

The total means were disaggregated into the three subsections. The results of the three subsections show a mixture of statistically significant vs. non-significant results. Unpaired t -tests were run on the three components: Safety and Security, Love and Belonging, and Esteem and Equity.

For the Safety and Security subsection, the unpaired t -value was 1.41289. The p -value was 0.176845. Consequently, the difference between the responses from Title 1 and non-Title 1 participants was *not* significant.

For the Love and Belonging subsection, the unpaired t -value was 1.07406. The p -value was 0.294435. The result is *not* significant at $p < 0.05$. Consequently, the difference between the responses from Title 1 and non-Title 1 participants was *not* significant.

Esteem and Equity were the only categories where the means demonstrated a statistically significant difference. The mean for the non-Title 1 participants was 3.5623 with a standard deviation of 0.29609, which is more positive than the mean from the Title 1 participants, which was 3.1661 with a standard deviation of 0.438777. The t -value is 2.6984. The p -value is 0.012553. The result is significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Since the difference was statistically significant, each of the items in the Esteem and Equity component was analyzed. Four of the statements had statistically sig-

nificant differences. All the means were significantly more positive for non-Title 1 schools.

The four statements were:

Students try their best. The t -value is 2.6984. The p -value is 0.012553. The result is significant at $p < 0.05$.

Students are praised often. The t -value is 2.12584. The p -value is 0.038688. The result is significant at $p < 0.05$.

Students work hard to get good grades. The t -value is 2.53026. The p -value is 0.014733. The result is significant at $p < 0.05$.

Students treat each other with respect. The t -value is 2.74641. The p -value is 0.008457. The result is significant at $p < 0.05$.

4. Findings and Limitations

Again, the question the researchers sought to answer was: How do the educators' perspectives of school climate compare between Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools? It is clear that from an overall view, teacher perspectives of school climate are far more positive in non-Title 1 schools. But, when the results were broken into the three subsections we used to describe school climate (safety and security, love and belonging, and equity and esteem), only equity and esteem saw a significant difference between the teacher perceptions of those who work in non-Title 1 schools as compared to their counterparts who work in the Title 1 schools.

It appears that teacher perceptions of safety and security, along with the component of love and belonging, run consistently across the participants from both types of schools, regardless of federal funding status. However, because of the small sample size and recruitment being limited to social media, there is no way to make assumptions about the applicability of the findings to a different sample.

5. Implications for School Leaders

Although the overall means of educators' perceptions about school climate in Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools were between neutral and agree, the disaggregation of the data into the three components revealed some interesting findings. There was no significant difference between types of schools when looking at the safety and belonging components. It may be safe to say that educators in all settings are equally concerned about safety issues and address the need to belong as part of commonly used school-wide discipline programs.

In Title 1 schools, it is important for educators to focus specifically on equity and esteem. Educators need to help students improve their peer social relationships as well as their individual grit and engagement through increased emphasis on praise and celebrating successes. This may encourage students to try their best and to work harder to obtain good grades, helping them to be more successful in school.

The means of educators' perceptions of school climate indicate that for both types of settings (Title 1 and non-Title 1), enhancing school climate is a concern. Based on the findings of this study, Pangle (2022) suggests that best practices for

all schools, both Title 1 and non-Title 1, provide four guidelines for ongoing attention to the issue of school climate. First, district and school leaders should regularly provide school climate surveys for all stakeholders. The data from these surveys should be analyzed to identify and address school-level and districtwide concerns. The next step would be to ensure that improving school climate is emphasized in school improvement plans developed with input from both instructional and non-instructional staff. However, school climate does not involve only students and faculty. Family engagement activities should be developed with input from families and community members, thus contributing to school climate by improving instructional and community support.

Finally, it is important to remember that Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools face differing challenges. District leaders need to continue to analyze differences in perceptions of the environment between Title 1 and non-Title 1 schools. These results will help to provide strategies to improve school climate. With a consistent focus, input from all stakeholders and a recognition that school climate influences teacher and student performance, school leaders can develop and maintain a school climate conducive to teaching and learning.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix. Delaware School Climate Survey

Safety and Security

- Students are safe in the hallways.
- The consequences of breaking rules are fair.
- Students threaten and bully others.
- Students know how they are expected to act.
- Students feel safe.
- Students worry about others bullying them.
- Students know they are safe in this school.
- It is clear how students are expected to act.
- Students are punished a lot.
- Students are sent out of class for breaking rules.
- Students are often yelled at by adults.
- Students are taught that they can control their own behavior.
- Classroom rules are fair.

Love and Belonging

- Teachers care about their students.
- Students are friendly with each other.
- Students care about each other.
- Students respect others who are different.
- Adults who work here care about the students.
- Most students like this school.
- Students are taught to feel responsible for how they act.
- Students are taught to understand how others think and feel.
- Students are taught they should care about how others feel.
- Students get along with each other.
- Teachers work closely with parents to help students when they have problems.
- Teachers, staff, and administration function as a good team.
- I like this school.

Esteem and Equity

- Teachers treat students of all races with respect.
- Most students try their best.
- Teachers listen to students when they have problems.
- Students are praised often.
- Students are often given rewards for being good.
- Teachers often let students know when they are being good.
- Classes get rewarded for good behavior.
- Students are taught how to solve conflicts with others.
- Teachers use just enough praise and rewards; not too much or too little.
- Students are often asked to help decide what is best for the class or school.
- Most students work hard to get good grades.
- Students treat each other with respect.
- Teachers show respect for parents.