



# Social Context of the Classroom



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**Professional  
Learning**





Randi Weingarten  
PRESIDENT

Lorretta Johnson  
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Mary Cathryn Ricker  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

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# INTRODUCTION

Educators have known for decades that there's more to teaching and learning than what a test score can measure. Test scores should never be the sole measure of student achievement, educator effectiveness or school success. Passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015 has provided educators, parents and other stakeholders the opportunity to broaden the vision of student performance and school success to include academic and nonacademic indicators. In ESSA, nonacademic indicators are described as the following: school climate and safety, student engagement, educator engagement, access to and completion of advanced coursework, and postsecondary readiness.


With regard to school climate and safety, Title II, Title III and Title IV funding streams have been set aside for states and districts to develop structures that promote positive school climate:

- ▶ Provide multi-tiered systems of support and positive behavior interventions;
- ▶ Implement effective discipline policies and practices;
- ▶ Foster physical and psychological safety, including improving crisis prevention, intervention and response efforts;
- ▶ Include all staff in professional development to build internal capacity to support positive school climate; and
- ▶ Address the comprehensive social, emotional, mental and behavioral health and wellness of all students.

The last structure suggested directly supports John Dewey's philosophy of education dating back to the 19th century, contending that schools need to attend to all dimensions of human development in order for optimal learning and social development to take place (Dewey, 1956). Establishing and maintaining a positive school climate begins with building trust and

developing caring relationships with students. Students who believe teachers, peers and support personnel care about them are more likely to invest in school; engage actively in learning; and develop into cognitively, socially and emotionally healthy individuals (Blum, 2005). Placing a renewed focus on nonacademic indicators supports the excellence in education we strive for in all of our schools and for all of our students.

But what does this look like in action? What are the best approaches for implementing nonacademic supports and assessing student performance and school success? Two simple approaches would be to ask a student through the use of surveys and to enlist the expertise of those who spend the most time with our youth in schools every day. There is also a growing body of evidence-based research that decision-makers can draw upon to build the right systems of support in this area. This research brief attempts to codify some of these findings to help inform and support teaching quality and student learning as it relates to nonacademic competencies.



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# REVIEW OF RESEARCH

## Social Context Defined

The study of the social context within the classroom is a complex examination of relationships that are continually changing, influencing and being influenced by such factors as behaviors, emotions, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions. Research indicates that questions educators must raise about classroom practice include the following:

- ▶ Which factors create a social context in the classroom that contributes to high levels of student engagement?
- ▶ Which aspects of a positive social context can educators influence, and how?

In studies of relationships and their effects on behaviors such as those related to student achievement, the fine meaning of words can have notable significance. Research on verbal and nonverbal communication has shown that factors like tone and connotation (the suggestive implication of words

beyond their literal meaning), as well as denotation (literal meaning) can influence human relationships. For purposes of this research brief, the term “context” is used to describe the interrelated components within an environment that can have the effect of serving as change agents for each other. In contrast to environment, the value of the word “context” to our study is its capacity for focus on the factors of both interrelatedness and influence.

Within this definition of “context,” students, teachers and paraprofessionals are seen not only as working within the environment of a classroom but also as being part of that environment. All members of the classroom are working within and help to create the social context, and the nature of that context determines its members’ abilities to remain engaged in the learning process. A study of the social context of the classroom, therefore, is a study

of the human relationships that affect human efforts. The goal of this research brief is to address actions that contribute positively to student achievement.

## The Effects of Perceptions on Relationships

Studies of classrooms reveal the nature of human perceptions and their influences, as well as ways in which educators are effective in fostering student learning. The results of these findings indicate that more than academics are involved in the learning process. Notably, Weinstein in her study of research literature (1991), found the classroom itself to

be a social context in which students learn both academic and social lessons. These social lessons include learning about “appropriate behavior in various contexts, one’s self as a learner and one’s position in a status hierarchy, about relationships with students from other ethnic and racial groups, about the relative value of competition and cooperation, and about friendship.” Implications for these findings demonstrate that planning and implementing the education of students involves educating the whole child within a constantly changing social context where each individual influences, and is influenced by, all other individuals.

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## Students' Perceptions of Teaching and Teachers

A first step in the study of the sociology of the classroom is to examine the perceptions that participants hold in the education environment. In fact, researchers such as Wittrock (1986) maintain that students' perceptions of teaching are what actually influence student learning and achievement, noting that "teaching" influences student thinking, which in turn mediates learning and achievement, whether or not the results are what the teacher intended.

## Contrasts in Perceptions and Their Effects

Examples of the significance of social influences on students and their teachers can be found in the results of several studies of the attitudes each group has toward the other, as well as effects of student-teacher and student-student interactions.

In a yearlong Claremont Graduate School study (Poplin and Weeres, 1992) of life inside

four representative public schools in Southern California—including elementary, middle and high schools—students and teachers both identified human relationships as being central to the problems faced by schools, particularly the relationships between teachers and students. The Claremont research data strongly suggested that the problems of schooling—such as low academic performance, completion rates, and difficulties in teaching quality—were the consequences of the deeper issues of human relationships.

For example, positive feelings about schools were closely tied to positive feelings about individuals who were caring, respectful, honest, open and sensitive. Negative feelings about schools were associated with the human elements of "fear, name calling, threats of or incidents of violence, as well as a sense of depression and hopelessness."

## Teacher vs. Student Perceptions of School and Relationships

The Claremont study clearly revealed the different viewpoints from which teachers and students approached school.

Teachers reported that they were motivated to enter teaching by their desire to give something to young people. Students' feelings about school were dominated by their concerns about relationships between students and teachers. Students' perceptions of teachers varied by age. Younger students saw their teachers as more caring than older students reported them to be. Claremont's study also found that teachers saw themselves to be more caring than students perceived them to be. Students and teachers alike felt they cared for one another, but each group also had differing definitions of "caring," which teachers saw as "listening, consoling and working hard." Students saw "caring" as exhibited concretely when teachers told them they cared, "laughed with them, trusted them, asked them or

told them personal things, were honest, wrote them letters, called home to say nice things, touched them with pats, hugs, handshakes, high fives, or otherwise recognized them as individuals."

The studies of Schmuck and Schmuck (1989) give further insight into relationships between teachers and students, and raise implications for what has been termed "social climate" and its effect on achievement in the classroom. Their 1989 survey of rural students' attitudes echoed a similar 1963 study of suburban and urban adolescents' attitudes. Like their earlier counterparts, students in 1989 were focused primarily on interpersonal and social-emotional concerns. Describing their teachers, students were concerned with:

- ▶ Teachers not getting to know the students;
- ▶ Teachers lacking interest in teaching and youth; and
- ▶ Teachers showing partiality for particular students.

Students' perceptions of teachers extended to establishing a division between what they believed comprised good and bad teaching. Students saw good teaching as:

- ▶ Giving students respect;
- ▶ Being patient and easy to know;
- ▶ Making subjects interesting by involving students in activities;
- ▶ Using demonstrations;
- ▶ Having a sense of humor;
- ▶ Listening to students; and
- ▶ Making changes in class to help students learn.

Bad teaching was perceived as being much the opposite of the previous list of qualities. Students saw bad teaching as:

- ▶ Having low respect for students;
- ▶ Lacking patience and humor;
- ▶ Treating students as if they were stupid;
- ▶ Being too harsh or too permissive a disciplinarian;

- ▶ Not caring about individuals and not being helpful;
- ▶ Not explaining things well enough for students to understand, forcing students to have to learn on their own; and
- ▶ Having favorites.

**Notably, students showed much greater concern about their relationships with teachers than with tests, curriculum or homework.**

# WAYS OF SHOWING CARE AND RESPECT

- ▶ Be Welcoming/Inclusive
- ▶ Be Sensitive to Concerns
- ▶ Be Open to Student Input/Autonomy
- ▶ Be Fair
- ▶ Be Real
- ▶ Understand Adolescent Culture
- ▶ Hold Class Meetings



## So What Can Educators Do?

A study by Cothran, Kulinna and Garrahy (2003) underscores the key role that positive student-teacher relationships play in classroom management. Interviews with 182 adolescents (grades 6-12), representing diverse socio-economic, cultural and academic backgrounds, revealed students' high regard for teachers who listen well, treat students with respect, and exhibit caring. The following strategies are drawn from their study.

### Be Welcoming/Inclusive

- ▶ Learn student names and correct pronunciation.
- ▶ Be aware of your own biases and stereotypes about certain groups or individuals.
- ▶ Learn about cultural origins, behaviors, languages and discourse patterns.
- ▶ Be culturally literate.
- ▶ Learn a few phrases in the native languages of English language learners.

### Be Sensitive to Concerns

- ▶ Discipline quietly, privately and with respect.
- ▶ Observe mood changes.
- ▶ Take concerns seriously if students confide in you.
- ▶ Be aware of anxiety or difficulty with course material.
- ▶ Look for areas of competency.

### Be Open to Student Input/ Autonomy

- ▶ Elicit discussion about classroom expectations.
- ▶ Allow for student input in grouping decisions (at times).
- ▶ Find out how each student learns best by using surveys and inventories.
- ▶ Allow students to create assignments, choose their own topic for research papers, or construct questions during a lesson.
- ▶ Teach students the art of self-reflection.



### Be Fair

- ▶ Set criteria for grades and expected behavior.
- ▶ Acknowledge individuality and student differences.
- ▶ Teach tolerance.
- ▶ Model traits you want students to exhibit (respect, kindness, tolerance).

### Be Real

- ▶ Share appropriate personal information (family, childhood memories, hobbies, vacations).
- ▶ Celebrate your own cultural background as well as the students' cultures.
- ▶ Admit when you don't know something or make a mistake.

### Understand Adolescent Culture

- ▶ Gain knowledge of pop music, fashion and current movies.
- ▶ Stay up to date on technology.
- ▶ Use technology in lessons (webcasts, blogs, Twitter).

### Hold Class Meetings

Using class meetings at the beginning of the day or class period reinforces the importance of dialogue and discussion to solve problems. Students learn valuable social and ethical lessons as well as skills in analyzing and negotiating. Class meetings also foster intellectual development, trust and communication skills.

- ▶ Guidelines for Class Meetings
  - Establish clear expectations.
  - Make sure everyone has an opportunity to share.
  - Teach social skills for listening respectfully.
  - Discuss issues, not people.

- ▶ Components and Procedures
  - Greeting
    - Have students sit in a circle and greet one another by saying hello, shaking hands or giving a high-five.
    - To create an inclusive atmosphere, teach students how to greet one another in different languages.
- ▶ Sharing
  - Provide concrete examples for younger students and visual aids for older students to spark discussion.
  - Generate a list of questions for “focused sharing” to reinforce content material or behavioral/social objectives.
- ▶ Group Activity
  - Use group activities to build team spirit and a sense of community.
  - Have students role-play, use storytelling, puppets, puzzles and choral reading of poems/songs that correlate to the meeting’s main topic or objective.
- ▶ News and Announcements
  - Create an announcement chart that includes class and school events.
  - Present an academic challenge to develop and reinforce language, math and/or other academic skills.

# CONCLUSION

Developing and sustaining caring, respectful, relationships with students is a crucial component in creating a positive classroom climate and culture. Once these relationships are established, students are more apt to engage in cooperative behaviors, take risks and accept challenges knowing they will be supported. Educators also need to be supported in their efforts to address the social, emotional, mental and behavioral needs of their students. High-quality professional development and professional learning structures are the avenues in which school communities can build internal capacity to support a positive school climate. For more information and support, contact Melanie Hobbs at [mhobbs@aft.org](mailto:mhobbs@aft.org).



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American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO  
555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.  
Washington, DC 20001  
202-879-4400  
[www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org)

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