We’re Not All Average: Reconceptualizing School Climate to Acknowledge Diverse Student Experiences in Schools

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The Research Alliance for New York City Schools
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About the Research Alliance

Housed at NYU Steinhardt, the Research Alliance for New York City Schools is an independent, nonpartisan research center that conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the City’s public schools. We strive to advance excellence and equity in education by providing evidence about the policies and practices that promote students’ development and academic success.
We’re Not All Average: Reconceptualizing School Climate to Acknowledge Diverse Student Experiences in Schools

How students feel about their schools—their perception of the safety, inclusiveness, rigor, and level of collaboration in the learning environment—is an increasingly important part of our conversations about school quality and improvement. A wide variety of research suggests that school climate contributes to students’ academic engagement, growth, and success (Bryk et al., 2010; MacNeil et al., 2009; Ripski and Gregory, 2009; Osher et al., 2006). Positive school climates can also make schools more joyful and functional places to work (Hoy & Miskel, 2013; Kraft, Marinell & Yee, 2016).

For these reasons, measures of school climate have become central to school accountability systems across the country, endorsed in federal education law (Kostyo et al., 2018) and documented in regular reports to the public. School climate measures typically rely on student, teacher, and parent surveys about a wide range of experiences in the school—perceived safety, trust among community members, experiences of bullying or discrimination—which are then aggregated and averaged to characterize the climate of the school as a whole. But analyses of these surveys also suggest that members of the same school may have fundamentally different experiences of the school environment, and that average climate scores may not be representative of the entire student body. Students from structurally oppressed communities, in particular, report worse experiences with school climate than their peers from more advantaged communities (Buckley et al., 2003; Fan et al., 2011; Way et al., 2007).

In NYC, which has had a school climate survey since 2007, growing concerns around equity have prompted district officials to revamp the reporting mechanisms to capture some of the differences in students’ perceptions of their school. This December will mark the first public release of school survey data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, grade, gender, English learner status, and disability status.

Using the NYC School Survey, we begin to tackle some of these issues in our new report, *We’re Not All Average*, which we hope will be the first in a series of studies addressing school climate in more individualized ways and exploring aspects of equity in perceptions of school climate. We start by statistically testing how much the measures tell us about distinctive qualities of a school versus how much they tell us about individual students within a school. We then examine one particular construct in greater depth, exploring how perceptions of Student-Teacher Trust (see textbox below) vary based on race/ethnicity, gender, and grade level, both across the City and within schools.
Student-Teacher Trust measures the degree to which students feel they can trust their teachers. Students were asked, on a scale (1-4) from “Strongly disagree” to Strongly agree,” how much they agree with the statements:

1. There is at least one adult in the school that I can confide in.
2. My teachers will always listen to students’ ideas.
3. My teachers treat me with respect.
4. When my teachers tell me not to do something, I know they have a good reason.
5. My teachers always do what they say they will do.

Key Findings from the Report

School climate scores are more reflective of students’ individual experiences than they are of consistent organizational characteristics. Across all measures of school climate, we found much more consistency in how individual students perceived the climate over time than in how students within the same school perceived the climate. These findings suggest that while school climate scores do tell us something about schools as organizations (especially in cases where the average scores are very low or very high, compared to other schools), they probably tell us more about students’ individual experiences there. In fact, the analyses show that the measures of school climate are three to five times better at reflecting individual characteristics than they are shared organizational characteristics.

As an illustration of the variation in school climate measures, Figure ES-1, below, shows the range of individual student scores in NYC middle schools for one construct: Student-Teacher Trust. Each vertical line represents a school, with the orange dot indicating the average trust rating of all the students within that school. The top purple dot represents the 90th percentile, or very positive responses, within the school. The bottom green dot represents the 10th percentile, or very negative responses, within the school. The schools are ordered from lowest to highest school-wide average. The figure shows that in most schools, there is quite a lot of variation in how students perceive Student-Teacher Trust. Nearly all of the schools have students who rate trust very positively (above 3.5 on the four-point scale), and most schools have students who gave trust a relatively low rating (below 2.5). In short, while the school-level average provides some information about differences among schools, it does not paint a complete picture of the climate in any given school. Clearly, not all individuals in a given school have the “average” experience.
When we examined the citywide scores for one survey construct—Student-Teacher Trust—by student background, we found that ratings were generally high for all groups of students, but that there was also a lot of variation within these groups. Average responses for all race/ethnicity, gender, and grade-level groups mostly clustered between 2.5 and 3.5 out of 4, with average scores close to 3. However, we also found that individual perceptions of Student-Teacher Trust varied substantially, with very high ratings, as well as very low ratings, in each of the groups. These findings indicate that while schools are generally doing a good job of promoting trust between teachers and students, there are opportunities to improve school climate by supporting students with particularly low perceptions of the environment.

Within the same schools, we found small but significant differences in perceptions of Student-Teacher Trust by race/ethnicity and grade level, and, to a lesser extent, gender. Black students, in particular, had significantly lower perceptions of Student-Teacher Trust than their peers. Black students’ perceptions of Student-Teacher Trust were consistently lower—across the City, within schools, and at both middle and high school levels—than students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds (see the textbox on page 4 for an illustration of this dynamic using one particular Student-Teacher Trust item). Gender differences, by contrast, were relatively small and more pronounced in middle schools than in high schools, with young men rating their perceptions of Student-Teacher Trust slightly lower than young women. We also found some intriguing differences by grade level, with students in their first years of middle and high school, 6th and 9th grade, respectively, reporting much higher perceptions of the school climate than students in later grades.
Exploring How One Dimension of Student-Teacher Trust (Respect) Varies by Race/Ethnicity

Figure ES-2, below, displays a striking example of how the perceptions of Student-Teacher Trust among middle school students across the City vary by race/ethnicity. The figure shows the percentage of middle school students agreeing with one of the Student-Teacher Trust items: “My teachers treat me with respect,” as captured by a 3 (“Agree”) or 4 (“Strongly Agree”) response on the survey. The good news is that across the board the vast majority of students feel that their teachers respect them. Even so, there are notable differences by race/ethnicity. Asian students are most likely to feel respected by their teachers, with 90 percent responding to the item with a 3 or a 4. White and Latinx students tend to agree with the item at slightly lower rates, about 88 percent in each case. Black students, by contrast, are much less likely to report feeling respected by their teachers than are their peers of any other race, with just under 82 percent agreeing with the item on respect. This means that a full 18 percent of Black students—almost one in five—feel their teachers do not treat them with respect.

Figure ES-2: Average Percent of Middle School Students Who Feel Their Teachers Treat Them With Respect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage Agreeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>81.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>88.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>88.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Figure shows average percent of each subgroup responding with a 3 (“Agree”) or 4 (“Strongly Agree”) to the item “My teachers treat me with respect” on the NYC School Survey. Reported rate is an average of all middle school responses from the 2015-2016 academic year through the 2018-2019 academic year. Total number of student responses for the 4 years is N = 498,504.

This figure raises important questions about what is driving the differences in students’ perceptions of respect. Racial segregation by school might mean that Black students are clustered systematically in schools with more dysfunctional student-teacher relationships. It’s also possible that differential treatment of Black students, including racially biased discipline practices, create more negative relationships between young people and teachers, regardless of school quality. Our report attempts to tease apart some of these complex dynamics by looking specifically at how individual student characteristics are linked to different perceptions of Student-Teacher Trust, after controlling for the schools in which they are enrolled.
Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

Some notable implications and opportunities for research, practice, and policy follow from our findings.

From a policy perspective, this report provides further support for changes in school climate reporting. While the school-level averages help us identify schools whose environments are substantially and consistently less welcoming than others—as well as schools with especially positive environments that may be able to share promising practices—our findings also suggest a need to understand the wide range of perceptions students have about their school. We believe that the NYCDOE’s recent disaggregation of survey data by student characteristic (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, IEP and English learner status) is a promising first step in understanding how to better serve all students.

From a practice perspective, it is important to identify students who have particularly negative perceptions of the school climate and to respond to them in more targeted ways. The racial inequities that emerged in our results, for example, indicate a need for interventions addressing relationships between Black students and their teachers. The anti-bias training already adopted by the DOE is aimed in part at improving teachers’ capacity to develop positive relationships with their students, but more research is needed to understand the impact of these efforts. Importantly, however, our findings also suggest that there is wide variation in how Black students—and students from other race/ethnicity groups—perceive student-teacher trust. And there are still many unanswered questions about the particular features of schools that are linked to better, more equitable experiences of school climate.

In terms of future research, these findings raise a number of questions about the precursors to perceptions of school climate, as well as the effects these perceptions might have on later outcomes. To what extent are school climate perceptions shaped by experiences with school discipline, for instance, or by tracking into lower academic streams, or by particularly low attendance rates? To what extent do individual perceptions of school climate predict individual academic growth or social-emotional learning? These directions for research have not been prominent in the literature, in part, because of how we have conceptualized climate primarily as an organizational phenomenon.

We see this report as a first step toward an expanded research agenda on school climate. It is also, perhaps more importantly, an opportunity to align our research with values that are increasingly central to our work in the nation’s largest school district: acknowledging the diversity of individual students’ experiences and increasing the visibility of inequitable conditions across the school system as a whole.
References


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