

Spring 3-24-2011

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McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, "The Relationship between Organizational Climate and Classroom Quality" (2011). *McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership Publications*. Paper 17.
<http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/mccormickcenter-pubs/17>

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Research Notes

Published by the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, National Louis University

SPRING 2011

The Relationship between Organizational Climate and Classroom Quality

Organizational theorists refer to the unique atmosphere that characterizes each setting as its organizational climate. Organizational climate is made up of the collective perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and values of the individuals in a work setting. In other words, it is the global perception of the quality of work life in an organization. While several studies have explored changes in the organizational climate in early childhood settings as the result of focused quality-improvement interventions, fewer investigations have explored the relationship between a center's work climate and classroom quality.

In a study of 60 child care centers in Pennsylvania, Iutcovich and her colleagues found that when staff perceived that their programs provided ample opportunities for professional growth, had clear policies, built consensus about educational goals, offered a fair reward system, and had a focused task orientation, they also demonstrated higher quality practices at the classroom level.¹ In a North Carolina study of 30 centers, Lower and Cassidy found that teachers who had more positive perceptions of their work environment also had higher quality interactions with the children in their care.²

The present study conducted by Dennis³ was designed to expand this line of research and provide a deeper understanding about the relationship between organizational climate and quality at the classroom level. It also examined whether the relationship between work climate and classroom quality varies as a function of teachers' level of education and experience.

Sample and Instrumentation

The sample included preschool teachers from 37 centers serving low-income families in a large northeastern city. The teachers were predominantly female (97%) and over the age of 35 (78%). They taught an average of five years at their current center. Two-thirds of the sample had completed a master's degree or had taken graduate-level coursework.

The *Early Childhood Work Environment Survey* (ECWES) was used to measure ten dimensions of organizational climate. Table 1 provides a fuller description of each of these dimensions.⁴ The possible range of scores for each dimension subscale is 0 to 10. A low score on any subscale represents unfavorable perceptions; a high score represents favorable perceptions. The *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised* (ECERS-R) was used as a measure of classroom quality.⁵ The ECERS-R items are scored using a 7-point scale from minimal to excellent quality.

Table 1. Ten Dimensions of Organizational Climate

Dimension	Definition
Collegiality	The extent to which staff are friendly, supportive, and trusting of one another. The peer cohesion and esprit de corps of the group.
Professional growth	The degree of emphasis placed on staff's professional growth. The availability of opportunities to increase professional competence.
Supervisor support	The degree of facilitative leadership providing encouragement, support, and clear expectations.
Clarity	The extent to which policies, procedures, and responsibilities are clearly defined and communicated.
Reward system	The degree of fairness and equity in the distribution of pay, fringe benefits, and opportunities for advancement.
Decision making	The degree of autonomy given to staff and the extent to which they are involved in making centerwide decisions.
Goal consensus	The extent to which staff agree on the philosophy, goals, and educational objectives of the center.
Task orientation	The emphasis placed on organizational effectiveness and efficiency, including productive meetings, program outcomes, and accountability.
Physical setting	The extent to which the spatial arrangement of the center helps or hinders staff in carrying out their responsibilities. The availability of supplies and materials.
Innovativeness	The extent to which the center adapts to change and encourages staff to find creative ways to solve problems.

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Findings

The Relationship between Classroom Quality and Organizational Climate

The results of the data analysis found a positive association between perceptions of the overall work climate as measured by the ECWES and classroom quality as measured by the ECERS-R. Programs with more positive work environments for teachers had higher quality classrooms ($r = .35, p < .05$). Notable was the significant correlation between the Activities subscale of the ECERS-R and the overall ECWES organizational climate score ($r = .40, p < .05$). Centers where teachers perceived their work environments more positively provided higher quality activities and materials in their classrooms.

Additionally, significant correlations were found between specific subscales on the ECWES and total classroom quality (professional growth $r = .36, p < .05$; reward system $r = .33, p < .05$; physical environment $r = .46, p < .01$). Centers where teachers perceived they had greater opportunities for professional growth, a more equitable reward system, and a more supportive physical environment also had classrooms with higher quality. When controlling for teacher education, director experience, director education, and teacher-child ratio, a significant association between overall organizational climate and total classroom quality was found ($\beta = .44, p < .05$). The work climate predicted variance in total classroom quality ($r^2 = .12, \beta = .44, p < .05$). When examining the standardized effects, the effect of organizational climate on classroom quality was twice that of the standardized effect for teacher-child ratio.

The Influence of Teachers' Experience and Education

The data analysis yielded several significant interactions relating to perceptions of the work environment, classroom quality, and teachers' level of experience and education. The more experience teachers had, the more their perceptions of their work environment appeared to influence their classroom quality ($\beta = .12, p < .05$). This finding suggests that teachers with more teaching experience are more affected by the work environment as it relates to their classroom quality than teachers with less work experience.

A significant interaction between the education level of the teachers and the work environment was also identified. The more education teachers had, the less their perceptions of their work environment seemed to influence their classroom quality ($\beta = -.40, p < .05$).

The fact that the relationship between perceptions of the work climate and classroom quality was not as strong for more educated teachers suggests that the more education teachers had, the less the work climate mattered for them. It can be hypothesized that teachers' educational background provides them with strategies for creating a high-quality classroom. Teachers with more education may feel independent of the larger work context for support and may be more able to ignore the outside influences of the work environment. Because the teachers in this sample were, on average, more educated than the general workforce of early childhood teachers, this area warrants additional research.

The effect of organizational climate on classroom quality was twice that of the standardized effect for teacher-child ratio.

In Sum

While the sample was small, the results of this study broaden our understanding of the importance of looking at a center's work environment when considering ways to improve educational outcomes for children. A positive organizational climate appears to create the context that supports higher quality interactions and educational practices at the classroom level.

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