

## Look both ways before crossing: Using a triangulation of art-based methods to transform student – staff relationships as it relates to school climate

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**Abstract:** By engaging in an art(s)-based action research case study, youth from a Montréal school considered student-staff relationships as they relate to school climate. Three arts-based data collection methods (timeline, relational map, and photovoice) were used to gain awareness on how relationships with staff constituted the primary determinant of student behavior, student engagement, and a robust school climate. Positive relationships were found to be facilitated by staff who authentically engage with students' lives outside the classroom, demonstrate equity and discretion in classroom management practices, and allow for redemption following rule infractions or conflicts. With the goal of enacting sustainable change in the school environment, participants collaborated in drafting a *Call to Action* addressed to the school's administration, advocating for the creation of a student council as a space to voice their positions, build better communication with staff, and foster a healthy school climate. The paper thus illustrates how art(s) based action-research can contribute to transforming school environments.

**Keywords:** Participatory Action Research; Arts-based methods; Student – staff relationships; School climate; Student council

### **Mira a ambos lados antes de cruzar: Utilizando la triangulación de métodos de investigación-acción basada en las artes para estudiar las relaciones entre estudiantes y personal en relación con el clima escolar**

**Resumen:** Al participar en un estudio de caso de investigación-acción basado en el arte, los jóvenes de una escuela de Montreal consideraron las relaciones entre estudiantes y personal del centro educativo en relación con el clima escolar. Se utilizaron tres métodos de recopilación de datos basados en las artes (línea de tiempo, mapa relacional y fotovoz) para generar conciencia sobre cómo las relaciones con el personal constituían el principal determinante del comportamiento estudiantil, la participación de los estudiantes y un clima escolar sólido. Se descubrió que las relaciones positivas son facilitadas por el personal que se involucra auténticamente con la vida de los estudiantes fuera del aula, demuestra equidad y discreción en las prácticas de gestión del aula y permite la redención después de infracciones o conflictos. Con el objetivo de implementar un cambio sostenible en el entorno escolar, los participantes colaboraron en la redacción de un *Llamado a la Acción* dirigido a la administración de la escuela, abogando por la creación de un consejo estudiantil como un espacio para expresar sus

posiciones, construir una mejor comunicación con el personal y fomentar un clima escolar saludable. Por lo tanto, el artículo ilustra cómo la investigación-acción basada en el arte puede contribuir a transformar los entornos escolares.

**Palabras clave:** Investigación-acción participativa, métodos basados en las artes, relaciones entre estudiantes y personal de centros escolares, clima escolar, consejo estudiantil

## 1. Introduction

Despite their often-common roots, school climate research is reflected in the diversity of climate typologies that have evolved (Marraccini et al., 2020). “Generally accepted as the quality and character of school life, the discussion around school climate is linked to differences among researchers in theory base, the hypothesized interrelationships of variables, unit of measurement choices, and the validity of subjective and qualitative data often based on participant or observer perception” (Cohen, et al, 2009, p. 182). Rather than shy away from the task of situating new research within the existing literature, here we move beyond viewing school climate as an undesirable albatross or an unattainable unicorn, but rather stand with Anderson (1982) in her seminal review of envisioning school climate as a phoenix, born of the ashes of past school effects research. Here, school climate is positioned as a “multidimensional construct consisting of a combination of interrelated school characteristics shown to determine student learning and behavior, and one that schools could [and should] successfully target for change” (Anderson, 1982, p. 372).

While the importance of school climate has been established, discerning the quality of a school climate has remained largely rooted in the data associated with office referrals or student grades (Daily, et al., 2019; Gietz & McIntosh, 2014). While academic success and a decrease in office referrals and suspensions merit accolades, how is one to determine the cause(s) of these fluctuations, or if these are even the criteria we should be using as a barometer to a healthy school climate? To address this query, we focus rather on the social dimension of school climate, specifically, student-staff relationships, as this rapport is seen to correlate with academic achievement, preventing behavior problems, and promoting social and emotional well-being (Bear, 2020).

Giving pride of place to students as active stakeholders and experts on their own experiences, this examination propels against traditional research, which can be self-serving, extractive, and where the “passive participation of children have historically been instrumentalized” (Loignon, et al, 2020, p. 211). Employing an Action Research methodology, youth are invited to participate in creating a space where, while learning the research process, “they could potentially transform themselves, those they work with, and the systems of which they are an intrinsic part” (Seeley, 2011, p. 84). With the goal of seeking insight beyond the intellectual, but rather through socially constructed experiential knowing, youth participants in this study were immersed in three arts-based data collection methods; relational map, timeline, and photovoice. “Recognized for engaging communities in action research processes that transcend age, education, language, and cultural barriers,” arts-based methods lean into children’s natural gifts for self-expression to “re-thread relationships, re-encounter themselves, and develop sensitivities to the complex challenges facing their community, in a space