

Identifying Ekvall's Creative Climate Dimensions in Gifted and
Talented/Enrichment Programs: An Executive Summary of
Richards' 2002 Master's Project

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Introduction and Overview

The purpose of this project is to assist teachers in recognizing behaviors in their classroom that are indicative of a creative climate. This project will lay the groundwork for further research ultimately leading to a checklist for teachers entitled the Creative Climate Checklist about School Settings (CLASS). Using Ekvall's ten Creative Climate dimensions for the business workplace as a guide and researching current creativity literature and trends, I will answer the following questions in this project:

1. How do Ekvall's climate dimensions manifest themselves in classroom settings
 - what is similar?*
 - what is different?*
2. What observed behaviors by both students and teachers may be indicative of creative climate in the classroom?
3. What literature already exists that examines or describes creative climate in the classroom

Pertinent background information

Because Ekvall's ten creative climate dimensions in a business setting were used in this project as a baseline of data to compare to classroom settings, an understanding of Ekvall's definitions is critical to this study. Evidence of the ten dimensions listed below were scribed from classroom observations on an observation protocol originally created from Miloshevski (2000) and Gordon (2000) for their work in identifying Ekvall's ten creative climate dimensions in an elementary classroom and a middle school classroom.

These dimensions originated from Goran Ekvall (1999) and were altered by Lauer (1994). Each of the team members on the creative climate research team were using these definitions as a baseline for collecting observational data.

Dimension A

Challenge is the degree to which members of the organization are involved in it's daily operations and long-term goals. High- challenge people are intrinsically motivated to make contributions, they find joy and meaningfulness in their work and invest much energy.

Dimension B

Freedom is described as the independence in behavior exerted by the people in the organization. In a climate with much freedom, people are given autonomy to define much of their own work. People are able to exercise discretion in their day-to-day activities. People take the initiative to acquire and share information.

Dimension C

Conflicts refer to the presence of personal, interpersonal and emotional tensions (in contrast to idea tensions in the debates dimension) in the organization. When a level of conflict is high, groups and single individuals dislike or hate each other and the climate can be characterized by "warfare". Plots and traps are common and backstabbing occurs.

Dimension D

Idea Support involves the new ways ideas are treated. In the supportive climate, ideas and suggestions are received in an alternative and kind way by bosses and workmates. People listen to each other and encourage initiatives. Possibilities for trying out new areas are created. The atmosphere is constructive and positive.

Dimension E

Involves encounters, exchanges often clashes among viewpoints, ideas and differing experiences and knowledge. In the debating organizations many voices are heard and people are keen on putting forward their ideas. Where debates are missing, people follow authoritarian patterns without questioning. Debate focuses on issues and ideas.

Dimension F

Tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity exposed in the workplace constitutes risk-taking. In the high risk-taking climate, bold new initiatives can be taken even when the outcomes are unknown. People feel as though they can “take a gamble” on some of their ideas. People will often “go out on a limb” to put ideas forward.

Dimension G

Dynamism and liveliness is the eventfulness of the life of the organization. In a highly dynamic situation, new things occur often and alternations between ways of thinking about and handling issues often occurs. The atmosphere is lively and full of positive energy.

Dimension H

Trust and openness refers to the emotional safety in relationships. When there is a strong level of trust everyone in the organization dares to put forward ideas and opinions. Initiatives can be taken without fear of reprisals and ridicule in case of failure. The communication is open and straight forward.

Dimension I

Idea time is the amount of time people can use and do use for elaborating on new ideas. In the high idea-time situation, the possibilities exist to discuss and test impulses and fresh suggestions that are not planned or included in the task assignment.

Dimension J

Playfulness and humor refers to the spontaneity and ease that is displayed. A relaxed atmosphere with jokes and laughter characterizes the organization which is high in this dimension.

Description of population

This project was made possible through observations based in two school districts of the Western New York region. The districts were chosen because of the thriving enrichment programs each possessed and the differences in student demographics. One school district is urban, one suburban, within both, only the elementary programs were observed from kindergarten through fourth grade.

The first district is a large urban district. The student population consists of 34% Caucasian students, 53% African- American students , 10% Hispanic and 2.6% other. Three of the eight classroom observations were taken from this district in the kindergarten, first and fourth grades. One teacher was used for these observations. The gifted and talented program at this particular school is a 15 year-old program based on creativity and the use of Creative Problem Solving to assist in the learning process. Each student at the school gets to attend this program, used on a rotating basis, like an exploratory class. The average time to visit the program is 30 minutes per week.

The second district is a large suburban district. The student population consists of 92% Caucasian students, 2.5% African- American students, .7% Hispanic students and 4.9% other. Five of the eight classroom observations were taken from this district in the second, third and fourth grade. Three teachers were used to make these five observations. The gifted and talented program in this district is well developed throughout the district, is present at each elementary school and middle school within the district. Each student at the elementary level will participate in the program on a rotating basis for an average of 30 minutes per week. Like the first district, this district focuses it's program on creativity and the use of Creative Problem Solving to assist in the learning process.

Method of data collection

Listed below are the steps used for collecting the data and a summary describing this process.

1. Preparing the teachers whose classrooms I would visit.
2. Adapting to each classroom's climate
3. Scribing behavioral data as fitting under a climate dimension on protocol sheets.
4. What happens when behavioral data doesn't fit under a climate dimension?

Each classroom was observed from a discrete spot in the classroom, attempting to blend in with the climate without effecting it. The idea was for the observer to have no effect on the climate that was to be observed. Actions, interactions, feelings or vibes that seemed to fit one of Ekvall's ten creative climate dimensions were scribed on the protocol sheet as the classroom proceeded with a lesson. As the observation progressed, actions, interactions, feelings (observable behavior) that did not fit into a certain dimension were scribed as "other". These interactions or vibes were a noticeable piece of the climate, yet did not belong to any certain dimension. This "new data" was classified under "different" or "other" on the observation protocol sheets.

Each classroom situation that was visited in the eight observations was quite different. See "Figure 1" to observe the differences.

Figure 1

School type	Grade level	Classroom lesson
Urban	kindergarten	Stations acting out the 6 step Creative Problem Solving Process
Urban	1	Presenting of student- created inventions
Suburban	2	A Medieval stations activity-learn about different Medieval times culture
Suburban	2	Classroom creation of a program for the principal
Suburban	3	Using Creative Problem Solving to build a structure
Suburban	3	Math Problem Solving
Suburban	4	Creative Problem Solving "hands-on" stations
Urban	4	Lesson on animal emotions

Findings

Most dimensions were found to exist in each classroom and the possibilities of new dimensions emerging were evident. Some dimensions may even be combined or re-named for a classroom setting. Still, other classroom environments may display dimensions besides Ekvall's ten dimensions for business settings.

Each Dimension had a way of manifesting itself in classroom environments and appeared relatively distinct from other dimensions. Below, you can take a look at a total summary of the individual insights received from the observations of each dimension. See the definitions from Lauer (1994) above for a comparison.

1. Challenge

Challenge according to the definition was present in each of the observations. Regardless of age group or teacher, challenge existed. The most common observation displaying challenge was that of helping children to be intrinsically motivated. As a result of the intrinsic motivation, many students became involved in the daily "operations" of the classroom. For example, students created inventions based on their personal needs, fueling intrinsic motivation. As a result, they wanted to be involved in the classroom to share their pride and excitement generated from their personal invention.

This dimension also worked with other dimensions creating a "layering effect." In practice, the theoretical dimensions seemed to overlap. For example, many observable behaviors could have started out as a "challenge" but were observable as "dynamism and liveliness", because of the intrinsic motivation a student feels (challenge), it may cause the atmosphere to be "lively and full of positive energy" (dynamism and liveliness) (Lauer, 1994). I had to be sure I was assigning the correct dimension to the observable behavior.

2. Freedom

A certain amount of control was observable by the teacher in each classroom. Freedom was given to students within parameters. Much of what the students were free to do, was set up by the teachers as a series of "choices" that were appropriate. Maybe "guided freedom" may be a more appropriate title for this dimension in the classroom. More "freedom" could be earned with good behavior and some could be restricted due to

insubordinate behavior. The students seemed to feel that there was more freedom in their gifted and talented classroom than the regular classroom. This feeling was displayed by their delighted reactions to the choices the students had in going through “creativity stations” or working on a project, or simply being able to sit anywhere they wished to work on projects. The children felt very free in the gifted and talented classroom and it was clear that the teachers were deliberate about this.

3. Conflict

Conflicts occur in any classroom or situation where humans interact with each other. The ability to handle a conflict, recognize that it exists and try to change the situation, was a strong point of these classroom I observed. For example, one of the teachers I was observing asked two students who were personally attacking each other (name-calling), how could they turn this into a debate? The fact that these teachers are so savvy with Creative Problem Solving and have knowledge of Ekvall’s ten creative climate dimensions has been fascinating to see at work in the classroom. Since the only negative dimension of the ten creative climate dimensions was *conflict*, it was interesting to see how these teachers would escape and minimize the use of this dimension.

4. Idea Support

Idea support was strongly displayed in the classroom as praise from the classroom teachers. Students seemed to thrive or search for support and acceptance from their teachers or other students whom they admired. The strong presence of this dimension seemed to feed into a certain amount of “trust and openness” among the students and teacher in the classroom.

5. Debate

This dimension was difficult to separate from conflict. There must be a distinction made regarding whether the clash of view points were personally attacking (conflict) or stuck to the issue at hand (debate). For the most part, the younger children seemed to stick to conflict as a way of expressing a clash in point of view. Sticking to the issue seemed to be more difficult to these younger students. Resorting to name-calling became a way to express their feelings.

As students got older, approximately third grade, I noticed a difference in the communication. Students were starting to stop and think about what they were angry

about, starting to solve a problem, rather than create one, terms could be heard such as “Let’s make a plan..” or the use of “I” messages so the finger is not pointing at others. Students were getting educated on how to keep things at a debate level and not a conflict. I overheard a teacher asking how the students could solve a problem without conflicting.

6. Risk taking

A major pattern that occurred was the connection between “trust and openness” and *risk taking*. As the amount of *trust and openness* increased, the amount of *risk taking* appeared to increase as well. It seemed that once the students felt trusted and trusted others, they were comfortable in taking risks. The question also arose, if the student feels extra comfortable in taking risks, is it still considered a risk?

I wonder if students in a traditional classroom would take the risks that students in an enrichment program take? It seems that these teachers somewhat encourage the risks with *idea support* and *trust and openness*.

7. Dynamism and Liveliness

This dimension was extremely evident in my observations. “Eventfulness” and “positive energy” could be felt as you walked into these classrooms. There were constant alternations of thinking occurring, as each lesson would be flexible enough to “go with the flow” (Lauer, 1994).

Students demonstrated this dimension by teaching each other the process that they followed in figuring out difficult problems. I observed a math lesson where the students worked on three very difficult multi-step problems. I watched them trying to calculate the problems on their own. After awhile, students were allowed to pick a partner and tell them about the process or approach that they were taking in figuring out the problem.. You heard alot of “Ohhh” and “let me try it that way,” according to Lauer (1994), alternations in ways of thinking really brought the dynamism out in these students.

8. Trust and Openness

The participating classrooms were observed in the end of the school year. As a result of the time these classes have had to “gel,” this dimension was displayed prominently. If I had stepped in to observe during the first month of school, I might not have observed as much evidence for this dimension. The trust that these students had for each other and the teacher was very evident.

Communication in these classrooms was an integral part of the operations. The classrooms were run with student opinion taken into consideration, resulting in students displaying open communication. The teachers encouraged and supported the maintenance of trust in the classroom so that everyone felt comfortable in their surroundings. Never did I observe a snide comment among students to be dismissed by the teacher. Negative comments were not tolerated, therefore students built trust in the teacher.

9. Idea Time

Teachers in general seem to be extremely familiar with “idea time”, in the words of countless education professors, this is also known as “wait time”. In order for all students to absorb what is being taught, when a question is asked, you need to “wait” for students who may not process as fast.

I noticed the use of words such as “incubate” being used by the participating teachers. Phrases similar to; “I’m going to let you incubate over this for awhile” could be heard in these classrooms. “Idea time” was not only given for responding to questioning, but was given in working at stations and working on projects. One of my observations centered around a project in which students were working for a couple days, and were allowed to come in and ask questions pertaining to the project each day. This not only seemed to fulfill a need for those students, but spurred ideas for other students regarding their own projects.

10. Playfulness and Humor

“Playfulness and humor” was a visible dimension in all observations. However, it did seem to appear in different amounts depending on teacher or class size. In one class, I noticed that the class size was extremely small (7 children), this seemed to spur a more relaxed atmosphere that lead to some joking and spontaneity, different from the large class sizes. Students seemed to feel more comfortable in the small setting in both joking with each other and the teacher.

Some teachers also show that laughter and joking is more acceptable in their classroom. I noticed certain teachers with larger class sizes seemed to be less apt to let the playfulness get carried away. It seemed that laughter and joking could escalate much quicker in larger groups. Because of this, teachers allowed only a certain amount of

“joking” and playfulness” before they would ask the class to move onto a more serious subject.

Other Possible Classroom Dimensions :

While fitting classroom actions and interactions into Ekvall’s dimensions, I noticed certain forces in the classroom that seemed to combine other dimensions, stand alone or rename a dimension more appropriate for a classroom setting. The following list of “forces” appeared present in every observation and seemed to have a very strong influence in certain instances. They are as follows:

- Acceptance
- Leadership
- Camaraderie
- Ownership

Acceptance:

The fact that a social hierarchy existed in each of the participating classrooms, prompted the thought of “acceptance” as a strong classroom force. I would often observe and scribe these “acceptance” behaviors under idea support, yet it seemed that there was much more to the observable behaviors. Most of the students seemed to be “governed” by this hierarchy. If a student was not socially accepted by a person that they looked up to, they would not be able to focus on academics. As a result, I wanted to start scribing the force of “acceptance” under “conflict” or even “trust and openness”, negatively impacting dimensions.

The students who did not feel accepted by a group (avoided, picked on, name-called) would not show signs of “trust and openness” in other students. The person in the room that these “non- accepted” students may trust is often the teacher. This acceptance by the teacher and no other is demonstrated as the “tattle-tail” or “teacher’s pet”. The lack of acceptance by anyone is displayed as a lonely, isolated child. For example, I observed a child who would beg the teacher to work by herself during group work as to avoid the rejection in group acceptance.

Leadership:

Some students inevitably become classroom leaders. Whether they put themselves in that position or the teacher or even the kids do, some students begin taking initiative, and others will follow. In each of the cooperative groups I observed that a leader would emerge. I noticed “alpha” leaders in each classroom. Often times these alpha leaders consist of one boy and one girl. I also noticed “sub- leaders” in small group activities, also relating to the social hierarchy mentioned above with “acceptance”. These leaders usually belong to the “top of the hierarchy” students, who often times are not smarter than others, but rather have a social advantage. Many factors may contribute to the “social advantage,” possibilities include: polite conversation, nice clothing, material values, good looks, funny and witty behavior, etc.

Camaraderie:

When a classroom seemed to “click” with everyone making their specific contributions and seeming to get along, including the teacher, I noticed a sense of camaraderie. Students all sharing or pitching in for one cause or joining together to plan something seemed to exemplify this force. For example, the planning of a party thrown for a retiring principal was observed and demonstrated as “classroom camaraderie”. The sharing in success as a classroom unit in one way or another was a very powerful force to observe in the classrooms.

I observed a particular participating classroom that epitomized “camaraderie” as a force. The students were working and joking with each other and the teacher at the same time. The teacher was joking back and teaching them all while staying on task. Each child was “part” of this classroom and joined in on the controlled joking and friendship, not one student was excluded. A large amount of mutual respect and trust amongst the members of the classroom could be felt upon entering the room. There is a possibility that this “force” is a result of the presence of all ten creative climate dimensions in place and working. However, it seemed to surface as a separate force as well.

Ownership:

Each member of the classroom setting seemed as though they wanted to make his / her own contributions to the classroom. As a result of contributions being made (ideas given, work displayed, caring for a classroom pet) I felt that a sense of ownership was needed for each student to feel good about themselves or successful. This force may tie into “challenge” in which members contribute to the daily operations of the organization (Lauer, 1994).

I noticed how good the students felt about themselves when something they made (inventions) was used by the teacher or displayed for the school to observe. When students were allowed to bring items from home to display at school, there was a sense of classroom ownership due to a connection with the student’s home life and their contributions to the classroom.

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