Chapter 9

Classroom climate

INTRODUCTION

Classroom climate as defined here is quite a wide-ranging concept encompassing the mood or atmosphere that is created in the teacher's classroom through the rules set out, the way the teacher interacts with pupils, and the way the physical environment is set out (Freiberg and Stein, 1999; Creemers and Reezigt, 1999).

The climate of the classroom has been widely studied since the 1960s. Most of these studies have identified classroom climate as an important concomitant of pupil achievement, both in Europe (Muijs and Reynolds, 1999; Mortimore et al., 1988) and in the US (Brophy and Good, 1986; Rosenshine, 1979). A large-scale meta-analysis conducted by Wang, Haertel and Walberg (1997) found classroom climate to be one of the most important factors to affect pupil achievement. Learning environment was also found to be related to achievement in Fraser's (1994) review of 40 studies on the effects of classroom climate. Apart from this relationship with pupil achievement on tests, a warm, supportive classroom climate has also been linked to a number of other factors, such as pupils' self-esteem (Fraser, 1994), pupils' participation in the classroom, and even pupils' democratic values (Cotton, 1997). Classroom climate has also been found to be a strong predictor of pupil aggression, with better relations with teachers and peers being related to lower levels of aggression (Schechtman, 2002). Creating a positive climate was identified as a prime characteristic of quality teachers in a study of teaching in 11 countries (OECD, 1994).
School climate and classroom climate

While in this book we are focusing on classroom teaching, it is clear that certainly with respect to classroom climate teachers do not operate within a vacuum. School climate will strongly influence classroom climate, and in order to be effective the two need to be complementary. A teacher going against the prevailing school climate will find it difficult to change pupils’ established habits. If, for example, pupils are not used to contributing ideas in other lessons they will find it hard to change their habits for one particular teacher.

The school can do a number of things to help create a warm, supportive atmosphere. As in the classroom, the use of pleasant, bright displays will help, with pupils’ work put up in hallways and dining areas. Schools should have strong and strictly enforced anti-bullying policies and should be open and receptive to problems pupils are having outside school. Good support services can help all pupils reach their potential. Minimizing noise and clean and pleasant communal spaces (hallways, dining room) will make a difference as well (Freiberg, 1999).

Measuring school and classroom climate

In order to be able to improve school and classroom climate it is necessary first of all to find out what the climate in school is like, and where possible problems may lie. A number of direct and indirect measures have been proposed, which can involve teachers, pupils, parents and other members of the community. Getting information from pupils as well as teachers is important, as they can often have a somewhat different perspective on school and classroom climate. Thus, Fraser (1999) has found that teachers have a more positive perception of the climate in their classrooms than their pupils. Involving pupils by getting them to give feedback on classroom climate has the further advantage of making them feel valued and important, and can therefore contribute to school and classroom climate in and of itself.

A number of checklists and rating scales have been proposed that can be used with either teachers, pupils, school management or parents, such as that proposed for Dutch primary schools by Creemers and Reezigt (1999) or Fraser’s (1999) Learning Environment Questionnaires. Fraser proposes measuring both pupils’ and teachers’ perceptions of school climate and measuring both actual and preferred climate among pupils. This can allow teachers and heads to see where the main discrepancies between actual and preferred climate lie and to target interventions specifically at those areas. Questionnaires aimed at parents and other members of the community have also been designed (Stevens and Sanchez, 1999). A useful suggestion is the use of entrance and exit questionnaires. Pupils entering secondary school could be asked questions such as:

What do you like about your current school?

What is one concern you have about going to secondary school?

What is something you will do to improve your success in secondary school?
What is one message you would like to give your teachers?

Pupils leaving the school could be asked:

- What do you like about this school?
- What was your most memorable experience in this school?
- What area would you like to have improved in this school?
- What is one message you would like to give your teachers? (Freiberg, 1999).

With very young pupils the use of questionnaires is inappropriate. A way of collecting classroom climate measures from these pupils can be to ask them to draw a picture of their classroom. This can provide valuable insights into how much distance they perceive from their teacher, how formally or informally the classroom is run and what parts of the classroom (such as the blackboard or the reading area) are perceived to be important (Freiberg and Stein, 1999).

Data such as the number of referrals of pupils to the head by a particular teacher or the number of absences in the school as a whole are also useful indicators of school and classroom climate. In order for these measures to be of practical use, however, the results they generate need to be used to improve the school climate. As many of the measures mentioned above are quite fine-grained and look into various areas in some detail, specific points can be targeted. Feedback on the results can be discussed, on the basis of which an improvement plan can be drawn up. Some time after the reform has been implemented, the same form can be used to measure school/classroom climate again to see whether the reform has had any effect (Fraser, 1994).

**CREATING A PLEASANT CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT**

**Classroom relationships**

The most important aspect of classroom climate is the relationship between teacher and pupils. This relationship can range along a continuum from formal to informal, and from warm to cool. A warm, supportive environment has been found to be important to teacher effectiveness, especially in encouraging pupils to contribute constructively to the lesson. Teachers who are perceived as being understanding, helpful and friendly and show leadership without being too strict have been found to enhance pupils achievement and their affective outcomes, while teachers who come across as uncertain, dissatisfied with their pupils and admonishing produce lower cognitive and affective outcomes (Wubbels et al., 1991).

Teachers should create an unthreatening environment, in which pupils’ opinions are valued, respected and solicited. Wrong answers should not provoke negative reactions on the part of the teacher, but need to be perceived as part of pupils’ learning processes. This can be done by reacting positively to wrong answers and by trying to emphasize what was right about the pupil’s thinking process.
Teachers who are concerned with pupils' emotional and social as well as academic needs have been found to engender more pupil involvement in lessons. Research has also pointed to the role of classroom climate in encouraging pupils with problems to request help. Often it can be the case that it is precisely those pupils who need help most who are most reluctant to request it, the most able pupils having been found to be the most likely to request help. Research has found, however, that this gap can be reduced if not closed by teachers who value the emotional needs of their pupils and create a warm and not overly competitive environment.

A basic, but often overlooked element in creating good classroom relations is the use by the teacher of pupil names. This can appear trivial, but not knowing pupils' names can create the impression that the teacher does not care about her/his pupils as people. Therefore the teacher should address pupils by name as often as possible. In the beginning of the year when faced with a new class (and, especially in secondary school, with one of several new classes) this can be more difficult than it sounds, however. A number of ways of making this more easy can be the following:

1 Have pupils give their name each time before they speak, until the teacher feels s/he knows everyone.

2 Have pupils make name tags they can put on their table, so every time the teacher looks at the pupil s/he can associate the face with the name. It can be helpful to ask pupils to write down some memorable characteristic or hobby, which the teacher can associate with the pupil and which will help her/him get to know the pupils better.

3 Have a list of names with the pupils' photos on the teacher's desk.

4 Try to memorize one row of pupils a day.

5 Ask pupils to introduce themselves to the class, giving their names, likes and dislikes, and other personal information.

An important component of classroom climate is the enthusiasm shown by the teacher. If the teacher him/herself is unenthusiastic about the subject or lesson being taught, this attitude is likely to rub off on pupils. Teachers who enjoy teaching their subject and can put their enthusiasm across are more likely to motivate their pupils, and research (e.g. Mortimore et al., 1988) has found a positive association between teacher enthusiasm and pupil involvement during lessons. It is no coincidence that most people, when they are asked to describe their favourite school teacher will tend to pick out a teacher, who managed to inspire them through their enthusiasm about the subject. Of course no teacher can be equally enthusiastic about all subjects or on all days. It is, however, important to avoid expressing overt dislike of the subject or topic through comments such as, 'I know this is boring, but we have to do it because it is in the curriculum'.

The physical environment

An aspect of a pleasant classroom that the teacher has a large amount of control over is creating attractive and pleasant displays. Colourful and bright displays can
cheer up the classroom and make it a more pleasant environment, while also giving the teacher the opportunity to allow peripheral learning to occur. This can be done by displaying learning materials on classroom walls, which can aid learning in an almost subliminal way by drawing pupils' attention to the displayed educational materials. Classroom climate can also be improved by displaying pupils' own work on the wall, as this can encourage pupils to take pride in their work and can motivate them. It is, however, important to give all pupils the chance to have their work displayed and not just to display the 'best' work if this means constantly displaying work from the same pupils.

Other aspects of the physical environment of classrooms and schools can also impact on school climate. Clean and tidy classrooms, hallways and toilets can create a better atmosphere across the school. Small things matter. High noise levels in for example the dining room or the hallways can have a strong negative effect on school climate and pupil behaviour but can often be quite easily reduced (Freiberg, 1999).

According to some authors, class size can affect classroom climate, with smaller classes often showing a warmer and more supportive atmosphere (Harman et al., 2002).

Some of what has been said in this chapter about the need for classrooms to be warm, relaxed environments may appear to contradict what was said in earlier chapters about the need for the classroom to be a disciplined, work-centred environment. If one veers to the extremes of either position this can indeed be the case. The best teachers, however, are able to create a classroom that is all these things, rather than either being either overly authoritarian or undisciplined. In our own research (Muijs and Reynolds, 1999) we found that good classroom discipline and a positive classroom climate were strongly related to each other, which suggests that in practice effective teachers are able strike the right balance between the two.

Sometimes it can be necessary to put in place a strategy to improve school and classroom climate. The best way to do this is to do something that can be quickly implemented and is highly visible, for example greeting all pupils when they come to school in the morning (Freiberg and Stein, 1999). Pupils should be involved in the improvement effort as much as is possible as this will mean the climate is improved in ways that are important to them, and because it will help them feel involved and valued, which in itself can improve school climate. Giving pupils authority in the classroom can improve classroom climate and encourage pupils to take responsibility for their environment. This has been identified as one of the differences in favour of Japanese schools when compared to American schools (Linn et al., 2000).

THREE TYPES OF CLASSROOM CLIMATE

Borich (1996) defines three types of classroom climate that the teacher may wish to use in different lessons. These are the competitive, co-operative and individualistic types. These three types are arranged along a continuum where the authority ceded
to the pupils by the teacher ranges from none to quite extensive, and where teaching
and learning move from being very teacher-led to being very pupil-centred.

In a competitive classroom pupils will compete among themselves to give the right
answer or to attain a standard set by the teacher. The teacher is the sole arbiter of
the correctness of the response, and no authority is given to pupils. The teacher leads
the class, presents and organizes the material and evaluates the correctness of
the pupils' responses. In whole-class lessons this can take the form of pupils competing
by having the turn to give the right answer. In collaborative work groups pupils
and work together, for example through group games. During individual
work the teacher can get pupils to compete by giving a prize to the pupil who has
correctly completed answers on a worksheet most quickly or for having the largest
number of correct answers. A competitive climate can motivate pupils, especially
boys, and can enhance pupil achievement because of this. This type of classroom
also allows for a large amount of teacher guidance, which can be important to pupil
learning. Structured whole-class teaching has been found to be effective in raising
pupils' achievement. The possible negative effects are damaging the self-confidence
of less able pupils through the constant comparison involved, which may lead to
them becoming disengaged from the lesson and possibly school and learning in
general, and the fact that this method will not inculcate co-operative skills in pupils.

In a co-operative classroom pupils engage in dialogue that is monitored by the
teacher. They are allowed to discuss and bring up their own ideas, but the teacher
intervenes to help them sharpen up and clarify their ideas and to encourage
higher-order and creative thinking. In this type of classroom pupils have more
authority than in the competitive classroom, in that they are allowed to present
their own opinions and ideas and discuss these freely with one another. The teacher's role
is to stimulate discussion, arbitrate the discussion and make sure disagreements
between pupils do not get out of hand. At the end of discussions the teacher will
summarize and organize the ideas presented by pupils. In whole-class lessons this
can take the form of pupils being allowed to call out hints or clues when another
pupil is having difficulties. During individual work pupils can be made to co-operate
with their neighbour by exchanging papers, checking each other's work or sharing
ideas. This climate type lends itself particularly well to group work, in which pupils
can co-operate by discussing a topic or working out problems with all pupils being
allowed to contribute. A major advantage of this type of classroom is that it will help
develop pupils' social and co-operative skills, which are becoming more and more
important in the workplace. Pupils often enjoy working with one another, which
means that co-operative work can be highly motivating. Being able to articulate
their own ideas can help develop pupils' thinking skills. Disadvantages are that exchanges
can easily become dominated by one or two highly self-confident individuals, with
others allowing them to do all the work, the so-called 'free-rider' effect. Also, pupils
can strengthen each other's misconceptions, and there is a risk of classrooms getting
out of hand with pupils shouting out answers.

The final type of classroom climate identified by Bower is the individualistic type. In
that type of classroom the emphasis will be on pupils getting through work
independently and testing themselves. Pupils will complete assignments monitored
by the teacher, rather than being given a standard set by the teacher. The teacher's
role will then be to correct pupils' errors and provide feedback. This type of classroom
is often found in large classes, where the teacher has limited time to give individual
attention to each pupil. The teacher's role is to organize and manage the classroom,
and to provide opportunities for pupils to work independently.

One of the main criticisms of this type of classroom is that it can lead to a lack of
interaction between pupils, and may not cater for those pupils who need more
individual attention. However, it can be effective in helping pupils to develop
independence and self-confidence. The teacher should ensure that pupils have
opportunities to work together, and to discuss and share ideas with their peers.

In conclusion, the type of classroom climate that is most effective will depend on
the needs of the pupils and the goals of the teacher. A combination of approaches
may be necessary, and the teacher should be able to adapt to the needs of the pupils
and the learning situation.
by the teacher, and are encouraged to give those answers that they think are best, rather than answers that are considered to be 'right' or 'wrong'. The pupils' role will then be to complete the assignment with the best possible responses, while the teacher's role will be to assign the work and make sure that orderly progress is made towards completing it. In a whole-class setting (not the most natural one for this type of classroom) this can take the form of the entire class chanting out answers in unison. When group work is used in the individualistic classroom, subgroups will complete their own assigned topic which will be independent of topics done by other groups. Results are not shared with the class. During individual work, pupils will complete seatwork on their own without direct teacher intervention. Advantages of this type of classroom are the freedom it allows for pupils to work at their own level and develop their own answers to questions. This will encourage pupils' individual problem-solving and independent learning skills. Negative effects can be that particularly less and averagely able pupils will suffer from lack of teacher guidance and make insufficient progress when left to learn in this way. Pupils will also not have the opportunity to develop co-operative skills, and for most pupils using too much individualized instruction has been found to be ineffective.

**TEACHER EXPECTATIONS**

One of the most important factors both in classroom climate and in school and teacher effectiveness more generally are the teacher's expectations of her/his pupils. From the late 1960s onwards (see box) research has found that teachers' expectations of their pupils can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Pupils that teachers expect to do well tend to achieve better, while pupils who are expected to do badly tend to fulfil their teachers' expectations as well. School effectiveness research has paid a lot of attention to this factor, which has been found to be one of the most consistently important factors in this type of research (Reynolds et al., 1996; Mortimore et al., 1988; Rutter et al., 1979).

Of course, one could argue that the relationship between teachers' expectations of their pupils' achievement and pupils' actual outcomes is merely the result of teachers having accurate perceptions of their pupils' ability. However, research has shown that although this is the case to a large extent, there is more going on. The initial research came about as a result of finding that teachers form expectations of pupils even before they have any evidence for their performance. These expectations have been found to be related to pupils' ethnic, gender and background characteristics. Thus, teachers tend to have lower expectations of working-class pupils than of middle-class pupils; they tend to have lower expectations of pupils from ethnic minorities; and in the past they tended to have lower expectations of girls, although there is some evidence that this has changed to the extent that gender expectations in many cases may have become reversed (Covington and Beery, 1976; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968).
Rosenthal and Jacobson's research on teacher expectations

The first major study on the teacher expectancy effect was undertaken by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) in the 1960s. At the start of the school year teachers were provided with a list of pupils who were said to be expected to bloom intellectually in the coming years on the basis of a test, but who in fact did not differ from their peers in this respect. Pupils were retested on three occasions during that school year and during the following year. Results indicated that 'bloomers' gained more in IQ than did control group children, although the effect wore off among the younger subjects, while growing in strength among older pupils. Grades in reading ability also improved significantly among the experimental group children, who were also rated more positively by their teachers on factors such as intellectual curiosity. Since then, the effect has received considerable empirical support (Covington and Beery, 1979; Burns, 1979). Harris and Rosenthal (1986) failed to find an expectancy effect in their study of kindergarten and second grade learning, but this is probably due to the short teaching span (10-minute sessions) and the unnatural learning situation. They did find the teacher's task orientation and non-verbal warmth to be significant predictors of pupils' academic self-concept.

These expectations can affect pupils in a variety of (often subtle) ways. Teachers communicate their expectations of certain pupils to them through verbalizations (which according to Burns, 1979, are fraught with evaluatory statements), by paying closer attention to high-expectancy pupils and spending more time with them, by failing to give feedback to responses from low-expectancy pupils, by criticizing low-expectancy pupils more often and praising them less often, by not waiting as long for the answer of low-expectancy pupils, by calling on them less to answer questions, by asking them only lower-order questions, giving them more seatwork and low-level academic tasks, and by leaving them out of some learning activities (Brophy and Good, 1986). These expectations are then internalized by the pupils and the peer group, who start to behave in the way expected of them by the teacher. Sometimes these expectations can be communicated more directly than this as well. In our own research we observed a teacher say to her class with an air of resignation: 'I know this topic is too difficult for you, but it is in the National Curriculum, so we have got to do it.'

Negative teacher expectations can be a particular problem in schools in disadvantaged areas, where an ethos of negative expectations can take over the whole school, creating an atmosphere in which teachers will say things like 'well, what can you expect with pupils like ours'. This will often lead to less effort being made to help these pupils achieve and can lead to a negative spiral in which teacher expectations and pupil expectations feed on each other.

Even where teacher expectations are unbiased and accurately reflect a pupil's ability in a particular subject, a form of expectation effect can occur, in that when a pupil's achievement suddenly improves (or goes backwards), the teacher's expectations remain unchanged. For example, a pupil who usually gets high marks for a subject
may continue to receive high marks on a bad essay s/he has done. Another example occurred with a pupil in our university who had not achieved well in French classes when at school. At one point this pupil returned to his old school for a reunion. When asked what he was doing, he (truthfully) told his former French teacher that he had just been awarded a first at university. The teacher furiously accused him of being a liar.

Strategies for avoiding negative expectations

The question then is how best to avoid these negative expectation effects. The first thing is for teachers to be aware of their own (unwanted) biases. Pupils from a different ethnic group and social class may look and act somewhat differently from the teacher’s norms. S/he should be aware of this, and not treat this as a sign of low ability. However, changing unconscious beliefs is no easy task. There are, however, a number of things teachers can do to help overcome this problem.

- The first is to remember that all pupils can learn, and communicate that belief to pupils.
- Teachers should make sure all pupils get the chance to answer questions, contribute to discussions, and so on.
- Teachers should try to be aware of how often they call on girls and boys and pupils from different ethnic groups. It can be useful to have a colleague observe the lesson to point out if there are problems in this respect. The observer’s report needs to take account of both verbal and non-verbal interactions.
- Teachers should try to use objective criteria when marking pupils’ work. To check whether this is the case one can occasionally have pupils’ work double-marked by a colleague who doesn’t know the pupils.
- Teachers should monitor how they distribute rewards and punishments. It is important to remember that expectancy effects can manifest themselves through allowing pupils of whom the teacher has low expectations to behave worse and be off task and disengaged from the lesson more often than high-expectancy pupils, as well as through giving them more punishments and less rewards than high-expectancy pupils.

**SUMMARY**

Classroom climate can be defined as the mood or atmosphere created by a teacher in her/his classroom, the way the teacher interacts with pupils, and the way the physical environment is set out. Research has shown the importance of classroom climate, not only to pupil achievement, but to self-esteem and lesson participation as well.

One of the main elements in developing a positive classroom climate is creating a warm, supportive environment in which pupils feel unthreatened and are therefore willing to make a positive contribution to the lesson. The enthusiasm of the teacher
Effective Teaching

Effective teaching has likewise been found to be an important factor. Therefore, even if the teacher is not feeling that enthusiastic on a particular day, s/he should avoid communicating negative feelings about the subject, lesson or curriculum to pupils. Creating a bright and pleasant classroom with displays of pupil work and educational materials can motivate pupils and promote peripheral learning as well.

Teacher expectation effects occur when teachers attribute certain characteristics to pupils (usually ability) based on factors such as class, gender and ethnicity. These expectations can easily turn into self-fulfilling prophecies, and must therefore be avoided as they can damage the achievement of pupils from these groups. While this is difficult, being aware of the problem is a first important step. Teachers should also carefully monitor their own behaviour, or have a colleague observe them, to see whether they are, for example, giving more attention to boys than girls.

As societies are becoming increasingly multicultural, it is important that teachers are aware of this, and don’t allow inevitable culture-shock to turn into prejudice. When teaching a group with pupils from different cultural backgrounds it can be useful to try and find out more about the pupils’ culture at the outset.

SELF-STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Think of a lesson you have recently taught, observed or been a pupil in. Were low expectations of any pupils evident? How do you know?
2. What would you do to encourage low-ability pupils to request more help?
3. Which of the three types of classroom climate would you prefer to use? Why?
4. Have you ever experienced culture-shock? How do you think it can be overcome?
5. What do you think can be done through school policies to counter low expectations of pupils?
6. Do you think classrooms can be both businesslike and warm environments at the same time? How could that be achieved?