

# Climate in the Augustinian School

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## Introduction: Climate in reference to a school?

The concept of the climate of a school is a relatively new idea that has received a good deal of attention in recent years.

When speaking of school climate people may be referring to a multitude of factors which may be measured in a variety of ways. It can include things as varied as air quality in classrooms including dust and oxygen content as well as humidity and temperature. Recently schools have focussed on issues such as colour and lighting, and playground topography.

Clearly in adjusting these things, schools hope that these things make a difference to outcomes at all sorts of levels. They are clearly committed to improving the environment so that it is both more teacher and student friendly because they believe it makes a difference. Precisely what difference is something for speculation and investigation. Sometimes the environment is taken to include advances in technology (digital projection, IT availability, specialised facilities such as laboratories, theatres, configurable spaces, libraries etc.).

However when most authors speak of school climate and in the context of student outcomes the variables they are discussing are not primarily ecological, technological or architectural. They speak of the atmosphere amongst staff, the kind of relationships that exist in the school community and that various groups experience (their everyday perceptions) and their impact on outcomes for the student.

A summary of some of the elements of this multi-dimensional reality is found in *Examining School Climate: Defining Factors and Educational Influences* by Megan L. Marshall from Georgia State University (see <http://education.gsu.edu/>) These are

- number and quality of interactions between adults and students  
(See Kuperminc, G. P., Leadbeater, B. J., & Blatt, S. J. (2001). School social climate and individual differences in vulnerability to psycho-pathology among middle school students. *Journal of School Psychology*, 39(2), 141-159. )
- students' and teachers' perception of their school environment, or the school's personality
- environmental factors (such as the physical buildings and classrooms, and materials used for instruction)
- academic performance
- feelings of safeness and school size
- feelings of trust and respect for students and teachers

A similar summary can be found in *El clima escolar agustiniano* (2002) Insunza Seco, Santiago M. et. al., Federación Agustiniana This also refers to instruments used to measure some of these dimensions of school climate.

## Methodology

In these recent studies climate is a characteristic of a contemporary school or educational institution. Often such institutions are composed of many teachers, several classes and a community composed of parents, students, and other staff. While there are some schools that have only one teacher schools or where pupils have only one teacher who works with them, this is the exception rather than the rule. An Augustinian reflection on school climate is challenging since the concept of 'school' for Augustine is a very different. In Augustine's world, the school experience for all students was of a single teacher at whatever level: primary, middle, secondary or tertiary. Hence a little caution needs to be exercised in seeking to develop a vision of what the climate of an Augustinian school or educational centre should be. We will have more chance of success if we focus on the dynamics spoken of in modern studies and seek in Augustine's writings and experience any insight into what lies behind them rather than expecting a direct consideration of school climate.

## Climate and Relationships

Let us turn first to the cluster of meanings for school climate around relationships, safeness, trust and respect for students and teachers. There is abundant evidence of the impact of these elements of school climate on both the strictly formal outcomes of education as well on the wider goals of the psychological and spiritual growth of students. Their impact is on mind and heart. This evidence is both in terms of the success of some positive experiences of schooling and the abject failure of schooling in the absence of a positive school climate. Let us look at a few examples.

It has been found that at times of transition (middle-secondary etc.) there is great danger of student disillusionment and their losing their way. A positive and supportive school climate for students is important for students to survive such transitions. Students at risk, especially boys, have been found to be protected by such environments. When they have a sense of connectedness with teachers and other student they are less susceptible to adolescent mental ill health and suicide. (See the website of Dr Michael Carr-Greg of the Centre for Adolescent Mental Health at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Melbourne <http://www.michaelcarr-gregg.com.au> for a collection of resources including an interview with Dr Resnick who is co-author of *Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health*. Journal of the American Medical Association 1997;278 :823-832.)

Investigating the various murder tragedies in the United States schools such as the Columbine High massacre, the United States Secret Service and the FBI sought to find out what the perpetrators had in common. Where they all spoilt rich kids? Were they all poor, disadvantaged

students? Were they academically gifted or academically challenged? It seems that none of these hypotheses was supported by the facts. There was no one profile of these perpetrators. The studies found however that a key though not unique characteristic of those responsible for the massacres of fellow students and staff was a sense of disconnectedness. They and the groups they belonged to were not valued in the school. Their experiences and stories were not heard and they were marginalised. One recommendation was that schools should connect with students better by paying attention to school climate (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbine\\_High\\_School\\_massacre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbine_High_School_massacre) and also *The School Shooter: A THREAT ASSESSMENT PERSPECTIVE* Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG); National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC); FBI Academy, Quantico, Virginia 22135)

A modern scholar helps us in understanding some of this reality. According to Professor Garcia from the University of Salamanca, the key concept in understanding the dynamic involved is the students' confidence in self and the teacher. In turn the key to this concept is the person's self image or positive sense of self. (See LA RELACIÓN DE CONFIANZA PROFESOR-ALUMNO, CLAVE DE LA EDUCACIÓN, Abilio de Gregorio García Profesor en Salamanca de IES , *El clima escolar agustiniano* (2002) Insunza Seco, Santiago M. et. al., Federación Agustiniana

We know that we acquire our sense of self and of self value, not by any inward assessment of our selves BUT by our interaction with others. At a young age we start to distinguish ourselves from the world as we experience it as resistant. Something of the nature of the "terrible twos" is allegedly allied to this learning. Later, in adolescence, youth need to discover an emotional independence where they seek personal support and approval **outside** their family. A school community can play a key role in this. The two most important forces in attaining this positive self concept are our experiences of family and school.

Garcia argues the importance of this positive self concept in maturity and confidence in the **cognitive, affective and social** domains. He pays particular attention to **affective** maturity: 'The more the educator rewards the deep basic need that the child or teenager has to feel they are of worth, the more the student feels a basic confidence that translates into an identification with the teacher and what he or she offers for learning. This affective dimension acts as a filter for the message. If absent it frustrates this basic trend to esteem and we meet resistance, rejection. Not only is the person rejected but what is taught also.'

However we do not need to be professional psychologists to understand the need for belief in self as a basis for confidence and stability in this area. Augustine recognised elements of this many centuries ago. He even uses the phrase "family climate".

Often we may lack enthusiasm and feel bored when dealing with topics that we ourselves know by heart having dealt with them over and over again, especially if the content is rather straightforward. When this happens, we need to meet our students with a brother's, a sister's, a father's or a mother's love. Once together with them in heart, we find the topics in question as fresh and new as they are to them. For so great a force is the sympathy of the souls and so favourable the family

climate generated that our listeners are affected while we speak. And we are affected while they listen. This way, we end up living in each other and, in a certain way, they speak in us who listen to us and we learn in them what we teach. We experience this sensation more vividly in as far as we identify in friendship with those whom we teach. In this way, things that have become routine for us are again new and exciting. (Catechesis of Beginners, 12, 17)

He clearly understands the need to generate in our students a sense of their value to us in encouraging their trust and interest. He is more than aware that free curiosity is a far more powerful force for learning than frightened compulsion (Confessions 1:14). Let us look more closely at his understanding of what encouraged learning in his classroom.

## **Climate in Augustine's Classroom**

Augustine was a skilled teacher. Despite never having taught in a modern school his experience in the classroom and his reflections on teaching are extensive and give some pointers to the climate we could come to expect in an Augustinian class room and school.

We have no ready picture of Augustine's teaching style or manner before his conversion in Milan in August 386. However his experience was broad. As noted above, in the Roman world education was provided at three levels: *literatorus* (elementary learning to read and write), *gramaticus* (a grammar school level where students learnt grammar) and *rhetor* (a tertiary level at which rhetoric which was the study of communication and law). Augustine's experience of the different levels was intimate. He had himself experienced the elementary level in his home town of Tagaste without much joy then having to live in the nearby town of Madura for his time under the *gramaticus* as there was no such school in Tagaste. Finally he travelled to Carthage to complete the tertiary stage. On completing this he returns to Tagaste to set up school as a *gramaticus*. He teaches as rhetor in Carthage and Rome where he has to contend with the problems of a school administrator (unruly students in Carthage and students who do not pay their fees in Rome). However if we are seeking detailed reflections on school climate we will not find them in Augustine. At each level the "school" consisted of a teacher and his class much akin to a one teacher school one might find in rural settings today. The climate of many a school of today often involving hundreds of staff and thousands of students is a new reality. Or is it?

One of the most delightful glimpses we have of the climate or atmosphere in his classroom is in the records of the time he spend teaching his own son Adeodatus and the sons of his friends who had joined him at Cassiacum near Milan following his conversion. He had abandoned his position as rhetor in the Emperor's household and had no desire to follow his profession in the normal way any longer however he joyfully takes on the task of educating these young men. Interestingly Monica his mother is sometimes a participant and supports him in managing the group. Lively discussion, searching together with his students, awareness of differing stages of preparedness of his students in different topics, sensitivity to this, and filling in that which they

might not yet be familiar without embarrassing them in front of the rest of the group are all part of his teaching.

These approaches are related to his fundamental understanding of what it is to teach and to learn. The role of the teacher or educator is to open the learner to question, arouse curiosity, create the moment for learning. The classes most often consist of dialogue between the students and the teacher. All participate, discuss and argue. In this atmosphere and methodology we see Augustine implementing his fundamental belief about the nature of teaching and learning. Students with the assistance of the Interior Master ultimately teach themselves.

When those called teachers make use of words to explain the subjects they profess, even those that deal with virtue and wisdom, those known as pupils consider within themselves whether what has been said is true. Contemplating according to their own capacities, they ascertain whether what they have heard accords with the truth they find within. It is only then that they learn. And when the inner response is yes and they discover that what they have been told is the truth, they praise their teachers without realising that, more than their teachers, they are praising those who have been taught. However they make the mistake of calling the exterior persons teachers when they are not that at all. They could be forgiven for such a mistake since there is generally no interval of time between the moment of speaking and that of knowing, and because coming to learn from them follows quickly upon the suggestive force of the speakers' words, they think that they have learned externally from the one who spoke those words. (The Teacher, 14, 46)

The counter example is also useful in appreciating his understanding: the role of the teacher in blocking learning!

There are people who learn quietly, teach distinctly unquietly, and though they have a patient teacher, they are savage with their learners. We all know, don't we, how quietly and gently scripture itself teaches us. So someone comes along and reads God's commandments, reads and understands them, understands them in tranquillity drinking from tranquil waters, feeding on green, clean pastures. Someone else comes along, hoping to hear something from him. He's bad-tempered, he upsets the student, finding fault with his stupidity, for example, when he is too slow in understanding something, and by upsetting him he stops him understanding as much as he could have done if he had heard it calmly and quietly. (Sermon 47, 9)

Is Augustine advocating that a school or teachers be simply encouraging or nurturing? The answer to this is very clearly no. He calls for a differentiated approach. One response will not fit all and this demands a very significant effort on the part of the teacher that a permissive encouraging warm demeanour does not. Augustine's approach requires hard work and intelligence by the teacher on three levels.

Firstly the teacher has to actually create that sense of trust by the students in the teacher. This is an ongoing challenge.. In talking about his own experience of teaching he says:

It is necessary to relax the tension and to eliminate the fear, creating a climate of kindness and understanding. It is sometimes necessary to break the ice with words and exhortations that cause their trust...But it is necessary to do this with fineness and tact, breathing trust and understanding... not hurting or embarrassing the student. (Catechesis of Beginners, 13, 19)

Secondly it requires a real knowledge of the student's own reality and reaching out to almost live within the other. He exhorts teachers to adapt ourselves to the various personalities within a class and to respond to them in a variety of ways, not simply one way.

Let us then adapt ourselves to our students with a love which is at once the love of a brother, of a father and of a mother When once we are linked to them in heart, the old familiar things will seem new to us. So great is the influence of a sympathetic mind that, when our students are affected by us as we speak and we by them as they learn, we dwell in each other and thus both they, as it were, speak within us what they hear, while we after a fashion learn in them what we teach. (Catechesis of Beginners, 12, 17)

This knowledge is essential if the teacher is to be able to respond to the needs of specific students within a class or other setting.

The same medicine is not to be applied to all, although to all the same love is due Different people must necessarily affect the teacher in different ways the teacher's talk should, as it were, wear an appearance expressive of the mind from which it issues; it should affect the hearer in different ways according as his frame of mind varies, just as his hearers too affect one another in various ways by their mere presence together. Not all are given the same medicine, though the same love is due to all ... Some are to be loved gently; others with severity; with love which is an enemy to none, a mother to all. (Catechesis of Beginners, 15, 23)

Clearly Augustine is aware of the climate within the classroom as being influenced by the presence of the others and how they influence each other. More importantly he has a clear awareness of the differing impact of the same words and actions on different students and the need to adapt the mode of the relationship to each student. This is no small challenge, indeed it almost implies the need to manage not only the climate in the classroom but a whole series of micro climates involving the teacher's relationship with each student.

Thirdly he calls for a presentation of subject matter in such a way that it arouses the student's curiosity and builds on what the student already knows in a way that takes advantage of the student's existing knowledge and experience. He realises intelligence and foresight need to be applied to the subject matter itself but most emphatically what is most required is an understanding of the student that comes of a commitment of care as well as knowledge.

The teacher's function is to develop a gradual approach for the student to the truth, especially for those who, while they may have a love of learning, have yet to develop a sharpness of mind. Without a careful and progressive plan, success cannot be achieved. (Soliloquies, 1, 23).

Augustine is clearly not advocating that a school or teachers be simply encouraging or nurturing. That would be a very flawed picture of the Cassiacum experience. Augustine's approach requires hard work and intelligence by the teacher on three levels of a) the trust earned of students, b) a real relationship of love for the student that involves knowledge of and attention to each individual and c) a competent knowledge of the discipline and the readiness of each student in terms of that discipline.

So can we now describe the approach to classroom climate that the teacher following in the steps of Augustine might employ?

One way of describing school or classroom climate is to connect it to the kinds of relationships that dominate between the teacher and student. Four categories are sometimes used to understand approaches to maintaining social norms and behavioural boundaries in the classroom but can be applied to classroom climate or even pedagogy. In each of these four types of classroom the level of **challenge to student learning** and **support** varies. These two variables can be arranged on axes such that the four categories of classroom climate relate to each other as in the figure below. This approach names the quadrants by the way the teacher maintains relationships and responds to the students' behaviour. (see *From Restorative Justice to Restorative Practices: Expanding the Paradigm*, Ted Wachtel, [http://fp.enter.net/restorativepractices/bc04\\_wachtel.pdf](http://fp.enter.net/restorativepractices/bc04_wachtel.pdf) )

In an **authoritarian** classroom the focus is the action of the teacher. The teacher does things **to** the students. The teacher's approach is didactic. The teacher teaches and the students listen. The students' opinions, prior knowledge and person are not valued greatly in classroom interaction. There are very strict limits on their mode of participation. Misbehaviour is dealt with punitively rather than in an educative manner. The approach is characterised by the word **TO**.

In a **neglectful** classroom the teacher is **not** concerned with the students at all and may simply focus on presenting the material without reference to its impact on the students. Misbehaviour may be ignored and the relationship with the student is largely non-existent. The approach is characterised by the word **NOT**.

In a **permissive** classroom the focus is the actions of the student. The attitude of the teacher is to attend to the student's whims and desires without any interaction with the teacher's more extensive experience or knowledge. While the teacher works **for** the student, there is no real relationship since all the actions of the teacher are for the student. The students set the agenda. The approach is characterised by the word **FOR**.

**HIGH**

challenge (limit-setting, discipline)

<b>TO</b>	<b>WITH</b>
<b>punitive</b>	<b>restorative/ (relational)</b>
<i>authoritarian stigmatising</i>	<i>authoritative re-integrative</i>
<i>indifferent passive</i>	<i>therapeutic protective</i>
<b>neglectful</b>	<b>permissive</b>
<b>NOT</b>	<b>FOR</b>

**LOW support (encouragement, nurture) HIGH**

In the fourth type of classroom, sometimes termed a **restorative** classroom, the focus is on the relationship between teacher and student. There is a high level of commitment on behalf of the teacher to nurturing and encouraging each student. There is a high level of challenge to students with the teacher challenging them to move forward, there are high expectations of the respect of student for teacher and teacher for students. This kind of classroom is characterised as **restorative** and **relational**. It is characterised by the word **WITH**. . In the **restorative** classroom misbehaviour is seen in terms of a break down in relationship between teacher and student and/or student and student. The way forward is through repairing of the relationships. While this way forward is the direction required when things go wrong, it is also at the heart of its pedagogy.

Learning is a cooperative work much as we see in the pictures of the class at Cassaciacum. Can we not reasonably conclude that the teacher or school that wants to follow in the steps of Augustine would best espouse a climate that lies in this fourth restorative relational quadrant?

### Implications for an Augustinian Educational Centre

If there is an appropriate approach to climate for an Augustinian classroom, is there also one for an Augustinian school? If in an Augustinian school the classrooms were committed to such a relational/restorative model, the climate of the school as a whole would have to be so also. If not, the conflicting approaches would undermine the school's effectiveness. There needs to be a consistency throughout the educational community. If the structures and practices of the school as a whole do not reflect the basic respect of teacher for student and student for teacher that might be

practised in the classroom it will undermine this reality. . Likewise if staff do not treat each in the same way the basic foundations of the community will be undermined. If we listen to Augustine in this regard his challenge to us is to ‘live together in oneness of mind and heart, honouring in yourselves God whose temples you have become.’ (Rule I, 9)

This vision fits with the vision of Augustine for his Church community. One image he has of his Church is that of teachers and students participating in a larger classroom. In addressing his congregation as their teacher he cautions them:

I don’t speak as a school master or teacher, but as a servant or minister. I don’t speak to pupils, but to fellow students; not to servants, but to fellow servants. There is but a single Teacher whose school is on earth and who teaches us from on high. (Sermon 292, 1, 1)

As a Christian community, an Augustinian school is part of this wider school that has Christ as its true Teacher to whom all members owe allegiance. Somewhat comfotingly Augustine reminds us that “in the school of the Master, we are all fellow students.” (Sermon 292, 1) For Augustinian schools this is a vision that encourages genuine participation and involvement in mission. Certainly if the image of the classroom at Cassaciacum were applied to our schools as a whole this sense of being engaged together (students, teachers, parents) with a common goal would surely be part of our vision and inform the climate of our educational community.

In many Augustinian schools the practical day to day experience, while not reflecting this vision perfectly, does realize it ‘as in a glass darkly’. There is a real sense of being on the road together seeking to be of one mind and heart. These ideals are often part of the formal mission statement or “ideario” of our Augustinian schools around the world. Students, staff and parents from Augustinian schools around the world identify and focus on the community dimension, friendship and the participatory nature of our educational communities. We also share an element of dissatisfaction as we strive to create the true climate of God’s kingdom in our communities because with Augustine we believe ‘we are pilgrims, people on the road, not residents. We should therefore feel unsatisfied with what we are, if we want to arrive at that to which we aspire.’ (Sermon 169).

## **Environment**

Let us now apply the same methodology to the grouping of factors associated with school climate that take the word climate somewhat more literally i.e. those referring to physical environmental factors (such as the physical characteristics of buildings and classrooms, air quality, materials used for instruction etc.)

Until recently the physical environment has not had a high priority as schools have struggled to simply provide adequate shelter and instruction. However there are many educationalists who are now pointing out the role of lighting, colour, seating etc in the way students perceive their environment at school and how this can scientifically be related to behaviours, students

perceptions of the school and scholastic outcomes. (Some of these results are found in the work by Ian Lillico, Churchill Follow for 2000 - see <http://www.boysforward.com/04/pers/reforms.htm> for a summary of his results “The School Reforms Required to Engage Boys in Schooling” on this web-site.

At first this might seem a little at odds with our Augustinian culture. Indeed extravagance in the physical environment could be seen as participation in the excess of consumerism that is part of much of modern culture. Augustine’s own words caution ‘it is better to want for a little than to have too much’ (Rule III,18). Indeed his recognition that what we waste through excess is depriving those in need of the basic means of survival suggests that we are involved in a kind of theft if we do not limit our consumption of resources. However Augustine himself does not argue for deprivation nor the rejection of God’s gifts in creation or in their use in architecture or in the furnishing of buildings. In fact he connects his heart’s ache for God with the goodness of the whole creation. He passes immediately from ‘You pierced my heart with your word, and I fell in love with you.’ to ‘But the sky and the earth too, and everything in them - all these things around me are telling me that I should love you...’ ( Conf. X, 8). In another classic passage he acknowledges how the appropriate use of the goods of creation can lift the heart and soul and create a sense of praise and exhilaration.

You love nothing but what is good. The earth is good, with its lofty mountains, gentle hills, and broad fields. Fruitful farmlands are good, and so is a well-constructed, well planned , spacious and well-lit building. Healthy healing air is good. Appetising and strengthening food is good, and so is health without pain or weariness. A person’s well-shaped countenance is good, with its living beauty and glowing colour. The soul of a friend is good, with the joy of unity and loyalty of affection. An up right human being is good, as are the riches that make life more enjoyable. The heavens are good, with sun, moon and stars. Speech is good when it teaches with patience, or gently rebukes. A song is good that has harmonious rhythms and deep significance. What else? Everything is good. This and that are both good. But forget this and that, if you can and try to see Good itself: then, you will see God. (The Trinity, VIII, 3,4)

Perhaps his actions in not choosing the more common wooden spoons but more expensive silver at his community table and having wine at meals points us to his realisation of how such simple physical practices can enhance the importance of occasions such as community meals. Perhaps we can draw the analogy in taking care with colour, light and furniture. These can enhance the atmosphere in which learning takes place. In this context the Augustinian educator should surely commit to creating an uplifting physical environment which aids learning but does not encourage or participate in excess.

## **Some Final Remarks**

A deeper understanding of the connection between school climate and successful educational outcomes comes from a reassessment of what education is and what successful outcomes are. We no longer think that a successful education as simply mastering more and more information or

being able to reproduce what the teacher teaches. We have returned in some sense to the belief that education is about “mind and heart”. To educate is to help the young person towards what they are co-creating - in some sense themselves in God’s image. We have returned to an understanding of knowledge that was Augustine’s.

Make use of knowledge like scaffolding that is used to help build the building of love; that building will last forever, even when knowledge has been dismantled. (Letter 55, 21, 39).

We are also aware that the end of education is “love” which is the key to happiness and becoming one with Christ.

Take this love, therefore, as the end that is set before you, to which you are to refer in all that you say, and whatever you narrate, narrate it in such a manner that he to whom you are discoursing on hearing may believe, on believing may hope and on hoping may love. (Catechesis of Beginners, 4, 8)

No wonder therefore that an Augustinian Educational community with a climate that focuses on relationships is well placed to achieve this ultimate outcome.

### **Some Discussion Questions.**

Why is participation an important part of the climate of an Augustinian school?

Why are co-curricular activities so important in so many Augustinian schools throughout the world? Should this be the case? Why?

Many Augustinian schools have strong associations and communities of alumni or past students. How is this related to the mission of an Augustinian school?