Identifying Ekvall's Creative Climate Dimensions in Elementary through High School Settings: An Executive Summary of Peters' 2002 Master's Project

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This study examined how Ekvall's ten creative climate dimensions manifested themselves in a classroom setting. The author noted that although much research had been done on organizational climate, there was a noticeable void when it came to looking closely at classroom climate (Peters, 2002). The project and data gathered from elementary through high school settings belonged to a larger initiative (Murdock, 1999). The initial research team was made up of Gordon, Miloshevski, and myself. The aim was to identify a preliminary list of behaviors that were indicative of a creative classroom climate. The questions that guided all three studies were: " What was similar to Ekvall's definitions in a classroom and what was different? What observed teacher and student behaviors may be indicative of a creative classroom climate? What literature exists on creative classroom climate?" We set out to answer these questions through a number of classroom observations and teacher interviews. Overall, we found that based on the organizational descriptors found in Ekvall's earlier work (Ekvall, 1987), the same ten dimensions could be identified and described behaviorally in elementary through high school settings (Peebles, 2000, p. 1).

Process

        Each team member identified classrooms in which to observe and note behaviors. Using a standardized protocol developed by Gordon (2000), notations were made under each of Ekvall's ten dimensions. These protocols provided the raw data from which observations and comments were sorted and categorized. Some actions belonged under more than one dimension, some were similar to Ekvall, some were different than Ekvall, and some were not necessarily behaviors but rather questions that grew from the observations. Teacher interviews were conducted using another standardized protocol developed by Mioloshevski (2000) and sorted in the same fashion. The data were sorted into three categories: similarities, differences and things to ponder/consider. From these categories, three sub-categories were introduced: student conversations, classroom observations and teacher interviews.

        Next, we determined what literature already existed on the topic of classroom climate by searching the ERIC and Wilson Select Plus databases. The topic of classroom climate was typed in using a few different wordings. The articles that did relate to our topic from the Wilson Select Plus database were analyzed by Miloshevski (2000) and the articles that related in the ERIC database were analyzed by Gordon (2000). I analyzed the articles from both databases that were determined not to relate to creative climate specifically and sorted them into fifteen categories according to topic (Peters, 2002). My intent was to document that although there was some material on climate in the classroom in the literature, pertinent work on creative climate that was based on data was not readily available. Thus many "creative climate" articles were truly unrelated to our research.

Results According to Dimension

Dynamism and Liveliness:

According to Ekvall's definition of Dynamism and Liveliness (Lauer, 1994) this dimension was identifiable in elementary through high school settings. Teachers tried to foster this dimension similarly to Ekvall by allowing students freedom in their assignments, encouraging discovery and experimentation and by keeping things interactive. Teacher responses and actions differed from Ekvall's definition in that in order to foster this dimension, they tried to boost student confidence and allow for intrinsic motivation. Student actions that were similar to Ekvall's definition were: moving about the room; excitedly announcing discoveries; and making their own decisions. One student action that differed from Ekvall's definition involved increased confidence level.

Trust and Openness:

Trust and openness was identifiable in elementary through high school settings. In an attempt to create trust and openness in their classrooms, teachers did the following things that were similar to Ekvall's definition: promoted open communication; allowed time for sharing; and treated all questions as worthwhile. The following teacher actions differed from Ekvall's definition: sought student advice; encouraged acceptance of everyone as an equal. Students were observed doing the following things that were similar to Ekvall's definition: volunteering ideas; respecting differing opinions; and admitting shortcomings. Things that students did that differed from Ekvall's definition of trust and openness were: sought out advice; and inquired deeper.

Idea Time:

Idea time was identifiable in elementary through high school settings. Teacher actions in idea time that were similar to Ekvall's definition were the following: allowed students to notice their own mistakes; gave options when beginning a project; and allowed students a second chance to answer questions. Teachers did these things that differed from Ekvall's definition of idea time as recorded by Lauer (1994): used brainstorming to "jump start" the idea process; and provided a variety of resources for students to choose from. Students were seen using time to improve ideas and taking the opportunity to research ideas. These behaviors were similar to the descriptions in Ekvall's definition. Students were also seen doing things that differed from Ekvall's definition, such as: brainstorming on their own; and being proud of their work.

Playfulness and Humor:

Playfulness and humor were identifiable in elementary through high school settings. Teacher actions to foster playfulness and humor in their classrooms that were similar to Ekvall's definition were: allowed jokes; and displayed a sense of humor. Things teachers did that differed from Ekvall's definition were: distinguished between playful and hurtful jokes, as well as appropriate and inappropriate times for playfulness. Students not only accepted jokes as part of the classroom and acted relaxed as in Ekvall's definition, but knew what was appropriate and were careful not to hurt the feelings of others as well.

Debate:

  The dimension of debate was identifiable in elementary through high school settings. Teacher behaviors that related to Ekvall's definition of debate were: avoided set patterns and rules; encouraged students to debate; and provided students with a choice in assignments. Teachers also taught students how to weigh options internally rather than aloud so they did not always require another to debate ideas with. This thinking process was not described by Ekvall's definition. Students did the following things that were similar to Ekvall's definition of debate: exchanged different views; and routinely discussed options. Students also differed from Ekvall's definition by physically taking a different road from others to illustrate their argument or how their ideas could be effective.

Risk Taking:

  Risk taking was identifiable by both teachers and students in elementary through high school settings. Teachers supported Ekvall's definition of risk taking by: trying new techniques and lessons; serving as a risk-taking model for students; and rewarding the effort rather than just the results. Teachers created an environment with risk taking that was different from Ekvall's definition by: using words like "deduction" and "speculation;" incorporating role playing; and utilizing group work so no one fails alone. Students supported Ekvall's definition by: putting forward new ideas with confidence; building on ideas of others; and complimenting risky efforts of others. Students also differed from Ekvall's definition when they: went beyond the project goals and incorporated new ideas.

Conflict:

This negatively correlated dimension in Ekvall's work was supported in elementary through high school settings. In other words, conflicts did exist and could be identified. Teachers in this category were observed contributing to Ekvall's definition of this negative dimension. They did this by: not stressing the importance of respect; and tolerating invasions of one student by another. Student behavior supported Ekvall's definition by: not respecting one another; and by using humor to mock others. Students went beyond Ekvall's definition of conflict by: taking sides in a conflict; and by feeling the tension in the room when conflict arose.

Idea Support:

Idea support was identifiable in elementary through high school settings. Similarities to Ekvall's definition on the part of the teachers were: complimented students often; taught deferring judgment; and made the classroom idea safe. Teachers were observed doing the following in this category that differed from Ekvall's definition: they modeled supportive behavior; and they supported students by taking an interest in their personal lives. Students did the following things that confirmed Ekvall's definition of idea support: complimented each other often; respected differences in opinion; and expressed themselves freely. Students also did the following which differed from Ekvall's definition: advocated for and protected one another; gave a feeling of cohesion; and expressed self doubt as a means of gaining support.

Challenge:

The dimension of challenge was identified in elementary through high school settings. Teachers did the following things in support of Ekvall's definition: encouraged student involvement; posed challenging questions; and allowed students more than one try at answering the challenge. Teachers did the following things that differed from Ekvall's definition: chose to break routine to keep students on their toes; and made long term goals. Students supported Ekvall's definition when they; accepted and welcomed challenging problems; sought a second chance in which to improve; and worked diligently. Students were also observed doing the following things which differed from Ekvall's definition of challenge: took on other roles to help them arrive at solutions; and eagerly awaited the next lesson's challenges.

Freedom:

Freedom was identifiable in elementary through high school classroom settings. Teachers were observed doing many things that supported Ekvall's definition of freedom, some of which were: allowed music to be played; encouraged students to observe the work of others; gave students autonomy to reach project goals. Teachers responses differed from Ekvall's definition in the following ways: allowed freedom with restrictions; and stressed student responsibility in their freedom. Students were observed as doing the following which were similar to Ekvall's definitions: acted as self-starters; showed independence from the teacher; and decided how they wanted to do assignments. Students differed from Ekvall's definition of freedom in the following ways: displayed interdependence; began norming once they knew how to act with freedom; and were relaxed and motivated.

Conclusions

       This study was successful in identifying how Ekvall's creative climate dimensions manifested themselves in a classroom setting. In addition to the similarities, the ways the dimensions were manifested that differed from Ekvall's definitions raised some important questions to be answered by the next wave of research teams on this topic. The study helped to establish a baseline pool of behaviors that indicated a creative classroom climate and the existing research on this topic was explored and reported.

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