

Unpacking School Culture and School Climate: A Critical Review and Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The literature identifies four sets of factors—learner-specific, familial, school-based, and external/environmental—as pivotal to successful school leadership, teacher effectiveness, and student academic achievement. This article zeroes in on two school-based constructs: school culture and school climate. Though interrelated and both are vital to school success, they are distinct, representing different dimensions of the school environment. Therefore, conflating them obscures their unique contributions and hampers improvement efforts. This critical review analyses their definitions, characteristics of each, delineates their differences using the Hall's Cultural Iceberg Model, and examines the synergistic effects of aligning them. The analysis concludes that many educational reforms in Nigeria fail because they target the observable climate or observable cultural aspects without addressing the deeper, and enduring foundational elements of school culture. Consequently, the paper recommends that for policies and school-level interventions to succeed, it is essential for government to apply a holistic approach that integrates and addresses both culture and climate in order to achieve sustainable improvement in our school system.

Keywords: Academic achievement, Climate, Culture, School

INTRODUCTION

The success of the trio - the school head, the effectiveness and efficacy of teachers, and the academic performance and achievement of students at any level, has been attributed to a complex interplay of multifaceted factors, commonly categorized into four groups namely: learner-specific, familial, school – based, and external / social (Walberg, Fraser & Welch, 1986; Cao, Mithra & Aravind, 2024; Costa et al, 2024). The learner specific factors include intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), self-control (Duckworth et al, 2007; Jensen et al, 2019; Hong et al, 2021), persistence through challenges (Dweck, 2006), cognitive abilities (Schneider & McGrew, 2018; Luo et al, 2023; Salvo - Gacrido et al, 2023), and physical and mental health (Walker, 2017; Schutt & Malouff, 2021; Earl et al, 2023; Basileo et al, 2024).

The familial factors include the home environment which encompasses parental educational background, socioeconomic status, parental involvement and support practices (Boonket et al, 2018; Mudrak et al, 2020; Zhang et al, 2020; Zhao & Zhao, 2022; Ozyildirim, 2024; Chen, Liu, Wijawa & Cao, 2025). The school and educational factors category includes teacher quality and teaching, curriculum quality, strong leadership, guidance and counselling, adequacy of available resources and the central foci of this paper: school culture and climate (Costa et al, 2024). The external and environmental factors are the broader community influences such as local geography, housing conditions, employment opportunity, employment

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pressures, peer influence, neighbourhood safety, work and financial pressures, and community resources and support (Evans, 2006; Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Kindermann, 2016; Tiaanto, 2024).

While all categories are significant determinants of learner's academic achievement, this paper focuses on two critical school-based constructs - school culture and school climate. Although mutually connected or interconnected, these concepts represent very recognizable distinct dimensions of school setting and students' academic life. In spite of this fact, there is the persistent tendency in both literature and practice to use these terms interchangeably as if they are one and same obscuring their unique roles and undermines the effectiveness of school improvement efforts.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Drawing on an extensive review of literature and over forty years of combined experience as educators, researchers, and university administrators, this paper argues that treating school culture and climate as distinct and complimentary constructs is essential for successful educational leadership. The authors therefore offer their practical insight into these two sister terms.

PROBLEM OF THE STATEMENT

The two terms, these authors firmly believe, must be treated as distinct but complimentary because, without appreciating this distinction, there is danger in such unification. School administrators who wish to introduce positive change without taking fundamental differences into consideration, without appreciating the distinction, will most likely not succeed in their efforts, and will at best achieve superficial results. Any government policy or initiative in Nigeria targeted at proffering solutions to school building problems that looks only at one of the phenomena will only be treating the surface of the problem. To succeed, the school administration needs to address both the school culture and climate holistically.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Consequently, this paper critically examines the definitions of school culture and climate, elucidates their characteristic differences and interrelationships, and discuss the synergistic potential that arises from addressing both concepts holistically.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The word school is a term common to both concepts. The term school, as it is used in this paper, refers to an established place or institution designated and dedicated to providing learning environment at which teaching is given to learners (children, young and old people) under the direction of facilitators called teachers. To better explain and understand the concept of school culture, it is important to understand first what the term culture means. Culture has been considered as a complex and multifaceted concept (Caceros, 2024) and long recognized to be notoriously difficult to define (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Apter, 2001). The result is that up till date it lacks a singular generally accepted definition even among anthropologists and sociologists where the word has its root.

Among the earlier authorities in the study of culture (Taylor, 1974; Hofstede, 1980; Shein, 1984; Deal & Peterson, 1993; Robbins & Alvy, 1995), one foundational definition widely cited is, Shein's (1984) definition, describing culture comprehensively as "the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problem of external adaptation and internal integration..." While comprehensive, this definition is considered as abstract as it does not entail the basic elements of culture. Some authors have interestingly described culture simply as "*the way we do things around here*"

(Williams et al, 1994), or "*the way of life of groups of people*", meaning "*the right way they do things around here*" (Dillion, 2025), or "*the right way in which problems should be understood in the organization*" (Lundy & Cowling, 1996).

Taylor's (1974) definition of culture is a simple but contains the generally accepted basic elements of culture today. He defined culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. For the purpose of this paper, we define culture as the holistic combination of a group's learned and shared ways of life, including customs and beliefs, values, traditions, norms, symbols, assumptions, art, rituals and practices that create cohesion, identity, and a framework for living and working (Wikipedia, 2025; The Cambridge English Dictionary, 2025).

School Culture Defined

No school is an island of its own as every school is situated in a social milieu - a community. The school also reflects the culture and sub-cultures of the environment. Like culture, school culture is also an incredibly broad concept and has no one universally accepted definition. As a result, there are also different definitions and those that are generally acceptable entail basically the elements of culture in the school settings. Applying this to the educational setting, we define school culture as "the set of shared norms, values and beliefs, rituals, traditions, ceremonies, symbols and stories, customs, vocabulary, codes of behaviour and unwritten expectations that are unconsciously absorbed over time by staff and students and directly affect everything that goes on inside its walls (The Open University, 2025; Peterson, 2002; Deal and Peterson, 1998). It is often described as the school's "hidden curriculum" (Pollard & Triggs, 1977), "inner reality" (Deal & Peterson, 1993), or its "*persona*" / "personality" (Cordeiro, 2021).

This "inner reality" reflects what the school community truly cares about, what it celebrates, what they talk about, and what it is willing to spend time doing (Robbins & Alvy, 1995). As an entity situated within a broader community, a school's culture is invariably shaped by the larger social and cultural milieu in which it exists. These unwritten rules rooted in historical practices and collective narratives are passed down through generations of staff and students and make up the foundation of school's social and emotional ethos (Deal & Peterson, 1998; Cordeiro, 2021).

The Characteristics of School Culture

From the foregoing definitions, school culture can be considered as an applied concept involving the application of the elements of culture to the school setting. Although school cultures vary in complexity across school districts, states, countries or regions, there are certain key characteristics common to all school cultures. These include:

1. Basic assumptions: These are fundamental statements taken as true, based on experience that help to interpret situations and guide actions and behaviour.
2. Enduring shared core values and beliefs: These are standards and convictions that the people, staff and students, of the school hold dearly and in common.
3. Social norms: refers to unwritten rules and collective expectations for behaviour and interactions within the school. These include respect for elders, adhering to rules and regulations, greetings, maintaining personal space, waiting in line to be attended to etc.
4. Habits and social behaviour: These include daily habits of holding morning assembly and attending classes every school day, avoid smoking in class or in assembly.
5. Traditions and rituals: These refer to daily or weekly routines of back-to-school rituals or annual and school wide ceremonies. These are morning assemblies, cultural day, recognition and award ceremonies, school motors or anthems, morning announcements,

sports days, labour days, inter-house sports, customs, which are shared practices built on traditions and values.

6. Symbols: refers to ideas, objects or items that are meaningful to the people of the school. Examples are the school logo, mascot, colour etc. that promote a sense of community and identity.
7. Artifacts: School artifacts refer to student, staff and administrators' created objects to demonstrate learning, document practices or preserve history of the school. They include dress codes, school uniforms, pattern of speech, lesson plans, assessment tools, posters, old school desks, ceremonial artifacts, paintings and other art works.
8. Physical design of the school buildings: Classroom layouts, laboratories and library, architectural designs, school plants, playground and other common areas, arrangements of desks etc. significantly shape the culture of the school. This physical environment of the school has been referred to as a "Silent Curriculum" that profoundly influences how students learn, teachers teach, and communities connect (Stebbins, 2025).
9. It contains visible or physical environment (above waterline) and invisible dimensions (beneath the waterline) as can be seen from the iceberg theory of culture (Figure I).
10. It is transmitted through socialization and enculturation - contact with other cultures and therefore adoptive; it is learned.
11. It is relatively rigid and therefore resistance to change.
12. The learned shared beliefs, traditions, values, customs, expectations, symbols, art, language, rituals, norms combine to influence behaviour.

From the above analysis, it could be argued that school culture is part of any school and the success or failure can be attributed to the nature of the school's culture; it is either favourable or positive and promotes effective learning through collaboration, support and good leadership, or corrosive, toxic or unfavourable hindering effective learning through conflict, uncooperative behaviour among staff, coupled with poor school leadership and lack of motivation, satisfaction and lack of commitment to work.

It is therefore not surprising that the factors that individually and in combination have been identified as crucial in influencing school culture are school leadership, staff, students, the community, school practices, and history and traditions of the school (Watson, 2001; Alvesson, 2005; Raudys, 2025).

School Climate

Schools differ in culture, so also in their climate, hence school climate is often regarded as a multidimensional concept. In spite of the school climatic differences, there are four common essential dimensions: teaching and learning, the institutional environmental dimension which is physical surroundings, the safety dimension which consists of social and emotional security including physical safety, and the social dimension which refers to respect for diversity, relationships and social support. School climate plays an important role in influencing the wellbeing of staff, happiness of learners in schools and community (Raphael, 2025), as it permeates into the overall psychological makeup of students through teacher - student interactions, peer interactions, classroom experiences, and parent - teacher communications. School climate is recognized not only as malleable but also as a complex phenomenon and difficult to define precisely (Freiberg, 1998).

Hoy and Miskel (2013), who are major authority in school climate, provided one of the acceptable definitions. They see school climate as enduring quality of the school environment that stakeholders experienced or perceived when they enter the school. It is the quality of interaction among principals, teachers and students (John and Taylor, 2005). The NSCC (2025) defined school climate as the "immediate emotional feeling, or "vibe" of the physical atmosphere experienced by stakeholders of the school, and attitudes shaped by perception of

safety, relationship and academic expectation." However, Loukas (2007) describes it poignantly when he pointed out that "when you enter the school environment, some schools feel friendly, welcoming, different, inviting and supportive, while others feel exclusionary and even unsafe. It is this feelings, perceptions and attitudes that are elicited by the school's environment that are referred to as school climate".

School Climate is thus the "current atmosphere" or "mood" or "feel" of the school's visible environment as perceived at any given time; how it feels to be there. It can fluctuate overtime due to factors such changes in leadership, student demographics or community events.

It should be noted that two or more persons visiting the same school at the same time may not necessarily experience it the same way due to variability in individual perception of the environment.

Characteristics of School Climate

As a multidimensional concept, school climate has been confirmed by overwhelming research as an integration of five dimensions or characteristics or elements. The tangible key indicators are grouped into: safety, interpersonal relationship, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and leadership (the National School Climate Centre (NSCC) (2022), The U.S. Department of Education (DOE) (2022), Wang & Degol (2016); Thapa et al, 2013). The key characteristics or elements are:

1. **Safety:** This is universally considered as fundamental to effective teaching and learning. The students and staff are expected to feel physically safe from physical hazards and be socially and emotionally safe to learn and work. This implies there should be enforced rules against violence, order, bullying, harassment, humiliation, discrimination, and trust and a belief that the adults will intervene to maintain peace and harmony in case of a breach of the rules, and should a problem arise (Wikipedia 2025, NSCC, 2022; CASEL, 2020; Thapa et al, 2013).
2. **Interpersonal Relationship:** This refers to the quality of relationships, empathy, trust, respect, open and honest communication between members of a school such as student - student, student - teachers, students - administrators, and teachers and administrators and relationship with other stakeholders of the school community. These stakeholders support, trust, and care for each other and a two-way communication with external stakeholders. This relationship has a critical influence on school climate (Hoy & Tarter, 1997; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Wang & Degol, 2016).
3. **Teaching and Learning:** This refers to the actual instructional technique used by teachers in their classrooms. The domain focused on high academic expectations and support (Lee & Smith, 1999), student engagement and staff development, and a sense of fairness and equity in disciplinary practices (Gregory et al, 2016). These strategies influence students' motivation and their involvement in the classroom, which in turn affect their academic performance (Wikipedia, 2025).
4. **Institutional / Environmental:** This refers to the physical and structural environment and shared vision which supports other dimensions. It includes physical layout of the classrooms, size of classrooms and other buildings or infrastructure and availability of educational resources. (Wang & Degol, 2016; US. DOE, 2022).
5. **Leadership and Efficacy:** This refers to the role of the school head in communicating his vision clearly and being supportive of the teaching and learning process. It is the principal's ability to successfully introduce and sustain reforms or improvement in the school (Vezzuto, 2011). For example, by painting the walls of school buildings, and introducing and enforcing anti - bullying rules and programmes can bring about improvement in the school climate in a short-term.

Other features include:

6. **Psychological Characteristics:** This is the psychological and dynamic element of school climate. It is dynamic and perceptual as it reflects the current "mood", "tone", "feeling" or "vibes" such as staff morale and job satisfaction after a desirable change is approved, adopted and implemented (Manning & Saddlemire, 1996; Marshall, 2004).
7. **Malleability:** School climate is easily susceptible to change. For example, the morale, motivation and satisfaction of teachers are increased with acceptable increase in remuneration and other allowances, or a good principal with good leadership style, involving teachers in decision making in matters that affect them.

Differentiating School Culture and School Climate

Differentiating school culture and school climate is the core of this critical analysis and argument. The differences have been identified and presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Differentiating School Culture and School Climate

Feature	School Culture	School Climate
Origin	Anthropology and Sociology	Psychology
Focus	Underlying values, beliefs, norms	Immediate atmosphere experience
Nature	Shared assumptions, values, beliefs, norms, ceremonies, rituals, unwritten rules, stories etc. that shape the daily operations of the school	Current perception of the characteristics of the school life – the “feel”, “mood”, “tone”, “vibes” and attitude of the school.
Depth	More stable, relatively rigid and enduring aspect of the school environment. It is the <u>personality/persona</u> , the DNA of the school; it is the bedrock of the school upon which school climate rests. It is resistant to change.	It is less rigid, less stable, more malleable and fluctuates overtime; e.g. changes by leadership and leadership style or behaviour.
Visibility	Relatively invisible, less tangible, underlying, unconscious, deeper elements of the school.	More surface, observable, visible environment; more at conscious level.
Duration	Long term to change or reform; more difficult to change and this gives distinctive identity to the school.	Short term to change/reform; easily changed
Intervention for Improvement	Focuses on shaping shared values, beliefs and norms (which are more difficult to change).	Focuses on perception of the physical infrastructure, social – emotional safety, interpersonal relationships, the teaching environment and environmental adequacy.
Assessment/ Measurement	Measured through interviews and focus group discussion; assessed through qualitative and ethnographic techniques.	Measured through observations and surveys i.e. measured through quantitative data.
Ontological Distinction	It resides in the realm of shared values, beliefs and norms; it is collective unconscious; the bedrock “of how things are done here”.	Exists foundationally in the realm of perception and immediate experience.
Formation	Transmitted/acquired through socialization and enculturation-contact; learned shared values, beliefs, traditions, norms, custom.	By observing the interactions and behaviours within the school buildings and outside (the buildings)
Foundational	Culture forms the foundation for school culture (over a period of time). It is the House.	Less foundational more latent/overt. It is the “mood” or “feeling” in the house.

Table 1 captures the differences between school culture and school climate. To make more explicit the definitions and distinction of the two complementary terms, however, would require a concise description of the cultural iceberg model (Figure 1) developed by Edward T. Hall in 1976. This metaphorical representation portrays culture as an iceberg where only a small portion (the tip) is above the water surface and greater aspect lies beneath the surface or the water level. It seems culture, therefore, has various layers that can be classified into surface culture and hidden culture.

The surface culture is considered as the visible aspects above the waterline. It consists of visible behaviours such as gestures, rituals, customs, dressing, food items, and communication style. Other tangible elements of a culture include artifacts, architecture, technology, symbols, branding and policies. The hidden culture, as the name suggests, refers to the aspects below the waterline. These are shared values, beliefs, tradition, norms, unwritten rules, trust, and expectations which are the implicit assumptions.



Figure 1

Source: Adapted from Edward Halls 1976 culture as Iceberg

From the Hall's (1976) cultural framework, one thing that is obvious is that when a visitor walks through the gate into a school premises for the first time, what strikes him most is the buildings, the layout of the school, the way staff and students dress, the interactions, the attitudes of respect or no respect, the language and communication and the tidiness of the school compound (which affects his impressions and “feel”). These visible features of the environment make impression through the senses and this experience of the school is interpreted as a favourable or unforgivable atmosphere for learning.

It is this perception, "feel", "tone", "vibe" or “mood”, the “weather” of the school that is referred to as the school climate. Thus, flowing from the cultural iceberg conceptual framework, school climate could be considered as the perception or "feel" resulting from the conscious observation of the surface/visible characteristics of School Culture and culture per se. They are therefore quiet differences and should be so considered.

The Interrelationship and Synergy between School Culture and Climate

School culture and climate are intertwined, influencing each other. Both concepts are shaped by shared experiences, values, traditions, norms, rituals, expectations and standards of the school community, including students, teachers, support staff, and school administrators. A favourable or positive school culture can contribute to a positive school climate and vice versa. Further, both concepts can influence the behaviour and attitudes of students, teachers, and staff, shaping the overall school environment. Finally, both school culture and school climate can impact student motivation, overall well-being, student learning and engagement and academic achievement, as well as teacher satisfaction and retention. Thus, both elements are essential in creating a positive and productive learning environment in schools.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing analysis, school culture and school climate are distinct although are interrelated. To understand school culture, school administrator and policy makers must go beyond the perception of the surface features to having knowledge of the underneath hidden elements. Except the differences are understood, meaningful reforms would not be sustained because the school climate is to a large extent determined by the hidden more rugged, rigid and more difficult to change elements. Understanding the differences between the two concepts is useful to policy - makers and school heads in their assessment of school needs and efforts to develop and implement appropriate actions to achieve targeted education projects and reforms. Except officials are conscious of the differences, reforms will only scratch the surface of the problems they are intended to solve and are bound to fail. We therefore, posit that any government policy or initiative aimed at sustainable school improvement must engage with both the deep – seated, enduring aspects of culture and the immediate, perceptual aspects of school climate.

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