

Creating and Sustaining Positive School Climates: Evidence from Malaysian Schools

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How to cite this paper: Bahari, N., Fauzi, M. A., Noorzeli, N. M., Aziz, M. A. A., & Aziz, A. K. A. (2025). Creating and Sustaining Positive School Climates: Evidence from Malaysian Schools. *Creative Education*, 16, 1172-1183.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2025.168073>

Received: June 23, 2025

Accepted: August 23, 2025

Published: August 26, 2025

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Abstract

Despite ongoing efforts to foster a positive school climate, Malaysian educational institutions continue to grapple with student misconduct and bullying, as highlighted by the recent case involving the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), which has recorded 5891 bullying cases involving school students as of October 2023 through the Student Discipline System (SSDM). The purpose of this study is to look at effective strategies to cultivate a supportive and inclusive educational environment that promotes student well-being and academic success into the positive practices. In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted with six key informants, including the school principals. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically using NVivo software to identify emerging patterns and core themes from the participants' responses. The findings show that strong leadership, a culture of collaboration, and emotional and social support are key strategies that drive a positive climate in schools. The implications of this study suggest that the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) should formulate clearer and more comprehensive educational policies to empower school leadership, strengthen a culture of teamwork, and provide a structured psychosocial support system to create a safer and more supportive school environment.

Keywords

Positive School Climate, Educational Leadership, Psychosocial Support, Collaborative, Malaysia Education Policy

1. Introduction

A positive school climate plays an important role in strengthening students' social and academic development. Globally, many countries have adopted community-

based approaches and distributive leadership in an effort to build safe, inclusive and supportive learning environments (Amzat et al., 2022; Shia et al., 2022). Studies show that a conducive school environment can reduce stress among teachers, increase job satisfaction, and reduce student dropout and misbehavior (Krstić et al., 2017). Therefore, strategies to create a positive school climate are now the focus of education policies at the international and local levels.

In Malaysia, issues of student discipline and teacher work stress remain major challenges in the education system. According to a report by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), a total of 402 schools nationwide have been identified as having disciplinary issues among their students. From the total, 311 schools have high disciplinary issues and 91 schools are under the “hotspot” category. The issues include involvement in crime, bullying and truancy (New Straits Times, 2017). At the same time, a study by the National Union of Teaching Professions (NUTP) revealed that over 70% of teachers experience high work stress due to non-teaching workload, which affects motivation and teacher-student relationships (Mohd Hafiz, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to explore effective strategies in building a positive school climate through leadership approaches, collaborative culture and psychosocial support, based on the experiences of school leaders in the field.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Positive School Climate

According to Berg et al. (2017) a positive school climate is defined as significant element in promoting student achievement in curriculum, cocurricular and well-being. It encompasses the quality and environment of school life such as their goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning activities. Next, if the school nurturing an inclusive climate, this situation will foster a sense of belonging, emotional safety, and mutual respect among students and teachers. The most important point if this happens in school it will contribute to reduced behavioral problems, improved academic outcomes, and stronger student engagement (Ismail et al., 2020). This was evidenced by Zullig et al. (2010) who investigate the connection between several aspects of the school climate and student satisfaction, finding that supportive peer interactions and good student-teacher connections have a major impact on students' general mental health.

In recent years, educational policymakers have increasingly drawn attention to the importance of cultivating positive school climates, particularly in response to rising concerns about student mental health, peer violence, and teacher burnout. Portraying these issues, research delve into realizing leadership style, student-teacher relationships, and parental involvement are critical determinants in shaping the school climate (Duraku & Hoxha, 2021). Furthermore, evidence shows that when schools employ school-wide interventions which is from socio-emotional learning until restorative discipline methods, they witness meaningful gains in student behavior and a stronger sense of school attachment (O'Malley et al.,

2015). Thus, a positive school climate is not merely a passive condition, but it play as an active agent in educational transformation and student success.

2.2. Empowering School Leadership

Empowering school leadership has emerged as a critical factor in advancing educational outcomes, fostering teacher motivation, and promoting a positive school climate. Contemporary research emphasizes that when school leaders are granted autonomy, decision-making authority, and access to capacity-building resources, they are better positioned to drive instructional improvement and organizational change (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Empowered principals are not merely administrative figures but act as transformational agents who cultivate professional learning communities, encourage shared leadership, and align school practices with long-term strategic goals (Bush, 2018). Moreover, studies have found that empowerment correlates strongly with increased teacher efficacy, reduced burn-out, and greater student achievement, particularly in underperforming or high-need schools (McConnell & Swanson, 2024). Thus, school leadership empowerment is not just a managerial initiative but a strategic imperative for sustainable school development.

2.3. Collaborative and Teamwork Culture

A strong culture of teamwork and collaboration is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective organizational and educational environments. In schools, collaborative practices among teachers, administrators, staff, and parents foster collective efficacy, improve problem-solving, and enhance instructional quality (Reeves et al., 2017). Research indicates that when teamwork is embedded in the school culture, it encourages knowledge sharing, mutual support, and shared responsibility for student outcomes. Inclusive collaboration that actively involves parents strengthens the school-community partnership, enhances transparency, and ensures that parents are aligned with school goals and strategies, thereby promoting student success (Hassan et al., 2022). Collaborative cultures also contribute to teacher satisfaction, reduce isolation, and create a more cohesive professional learning environment (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Moreover, such a culture enables schools to adapt more effectively to change, implement innovations, and maintain a unified focus on continuous improvement. As such, fostering a culture of collaboration that includes parents is not only beneficial for individual staff well-being but also essential for organizational resilience, family engagement, and sustained school success.

2.4. Psychosocial Support

Psychosocial support in educational institutions plays a pivotal role in promoting emotional well-being, resilience, and a sense of belonging among students and staff. Effective psychosocial interventions, such as counseling services, motivational talks, and inclusive co-curricular activities, contribute to the holistic devel-

opment of individuals and the creation of a nurturing school climate (Chaudhry et al., 2024). Research has shown that access to trained counselors and structured support programs can reduce anxiety, improve coping mechanisms, and foster a positive attitude toward learning and teaching (Simbolon & Purba, 2022). Moreover, integrating annual school-wide activities—such as sports days, entrepreneurship carnivals, and arts programs—not only enhances social connectedness but also provides therapeutic outlets that mitigate stress and strengthen school engagement (Martinez et al., 2016). As highlighted in the interview with a vocational college director, consistent implementation of such initiatives reflects an institutional commitment to safeguarding the psychosocial health of both students and staff, thereby laying a strong foundation for sustained academic and emotional success.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews to explore how school leaders create and sustain positive school climates in Malaysian schools. This approach was chosen to allow for rich, contextual insights into leadership strategies, school culture, and policy implementation from the perspectives of experienced principals.

3.2. Sampling and Informant Profile

Purposive sampling was used to select six school principals who have demonstrated leadership in cultivating positive school environments. The sample of six principals was selected as they met the purposive criteria of this study. Data saturation was reached after the sixth interview when no new themes emerged, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (Braun & Clarke, 2006) guidance for small-sample qualitative research. The selection criteria included: (Table 1)

- A minimum of 20 years of experience in the education sector,
- At least 5 years of service as a principal,
- Recognized involvement in whole-school improvement initiatives or school transformation programs.

Table 1. The profile of the informants.

Informant Code	Gender	School Type	Region	Years in Education	Years as Principal
P1	Male	Secondary (Urban)	Central Malaysia	25 years	8 years
P2	Female	Primary (Rural)	East Coast	23 years	6 years
P3	Male	Secondary (Suburban)	Southern Region	26 years	10 years
P4	Female	Primary (Urban)	Northern Region	24 years	7 years
P5	Male	Secondary (Rural)	East Malaysia	21 years	5 years
P6	Female	Primary (Suburban)	Central Malaysia	22 years	9 years

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Each participant was contacted via official school communication channels. Upon agreement and informed consent, interviews were scheduled. The interview guide included questions on leadership practices, strategies to foster a collaborative culture, and initiatives for psychosocial support. Interviews were conducted in Malay, each lasting approximately 45 - 60 minutes. They were conducted either in-person or via video conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability and location.

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-phase approach. Transcripts were coded manually and with the assistance of NVivo software to identify recurring patterns and themes. Themes were refined through constant comparison, peer debriefing, and member checking to ensure trustworthiness and validity. Initial coding was conducted by the researchers. Discrepancies were addressed through discussion and resolved by consensus with input from the expert panel.

4. Findings

4.1. Theme 1: Strong and Inclusive Leadership Practices

The results of the interviews conducted, found that strong leadership is very important in maintaining positive school climate, findings show the principal used various strategies to strengthen leadership in maintaining a positive climate as stated below:

"...For me, positive behavior starts with myself. I always listen to the views of all parties, regardless of staff or students. When they see that I respect their opinions, they will begin to feel comfortable sharing problems and ideas with me. I will also be fair in making decisions if there are problems at school..."

(P1, Male, 25 Years in Education)

"...In my view, positive behavior begins with mutual respect. I make it a point to greet and engage with everyone—teachers, cleaners, guards, or students—because I believe every role is important. I try to build rapport by being approachable and present during school activities. When staff and students feel seen and appreciated, they are more open and willing to cooperate. I also emphasize transparency when handling conflicts, so everyone feels the process is just and inclusive..."

(P2, Female, 23 Years in Education)

"Continuous professional development for teachers is another strategy I prioritize. We hold regular workshops that focus on classroom management, inclusive teaching practices, and mental health awareness. By equipping our teachers with the right tools, we create a more positive and effective learning environment..."

(P4, Female, 24 Years in Education)

Based on the statement above, informants show leadership through positive example, where he is aware that a good leader must be the main example in showing

positive behavior, especially in the aspects of respect and inclusion. The attitude of listening to opinions from all parties as stated by informants, shows a commitment to being a fair and open leader. Therefore, this approach can build positive relationships among staff and students. In addition, the informants also practice a transparent approach, where they listen to the views of both parties fairly. This reflects the basic principles of leadership that prioritize justice and problem-solving skills that focus on mutual benefit. In addition, informants also practice open communication to help reduce misunderstandings and tension between both parties to create a positive environment. Lastly, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers is a vital strategy for creating a positive and effective learning environment. Principal used to hold regular workshops that focus on classroom management and inclusive teaching practices to succeed. This investment in teacher development not only enhances teaching quality but also fosters an inclusive and supportive atmosphere for all students. Ultimately, prioritizing CPD leads to improved educational outcomes and a thriving school community.

4.2. Theme 2: Fostering a Collaborative School Culture

Through the interviews that were conducted, there was a second theme found, which is the culture of cooperation. The informants strongly emphasize the culture of cooperation between parents, staff and students need to be empower to create a positive school climate. Based on the informant's statement:

"...we have established several special committees involving representatives from among parents, staff and students. Every year, I will make sure there is a meeting session with parents to share ideas and objectives of the college so that they know their respective roles in supporting their children. We will also do activities with students, staff and parents at the open day program or other programs that involve joint activities..."

(P6, Female, 22 Years in Education)

"... We realized that improving the school climate required the involvement of parents and the wider community. We held workshops and meetings to engage them in our efforts, which has led to a stronger support system for our students and a more unified approach to addressing challenges..."

(P5, Male, 21 Years in Education)

"...I involve my staff in the decision-making process whenever possible. For instance, when we were considering changes to our curriculum, I formed a committee that included teachers from various grade levels. Their input was invaluable in shaping our final decisions..."

(P3, Male, 26 Years in Education)

Based on the statement above, informants showed a deep understanding that portray cooperation between parents, staff and students is a fundamental matter in building a positive school climate environment, where each party has a role in supporting student success. In addition, the initiative to hold annual meetings with parents is to provide parents with an opportunity to understand the school plans and goals in order to build trust and support from parents. Therefore, this

step can strengthen relationships between parents, staff and students and can create an ecosystem that supports student learning at school. Additionally, the findings indicate that the principal emphasizes collaborative decision-making by involving staff in key processes. For example, a curriculum review was conducted through a committee comprising teachers from various grade levels, allowing diverse input to shape the final outcome. Thus, this inclusive leadership approach fosters a sense of ownership, trust, and shared responsibility among school staff.

4.3. Theme 3: Emotional and Psychosocial Support Systems

As a result of this interview, the next themes discovered are emotional and social support. The informants are very concerned about emotional and social support for their staff and students in order to maintain a positive school climate. Based on the informant's statement:

"...every year, I will make sure that there are always annual talk programs and activities such as sports days, entrepreneurship days, art programs and many more for students and staff. This school also provides counseling services conducted by experienced counselors for staff and students if there are problems to be expressed..."

(P1, Male, 25 Years in Education)

"... We introduced mental health support initiatives, including counseling services and wellness programs. By prioritizing mental health, we've seen a decrease in behavioral issues and an increase in student engagement. It's essential that students feel supported emotionally to thrive academically..."

(P4, Female, 24 Years in Education)

Based on the above statement, the informants show a high commitment in providing various programs and services specifically for the emotional and social well-being of staff and students. This shows the informants concern for the mental and emotional well-being of staff and students. The annual activities carried out at the school are part of a proactive strategy to reduce stress and create a more friendly work and learning environment.

The informants also used the implementation of mental health support for fostering a positive educational environment. By prioritizing mental health through counseling services and wellness programs, schools can significantly reduce behavioral issues and enhance student engagement. It is vital for students to feel emotionally supported, as this foundation allows them to thrive academically. As educational institutions continue to recognize the importance of mental health, they can create nurturing environments that empower students to reach their full potential.

5. Discussions

5.1. Grounded Leadership Demonstrated through Action

The findings of this study reveal that grounded leadership—characterized by humility, inclusiveness, and direct engagement with stakeholders—plays a signifi-

cant role in shaping a positive and productive school climate. The informants interviewed illustrated leadership through example. Their emphasis on mutual respect, regardless of staff hierarchy or student status, reflects a value-driven approach to leadership. For instance, informant highlighted the importance of listening to all voices and being fair in decision-making. This inclusive practice not only fosters psychological safety among staff and students but also encourages a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. Similarly, others informants emphasized daily interactions and visibility during school activities, reinforcing approachability and breaking down hierarchical barriers. As supported [Rogers and Ashforth \(2017\)](#) stated leaders who consistently demonstrate respect, transparency, and presence on the ground cultivate trust and open communication within the school community. These behaviors signal a leader's willingness to serve, not just to manage.

Furthermore, the strategic use of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) highlights the leaders' commitment to capacity building. By prioritizing workshops on classroom management, inclusive pedagogy, and mental health, principals empower teachers with relevant skills while indirectly shaping a healthier school environment. This aligns with literature on transformational leadership, which suggests that effective leaders not only direct but also inspire and equip their teams ([Permana & Yuslimah, 2025](#)). These findings support the notion that grounded leadership goes beyond administrative control—it requires modeling positive behavior, actively participating in the school's daily life, and cultivating a culture of openness and fairness. When leaders are present, transparent, and respectful, it strengthens relational trust, a critical component for organizational effectiveness ([Zafar et al., 2024](#)).

The findings on inclusive leadership align with the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025), which emphasizes the empowerment of school leaders. The theme of collaboration supports the Ministry of Education's Professional Learning Communities (PLC) guidelines, while the emphasis on psychosocial support resonates with national initiatives such as the Peer Support Programme and school counseling services. These connections demonstrate how the study extends current policy and practice frameworks in Malaysia.

5.2. Strengthening Parental and Community Involvement

Based on the findings of the second theme, a strong culture of cooperation among parents, staff, and students is crucial for achieving mutual success, particularly in fostering a positive school climate. Representatives from each stakeholder group serve on a special committee, which convenes annually with parents to discuss school matters and strengthen collaborative engagement. To strengthen the cooperation in the school area, the planning aspect should be considered as a vital element in school management, the principal needs to take the initiative to organize and formulate strategies to build strong cooperation by ensuring that each party understands their respective roles. As supported by [Shah et al. \(2020\)](#), parental

involvement in education is widely recognized as a critical factor in enhancing student academic achievement. Evidence suggests that active engagement from parents correlates positively with improved outcomes for students across various educational stages. This was being agreed by a body of research indicating that students whose parents are actively involved in their education tend to perform better academically, demonstrate improved behavior, and have higher graduation rates (National PTA, 2022). Thus, the involvement can take many forms, including communication with educators, participating in school activities, and supporting learning at home (Ismail et al., 2019). By holding meetings every year with staff and parents, the principal can share ideas together and can set objectives to be achieved together and can formulate a school vision statement.

Besides that, the involvement of parents and the wider community is vital for improving school climate. By engaging these stakeholders through workshops and meetings, schools can strengthen support systems for students and foster a collaborative approach to addressing challenges. This partnership not only enhances the educational experience for students but also cultivates a sense of community and shared responsibility. As schools continue to prioritize the involvement of parents and community members, they can create a more positive and supportive environment that empowers students to thrive.

5.3. Established an Open Communication Channel

A study found that negative school climate correlates with higher depressive symptoms among adolescents, mediated by feelings of school belonging (Yin et al., 2024). Therefore, informants established an open communication channel for addressing this negative school climate. By implementing regular feedback sessions that allow students and staff to voice their concerns without fear of repercussions, schools can foster a culture of transparency and trust. This approach not only empowers individuals to engage in meaningful dialogue but also strengthens the bonds within the school community. Ultimately, prioritizing open communication can lead to a more positive and supportive educational environment, where everyone feels valued and heard (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024). Apart from that, informant also used the implementation of mental health support for fostering a positive educational environment. By prioritizing mental health through counseling services and wellness programs, schools can significantly reduce behavioral issues and enhance student engagement. It is vital for students to feel emotionally supported, as this foundation allows them to thrive academically (Hoover & Bostic, 2021). As educational institutions continue to recognize the importance of mental health, they can create nurturing environments that empower students to reach their full potential.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that leader play a vital role in creating and maintaining a positive school climate through strategic and comprehensive leadership.

In addition, the insights gained from this interview underscore the importance of effective management practices in education. As schools face evolving challenges, the principles outlined in this discussion serve as a guiding framework for leaders striving to create nurturing and high-performing educational environments. The role of a school leader is not only to manage but to inspire, cultivate relationships, and drive positive change, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive. The emphasis on inclusive decision-making and modeling expected behaviors further reinforces a culture of respect and accountability within the school community. Ultimately, the principal's commitment to continuous improvement and professional development exemplifies the dynamic nature of educational leadership. This study has limitations that warrant consideration. The small purposive sample, restricted to selected Malaysian regions data may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research could incorporate a larger and more diverse sample, as well as multiple data sources, to validate and expand upon these findings

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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