

## ***Imperative of a Safe School Climate for Effective Teaching and Learning Outcomes in an Era of Insecurity in Nigeria***

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### **Abstract**

*School and schooling have already achieved ubiquity in human society. However, learning psychologists, and pedagogy experts are extensively researching to determine the pattern, environment and circumstances by which an individual most consistently experience and demonstrate learning. Environments that support learning or school climate is one of such areas attracting robust research. A good, safe and secured school/classroom climate guarantees effective teaching and learning in schools. School climates in Nigeria has been made fragile by societal ills that afflict schools; then came the COVID-19 pandemic that affected schools worldwide, and led to their closure for a long time. Currently, the Nigerian school system is facing an on-going threat from insecurity. This paper explores dimensions of school climate and the impact of its disruption on teachers, students and schools. The authors finally propose ways to stem the tide of insecurity in schools and restore them back to their overarching goal of preparing manpower to build a safe, secured and learning friendly society.*

**Keywords:** school, climate, teaching, learning, insecurity

### **Introduction**

There is a global call for educational systems to be revitalized and repositioned after the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in the closure of schools at all levels for a protracted length of time. Even before this global shutting of schools and schooling due to the pandemic, calls for reform in the educational system were already going on in Nigeria and elsewhere. The different agitations were directed at arresting what is generally referred to as “the falling standard of education” or the poor teaching and learning outcomes that now produce or turn out large numbers of learners who can no longer produce the results of schooling commensurate to the huge investments being made in education (public and private schools alike). Learners are adjudged to perform poorly when outcomes of learning are required from them. Many concerned stakeholders believe that the entire education enterprise needs to be revitalized and repositioned to become more productive and result-oriented in order to produce the needed manpower for Nigeria’s development and technological advancement. Oyekan (2019) captured the agitations succinctly when he stated that the Nigerian school system is increasingly faced with the practical task of

justifying its relevance, performance and effectiveness in this critical period of social, economic and political stress in the country.

Inyang-Abia (2014), commenting on the hues and cries about this so-called fallen standard of education in Nigeria, first pointed out that this trend is not limited to Nigeria as a country, but is global in nature. He characterized the trend as “the global decrease in learners’ performance value”. He further decries the fact that schools and teachers continue to be the focal point of blame for this trend. These education critics fail to take into cognizance the myriad of other variables that work together to plummet the standard of schooling and learners’ performance downwards. These various factors have variously been researched and documented by scholars and educators such as Akinpelu (1999) in Ozumba (2006), Sunday (2012), Orlu (2013), among others.

These researchers show evidence that teachers, staff and school administrators have been grappling with the demand of the curricular provision in the National Policy on Education in order to attain the global goals of education in this country; amidst a climate of widespread ills such as disruptive cult activities, occultism, gangsterism, widespread and deepening crisis of examination misconducts, students’ indiscipline and unrest, government and teachers/labour face-off, decaying school infrastructures, low morale of teachers, students’ passive attitude to learning, crowded and poorly equipped classrooms, empty school laboratories and libraries filled with outmoded and old textbooks, poor school and community relations and a litany of other ills; all of which are indicators of the state of the school’s climate, learning atmosphere and schools environment.

To add to this mix is the recent challenge of attacks on institutions of learning at all levels by armed renegades and terror groups that are turning institutions of learning to arenas of fear, trepidation and terror (Abati, 2021), as students, teachers, lecturers, and school administrators have become victims of kidnapping, banditry and demand for ransom payments. The insecurity factor orchestrated a decade ago by the Islamic extremist and terror group Boko Haram’s deschooling ideological war waged against Western Education by the group and its affiliates has disrupted beyond measure the fragile schools’ climate, thereby, diminishing further teaching and learning outcomes in many schools in Northern Nigeria and beyond. As the trend spreads country-wide, the responses of many state governments to the security challenge by imposing curfews, affect schools and schooling further by cutting down the hours teachers and students spend in schools for effective teaching and learning to take place. This entire scenario puts education at risk in peace time as if it were war time.

There is a widely held myth, fostered by the regimen of school, that people should learn continuously and under all kinds of conditions. But when do people really learn? Learners do learn under certain conditions and moments and never continuously. This assertion, according to Loftus (2011), is that learning involves nurturing interest of learners under certain conditions which are interest in what is being thought; so that threats to interest such as fear, anxiety, guilt stop interest cold. That is to say, they stop the movement of information into memory and into utilization and communication. In a situation like what

is obtainable now in most parts of Nigeria, the notion that learning can and should take place in pleasant and unpleasant circumstances is no longer the norm. Pain, distress, fear, apprehension connected to learning under the current climate of insecurity has grossly hampered learning. Learners and teachers alike cannot function well under the current school and classroom climate of fear, anxiety, worry and apprehension for the safety of their lives; and this does not foster learning.

UNESCO (2021) project that if any crisis close to the COVID-19 pandemic ever hits education again at country or global levels, the system will be thrown back by twenty years when schools in many nations operated at less than one quarter of their capacity due to social inhibitions. This article seeks to deliberately turn the searchlight on the nature of school climate and how its disruption directly impinges on teaching and learning outcomes. The article also explores ways of improving this condition and repositioning the education enterprise in the midst of daunting social challenges especially insecurity.

### **Schools climate/environment and the instructional process**

Schools do not exist in their own right; they are a creation of the society. Each society creates its own school system suitable for the preservation of its cultural values and heritage and to advance the society socially, economically, technologically and otherwise. According to Wong and Wong (2014), school is a serious place where people go to study, work and produce. School is where people go to acquire knowledge, learn skills and develop values that will make them productive citizens and help them grow to their fullest potentials as human beings. There is therefore an environment and presence of certain amenities that support learning. Apart from the need for physical hard wares like classrooms, chairs, tables, writing boards, and efficient teachers, there is the need for a conducive, friendly and supportive school and classroom climate that makes efficient teaching and learning possible, and learning outcomes to be optimal and satisfactory. As temples of knowledge and agents of social change and transformation, schools need a certain ambience, quality of peace and tranquillity to deliver on their mission.

### **What school climate is**

First, there is need to define and contextualize school climate as a concept and phenomenon. The climate of a school connotes the sum of all the components that make for a healthy learning environment. School is a culture like most cultures. It is filled with its own unique rituals and traditions and its own set of norms and morals (Sadkar & Sadkar, 2005). A healthy, wholesome environment where both teachers and learners feel safe, comfortable and at peace is needed for the transmission and reception of knowledge, skills and values and many other activities that add value to and improve peoples' lives in learning situations.

Devine and Cohen (2007) view school climate as the quality and character of school life, reflecting the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices and organizational structures. It is a sustained positive climate that fosters learners' development and learning necessary for a productive contribution and

satisfying life in any given society. Meiselsperger (2014) defined school climate as the prevailing tangible and intangible conditions in a school that can either impede or support learning. To the trio of Hoy et al. (1991), school climate is that significant relationship that exists between school health and academic performance which is determined by specific measurable factors that make school a good healthy and safe place to work and learn.

Mgbodile (2004) on his part characterized school climate as a truly humane school setting. Humane in his words is the provision throughout a school; a wholesome, stimulating and productive learning environment conducive to academic achievement and personal growth of students at different levels of development. Clearly, school climate is multi-dimensional and influences all the stakeholders in the education enterprise including students, parents, school administrative personnel and the community at large, within the learning environment. Owoeye (2011) notes that school climate can be a positive influence or otherwise in the sense of being a contributory factor or a barrier that contributes to learning in many areas and people within school. For example, a positive school climate has been associated with fewer behavioural and emotional problems for students as a group.

It is in this wise that the United Kingdom (UK) Commission on Education prescribes that all schools in its domain should nurture conditions that provide a pleasant and satisfying environment with which students can live and work and be productive; and where teachers, principals, the non-tutorial staff and parents can work together to grow a school that nurture productive citizens (Wikipedia, 2012). For the outgrowth of a good and safe school climate which is productivity and satisfaction, the document stressed further that the productivity of teachers and students translates into achieving basic skills in the development of constructive attitudes and the expansion of adequate knowledge base, clarifying of values and purposes and the utilization of inquiry and problem-solving processes.

Without belabouring the concept clarification any further, a school climate, from the foregone explications, can be said to be the outcome of the interactive processes of the physical, social and cultural attitudes that characterize any school which sets the tone for and dictates direction for learning in a typical school and its classrooms. It is a set environment that makes curriculum and lessons contents delivery free, seamless and result oriented.

### **Analysis of the essential dimensions of school climate**

School climate is multi-dimensional and it can be created, set and maintained at various levels; at the community level, the school level and the classroom level. According to Devine and Cohen (2007), it is measured by the quality of relationships and interactions of these three levels. Those who have done extensive research on school climate crystalize the specific elements that make up a typical school climate into the following dimensions: (i) the community/school relationship (ii) the school administration and staff relationship

level (iii) the teacher/student relationship at the classroom level (iv) the students to student relationship at the classroom socialization level. However, a caveat must be added here that there is no “one list” that summarizes these elements or dimensions to the satisfaction of all. But several researchers in the area of school climate, such as Hoy et al. (1991), Frieberg, (1999), Meiselsperger (2014), seem to agree that the four major areas that are essential to pay attention to while considering school climate analysis are as follows:

1. Safety/security
2. Relationships
3. Teaching and learning
4. The external environment (physical environment surrounding the school).

According to Devine and Cohen (2007), each of these areas includes a series of subscales which serve as indicators that help to clarify these essential areas. They are as indicated tabularly below:

**Table 1:** The various dimensions of school climate

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Major Dimension and Subscale Indicators</b>
<b>Safety</b>	A-Physical safety B-Social and emotional safety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School has physical environment that makes people feel safe</li> <li>• There are clear safety measures and rules</li> <li>• School has clear rules against violence, bullying and disruptive behaviour and evident security provisions.</li> </ul>
<b>Teaching and learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of conducive classrooms</li> <li>• Quality of instruction available</li> <li>• High academic standard, varied teaching methods</li> <li>• Teachers invest in helping students acquire skills</li> <li>• Good school/classroom climate</li> <li>• Leadership by head of school projected through clear visions.</li> </ul>
<b>Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrators’ accessibility/support</li> <li>• Positive adult/adult relationships</li> <li>• Good cordial teacher to teacher relationship</li> <li>• Good administrator/staff relationship</li> <li>• Student/student relationship</li> <li>• Students’ involvement in decision making</li> <li>• School/community collaborations and relations</li> <li>• School/community involvement</li> <li>• Strong governing body/school relationship.</li> </ul>

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	<b>Morale</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students, school and parent-teachers’ norms vis-à-vis learning</li><li>• Motivated students and teachers with high morale.</li></ul>
<b>Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Environmental adequacy, conduciveness for learning, cleanliness, order and low noise</li><li>• Good, basic facilities, adequate space, materials, time.</li><li>• Aesthetic beauty etc.</li></ul>

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Source: Devine and Cohen, 2007

Using Cohen’s major dimensions and their accompanying subscales to measure the level of disruption of school climates in Nigeria, it will be easy for any analyst to observe that the school system in Nigeria at various tiers of its operation come short at various dimensions. Teaching and learning takes place under unconducive classroom conditions such as poor provision of classroom basics such as classroom furniture in terms of comfortable seating arrangement, proper ventilation and lighting of the classroom space.

At the relationship’s level, many schools which are privately owned at all the tiers (that is nursery, primary, the secondary and higher education levels) seem to care about, and pay attention to relationships such as the learner-teacher, administration-teaching and staff relationships, but the public and government funded schools up to the universities care very little to establish even minimum standards and monitor the type of relationships that exist within the walls and classrooms of these schools. The universities that should be the standard bearer in this regard lack common mentoring programmes for faculty members and students. They are an uncharted jungle where teachers, administrators and students assert themselves in whatever way they deem fit with no clear guidelines on how each group should be treated with respect to their rights, privileges and responsibilities. The result is inevitable violation of the dignity of the human person.

The common noticeable pattern is teachers treating learners as adversaries, and administrators adopting dictatorial and controlling leadership styles. However, exceptional cases exist here and there. On the dimension of safety and security as a school climate indicator, Mgbodile (2004) observed that Nigerian schools enjoyed premium safety in the late 60s, the decades of the 1970s, the 1980s up till the mid-1990s, when disruption of school climate began occasioned by cult activities and cult clashes. They began as isolated incidences before becoming rampant; spreading down to primary schools across the country. The total disruption of safety and security began since the well-publicized abduction in 2014 of 276 school girls from Chibok Secondary School by Boko Haram Islamist Militants in Borno State. It was followed by Dapchi in 2018 in the series of mass abductions of students, teachers and others.

According to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC, 2018), “safe school initiative” was launched after the Chibok girls were abducted to bolster security in schools in the

North East by building fences around them. Obviously, the 2018 abduction of 110 Dapchi School Girls raised questions about the success of the initiative. The widespread activities of many groups who have resorted to mass abduction of students, teachers, lecturers, pupils and other school workers indicate that these groups have seen that mass abductions bring them monetary gains from ransom payments.

As part of the response to the security situation, the military has built post close to some schools, but the number of schools in the North and other parts of the country makes it impossible for the military to be everywhere. Some schools have employed local vigilantes, armed with local weapons but this has proved ineffective against the heavily armed bandits. Education and schools in Nigeria are under siege and serious threat due to the frequency of mass abductions. The implication of this scenario on schools and schooling is that many schools in the country are shut down for months, some up to a year; thus, giving place to many dropping out of school, as many have become discouraged and unmotivated to continue with school. There is a high attrition rate of teachers; parents and guardians are scared of allowing their wards to go to school.

Any school willing to examine and improve its climate can use the indicators to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses in terms of its existing climate. Mgbodile (2004) explicates that there is a strong relationship between a school's climate and the academic and general achievement of a school's set goals and objectives. These occurrences have indeed contributed to lowered academic performance when learning outcomes are measured.

Sunday (2012) wrote that school climate is critically linked to risk prevention and health promotion. A school that ensures minimal risk to people and a healthy climate provides also a solid foundation that supports students' academic performance and development of positive attitudes and behaviour. Also, Blum (2005) provides research evidence which showed that students and staff in schools that make people feel safe with minimal physical and emotional threats perceive themselves to be happy and feel as part of a school community and experience less stress and thus engage in fewer risk-taking behaviours.

Sadker and Sadker (2011), writing on the extensive research carried out by school assessors in many states of the US to document what makes for effective schools, stated that researchers found a common set of characteristics that make many successful schools work. These characteristics which became known as the five-factor theory of effective schools are stated below:

1. Strong leadership
2. A clear school missions
3. A safe and orderly school climate
4. Monitoring of students' progress
5. High expectations

Sadker and Sadker points out that the third factor, though ranked third, is foundational and a prime factor for the successful accomplishment of the rest of the factors. It is a

truism that no meaningful teaching and learning can take place in a climate of fear, disorder or chaos. In fact, evidence from brain research published by Wolfz (2001) in her acclaimed work titled “Brain matters: translating brain research into classroom practice” lend credence to the fact that learning can only take place in a safe climate.

Wolfz showed that when the human brain receives signals of impending danger, it triggers the release of the adrenalin hormone which warns a person to “fight or flee”; and if the process is repeated severally in the same environment, the individual begins to feel unsafe instinctively when in the said environment, with or without a trigger from the brain. Applying this to the classroom practice, she states that teachers or learners feel quite unsafe being in an environment or classroom where shootings, overt-violent behaviours like bullying, fighting and harsh exchanges, occur often. Bringing this home to the school environment, cult clashes that involve shooting, kidnapping of school personnel create a climate of fear, trepidation, and sometimes total avoidance of schools and classrooms where these incidences occur unchecked and unrestrained. The peace, tranquillity and ambience of schools as a place to be and socialize is fast being eroded in many parts of the nation.

The school administrator or leader is identified as the school climate leader; such is responsible to set the tone for the school climate by his/her leadership style and shaping or interpretation of the school’s philosophy of existence. Hoy et al. (1991) note that a school administrator who takes into account the views, wellbeing of staff, teachers and learners and is involved in the routine running of the school tends to be logarithmically more effective as a school climate leader than those who do not. The effective leader of a school harnesses all aspects of school life to work in a synchronised order. Following closely behind the school leader is the teachers. The teacher, by virtue of his functions and professional sphere of influence, is the head of the classroom climate. Orlu (2013) wrote that studies involving many schools, especially public funded schools in Nigeria, portray them as having adverse classroom climates because most teachers in these schools adopt the adversarial posture in dealing with students. They are harsh and hard when dealing with the learners. The teachers in the study conceded further that they assume this approach because the students in these public schools are difficult to control and they do not willingly submit to leadership except by coercion.

Orlu counsels teachers to become friendlier and not mean, appear admirable but not seductive and to attend to learners’ complex needs in a fair, but firm manner in order to change the existing adverse climates that already exist in such schools and classrooms. Bryce (2004) also pointed out in the same vein that the classroom climate is created and maintained by the teacher. To him, each classroom has a “tone”, a “mood”, a kind of an “environ” or an “aura” about it. One can sense it, though intangible, when one steps into any classroom as an observer, visitor or supervisor of pedagogical activities.

Bryce stressed further that it is virtually impossible to teach in a sterile environment devoid of emotion, conviviality and passion. The teacher as a classroom leader has to



practically set the tone of the classroom, each and every time, or assess an existing “tone” before embarking on teaching. Learning outcomes which can be measured overtly or covertly are highly dependent on classroom climates. Further research evidence has shown that students in schools with a climate characterized by caring and supportive interpersonal relationships have more positive academic attitude and values and are more satisfied with school (Baker, 1999 in Cohen, 2006; Kingsbury, 2009). In a related study by McCombs (2001) and McCombs and Quilt (2001) as cited by Devine and Cohen (2007), positive relationship with the teacher was found to be one of the key factors in students’ motivation and achievement.

Another important indicator in the milieu of measuring school climate is the students-to-students relationships. It is believed that students determine their own interactions with one another, but must be within the purview of the school, classroom and socially acceptable standards. The school and the teacher set the rules for this level of interrelationships through rules; rules that ensure that each person is treated fairly, treated as an important member of the school social community, free from bias as regards gender, race, colour or religious persuasion. The rules are made to prevent bullying, fighting, stealing, and other common vices among the youths.

Bryce (2004) however cautions that school rules and directives targeting the control and moderation of students’ behaviour towards one another must be limited to protecting the rights of each student and not be made to stifle social interactions in schools and the classroom, and turning them into some boot camps; but should be flexible enough not to instil fear in learners. This is because learning is essentially social and fear deactivates creativity which is a goal of all good teaching activities. The general school environment is the sum of the total appearance of any given school. It is a school’s operational environment embracing its location, type of building, planning of its layout, aesthetics and others. It is the view of Oyekan (2019) that conducive learning climate is provided when a school is clean, tidy, with a spacious classroom and a good chalkboard. A diligent school and teacher’s leadership help to keep all vices that often turn some schools into breeding grounds for many social and societal problems and challenges away or minimise them.

### **Insecurity and the disruption of safe school climate**

Before the current spate of insecurity in terms of kidnapping in Nigeria that manifests in hostage taking for ransom, banditry, terrorism engulfed the nation, school climates across the country from primary schools to tertiary institutions were already made fragile by frequent and disruptive cult activities, drug use and drug abuse among youngsters, students’ misconducts during examinations and many other social vices. But with the invasion of the school system with violence of shootings, abduction of school children, rape and killings, the fragile school climates are currently overwhelmed with these occurrences until they are becoming a trend and accepted occurrences associated with schooling in Nigeria.

This current challenge of insecurity in the school system was orchestrated by the de-schooling ideological war waged against Western education by the Islamist extremists and terror group, the so-called Boko Haram (meaning Western education is highly forbidden) and its affiliate groups. It all began in 2014 when two hundred and seventy-six (276) school goes of a secondary school in Chibok, Borno State were forcefully taken by the terror group - Boko Haram. Since then, attacks on schools and abductions of students have grown in number and spread across the Northern part of the country. The trend persists, schools are becoming a scary place to be; and this is affecting teaching and learning, and the expected learning outcomes.

An ugly dimension has been added to the mix as the kidnapers now demand millions of naira in ransom for students' release thereby robbing parents of the financial means to give their wards meaningful education. According to Kauchak and Eggen (2011), one of the most unfortunate things to happen to any educational system is to allow crime and violence to enter school doors. According to the duo, the problem of violence came into national attention in 1999 (just as the Chibok girl's abduction did to Nigeria in 2014) with the tragedy of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in which two students went on rampage, gunning down 13 students before killing themselves. It was amplified in 2005 when a high school student in Red Lake Minnesota killed seven people including a teacher and a security guard, and wounded seven.

The scenario here is different from what is obtainable in Nigeria. The perpetrators of the violence are students against fellow students and other victims are collateral damage. The scenario above seems a replication of cult-related violence in Nigerian school system, but the current insecurity affecting schools is a case of aggression carried wholesale from society against schools and schooling at all tiers. Educational stakeholders in Nigeria and school managers stand to learn and gain experience from the approach that authorities in the U.S. have adopted so far and it is working for them. They have employed weapons' experts and relevant technologies to reduce violence; this can be employed in the Nigerian situation or adapted to suit the situation. They are many but the approach that has universal application that can benefit Nigeria is the school wide safety/security programmes.

### **School wide safety/security programmes for tackling insecurity in schools**

School authorities where violent incidences occurred responded by designing safety programmes to make the schools a safe haven for teaching and learning through comprehensive anti-violence and anti-bullying programme. According to Cornelly and Goldstein (2004) as cited by Kauchak and Eggen (2011), the programme proposes the teaching of conflict resolution skills as against violence in addition to prevention policies. The prevention policies include the following:

1. Screening all who entered the school using metal detectors
2. Installation of CCTV cameras at strategic points to monitor and record activities of people who come and go from the school at all times
3. Taking advantage of drone technology and deploying them to monitor, record and transmit images of movement, activities of unwanted persons about thousands of

kilometres close to school premises at all times. Apart from detecting intending intruders, it provides aerial surveillance round the clock.

4. Another strategy will be to engage intelligence gathering service to detect and fish out informant and collaborators with those who carry out banditry, kidnapping and others; for experience has shown that the perpetrators of violence against schools and their personnel do so with inside help from paid collaborators.

5. Military or paramilitary agencies that bear arms should not be stationed in schools for long; this rather convey a deeper sense of insecurity to learners than lessen it or offer any sense of protection. It reinforces people's fear of the state of insecurity.

6. The government needs to use its apparatus of security to identify at risks schools and take preventive, proactive and precautionary covert measures to protect such schools and prevent attacks.

7. The states of the Federation and the Federal Government both have an obligation to maximize the protection of human rights, by creating the safest possible environment for the people especially those considered to be at the greatest risk such as young school goers. This is because, if a state does not exercise adequate control over the possession and use of firearms in the face of persistent gun related violence (terror perpetuated by firearms carriers), this could amount to a breach of their obligations under the International Human Rights Law. In fact, the law that stipulates child, children and young adults' protection and rights to life and education must be upheld, by fighting what terrorize them.

## **Conclusion**

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the human need for self-actualization is said to be the highest need level; it is the need to fulfil one's self; to grow and use abilities to the fullest and most creative extent. This is why many people go to school, as schooling helps people to unlock their potentials. The need for security, protection, safety in the physical space of existence are basic needs of all humans; but the recent spate of insecurity that has entered the doors and gates of the school system has raised safety need to a higher order need.

Fear induced anxiety and worry over possible attack, kidnapping and even death has been proven to stifle teaching and learning, achievement and motivation as safety of people is threatened. A good and safe school climate is a sine-qua-non for effective curriculum implementation as it guarantees suitable conditions for meaningful learning in schools. This paper has explored the various dimensions of a conducive school climate for effective and improved teaching and learning. The state of insecurity is negating this goal and the ways to stem the tide of this ugly trend if implemented, will restore safety and ensure sustainable teaching and learning climate that will guarantee optimal learning outcomes for the benefit of learners and the society at large.

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