Review

Critical Review: Secondary School Climate and Adolescents' Emotional Well-Being

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Abstract: The social and emotional health of adolescents is increasingly a concern worldwide. To date, there remains a lack of research on how school climate influences adolescents' learning experiences and their social and emotional health. To address this gap in the literature, this critical review addresses the role that the school climate plays in an adolescent's school life and emotional well-being. This article takes a critical approach and outlines the key issues in research on the secondary school climate in the digital and real-life sense and the implications for adolescent's well-being. We first outline the definitional and methodological issues regarding research on school climate in adolescence. We then outline why mental health is a key issue for adolescents across the globe and conclude with a list of implications for theory, research, and practice. Thus, this article builds on past, current, and ongoing research on adolescents' emotional well-being and school climate across the globe. The article provides new directions and recommendations for future research on inclusive educational philosophies and positive psychology and suggestions for practice aimed to best support adolescents' learning experience and mental well-being.

Keywords: adolescence; school climate; mental health; well-being

1. Introduction

What does it mean when there is an emotionally warm and compassionate classroom climate or a cold and uncompassionate one? What are the experiences of adolescents when they are exposed to the emotional atmosphere of the classroom? Why does there remain a lack of studies on school climate and social affective aspects of adolescent development? To answer these questions, this article will consider how adolescents make sense of themselves and their social world within the school climate. As we journey into the mid-half of the 21st century, adolescents' emotional well-being has become increasingly a global concern [1]. Researchers and educators who work with youth need to remain open to new conceptions of the secondary school classroom that best support the mental and emotional well-being of the adolescent. Thus, this article examines past and current holistic educational philosophies, psychoeducational research, and whole-child practices that explore how the social and emotional climate of the school and classroom influence adolescents' learning experiences and emotional well-being.

The present article addresses this issue and examines how the school climate and classroom characteristics, including gender and ethnicity composition and language level, may affect adolescents' learning experiences and emotional well-being. In particular, we will focus on the multifaceted character of the school climate as a dynamic fluid process or living ecology and as an integral part of the teenager's overall learning experience and emotional well-being. With a vision toward the future, we recommend ways in which educators can redesign and rethink a holistic and inclusive education that honors, values, and embraces inclusivity, kindness, and compassion in the school community.

To explore the landscape of school climate in adolescence, we will outline multiple meanings of school climate that affect adolescents' solitary and collaborative learning experience and their overall emotional well-being. We explore why the field of developmental psychology continues to evade comprehensive empirical study of school climate and adolescents' mental health and propose pathways forward for gender-sensitive and culturally informed educational programs that promote inclusivity, compassion and kindness. We outline how educators and practitioners can work together to co-create experiences of learning in the classroom that increase adolescent's ability to flourish or feel confident and function well.

2. School Climate for Adolescents

What Does School Climate Mean? Why Does It Matter for Adolescents?

Most researchers and educators agree that adolescence (defined as the developmental stage that begins with the onset of puberty and ends when individuals reach adulthood, is one of the most pivotal times in an individual's overall development [2,3], during which individuals shift their emotional focus from themselves to their social relationships. The central task of adolescence includes the development of a unique identity within the social context that includes direct exchanges and conversations, nonverbal communication, and silences. The adolescent needs to negotiate between developing a strong sense of self and autonomy [4] while, at the same time, developing a strong sense of belonging and gaining acceptance from their peers [5]. Given adolescents' sensitivity to social context, the school environment and relationships play a key role in adolescents' sense of identity and emotional well-being.

Although often used, there remains a general lack of consensus about the meaning of school climate. Researchers have, indeed, yet to define what school climate means and how to measure this multifaceted and nuanced phenomenon [6]. While some studies define school climate as consisting of four core domains: safety, community, academic, and institutional environment [7], others focus on teacher-student relationships and the emotional tone of the school and the classroom defining it as either 'positive' and compassionate, or 'negative' and unsupportive [8]. Surprisingly, although peer relationships and emotional well-being are crucial during adolescence [9]. The majority of studies focus on the role school climate plays in adolescents' social-cognitive abilities and in their social interactions with peers and teachers [10]. In contrast, few studies explore how the school climate influences an adolescent's intrapersonal skills and emotional well-being [11,12].

In this critical review, we argue that a useful way to define and investigate the effects of school climate is via the socio-ecological and psychodynamic models [13]. According to Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems model, individuals' development should be framed by and is influenced by different levels of environment, called systems: microsystem (e.g., direct interactions between the child and their family members and teacher), the mesosystem (e.g., interactions between the child's microsystem, such as interactions between parents and teachers, or between peers and teacher), and macrosystem (larger community interactions such as school culture) [14]. From this multi-dimensional and dynamic, relationship-focused perspective, school climate is defined as the emotional quality and moral character of school life [15,16]. This 'school life' is dynamic, fluid, and constantly evolving in that it represents a 'global, multi-dimensional summary of the psycho-social-emotional and organizational/managerial dimensions of the classroom' [17].

Dynamic and socio-ecological developmental models of adolescence are useful in explaining how the school climate influences adolescents' school life and emotional well-being, as they highlight the role of systems and cross-contextual relationships with family and peers that predict youth outcomes [14,18]. More specifically, as teenagers' social worlds undergo a social re-orientation from parents to peers, such theories explore how the micro- and meso-systems (defined as the interactions between micro-systems) may produce cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities. That is, during adolescence, a social re-orientation occurs in that youth transition from the main influence of their parents in

their home (microsystem) to being influenced by their peers in their school (microsystem). Given that the secondary school microsystem is a large part of the adolescents' world, their views of school climate may influence their social-emotional learning experiences, which has implications for their overall well-being [19].

As such, a psychosocial-ecological theory is helpful to highlight the multiple levels (e.g., societal to individual) that can further our understanding of what social-cultural factors [20], such as the school climate, can affect mental well-being in adolescence, and thus help to develop holistic and developmentally appropriate culturally informed and gender-sensitive prevention programs for youth depression and suicide. For example, a culturally informed and gender-sensitive school climate that promotes an inclusive, mindful, and compassionate approach to learning may encourage youth to engage in critical reflection and creativity, which in turn may lead to feelings of well-being, self-compassion, and happiness [21]. In contrast, a youth who perceives one's school climate as uninviting, uncaring, and hostile may experience fear, anxiety, social avoidance, and social dissatisfaction, which may lead to increased feelings of loneliness and depression [22,23].

School climate is generally considered a multi-dimensional construct that encompasses a school's atmosphere, the culture of safety, values, resources, and relationships, including peer social networks [12,24]. Teacher-student relationships are especially important during the transition to adolescence when self-confidence, motivation, engagement, and achievement may be vulnerable to decline [25,26]. Research from a stage–environment fit perspective suggests that the nature of changes in students' engagement during the transition to adolescence depends largely on the emotional climate of the school and classroom [10].

For example, past research shows that when students feel welcomed into an inviting, non-judgmental, and supportive school environment, they tend to flourish academically and socially and experience greater self-worth [22,27]. In contrast, a student who perceives his/her classroom as a threatening and non-welcoming school environment is more likely to experience high levels of distress, which may, in turn, increase feelings of fear, disengagement, and lack of motivation [8]. To illustrate this further, many studies show that when the teacher-student relationship is supportive and caring [28], and goal coordination is strong, teacher-student partners can achieve a greater level of goal success than if a student is working alone or has a conflict-ridden relationship with the teacher [29].

Studies show that the school and classroom climate influences adolescents' day-to-day school experiences and their mental health. For example, a positive class climate is characterized by a positive, warm, fair, and supportive environment and is associated with a variety of positive school-based outcomes [30]. An emotionally warm and positive class climate is linked to higher levels of student motivation and engagement [11], creativity [21], school belongingness [31], academic self-efficacy and achievement [32,33]. In contrast, an emotionally cold and negative school climate that enforces competition and academic excellence to the detriment of social-emotional well-being is associated with adolescents' poorer mental health and aggressive behavior [34].

Here, it is also important to note that a more nuanced picture emerges when we closely examine the influence of school climate on students' well-being. As a context for the 'hidden curriculum,' or the implicit social and emotional lessons that children learn in school [35], the school climate allows adolescents to learn and practice social communication strategies and behaviors that are guided by social and cultural conventions which govern appropriate verbal interaction [36]. Given the multi-dimensionality of the school climate within the secondary school classrooms, the school climate may have differential influences on adolescents' academic performance and their sense of emotional well-being [37]. Research shows that for some students, an inviting, inclusive, and learner-focused school climate may have a positive influence in that it may lead to curiosity [38], which in turn drives learning and student engagement [38,39]. Alternatively, for some youth, a school climate that is co-created by students and teachers may lead to feelings of angst and worry, given the uncertain and unpredictable nature and an emphasis on learner-

controlled and intellectual freedom in the classroom [40]. Overall, given the multifaceted nature of school climate and the transitional time of adolescence, there remains a lack of research on how school climate influences adolescents' school lives and well-being.

Given these effects of the school climate, it is not surprising that most global institutions have introduced policies and guidance aimed at improving school climates and promoting positive and inclusive learning environments [10]. For example, the UN emphasizes the need to provide children and youth with safe and inclusive learning environments that promote cohesive learning communities [1]. Such initiatives encourage schools to provide inviting and compassionate schools, and educators are tasked with *How* to create safe, culturally responsive, and inclusive school climates for adolescents and then focusing on whom the programs should be for.

3. School Climate and Mental Health

3.1. Multifaceted Nature of School Climate: Friend or Foe of the Adolescent?

The social-emotional school climate refers to the degree to which students feel emotionally connected to their teachers and peers [11]. This emotional atmosphere of the classroom and of the school community includes relationships (teacher-student, peer-peer) and the student's personal experiences of how connected they feel to others within a school environment that represents a cohesive community of learners [41]. Such feelings of emotional connectedness may lead to the well-being of an adolescent during interactions at school as well as times of solitude [10]. Thus, the school climate may either ameliorate or exacerbate an adolescent's sense of social competence, confidence, and well-being.

The school culture or climate also plays a critical role in students' mental and social lives as it represents the nature of the interpersonal relationships (student–student, student–teacher, teacher–teacher/parent) that exist in the school [33,42]. Such relationships affect the daily language, activities, and decision-making processes in the real-life and virtual events of a typical school day [4]. The emotional or psychological tone or climate that is co-created within the school helps to establish expectations for ethical standards of interpersonal relationships among the students beyond school walls [43]. That is, to develop a school-community partnership that promotes a culture of kindness, civility, and compassion, educators need to collaborate with like-minded leaders and moral and ethical exemplars or advisors within the larger community [44]. Furthermore, educators and researchers need to collaborate to address emerging tensions between ethnic and school or academic identities within educational practice [45].

This psychocultural approach to school climate assumes that knowledge of other's mental states is built out of experiential, pragmatic knowledge acquired in an interpreted, social world. A relational, developmental view of learning supports further research of scholars who explore the connections among thought and emotion, language, and behavior within the personal, social, and cultural world [46,47]. For example, for some individuals, a supportive, caring, and cohesive classroom climate may serve as a source of inspiration and as a psychological and emotional venue for quiet reflection, as well as an opportunity to interact with peers. However, a classroom that is uncaring and lacks unity may evoke a sense of power and fear and increase an adolescent's feelings of loneliness and emotional pain [22]. Such a negative school and classroom climate may thus bring wariness in social company, victimization, fear of rejection, and feelings of self-consciousness [48], social dissatisfaction [4], as well as academic disengagement or lack of motivation to learn [11]. In short, there exists a complex myriad of implications of the school climate for adolescents' emotional experiences and behavioral expressions of silence. On one hand, a cold and uncaring school climate may elevate a young person's negative feelings of isolation and abandonment and feelings of loneliness [22]. On the other hand, a kind and caring school climate has the potential to promote students' feelings of peace, contentment, and relaxation – or joy, awe, and wonder.

3.2. Self within Social Context: School Climate, Mental Health, and Inter- and Intrapersonal Skills

Regarding the subtleties of social interaction, researchers continue to remain challenged by how the school community shapes adolescents' ability to understand the mental states and emotions of others, which helps to guide their behaviors. More specifically, researchers need to understand how the school climate and emotional atmosphere of the classroom influence adolescents' ability to co-construct their emotional knowledge via their social interactions. Studies suggest that the co-construction of emotion and knowledge occurs within sociopolitical structures such as schools [16]. The definition of school as a sociopolitical structure highlights the need for school leaders to create safe and inclusive learning environments that promote critical thinking skills, social awareness, and compassion and kindness toward all [49]. Thus, to try to make sense of the role critical curiosity and consciousness play within the process of adolescents' psychological pragmatics or what students 'do with words' [19], researchers who study school climate need to build on, and extend studies that suggest curiosity experienced during times of silence may help to drive learning, engagement, and well-being [50].

Most higher-level language educational programs often focus on the verbal components and promote socio-communicative skills such as speaking in front of others and conversation skills. In contrast, few language programs for adolescents aim to sharpen critical listening and observational skills [19,51,52]. Educational programs for adolescents rarely focus on the pragmatic or sociolinguistic skills involved in the process of social and emotional learning [6,53]. To date, within the literature on secondary school climate and mental health, there remains a lack of balance between "intrapersonal skills", which involve time for periods of purposeful, silent contemplation and reflection, and "interpersonal skills", such as perspective-taking within collaboration and communication, listening and dialogue, and negotiation [40,54,55].

A psychologically safe school climate can also affect how adolescents make use of and experience solitude and silence. Solitary learning time during the daily academic schedule can provide students with the opportunity to use class time to be alone with their minds without the companionship of any personal digital devices [56]. Such learning opportunities can encourage youth to feel comfortable taking the risk of being curious, creative, and engaged in imaginative problem-solving and mindful reflection. Such opportunities to engage in mental reflection and contemplation may also help to increase cognitive flexibility or cognitive broadening, which in turn helps youth to think about different ways to address unexpected challenges and ambiguous situations [57].

For example, studies show that times of mindful solitude help to increase adolescents' ability to expand their diverse and critical thinking skills to develop a way to cope with unexpected events and engage in effective and meaningful personal problem-solving [58]. In addition, such scheduled solitude and reflection time in schools would also provide students with the opportunity to "listen to themselves", expand their inner dialogue, and create habits of mind that include positive and kind thoughts and feelings directed toward self and others [59]. Thus, as many researchers suggest [60], we need programs that promote emotion regulation and management strategies using the cultivation of reflection, attention or presence, perspective, and affect, such as compassion (for self and others).

3.3. Online Learning Environment and Perceived School Climate

As mentioned earlier, the school climate refers to the characteristics and quality of school culture as a learning community [15], the 'perceived school climate' is the school environment perceived by teenagers on an individual level [61]. For example, a positive perceived school climate refers to a good feeling (i.e., happy and safe) about living in one's school environment. Increasingly, learning and social activities are taking place online both outside and inside schools, and online engagement and activities can impact adolescents' well-being [62]. Here, we argue that the school climate can provide a backdrop that may enhance student online learning and positive online engagement or can further lead to potential student isolation and negative outcomes such as cyber-bullying [12].

In terms of frequency and timing, cyber-bullying can occur at any time of the day, and many cyber-bullying incidents filter into school hours [62], which has negatively affected student's academic performance [20], their connection to the school [63], and their sense of safety at school [7]. When students have negative perceptions of their school climate, they are less likely to disclose victimization experiences to their teachers [62]. When students have feelings of being safe, supported, and secure in their school, it can help to reduce cyber-bullying and lead to better mental health [22,58], whereas feeling unsafe, unsupported, or 'invisible' in school is considered a risk factor for being a cyber-bullying perpetrator which in turn may lead to increased feelings of loneliness and lower mental health [12,64].

Thus, school climate can moderate the negative impact of cyber-victimization on attendance rates, psychological well-being, academic achievement, and risky behavior [11,20,24]. Research shows that a positive school climate promotes disclosure to teachers among adolescents [11], and reduces overall rates of cyber-bullying [62], and cyber-victimization [40]. For example, researchers find when students perceive their school climate as being more supportive of students seeking help when bullied (e.g., teachers being more likely to intervene, clear rules about consequences of bullying), perpetration and victimization often decrease [65]. Research also highlights the interaction between cyber-bullying and negative online and in-person classroom climate [62]. The perception of an uncompassionate and hostile classroom climate combined with cyber-bullying may have negative implications for youth, especially social withdrawal, avoidance, and school dropout.

Thus, the literature to date highlights the need for research to focus on the psychosocial factors involved in social interactions and relationships in the classroom as the basis for creating a positive online classroom climate with the aim of preventing acts of prejudice, ostracism, and aggression such as cyber-bullying [66]. However, despite this call, there remains a gap in the literature addressing how the right to remain silent and take time to oneself for learning remains important for well-being, particularly during adolescence. This need for solitude within the learning context applies to all cultures and modes of learning (real-life and digital). As the digital world plays an increasingly important role in adolescents' lives, more research is needed to better understand the relations between the shared space of class online social life, classroom, and sense of class belonging with respect to cyber-bullying [63]. In addition, researchers and practitioners need to co-develop educational social media programs such as 'Safe Surfing' that aim to decrease cyber-bullying and promote digital decorum and respectful and prosocial communication online [62].

As noted earlier, an uncompassionate or cold classroom climate includes structural or social silences due to differences (i.e., gender, ethnicity, ability) that may be experienced by adolescents as prejudice [6], and they feel as if they are being silenced, or ignored by others. This phenomenon of "feeling invisible," or feeling left out of social interactions, is often studied within the context of ostracism and psychological bullying. Studies that explore the role of the classroom climate in the development of social silence show that these nuanced hostile acts are also known as microaggressions [67,68]. Such acts can be subtle and commonplace remarks or behaviors that people interpret as prejudicial, negating, and demeaning [69].

For example, a secondary school classroom that has an uncaring and fragmented social-emotional climate may include uncompassionate comments by either the teacher or a student in the classroom on another student's family heritage, gender, or faith orientation (e.g., comments from a student on their peer's clothes or food, or comments from the teacher that congratulate a female student for making the hockey team or congratulates a male student for receiving a high grade in a fashion and design course). However, given the sensitivity of such issues for particular students, such comments may be interpreted as damaging, irrespective of the speaker's intention. Given the curricular and classroom time constraints, some teachers may decide to refrain from addressing controversial issues in class and, thus, may unknowingly silence current topics such as cultural diversity [68], gender fluidity, and sexual diversity [55,70].

In terms of applications to practice, a recent meta-analysis of universal school-based social-emotional (SEL) programs for children and adolescents showed that school climate and feelings of safety were some of the key determinants of students' well-being and academic performance [10]. The results of their study also suggested that SEL programs that promote self-focused emotional skills before social skills showed the highest success rate. Such results support the notion that a positive, culturally cohesive, and gender-inclusive perceived school climate helps youth to treat each other with kindness and respect and disengage in aggressive activities such as cyber-bullying [12]. As such, educators should provide a school climate where teenagers feel a close emotional connection to their teachers and peers of all cultural and gender identities.

A mindful, compassionate, and inclusive school climate can help youth feel that they are supported by, cared for, and trusted by their teachers and peers [54,71]. A caring school context provides them with those resources that are necessary to cope with negative events and to express negative emotions in an adaptable way as they will feel safe enough to engage in critical discussions about sensitive topics such as culture and gender [16]. Such coping skills may, in turn, prevent youth from engaging in bullying and non-caring behaviors online and in-person. In the next section, we will provide examples of how educators can create an inclusive, caring, and compassionate school climate that promotes academic excellence, prosocial behaviors, and well-being among youth and suggest directions for future research and practice.

As discussed earlier, such caring and supportive relationships may create a classroom atmosphere of trust and compassion that may foster the development of adolescents' mentalization skills, also known as theory of mind (defined as the understanding of others' mental states), self-management and regulation skills, and social adjustment [28]. Thus, similar to a calm, caring, emotionally stable home and family environment [16], a compassionate school climate that is calm, peaceful, and chaos-free may motivate students to tune into others and ask for help and/or to report acts of violence, incivility, or disruptive behaviors [7,10,72]. Such valuable feedback from students could then be used for the prevention of violence or incivility before such uncivil behavior begins [36].

3.4. Multiple Uses of School Climate in Adolescence: Online and In-Person?

Given the multifaceted and nuanced nature of the school climate, the emotional tone of the school plays a crucial role in the adolescents' school life and emotional well-being. Building on Dewey (1910) and Vygotsky's and Piaget's work on intellectual development and play, Susan Engel [50] states how studies tend to overlook the role that the secondary school climate or atmosphere of the classroom plays in adolescents' self-processes, learning, and overall emotional well-being. Engel [50] discusses how the school climate or culture needs to focus on a balanced approach that promotes the importance of social relationships and social skills, as well as self-management skills such as individual responsibility for learning and time for positive solitude in person and online.

A classroom climate that promotes the constructive use of solitude and prosocial interactions in person and online promotes the importance of mindfulness and silence in the classroom as a means of power [51–53], reflection and creativity, and self-expression during adolescence [4,19]. A caring and compassionate school climate can help to reduce anxiety and stress in youth by promoting fairness, respect, and kindness in students, teachers, and the larger school community. Such a supportive climate may increase feelings of belonging and acceptedness, which in turn may alleviate stress and anxiety in youth [10,15]. It could also encourage prosocial actions among students and create a sense of respect and peace among students to avoid aggressive behavior such as bullying and uncompassionate actions [16,54].

Recent research explores how different dimensions of the classroom, such as physical and interpersonal aspects, help to create an overall emotional climate that is supportive and inclusive [10]. For example, educators need to address the divergent emotional needs and learning preferences of adolescent students to move beyond deficit models of schooling

and view learners as sense-makers, recognizing the humanity and potentiality of each learner [54]. Studies show how classrooms can be organized to recognize the dignity and humanity of youth with different ways of knowing [24], and support youth who prefer to learn in conditions that involve solitude and silence [4], or those who prefer collaborative learning and a dialogue focus [16].

For example, the physical layout of a classroom could be organized to have safe spaces strategically placed to provide opportunities for students to have a calm, peaceful, and private area for solitary activities such as creative writing, drawing, or reading [50]. Quiet spaces that include connections to nature and appear warm and welcoming via the use of plants, fish tanks, carpets, and cushions can provide students with opportunities to engage in mindful activities such as creative thinking and reflection. For collaborative and group activities, spaces and furniture in the classroom could be used to promote communication and sharing of materials.

Studies on the influence of the family environment on a young person's mental and emotional life also may inform researchers on the influence of school climate on students' mental well-being. For example, studies show that adolescents who lived in a chaotic family household, defined as a lack of family structure and consistency, were more likely to experience emotional challenges [73]. Thus, to promote a sense of safety, stability, and peacefulness in the classroom, educators should aim to provide classroom contexts that are characterized by a calm, organized, and structured learning environment with little clutter and low people traffic [72].

Here, it is also important to highlight the multicultural and multilinguistic contexts of adolescents' worlds as they live in an increasingly connected world. Within this increasingly global context, many adolescents may experience socio-political silences within the classroom, which in turn may influence their emotional well-being and ability to learn [16]. These silences also extend to peer relationships in the classroom, where adolescents of color or ethnic minorities may silence their voices to avoid negative repercussions. Regarding diverse gendered identities, some transgendered, gender diverse, or LBGQT adolescents may use silence to express themselves within a community where the majority of the population is heterosexual and cisgender [16,70].

Although teachers play an important role in the co-construction of adolescents' social-cognitive and linguistic abilities [71], few studies explore the links among school climate and teachers' and peers' perceptions of gendered, cultural identities, and adolescents' emotional well-being and socio-communicative abilities. That is, most studies explore one aspect of the school climate, such as teacher–student talk in the classroom, but fail to examine other components of school climate, such as the policies regarding cultural and gender diversity and student safety and support for mental health [71]. Findings on teacher–student emotion talk in terms of gender and culture remain mixed [16], and few studies explore how teacher–adolescent conversations within the secondary school climate influence student emotional well-being. Such findings have implications for the school climate as the culture of the school is co-created in part by classroom conversations such as the use of gender-sensitive and culturally informed talk and silences in daily school events and learning activities.

Research on gender and culturally related differences in adolescents' experiences of school climate and social and emotional understanding remains inconsistent and fairly scarce. In particular, few studies examine how school climate influences the development of adolescents' understanding of complex, self-conscious emotions such as remorse and shame. For example, a recent study showed that adolescent girls' views of the world played a larger role in their well-being than boys, which places them more vulnerable to a hostile or negative school climate [71]. Researchers are also starting to focus on the exploration of between-genders to within-gender and gender similarities versus differences [72]. Taken together, such studies suggest that future research addresses the constantly changing definitions of gender and gender fluidity across the globe. Such an approach to exploring silences and gender and cultural identity within the secondary school context may be useful,

particularly for positive youth development programs that aim to promote emotional well-being and academic competence in adolescence [22,73].

4. Implications for Practice and Future Directions

4.1. School Climate, Social Cognition, and Mental Health

To summarize, adolescents' experiences of solitude and social interactions within the classroom often involve emotional exchanges where they practice emotion and language in collaboration and play as well as in competition. This section highlights some key strategies that include culturally responsive strategies for cooperative learning and times of competition in the classroom. The aim of such strategies is to help further the development of emotional competence in adolescents across silent or verbal contexts. The integration of social and emotional education in gender-informed and culturally responsive practice with adolescents underscores the dynamic complexity, fluidity, and continuity of the formation of a social and private self. That is, we will consider the ways in which emotional practice and students' mental health are affected by language, gender, and ethnicity (and vice versa) during school hours.

4.2. Social-Emotional School Climate in Secondary Schools: Positive Psychology and Compassion-Focused Mindfulness School Programs

Research on the connections between the school climate and mental health in adolescents highlights the importance of mindfulness and self-compassion [51–53] and the concept of flow and positive thinking [74]. This branch of humanistic psychology focuses on the ability to flourish by combining resilience with optimism [75], and examines how cognition and spiritual and/or religious experiences interact and work together to influence a young person's learning experiences and emotional well-being. Research shows that flow or optimal experiences may have a neurological basis [76,77], and that adolescents who report experiences of flow and high levels of mindfulness are more likely to experience a decrease in anxiety and depression together with a greater sense of self-regulation, psychological well-being, and successful academic achievement [51,52,78].

Given the more contemporary, broader concepts of mental health, the notion of happiness and subjective well-being may also provide researchers with some answers to the inner, spiritual world of adolescents. For example, recent examples from our ongoing longitudinal research on social cognition and mental health in Canadian adolescents (11 to 17 years) show that high levels of students' mindfulness link to high levels of self-compassion and perceived self-worth [48]. In addition, Assor et al. [79] found that 18–19-year-old adolescents' well-being improved via reflective authentic inner-compass facilitation programs (RAICF) that promoted examination of one's authentic inner values using times of silence and contemplation. Thus, positive youth psychology provides an empirical foundation for school-based mindfulness programs to flourish [51,52], and suggests the need for more research on how school climate influences the interconnections among adolescents' learning and their experiences of silence, mindful reflection, and well-being [80].

4.3. Global: Towards a Culturally and Gender Diverse Secondary School Climate

Connections among School Culture, Cognition, and Well-Being

The increasing prevalence and asserted presence of culturally diverse youth across the globe demands a critical examination of our ways of talking about and studying race and ethnicity in schools. In particular, special attention is needed to include how gender identity interacts with one's cultural orientation. Given that adolescence is a crucial time in the development of one's identity, gender, and cultural orientation [9], the second decade in one's life is a prime time to learn in a gender-sensitive and culturally informed school climate. Such a supportive emotional learning environment promotes young people's ability to be kind, compassionate, respectful, and mindful of others, irrespective of their cultural and gender orientation [49]. Thus, inclusive educational and research programs need to allow for fluidity and multiplicity regarding racial–ethnic and gender identification.

As educators, we need to explore the emotional worlds of mixed heritage youth and how their life experiences differ from those raised in uniethnic homes. For example, most social-emotional learning programs (SEL) programs for youth advocate the use of 'I' sentences to verbalize emotions and to negotiate conflicts (e.g., "I am feeling sad, I do not understand why you yelled at me) [81]. However, social communication patterns are largely determined by one's culture, as studies show that East Asians are less likely to show emotions in the presence of their Western classmates and may not feel comfortable using the personal pronoun "I" compared to their North American classmates [16].

Thus, to address these differences in communication and thinking, a school and classroom culture or climate that values all kinds of communication (verbal and nonverbal), as well as the right to not communicate at times and engage in solitude and noncommunication [82]. Such an inviting school climate would promote mutual respect, caring, and sensitivity and should promote prosocial attitudes and behaviors, including acceptance of and respect for differences. The tacit and explicit social norms and rules that govern sociolinguistic behaviors in a culturally and gender-diverse secondary school setting help to define what is acceptable and unacceptable treatment of individuals.

Given that school life reflects how our world is becoming increasingly global and diverse, adolescents are increasingly likely to meet and interact with others whose gender, race, ethnicity, and family backgrounds differ from their own [69]. Recent research shows that this variety in classroom composition is beneficial for children's and adolescents' development as it prompts children's socio-cognitive understanding [83]. For example, Devine and colleagues found that, in a racially/ethnically diverse sample (52% White, 32% Asian, 8% Black, 6% Mixed race/ethnicity) of 1020 children (age range: 8–13 years) from the United Kingdom, that children with cross-race/ethnicity friendships outperformed their peers on theory of mind tests, even when age, verbal ability, and demographic factors were considered [84]. More recently, Lecce and colleagues conducted a longitudinal study involving 409 children (aged from 8 to 12 years) and showed that, over and above individual variables, high diversity in classmates' theory of mind abilities predict children's development of ToM across one year [85]. Overall, then, these and data point to the power of interacting with different, rather than similar, peers for the development of socio-cognitive skills [86].

In addition to race and ethnicity, other differences such as gender, social class, physical characteristics, and sexual orientation may serve as focal points for conflict and intolerance among adolescents [70]. As our society grows in cultural diversity, the need is great for developmentally appropriate and inclusive curricula that move beyond tolerance and promote the acceptance of and respect for differences [10]. Such programs can include the application of mentalization activities in the classroom, such as role-playing and storytelling with critical discussion, as such activities promote perspective-taking and emotion recognition [84]. Students will be able to use these social and cognitive tools to help them navigate their relationships with others from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and prevent cultural biases and prejudice from forming in the classroom [43,87]. A culturally and gender-diverse school climate will implement education programs that help youth to understand the notion of polyculturalism or the idea that culture is conceptualized as dynamic, flexible, and interactive, where each culture learns from each other via communication and the sharing of their beliefs, attitudes, and practices with one another [69,88].

Irrespective of educational programs, schools must provide an inclusive and developmentally appropriate learning culture or school climate that promotes a sense of mutual respect, connection, caring, compassion, and inclusion [16]. It is imperative that educators and researchers help high school students to co-create an ethnic-racial and gender-inclusive school climate [66], that will include a set of values and standards that promote affirmation and acceptance of diversity [67], and eliminate insensitive and intolerant behavior in the classroom [16]. The social and emotional school climate needs to reflect the collective values and standards of interpersonal relationships and prosocial interactions that promote the communicative value of silence, as well as the spoken word.

For example, recent findings show how a kind, motivational, and emotional tone of the teacher's voice can have a positive impact on students' academic competence [10]. Such findings encourage educators to be aware of the nonverbal signs they emit to their students, including tone of voice and body language. Thus, a school climate of mutual respect and compassion for all, regardless of group and individual differences, is crucial to helping young people develop into competent and compassionate adults who exhibit moral and civic responsibility. Such a caring, civil, and compassionate school climate will promote inclusivity, which in turn may help adolescents feel accepted and validated by a non-judgmental and open-minded learning community. Such positive feelings may then encourage youth to accept, care for, and befriend their peers from diverse cultures and aim to understand the beliefs and attitudes of others that may differ from their own [16].

Teachers have many ways to prompt the understanding of others' mental states in their adolescent students. Research in this area shows that the content and quality of children's social interactions are powerful ways to do so. For example, Lecce and colleagues demonstrated that 7- to 12-year-old children whose teachers used mental-state language and encouraged discussions in the classroom outperformed their peers in mentalizing [85]. Importantly, training studies also showed that conversation-based interventions improve children's theory of mind and that teachers can be taught to implement such training programs [89,90].

To foster young people's understanding of peaceful, civil, and prosocial actions, using critical and compassionate dialogue, educators could help youth to clarify which social behaviors are acceptable or "the right thing to do" and which are not [91]. Such discussions would help youth understand the reasons for various school regulations and prohibitions and expose youth to a culturally diverse selection of models of moral behavior and social etiquette [16]. Teachers and peers could model examples of how to display respectful and supportive moral and prosocial behavior (e.g., speaking up and reporting to a teacher if you see a rule being broken, such as peer harassment in the hallway, vandalism to school property, offering comfort to a student who appears upset or anxious).

Second, educators could encourage critical dialogue and inquiry on friendships and peer relations via group discussion and critical co-viewing of popular media with parents, teachers, and peers (newspapers, TV news shows, social media, films, etc.) [16]. Mixed-aged and culturally diverse student groups could provide multiple perspectives and may challenge learners' social and moral reasoning. Third, students could be encouraged to critically discuss the universality or global application of friendship and morality (i.e., the universal definition of a 'friend'). For example—they could address questions such as: What does this mean, and is a transcultural definition possible? If so, how would a global moral landscape affect our identity and peer relationships?

Finally, adult leaders could encourage youth to understand their peers' perspectives and justifications regarding the choice to follow a moral, virtuous life and to understand the perspectives of those who choose to lead a lifestyle with moral boundaries that divert from society's guidelines. For example, learners could be encouraged to question why some people who are educated choose to perform acts of violence and hatred towards their friends and loved ones. Such questions could be framed within an atmosphere of safe inquiry and dialogue within the classroom and include in-person as well as digital interactions, including social media sites [10,56,92].

As we approach the third decade of the 21st century, together with rapid technological advancements, educators and researchers need to consider diverse meanings of communication [93,94], and highlight the importance of the connections between school climate and students' well-being. To promote adolescent's school engagement and emotional well-being, as technology continues to speed up, the challenge for educators in the 2020s and beyond will be to slow down the process of learning and take the time necessary to create an inclusive, mindful, and compassionate school climate that promotes the formation and maintenance of meaningful and trustworthy relationships that support and value mental health and life-long learning.

5. Conclusions

Given the complex social and cultural rules of secondary school life, to preserve students' mental health and well-being, educators and researchers need to create a school climate that will help adolescents navigate the social world of the classroom. As we have outlined above, findings suggest that the school climate (actual and adolescents' perceptions) plays a key role in an adolescent's psychosocial life and emotional well-being. This critical analysis also revealed there remains a lack of studies that focus on the importance of secondary school programs to be culturally informed and gender-sensitive. More studies are needed on school climate in real-life and virtual settings and on how such learning contexts differ in terms of the effects they have on adolescents' mental health. Another key finding that emerged from the present review was there is a lack of existing educational programs that take into consideration adolescents' intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, although research shows these are crucial for mental health and academic achievement. Future programs should, therefore, devote more attention to including a balance of self and social skills to help promote well-being and academic success.

Overall, this article highlights the importance of the school climate in an adolescent's emotional well-being and calls for the need for further research on how the school climate can strengthen the link between students' learning experiences and a sense of dignity in the classroom. More studies need to gain access to the voices of adolescents and adopt a person-centered approach. Ideally, this research should have a longitudinal design and a cross-cultural approach to address the importance of school climate for adolescents' mental health across the globe. Additionally, given the rise in virtual classrooms, future research on school climate in adolescents needs to incorporate studies on school climate in real life (FtF) and virtual classrooms.

Given that the social-emotional climate of the secondary school reflects the increasingly culturally diverse global population, researchers and practitioners need to recognize how such a nuanced and multi-layered landscape influences the emotional well-being of the adolescent. As many researchers claim [10,39], to ensure the social and emotional health of youth today, researchers and educators need to move beyond the what and how of social-emotional learning programs and focus on the whom. A compassionate and culturally informed school climate will foster the feeling of safety and belonging in the classroom. Now is the time for researchers and educators to form alliances, draw from the lived experiences of youth, and co-create a youth-informed, compassionate, and inclusive school climate for all students to feel accepted and that they 'matter.'

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