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## **Analysis of Institutional Climate at High Performing Schools: The case of St. James Senior High School, Sunyani, Ghana**

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### **Abstract**

A mixed-method design adopting a non-experimental survey and a basic interpretive study was conducted to analyse the institutional climate of high performing schools with the focus on Saint James Senior High School. Data were collected using a closed-ended Likert type items from a defined population of all the 43 academic staff and six management members of the school and a semi-structured interview protocol from 10 purposefully-selected heads and assistant heads of departments. The study revealed that there is a positive school climate showing respondents having a high level of institutional identity, strong collegiality, favourable supervisory styles, and a good sense of professionalism. These four elements of the positive climate correlate strongly with institutional effectiveness at St. James Senior High School. The study further revealed that St. James Senior High School has achieved a climate of success through professional development workshops, team reflective practices, and supportive school leadership.

**Key words:** school climate, school improvement, learning outcomes, student performance, test scores.

### **Introduction**

Institutions have a defined mission to accomplish. According to Fullan (2003), institutions exist to address authentic human needs for individuals and provide support for the common good of society. Schools are expected to perform specific tasks in the society and it is the school's mission that gives indication of what those specific tasks are. For example, in addition to preparing students to pass standardized tests, schools are to teach students to be adaptable, creative, innovative, and to have information processing skills and be able to use technology

to solve problems (Amakyi, 2017). A school's strive towards high performance and the attainment of its mission are driven by the beliefs, assumptions, expectations, norms, and values, both shared and idiosyncratic to individual members of the school. Thus, the extent to which a school realizes its mission is predicated on myriad of factors, notable among them is the climate of the school (Nelson & Quick, 1994).

A school's climate, which is the descriptive beliefs and perceptions individuals hold of the school (Rousseau, 1990), is pivotal in determining the performance of the school. According to Morgan (2006), the feelings evoked by the way members of a school community interact with each other, with outsiders, and with their environment, including the physical space they occupy constitute the climate of the school. School climate may be seen as a combination of shared history, expectations, unwritten rules, and social mores that affect the behaviours of everyone in the school (Kowalski, 2010).

Mullins (2016) sees the school climate as the relatively enduring quality of the internal environment of the school and proceeds to give a three-prong description of a school climate: (a) it is experienced by the members of the school community, (b) it influences their behaviour, and (c) it can be described in terms of the values of a particular set of characteristics or attributes of the school.

The concept of school climate is an important aspect to consider because it greatly affects the school's ability to utilize its technical and human resources. Every school has a climate of its own. This climate affects how members of the school community behave which ultimately impacts their performance. Sarason (1996) intimates that a school climate is not a goal unto itself but a key link in a school's ability to maintain and improve performance.

Literature is replete with findings of relationships between institutional climate and various measures of institutional success, such as staff retention and empowerment in decision making, improved student performance (Reichers & Schneider, 1990), and increased productivity (Patterson, Warr, & West, 2004). Reviewing extant research on institutional climate, Kopelman, Brief, and Guzzo (1990) established a nexus between institutional climate and institutional performance. They concluded that if the institution has a positive institutional climate, then favourable conditions are created for the institution to attain high performance. A positive institutional climate

includes attributes commonly found in high performing institutions (For example, collegiality, adequate resources, trust, and high expectations).

On the other hand, if the institution has a negative climate, then the institution experiences unfavourable conditions which become a hindrance to the institution's efforts to achieve high performance. In a negative institutional climate, members of the institution have inadequate resources, function independently, and are guided by counterproductive convictions and unethical practices (Stringer, 2002).

Creating an enabling school climate is sine qua non to attaining success in the school. Carr, Schmidt, Ford, and Deshon (2003) identify institutional climate as a critical determinant of individual behaviour in institutions. Institutional climate is shaped by employee perception which is contingent on an internal drive to satisfy an unsatisfied need and the will to achieve. Carr et. al., (2003) observe that institutional climate is the driving force behind the level of commitment employees choose to exhibit in the institution. The level of commitment enables members of the school community to strive to (a) do things better, (b) outperform others, (c) establish internal standards of excellence, and (d) set realistic goal accomplishment (Cunningham, 2002).

Kowalski (2010) sees climate as an intervening variable in the process between input and output, and one that has a modifying effect on this process. Climate affects institutional and psychological processes and thus acquires an influence over the results of institutional operations. It thus behoves schools to endeavour to create the climate that will facilitate high performance. However, many schools fail to cultivate the enabling climate such as, emphasizing creativity and innovation, staff commitment, retention of their most highly effective staff and resource availability to succeed.

In an environment where demand for stewardship and accountability of school leadership is high and institutions are expected to perform creditably well, benchmarking best-operating-practice (BOP) of high performing school provides a path to enhancing school performance. Expectedly, the school climate of high performing schools, especially the ones making giant leaps in recent years, has come under scrutiny. The inquiry centers largely on identifying schools adjudged to be high performing institutions and interrogating their climate to determine the type and nature of climate that facilitates the attainment and sustenance of high performance.

McEwan (2008) highlights three key elements—the climate, the learning, and the people—as the defining characteristics of a high performing school. These three elements impact each other and the results are manifested in a high performing school. McEwan identifies a high performing school as having a climate that is academically focused; multi-direction communication channels that keep information flowing among the school head, staff, students, and parents; members of the school-community agreeing on parameters of acceptable behaviour; high academic expectations for students; teachers are well-trained, motivated, and use methods that produce results; and students are motivated, disciplined, self-directed, and eager to learn. In a high performing school, the school head sets the school agenda, communicates the school's mission, determines what gets measured and noticed, and distributes the necessary resources. The school boasts of a collective effort to sustain innovations and create meaningful, time-sensitive plans that keep the school on course (Amakyi, 2017).

### **Statement of the Problem**

School differences manifest themselves in the spirit, energy level, and quality of the interactions between members of the school community. Every school has a rather distinctive atmosphere. However, schools learn from each other and look for ways to stay competitive. The search for best-operation-practice (BOP) entails examining the way schools having high performance conduct their operations; *what is it that the high performing schools are doing right?* For schools seeking to attain excellence, one of the key paths to follow is to learn from other schools achieving high performance and adapting their best practice.

Students in senior high schools in Ghana take standardized tests (i.e., West Africa Senior School Certificate Examinations, WASSCE) at the end of their final year in senior high school. Schools are expected to be efficient and effective in preparing the students to pass the final examinations. The test scores play a key role in students' progress and pursuit of their highest levels of academic and personal achievement. Additionally, the test scores of the students provide objective measure about learning outcomes in a school and ultimately provide valuable information about effectiveness of school processes. The test scores are used as key determinants to judge how schools are performing in terms

of realizing their mission. Also, the test scores of the students are used in ranking schools and categorizing them as high performing or low performing schools in the country.

Rankings for the past five years have revealed that the performance of students of certain schools are consistently improving. Schools that were hitherto not included in the list of top performing schools are rubbing shoulders with the ones that have been acclaimed as top performing schools in the past (Ministry of Education, 2017). Notable among the schools that are having improved test scores is St. James Senior High School in Sunyani. The school is graduating a high percentage of students with grades that qualify them to proceed to tertiary institutions. The WASSCE results revealed that out of the 226 candidates presented in 2015, 213 of the candidates were shortlisted for university admission. In 2016, out of the 348 candidates presented, 347 were shortlisted for university admission. In 2017, out of the 266 candidates presented, 220 were shortlisted for university admission. The summary analyses of the WASSCE results of St. James Senior High School for 2015, 2016, and 2017 are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary analyses of WASSCE results 2015 – 2017**

Year	Candidates Presented	Number of Passes in Subjects							
		8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
2015	226	226	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2016	348	346	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
2017	266	263	2	0	0	1	0	0	0

The emergence of the “*new kid on the block*,” St. James Senior High school to be considered among the league of top performing schools that have well-established institutions with history and traditions that predate the independence of Ghana, has generated keen interest in the operations of St. James Senior High School. Clearly, there is a general belief among key stakeholders in the management of education in Ghana that the leadership of St. James Senior High School may be doing “something right” and the school may have some innovations and a climate of school improvement practice to offer to the other schools. In other words: *what are the lessons that can be learned from St. James Senior High School?*

To adequately address the above enquiry requires the availability of data on the operations and processes of St. James Senior High School. An examination of the type of climate at St. James Senior

High School which is propelling the school to greater heights as a high performing institution in Ghana lies at the heart of this study. In attempting to understand institutions, researchers have examined a wide range of variables (Lindahl, 2006). These variables include the structure as well as the climate of the institution. This study examines the institutional climate of St. James Senior High School from the perspective of both the school management and the staff.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were posed to guide the study:

1. What is the nature of institutional climate of St. James Senior High School?
2. To what extent do the elements of the institutional climate of St. James Senior High School account for institutional effectiveness?
3. How was the prevailing climate of St. James Senior High School attained?

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings and conclusions reported in this study are important for the following reasons. First, they provide data about the institutional climate at St. James senior high school to identify elements of the climate that are supportive of high performance. Second, they provide baseline information to foster improved working relationships between the management and staff at St. James senior high school in their quest to have common perception about school improvement. Third, they provide data to other institutions desiring to benchmark St. James senior high school. Fourth, they constitute an important addition to the professional knowledge base on institutional climate to attain school improvement in Ghana.

### **Methodology**

A mixed-method design adopting a non-experimental survey and a basic interpretive study was used to collect data for the study. Survey design is a very valuable tool for assessing opinions and trends. The capability of the survey design to gather meaningful facts about a situation under study informed the researcher's choice of the design for collecting data. Basic interpretive study is helpful in understanding a phenomenon and the perspectives of the people involved and how they



construct their worlds, as well as the meaning they attribute to their experiences.

The study population consisted of 43 academic staff and six management staff. A census sampling was adopted and all the academic staff and the members of the management team in the school were solicited to participate in the study. Using the entire population for the study increased the potential power of the study by providing the largest possible *N* size, thereby, strengthening the data analyses (Heiman, 2013).

The instrumentation used for the study was made up of a semi-structured interview protocol and 55 closed-ended items. The semi-structured interview protocol was used to elicit information from 10 purposefully-selected school staff made up of heads of departments and their assistants. The closed-ended items consisted of 40 Likert-type statements describing dimensions of institutional climate, and 15 Likert-type statements describing institutional effectiveness. The works of various researchers over the years (e.g., Jones & James, 1979; Litwin & Stringer, 1968; Schein, 1996; Zammuto & Krackower, 1991) on dimensions of institutional climate and institutional effectiveness served as the primary sources for the development of the questionnaire items. The statements on the questionnaire elicited responses from participants who selected from one of four response choices that were coded: *Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Agree (3), And Strongly Agree (4)*.

The Likert-type items describing dimensions of institutional climate covered four broad dimensions of institutional identity, collegiality, supervisory style, and professionalism.

Institutional identity deals with staff understanding of the goals of the institution, the sense of direction of the institution, staff commitment to the institution, and staff plans to build a career in the institution. The institutional identity dimension has 10 items—Questions 1, 9, 18, 23, 25, 34, 40, 53, 58, and 63.

Collegiality includes how staff relate to one another in the institution portraying the degree of openness and the informal associations that exist. The dimension of collegiality has 10 items—Questions 3, 12, 13, 24, 26, 35, 43, 46, 54, and 57.

Professionalism addresses member autonomy, role clarification, innovative spirit, and ability to demonstrate competence

to execute assigned duties. The professionalism dimension has 10 items—Questions 5, 10, 15, 22, 29, 39, 44, 51, 60, and 61.

Supervisory style addresses how leadership governs the institution, the structures and policies created by the institution to facilitate the work of the staff, the leadership style and strategy adopted in the institution, and performance appraisal. The supervisory style dimension has 10 items—Questions 2, 11, 16, 20, 30, 36, 41, 49, 56, and 62.

The Likert-type items describing institutional effectiveness covered employee motivation, job satisfaction, and job performance. The institutional effectiveness has 15 items—Questions 7, 8, 14, 17, 27, 28, 32, 37, 38, 42, 47, 48, 52, 55, and 59.

The researcher received 38 surveys out of the 49 surveys distributed. The final returned survey used for the data analyses was 38, constituting a response rate of about 77.6%.

For research question one, data were analysed using a decision rule over a continuous scale for the computed mean scores,  $M$  (including group mean scores) and standard deviations to describe the climate at St. James senior high school. The adopted decision rule was as follows:

- $M \leq 1.5$  indicates strong disagreement with statement
- $1.5 < M \leq 2.5$  indicates disagreement with statement
- $2.5 < M \leq 3.5$  indicates agreement with statement
- $3.5 < M \leq 4.0$  indicates strong agreement

For research question two, the researcher conducted correlation analyses using Spearman's correlation coefficient, ( $r_s$ ) to ascertain the association between dimensions of institutional climate and institutional effectiveness as perceived by respondents. The decision rule to determine strength of association was established as follows:

1.  $r_s < .20$ , negligible association
2.  $.20 \leq r_s \leq .35$ , small association
3.  $.35 < r_s < .65$ , moderate association
4.  $r_s \geq .65$ , large association

A quantitative measure, the coefficient of determination, was used to indicate the proportion of variance in the elements of institutional climate accounted for or explained by the variance of scores of institutional effectiveness. To determine significance throughout the study, the standard  $p < .05$  was used.

To address research question three, the interview data were analysed and put into themes that provided a description on how the prevailing climate of the school was attained.

### **Findings and Discussion**

To address research question one, *what is the nature of institutional climate of St. James Senior High School identified by the study population?* respondents indicated the extent of agreement with statements on school climate dimension by selecting one of four response choices: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. Means and standard deviations were calculated for the responses to each climate dimension. The computed means revealed that the respondents were in strong agreement with positive statements on the four dimensions of school climate: institutional identity, collegiality, supervisory style, and professionalism. The respondents describe the school climate as positive. This finding is consistent with research conducted on characteristics of high performing schools (e.g., Shannon & Bylsma, 2007; Teasley, 2017) that describe high performing schools as having a positive school climate. According to Teasley (2017), staff in a school with positive school climate have institutional identity, promote collegiality, share in supervisory roles, and exhibit high sense of professionalism.

Further analysis was conducted where the means were rank-ordered from highest to lowest and the results are presented in Table 2. The top 10 statements about climate dimension that respondents were in strong agreement with were then analysed to determine if they were related to institutional identity, collegiality, supervisory style, or professionalism.

**Table 2: Rank-ordered means of climate dimension**

<b>Climate Dimension</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
1. I am committed to the goals and vision of this school	3.89	.577
2. The school has a supportive work environment	3.86	.506
3. I feel respected by my coworkers	3.85	.490
4. Teamwork is encouraged in this school	3.85	.664
5. My department collaborates well with other departments	3.83	.512

6. The goals of this school have been communicated clearly	3.82	.547
7. My job duties have been clearly explained to me	3.82	.622
8. Staff in this school are held accountable	3.80	.529
9. Conflicts are resolved to the satisfaction of feuding parties	3.77	.486
10. Good relationships prevail in the work environment	3.77	.487
11. I have received the training I need	3.77	.818
12. The regulations and procedures in place are easy to understand	3.76	.517
13. Management encourages me to be innovative in my work	3.76	.613
14. Management delegates tasks and responsibilities to others	3.75	.733
15. Staff assume personal responsibility to achieve the school's goals	3.75	.592
16. The operations in the school are governed by many rules	3.75	.592
17. This school makes good use of its staff skills and abilities	3.75	.677
18. My coworkers support me in my work	3.72	.517
19. I can talk to my coworkers about my problems	3.72	.632
20. This school recognizes that success depends upon its staff	3.72	.784
21. Management encourages staff	3.72	.863
22. I understand how the performance appraisal system works	3.71	.665
23. Delegation is handled well in this school	3.68	.665
24. Career development is taken seriously in this school	3.67	.718
25. More experienced members of the school take time to help	3.67	.801
26. This school values its staff	3.63	.704
27. I am made aware of the results of my performance	3.63	.843
28. Management assists me in solving my work	3.60	.786

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29. People in this school ask about each other	3.60	.891
30. I am allowed to participate in major decisions	3.60	.891
31. This school takes an active interest in the progress of its staff	3.59	.662
32. This school responds well to new technical innovations	3.59	.739
33. I have confidence in the process by which important decisions are made	3.59	.775
34. Staff are given opportunity for leadership roles	3.59	.781
35. I understand what most staff in this school do	3.59	.781
36. My job aligns with my interests	3.59	.858
37. Staff members trust one another	3.56	.828
38. This school provides opportunities to receive training and education	3.56	.724
39. This school is willing to be flexible to meet the needs of its staff	3.56	.760
40. Management encourages constructive criticism	3.56	.830

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Among the top 10 statements that respondents were in strong agreement with, six of the statements refer to collegiality. None of the top ten statements refer to supervisory role. The remaining four statements were equally divided between institutional identity and professionalism. Collegiality, where staff members of the school are able to interact with one another to achieve goals and objectives of the school is manifested in St. James Senior High School. Literature on effective school practices points to collegiality as key element in relational trust in schools. Bryk and Schneider (2002) posit that where relational trust abounds, schools are bound to highly perform.

To address research question two, *to what extent do the elements of the institutional climate of St. James Senior High School account for institutional effectiveness?* Spearman's correlation coefficient was computed to measure the association between institutional identity, collegiality, supervisory style, and professionalism as predictor variables and institutional effectiveness as criterion variable. Complete correlation information is provided in Table 3.

**Table 3: Association of institutional climate and institutional effectiveness**

Climate Dimension	Institutional Effectiveness		
	$r_s$	Strength of Association	$p$ value
Institutional Identity	.748	Large	.002
Collegiality	.865	Large	.000
Supervisory Style	.700	Large	.008
Professionalism	.732	Large	.002

The findings showed large associations between the dimensions of institutional climate and institutional effectiveness at St. James Senior High School. The associations were statistically significant. Computation of the coefficients of determination revealed that;

1. A change in institutional identity accounted for about 56% of the change in institutional effectiveness at St. James Senior High School.
2. A change in collegiality accounted for about 75% of the change in institutional effectiveness at St. James Senior High School.
3. A change in supervisory style accounted for about 49% of the change in institutional effectiveness at St. James Senior High School.
4. A change in professionalism accounted for about 54% of the change in institutional effectiveness at St. James Senior High School.

The findings show that institutional identity, collegiality, supervisory style, and professionalism significantly account for the institutional effectiveness at St. James Senior High School, manifesting in outstanding student test scores. Sarason (1996) draws the conclusion that schools will experience institutional effectiveness when there is favourable supervisory style and staff have institutional identity, promote collegiality, and practice professionalism.

To address research question three, *how was the prevailing climate of St. James senior high school attained?* a semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 informants. The interview data were coded and analysed. Recurring themes that emerged were grouped

under (a) school-based workshops, (b) team reflective practice, and (c) supportive school leadership.

The study informants intimated that school-based workshops scheduled at regular intervals provided opportunities for staff to exchange ideas, be abreast of new pedagogical skills, and set challenging targets to improve student learning outcomes. A study informant indicated: *"because we have purposeful gatherings, we are able to identify areas we need to improve upon and also identify why we are doing well in certain areas."* Another informant observed that: *"I am regular at the school-based workshops because they provide the forum for us to learn new things, put them into practice, and then return to share your experience with the others. This is all done under relaxing conditions."*

The study informants identified team reflective practice as helpful tool in building a climate of success in the school. An informant pointed out that the team reflective practice has enabled them to conduct self-assessment in the school: *"we get together and we ask ourselves questions such as, what did we plan and we were not able to accomplish and why? and what did we plan and we accomplished and why? These questions get us to surface issues and discuss them."*

The study informants also identified supportive school leadership as a contributing factor in attaining the climate they have. An informant stated: *"we have school leadership that continues to demonstrate that they care about our wellbeing. The school head is even interested in how your family is doing."* Another informant pointed out that: *"often times in the school, we do not get material rewards, but this is not an issue because you can feel that the school head is genuinely concerned about your progress in life."* The informants also talked about the readiness of the school leadership to provide adequate resources for work to be done. An informant stated that: *"within the constraints of providing all we request for in terms of TLMS, the leadership does well to respond positively to our needs. If they have the means, they will surely provide for us."*

According to Kowalski (2010), schools are apt to create a conducive school climate for success when staff have opportunity for career professional development, especially through school-based workshops. He states further that school-based workshops are tailor-made to meet the needs of staff. Engaging in team reflective practice in the school enables staff to acquire the skill for studying experiences to

improve on the way they function. Schon (1990) states that reflective practice entails looking back on an experience and making sense of it to identify what to do in the future.

### Conclusions

A positive school climate has attributes commonly found in high performing schools. Based on the findings of this study, two conclusions are drawn. First, the study concludes that St. James Senior High School has a positive school climate defined by strong institutional identity, collegiality, favourable supervisory style, and a good sense of professionalism. Second, St. James Senior High School has achieved a climate of success through professional development workshops, team reflective practices, and supportive school leadership.

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