SCHOOL CULTURE & SCHOOL CLIMATE

IN Focus

ATMOSPHERE & PERSONALITY OF A SCHOOL

As school administrators struggle with NEP & NCF reforms to improve students' academic performance, their concerns must encompass more than instructional change. **School Culture** and **School Climate** are two factors of a school's environment that can either impede or support learning. There is often confusion between the terms "*school climate*" and "*school culture*," which can lead to misunderstandings. Both elements significantly *impact student learning* and *engagement, as well as teacher satisfaction and retention*. Let us try to understand both these terms in simple layman's language.

School Climate refers to the o*verall atmosphere* : that support physical, emotional safety of students & staff. On the other hand, **School Culture** encompasses the *personality* of a school that shapes patterns of behavior, attitudes & expectations among stakeholders. It is the *way things are done*.

Positive and healthy *School Cultures* and *School Climates* are the foundations of high quality learning environments and create the conditions for effective teaching and learning to occur. According to *DuFour and Eaker (1998)*, the reform efforts of the last 30 years have failed to improve student achievement in schools *because they failed to adequately address the importance of the culture and climate of schools*. Building a school culture & climate *is a slow process* and there is no magic equation. Many fluid factors impact the process, but in the end it is all about *valuing educators, maintaining a positive energy,* and the *staff being filled with problem solvers and visionaries.* Overall, the administration & staff work hard to create a *culture of acceptance, collaboration, passion*. This month we focus on both these aspects and their *relationship to learning*. Our QED Expert offers some *assessment instruments* for assessing culture & climate.

WONDER WORDS

* School Culture

The *norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals built up over time*. A school's culture is *always at work*, either helping or hindering learning. It *influences every decision and action* in a school, from the leadership style of the principal to the way teachers select & use curriculum materials, and interact with students.
- Deal and Peterson

Culture provides a school's identity and image—its "brand."

* School Climate :

The heart and soul of the school, the *feeling* that either encourages teachers and students to engage, love the school, and to want to be a part of it, or to reject the school and disengage from it. It is the *outcome* of the school's norms and values, the way in which people at the school relate to and interact with one another, and the way systems and policies manifest.
– Freiberg and Stein

A school's climate is both a window into its culture and a learned response that the culture teaches new members.

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> *"True change requires a focus on creating a **school culture** that supports the academic, social, physical and character development of its students."*
>
> – *Maurice Elias, Ph D*

QED Talk

NEP 2020's focus on
SCHOOL CULTURE and CLIMATE

MR. MOLLINS TURNER
Educational Thinker, Innovator, Strategist
Founding Member of Core Team -
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■ *In essence, what is School Culture and how is it different from School Climate?*

Just as every individual has a distinct personality, every school cultivates its own traits known as **School Culture**. A positive school culture derives from core values and beliefs set by the school. Culture lays the foundation of building an environment that promotes *values, morals, behaviour, a cooperative and participative environment* and *effective communication*. All these traits greatly contribute in shaping up the Culture of the school.

On the other side, **School Climate** is often referred to the *social atmosphere of the learning environment* which defines the quality and character of the school life. A physical and social environment of the school builds the foundation of the *School Cimate.*

School Culture places more focus on embracing beliefs and values reflective of the common behaviour, whereas *School Climate* relies on stakeholder's perceptions in regards to the leadership of the organization, in cooperation with the working environment.

■ *How would you enumerate the core constituent elements of both?*

While speaking about core constituent elements of **School Culture**, it's all about what schools build to *offer as an experience* to students, parents and teachers. School culture builds a sense of nurturing learning environment, core values on which school's mission and vision is aligned. Some traits like practicing values and beliefs, shared goals, mindfulness, well-being, collegiality, mutual respect are some basics for school culture. These are essentials in building sense of responsibility for success and respect.

School Climate is developed through *practicing traits of school culture*. School climate gives students, parents and staff an *experience* of safety, discipline, institutional environment, parent involvement, academic achievement and growth leadership traits.

■ *Since you have worked across varied fields (corporate, education, training), would you say any work-space would require Culture and Climate?*

Yes, I have worked in all spheres of educational spaces that includes School, University, Corporate and CSR, and I believe culture and climate are essential ingredients for any work-space entity. *There is no alternative or replacement to these two Cs.*

For effective growth, efficacy, well-being, work efficiency and productivity (for both organisation and employee), *Culture* and *Climate* are two must HAVEs and in consistently practicing them, they become two must DOs.

Things like learning environment, work and learning relationship, healthy work environment, staff attrition, organisation's multi-fold growth, learning opportunities, achievements and setbacks – all are directly linked to Culture and Climate. *Culture sets the right environment* and *Climate sets the right path for growth and success*.

> *A positive school culture is the underlying reason why the other components of successful schools were able to flourish.*
>
> *– Shelly Habbegar*

■ *Some people say that a School's Climate has 2 aspects: What you <u>can</u> see & what you <u>don't</u> see, but you <u>feel</u>. Please comment on this.*

As stated in one of the research papers on School Climate - *School climate has often been described as the 'quality and character of school life'.* What we can see are the physical infrastructure and brand items (logos, colours, signages, uniform, print items and media, etc). What we don't see, which are equally important, are the social-emotional, values-morals, communication and intellectual environments. We experience and feel them.

■ *How do Culture & Climate impact structure, learning and performance of a school?*

Culture and Climate greatly impact the structure, learning and performance of a school. All best practices in teaching and learning, behavioural aspects, and overall atmosphere of the school is where culture and climate play the key role. Culture is built through the *right choices* whereas climate is with the *adherence and belief* in those choices.

Culture significantly impacts in shaping a child's personality that is determined by strong values and principles. Morals such as integrity, justice, truthfulness, equality, politeness and humbleness are required regardless of gender and age.

In the recent times, many behavioural problems at school such as bullying, delinquency, sense of disrespect and aggressive behaviour even at early age are linked to the climate of the school. A high quality academic environment within the school, power-packed with strong cultural values can reduce behavioural problems.

■ *Is there a way that one can assess / measure School Culture & Climate?*

It's essential to measure and evaluate school culture on a regular basis through commonly recommended approaches, such as surveys from student, teacher and parents. Some surveys/questionaries *checking collaboration, honesty, hard-work and integrity* will help assess the *strength and gaps in culture.*

In the same way, *Engagement, Safety, Environment* are the three traits that need to be *assessed to measure climate.* Surveys and structured observations are two known methods of measuring school climate. Surveys with focused objective outcomes for safety - both physical and mental, social and emotional wellbeing, stress free learning environment will greatly help analyse healthy climate in the school.

■ *In the current Indian education scenario, which aspects of Culture and Climate need to be reviewed and improved for an effective and hi-performance educational system?*

With the changing scenario in Education in India in a past few decades, when more focus is on learning, organisations/schools need to invest in developing climate. 95 out of 100 schools/organisations talk about school culture, but hardly few talks about climate. *Culture heavily impacts and influences the climate in the school/organisations.*

Some aspects that I believe every school **must** include as a part of both Cs are:

READ TO SUCCEED

FOR LEADERS

School Climate : *Leading With Collective Efficacy First Edition*

- by **Peter M. DeWitt**

Peter DeWitt offers leaders practical high impact strategies to improve school climate, deepen involvement in student learning, and engage a broader family network. This book features tools such as : *a leadership growth cycle to help leaders build their self-efficacy; a teacher observation cycle centered on building collective efficacy; an early warning system to identify potential at-risk students; action steps following each chapter to apply to your own setting; discussion questions for use in team environments.* Establishing a supportive and inclusive school climate where professionals can take risks to improve the lives of students is vital to maximize learning in any school community.

"Is improving school climate on your to-do list? Do you think about it as a top-down directive or as a dialogue to build equity within the school? "

FOR TEACHERS

Leveraging the Impact of Culture and Climate: *Deep, Significant, and Lasting Change in Classrooms and Schools*

- by **Steve Gruenert, Todd Whitaker**

Together, culture and climate can make or break your school improvement efforts. Authors *Todd Whitaker* and *Steve Gruenert* help educators understand how to leverage culture and climate to *drive deep and lasting change.* Learn how to assess current culture, address climate issues, combat challenges, and work toward a collaborative school community dedicated to achieving high levels of learning for all. You can rely on this book's effective school improvement strategies for creating a collaborative culture in schools.

- Foster collaborative leadership
- Developing positive practices
- Timely measuring progress of both Cs
- Rewards & recognitions (R&R) needs to be encouraged
- CPD focusing on problem solving and crisis management
- Data driven assessment and Action planning
- Deeper stakeholder involvement
- Prioritize needs for learning and assessment
- Student counselling and support

A healthy culture not only identifies the school's values, but it also **builds a brand**, thereby attracting parents & students, best calibre teachers, who in turn become advocates for the school. It brings out the best in everyone!

■ **In what way (or ways) does teacher satisfaction contribute to a positive school culture and environment?**

Culture, ethos, atmosphere, climate...what do these words mean for any school? The prevailing atmosphere in a school will affect *everything* and *everyone* inside its walls - and **teachers are,** by far, **the most important asset a school has, since it is THEY who actually transform minds and shape the future resource people for the wider community**!

As leaders, it is crucial to ask certain questions :
- How do we want teachers and students to *feel* when they walk into school every morning?
- Are our teachers dreading coming to work in the morning?
- Or are our teachers *excited,* starting each class with enthusiasm?
- Do we *hear laughter* in the staffroom during break time?

As you can see, the culture & climate in a school go beyond the student body; they also involve how teachers interact with each other, their students, and the parents. I read in a book that a *toxic* school culture is an environment where school staff "*fail to figure out what's needed to cultivate the characteristics necessary for student growth and learning*." A school's climate will be positive if the **teachers are themselves aware, know what is expected of them, are suitably rewarded for their efforts & initiative, have a positive mindset and feel happy!**

As leaders, **transformation of school culture begins at the top**. If we have a list of qualities and values that we want to see in our teachers and students, then **we need to model them** - when we interact with teachers, parents, visitors and students . . . we need to be an *example* of that behavior. Teachers will then model the same to the students.

■ *Your final comments*

> It takes a long period of time to change a school's *culture*, while school *climate* is more *"amenable to influence and change"*.

*The **March 2024** issue will focus on"**Mindsets and Practices for Equity Teaching**". Please send your contributions of an effective classroom strategy/class humour/vocab/word/a featured article/book titles, to **team@qedrak.com***

DEVELOPING SCHOOL CULTURE

Everyone speaks the same language !

School culture is one of the most complex and important concepts in education. In relation to school improvement, it has also been one of the **most neglected.** The basic essence of an institution's culture is said to be, *"the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members in it, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic 'taken-for-granted' fashion an organisation's view of itself and its environment"(Schein)*.   These are the *heart* of an institution's culture, and what makes it so hard to grasp and change.

Culture describes how things **are** and acts as a *screen or lens* through which the world is viewed. In essence, it *defines reality for those within a social organisation, gives them support and identity and creates a framework for occupational learning.* Each school has a different reality or mindset of school life, often captured in the simple phrase "**the way we do things around here**". It also has its own **mindset** in relation to what occurs in its external environment. Culture is, thus, "*situationally unique".*

A school's Culture is shaped by history, context & the people in it:

1. The school's age can impact cultural change : One can identify 3 significant developmental periods in a School's life. They are -

- **Early Years:** when *dominant values emanate from its "founders"* and the school makes its culture explicit. It *clarifies its values, finds and articulates a unique identity* and shares these with newcomers, whether teachers, pupils or parents, and the wider community.

  Culture is the "glue" that holds everyone & everything together, and can be seen as a positive development force.

- **Midlife years**: when the school is well-established but *needs to continue growing and renewing*. Changes may have occurred due to its external and internal contexts, altering strengths and weaknesses. The *most important aspects of the culture are now embedded and taken for granted*, and culture is increasingly implicit. Subcultures have also sprung up. Change becomes more difficult because of less consciousness of the culture; it is harder to articulate and understand.

- **Maturity and/or stagnation and decline**: the *most problematic* from the cultural change perspective. This stage is reached if the school has *ceased growing and responding to its environment.* Dysfunctional elements have surfaced, and challenging old assumptions are resisted.

2. School culture is influenced by a school's external context. Locally, a school's community, including the pupils' parents, may have their *own conceptions* of what a "real school" is: "**a real school is what I attended when I was a child**." The Local Educational Authority can also help create an improvement mindset, as well as have its own improvement orientation and language *(e.g. compulsory state language from Grade 1)*. Political and economic forces or changes in national or local educational policies are also influences (NEP, NCF, RTE, use of the Mother tongue, Multilingualism, Informal assessments, competency-based education, inter alia).

3. School cultures vary between primary and secondary schools. In primary schools, *care and control* influence their culture, such that when pupils *leave* **primary** schools there is *a feeling* that they have *left a* **family**. In contrast, **secondary** school culture is influenced not only by *larger size and department structures,* but by the *very fundamental nature of teachers' academic orientation*—the difference between being, e.g. an art teacher and a science teacher—and the *fragmented individualism* that pupils experience in moving from one subject and teacher to another.

RELATED TERMS :

Typology of School Culture:

Traditional: low social cohesion, high social control; custodial, formal, unapproachable

Welfarist: low social control, high social cohesion; relaxed, caring, cosy

Hothouse: high social control, high social cohesion; claustrophobic, pressured, controlled;

Anomic: low social cohesion, low social control; insecure, alienated, isolated, "*at risk*".

Hargreaves (1995)28

4. School culture is influenced by the school's pupils and their social class background. The social mix of the school plays a major role in how it functions, largely because of the *cumulative effect of how the pupils relate to each other* as a group (*Thrupp*). Essentially, pupils who attend the school, *flavour it in a particular way,* through their own pupil culture. This takes on added significance when they reach adolescence and their identities and values are shifting.

5. Changes in society pose challenges to a school's culture. These may be related to *learning*, the pupil *population*, organisational *management*, rapid *technological developments* or the *changing role of women*. Such societal changes often *demand rapid responses from a school.* Yet **while culture changes as participants change**, it **can also be a stabilising force,** particularly for those who have been part of the culture for a longer period. It can therefore appear problematic for those in search of *quick fix changes* because it often seems as if it is an unmovable force. While culture presents, **the paradox of both being static and dynamic,** in reality it is **constantly evolving** and being **reconstructed.**

Culture can take different forms - (a) pupil culture, (b) teacher culture, (c) leadership culture, (d) non-teaching staff culture, and finally (e) parent culture. *Teacher cultures* have received the most attention for school improvement.

How are Culture and Structure related?

Culture and structure are *interdependent*. Most school improvement efforts focus on changes to the following structures:
- *time*—e.g., rearranging the school year into four or five periods with shorter breaks between;
- *space*—e.g., moving the science and mathematics departments of a secondary school on to the same corridor to promote collaboration;
- *roles and responsibilities*—e.g., creating a school improvement coordinator post. This is because structures are relatively easy to manipulate and are visible, but for structures to effect change, it is also necessary to attend to the underlying culture.

Culture affects the structures put into place in a new initiative, for example a school may purchase two computers for every classroom, but because of the prevailing *norms of contentment*, or a *lack of risk taking*, or support, in many classrooms computers remain in their boxes.

At the same time, **structures can also influence culture.** If greater collegiality between teachers in schools is desirable, *but the timetable doesn't allow teachers to meet during the day,* this will act as a *barrier*. According to *Andy Hargreaves*, teaching is an isolated activity, because: "*Structures of teacher isolation have their roots in schools that have been organized like egg crates since the mid nineteenth century.*" Collaboration does not just happen, and it is through structures—"*real tasks on which teachers can collaborate*" that cultures can be modified.

> School culture is like the wind; it can be hard to see but everyone can feel it.
> *– Danny Steele*
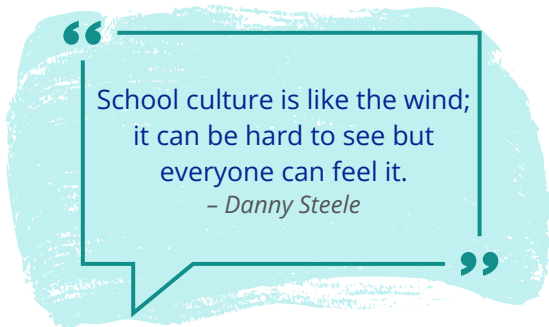
The **quote** on the right addresses those aspects of the school environment that one cannot see, but experience.

Real improvement cannot come from anywhere other than within schools themselves, and "within" is a complex web of values and beliefs, norms, social and power relationships and emotions. Changing schools is not just about changing curricula, teaching and learning strategies, assessment, structures, and roles and responsibilities. It does not happen just by producing plans as a result of external inspections or reviews. Nor does it happen just by setting targets because data (even valid and sensitively analysed data), has suggested that all pupils or certain groups of pupils could be doing better.

VALUES   RITUALS   HEROES   NORMS   ARTIFACTS   STORIES   CULTURE

It requires an understanding of and respect for the different meanings and interpretations people bring to educational initiatives, and work to develop shared meanings underpinned by norms that will promote sustainable school improvement.

Some points to ponder over:
1) What different subcultures can you see in your school/the schools you work with?
2) How do structures in your school/the schools you work with, affect school culture? How does school culture affect the structures?
3) What are the main power issues in your school/the schools you work with? How can conflicts best be addressed? ***

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT

From Chaos to Calm!

Imagine a classroom where students are actively engaged in learning, where everyone is calm, focused and working together. Imagine a classroom where you can walk in on any given day and know exactly what to do to help your students succeed. *Reality or Fantasy?*

It doesn't have to be a fantasy! When a *positive learning culture* is created, the transition from *chaos to calm* can become a reality. As a teacher, there are *strategies you can use* to support your students' learning and behaviour. The key is to *find strategies that work for you and your students,* and then *use them regularly* to keep your classroom calm and focused. So relax, take a deep breath and let's get started on this journey to help you and your students thrive.

> In any team sport, the best teams have consistency and chemistry.
> *– Roger Staubach*

The quote on the left, holds true for education as well - it is all about *consistency in behaviour management* and the *chemistry between the teacher and the taught.* A healthy school culture nurtures *positive relationships among staff and students*, which can lead to increased collaboration, morale and job satisfaction for educators.

To effectively improve school behaviour management, it is *crucial to first assess its current state* in your school. Utilizing tools and surveys can provide valuable insights. These measurements can help identify areas of strength, as well as areas that may require improvement. While there are many research-based classroom management strategies to consider, here are a few to incorporate, if you are not already doing so:

1. Build Relationships: Get to know students by their first-names; students' hobbies, preferences and interests. Include these in your content when possible to increase engagement and motivation.. When you see students between classes, engage in small talk. Don't try to **be** "one of the students," but *don't ignore them when you are with peers*. Building relationships with students can help create a positive classroom environment where students feel comfortable and respected, leading to fewer disruptions and a more productive learning experience for everyone.

2. Set Clear Expectations and Consequences: It is easy to assume that the students *understand* the rules and consequences as well as adults do. But, that may not be the case. Even if it isn't an issue of "cheating," students may have a vague idea of what a particular rule looks like or its nuances. A student may have another teacher who *did not* enforce the rule/consequence, so s/he believes that the rule/consequence isn't really expected. Regardless of the grade level, reviewing the rules and consequences is a good thing. *Ask students to participate in setting the rules and consequences.*

3. Use Restorative Justice: In the context of a classroom, *Restorative Justice* is an approach to discipline that focuses on *mediation* and *agreement* rather than *punishment*. It aims to get students to take responsibility for their actions, understand the harm they have caused, and make restitution to those affected. This approach can help create a positive classroom environment where students feel comfortable and respected, leading to fewer disruptions and a more productive learning experience for everyone. Restorative justice is not just a tool to use in a crisis, but can be used proactively to build and nurture meaningful relationships and a strong sense of community within the classroom.

4. Establish Earned Empowerment: Some students respond well when they are allowed to make choices. *Earned empowerment environment* is one in which students have *earned the ability to make choices* because they have previously demonstrated good choices (doing homework, supporting peers, following classroom rules, etc.). When you move to this philosophy, be sure that you are *fair and equitable* as to how various levels of empowerment are earned.

5. Document is the 'key': As educators, *not documenting student behavior and progress* actually *undermine* your success and your students' ability to receive help based on trends or habits that they may be exhibiting in the classroom. Use the best way you know to *document behaviour* (attitude-engagement levels), as you walk around the room. You can also get students to fill in a form like a self appraisal - it holds them *accountable* to truthfully telling what is happening.

6. Get Feedback from Others: Sometimes we have students who are difficult, and we have no clue how to help them. Our personalities might be completely different or we lack the experience to pull up strategies that are needed to help those students. In such times, consider *talking with the parent*(s), a *peer teacher*, and/or the *school counsellor* for input. By partnering with parents and professionals, we can *gain insight into a student's life* and find ways to support him/her. Also, advice from senior & more-experienced teachers can help - new strategies/techniques can be tried in the classroom. *******

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