A Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Promotion of a Positive School Climate: Context, Challenges, and Solutions

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Abstract

There is a common understanding among researchers and practitioners that the learning environment is a key aspect of the adjustment and well-being of students and teachers. There is a necessity to translate the findings of individual studies on building positive learning environments to a comprehensive and integral framework to sustain and promote a positive school climate using a holistic approach. Sustainability in this theoretical paper is approached as a dynamic, continuous, and long-term process of consciously and consistently implementing actions, strategies, and values at all levels and in all environments to facilitate and maintain a positive climate in educational settings. This conceptual approach, based on action research in the fields of education and psychology, will help to broaden perspectives on both positive school climates and sustainability to improve the understanding and practices of all stakeholders in education. As such, this article presents a conceptual framework as well as guidelines for the assessment of sustainably promoting a positive school climate.

Keywords: Conceptual framework, inclusion, learning environment, school climate, school cultural congruity, social-emotional learning, sustainability.

Introduction

The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) address the evolving concept of sustainability, which now encompasses a holistic approach that links economic development, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. The document reaffirms each state's right to sovereignty over its resources and commits to implementing the Agenda for the benefit of both

present and future generations while stressing the importance of adherence to international law.

The UN General Assembly declared 17 SDGs and 169 associated targets, emphasizing their integrated and indivisible nature. This unprecedented commitment from world leaders aims to achieve sustainable development through collective efforts and global cooperation. The SDGs, established by global leaders, aim to tackle challenges from eradicating poverty and hunger to ensuring well-being and equality for all by 2030. A key goal within this framework is to provide quality education for everyone (SDG 4), highlighting the interconnectedness of these objectives in fostering sustainable development worldwide (Sachs, 2014).

The UNESCO document "Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action" outlines a global vision and commitment to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. Adopted at the World Education Forum in Incheon, South Korea, in 2015, this framework serves as a guide for implementing the SDGs' education targets.

The Education 2030 framework represents a continuation and evolution of the goals and priorities set forth in the Edgar Faure Report (see Faure, 1972, for full report) and the Delors Report (see Delors, 1998, for full report). The Faure Report emphasized the importance of lifelong learning and the need to adapt education to the changing needs of society, and the Delors Report called for a holistic approach to education that would emphasize not only cognitive development but also social and emotional growth. The Education 2030 framework builds upon these ideas and incorporates a stronger focus on equity, inclusion, and sustainable development. Additionally, Education 2030 recognizes the need for increased collaboration and partnership among stakeholders at all levels to achieve its goals.

Rieckmann (2017) highlights the significance of education as both an independent goal and a means to achieve all other SDGs in UNESCO's education for sustainable development (ESD) learning objectives. Education is integral to sustainable development and a crucial factor in its pursuit. Achieving a sustainable world requires a profound transformation in how we think and act, necessitating individuals to become responsible agents of change, equipped with the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that enable them to contribute to sustainable development. Furthermore, ESD emphasizes a commitment to providing inclusive, equitable, and quality education at all levels, ensuring access for all, regardless of gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability, or other vulnerable circumstances. This includes fostering a supportive environment for children and youth to realize their rights and abilities, contributing to countries' demographic dividends through safe schools and cohesive communities and families.

ESD is a relevant concept in the discourse on 21st century education (Bell, 2016). Besides the necessity to develop an individual's skills and competencies to adapt to rapid social and environmental changes, ESD emphasizes creating competencies for a sustainable future. These include the ability to use, manage, and consume goods and develop the capacity to create and transform resources, including the facilitation of their own mental health and well-being. To provide sustainable development in educational settings, there is also a necessity to broaden perspectives on teachers' and administrators' education for sustainability, including human sensitivity (Salīte et al., 2021; Salīte et al., 2022). Several pedagogical principles have to be implemented to act within the framework

of transformative sustainability education (TSE), including solidarity, taking learners' experiences into account, being aware of social and environmental problems, and participatory teaching and learning (Bedford, 2022). Through these principles, it is possible to emphasize a key role of learning environments, which are expected to be inclusive, safe, and non-discriminating to facilitate all learners' growth. However, other researchers point to the risk that focusing mainly on psychological aspects (e.g., motivation, communication skills, or promoting well-being) could lead to diminishing academic quality in the future (Pipere et al., 2022).

Positive Learning Environments and School Climate

During the past several decades, a growing body of empirical research has provided solid evidence that a safe, healthy, inclusive, and relationship-oriented environment leads to more effective learning and promotes both students' and teachers' own well-being (e.g., Hughes & Coplan, 2017; La Salle et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2012). Based on social and educational values and embedded in social interactions between peers and teachers, a positive school climate can increase students' well-being (Koth et al., 2008).

It is evident that the creation of positive learning environments and a positive school climate represents one of the main pathways to achieving the SDGs, particularly Goal 4. The 17 goals are interconnected, and Goal 4 serves as a central axis. In this context, fostering a positive learning environment and school climate means cultivating citizens who, in turn, contribute not only to promoting a better society through their academic and professional skills but also to fostering citizens who engage in social endeavors and uphold positive values and democratic culture (Lenzi et al., 2014). Ultimately, this ensures long-term sustainability by considering future generations and the future of the Earth, both socially and environmentally.

However, it is essential to differentiate between "learning environment" and "school climate". Both concepts consider the context and environmental influences that characterize students' experiences in educational settings and the organizational aspects of the school system. The difference lies in the nuances, where the concept of learning environment is more closely tied to the arrangement of spaces and teaching methods, while the notion of school climate has a broader meaning, referring to the atmosphere and culture of a school, including its values, norms, expectations, and practices. A positive school climate can encourage teachers' educational activities, school relationships, and student engagement (La Salle et al., 2015). School climate is a multi-dimensional construct representing perceptions of the educational environment, connected to the beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape the interactions between students, teachers, and administrators within a school (Cohen et al., 2009; Kuperminc et al., 1997).

The topic of learning environments has been the subject of a significant OECD investigation called "Innovative Learning Environments" (ILE). In the project report, a learning environment is defined as "a holistic eco-system that functions over time and in context and includes the activity and outcomes of learning" (OECD, 2013, p. 23). The project investigates key principles, designs, and approaches for transforming education into engaging, personalized, and effective learning experiences. Focusing on research, analysis, and knowledge dissemination, the ILE project offers practical guidance for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders. By exploring global case studies, the project

identifies the essential elements and strategies for successful innovative learning environments, such as student-centered pedagogies, flexible spaces, collaborative practices, technology integration, and real-world experiences, highlighting the importance of a holistic approach to education.

The concept of the school climate is closely related to school culture or school values. The content of the school climate may vary depending on the perspective of students, parents, or staff (Cohen et al., 2009; Wang & Degol, 2016). Perceptions of the climate are associated with the quality of the environment, where a better environment leads to more positive perceptions. However, the relationship can be more complex, as individuals contribute to the social climate and filter their environment based on personal characteristics. The interplay between different aspects and levels of analysis adds complexity to the issue but does not diminish its importance. School climate is central to our memories of school life, coloring our experiences and influencing subsequent choices. To confirm this, one can simply ask someone, "What do you remember about the school you attended?" The answer will most likely involve aspects of the school climate rather than – or at least in addition to – their grades or the learning content.

The most commonly recognized areas of school climate include perceptions of physical and emotional safety, interpersonal relationships among peers and adults, and perceptions of the learning environment, including teacher expectations and school material resources, such as textbooks (Cohen et al., 2009; La Salle et al., 2015; Parris et al., 2018; Thapa et al., 2013). In their review, Thapa et al. (2013) propose distinguishing five areas of school climate: a) safety, b) relationships, c) teaching and learning, d) the institutional environment, and e) the school improvement process.

The first area, safety, involves social and emotional safety. The second area, relationships, involves respect for diversity, school connection, and perceived social support. The third area, teaching and learning, involves the perception of the school as an adequate and stimulating context in terms of teaching and learning processes. The fourth area, the institutional environment, involves the perception of the surrounding environment in terms of cleanliness, order, and resources. The fifth area, the school improvement process, involves the activation of school reform programs.

School Climate Assessment

Most tools for assessing school climate are based on students' perceptions. In many respects, this is certainly an advantage, as student behavior depends to a large extent on how they perceive the school environment. On the other hand, a broader view of the school climate can be obtained if we also investigate the perception of the school climate that parents and staff have. Therefore, tools such as the Georgia School Climate Survey (La Salle, 2022) are of particular interest due to having a form for students as well as a form for school staff and a form for parents. The evaluation of different perspectives makes available more information to define improvement policies in the school environment while involving the largest number of people possible in the process of change.

When examining data, several considerations must be taken into account. For example, when the school climate among students with minoritized and marginalized identities is investigated, compiling aggregate data from the survey may not be sufficient to grasp the complexity and specificity of the problems that characterize a specific group, for example, one distinguished by ethnicity or sexual orientation. When there

are only a few students in a school, it becomes difficult to grasp the extent of the discomfort for numerical reasons. In these cases, the use of qualitative techniques, such as interviews and focus groups, which lend themselves to investigating issues more deeply, may be preferable.

Analyses of the self-report tool and qualitative methods can be integrated with other observational tools on the characteristics of the school environment and the collection of objective data relating to students, for example, the number of unjustified student absences (truancy) or absences due to illness, or to the school staff, for example, the number of teachers who annually request to be transferred to another school. The integration of objective and subjective data provides a richer and more articulated picture of the school climate, which, even if filtered by the subjective experience of the actors involved, nevertheless maintains a causal relationship with the objective factors that characterize a specific school.

Importance of a Positive School Climate for Students' and Teachers' Well-being

A positive school climate is crucial for supporting students' social, emotional, and behavioral adaptation, particularly during their challenging transition to secondary school. The studies by Lester et al. (2013) and Lester and Cross (2015) provide evidence for the importance of school connections and social support as protective factors against depression and anxiety among adolescents. Additionally, their findings suggest that the perception of connection and belonging may play a bidirectional role in promoting student well-being and a positive school climate. These results highlight the need for educators and policymakers to prioritize the creation of supportive and inclusive school environments that foster student connection and promote mental health.

Research by La Salle et al. (2018) and Wang et al. (2018) highlight the importance of school climate in relation to mental health outcomes for students. While negative perceptions of school climate are associated with mental health challenges, a positive school climate has been linked to both reduced negative mental health symptoms and increased positive mental health outcomes. It is important to recognize that mental health encompasses more than just the absence of negative symptoms and that positive mental health outcomes are crucial for students. Improving school climates can contribute to better mental and physical health outcomes for students, emphasizing the importance of creating supportive and inclusive learning environments for all students.

A recent multinational study by La Salle et al. (2021) explored adolescents' perceptions of school climate and mental health in nine different countries. The study involved a broad sample of students between the ages of 13 and 16 who completed an online survey assessing various aspects of school climate (such as inclusivity, teacher support, and safety) and mental health (such as depression, anxiety, and self-esteem). The results showed that a positive perception of school climate was associated with better mental health, while a negative perception of school climate was associated with a higher incidence of mental health problems (La Salle et al., 2021). Additionally, the results highlighted some differences between the participating countries, suggesting that perceptions of school climate and mental health might be influenced by cultural and social differences. Overall, the study provides important information on how school climate can impact adolescents' mental health and help education professionals create more favorable school environments for students' mental health.

Previous research shows that building a positive school climate fosters teachers' mental health and well-being (e.g., Cann et al., 2020; Dreer, 2022), thus adding to the understanding that investing effort in building a positive school climate is not an additional burden to teachers' workload.

A recent paper by Di Sano et al. (in press) examines the association between school climate and educational disparities, both generally and within the specific national contexts of Germany, Italy, Latvia, and the United States. They contend that, while the status of marginalized groups may differ depending on the cultural milieu, there is a universal link between school climate and equity in educational settings that can be addressed through concerted research and practice. This has implications for promoting educational equity on a global scale.

Sustainability as a Dynamic Process and Outcome

Despite understanding the importance of positive learning environments, there is still insufficient evidence and even awareness of how, once created, positive environments can be sustained year by year (Moceri et al., 2012). This is not a simple task because the question is not just about the orientation to a sustainable future but also about the sustainability of already implemented effective practices. Consequently, an important challenge is how to create learning environments through implementing practices that can become an integral part of everyday teaching and learning practice and endure over time.

Several factors must be addressed when considering the implementation of evidence-based practices. Well-designed social-emotional learning programs implemented with fidelity lead to positive outcomes (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011); however, the approach itself does not ensure a long-term effect. In fact, researchers have warned that trying to make such programs more attractive and easily adopted by simplifying their content could compromise their sustainability (Commins & Elias, 1991). In other words, putting less effort into an intervention's implementation jeopardizes its sustainability. Another approach to more sustainable practice for the development of students' social-emotional competence that avoids these obstacles is moving from programs to strategies, integrating the teaching and reinforcing the skills into the routine of everyday teaching and interaction (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2020; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Nevertheless, these tools and strategies are just one part of the whole and more complex process of adopting a sustainable approach toward facilitating a positive school climate.

Moceri et al. (2012) proposed that sustainability could be used synonymously with implementation since their theoretical and empirical research findings led to the system of sustainable implementation. Recognizing the importance of an action research perspective (Elias et al., 2003) and based on this approach, Elias (2007) identified the core factors of the system of sustainable implementation as follows: (a) an explicit commitment, (b) the involvement of implementers, (c) the integration of intervention in school life, (d) the compatibility of the intervention with the school's needs, (e) following a long-term implementation plan, (f) opportunities to reflect upon the plan's progress, and (g) collecting information about the effectiveness of its implementation.

This approach allows us to consider sustainability as both a process and an outcome. Furthermore, we can broaden our perspective by including the key elements of the phenomenon in one holistic model. The conceptual approach facilitates in-depth research

without fragmenting attention to the relationships between individual variables, the clarification of which is important but does not include essential aspects like the sustainability of the whole phenomenon. Based on this model, practitioners could approach a variety of aspects from different levels vital to creating, facilitating, and sustaining positive learning environments, while researchers could address the school climate by examining not only the multi-dimensional structure of the concept but also aspects of its sustainability.

Principles of Sustainability and Promoting a Positive School Climate

Several general principles play a significant role in the effective implementation of interventions and in ensuring the sustainability of already established practices toward building a positive school climate. One such principle is a **whole-school** approach in which the whole system adopts the same practices instead of implementing separate and sporadic activities. Recent research provides evidence that targeting the whole school also significantly improves the outcomes of teachers and students at a classroom level (Bradley et al., 2018). This effect is based on the fact that different levels (individual, classroom, school, family/community) are interdependent. Nevertheless, all the levels should be aligned to ensure that practice is successfully sustained in the long term. The whole-school approach incorporates important aspects, including the leadership of the school administration, targeted objectives in the school strategic documents (vision, mission, plans), forming a support team to activate and model intended goals, collecting and monitoring data, providing professional development for all school staff, assessing needs and the implementation process, and integrating the planned innovation with the school existing and well-established networks and internal systems (e.g., Dusenbury et al., 2015; Hoare et al., 2017). The whole-school approach involves all school community members (e.g., teachers, support staff inside and outside school, technical staff, parents, local community) and ensures support to all students in all environments at school through curricular, instructional, relationship, and contextual processes (Cefai et al., 2021).

Another key aspect that has to be considered and facilitated is the **readiness of the school staff** to implement an intervention or change. This leads to a clear commitment to work toward the goal and plan changes and the participation of all involved members (Elias, 2007). Without this commitment, even well-planned and relevant initiatives could not be implemented appropriately due to teachers/implementers' lack of confidence, unwillingness, or even resistance. Teachers have to be considered as one of the most important factors predicating student outcomes, both academic (e.g., Hattie, 2008) and social-emotional (Elbertson et al., 2010).

For this reason, a prerequisite of building and sustaining a positive school climate is providing **training and continuous support to teachers** (e.g., Elias et al., 2003). Maintaining a united whole-school approach and taking personal responsibility to implement activities supporting a positive school climate in a coordinated way requires teachers' motivation (e.g., Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Recent research shows that teachers' positive attitude toward promoting their students' mental health and well-being is associated with their own propensity to dedicate time to the respective activities and embed them in their practices (Nalipay et al., 2021). However, this actualizes the dilemma between teachers' role in teaching core subjects and simultaneously addressing their students'

social-emotional well-being, especially since the global pandemic (Sahlberg, 2021). One of the ways to ensure teachers take an active role in building a positive school climate is by providing evidence-based information on positive gains from such efforts, including improvements to teachers' own mental health and well-being (e.g., Cann et al., 2020; Dreer, 2022).

Another principle recognized as particularly important is the active **role of administration** (e.g., Capp et al., 2022; VanLone et al., 2019). The principal fulfills their active position through personal engagement in the process of promoting and sustaining practices facilitating a positive school climate year-by-year through leadership, planning, providing positive reinforcement, role-modeling, and monitoring. The school administration should be engaged with the strategic planning to renew teachers' skills and maintain the whole-school approach toward a positive school climate despite other essential obligations or external factors, such as teacher turnover or another topical actuality (e.g., school accreditation). The creation of a support team involving teachers and opinion leaders to provide internal collegial support and modeling of the expected practices has also been proposed (e.g., Merrel & Guelder, 2010). Nevertheless, the school leader should also initiate opportunities for staff to receive supervision and ongoing consultations from external experts (e.g., Martinsone & Vilciņa, 2017). Through the leader's consistent initiatives to disseminate plans, activities, and experience devoted to promoting a positive school climate, two important goals could be achieved: first, the involvement of the wider community (students, families, media, mental health professionals) (Blackburn Franke et al., 2021) in the school efforts, and second, the increased sustainability over time.

General Ways to Promote a Positive School Climate

Related to essential elements in school, innovations or improvements are both general and more specific ways to promote and sustain a positive school climate. Of the general approaches, relationship orientation, the school cultural congruity, and equity and inclusion are of special relevance to the focus of this article.

Relationship orientation corresponds to the premise that productive learning and disciplining, as well as bonding to school, are based on positive relationships. Research shows that students' academic motivation, social skills, behavioral outcomes, and mental health are strongly associated with the quality of student-teacher relationships and support received (e.g., Bryan et al., 2012; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Empirical evidence supports the observations of education practitioners that the focus on building positive relationships is natural at elementary school but may be challenging at middle/high school. One of the reasons is that while students are mostly taught by one teacher in elementary school, they are taught by several teachers in secondary school, and they may not be positively connected to all of them.

Research also shows that emotionally supportive teacher-student interactions lead to an increase in students' perceived sense of autonomy, as well as more supportive peer relationships among students. These outcomes, in turn, predict higher student engagement (Ruzek et al., 2016). Therefore, since positive relationships strongly predict school engagement (measured through academic participation, enjoyment, and efforts); it is important to plan and consciously invest in building positive relationships among teachers and students (Martin & Collie, 2019). The authors claim that relationships between teachers and students are developed and sustained in three ways: interpersonally through

teachers' warmth, pedagogically through delivering subject matter, and substantively through instruction and tasks.

The building of positive relationships corresponds to two levels: school level and class level. At the school level, it is essential to ensure that there are predominantly positive relationships among teachers and students, which requires teachers' continuing education and training on the relevance of building positive relationships with students. Additionally, the balance of negative and positive behavior records has to be monitored at the school level. At the class level, instructional strategies should be addressed to promote teacher-student relationships. Among these strategies are knowing and affirming all students (to build interpersonal relationships), assigning relevant and interesting tasks (to foster substantive relationships), and providing positive and specific feedback (to sustain pedagogical relationships).

The **school cultural congruity** is a key aspect that should be consciously targeted when it intends to promote a positive school climate and build a strong partnership with families. The concept of school cultural congruity describes the degree to which the school meets the diverse needs and values of the families it serves (Weber et al., 2021; Madsen & Mabokela, 2013). Culturally responsive school practices are crucial to facilitate parental engagement since different values and expectations of the school and families could hinder collaboration and even block it (Yulianti et al., 2020). The concept of school cultural congruity comes from a broader perspective of a possible mismatch in cultures of mainstream educational settings and indigenous or racial minority cultures (Rattenborg et al., 2018). Nevertheless, even beyond cultural diversity, the concept of congruence is relevant. For example, if a school values academic success but the family appreciates their child's creative expression, problems could arise in a common view on the child's adjustment at school. Thus, the starting point should be the school cultural sensitivity, including the recognition of cultural biases, allowing it to develop appropriate practices congruent with the diverse needs of the entire school population.

Equity and inclusion serve as a foundation for fostering a positive school climate, as they emphasize the importance of values. The prioritization of academic, social, and emotional skills while disregarding values may prove detrimental in the long run. Consequently, the cultivation of values precedes the development of learning and social skills and constitutes a crucial goal in education from a global standpoint. In the pursuit of equity, the human rights-based approach holds particular significance, positioning school psychologists and other professionals in the educational sphere as "advocates for the rights of the child" in compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Nastasi & Naser, 2020). Similarly, the social justice perspective within school psychology and other disciplines advocates for non-discriminatory practices, the empowerment of families and communities, and the establishment of equitable schools and communities while safeguarding students' rights and fostering opportunities (Grapin & Shriberg, 2020).

Specific Approaches to Promoting a Positive School Climate

Among the more specific approaches to promoting a positive school climate, the implementation of evidence-based preventive (universal and targeted) interventions, classroom instruction strategies, and formative assessment should be emphasized.

Such preventive approaches as social-emotional learning (SEL) and positive behavioral intervention and support (PBIS) are whole-school frameworks targeted at all students and aimed at developing a whole-school culture promoting social-emotional growth and behavioral adjustment. Jimerson et al. (2022) claim that schools should employ evidence-based interventions to support all students (universal level), as well as support students at risk (secondary level) and those in need (tertiary level). This is called the multi-tiered support system (MTSS), aimed at developing a positive school culture and supporting students who need more individualized support. When speaking about the school climate, universal interventions should primarily be considered since they invest in the well-being of both students and teachers through the direct learning of social-emotional skills, promoting resilience, and preventing social, emotional, and behavioral problems (e.g., Cefai et al., 2022). Despite evidence that universal interventions are effective for at-risk students or those already facing problems (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011), the necessity to pay specific attention to those children is supported by research that has found that an integrated MTSS approach is most effective starting even from preschool age (e.g., Liu et al., 2020; Murano et al., 2020).

Additionally, teachers' own well-being has to be included in these supportive approaches. The comprehensive model of promoting mental health at schools developed by Cavioni et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of sustaining teachers' well-being. Research has found that teachers with higher social-emotional competence build better relationships with students, improve classroom interactions, and experience higher self-efficacy, consequently perceiving increased work satisfaction and reduced stress and burnout (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2013).

Classroom instruction strategies promoting students' well-being should also be integrated into everyday teaching routines without compromising the academic curriculum. Additionally, formative assessment helps to go beyond putting grades on students' knowledge and performance and includes the teacher taking an active role, observing their students' personal growth and development of soft skills, as well as looking for evidence of students' improvement (Ferreira et al., 2020). Wiliam (2011) proposes the following formative assessment strategies: understanding students' learning intentions, finding evidence of student learning, providing feedback, activating students as instructional resources for learning, and activating students as owners of their learning. Within the last strategy, reflection is of special importance. Thus, such practices as cooperative learning, providing positive and specific feedback, encouraging classroom discussions, considering different opinions, self-assessment and self-reflection, and others have to be sustained as everyday approaches to investing in building a sustainable and positive school climate.

Discussion

All the aforementioned aspects, crucial for building, facilitating, and consistently sustaining a positive school climate, are included in the conceptual model (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Sustainable Promoting of Positive School Climate (developed by Martinsone et al. for this article, 2023)
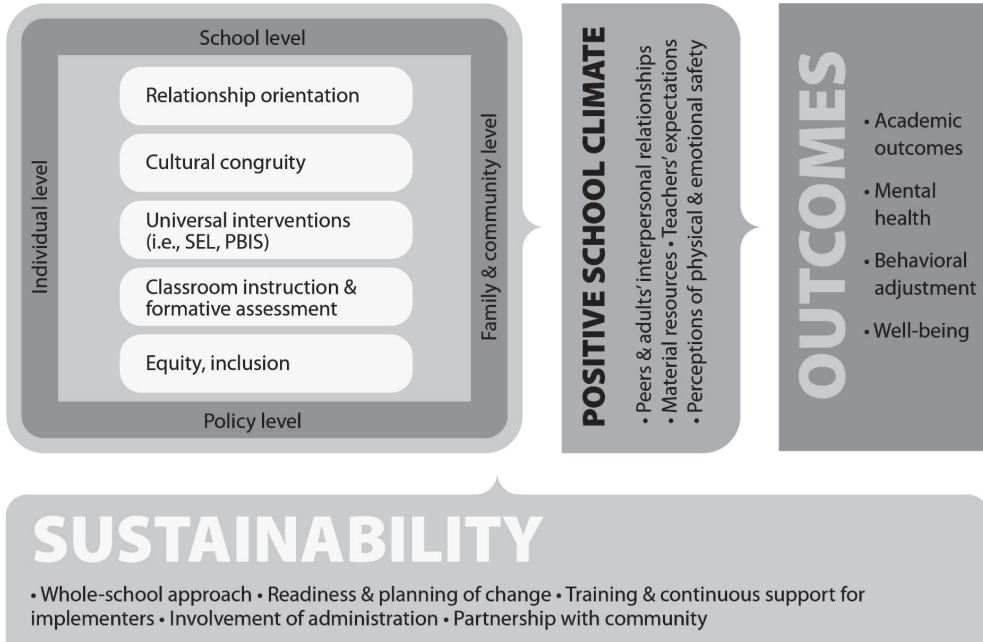
The model includes the core approach of promoting a positive school climate while considering the efforts and coordinated collaboration of involved persons at all levels. Among the more general approaches are an orientation to building positive relationships, promoting cultural congruity, and equity and inclusion. Specific core approaches to promoting a positive school climate are social-emotional learning and other evidence-based interventions implemented universally for all children while also providing consistent selective and individually indicated support for children at risk or in need. Another aspect that should be addressed is indirect social-emotional learning through classroom instruction strategies and formative assessment embedded in everyday teaching routines and practice. A positive school climate can be sustainably maintained by consistently embodying such principles as using the whole-school approach, encouraging teachers' readiness to implement changes, investing in teacher training and continuous support, the active leadership of the administration, and continuing partnerships at different levels.

Such coordinated and well-sustained actions will lead to creating and maintaining a positive school climate, covering such dimensions as the quality of interpersonal relationships, a well-sustained physical environment at school, high achievement standards for every student, and perceived physical and emotional safety at school. In the long term, a consistently sustained positive school climate will lead to improvements in academic outcomes, prosocial behavior, and mental health and well-being. Through consistent role-modeling, positive feedback, learning through action, and opportunities to practice

the skills obtained, students will absorb and internalize the value of a positive school climate and will be able to invest in broader global processes through civic engagement.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Creating an educational system that promotes a positive school climate ensures that all students reach their full potential. However, ensuring that such a system is sustainable and can be maintained over time is also essential. It involves taking a multi-level and multi-dimensional approach that engages schools, individual students and families, and policymakers. By incorporating sustainability principles into the educational approach, it is possible to create a model that supports student learning and development and ensures that goals are achievable and maintained in the long term.

In line with the model proposed in this study, a positive school climate predicts academic achievement, school success, effective violence prevention, students' healthy development, and teacher retention (Cohen et al., 2009) despite low socioeconomic backgrounds' negative contribution to academic achievement (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Research shows that school climate is a critical factor in students' behavioral adjustment (Reaves et al., 2018). According to Lombardi (2019), school climate is vital in improving engagement in school activities and supporting well-being. Student support and disciplinary structure in the school climate positively relate to student civic engagement, and student support moderates the relationship between a sense of belonging and civic behaviors (Encina, 2021). A perceived democratic school climate is associated with higher levels of adolescent civic responsibility, which in turn is positively associated with a stronger intention to participate in the civic domain in the future (Lenzi et al., 2014).

School Level

At the school level, policies, procedures, and programs can be implemented to promote positive relationships and cultural responsiveness and to integrate universal interventions into classroom instruction and behavior management systems. This can create a positive school climate that supports learning and social-emotional development for all students. Relationship orientation and cultural congruity are typically implemented at the school level through policies, procedures, and programs that promote positive relationships and cultural responsiveness among students, teachers, and staff members (e.g., Smith et al., 2011). Universal interventions are also implemented at the school level and can be integrated into classroom instruction and schoolwide behavior management systems (Durlak et al., 2011; Reinke et al., 2013). Equity and inclusion are typically addressed at the school level through policies and programs promoting equity and inclusion for all students (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

Individual Level

At the individual level, teacher-student and peer-to-peer relationships can be fostered to promote relationship orientation (Keller & Pryce, 2012; Zandvliet et al., 2014). Differentiated instruction and formative assessment can also be used to support individual

students' learning and growth (Ferreira et al., 2020). Cultural congruity is implemented at the individual level through individualized instruction and support responsive to students' cultural backgrounds and needs. Appropriate individualized support also fosters equity and inclusion for all students (Gay, 2010).

Family and Community Level

At the family and community level, partnerships and collaborations can be established between schools, families, and community organizations to promote relationship orientation (González-DeHass et al., 2005; Epstein, 2007; Epstein, 2010), cultural congruity, and equity and inclusion (Teemant et al., 2020). Cultural congruity could also be addressed through outreach and engagement with families and community organizations that reflect the diversity of the school community (Brion, 2022; Stuart et al., 2010).

Policy Level

Policies promoting equity and inclusion in education (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2015), relationship orientation and cultural congruity (Song, 2018) and supporting the implementation of evidence-based practices and interventions – social-emotional learning, positive behavior support, high-quality instruction, and formative assessment (Domitrovoch et al., 2008; Greenberg & Abenavoli, 2017; Simòn et al., 2021) – foster a positive school climate and cultural responsiveness.

Summary

By implementing these multi-level and multi-dimensional approaches, education systems can create and sustain a positive school climate oriented toward positive relationships, cultural congruity, and equity and inclusion. This can support all students' learning and development and promote greater equity and social justice in education.

Criteria (Checklist) for Assessing the Sustainability of a Positive School Climate

Based on the literature analysis of existing positive and sustainable school climate standards (e.g., Bradley et al., 2018; Elias, 2007; National School Climate Standards, 2021), we have developed a checklist for self-assessment, monitoring, and planning. This tool could be used as a regular instrument for self-assessment at different levels, from individual teachers to school administration teams and policymakers. Frequently reviewing the criteria and adapting them to the school environmental and cultural specifics is one way to facilitate a consistent approach to creating and sustaining a positive school climate. An essential aspect of the checklist is to find specific behavioral and/or environmental indicators of *how* exactly this criterion is or is not represented in the school. This self-reflection, either individually or in groups, will create the basis for further planning and regular monitoring, thus embodying sustainability in actions devoted to a positive school climate.

Table 1

Checklist for Assessing the Sustainability of Promoting a Positive School Climate (developed by Martinsone et al. for this article, 2023)

Criterion	Examples of observable indicators (behavioral or environmental)	Represented at school: Yes/ Partially/ No	Self-reflection
A positive school climate is explicitly communicated as a value and goal of the school	A positive school climate is included in the school vision; it is discussed in different meetings; it is included in the school slogan, visual posters around the school, or on the school website or social media account(s); academic learning is defined as equally important as personality growth		
The whole-school approach is implemented	The school administration takes an active role in planning, devoting time, and actualizing the importance of a positive school climate; a support team is organized for implementing, modeling, and sustaining new initiatives facilitating a positive school climate; teachers have regular training and continual support on how to implement different innovations; every staff member does activities to promote positive relationships at all levels; there are high achievement standards for every child		
The school has clear rules and a system to facilitate the social-emotional growth of everybody and maintain positive behavior and respectful relationships	An evidence-based universal program of social-emotional learning or support for positive behavior is integrated in the curriculum and implemented in the school year by year; a clear system is developed for problem-solving and supporting students who have become disengaged; relationships have been established with support systems outside the school; regular routines (e.g., morning circle) are sustained		
There are systematic opportunities to practice inclusion, prosocial behavior, civic engagement, support and safety	In subject lessons, more divergent tasks are offered with more than one correct answer; formative assessment is actively used; positive feedback is provided; students are involved in special projects for prosocial activity		
Data are regularly collected and analyzed	The school climate is monitored (by students, school staff, and parents) to collect data, reflect on results and plan further activities; parents are interviewed; there is a focus on the congruity of family and school values; evaluations of the school climate are included in the school annual reports		

Conclusion

In this article, the construct of the school climate has been addressed as a higher-level concept. The school climate itself is multi-dimensional and includes such aspects as the physical environment and safety at school, the perceived quality of relationships among students and adults at school, parental involvement, teaching and disciplining practices, the connectedness at school of all involved parties, cultural acceptance, etc. A positive school climate is known to be a key factor for academic learning, behavioral adjustment, and mental health, thus promoting the well-being of students and educators. When speaking broadly about the global climate, one of the central questions that arise relates to its sustainability to ensure a stable environment for the qualitative life of the next generations. Similarly, a positive school climate requires consistent and coordinated efforts at the individual, whole-school, and policymaking levels not only to develop and integrate practices facilitating positive learning environments today but also to maintain interventions and everyday practices year after year, thus ensuring their sustainability over time and making them an integral part of school culture.

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