

## Organizational Climate in Early Childhood Education\*

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### Abstract

Organizational climate is a concept that may affect individual behaviors, attitudes and well-being in organizational life as well as explain why some organizations are more productive, effective, innovative and successful than others. The concept has been investigated in many disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, and management for years and was first considered in education at the end of the 1960s. Since then it has been researched in the field of education in many studies. In this paper, the organizational climate of early childhood centers is examined according to the opinions of early childhood teachers. The Early Childhood Work Environment Scale was used to obtain the data. Participants were a total of 214 teachers who work in public early childhood centers in an urban school district of Turkey. Teachers reported on their opinions of ten components of organizational climate: Collegiality, professional development, director support, clarity, reward system, decision making, goal consensus, task orientation, physical setting, and innovativeness. Results showed that collegiality is at the highest level among the components and the most negative opinion was expressed for the professional development component of the organizational climate. The findings are discussed in the light of the related literature. Suggestions for educators, researchers and decision makers are provided.

**Keywords:** organizational climate, early childhood, preschool, early childhood teachers

### 1. Introduction

Psychological studies of human behaviors, which began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe and later in America, revealed a new paradigm of science known as Behaviorism through the establishment of experimental laboratories (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). Behaviorism has explored behaviors that can always be observed and quantitatively measured in controlled laboratory conditions. While the behaviorist approach focuses on the behaviors that are observable in individuals, it has ignored possible internal factors such as motivation and mental mechanisms such as thinking. This approach has had implications for organizational structures of educational programs, students, teachers, teaching methods and educational institutions. Accordingly, educational objectives should be defined as behavior-oriented. In the 1900s, the existence of subliminal instincts in human behavior was discussed and it was stated that the motives of people are some of the reasons for behaviors. These theories later became the basis for scales developed for personality profiles (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008; Owens & Valesky, 2011; Woolfolk, 2014). The cognitive and social psychologies that emerged in the 1960s were considered as the primary components of the scientific foundations of education and had great impact on the concepts of learning and teaching. However, when describing an individual's behavior, one must focus on the interaction between personal characteristics and the social characteristics of the group or organization in which that behavior occurs. When describing organizational behavior, it is necessary to consider the influence of the social circle in which the organization is located (Glisson & James, 2002; Owens & Valesky, 2011; Roeser, Urdan & Stephens, 2009).

In addition to the social environment in which schools are located, some features in the internal structure are related to the organizational structure and climate of the school. In this context, the school can be regarded as a multi-layered

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organizational model that is considered as a learning organization. The learning organization dimensions were first developed by Marsick and Watkins (2003) then proposed as an integrated model by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). According to this model, the school is seen as a learning organization in which children's learning is at the center. (Kools & Stoll, 2016). In this model, schools as learning organizations should also provide a shared vision for children's learning experiences, support employees' sustainable professional development, value team work and collaboration among staff, adopt the culture of innovativeness and own a leadership model that is open to development (Kools & Stoll, 2016). A school in the model proposed by OECD and UNICEF brings to mind the concept of organizational climate in the educational literature.

Organizational climate, defined by Litwin and Stringer (1968) as "*a set of measurable characteristics that are directly or indirectly perceived by people living and working in the workplace, and that are supposed to affect their motivations and behavior*", consists of the attitudes and beliefs of individuals in the workplace; in other words, a continuous and general perception of the quality of organizational characteristics (Bloom, 2010; Taguiri, 1968). At this point, organizational climate comes to mind when based on the subjective interpretations of events and behaviors of employees in the organization, and this overlaps with objective reality. However, how workers perceive and interpret subjective perceptions, events and behaviors is more important than objective reality because the reaction of individuals to events is based on what those events mean to them. In other words, perceived reality is related to the role of employees and their values (Bloom, 2010).

Those who have done scientific research on organizational climate suggest that the climate of an institution affects the behavior and attitudes of people in that institution (Hoy, Tarter & Kottkamp, 1991; Judge, Thoreson, Bono & Patton, 2001; Weakliem & Frenkel, 2006). Accordingly, it is believed that those who have more positive feelings about the institution are more productive, thus making the institution they work in more effective. This situation increases the importance of organizational climate in educational institutions. This is because effective schools in which productive trainers are involved will ensure that the skills of individuals and communities are supported in the most qualified way.

### 1.1 Organizational Climate in Education

The organizational climate was first popularized in 1960 by George Sterns in his study of higher education institutions and later by the studies of Andrew Halpin and Don Croft (Owens & Valesky, 2011). The concept of organizational climate has been further developed by the use of these concepts in schools (Hoy, Tarter & Kottkamp, 1991). Different descriptive and measurement tools are used in the studies explaining the organizational climate but the relationship between the individuals in the organization is emphasized as common (Çalık & Kurt, 2010) and an evaluation of the individuals is given related to the organizations (Halis & Yaşar-Uğurlu, 2008).

As an educational organization, the organizational climate of the school, the ecological environment in which the school is located, the social environment, and the dynamic interaction between the organization and culture are the result. Individuals working at the school and students are part of this interaction. Their perception on organization is due to this interaction. Based on the ecological theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1994), the school climate reflects the processes in which all the individuals in the school actively participate and cooperate. According to Şirin (2010), taking into account the social and economic environment, the school climate with all its needs is an interactive process jointly established by pupils, teachers, and parents. Examining the interactions between these components of the school climate allows for a more qualified and productive learning environment.

### 1.2 Organizational Climate in Early Childhood Centers

Early childhood centers can be defined differently in terms of many characteristics such as size, type, age group addressed or the institution they depend on. However, in terms of organizational theories, more abstract definitions can be made in these institutions. Some institutions are positive and have an energetic and welcoming atmosphere in terms of the attitude of the employees but in some cases the opposite can be experienced. According to Bloom (2010), directors and teachers are dynamic, enthusiastic about their work and happy to be with children in warm and supportive centers with a positive atmosphere. On the other hand, where the overall atmosphere in the school is quite different it can be seen that the employees are reluctant to work with each other, with the children and with parents.

Bloom (2010) identified ten components of organizational climate in the light of the studies that she conducted for many years in early childhood centers. These components are collegiality, professional development, director support, clarity, reward system, decision-making, goal consensus, task orientation, physical environment and innovation.

*Collegiality:* Individuals are not isolated from others in the work environment but live a collective life in which they collaborate and exchange information and emotional support. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), all individuals are in need of care from others. Having such emotional support in the business environment is one of the

most important factors in providing a positive work environment (Bloom, 2010). Collegiality describes how employees approach each other in a school with a friendly and supportive attitude. Positive perceptions of early childhood teachers about the people they work with in the school are related to the quality of education. Positive perceptions of collegial support also lead to positive attitudes of teachers towards their own profession (Dennis, 2010).

*Professional Development:* Teachers need to continue their education while working in order to improve their knowledge and skills. Many scientific studies in the field of early childhood education emphasize that there is a strong relationship between children's developmental/educational outcomes, educational quality and professional support for teachers (Barnett, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Howes, 1997; Frede, Jung, Barnett, Lamy & Figueras, 2007). According to Bloom and Bella (2005), in addition to providing in-service training opportunities, teachers should be encouraged to progress in the stages of their careers. Teachers generally make a major contribution to school effectiveness and educational quality in schools where professional development and career advancement are supported.

*Director Support:* Research shows that not only teachers but also school directors are an important factor in quality and effectiveness in education (Howes, 1997; Howes, James & Ritchie, 2003). The amount and quality of feedback teachers receive from directors affects the quality of the education they provide. In addition, the feedback provided to the teachers gives the message that their work is valuable, thus ensuring that teachers perform better in the profession (Bloom, 2010).

Director support includes frequent constructive feedback on teacher performance, useful information, an equitable attitude towards employees, and encouraging employees to improve themselves professionally. Administrative support in early childhood education is among the most important predictors of teachers' positive perceptions about their work and the effectiveness of education (Rohacek, Adams & Kisker, 2010; Howes, James & Ritchie, 2003).

*Clarity:* The clear definition of the policies, regulations, programs, rules and responsibilities applied in early childhood centers is of great importance for the overall efficiency of the center. Clarity refers to the explicit identification and application of organizational functioning. Developing a clear understanding of what employees are doing and what they expect are among the components of a positive climate (Bloom, 2010). The lack of clarity in rules, regulations and organizational practices in a school results in increased work stress and even burnout (Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Glisson & James, 2002).

*Reward System:* Employees at educational institutions are able to compare themselves with their colleagues in terms of pay, promotions, rewards or praise. In addition, the fact that educators working in the field of early childhood education may think that they have low wages for the work they do may prevent their positive perceptions about the center they work in. For this reason, it is very important for early childhood centers to block inequality among the educators to create a positive organizational climate (Bloom, 2010).

*Decision-Making:* Decision-making in early childhood centers refers to the sharing of power among education and administrative staff, who decides which decisions are taken, and how people are referred to the decisions taken (Bloom, 2010). These decisions may include topics such as managerial, vocational, educational, financial issues or human resources, school-family relationships and evaluation.

In the decision-making process, healthy sharing between education and administrative staff ensures that employees have confidence in themselves, democratic decisions are taken and implemented at the institution, concrete achievements are reached, and school management is supported (Dennis, 2010). In order to have a positive organizational climate in early childhood centers, it is necessary to establish a decision-making structure that is flexible and facilitated by the participation of everyone working in the institution.

*Goal Consensus:* This component of organizational climate means developing a common vision for the school among employees. In particular, there should be common educational objectives on how children will go through the education process and what they will gain at the end. According to Bloom (2010), differences in individual characteristics, life philosophies, and professional experience make it difficult to reach consensus on goals. In this respect, ensuring compromise in the educational goals of the school reflects the skills of the individuals to tolerate differences and to be able to do teamwork.

*Task Orientation:* Task orientation focuses on the planning of tasks in an organization, completion of tasks on time, and the efficiency of the organization. It can be seen that time is used effectively in early childhood centers with a positive organizational climate where employees are not engaged in activities that prevent them from performing their primary tasks. In these institutions, the meetings are clearly planned with clear objectives and there are few delays in meetings or other activities (Bloom, Hentschel & Bella, 2010). However, having a positive organizational climate does not mean having a very strict regime because it is not possible to assess the opportunities that develop spontaneously in

institutions where there are very strict rules and practices. The task-oriented nature of an institution means that all employees are engaged with their primary tasks and that routines are unhindered and performed in a timely manner with the most effective use of time in accordance with specific goals.

*Physical setting:* The physical setting such as safety concerns, temperature, decor, materials and equipment may affect the perceptions and attitudes of employees towards the organization. The inadequacy of the necessary physical arrangements and materials can lead to a perceived stressful work environment. Ergonomically designed materials may make the education more effective (Bloom, 2010; Rohacek, Adams, & Kisker, 2010).

*Innovativeness:* Organizations with a positive organizational climate encourage employees to find creative solutions to problems. In addition, differences of opinion are valued and new approaches and practices in education are supported. Innovation is related to the leadership styles of the school directors because it is the job of the director to initiate a supportive process for change and then to monitor and sustain this innovative process. Such directors play a very important role in the identification of problems in school, necessary interventions, and a qualified and dynamic understanding of education (Bloom, Hentschel & Bella, 2010).

Considering the related literature, organizational climate is very important for educational institutions. However, there are few studies on the organizational climate in early childhood education especially in non-western countries such as Turkey. Consequently, in this study we aimed to examine the perceptions of Turkish early childhood teachers on organizational climate in the centers they work in.

### 1.3 The Current Study

The aim of this research was to examine the perceptions of early childhood teachers regarding the organizational climate of early childhood centers in Turkey. It is known that research into organizational climate in both educational sciences and other disciplines has a long history and the importance of organizational climate on institutions and individuals is widely accepted in these studies (Early et al., 2006; Dennis & O'Connor, 2013; Glisson & James, 2002; Schneider, Gunnarson & Niles-Jolly, 1994). However, research on organizational climate is not frequently encountered, especially in early childhood institutions. We believe that the current study will contribute to early childhood education research by examining the organizational climate as an out-of-class factor that may have an impact on teachers and education quality. In this context, the study aims to answer the following question: What are the perceptions of early childhood teachers regarding the organizational climate in their schools?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

The participants in the current study comprised a total of 214 preschool teachers. All of the teachers were female and worked in state-funded early childhood centers in an urban school district of Turkey. The professional experience duration of teachers varied between two months and 38 years. The average duration of professional experience was 13.9 years ( $SD=8.1$ ).

### 2.2 Measures

The information for this study was gathered using the Early Childhood Work Environment Scale (ECWES) developed by Bloom (2010). The ECWES provides an opportunity to collect multiple data sets to measure perceptions of the work environment and evaluates employee opinions on organizational climate components. In the questionnaire, the opinions of the teachers on the organizational climate of centers are evaluated with ten components. These components are: Collegiality, professional development, director support, clarity, reward system, decision-making, goal consensus, task orientation, physical environment and innovation. Teacher evaluations are taken separately for each component. In each component the lowest score is 0 and the highest is 10.

The components of the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey are independent of each other. As a result of the application of the survey, instead of obtaining a general total score, the components do not show a dimensional structure and are evaluated individually. In order to form the Turkish version of the questionnaire, the original English-language questionnaire was translated into Turkish by three language experts. Then, the Turkish version of the questionnaire was created by examining the different and common aspects between these translations. This Turkish form was translated back to English by three language experts who were different from the previous ones and different expressions between the two versions were corrected. The Turkish and English versions of the questionnaire were applied to early childhood teachers who had mastered both languages and the teachers received the same results from both versions. In order to determine the reliability and validity of the articles in the Turkish form, experts in the field were consulted. This is because the survey provides a single indicator measurement consisting of a different number of items related to the single subject (organizational climate) and does not show a factor structure. The assessments are based on the direct responses of participants. For this reason, instead of performing classical reliability analyses (Şencan, 2005; Trochim,

2012) we used the opinions of the seven field experts of using the Early Childhood Work Environment Questionnaire in Turkish culture.

In the evaluation of the opinions of the field experts, the content validity ratio of each item was calculated and the content validity index was determined in accordance with these ratios. Items with a content validity greater than 0.75 were accepted (Yurdugul, 2005). As a result of the calculation of the content validity rates, the field experts expressed their positive opinions regarding the use of all items of the questionnaire and we concluded that the questionnaire was appropriate for use in this research.

### 2.3 Data Collection and Analytical Approach

Participants completed questionnaires about their perceptions regarding the organizational climate. Each participant provided a written consent form. Confidentiality was provided by hiding their personal information during data analyses. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were run to examine the nature of teacher perceptions on organizational climate.

After obtaining the IRB and school permissions for the research, the data collection process was carried out by the researchers. The questionnaires were delivered to the teachers in a closed envelope and returned in a closed envelope once completed.

SPSS 22 program was used to organize research data, to calculate descriptive statistics and to test the relationships. Descriptive statistics were calculated by percentage and frequency analysis and Pearson Correlation Analysis was used for correlation tests among variables.

### 3. Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. According to the table, the majority of the teachers' educational level was a 4-year bachelor's degree ( $n=159$ , 74.3%). In terms of the participants' daily working hours, a large majority of the teachers worked half days ( $n=166$ , 77.6%).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the teachers

		N	(%)
Educational level	High School	1	0,5
	College	43	20,1
	Bachelor's Degree	159	74,3
	Master's Degree	11	5,1
Daily working hours (DWH)	Full day	48	22,4
	Half day	166	77,6
	Total	214	100,0

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of participants' opinions on organizational climate components. According to this table, the teachers gave the highest score to the collegiality component ( $M=6.0$ ,  $SD=2.7$ ). The lowest score was the professional development component ( $M=1.8$ ,  $SD=2.1$ ).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of teacher opinions on organizational climate

Organizational Climate Variables	n	Mean	S.D.
Collegiality	214	6,0	2,7
Professional development	214	1,8	2,1
Director support	214	5,6	2,2
Clarity	214	3,2	2,0
Reward system	214	5,6	1,0
Decision making	214	5,1	2,7
Goal consensus	214	5,6	2,7
Task orientation	214	5,8	2,3
Physical setting	214	5,7	2,6
Innovativeness	214	4,8	2,9

In the research, the relationship between the demographic characteristics of teachers and their views on organizational climate were examined and the results of this relationship are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Association between teacher demographic variables and opinions on organizational climate

Variable <sup>1</sup>	Organizational Climate Variables <sup>2</sup>									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Profes.experience	-,011	-,206**	-,186**	-,184**	-,015	-,094	-,183**	-,184**	-,030	-,220**
Edu.level	,016	-,065	,027	-,027	,173**	,006	,017	,008	,023	,024
DWH <sup>3</sup>	-,034	-,138*	-,022	-,197**	,081	-,055	-,096	-,123*	-,163**	-,145*

\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .001$

<sup>1</sup> Demographic qualification of teachers

<sup>2</sup> Organizational climate components: 1. Collegiality, 2. Clarity, 3. Director support, 4. Professional development, 5. Reward system, 6. Decision making, 7. Goal consensus, 8. Task orientation, 9. Physical setting, 10. Innovativeness

<sup>3</sup> Daily working hours of teachers: Half day and full day

According to Table 3, there is a significant and negative relationship between the teachers' professional experience and some of the components of organizational climate such as clarity, director support, professional development, goal consensus, task orientation and innovativeness. According to this result, as the teachers' experience increases their opinions regarding the clarity of the school's rules and practices, director support, opportunities for professional development, and task-oriented and innovation-related issues become more negative. In addition, teachers who work full-time have more positive opinions on some of the organizational climate components such as clarity, professional development, task orientation, physical environment, and innovativeness. According to this result, it can be seen that the teachers who work full-time have more positive evaluations about the organizational climate of their schools. Full-time teachers provided more positive opinions regarding the clarity of the school rules and practices, professional development opportunities, task-orientation, the physical conditions of the school and innovative implementations. The only organizational climate component that had a significant and positive relationship with the educational level of the teachers was the reward system. According to this relationship, as the education level of teachers increases their opinion about the reward system in the schools becomes more positive.

#### 4. Discussion

This study examined the organizational climate of early childhood education centers and the opinions of early childhood teachers were evaluated related to the organizational climate in Turkish early childhood centers. Results showed that the most positively expressed organizational climate component is collegiality. According to the opinions of teachers, the organizational climate component that is evaluated as the most inadequate with the least points is professional development. We also found that teachers with more experience rated their centers' organizational climate with lower scores, while full-time teachers reported more positive opinions regarding the center they work in. It is noteworthy that the professional experience of the teachers in the study had a significant but negative relationship with organizational climate variables (clarity, director support, professional development, goal consensus, goal orientation and innovativeness). Accordingly, as the professional experience of teachers increases, their evaluations of these organizational climate variables become more negative. This finding can be evaluated in the light of some previous research. For example, in a study conducted by Dennis (2010) in 37 early childhood education institutions, a strong relationship was found between teacher opinions of the organizational climate and their professional experience. The researcher found that the teachers who had more experience were more affected by the organizational climate of the schools where they work. In addition, Dennis (2010) also found that teachers with higher levels of education were less affected by the organizational climate of the school. A similar result was found in the study conducted by Dennis and O'Connor (2013), who revealed that there was a strong and negative relationship between the professional experience of teachers and the organizational climate. According to this study, teachers with more professional experience make more comparisons between existing work environments and previous environments. They are affected more by working environments and therefore become more critical. On the other hand, new teachers do not have the experience to compare their existing work environments and instead focus on their own professional competence and class environments rather than the conditions of the work environment (Dennis and O'Connor, 2013). These findings can also be explained by the model of professional developmental stages for teaching candidates proposed by Fuller (1969). According to Fuller, pre-service teachers go through four stages related to their professional development namely the non-teaching stage, the self-anxiety stage, the task-oriented stage and the impact stage. According to this model,

teachers with less experience focus primarily on their competencies rather than on the work environment. Although this model was developed for pre-service teachers, we thought that the stages mentioned in the model might also apply to teachers in the system. The model developed by Katz in 1969 to explain the professional development of early childhood teachers is similar to the Fuller model. In this model, the stages of early childhood teaching are explained from the beginning and teacher needs at each stage are discussed. According to the model, teachers who are less experienced in the profession need to professionally prove themselves. Also, the most important issue for new teachers is fulfilling their responsibilities towards the needs, development and learning of the group they teach (Katz, 2014). As we show in the results of the current study, as early childhood teachers work longer in the profession they begin to focus more on external issues and therefore may be more sensitive and critical of factors such as organizational climate.

Findings from the research conducted by Iutcovich et al. (1997) show similarities with the current study. They found that the quality of the classroom has a positive relationship with professional development, clarity, reward system, task orientation and goal consensus in early childhood institutions. McGinty, Justice and Rimm-Kaufman (2008) also found that the positive attitudes of early childhood teachers towards the center were significantly correlated with a positive attitude towards their profession. A study on the association between educational quality and administrative implications in early childhood education was conducted by Lower and Cassidy (2007). According to the results of this research, there is a positive association between the organizational climate and the quality of education. In addition, it has been determined that the administrative practices of the school are related to the quality of education. Teachers who have a positive perception about their directors eagerly participate in educational practices.

In the current research, professional development was the component of organizational climate that was evaluated by teachers as the most inadequate. However, according to the research conducted by Mantyla, Uusiautti and Maatta (2012), the lack of professional development resources negatively affects teachers. Teachers develop more positive opinions about their work environment when they focus on their profession and spend more time with children. Teachers who receive professional guidance implement more qualified language and literacy activities (Dennis, 2010; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). All these studies on organizational climate in early childhood education show that all the components of the organizational climate are very important for the professional attitudes of the teachers, the quality of education and a positive classroom environment. In addition, these studies clearly demonstrate the importance of having a clear, healthy and positive organizational climate in increasing the quality of early childhood education.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study we examined the organizational climate in terms of the factors that might affect the quality of teachers and early childhood education. We aimed to contribute to research in this field in a wider perspective. Research on organizational climate in early childhood education reveals that there is a strong relationship between an open and positive organizational climate and positive teacher behaviors, attitudes and qualified practices. Each of these studies shows that all the components of organizational climate are important for school productivity, teacher effectiveness and educational quality in early childhood education. In the light of these findings, the importance of improvements in the organizational climate components of early childhood centers is clear. For this reason, teachers and directors should participate in in-service training programs and increase their knowledge of early childhood education. In addition, effective, egalitarian, tolerant and supportive leadership skills of directors should be developed. Directors and teachers need to improve their skills in creating a positive organizational climate. Intervention programs for all employees in early childhood centers should be developed and their impact on the organizational climate, quality of education and children's outcomes should be examined.

As a result of this research, comprehensive future studies about organizational climate in early childhood education are very important. This is because multifaceted policies that will be developed considering the scientific findings will help improve the quality of education and support the cognitive, social, emotional and academic skills that our children will need throughout their lives.

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