



Teachers' Perceptions of the Work Climate: Implications for Teacher Performance and Professionalism in Vocational High School

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ABSTRACT

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In the context of vocational education, the school work climate significantly influences teacher performance, motivation, and commitment. While teachers are expected to exhibit high professionalism, many vocational high schools still lack a conducive environment that fosters collaboration, support, and participation. This study explores how teachers perceive the work climate in state vocational high schools. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. The findings reveal that teachers perceive institutional support as a key element of a positive work climate, reflected through leadership responsiveness, mentoring systems, and inclusive academic planning. Ideal support is shown to be multidimensional, structural, relational, and participatory, promoting teacher engagement, psychological comfort, and a sense of belonging. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychosocial dimensions that shape the school environment and provide empirical insights for policy interventions aimed at improving the quality of teacher professionalism and educational outcomes in vocational schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Education serves not only as a means of transferring knowledge but also as an instrument of social development and improving the quality of human resources. In modern society, the quality of education is largely determined by a supportive work environment in schools. A positive work climate will encourage teachers to work optimally, increase the effectiveness of learning, and directly impact educational outcomes (Albanesi et al., 2023; Otrębski, 2022; Ssenyonga & Hecker, 2021). Conversely, an unconducive work climate can reduce teacher

enthusiasm and productivity, resulting in a decline in the quality of education itself. Amidst demands for teacher professionalism, it is crucial to understand how teachers perceive the work climate in their schools, as these perceptions can influence their attitudes, performance, and motivation (Buskila & Chen-Levi, 2021; Grant & Brantlinger, 2022; Nakata et al., 2022). Therefore, research on teachers' perceptions of the school work climate is crucial as a basis for policies to improve the quality of education, particularly at the Vocational High School (SMK) level, which faces unique challenges in implementing vocational education.

A current problem in the world of education is the disparity between expectations for teacher professionalism and the reality of the work environment they face. Although teachers are expected to be creative, innovative, and committed to quality learning, many schools still do not provide a work climate that supports the development of teacher professionalism. Several indicators, such as a lack of support from school leaders, minimal collaboration between teachers, and the absence of participation in decision-making, often hamper work enthusiasm (Devjak et al., 2020; García-Moya et al., 2023). This reality demonstrates that improving the quality of education cannot solely focus on improving individual teacher competencies but also requires attention to the collective work environment within the school. In other words, improving the quality of education will be difficult if the school work climate is neglected. This issue requires serious examination as it affects the comfort and sustainability of teachers' professional duties.

Based on initial observations at SMK Negeri 1 Painan and SMK Negeri 2 Painan, it was found that the teacher work climate at these schools was suboptimal. Several teachers expressed complaints about the lack of social interaction in the workplace, the dominance of formal communication, and the absence of forums that encourage creative collaboration. Furthermore, teachers felt underappreciated in school decision-making and experienced pressure to complete high administrative workloads. This situation was exacerbated by limited support from school leaders for developing professional competencies. Informal interviews with 15 teachers from the two schools raised concerns that this work environment could erode loyalty and commitment to their work. This phenomenon indicates that teachers' perceptions of the work climate significantly influence their work enthusiasm and involvement in achieving school goals. Therefore, in-depth research is needed to understand how teachers interpret the work climate they experience.

Extensive research on school work climate has been conducted, demonstrating that it significantly correlates with teacher job satisfaction, motivation, and learning effectiveness. For example, Corbin et al. (2024) found

that 90.25% of teachers who perceived a positive work environment showed improved performance. Sperati et al. (2024) stated that teachers' perceptions of the work environment contribute to levels of participation and work enthusiasm. Meanwhile, Sanz-Mas et al. (2024) emphasized that work climate is a measurable factor that influences the behavior of members of educational organizations. However, the majority of this research focuses on the general school context and has not specifically addressed the work environment in vocational schools, which have different characteristics and demands, both in terms of curriculum and practical workload.

The limitations of previous research are also evident in the methodological aspect, where qualitative research that explores teacher perceptions in depth is still relatively rare, especially in public vocational high schools (SMK) in semi-urban areas like the IV Jurai District. Most studies use a qualitative approach that measures variables numerically, without allowing for contextual narratives of teachers' experiences. Perception is a subjective construct that relies heavily on individual experiences within a specific social environment (Álvarez-Arregui et al., 2023; Srisarajivakul et al., 2023). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by emphasizing the importance of teacher perspectives in understanding the work climate in schools. This research seeks to capture a richer reality through a descriptive-qualitative approach, a topic that has not been widely explored by previous studies, particularly in public vocational high schools (SMK) throughout the IV Jurai District.

This research is relevant and novel because it focuses on the perceptions of teachers in public vocational high schools (SHS), which have received little attention in the discourse on improving educational quality. Using a qualitative approach, this study explores teachers' subjective experiences in understanding the dynamics of their work climate, from social relationships, communication patterns, leadership support, to decision-making opportunities. This approach provides a comprehensive overview that addresses not only the structural dimensions but also the psychosocial dimensions that shape the work climate. Furthermore, the unique conditions of vocational education, such as the workload, cross-specialty collaboration, and industry-school relationships, require a more in-depth mapping of the work climate in vocational schools. Therefore, this research can be an important contribution in designing policy interventions to improve the quality of the teacher work environment in vocational schools, especially in areas that have not yet received much academic research.

Based on the above background, the main question this research aims to answer is: How do teachers perceive the work climate in state vocational schools in the IV Jurai District? The answer to this question will make a significant

contribution to understanding how the work climate is perceived by the primary actors in education, namely, teachers. These perceptions will directly reflect the factors that support or hinder them in carrying out their professional duties. By identifying elements teachers consider meaningful in the school work climate, this research will provide an empirical basis for improving school management policies and practices. The main argument of this research is that teacher perceptions are not simply a reflection of conditions but also a determining factor in the formation of a healthy and productive work culture. Therefore, a deep understanding of this perception is very important for improving the performance of vocational education institutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study (Assyakurrohim et al., 2022). This approach was chosen because the researcher sought to deeply understand teachers' perceptions of the work climate in their school environment in a contextual, natural, and holistic manner. Case studies were chosen because they allowed researchers to explore teachers' subjective experiences in real-life situations, including how they assess, perceive, and respond to the work environment in their respective schools. According to Fadli (2021), a case study approach is appropriate when researchers want to investigate contemporary phenomena in a real-life context and when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear. In this context, teachers' perceptions of the work climate cannot be separated from the social structure, organizational culture, and interactions that occur in their work environment. Therefore, case studies provide an exploratory space for a holistic understanding of the dynamics existing in state vocational high schools (SMK) in IV Jurai District.

This research was conducted at a state vocational high school (SMK) in IV Jurai District, Pesisir Selatan Regency. This location was selected based on several considerations. First, there is more than one state vocational high school in this district with a representative number of teachers, thus providing rich and diverse data. Second, based on initial observations and informal communication with several teachers, indications were found that the work climate in these schools is suboptimal and still presents various challenges in collaboration, communication, and organizational support. Third, there has been no similar research specifically examining teachers' perceptions of the work climate in public vocational schools (SMK) in this area, making this location a suitable case study. Furthermore, this school has a unique semi-urban socio-cultural context, so the results of this study are expected to provide scientific and practical contributions to the development of regional education policies.

Data collection in this study was conducted using three main techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to capture the situation and interactions between elements within the school directly, such as communication patterns between teachers and interactions with leaders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, namely, public vocational school teachers who had taught for at least two years. Interviews also involved school principals and educational staff as supporting informants. The interview guide was developed based on relevant school climate indicators, including dimensions of social relationships, rewards, workload, participation in decision-making, and professional support. Documentation, such as school activity records, minutes of teacher meetings, and internal policy documents related to human resource management, was used to supplement and strengthen data from observations and interviews.

Data analysis was conducted interactively and occurred simultaneously with the data collection process, following the qualitative analysis model of Sulistiyo (2023), which includes three main steps. First, data condensation is the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data obtained from the field into a more concise and meaningful form. Second, data display, which is carried out by organizing the condensed information into a matrix, thematic narrative, or category table to facilitate the extraction of meaning and patterns. Third, conclusion drawing and verification, which involves formulating interpretations of the data, drawing initial conclusions, and then conducting ongoing verification through triangulation of sources and methods to ensure the validity of the findings. This process was carried out iteratively until convincing and scientifically sound conclusions were reached.

To ensure data validity, four criteria were used according to Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To achieve credibility, triangulation of sources (teachers, principals, documents) and techniques (observation, interviews, documentation) was conducted, as well as member checking with informants to reconfirm data accuracy. Transferability was ensured by providing detailed contextual descriptions of the location and respondent characteristics so that the research results could be considered for their relevance elsewhere. Dependability was achieved by systematically recording all research processes, including logs of notes and reflections during data collection. Meanwhile, confirmability was maintained through an audit trail and regular discussions with supervisors or colleagues to maintain objectivity and avoid interpretation bias. With this approach, the research results are expected to have high validity and reliability

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Teachers' Perceptions of Institutional Support

In this study, support is defined as teachers' perceptions of how much school leadership, peers, and institutional systems provide assistance, facilitation, and concern for their professional and emotional needs. Support may take the form of access to teaching resources, direct problem-solving help from principals, recognition of teachers' work, and open communication spaces. Adequate support is fundamental to creating a conducive school work climate, which boosts teacher motivation, engagement, and effectiveness in fulfilling professional duties.

Table 1. Summary of Average Scores Regarding Teachers' Perceptions of the Work Climate

No	Indicator	Average Score	Category
1	Support	4.16	Good
2	Environmental Comfort	4.31	Good
3	Work Pressure	3.63	Good
4	Trust	4.24	Good
5	Achievement Standards	4.40	Good
6	Staff Freedom	4.36	Good
7	Affiliation	4.38	Good
Average Score		4.21	Good

The excerpts above reveal that teachers perceive support through various forms: leadership responsiveness, access to resources, recognition, and collegial solidarity. Teacher A highlights the value of open communication with school leaders, indicating a vertical support structure based on mutual trust. Teacher B emphasizes psychological support, being appreciated for one's efforts, which plays a vital role in enhancing teacher morale. These statements suggest that support does not need to be purely material; emotional and relational aspects are equally essential for building a positive work environment.

Teachers C and D point to institutional support through empowerment and facilitation, availability of teaching tools, and logistical support for professional development. Teacher E illustrates a culture of collegial mentoring, where senior teachers actively assist newcomers. This indicates a healthy, collaborative work climate where support is embedded in daily practices. Collectively, the data show that a supportive school environment, both structurally and socially, enables teachers to work more confidently, feel respected, and remain committed to the school's mission.

Observations made during the study support the above findings. Teacher rooms were well-organized with accessible information boards, and several staff

meetings included interactive segments where teachers were invited to provide input. Moreover, schools were seen facilitating teacher participation in training programs both administratively and logistically. This confirms that institutional support at these schools is not just theoretical, but actively practiced through policies and actions that nurture professional growth and psychological comfort.

Based on both interview and observational data, it can be concluded that teachers in state vocational high schools in IV Jurai perceive institutional support as a key factor in fostering a comfortable and productive work environment. This support includes open dialogue with principals, access to teaching resources, encouragement to participate in decision-making and training, as well as mentoring relationships. Such support systems contribute to an overall climate that is inclusive, motivating, and aligned with the needs of educators. The pattern emerging from this data suggests that when support is systemic and multidirectional, it enhances job satisfaction, strengthens team spirit, and positively impacts teaching quality.

Ideal Support in Vocational School Work Climate

Ideal support within the context of the vocational school work climate refers to a set of actions and systems established by the institution to fulfill the emotional, professional, and social needs of teachers. This support is both structural and relational, involving leadership engagement, peer collaboration, and teacher participation in decision-making and academic planning. Effective support creates a sense of appreciation, high involvement, and loyalty to the institution. In this study, ideal support is manifested through structured dialogue forums led by school leaders, mentoring systems from senior teachers to new teachers, and the inclusion of subject teachers in academic planning. These three forms of support reflect positive synergy and significantly contribute to strengthening a healthy and collaborative work climate in vocational schools.

Observation and in-depth interviews revealed that the support perceived by teachers originates from multiple institutional layers. Principals facilitate weekly open forums that allow idea sharing and open dialogue, bridging hierarchical gaps. Senior teachers serve as mentors for new staff, establishing a safe and collegial professional culture. Subject teachers feel appreciated when they are involved in academic planning. These practices indicate that support within the vocational school environment is not a temporary measure, but a consistent and structured system. The researcher interprets that such a system strengthens internal social cohesion and simultaneously enhances teacher autonomy, allowing them to perform their duties with greater enthusiasm and effectiveness.

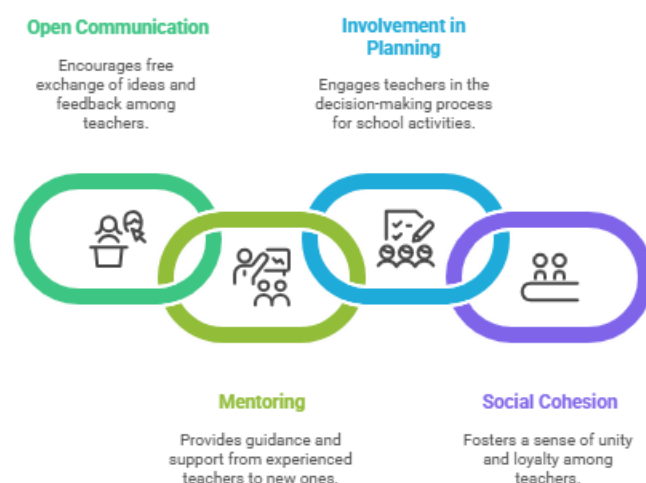


Figure 1. Visual Representation: Ideal Support Pattern

Based on the interview excerpts, ideal support experienced by teachers stems from three key actors: principals, senior teachers, and fellow subject teachers. Principals actively create spaces for open and regular communication. Senior teachers guide new staff through adaptive mentoring, while subject teachers are empowered through involvement in lesson planning. This restates the notion that genuine support not only builds comfort in the workplace but also reinforces teachers' sense of belonging and institutional loyalty. The researcher concludes that structured and participative support leads to a positive work climate and long-term professional commitment.

The data reveals an integrated and reinforcing support pattern. This pattern comprises three core pillars: (1) leadership initiatives that provide open communication and appreciation of teacher input, (2) peer collaboration through structured mentoring, and (3) professional empowerment via participation in decision-making processes. These elements are interrelated and together create a work ecosystem that is not only conducive but also motivating. In vocational schools, where the challenges are practical and industry-driven, such support is essential to sustain teacher morale, enhance professional engagement, and develop an empowering school culture.

Empowered Climate: Patterns of Support and Comfort in Enhancing Teacher Performance at Vocational High Schools

The work climate in vocational high schools refers to teachers' collective perceptions of their professional environment, covering key aspects such as support from management and colleagues, communication comfort, perceived workload, mutual trust, achievement standards, autonomy, and affiliation. These components shape the emotional and professional conditions that influence teachers' motivation, well-being, and performance. In this study, the work

climate is measured through a Likert-scale questionnaire and supported by qualitative interviews and observations. An ideal work climate is one where teachers feel supported, respected, trusted, empowered to share ideas, and have a sense of ownership over their roles.

One teacher shared, “The school often facilitates training programs, and I feel that the management genuinely wants us to grow.” This reflects a positive perception of institutional support that goes beyond procedural obligations. The training initiatives are viewed not only as tools to enhance technical skills but also as acknowledgments of teacher contributions. The researcher interprets this as a fundamental element that reinforces teacher engagement and motivation, fostering a supportive environment where professional growth is nurtured and valued.

Another teacher expressed, “Sometimes it’s hard to speak openly about problems because I’m afraid it’ll be misinterpreted or used against me.” Although most teachers reported feeling comfortable in communication, this statement indicates the presence of latent emotional tension. The researcher interprets this as a sign that while structural support is evident, emotional and psychological safety still needs improvement. Teachers should feel confident expressing concerns without fear of negative consequences. Leadership needs to foster a culture of openness where vulnerability is met with empathy and constructive response.

During field observations across several vocational schools in the IV Jurai District, variations in school culture were evident. Schools that held regular forums or open discussion platforms exhibited strong teacher collaboration, high morale, and a visible sense of collegiality. In contrast, schools without such platforms showed more fragmented social interactions, where teachers worked in isolation, especially new staff who felt less integrated. These observations corroborate the quantitative findings, emphasizing that a structured support system significantly enhances the overall work climate and professional solidarity within the school.

In general, teachers in vocational high schools across the IV Jurai District perceive the work climate positively. The strongest aspect reported was the school’s effort in recognizing teacher achievement through appreciation and praise, followed closely by comfort in professional communication and trust in school management. While teachers feel supported and acknowledged, some aspects, such as freedom to express professional challenges, emotional safety, and trust in colleagues’ competencies, still need development. This shows that the overall climate, although rated as good, is not yet fully ideal and would benefit from deeper collaboration and emotional reinforcement.

Discussion

Based on the research findings regarding teachers' perceptions of the work climate at public vocational high schools in IV Jurai District, it was found that overall, teachers perceive the school climate as positive, especially in terms of support, comfort, and trust. This aligns with literature such as Sullanmaa et al. (2022), who stated that professional and institutional support enhances job satisfaction and teacher engagement in instructional tasks. Similarly, Silva et al. (2024) showed that a comfortable work environment correlates positively with teacher enthusiasm and performance. However, despite these high perception scores, the study also revealed that teachers sometimes hesitate to voice concerns and feel burdened by high expectations from school leadership. This highlights that positive quantitative scores do not always reflect a fully healthy psychological climate.

Some differences from existing literature emerged, particularly regarding work pressure and peer trust. Morote (2024), Abdullah (2024), and Safitri (2025) emphasized that strong team trust fosters effective collaboration. Yet, in this study, although teachers expressed trust in school management, there were lingering doubts about their colleagues' competence (Widiasari & Zahro, 2024). This suggests that in vocational school contexts, horizontal trust among teachers needs to be strengthened alongside vertical trust in leadership. Similarly, regarding work pressure, even though teachers felt supported, the high expectations set by principals were still perceived as overwhelming. This finding confirms Umar (2024) claim that unmanaged job pressure can negatively impact teachers' well-being.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to the development of organizational climate theory in the context of vocational education. School climate cannot be assessed merely through structural or administrative indicators, but must also consider the psychosocial dynamics that underlie the daily realities of teachers (Herlina, 2024; Jali, 2025; Khoiroh et al., 2024). These findings enrich our understanding that a healthy work climate is multidimensional and must be managed systematically, with support, communication, trust, and participation reinforcing each other. The findings also support theories of work motivation and transformational leadership, demonstrating that appreciation and involvement in decision-making increase teachers' sense of ownership and responsibility toward the institution (Bali et al., 2024; Muhsarrof et al., 2025; Sain, 2025).

Practically, this study offers clear recommendations for school principals and vocational education policymakers. Efforts to build a positive school climate must go beyond providing training and recognition (Febriyanti et al., 2024; Hina, 2024; Putri, 2023). It is also essential to create emotionally safe spaces for open

dialogue, strengthen peer solidarity, and develop realistic and fair expectations. Principals can use reflective forums and socio-emotional training strategies to reduce psychological stress and cultivate a collaborative culture (Aziz & Sain, 2025; Munawwaroh, 2024; Nisa' & R, 2024). These implications are important so that teachers feel supported not only administratively but also emotionally and professionally in carrying out their responsibilities.

In conclusion, the discussion of these three findings illustrates that teachers' perceptions of the vocational school climate reflect a complex and holistic reality. On one hand, teachers report satisfaction with the support, communication comfort, and appreciation they receive. On the other hand, there is still room for improvement in building horizontal trust and balancing workloads. Therefore, creating an ideal work climate in vocational schools requires a comprehensive approach involving all stakeholders in fostering a healthy, productive, and sustainable environment.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this research is that institutional support, such as leadership responsiveness, structured mentoring systems, and teacher participation in academic planning, plays a central role in shaping a positive and productive work climate in state vocational high schools. These support systems not only enhance teachers' psychological comfort and professional engagement but also cultivate a sense of appreciation and belonging that contributes to their long-term commitment. In the specific context of vocational schools, where instructional demands are both academic and practice-oriented, such supportive environments are crucial to maintaining motivation and effectiveness in teaching.

This study makes a scientific contribution by offering a qualitative exploration of teachers' perceptions, providing rich, contextual insights into the psychosocial dimensions of the work climate, an area often overlooked in quantitatively driven educational climate studies. It fills a research gap by focusing on state vocational high schools in a semi-urban area, which remain underrepresented in educational research. However, the study has limitations, including its limited geographical scope and relatively small sample size, which may affect the broader applicability of the findings. Future research should consider expanding the setting and employing longitudinal or comparative designs to explore how perceptions of the work climate develop across different school environments and over time.

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