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Investigating the degree of social climate embedded in the educational environment of Bangladeshi Secondary schools

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Abstract

This research examines the extent of different domains (namely, peer sensitivity, disruptiveness, teacher-student interactions, achievement orientation, support for different economic backgrounds, and safety problems) of the social climate embedded in the schools belonging to urban, rural and hilly regions in Bangladesh. It is significant in the sense that the social climate of a school primarily refers to the physical as well as social-emotional safety of the learners and it impacts teaching-learning practices that reflect academic, social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning. The required data were collected using a questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Both the secondary school teachers and students were the respondents. The findings of this study seem to suggest that the degree of peer sensitivity, one of the key domains of the social climate of a school, is high in urban and hilly regions compared to rural schools. Another domain, teacher-student interaction, as well as the teacher-student relationship, depends on the societal condition and the societal practices in which the school is situated. As the data indicates, in the hilly region as well as in the rural context, teachers appear to be sympathetic and concerned for students' mental well-being; however, the teachers are not equally supportive of education, especially outside the classroom. Articulations of students belonging to urban schools shed light on the fact that their school environment lacks sufficient support for students coming from different economic backgrounds. The findings of the study implicate that the teacher student relationship in urban schools needs to be redirected towards more students' wellbeing rather than only structured teaching-learning. Students belonging to rural and hilly region schools need to address this in a way that their academic orientations become stronger. And above all, safety issues need to be addressed across the nation.

Keywords: Bangladeshi secondary schools, educational environment, peer sensitivity, social climate, students' wellbeing, teacher-student interactions.

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Introduction

Social climate primarily refers to the physical as well as social-emotional safety of the learners (Cohen et al., 2009) and is one of the key components of the educational environment of any school. The social climate of a school impacts teaching-learning practices which are subsequently realised in the academic, social, emotional, ethical, and civic learning of the learners belonging to that school (Thapa et al., 2013). Literature suggests that quality, quantity and directions of social climate can be correlated with academic performance and self-development of the learners (e.g., Haahr et al., 2005), and a high-quality social climate can influence to minimize the negative impact of the socioeconomic context on academic success (Astor, Benbenisty, & Estrada, 2009). Most notedly, an excellent social climate in any school can enhance learners' school connectedness with that school (Cohen et al., 2009). However, it is interesting to note that the prevalence of the high-quality social climate doesn't necessarily ensure its positive influence on the learners' personal development unless the embeddedness of all the features of the social climate will be fathomed and realized by the teachers and learners. In this regard, Allodi (2010) maintained that within an identical social climate, the environment of educational settings may vary due to differences in perceptions and practices of social climate by the teachers and learners.

As far as the Bangladeshi education scenario is concerned, the current educational practices here in Bangladesh don't look conducive to students' well-being and their emotional connectedness with the school. A large body of papers (e.g., Khan, Ahmed, & Burton, 2020; Sakib et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2008) underline the lack of a healthy social climate in Bangladeshi schools and its adverse effect on the student life experience. Ahmed (2008) explains how the absence of peer sensitivity plagues the school connectedness of students in Bangladesh. Similarly, Khan, Ahmed, & Burton (2020) discusses how 'feeling unsafe' at school leads to depressive symptoms in secondary school goers. Sakib et al. (2020) identified some crucial factors (such as unsupportive teachers and an unfriendly educational atmosphere) that lead to depressive symptoms among the students of Dhaka city. Conversely, Khan, McGeown, & Bell (2020) discuss the potentiality of having a good outdoor learning environment for the academic achievement of the learners in Bangladeshi primary schools. Hossain, O'Neill, & Strnadová (2019) in their study illustrates the correlation between some domains of social climate (e.g., teacher-student interaction, academic support) and learners' emotional connectedness with the school (in form of school satisfaction) in Bangladeshi secondary education contexts. Considering the significance of the social climate of the educational setting, as discussed in empirical literature across the globe, the quality improvement process of the school essentially intends toensure the students' well-being and their emotional connectedness with the school. Whereas evidence from research demonstrates that quality improvement of schools in Bangladesh predominantly refers to addressing structural or organizational issues of schools (e.g., Hoque, Alam, & Abdullah, 2011; Behrman, Deolalikar, & Soon, 2002). Illustratively, addressing the quality improvement process of Bangladeshi schools from the directions of students' wellbeing, selfdevelopment, and their emotional connectedness with the schools is evidently missing; which can be explored by researching varied domains and subdomains (e.g., peer sensitivity, safety problems, teacher-student relationship, etc; as discussed in Brand

et al., 2008) of the social climate of schools. It is to be noted that research (Khan, Ahmed, & Burton, 2020; Sakib et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2008) conducted in the Bangladeshi context clearly indicates the necessity of addressing students' social and emotional issues about their personal development as well as academic achievement. Likewise, researching the social climate deep-rooted in Bangladeshi secondary schools, which is the focus of this present study, potentially may address those issues. A better understanding of social climate is well desired as it helps the quality improvement process of a school (Thapa et al., 2013; Zulling et el., 2010). Considering the current scenario of Bangladeshi educational practices, it would be interesting to explore the social climate of schools across the nation-state. Understanding the features of the social climate by the relevant educational settings can potentially help develop students' connectedness with the schools, which eventually can facilitate the quality improvement process in Bangladeshi schools.

The available research of the Bangladeshi education context features at best one or two single issues of social climate to portray the current educational atmosphere, and those researchers posit those issues as problems or challenges without acknowledging those as components of the social climate of the school. For example, Ahmed (2008) talks about the disruptive behaviour of fellow students; or, Khan, Ahmed, & Burton (2020) explore students' feelings of insecurity at school and its impact on depressive symptoms among the students. Unlike those mentioned research, this present study applied a holistic approach to all the domains and subdomains of social climate and based on that subsequently investigated the social climate embedded in Bangladeshi secondary schools. In doing so, this study fills one significant research gap as no study has been done to date in Bangladesh that offered a holistic analysis of the social climate of secondary schools.

Review of Literature

The theoretical constructs of social climate

Research (e.g., Thapa et al., 2013; Zulling et el., 2010, Allodi, 2010; Brand et al., 2008) on the social climate of a school largely focuses on the definition and theoretical construct of different domains of the social climate. The definition of social climate ranges from psychological to contextual perspectives and is viewed from both emic and etic angles. Zulling et el. (2010) reviewed 30 years of research on school climate and came up with five domains of school climate, of which three domains (order, safety and discipline; social relationships; and school connectedness) refer to the social climate of a school. Order, safety and discipline address learners' perceived safety, respect for peers and authority, and fairness in rules. Social relationships concern teacher-learner, and learner-learner interactions along with the supportive mentality of the staff. In another domain, school connectedness refers to 'feeling enthusiastic and engaged' about school. Thapa et al. (2013) discuss five dimensions of which three safety, relationships and teaching-learning confer directly on the social climate. It is interesting to note that while Thapa et al. (2013) and Zulling et al. (2010) hold a psychological perspective in defining social climate; Brand et al. (2008) uphold both psychological and contextual perspectives in their definition of the social climate. Brand et

al. (2008) discuss specific dimensions of social climate and those are relationships, personal growth, and maintenance and change dimensions. While relationships and personal growth are self-explanatory, maintenance and change dimensions call for a required change in the educational setting. For example, in a multicultural society 'support for diversity or pluralism' emerged as one key domain of the social climate of a school. Unlike the aforesaid researchers, based on Moos' (1979) psych-social environment framework Allodi (2010) puts forward his idea of a social climate model comprised of ten aspects (namely, creativity, stimulation, achievement, self-efficacy, safety, control, helpfulness, participation, responsibility, and influence). These ten aspects will determine students' experience to differing extents in the educational context. Understanding the educational environment of Bangladeshi secondary schools (from the literature) six domains namely peer sensitivity, disruptiveness, teacher-student interactions, achievement orientation, support for different economic backgrounds, and safety problems are examined in this study project to fathom the degree of the social climate of the Bangladeshi schools.

The theoretical construct of the social climate measurement tool

Most of the studies (e.g., Zullig et al., 2015; Cemalcilar, 2010) that developed school climate (and social climate) measurement tools are based on psychometric theory, and those tools record only students' perspectives to measure different variables of school climate. Again, Allodi (2010) and Brand et al. (2008) specifically developed social climate measurement tools based on social learning theory. However, the exclusivity of Brand et al.'s (2008) tool lies in the fact that unlike other tools it extracts teachers' perspectives on six domains namely peer sensitivity, disruptiveness, teacher-student interactions, achievement orientation, support for cultural pluralism, and safety problems to measure the social climate of a particular educational setting. Research to measure social climate essentially requires a large sample size of data (Allodi, 2007). It can be argued that for the Bangladeshi context, it would be better to rely on teachers' perspectives than on studentsto investigate the social climate of secondary schools. Bangladeshi students generally lack the experience to take part in research or be expressive to articulate their own views, therefore only students' views may not reveal the actual scenario of the social climate of secondary schools. Thus, taking into account the practical reason, an adapted version of Brand et al.'s (2008) tool was used for this present study to record students' views. However, this research also assessesthe degree of different domains and subdomains of social climate embedded in the secondary educational atmosphere. And to do that, students' and teachers' actual experiences within the educational settings need to be realised. In doing so, in this research, both the teachers' and students' narratives were the source of data as well. To determine the degree of social climate as experienced by the secondary students of Bangladesh, a framework based on the facet theory (Guttman, 1954; cited in Allodi, 2010: 226) has been used in this study.

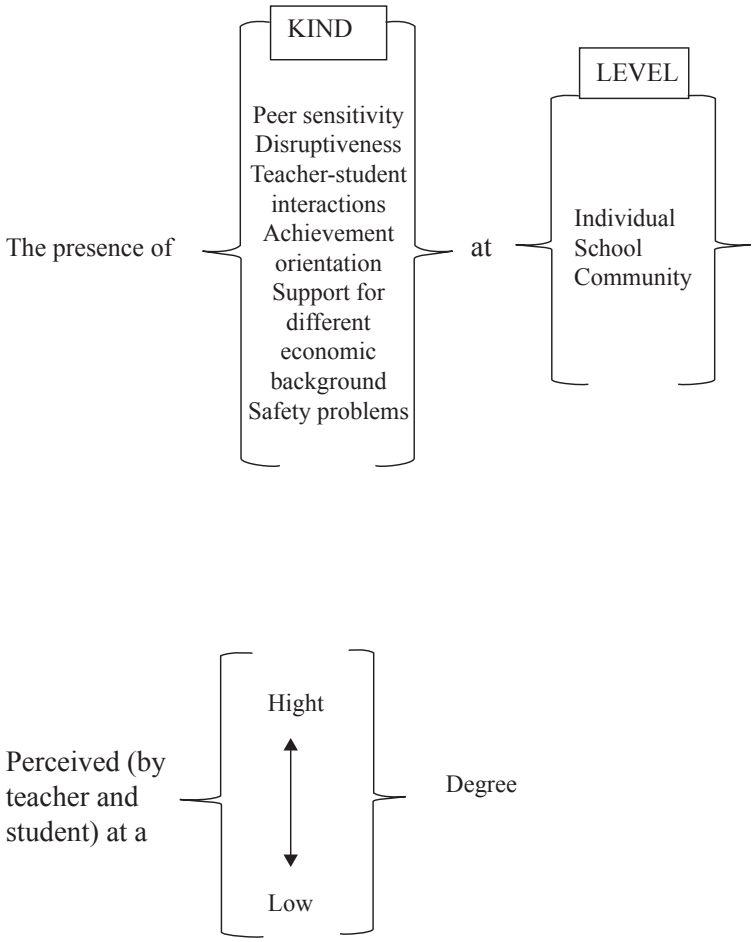
Determination of the degree of the social climate

The conceptual understanding and framework of the study are presented in this subsection. Through the theoretical framework discussed here, an explanation was made to demonstrate

how the degree of various domains and subdomains of social climate embedded in educational settings will be determined. Figure 1 illustrates the framework, based on the facet theory of Guttman (1954), cited in Allodi (2010: 226).

Figure 1:

Conceptual framework for determining the degree of social climate embedded in educational settings



As the framework shows, the degree of all the domains and subdomains of social climate will be determined by the narratives of students as well as of teachers. For example, when teachers and students will be asked about safety problems or teacher-student interactions, they will share views on whether they feel secure (or not) at a personal level, as a group in the school, or outside the school at the community level. Or, for example, again in determining the degree of teacher-student interactions whether the teachers' offering of support transmits beyond classroom issues, and whether teachers are supportive enough for the students'

emotional issues. When data demonstrate the existence of any particular domain/sub-domains of the social climate at the personal, school and community level then the degree of the social climate would be high. Likewise, if a domain exists only in two or one level among the three levels then the degree would be moderate or low. This determination of the degree of social climate would probably differ in different educational settings.

Research Methodology

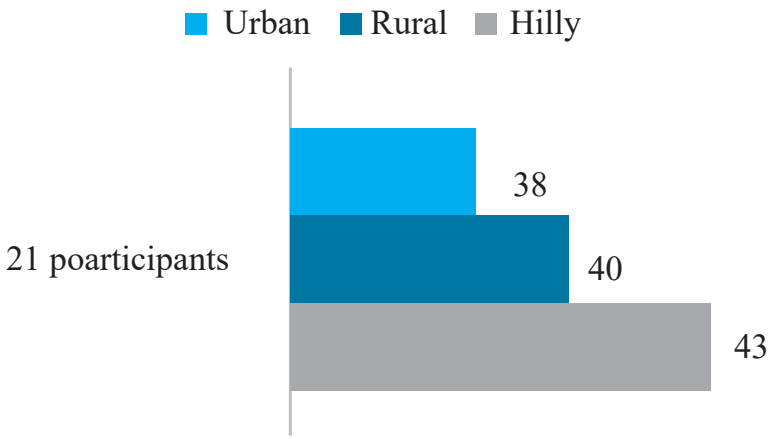
This research is predominantly qualitative in nature. However, some quantitative data set (from the questionnaire survey) in the form of central tendencies was used too. A survey was done on the students to document the frequency distribution of the stated six domains in different educational contexts of Bangladesh. These findings of the survey were triangulated later with the analysed data of interviews and FGD to interpret the extent of the prevalence of different domains of the social climate in secondary schools belonging to urban, rural, and hilly regions of Bangladesh.

Sampling

The data set of the questionnaire survey were collected purposively. A minimum of 50 respondents each from urban, rural and hilly region schools were targeted purposively for this research. Subsequently, altogether 151 students took part in the questionnaire survey (50 from urban schools, 51 from rural schools, and 50 from hill-tracks region schools). However, during the process of data cleansing and analysis, some incomplete survey forms were found and a good amount of data was lost. Finally, 121 respondents' data was used for this research. Below, we see the participants from different educational contexts.

Figure 2:

Participants from different educational settings



A total of 3 FGDs were conducted with students from 3 schools, one FGD each from an urban, rural and hilly region school. The participants in each FGD session ranged from 5

to 7 persons and were students of classes viii to x. The researchers arranged the sessions in a venue convenient to the participants. Two researchers conducted each FGD session. The FGD sessions were guided by a written guideline covering indicators of the study. At the same time, the researchers allowed variation of response on contextual aspects regarding their statement. For the interview, 7 secondary school teachers, belonging to urban, rural, and hilly region schools, were selected purposively on a random basis in order to understand the educational environment of those schools where they teach as well as to get an in-detail explanation of the responses of the students provided in the questionnaire survey and FGD. Participant teachers have teaching experience of a minimum period of 5 years, and they primarily are the class teachers of classes ix and x. Discussions in the interviews primarily centred around the issues related to their experiences and views on the six domains (peer sensitivity, disruptiveness, teacher-student interactions, achievement orientation, support for different economic backgrounds, and safety problems) of the social climate of their schools. All the sessions of FGDs and interviews were audio-recorded and were transcribed later for the purpose of analysis. To maintain the ethical issues of the participants, oral consent was taken from the parents as well as the students, and from the teachers prior to taking part in the interviews. No actual names and gender identities of the participants were disclosed in this study.

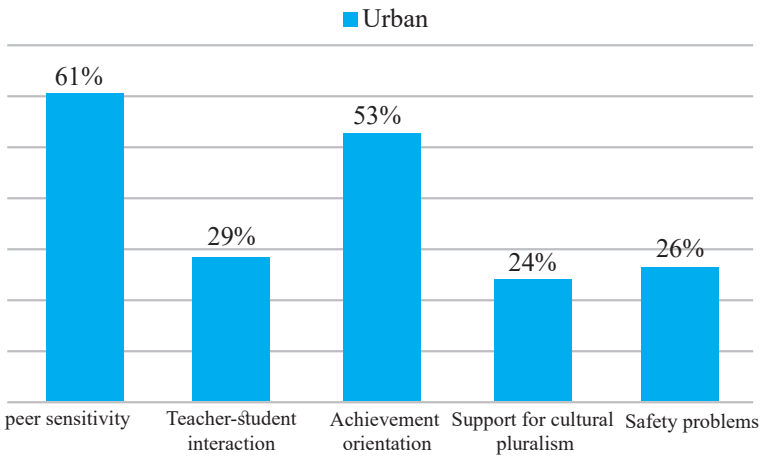
Findings from the survey

Frequency distribution of the domains of the social climate in different educational setting

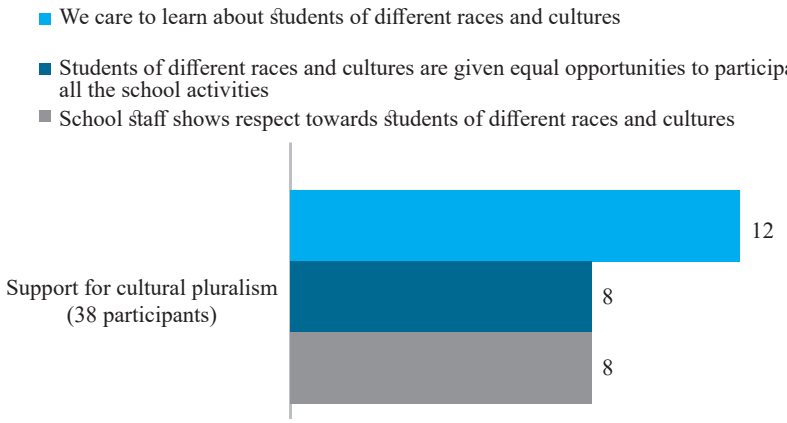
As the data demonstrates, peer sensitivity and academic achievement orientations are the major strengths in terms of their prevalence in urban schools. On the other hand, the social climate of urban schools suffer because of the lack of teacher-student interactions and support for different economic backgrounds.

Figure 3:

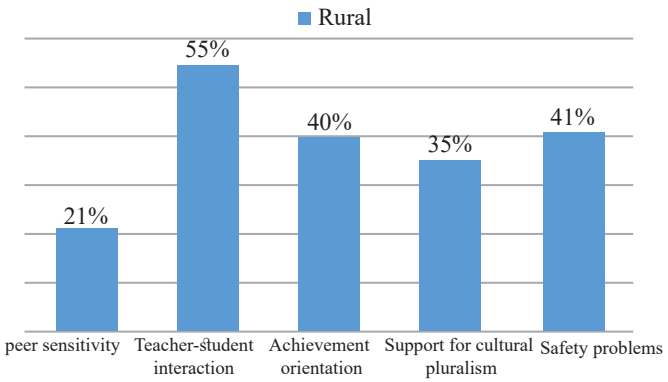
Frequency distribution of the domain



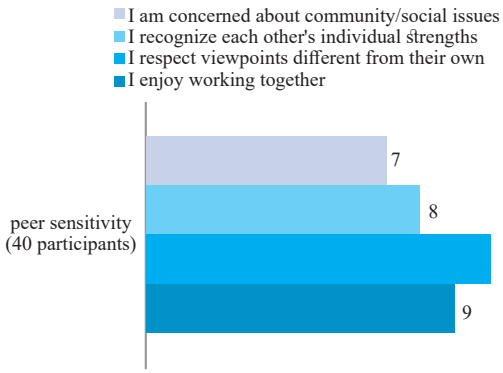
For example, if we see given below graph on the detailed analysis of support for different economic backgrounds, it is clearly evident that students of urban schools did not hesitate to disagree with the statement such as "students of different races and cultures are given equal opportunities to participate in all the school activities" and "school staffs show respect towards students of different races and cultures" As the graph projects (given below), teacher-student interactions are major strength in rural schools whereas safety issues are to be resolved for sure.



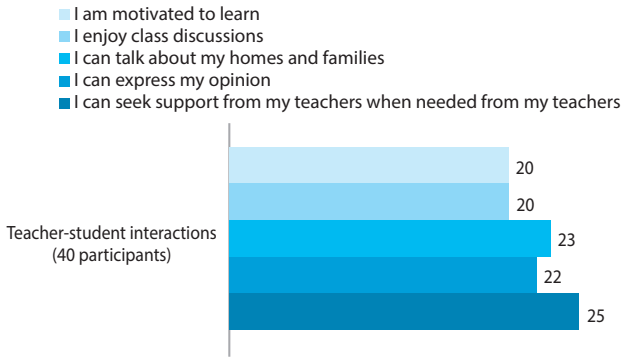
In rural educational settings, we see a balance of the existence of all the domains of the social climate, though they lack peer sensitivity to a great extent (21%).



If it is illustrated further, it is apparent that students there in the rural contexts lack responding and maintaining peer sensitivity in terms of "recognising each other's strengths" and "concerning about social issues".

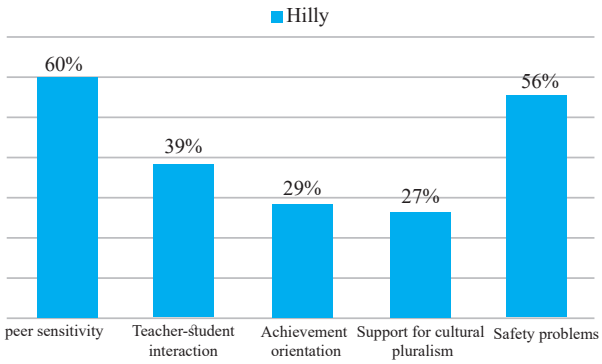


Contrary to this there exists a strong presence of teacher-student interactions

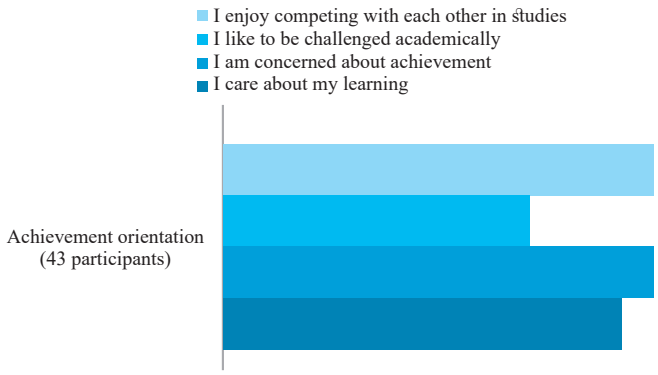


when they are asked to respond in favour of whether they "can seek support from teachers when needed" or "I can talk about my homes and families" with my teachers.

The below bar charts reveal the prevalence of the social climate in the hilly region schools.



As the data suggests the schools have safety issues and students lack achievement orientations. For example,



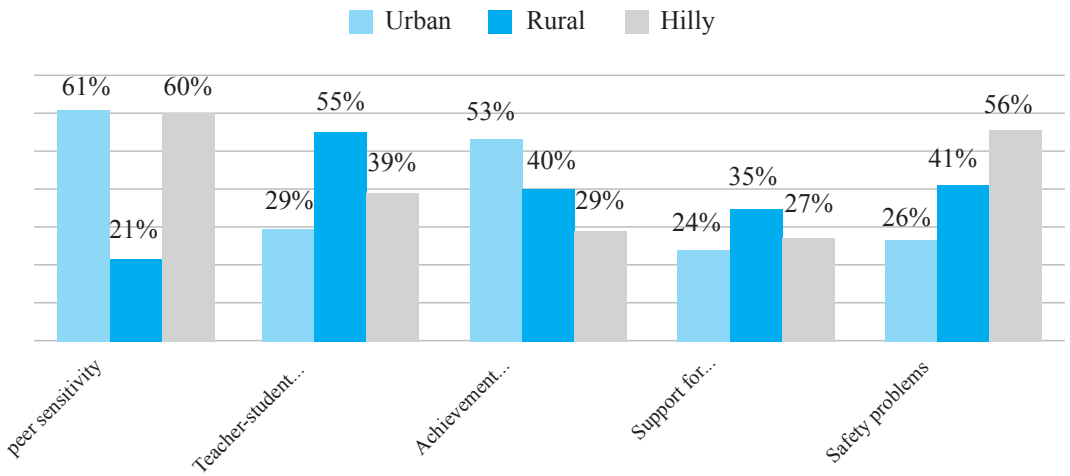
they seem to disagree (10 students agree with the statement out of 43) with statements like "I like to be challenged academically" or "I care about my learning".

Comparison of the frequency distribution of the domains of thesocial climate in different educational contexts

The analysed data of the questionnaire survey demonstrates some interesting distribution of the different domains of the social climate of the urban, rural and hilly region educational contexts.

Figure 3:

Comparison of prevalence of domains in different educational settings



The chart displays that there is no consistency in any domain among the urban, rural and hilly schools. As discussed earlier, the whole concept of social climate is context-specific

therefore to determine the degree of the social climate in each stratum (as in an urban, rural or hilly region school) all the domains need to be examined independently.

As shown in figure 3, the prevalence of peer sensitivity, one of the key domains of the social climate in any educational context, appears to be high in urban and hilly region schools compared to rural schools.

And meaningful teacher-student interactions exist in rural schools (55%) against the urban and hilly regions. Students of urban and rural areas are more concerned about academic achievements than the schools of the hilly region (29%). Diversity or support for different economic backgrounds happens to be a significant indicator of the condition of the social climate of a particular educational context. As the data suggests, Bangladeshi schools lack support for different economic backgrounds to a larger extent and urban schools suffer more in this domain. As far as safety issues are concerned students of the hilly region schools are really in a threatening situation.

Key findings from the semi-structured interviews and FGD

As the data displays, the qualitative data findings reflect the key ideas of the questionnaire survey. During the interviews and FGD, both the teachers and students were asked questions to validate the findings of the survey, and most importantly the discussion tried to extract and understand whether the existence of any domains of the social climate hovers at the individual, school, and community levels. Below are some relevant summarized findings-Peer sensitivity among the students is more visible in the hilly region and urban

- Peer sensitivity among the students is more visible in the hilly region and urban schools compared to rural schools.
- Teachers in urban schools are more supportive of academic advancement than of the mental well-being of the students.
- Teachers in the hilly region and rural schools are concerned about the students' well-being.
- Teasing and bullying are evident in all educational settings, and outside school, teasing is the key issue to address.
- Students across all educational settings are concerned about their academic achievements.
- The teacher-student relationship depends on the societal condition and societal practices in which the school is situated.

Discussion

Determination of the degree of social climate

Below in the following subsections, each domain will be examined in terms of its presence at the individual, school, and community levels to portray a qualitative interpretation of their degree in the different educational settings.

The degree of peer sensitivity

Based on the qualitative and quantitative data it can be said that the degree of peer sensitivity appears to be high in urban and hilly region schools when compared with rural educational contexts. As the survey shows overall 21% of students respond in favour of peer sensitivity in comparison to urban (40%) and hilly regions (60%) and it is also evident in FGD.

For example, in FGD 1, in response to "how students usually tackle teasing in public places in the remote hilly region" one of the respondents mentioned –

"We usually go together, as we are aware that some places are not safe for us" and that reflects their peer sensitivity hovers beyond school to reach the community level.

In another, FGD 2, in response to their account for fellow feelings, one participant stated from an urban school–

"The majority of us feel that in our school we need a sanitary napkin dispensary. We decided to install one. But not sure though how we should do that". This statement is significant in the sense that it indicates the student's views on the core issues he felt for his fellow students.

The degree of teacher-student interaction

The degree of teacher-student interaction appears to be different in different educational contexts. The data set seems to highlight that the teacher-student relationship depends on the societal condition and societal practices in which the school is situated. For example, in the hilly region as well as in the rural context, teachers appear to be sympathetic and concerned for students' mental well- being. Analysed data of the questionnaire survey indicates the same. In FGD3 one student of the rural school mentioned that "*Sometimes when I am bullied/teased by other students I don't share that with my parents as they may scold me. Rather I share that with my teacher. He helped me once*" or, one statement is significant to see the teacher-student relationship in the rural educational context: "*once one teacher helped me to buy some books, as I do not have money to buy books*" (in FGD3). Similarly, one teacher from a rural school put it nicely by saying "*In my school, most of the students are from illiterate families, so I always encourage them in studies or they will be dropped out anytime*". Or as he says, "*I try to help them ... by buying books, khata. Sometimes, ask their elder brothers/ fathers to talk to me about them*".

The degree of support for different economic backgrounds

From the survey data, we find that the students of the urban schools consider their school environment to lack support for those who are coming from marginalised economic backgrounds. The identical responses are evident in the FGD when one of the participants of the urban school opened up nicely when she illustrated how she experienced biases in teachers–

"*We see a clear division between the students coming from well-off families and the students comingfrom comparatively poor economic backgrounds*". Another student put it like that- "Even teachers arenot concerned about them (i.e., *students belonging to poor economic*

backgrounds, and inattentive/slow learners)". Hence, it will not be wrong to assume that the degree of the domain, support for different economic backgrounds, is low in urban educational settings. The data set aboutthe social climate of the urban educational context can be correlated with the study findings of Sakibet al. (2020).

Again, as far as the hilly region schools are concerned, the degree of support for cultural pluralism and different economic backgrounds appears to be moderate. For instance, in response to the issue of "whether they feel comfortable to study and socialise with students belonging to different economic and social backgrounds?" one student of the hilly region school said that –

"*as most of us are Chakmas so most of the time we usually socialise together, however, we don't think or see differently to the students coming from other social, cultural backgrounds… for example Bengali students*"

The degree of the safety problem

As mentioned earlier, eve-teasing is a big issue across the nation-state. The triangulated data is suggestive that the degree of the safety problem is different, rather, in the hilly region schools it is high, in the rural school it is low and in the urban schools, it is moderate. Therefore, students seem to feel a lack of motivation due to these safety issues. As argued in Hossain, O'Neill, & Strnadová (2019: 671), 'low level of school satisfaction has been related to an increased risk of school failure, substance abuse, and externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems, and assurance of quality social climate leads to many positive school-related outcomes and psychological wellbeing of the learners.'

The students of the hilly region schools are experiencing teasing frequently and nonetheless, the degree of safety problems appears to be addressed at the community level in the hilly region, therefore it is high. In response to addressing "how to mitigate the safety-related issue that emergesin school" one teacher said that –

"if *something happens we inform our headteacher. He engages and consults local community leaders. In Bandarban, it is wise to engage local renowned people to solve such issues*"

Interestingly, according to the data, the degree of safety problems appears to be addressed at the individual level in rural schools. (e.g., by an individual teacher). Therefore, it is considered low.

In response to addressing "how to mitigate the safety-related issue that emerges in school" one teacher said that –

"*if something occurs and it is (e.g., teasing, vandalism, etc) done by our students we can take action by ourselves. We can punish them or warn them, and inform their parents. If they are outsiders, we inform our headteacher*"

The degree of safety problems appears to be addressed at the school level in urban schools, therefore it is moderate. In response to addressing "how to mitigate the safety-related issue that emerges in school" one teacher stated that –

"*Our school is well guarded and surrounded by high fences. when it happens, we have a committee to look after those issues, it is headed by our headteacher. Besides, our students are cable enough to handle issues like eve-teasing*"

The degree of the academic orientation

The extent of the academic orientations is related to the socio-economic conditions of the contexts in which the schools are situated. That is why the reason, the students of the urban schools seem motivated and more aware of their academic achievements and academic orientations whereas the students belonging to the rural and hilly regions lack that motivation.

Edagogical Implications

As argued, a high to moderate degree of the social climate of any educational context is conducive tobetter academic achievements of the students along the side with creating a school connectedness among the students. The findings of the study implicate that the teacher-student relationship in urban schools needs to be redirected towards more students' well-being rather than only structured teaching-learning. Students belonging to rural and hilly region schools need to address this in a way that their academic orientations become stronger. And above all, safety issues need to be addressedacross the nation.

Future Directions

A significant number of research is required for further exploration of the social climate of the schools. For example, research can only be done to understand the issues related to the academic orientations of the rural and hilly region schools. A co-relational study will pave the way to see the impact of the students' academic achievements in a healthy social climate of the schools.

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