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School climate: perceptions of secondary school students. A systematic review (2024–2025)

Clima escolar: percepciones de los estudiantes de educación secundaria. Una revision sistemática (2024–2025)

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Abstract

This study conducts a systematic review of the school climate and its influence on the academic and social-emotional experience of secondary school students. The main objective was to analyze students' perceptions of coexistence, sense of belonging, and the impact of interactions on their performance and well-being. To this end, the PRISMA protocol criteria were applied, considering articles published between 2024 and 2025 in indexed databases, which allowed for the selection of 24 studies from diverse contexts such as the United States, China, Chile, South Africa, Spain, and Japan. The results show that a positive school climate is closely associated with a decrease in violent behavior, a strengthening of academic commitment, and the prevention of emerging problems such as bullying, school dropout, and problematic internet use. Likewise, it is observed that factors such as cultural diversity, gender equity, and socioeconomic conditions significantly mediate the construction of perceptions about the educational environment. The review also confirms that institutional management and teacher support are key to promoting inclusive and participatory environments that can respond to the contemporary demands of secondary education. It concludes that consolidating a school climate based on respect, empathy, and collaboration not only enhances learning but also contributes to the comprehensive education of students, reaffirming their right to a quality education in democratic and diverse contexts.

Keywords: school climate, high school students, student perception.

Resumen

El presente estudio desarrolla una revisión sistemática sobre el clima escolar y su influencia en la experiencia académica y socioemocional de los estudiantes de educación secundaria. El objetivo principal fue analizar las percepciones estudiantiles respecto a la convivencia, el sentido de pertenencia y el impacto de las interacciones en su rendimiento y bienestar. Para ello, se aplicaron los criterios del protocolo PRISMA, considerando artículos publicados entre 2024 y 2025 en bases de datos indexadas, lo que permitió seleccionar 24 investigaciones provenientes de contextos diversos como Estados Unidos, China, Chile, Sudáfrica, España y Japón. Los resultados evidencian que un clima escolar positivo se asocia estrechamente con la disminución de conductas violentas, el fortalecimiento del compromiso académico y la prevención de problemáticas emergentes como el acoso, la deserción escolar o el uso problemático de internet. Asimismo, se observa que factores como la diversidad cultural, la equidad de género y las condiciones socioeconómicas median de manera significativa en la construcción de percepciones sobre el entorno educativo. La revisión también confirma que la gestión institucional y el apoyo docente resultan determinantes para promover ambientes inclusivos y participativos, capaces de responder a las demandas contemporáneas de la educación secundaria. Se concluye que la consolidación de un clima escolar basado en el respeto, la empatía y la colaboración no solo potencia el aprendizaje, sino que también contribuye a la formación integral de los estudiantes, reafirmando su derecho a una educación de calidad en contextos democráticos y diversos.

Palabras clave: clima escolar, estudiantes de secundaria, percepción estudiantil.

Introduction

In recent years, educational research has highlighted the importance of school climate as an essential component for learning, coexistence, and the holistic development of students. Various studies have indicated that this phenomenon not only affects academic performance but also contributes to the establishment of more

harmonious social relationships and the prevention of violence in educational settings (Calderón-González & Vera-Noriega, 2022; Tejeda Flores & Aguilar Riveroll, 2023). In this context, the creation of positive and respectful environments has become a priority objective for educational systems in Latin America.

Within this framework, positive discipline emerges as a pedagogical approach that replaces punitive methods with strategies based on respect and empathy. Its implementation has demonstrated favorable effects in reducing disruptive behaviors and fostering an environment of trust and safety in the classroom. Recent research confirms that when respectful relationships are prioritized, students develop a greater commitment to their learning and exhibit improved academic performance (Prado et al., 2024; Orozco, 2023).

Analyzing school climate also requires a thorough examination of the relational dynamics between students and teachers, as these interactions are crucial for how the educational environment is perceived. In this regard, it has been documented that the social dimension of school climate directly contributes to peaceful coexistence, conflict resolution, and violence prevention (Rioseco & Barría, 2021). Therefore, understanding how students construct their perceptions of their educational environment is key to designing inclusive and effective pedagogical policies and practices.

On the other hand, contexts of cultural diversity and migration have shaped new realities in the region's educational systems. In countries like Chile, the arrival of foreign students has transformed classrooms, demanding pedagogical responses that promote equity and recognition of difference. In this scenario, it has been identified that cultural pluralism and school life conditions directly influence students' academic self-concept and quality of life (Lahoz, 2021). These transformations necessitate a rethinking of the concept of educational environment as a multidimensional phenomenon that incorporates safety, interpersonal relationships, and social inclusion.

Evidence from Mexico also provides relevant insights for the discussion. Research conducted in the northwest of the country shows that students significantly value school climate and associate it with respect in interactions and the management of violent situations within institutions. These findings underscore the need to strengthen coexistence and participation strategies that recognize student voice as a fundamental axis for educational management (Juraz Rolón et al., 2024; Calderón-González & Vera-Noriega, 2022).

In this context, the present study aims to analyze the perceptions that secondary school students construct regarding school climate, focusing on the social dimension and the factors influencing their academic self-concept and educational well-being. The research is guided by three objectives: (1) to analyze the perception of school climate from the perspective of secondary school students, (2) to describe how they perceive interpersonal relationships with their peers, and (3) to explain the educational elements that influence the creation of a positive school environment.

Methodology

This study followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency and rigor in the systematic review process. The search was conducted exclusively in the Scopus database, chosen for its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the fields of social sciences and education.

Search strategy

The advanced search strategy was designed to identify studies focused on school climate from the perspective of secondary education students. The final query combined the following terms:

(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("school climate" OR "school environment" OR "school atmosphere" OR "learning climate")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("secondary school" OR "high school" OR "secondary education" OR "middle school")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (perception OR perceptions OR perspective OR perspectives OR views OR attitudes OR experiences OR "student voice" OR evaluation OR assessment)) AND PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND PUBYEAR > 2023 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI")) AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD , "School Climate"))

Eligibility criteria

Studies included in the review had to:

(a) address secondary or middle education contexts;
(b) analyze students' perceptions, perspectives, or attitudes towards school climate; and
(c) correspond to articles published in peer-reviewed journals.

Studies were excluded if they:

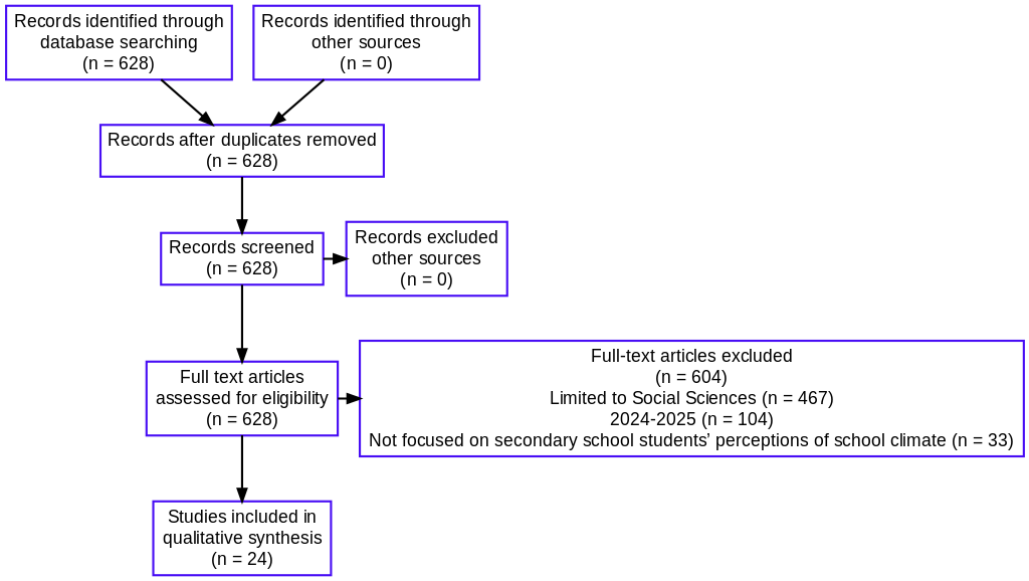
(a) fell outside the temporal range of 2020–2025;
(b) focused exclusively on teachers or administrators; and
(c) did not consider school climate as a primary construct.

Selection process

The initial search identified 628 records. After reviewing titles and abstracts, 604 studies were excluded for not specifically analyzing secondary students' perceptions of school climate. A total of 24 articles met the inclusion criteria and were considered in the qualitative synthesis. No duplicates were identified, nor were documents added from other sources.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the process of identification, selection, and inclusion of the studies considered in the systematic review



Note. Content generated from https://hollyhartman.shinyapps.io/PRISMAFlowDiagram/

Data extraction and synthesis

From each selected study, information was extracted regarding authors, publication year, country or context, methodological approach, and key findings related to school climate and student perception. The synthesis was developed narratively and thematically, highlighting dimensions such as school belonging, interpersonal relationships, academic engagement, well-being, and educational performance.

The integration of the 24 articles provided a methodologically robust overview of student perceptions of school climate in secondary education contexts, encompassing research conducted in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Africa. These studies not only validated measurement instruments (Romero et al., 2025; Zynuddin & Sumintono, 2024) but also explored critical dimensions such as the influence of identity and cultural diversity (Mack et al., 2025; Scrofani et al., 2025; Krauss et al., 2024), student participation in creating positive environments (Edling et al., 2025; Renick & Reich, 2024), and the relationship between school climate, well-being, and academic performance (Yang, 2025; Voight et al., 2024; Verner-Filion et al., 2023).

Moreover, studies linking school climate with emerging issues such as violence, bullying, and absenteeism (DiRussa et al., 2025; Çimen, 2025; Pérez-Marco et al., 2025), problematic internet use (Yuan et al., 2025), and academic burnout (Tang, 2024) were highlighted. Other works analyzed specific interventions aimed at strengthening the educational environment, such as coexistence and prevention programs (López et al., 2025; Washington-Nortey et al., 2024; Adhia et al., 2024).

Table 1

Selected studies on school climate from the perspective of secondary students (2024–2025)

Author(s)	Year	Country/Context	Relation to the Topic
Mack et al.	2025	USA	Analyzes how intersectional identities influence perceptions of school climate and violence.
Scrofani et al.	2025	USA	Review of school climate among transgender secondary students.
Yang	2025	China	Examines the link between school climate, engagement, and life satisfaction.
Romero et al.	2025	USA	Validation of a school climate model through confirmatory analysis.
Edling et al.	2025	Sweden	Student experiences on how school staff shape a positive climate.
DiRussa et al.	2025	USA	Impact of school climate on students' willingness to intervene in bullying.
Çimen	2025	South Africa	School climate as a moderator in belonging and delinquent behaviors.
Qi et al.	2025	Rural China	Relationship between climate perception and positive youth development in impoverished areas.
López et al.	2025	Chile	Longitudinal study on the evolution of school climate and violence.
Pérez-Marco et al.	2025	Spain/Norway	School climate and absenteeism patterns in adolescents.
Yuan et al.	2025	China	Longitudinal influence of school climate on problematic internet use.
Welsh et al.	2024	USA	Student perceptions of climate, staff, and discipline in secondary schools.
Zynuddin & Sumintono	2024	Malaysia	Validation of a school climate instrument among secondary students.
Krauss et al.	2024	Malaysia/China	Positive school climate and emotional engagement among ethnic minorities.
Renick & Reich	2024	USA	Youth participatory research to improve school climate during the pandemic.
Voight et al.	2024	USA	Urban students' perceptions of school climate and academic performance.
Verner-Filion et al.	2023	Canada	Mediating effect of self-determined motivation on school climate and grades.
Chuang et al.	2024	USA	Racial differences in perceptions of authoritative school climate and victimization.
Kelly et al.	2024	USA	School climate as a moderator in bullying behaviors and academic performance.
Ryberg et al.	2024	USA	Technical assistance model and improvements in students' perceptions of climate.
Washington-Nortey et al.	2024	USA	Impact of the Olweus program on interpersonal relationships in secondary education.
Adhia et al.	2024	USA	Improvements in school environments to prevent sexual violence among LGBTQ+ youth.
Tang	2024	China	School climate as a predictor of academic burnout among secondary students.
Hirata et al.	2024	Japan	Multiple perceptions (teachers and students) on school climate and associated factors.

Note. Studies focused on student perceptions of school climate in secondary education were prioritized; some complementary studies also consider teachers' perspectives or associated factors (violence, burnout, absenteeism, etc.).

Overall, this review reinforces the relevance of a systematic and contextualized approach that considers both direct student perceptions and the structural and relational factors shaping school climate in contemporary secondary education.

Results and discussion

The study of school climate in secondary education has gained increasing relevance in recent years, as it constitutes a decisive factor for student learning, coexistence, and well-being. Recent research provides a comprehensive view that encompasses aspects such as inclusion, diversity, validation of instruments, violence prevention, and the strengthening of interpersonal relationships. Through various geographical and methodological contexts, a body of evidence has emerged that allows for a deeper understanding of the complexity of school climate and its implications for academic and social life.

Table 2

Thematic axes of selected studies on school climate in secondary education (2024–2025)

Thematic Axis	Associated Studies	Description
Identity, diversity, and equity	Mack et al. (2025); Scrofani et al. (2025); Krauss et al. (2024); Chuang et al. (2024); Adhia et al. (2024); Hirata et al. (2024)	Research focused on inclusion, cultural diversity, intersectional identities, and equity in school climate perception.
Well-being, mental health, and academic motivation	Yang (2025); Voight et al. (2024); Verner-Filion et al. (2023); Yuan et al. (2025); Tang (2024)	Studies analyzing the relationship between school climate, student engagement, motivation, psychological well-being, and academic performance.
Violence, bullying, and school safety	DiRussa et al. (2025); Çimen (2025); López et al. (2025); Pérez-Marco et al. (2025); Kelly et al. (2024); Washington-Nortey et al. (2024)	Works exploring how school climate influences violence prevention, bullying, antisocial behavior, and absenteeism.
Instruments, validation, and participatory methodologies	Romero et al. (2025); Zynuddin & Sumintono (2024); Renick & Reich (2024); Ryberg et al. (2024)	Research validating instruments for measuring school climate or applying participatory methodologies (YPAR, technical assistance).
Interpersonal relationships and role of school staff	Edling et al. (2025); Welsh et al. (2024)	Studies highlighting the importance of relationships among students, teachers, and educational staff in constructing school climate.

Note. The table organizes the 24 articles included in the systematic review according to five main thematic axes: identity and diversity, well-being, violence and safety, instruments and methodologies, and interpersonal relationships.

Identity, diversity, and equity

Studies indicate that perceptions of school climate are influenced by factors associated with cultural, gender, and social diversity. Mack et al. (2025) demonstrate that intersectional identities condition how students experience violence and coexistence. Complementarily, Scrofani et al. (2025) analyze the experiences of transgender students in secondary education, highlighting the barriers and challenges they face in achieving an inclusive environment. Krauss et al. (2024) emphasize how a positive climate strengthens the emotional commitment of ethnic minorities, while Chuang et al. (2024) examine racial differences regarding authoritative perceptions and victimization experiences.

Other contributions within this axis underline the need to improve educational equity. Adhia et al. (2024) show that inclusive school environments help prevent sexual violence against LGBTQ+ youth, while Hirata et al. (2024) contrast the perceptions of teachers and students to understand the convergences and divergences surrounding school climate. Together, these works reaffirm that addressing diversity and equity is essential to ensuring a respectful and meaningful educational experience for all students.

Well-being, mental health, and academic motivation

Regarding the axis of well-being and emotional health, Yang (2025) asserts that life satisfaction and identification with the school mediate the relationship between school climate and academic engagement. Voight et al. (2024) delve into urban students' perceptions, demonstrating that a positive climate translates into better academic outcomes. Similarly, Verner-Filion et al. (2023) emphasize the role of self-determined motivation as a mediator of performance, linking the quality of school climate with academic achievement.

Complementarily, Yuan et al. (2025) indicate that school climate has longitudinal effects on problematic internet use among adolescents, while Tang (2024) reveals that perceiving an unfavorable environment increases

levels of academic burnout. These findings collectively highlight that emotional health and motivation cannot be dissociated from the context in which school experiences occur, underscoring the need for comprehensive support within educational institutions.

Violence, bullying, and school safety

The axis of violence, bullying, and safety encompasses a broad line of research. DiRussa et al. (2025) analyze how school climate influences students' willingness to intervene in bullying situations, while Çimen (2025) presents the role of climate as a moderator in the relationship between school belonging and delinquent behaviors. In the Latin American context, López et al. (2025) present a longitudinal study on the evolution of climate and violence in Chile, highlighting the need for sustained policies on school coexistence.

Complementarily, Pérez-Marco et al. (2025) investigate the connections between school climate and absenteeism patterns among adolescents; Kelly et al. (2024) demonstrate its moderating role in the relationship between bullying behaviors and academic performance; and Washington-Nortey et al. (2024) analyze the impact of the Olweus program on improving interpersonal relationships in secondary education. Collectively, these studies affirm that the prevention of school violence requires both a climate of trust and coherent, sustained institutional intervention strategies.

Instruments, validation, and participatory methodologies

Regarding the axis of instruments and validation, Romero et al. (2025) validate a school climate model through confirmatory analysis, while Zynuddin and Sumintono (2024) assess the validity and reliability of an instrument applied to secondary students in Malaysia. These studies contribute methodological rigor to the field by providing reliable and comparable tools for measuring school climate.

Simultaneously, Renick and Reich (2024) implement youth participatory action research (YPAR) to improve school climate during the pandemic, and Ryberg et al. (2024) demonstrate how a technical assistance model enhances student perceptions. This axis underscores the importance of participatory and contextualized methodologies that legitimize students' voices in institutional change processes.

Interpersonal relationships and role of school staff

Finally, the axis of interpersonal relationships and the role of school staff highlights the importance of human interactions in building positive school climates. Edling et al. (2025) document students' experiences regarding how the attention and actions of school personnel shape or limit the creation of a favorable environment. Meanwhile, Welsh et al. (2024) examine how perceptions of staff, discipline, and climate intertwine in the student experience, showing that the school-student relationship is a fundamental pillar in the formation of healthy educational environments.

Interpretative synthesis

Collectively, the 24 studies analyzed allow for the establishment of five main axes that reveal the multidimensional nature of school climate. The evidence shows that factors linked to identity, well-being, violence, assessment methodologies, and interpersonal relationships intersect and determine both educational quality and student experience. This comprehensive view helps lay a solid foundation for future research and for designing educational policies aimed at coexistence, inclusion, and academic development.

Conclusions

The reviewed evidence confirms that school climate is a central axis in constructing healthy, inclusive educational environments that promote the holistic development of students. The systematic analysis of recent studies demonstrates that factors such as social interactions, coexistence management, and the perception of institutional support not only impact students' daily experiences but also directly affect their academic performance and socio-emotional well-being. These findings reinforce the need for educational institutions to prioritize policies and practices that promote active student participation in shaping their school environment and in decision-making processes that affect their educational lives.

Furthermore, cultural diversity, the inherent challenges of adolescence, and the intensive use of digital technologies emerge as variables that complicate the relationship between school climate and learning outcomes. Acknowledging these realities allows for a clearer understanding of both the opportunities and tensions faced by educational systems in global and local contexts. The evidence suggests that a positive school climate is not merely the absence of violence or conflict, but involves the construction of an educational ecosystem where

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inclusion, equity, and student participation are guiding principles of pedagogical practices and democratic coexistence.

Finally, there is a need to continue developing research that integrates comparative perspectives and multidisciplinary approaches to gain a deeper understanding of how various sociocultural contexts shape perceptions and experiences of school climate. Strengthening these lines of inquiry is essential for designing public policies and pedagogical strategies aimed at promoting social cohesion, preventing emerging issues, and ensuring the right to quality education in equitable, respectful, and participatory environments.

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