

Addressing Barriers to Learning

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Good Schools and Classrooms*

Learning and teaching are collaborative, dynamic, nonlinear processes. Despite the best teaching, schools find some students manifest learning, behavior, and emotional problems that require additional interventions. Good schools have a system in place that effectively prevents many problems and quickly addresses those that arise.

Schools are expected to do their best for *all* students. This, of course, reflects our society's commitment to equity, fairness, and justice. Ultimately, this translates into school improvement efforts that stress applying the best practices known to date.

Yet, if the commitment to ensuring equity, fairness, and justice is to be meaningful, it cannot be approached simplistically. As Jeanie Oakes has lamented:

Popular reforms over the past three and a half decades have done little to close opportunity and achievement gaps, and some reforms actually increase those gaps.¹

For schools, school improvement starts with designing instruction in ways that account for a wide range of individual differences and circumstances. But, the work can't stop there if the aim is to assure all students an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. Administrators, teachers, and all student and school support staff must promote positive development, prevent problems, and accommodate and assist the various learning, behavior, and emotional concerns that arise daily. Given current preparation programs, the best ways to do all this involve considerably more than most school staff will have learned before being first-hired.

Fortunately, good policy makers, administrators, teachers, and student support staff are continuing learners and are keenly interested in what others have found works. As a result, most become rather eclectic in pursuing their daily functions.

Thoughtfully put together, an eclectic set of practices can be a healthy alternative to fads, fancies, and dogmatism. But care must be taken to avoid grabbing hold of almost every new idea. (If it looks appealing, and especially if it has been designated a science-based practice, it often is adopted – regardless of whether it is consistent with other practices being used.) This is naive eclecticism and can result in more harm than good.

The way to avoid naive eclecticism is to build approaches on a coherent and consistent set of

- underlying concepts
- practice guidelines that reflect these concepts
- best practices that fit the guidelines
- valid scientific data as they become available.

Each of these considerations guide the following discussion of good schools and classrooms.

*Adapted excerpts from: H. Adelman & L. Taylor (2018), *Improving School Improvement*

¹Jeanie Oakes (2018), Public scholarship: Education research for a diverse democracy. *Educational Researcher*, 47, 91-104.

It's Not Just about Teachers

Discussions of schooling and teaching are shaped by an underlying *rationale* regarding what constitutes the right balance between societal and individual interests under a system of compulsory education. Public school curriculum guides and manuals reflect the aim of preparing youngsters to cope with what may be called *developmental* or *life tasks*. Reading, math, biology, chemistry, social studies, history, government, physical and health education – all are seen as preparing an individual to assume an appropriate role in society as a worker, citizen, community member, and parent.

Most educators and parents also want to foster individual well-being, talents, and personal integrity. This requires that schools accomplish society's intentions in ways that promote the well-being of all students. For *all* to benefit, schools must ensure equity of opportunity.

Good schools not only teach well; they also prevent and help address learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Teachers, of course, play the primary role in formal instruction. Learning, however, takes place throughout the school day in and out of classrooms. Every encounter results in something learned – for better or for worse. For example, every transaction with someone at school is teaching youngsters something.

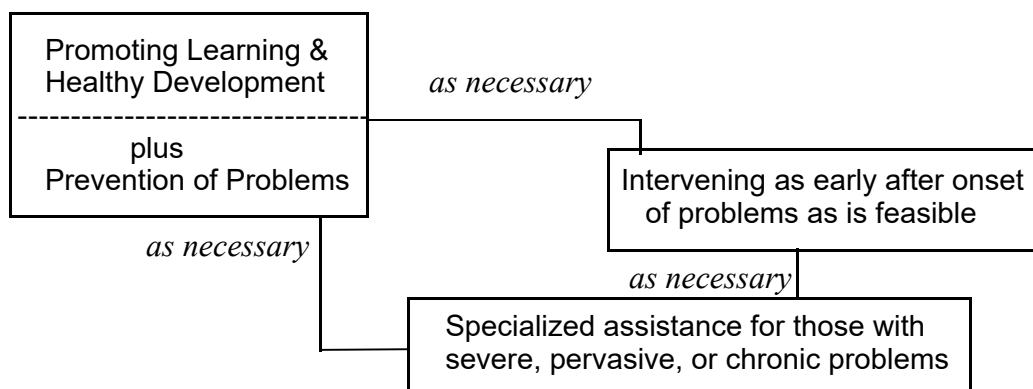
And they do not expect teachers to do it all by themselves.

Good teaching, therefore, is not simply a matter of conveying content and mastering instructional techniques. And when a student is not doing well, support staff, administrators, and others often are called on to play a primary “teaching” role. (Generally, this happens after a problem has worsened over a period of time.)

As illustrated in Exhibit 1-1, besides providing excellent teaching, good schools promote assets, prevent problems, and address problems that arise as early after onset as feasible and, as necessary, with specialized assistance.

Exhibit 1-1

Good Schools Promote Learning and Well-being & Effectively Address Problems



The commonsense view of good teaching is captured by the old adage: *Good teaching meets learners where they are*. Unfortunately, this adage often is interpreted only as a call for *matching* a student's current *capabilities* (e.g., knowledge, skills). The irony in this, of course, is that most school staff recognize that motivational factors often play a key role in accounting for poor instructional outcomes. One of the most common laments among teachers is:

"They could do it, if only they wanted to!"

Teachers also know that good abilities are more likely to emerge when students are motivated not only to pursue class assignments, but also are interested in using what they learn in other contexts. So while matching current knowledge and skills is a basic concern, it is evident that good teaching also requires matching *motivation* (e.g., attitudes) and encompasses practices that reflect an appreciation of *intrinsic* motivation and what must be done to overcome *avoidance* motivation. (These matters are discussed in more detail in [Improving School Improvement](#).)

The top ten most important qualities or competencies of effective teachers reported in a survey of U.S. students 15-19 years old conducted by the Pearson company:

1. Ability to Develop Trusting, Productive Relationships
2. Patient, caring, and kind personality
3. Knowledge of learners
4. Dedication to teaching
5. Subject Matter Knowledge
6. Professionalism
7. Ability to Engage Students in Learning
8. Teaching Skills/Pedagogical Practices
9. Creativity in Planning and Delivering Instruction
10. Managing the Classroom Learning Environment

https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/corporate/global/pearson-dot-com/files/innovation/global-survey/reports/RINVN133376_US_Report_WEB_f_execsum.pdf

Because the rationale adopted by teachers and other school staff is so important, the following presents brief syntheses of principles, guidelines, and characteristics that encapsulate some of the best thinking about good schools and classrooms. The complexity of these concepts, of course, warrants more exploration than we can provide here. (See the references in [Improving School Improvement](#).)

Some Basic Guidelines

In general, good schools and good teaching are experienced by all stakeholders as user friendly, flexibly implemented, and responsive.

Consensus is emerging about what constitutes good schools and classrooms. The following synthesis is organized around three topics: (1) stakeholders, (2) the teaching process, and (3) school and classroom climate.

- (1) With respect to *stakeholders*, good schools and good teaching
 - employ a critical mass of high quality leadership and staff who believe in what they are doing, value the search for understanding, see errors as valuable sources of learning, and pursue continuing education and self-renewal,
 - involve all staff and a wide range of other competent, energetic, committed and responsible stakeholders in planning, implementation, evaluation, and ongoing renewal,
 - identify staff who are not performing well and provide personalized capacity building opportunities, support, or other corrective remedies.
- (2) With respect to the *teaching process*, good schools and good teaching use the strengths and vital resources of all stakeholders to
 - ensure the same high quality for all students,
 - formulate and effectively communicate goals, standards, and quality indicators for cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development,
 - facilitate continuous cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development and learning using procedures that promote active learning in and out of school,
 - ensure use of comprehensive, multifaceted, and integrated approaches (e.g., approaches that are extensive and intensive enough to ensure that students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and develop in healthy ways),
 - make learning accessible to all students (including those at greatest risk and hardest-to-reach) through development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports (i.e., a primary component of school improvement policy designed to address barriers to learning and teaching),
 - tailor processes so they are a good fit in terms of *both* motivation and capability and are no more intrusive and disruptive than is necessary for meeting and accounting for distinctive needs, assets, and other forms of diversity,
 - deal with students holistically and developmentally, as individuals and as part of a family, neighborhood, and community,
 - tailor appropriate measures for improving practices and for purposes of accountability.
- (3) With respect to school and classroom *climate*, good schools and good teaching
 - delineate the rights and obligations of all stakeholders,
 - are guided by a commitment to social justice (equity and fairness) and to creating a sense of community,
 - ensure staff, students, family members, and all other stakeholders have the time, training, skills, and institutional and collegial support necessary to create an accepting and safe environment and build relationships of mutual trust, respect, equality, and appropriate risk-taking.

Recently the American Psychological Association (APA) generated what they term “the most important principles from psychology” for use in pre-K to 12 classroom teaching and learning (see Exhibit 1-2). The APA encourages consideration and practice of these principles throughout all teacher preparation programs “to ensure a solid foundation of psychological knowledge in pre-K to 12 instruction.”

Exhibit 1-2

APA's Top 20 Principles for Pre-K to 12 Education

<http://www.apa.org/ed/schools/teaching-learning/top-twenty-principles.aspx>

Principles 1-8 – about *Thinking and learning*

1. Students' beliefs or perceptions about intelligence and ability affect their cognitive functioning and learning.
2. What students already know affects their learning.
3. Students' cognitive development and learning are not limited by general stages of development.
4. Learning is based on context, so generalizing learning to new contexts is not spontaneous but instead needs to be facilitated.
5. Acquiring long-term knowledge and skill is largely dependent on practice.
6. Clear, explanatory, and timely feedback to students is important for learning.
7. Students' self-regulation assists learning, and self-regulatory skills can be taught.
8. Student creativity can be fostered.

Principles 9-12 – about *Motivation*

9. Students tend to enjoy learning and perform better when they are more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated to achieve.
10. Students persist in the face of challenging tasks and process information more deeply when they adopt mastery goals rather than performance goals.
11. Teachers' expectations about their students affect students' opportunities to learn, their motivation, and their learning outcomes.
12. Setting goals that are short term (proximal), specific, and moderately challenging enhances motivation more than establishing goals that are long term (distal), general, and overly challenging.

Principles 13-15 – about *Social-emotional learning*

13. Learning is situated within multiple social contexts.
14. Interpersonal relationships and communication are critical to both the teaching- learning process and the social-emotional development of students.
15. Emotional well-being influences educational performance, learning, and development.

Principles 16-17 – about *Classroom management*

16. Expectations for classroom conduct and social interaction are learned and can be taught using proven principles of behavior and effective classroom instruction.
17. Effective classroom management is based on (a) setting and communicating high expectations, (b) consistently nurturing positive relationships, and (c) providing a high level of student support.

Principles 18-20 – about *Assessment*

18. Formative and summative assessments are both important and useful but require different approaches and interpretations.
19. Students' skills, knowledge, and abilities are best measured with assessment processes grounded in psychological science with well-defined standards for quality and fairness.
20. Making sense of assessment data depends on clear, appropriate, and fair interpretation.

A Note about Adopting Principles

Discussions of principles related to most interventions have become so diffuse that almost every guideline is called a principle. With respect to school and classroom practice, especially with vulnerable and disenfranchised populations, a principled approach certainly is needed. The literature discussing the fundamental social philosophical concerns raised by schooling, teaching, and other intervention decisions suggests that what must be addressed first and foremost are overlapping concerns about distributive justice (equity and fairness) and empowerment.

Equity is the legal facet of distributive justice. It ensures and protects individual rights and addresses inequities related to access to “goods” in life and meeting needs. Fairness is the more social philosophical application that deals with such ethical questions as: Fair for whom? Fair according to whom? Fair using what criteria and what procedures for applying the criteria? Obviously, what is fair for the society may not be fair for an individual; what is fair for one person or group may cause an inequity for another. A good example of the dilemma is provided by high stakes testing, which is experienced by some students as fair and others as cutting them off from future opportunities. Another example is provided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which attempts to meet the special needs of a subgroup of individuals in ways that are fair to them and to the rest of society.

Equity and fairness do not guarantee empowerment. Empowerment is a multifaceted concept. In discussing power, theoreticians distinguish “power over” from “power to” and “power from.” *Power over* involves explicit or implicit dominance over others and events; *power to* is seen as increased opportunities to act; *power from* implies ability to resist the power of others.

From the perspective of school and classroom practice, the above overlapping principles raise complex concerns because there are three involved parties in any intervention: the society, the intervener(s), and those who are identified as participants (e.g., students, families). Each is a stakeholder; each brings vested and often conflicting interests to the enterprise; each party wants to be treated equitably, fairly, and in ways that promote empowerment. The profound implications of all this require greater attention, especially with an eye to stakeholder motivation, setting standards, and cost-benefit analyses.

Characteristics of Effective Schools and Classrooms that Account for All Learners

In drawing on the vast research literature on effective schools and classrooms, we have extrapolated the following:

Effective Schools demonstrate

- commitment to a shared vision of equity of opportunity, with high expectations for student learning and an emphasis on academic work that is meaningful to the student
- daily implementation of effective processes
 - >strong administrative leadership
 - >alignment of resources to reach goals
 - >professional development tied to goals
 - >discipline and school order
 - >a sense of teamwork in the school
 - >teacher participation in decision making
 - >effective parental outreach and involvement

- monitoring of student progress through measured indicators of achievement
 - >setting local standards
 - >use of national standards
 - >use of data for continuous improvement of school climate & curricula
- optimizing of school size through limited enrollment, creation of small schools within big schools (e.g., academies, magnet programs), and other ways of grouping students and staff
- strong involvement with the community and with surrounding family of schools
 - >students, families, and community are developed into a learning community
 - >programs address transitions between grades, school, school-to-career, and higher education

Effective Schools and Classrooms ensure that all students learn how to learn and are prepared for lifelong learning

Effective Classrooms

- have a positive classroom social climate that
 - >personalizes contacts and supports in ways that build trust over time and meets learners where they are
 - >offers accommodations so all students have an opportunity to learn
 - >adjusts class size and groupings to optimize learning
 - >engages students through dialogue and decision making and seizing “teachable moments”
 - >incorporates parents in multiple ways
 - >addresses social-emotional development
- design and implement quality instructional experiences that
 - >involve students in decision making
 - >contextualize and make learning authentic, including use of real life situations and mentors
 - >are appropriately cognitively complex and challenging
 - >enhance language/literacy
 - >foster joint student products
 - >extend the time students engage in learning through designing motivated practice
 - >ensure students learn how to learn and are prepared for lifelong learning
 - >ensure use of personalized and in-classroom special intervention strategies prior to referring students for specialized services
 - >use a mix of methods and advanced technology to enhance learning
- modify instruction to meet students’ needs based on ongoing assessments using
 - >measures of multiple dimensions of impact
 - >authentic assessment tools
 - >students' input based on their self-evaluations
- enable teachers to collaborate and supports them with
 - >personalized inservice, consultation, mentoring, grade level teaming
 - >special resources who are available to come into the classroom to ensure students with special needs are accommodated appropriately

What are students currently saying about what makes for a good teacher?

In a recent Gallup poll, Gen Z K-12 students ages 12-18 were asked: *Please think about the best middle school or high school teacher you ever had. In your opinion, what made them the best teacher?* Respondents provided multiple answers.

73% answered: *They cared about you as a person.*

62% answered: *They made it easy to understand what they were teaching.*

58% answered: *They were someone that you trusted.*

57% answered: *They were energetic and excited about teaching.*

56% answered: *They pushed you to be your best.*

53% answered: *They went above and beyond to help you.*

47% answered: *They taught you new ideas or helped you see a new perspective.*

46% answered: *They helped you learn something difficult.*

25% answered: *They helped you think about future jobs or education.*

Gallup's Zach Hrynowski interprets the findings as indicating that what teens value most in teachers is to "know who I am, know what's important to me, know what my goals and dreams are, and help me understand what I have to do to reach them."

Source: Gallup survey of 2,317 Gen Z children (age 12-18) enrolled in K-12 school conducted April 26 - May 9. The margin of error for the sample is 2.7 percentage points.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/648896/schools-struggle-engage-gen-students.aspx>

About Differentiated Instruction

For some time, efforts to improve the match for learning in classrooms have revolved around the idea of differentiated instruction – often referred to either as individualized or personalized instruction. The two terms overlap in their emphasis on accounting for developmental differences. However, while most *individualized* approaches mainly focus on individual differences in developed capabilities (i.e., skills and knowledge), *personalization* is defined here as accounting for individual differences in both capabilities *and motivation* (e.g., current interests, attitudes). Some discussions describe personalization as “customizing education to each students’ strengths, weaknesses, and personal interests.”

Good schools strive to *personalize* instruction and special assistance

For motivated learners, either individualized or personalized instruction can be quite effective. For students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems, motivation for classroom learning often has waned. In such cases, motivation is a primary consideration, and personalized instruction is the best practice. And, properly designed and carried out, such instruction can reduce the need for special assistance and referrals for special education.

Is it personalized?
Only if the learner perceives it that way

Definitions and formulations of personalized learning and instruction abound. Missing in most presentations is a psychological perspective.

Personalization is best understood as a psychological construct. That is, the *learner's perception* is a critical factor in defining what is a good fit. From this perspective, a basic assessment concern is that of eliciting a learner's perceptions of how well classroom practices and schoolwide experiences match her/his interests and abilities. Thus, we define personalization as the process of matching learner motivation and capabilities and stress that it is the learner's perception that determines whether the match is a good one.

In keeping with the above definition, outlined in Exhibit 1-3 are some underlying assumptions and major elements of personalized interventions.

Exhibit 1-3

Underlying Assumptions and Major Elements of a Personalized Interventions

I. Underlying Assumptions

The following are basic assumptions underlying personalized interventions as we conceive them.

- Learning is a function of the ongoing transactions between the learner and the learning environment.
- Optimal learning is a function of an optimal match between the learner's accumulated capacities and attitudes and current state of being and the program's processes and context.
- Matching both learner motivation and capacities must be primary procedural objectives.
- The learner's perception is the critical criterion for evaluating whether a good match exists between the learner and the learning environment.
- The wider the range of options that can be offered and the more the learner is made aware of the options and has a deciding role in choosing which to pursue, the greater the likelihood that a student will perceive the match as a good one.
- Special assistance in the classroom is a necessity for students who are having frequent problems.
- Besides improved learning, personalized interventions enhance intrinsic valuing of learning and a sense of personal responsibility for learning. Furthermore, such interventions increase acceptance and even appreciation of individual differences, as well as independent and cooperative functioning and problem solving.

II. Intervention Elements

Major elements of personalized interventions as we have identified them are:

- III. regular use of informal and formal conferences for discussing options, making decisions, exploring learners' perceptions, and mutually evaluating progress;
- IV. a broad range of options from which learners can make choices with regard to types of learning content, activities, and desired outcomes;
- V. a broad range of options from which learners can make choices with regard to facilitation (support, guidance) of decision making and learning;
- VI. active decision making by learners in making choices and in evaluating how well the chosen options match their motivation and capability;
- VII. personalized special assistance provided as necessary, with referrals for specialized interventions to address chronic problems;
- VIII. establishment of intervention plans and mutual agreements about the ongoing relationships between the learners and interveners;
- IX. regular reevaluations of decisions, reformulation of plans, and renegotiation of agreements based on mutual evaluations of progress, problems, and learners' perceptions of the "match."

*As noted, learning is an ongoing, dynamic, and transactional process. As students change, so must practices. Personalized instruction, with special assistance added when necessary, enables school staff to effectively pursue the art, craft, and science of teaching in ways that more optimally match the range of individual differences in **both** motivation and capabilities that exist in every classroom.*

In sum, good schools enhance the quality of life for students and staff not only in the classroom, but school-wide. Three major components of this are (1) a curriculum that promotes not only academic, but also social and emotional learning and fosters intrinsic motivation for learning and teaching, (2) a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of that addresses barriers to learning and teaching and reengages disconnected students in classroom learning, and (3) a governance/management approach that is inclusive of key stakeholders.

Coda

A note about caring. From a psychological perspective, learning and teaching are experienced most positively when the learner cares about learning and the teacher cares about teaching. Moreover, the climate at a school benefits greatly when all the participants care about each other.

Caring has moral, social, and personal facets. When all facets of caring are present and balanced, they can nurture individuals and facilitate the process of learning. At the same time, caring in all its dimensions should be a major focus of what is taught and learned. This means ensuring that the focus on fostering positive social and emotional development includes a balanced emphasis on empathy and compassion for others.

To promote a sense of caring and community, schools can develop and institutionalize procedures that start when newcomers arrive (e.g., students, their families, staff, volunteers and others from the community). This involves an initial focus on welcoming and connecting them with those with whom they will be interacting. A supportive school welcomes and provides social supports to ensure that students (and their families) make a good adjustment to school, and to address initial adjustment problems if they arise. The welcoming and transition processes continue with an emphasis on ensuring social and learning supports and guidance, mentoring, advocacy and, if necessary, special assistance.

Besides creating a welcoming and supportive climate, there are a myriad of strategies that can contribute to students feeling positively cared for and connected in the classroom and school. Examples include practices such as personalized instruction, cooperative learning, regular student conferences, activity fostering social and emotional development and positive human relations, conflict resolution and restorative justice, participation in decision making, volunteer opportunities, enrichment activities, opportunities for students to attain positive status, and various forms of guidance and special assistance.

Do you think going to school is important?

Sure! Everyone needs an education, even if they already know everything.



About Creating a Collaborative and Caring Classroom: Teachers Can't Do it Alone*

There is considerable advocacy for school improvements that establish a healthy and attractive physical and psychological environment. Such an environment is welcoming, supportive, caring, respectful, and promotes whole child development, a sense of community, and feelings of hope for the future. And creation of such an environment involves a critical mass of stakeholders working collaboratively.

Isolated Teachers and Difficult Classroom Teaching Conditions

In too many schools, teachers are confronted with teaching conditions and classroom dynamics that are beyond one individual's ability to cope effectively. Here is how Jeffrey Mirel and Simona Goldin described the problem in an article entitled: *Alone in the Classroom: Why Teachers Are Too Isolated* (excerpt from *The Atlantic*).

"On the first day of their first year teaching, new teachers walk into their schools and meet their colleagues. They might talk about the latest state assessments, textbooks that have just arrived, or the newest project the district is spearheading. Some veteran teachers may tell the newcomers "how things are done" at the schools. And then, as teachers have done since the founding of public education in the U.S., they take leave of one another, walk to their classrooms to meet their students, and close the door.

In his classic 1975 book, *Schoolteacher*, Dan Lortie described teacher isolation as one of the main structural impediments to improved instruction and student learning in American public schools. Lortie argued that since at least the 19th century teachers have worked behind closed doors, rarely if ever collaborating with colleagues on improving teaching practice or examining student work. "Each teacher," Lortie wrote, "... spent his teaching day isolated from other adults; the initial pattern of school distribution represented a series of 'cells' which were construed as self-sufficient."

This situation continues to the present day. A recent study by Scholastic and the Gates Foundation found that American teachers spend only about 3 percent of their teaching day collaborating with colleagues; the majority plan, teach, and examine their practice alone.

In other countries ... where students outperform those in the U.S. in international tests ..., collaboration among teachers is an essential aspect of instructional improvement. The problem is not that American teachers resist collaboration. Scholastic and the Gates Foundation found that nearly 90 percent of U.S. teachers believe that providing time to collaborate with colleagues is crucial to retaining good teachers.

So what would it take structurally to enable teachers to work collaboratively for improved learning outcomes? Answering this question demands changes in some longstanding American public school structures."

*Adapted excerpts from: H. Adelman & L. Taylor (2018), *Improving School Improvement*.

About School and Classroom Climate

The concept of school climate currently is playing a major role in discussions about the quality of school life, teaching, learning, and support. School and classroom climates range from hostile/toxic to welcoming and supportive and can fluctuate daily and over the school year.

Collaborative and caring classrooms contribute to a positive school climate

A variety of studies indicate that a positive climate can have a beneficial impact on students and staff; a negative climate can be another barrier to learning and teaching. Analyses of research suggest significant relationships between classroom climate and matters such as student engagement, behavior, self-efficacy, achievement, and social and emotional development, principal leadership style, stages of educational reform, teacher burnout, and overall quality of school life. Studies report strong associations between achievement levels and classroom goal-direction, cohesiveness, and organization. Research also suggests that the impact of classroom climate may be greater on students from low-income homes and on groups that often are discriminated against.

What the research doesn't articulate well is that school and classroom climate are *emerging* qualities. That is, climate is a temporal, fluid quality of the immediate setting that emerges from the complex transaction of many factors.

School and classroom climate reflect the influence of the underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, and traditions that constitute the school culture. And, of course, the climate and culture at a school also are shaped by surrounding political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

School and classroom climate are *emerging* qualities

A range of concepts have been put forth for understanding school and classroom climate. These include social system organization; social attitudes; staff and student morale; power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures; curricular and instructional practices; communicated expectations; efficacy; accountability demands; cohesion; competition; "fit" between learner and classroom; system maintenance, growth, and change; orderliness; and safety. Moos groups such concepts into three dimensions: (1) *relationship* (i.e., the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment; the extent to which people are involved in the environment and support and help each other); (2) *personal development* (i.e., basic directions along which personal growth and self-enhancement tend to occur); and (3) *system maintenance and change* (i.e., the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change).

Because of the correlational nature of school climate research, cause and effect interpretations remain speculative. The broader body of organizational research does indicate the profound role accountability pressures play in shaping organizational climate. For example, pressing demands for higher achievement test scores and control of student behavior often contribute to a classroom climate that is reactive, over-controlling, and over-reliant on external reinforcement to motivate positive functioning.

Given current understanding of what factors affect school and classroom climate, good schools and good teachers work diligently to create a caring and collaborative atmosphere that encourages and supports whole child learning and wellness and prevents learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems.

Collaborative efforts in classrooms require a symbolic opening of doors. When teachers go into their classroom and shut the door, they are deprived of essential support and learning opportunities. Too often, negative classroom dynamics and the isolation from colleagues lead to feelings of alienation and "burn out." And, students are cut off from a variety of resources and experiences that can enhance learning and prevent problems.

Opening Doors

Because the negatives outweigh the potential gains, there are increasing calls for "opening school doors" to enhance collegial collaboration, consultation, and mentoring. Open doors also enable access to a variety of expert assistance, volunteers, family members, and the community-at-large. These changes are especially important for preventing commonplace learning, behavior, and emotional problems and for responding early-after-the onset of problems. Moreover, such fundamental changes in the culture of schools and classrooms are seen as routes to enhancing a caring climate, a sense of community, and overall teaching effectiveness.

The following Exhibits and ensuing discussion highlight considerations related to opening school doors to enhance a collaborative and caring environment.

Exhibit 2-1

Working Together

Teaching benefits from organizational learning

As Senge stresses, organizational learning requires an organizational structure "where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision and improve shared mental models" by engaging in different tasks, acquiring different kinds of expertise, experiencing and expressing different forms of leadership, confronting uncomfortable organizational truths, and searching together for shared solutions.

Collaboration and collegiality

As Hargreaves and others have noted, these concepts are fundamental to improving morale and work satisfaction and to the whole enterprise of transforming schools to meet the needs of individuals and society. *Collaborative cultures* foster collaborative working relationships which are spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable. When collegiality is *mandated*, it often produces what has been called *contrived collegiality* which tends to breed inflexibility and inefficiency. Contrived collegiality is administratively regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space, and predictable.

Welcoming for new staff and ongoing social support for all staff

Just as with students and their families, there is a need for those working together at a school to feel they are truly welcome and have a range of social supports. Thus, a major focus for stakeholder development activity is establishment of a program that welcomes and connects new staff with others with whom they will be working and does so in ways that effectively incorporates them into the community.

Barriers to working together

Problems related to working relationships are a given. To minimize such problems, it is important for participants to understand barriers to working relationships and for sites to establish effective problem solving mechanisms to eliminate or at least minimize such barriers.

Rescue dynamics

A special problem that arises in caring communities are rescue dynamics. Such dynamics arise when caring and helping go astray, when those helping become frustrated and angry because those being helped don't respond in desired ways or seem not to be trying. It is important to minimize such dynamics by establishing procedures that build on motivational readiness and personalized interventions.

Exhibit 2-2

Collaborative Teaming in Classrooms

The teaching community brings together many sources of talent who can team to enhance and enable teaching and learning.* Partnering with compatible others enables staff to complement each others' areas of competence and provide each other with nurturance and personal support, and allows for relief in addressing problems. And, with access to the Internet and distance learning, the nature and scope of collaborative teaming has the potential to expand in dramatic fashion.

Teaming may take the form of:

- *Parallel Teaching* – team members combine their classes or other work and teach to their strengths. This may involve specific facets of the curriculum (e.g., one teacher covers math, another reading; they cover different aspects of science) or different students (e.g., for specific activities, they divide the students and work with those to whom each relates to best or can support in the best way).
- *Complementary Teaching* – one team member takes the lead with the initial lessons and another facilitates the follow-up activity.
- *Special Assistance* – while one team member provides basic instruction, another focuses on those students who need special assistance.

Collaborating with Special Educators and Other Specialists – Almost every school has some personnel who have special training relevant to redesigning the classroom to work for a wider range of students. These specialists range from those who teach music or art to those who work with students designated as in need of special education. They can bring to the classroom not only their special expertise, but ideas for how the classroom design can incorporate practices that will engage students who have not been doing well and can accommodate those with special needs.

Volunteers – Volunteers can be a multifaceted resource in a classroom and throughout a school (see Exhibit 2-3). For this to be the case, however, the school staff must value volunteers and learn how to recruit, train, nurture, and use them effectively. When implemented properly, school volunteer programs can enable teachers to personalize instruction, free teachers and other school personnel to meet students' needs more effectively, broaden students' experiences through interaction with volunteers, strengthen school-community understanding and relations, enhance home involvement, and enrich the lives of volunteers. In the classroom, volunteers can provide just the type of extra support needed to enable staff to conference and work with students who require special assistance.

Working under the direction of the teacher and student support staff, they can help students on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. One-to-one assistance often is needed to establish a supportive relationship with students who are having trouble adjusting to school, to develop a positive relationship with a particularly aggressive or withdrawn student, to re-engage a student who has disengaged from classroom learning, and to foster successful task completion with a student easily distracted by peers. Volunteers can help enhance a student's motivation and skills and, at the very least, can help counter negative effects that arise when a student has difficulty adjusting to school.

Students as Part of the Team – Besides the mutual benefits students get from cooperative learning groups and other informal ways they help each other, students can be taught to be peer tutors, group discussion leaders, role models, and mentors. Other useful roles include: peer buddies (to welcome, orient, and provide social support as a new student transitions into the class and school), peer conflict mediators, and much more. Student helpers benefit their peers, themselves, and the school staff, and enhance the school's efforts to create a caring climate and a sense of community.

*When a classroom successfully joins with its surrounding community, anyone at a school and in the community who wants to facilitate student learning might be a contributing teacher (e.g., aides, volunteers, family members, students, specialist teachers, student support staff, school administrators, classified staff, professionals-in-training). Together the array of school and community people constitute a teaching community.

Exhibit 2-3

The Many Roles for Volunteers in the Classroom and Throughout the School*

I. Welcoming and Social Support

A. In the Front Office

1. Greeting and welcoming
2. Providing information to those who come to the front desk
3. Escorting guests, new students/families to destinations on the campus
4. Orienting newcomers

B. Staffing a Welcoming Club

1. Connecting newly arrived parents with peer buddies
2. Helping develop orientation and other information resources for newcomers
3. Helping establish newcomer support groups

II. Working with Designated Students in the Classroom

- A. Helping to orient new students
- B. Engaging disinterested, distracted, and distracting students
- C. Providing personal guidance and support for specific students in class to help them stay focused and engaged

III. Providing Additional Opportunities and Support in Class and on the Campus as a Whole

Helping develop and staff additional

- A. Recreational activity
- B. Enrichment activity
- C. Tutoring
- D. Mentoring

IV. Helping Enhance the Positive Climate Throughout the School – including Assisting with "Chores"

- A. Assisting with Supervision in Class and Throughout the Campus
- B. Contributing to Campus "Beautification"
- C. Helping to Get Materials Ready

*Volunteers can be recruited from a variety of sources: parents and other family members; others in the community such as senior citizens and workers in local businesses; college students; and peers and older students at the school. There also are organized programs that can provide volunteers, such as VISTA, America Reads, and local service clubs. And, increasingly, institutions of higher education are requiring students to participate in learning through service. Schools committed to enhancing home and community involvement in schooling can pursue volunteer programs as a productive element in enhancing school climate.

Opening Doors for Assistance and Partnerships

Clearly, opening the classroom door allows for the addition of a variety of forms of assistance and useful partnerships. Teachers need to work closely with other teachers and school personnel, as well as with parents, professionals-in-training, volunteers, and so forth. Collaboration and teaming are key facets of school improvement. Expanding and integrating social capital allows schools to enhance resources and strategies for improving school climate and learning and performance in- and out-of-the-classroom. And as Hargreaves cogently notes:

the way to relieve the uncertainty and open-endedness that characterizes classroom teaching is to create communities of colleagues who work collaboratively [in cultures of shared learning and positive risk-taking] to set their own professional limits and standards, while still remaining committed to continuous improvement. Such communities can also bring together the professional and personal lives of teachers in a way that supports growth and allows problems to be discussed without fear of disapproval or punishment.

An Example of Improving Classroom Climate: Using Support Staff, Aides, and Volunteers to Provide Special Assistance

Every teacher has had the experience of planning a wonderful lesson and having the classroom instruction disrupted by some student who is less interested in the lesson than in interacting with a classmate. The first tendency usually is to use some simple form of social control to stop the disruptive behavior (e.g., using proximity and/or a mild verbal intervention). Because so many students today are not easily intimidated, teachers find such strategies do not solve the problem. So, the next steps escalate. The teacher reprimands, warns, and finally sends the student to "time-out" or to the front office for discipline. In the process, the other students start to snicker about what is happening and the lesson usually is disrupted.

In contrast to this scenario, teachers can collaborate with support staff and train their aides (if they have one) or a capable volunteer to provide guidance and support for disruptive youngsters. The emphasis is on ensuring that someone is present and prepared to respond immediately when the teacher indicates the need. The tactic involves sitting next to the student and quietly trying to re-engage her/him. If necessary, the student is taken to a quiet area in the classroom and provided with the opportunity to choose an engaging activity. In extreme instances, the two may even go out for a brief walk and talk if this is feasible. It is true that all this means the student won't get the benefit of the planned instruction during that period, but s/he wouldn't anyway.

None of this is a matter of rewarding the student for bad behavior. Rather, it is a positive strategy for avoiding the tragedy of (a) the teacher reprimanding the culprit and increasing that student's negative attitudes toward teaching and school and (b) in the process, disrupting learning for the rest of the class.

Using this approach and not having to shift into a discipline mode has multiple benefits. For one, the teacher is able to carry out the day's lesson plan. For another, the other students do not have the experience of seeing the teacher engage in a control contest with a student. (Even if the teacher wins such a contest, it may have a negative effect on the teacher-student relationship; and if the teacher somehow "loses it," that definitely conveys a wrong message. Either outcome can be counter-productive with respect to a caring climate and a sense of community.) Finally, note that the teacher has not had a negative encounter with the disruptive student. Such encounters build up negative attitudes on both sides which can be counterproductive with respect to future teaching, learning, and behavior. Because there has been no negative encounter, the teacher is likely to find the student more receptive to discussing things than if the usual consequences have been administered (e.g., loss of privileges, sending the student to time-out or to the assistant principal). This makes it possible to explore with the student ways to make the classroom a mutually satisfying place to be and prevent future problems.

Opening Doors to Enhance and Personalize Staff Development

As with students, good personnel development involves meeting staff where they are and taking them to the next level

Personnel development is a critical element of improving school and classroom climate and staff effectiveness. New staff need as much on-the-job training and support as can be provided. All teachers need to learn more about how to enable learning in their classrooms. All school staff need to learn how to team in ways that enhance their effectiveness in supporting and learning from each other and improving student outcomes.

In opening the school and classroom doors to enhance support and staff development, the aim is to personalize capacity building. This requires selective assignments for teaming, mentoring, and other collegial activity. It involves identifying what an individual needs to learn at this point in time. Again, as with students, it is a matter of meeting staff members where they are and taking them to the next level. And, it involves more than just talking and "consulting". It requires modeling and guiding change (e.g., demonstrating and discussing new approaches, guiding initial practice and eventual implementation, and following-up to improve and refine).

Teaming with a mentor or a colleague provides a more intensive form of shared and personalized learning. Mentors and colleagues include teachers, specialist personnel (such as resource teachers and student support staff), and administrators. For teachers, optimal learning opportunities are those carried out in their classrooms and through visits to colleagues' classrooms. In this respect, instead of just making recommendations about what to do about student learning, behavior, and emotional problems, specialists need to be prepared to go into classrooms to model, guide, and team with teachers as they practice and implement new approaches. Videos and workshops on good practices can provide supplementary learning activities.

Opening school and classroom doors to teaming and collaboration is key to significantly improving inservice personnel development. And, of course, improving continuous staff development is essential to job satisfaction and enhancing a positive climate at school.

There is so much more to discuss about *Good Schools and Classrooms*. For example, in *Improving School Improvement*, see the following chapters:

3. Creating a Stimulating and Manageable Learning Environment
 4. Enhancing Engagement in Learning at School
 5. About Re-engaging Disconnected Students
 6. Managing Behavior at School: Beyond Overrelying on Control Strategies
 - Part II: Moving toward Personalized Instruction and Special Assistance**
 7. Providing More Special Assistance In the Classroom
 8. School Improvement & Personalizing Classroom Instruction
 9. Improving Special Assistance
 10. Providing More Special Assistance In the Classroom
 - Part III: New Directions for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching**
 11. Current Status of Student/Learning Supports
 12. Rethinking Schoolwide Student/Learning Supports
 13. Reworking the Leadership Infrastructure into a Three Component Framework
 14. Enhancing School and Community Collaboration
 15. Reframing Accountability for Whole Child Development and Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching
 - Part IV. Moving Forward**
 16. Toward Substantive and Sustainable Systemic Change
 17. Making it Happen
- Appended: Active, Engaged Learning Practices**

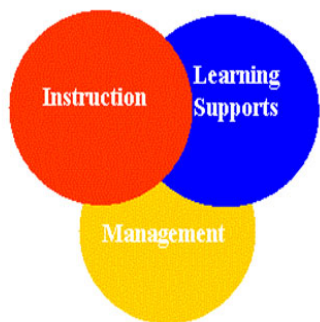
School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students.

But . . .

when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.

Carnegie Task Force on Education

**Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to
promoting whole child development, advancing social justice,
and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.**



For information about the
National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports
go to <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Invitation to Readers:

Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and mental health. This is a critical time for action. Send this on to others to encourage moving forward.

AND let us know about what you have to say about related matters.

Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

If you're not directly receiving our resources such as this quarterly e-journal, our monthly electronic newsletter (ENEWS), our weekly Practitioners' community of practice interchange, and other free resources, send a request to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

<p>The <i>Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports</i> operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.</p> <p>Center Staff: <i>Howard Adelman, Co-Director</i> <i>Linda Taylor, Co-Director</i> <i>Perry Nelson, Coordinator</i> <i>. . . and a host of students</i></p>
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