
The psycho-social school environment

BRIEF 3

Educational psychology

A positive psycho-social context helps to create a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning.

Quality teaching and learning are supported when school professionals plan, develop, institute, monitor, and assess the characteristics of a positive psycho-social school environment. These components include: positive student and teacher relationships, violence prevention in schools, disciplinary interventions that promote student socio-emotional development, maintaining reasonable workloads, and helping students see the value and purpose of learning beyond the classroom context and grades.

Issues and Discussion

Student and teacher relationships: [Positive student and teacher relationships](#) can impact student's motivation, academic achievement, attendance, and improve teacher retention.(2)(3)(8)(11)(12) Positive student and teacher relationships are associated with successful [adjustment to primary school](#) and teacher's empathy and warmth is associated with positive outcomes for secondary students.(3)(11) Positive school relationships can be developed when teachers and administrators work together to develop and design school objectives and policies and when there is a [democratic approach to teaching](#) and managing classroom behaviours.(2)(9) Relationships can be mediated through [social and emotional activities](#) while ongoing monitoring and evaluation of school climate can be captured through evidence-based measures.(1)(2)(3)(12)

Violence prevention in schools: All [children have the right](#) to be protected from harm and from cruel or humiliating punishments.(2) Governments, communities, families, and schools should communicate these rights [in a way young people will understand](#), to empower students so they may contribute to making schools and communities safer.(1) Reducing violence is supported through socio-emotional activities including classroom discussions on violence and harmful behaviours (such as [bullying](#)) that take place both in person and online, and on the [roles students have](#) in reducing violence.(1)(3) Teaching effective communication and problem-solving skills, [building a sense of school community](#) through relationships, and promoting socio-emotional learning all contribute to violence prevention efforts and to establishing a positive psycho-social learning environment.(1)(2)(3)(9)(11)(12)

Discipline that promotes socio-emotional development: Emphasising the well-being and [happiness of students who feel they are cared for](#) can lead to healthier school climates, greater academic success,

and lower mental health issues.(1)(2)(3)(8)(11)(12) Proactive disciplinary systems improve and develop student's socio-emotional and behaviour skills and should be promoted over less effective forms of discipline that can be reactive and punitive, including [zero tolerance policies](#).(1)(9) Restorative practices, for example, allows students to repair relationships for any harm they may have caused to their peers or teachers.(2) Both the offender and the person harmed take part in reconciliatory activities to repair relationships including peer mediation, restitution, and peer conferences.(9) Restorative policies improve academic performance, lower student absenteeism, drop-outs, and increase graduation rates.(9)

Reasonable school workloads: School workloads are reasonable when they reflects students' current capabilities and developmental levels and takes into account the time students need to complete assignments.(5) School leaders should monitor assigned workloads, as excessive expectations on [students](#) and [teachers](#) can negatively affect stress and perseverance levels and school and home relationships.(5)(8) Students benefit when school and homework is connected to educational goals, promotes long-term academic skills including study habits, and does not significantly deter students from participating in other extra-curricular activities.(5)(8) The purpose, amount, frequency, and responsibilities of the school, teacher, and parents for students completing their school and homework should be part of a school and homework policy.(5)(8) Time management training for students to complete assignments at home and for teachers in preparing for and teaching in small and large class sizes can improve workload conditions and impact student performance.(5)(8)

Learning with a purpose beyond grades: Students can develop a more positive orientation to school and greater motivation to learn when their studies are connected to broader purposes beyond just earning a grade. Opportunities for learning that extend [beyond the classroom](#) both expand teachers' access to resources and connect students' learning with real-world contexts and concerns.(8)(10) Service learning is an approach that helps students apply what they are learning to real community needs.(2)(10) These opportunities support school-community partnerships, build students' socio-emotional development, raise the voice of students through civic engagement, and demonstrate to students that what they are learning is both meaningful and useful.(10)

Inclusiveness and Equity

Discrimination of youth of ethnic and/or racial minority background: The psycho-social development and academic outcomes of students of ethnic and/or racial minority background around the world are influenced by [historical and systematic discrimination](#) in society and school. Issues include segregation and institutionalised racism, disproportionate punitive punishment, and low community, teacher, and peer expectations of students of ethnic and/or racial minorities.(6)(7)(8) School professionals should collaborate with diverse communities to reduce stereotypes or biases that contribute to lower expectations and unfair punishments while monitoring the climate in classrooms to ensure treatment and discipline of all students are equitable.(6)(7)(9) Policies combating discrimination at the school level should augment [community and national policies](#) and should be developed in collaboration with advocates and members of racial and/or ethnic minority communities.(2)(6)(9)

Discrimination of youth in the sexual minority: Youth who are of sexual minority face heightened discrimination, are bullied more than their heterosexual-majority peers, and are at increased risk for negative socio-emotional health outcomes.(4) School policies that reinforce the safety of students of

sexual minority help reduce their risk for depression and drug use.(4) [National laws and school policies](#) should protect the safety and contribute to a warm and welcoming climate in schools and communities.(4)

Policy Examples

- Cambodia [[PDF](#)]
- Palau [[PDF](#)]
- Papua New Guinea [[PDF](#)]
- Rwanda [[PDF](#)]

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