

SCHOOL CLIMATE IN GENERAL AND VET SCHOOLS IN LATVIA: PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

During OECD TALIS research in years 2013 and 2018 high level of school evaluation was found from principals and teachers' viewpoint.

Despite several external problems, principals and teachers found their schools as a very good working place that could be suggested to other colleagues. This opinion points to a good school climate. Such a factor leads to a good learning environment and increases the learning outcomes of students.

The international survey OECD TALIS 2013 had an additional national level survey adapted for vocational education and training schools (TALIS PROF). Despite some differences in levels general and vocational schools provide, there are some issues of education management that might indicate the overall climate in schools of Latvia, including general and vocational education. As TALIS PROF was not continued in next OECD TALIS research cycle in year 2018, the additional survey for principals of vocational schools was provided in year 2022. The additional survey was adapted from the survey OECD TALIS 201, including specific vocational education targeted questions and actual education environment and climate questions from survey of OECD TALIS 2018. The aim of this research was to find school principals' attitude to questions regarding school climate.

In order to find best answers regarding the school climate, resources were analysed. Independent sample tests were provided to find out differences between groups of principals. The study compared the opinions expressed by general and vocational school principals of survey year 2013 in order to find whether there were differences between their opinions on school climate questions. To find if there were differences between opinions on school climate questions, general and vocational school principals' views of survey year 2018 and results of the adapted survey 2022 were compared.

The research found that principals of schools in survey cycles year 2013, 2018, 2022 evaluated highly the school climate. Mainly there is no crucial difference between general and vocational education principals' opinions regarding questions on the school climate.

Keywords: *OECD TALIS, School Management, School Climate, School Environment, Management Style*

Introduction

Given the changes in education funding and content models in Latvia over the last decade, the challenges related to the prestige of education and the increase in the average age of teachers appeared. Despite that lower-secondary school teachers and principals showed high ratings of their school as an attractive and recommendable working place in OECD TALIS cycle 2 in 2013, which continued in cycle 3 of the study in 2018 (Geske, 2020).

In parallel, TALIS PROF 2013, a national survey of vocational school principals and teachers was conducted using a core survey supplemented with specific questions focusing on vocational education.

OECD TALIS 2018 cycle 3 surveyed only lower-secondary school teachers and principals, so information on vocational education and training (VET) was not available.

In order to conduct further research to improve the performance of VET institutions, it was important to find out whether the internal climate of the school is favourable so that the focus for future performance improvement can be placed on external conditions.

The aim of the study was to find out the issues related to the climate of the institution in lower-secondary and VET schools of Latvia.

The hypothesis of the study is that the opinion of school leaders on the climate of the institution they lead does not depend on the type of the institution (general or VET school).

The tasks of research were:

- to identify the characteristics of the school climate by analysing sources,
- to propose questions in the survey corresponding to the indication of the characteristics,
- to find out, by analysing OECD TALIS 2013 and OECD TALIS 2013 PROF data, whether general education and VET principals have different views on the school climate.
- to find out whether general education and VET principals have different views on the school climate by analysing data from the OECD TALIS 2018 and the author's adapted VET principals' Survey 2022.

Theoretical Framework

Principals have a crucial impact on the school climate. One principal may not have success in different schools as every school is special and different (O'Leary & Pulakos, 2011). It is not even about one person to improve the climate in school. An effective leader fosters a system to improve work results. There should be a focus on the openness of communication and culture in school (Ock & Oswald, 2015).

If schools have more autonomy and self-determination it results as much modern work environment (De Toni & De Marchi, 2023). Effective school leadership contributes to students' academic and social success (Smith et al., 2020). Although the role of

principal-administrator cannot be denied, the development of manager-leader in schools should be encouraged. Being a school leader is an art (Clipa & Honciuc, 2020).

Climate is the starting point to foster academic learning and achievement, not the driver (Hopson et al., 2014). Academic well-being strongly relates to self-rating (Rathmann et al., 2018) and impacts absenteeism inversely (Hendron & Kearney, 2016). Students must have good climate in school, high self-rating and willingness to attend school.

Three basic domains are used to measure school climate: Safety, Engagement and Environment (Waasdorp et al., 2020, Osher et al., 2020).

Relationships and in-person attendance are basics of positive school climate (Teasley, 2017; Mitchell, 2021). Involvement and feedback have a positive effect on teachers' motivation, which improves the quality of their work (Van Beurden et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2020). Some positive relationship activities may take more time, but some are relatively quick and effective. For example introduction of day provided by staff of school positively takes all engaged persons "on one wave" to work more productive (Anyon et al., 2018).

School as community hub can focus resources of engaged groups (school, family, community) to decrease drop-out rate (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2018) and to increase children's success (Britt et al., 2023). Stakeholders' care on emotional practices decrease drop-out in VET schools (Lippke, 2012). Stakeholders, schools and community should understand that investment in school climate leads to future community strengthening (Converso et al., 2019). Community strengthening is achievable through viewpoint of social satisfaction. It is important to use the trust network as it has significant impact on community strengthening (Veretennik & Kianto, 2019).

School climate measurements must be provided regularly to reduce bullying and improve programmes that foster students feeling of safety and engagement (Brewer et al., 2017). Student achievement is based on core variables: school climate and social identification (Maxwell et al., 2017). Scope of this research was school climate.

Methodology

School climate is a complex system to analyse. It was possible to divide it in smaller subdomains for the observation. This research is based on the domains: Engagement, Safety and Environment (Osher et al., Waasdorp et al., 2020). Every domain has subdomains that give a possibility to measure every subdomain separately or to create a tool that returns complex information on school's climate. This research is based on OECD TALIS Principal Survey data, case of Latvia, covering such subdomains as Relationships, School Participation (domain: Engagement), Emotional Safety, Physical Safety, Bullying and Cyberbullying, Substance Abuse (domain: Safety), Physical Environment, Instructional Environment, and Discipline (Domain Environment) (Osher et al., 2020). There are still uncovered subdomains to measure school climate more widely, but this research was focused on similarities of principals' opinion regarding the school climate.

All statements described in the research had 4 point Likert scale structure.

To collect the information 44 statements (2013) and 45 statements (2018 and 2022) were selected under the categories:

- decision-making and collective governance,
- things that the school lacks- physical, staff, methodological resources,
- actions observed by students,
- stress triggers for the staff,
- attitudes towards the profession and the workplace.

During data collection in year 2013, there were indicated groups of respondents: Principal of a general education institution ($n = 111$), Principal of vocational education ($n = 36$).

During data collection in year 2018 the respondent type and number was as follows: Principal of general education ($n = 133$), but during data collection in year 2022: Principal of a vocational education institution ($n = 8$).

As data compared in the research had scale structure and there were uneven groups of respondents to compare, Kolmogorov-Smirnov's test was used.

Data processing and demonstration tools: IBM SPSS 22, MS Excel 2016.

The hypothesis was that the results for each pair of groups will not differ with 95% confidence.

Results

The comparison of data between general and VET schools demonstrated high and very high satisfaction on principals' job (see Table 1, statements S1 to S6). Talking about the value of the profession in society, the answer is moderate (statement S7), Talking about disadvantages of the profession, principals' answers had very low points (statements S8 to S9). That means advantage statements are proportionally reversed versus disadvantage statements. It double-checks the results and shows correct controversial answers.

All groups were compared to each other by pairs to find if there are differences by data collection year or school type regarding principals' attitudes towards their work.

Table 2 shows that there is no statistical difference between opinions about job satisfaction of principals comparing groups in pairs.

Comparing data between groups of general and VET school principals (see Figure 2), it appeared that despite the big difference in number of respondents it does not make a profound impact on results. Continuing to focus on statements described in Table 1 and compared in Figure 2, data were checked using Kolmogorov-Smirnov's test to measure the difference in answers between groups. The result was as follows: there is no statistical difference in all 10 statements between groups of general and VET schools (sig.level 0.95).

44 statements were selected (2013) and 45 statements were selected (2018 and 2022) to compare the difference between groups in each cycle of data collection.

No statistically significant difference was observed in 41 statements (2013) and 41 statements (2018 and 2022) with significance level 0.95.

Table 1 Principals' attitudes towards their work, TALIS survey 2013, TALIS survey 2018, Author's survey 2022

Num.	Statement	general ed. schools (2013), <i>n</i> = 111		VET schools (2013), <i>n</i> = 36		general ed. schools (2018), <i>n</i> = 133		VET schools (2022), <i>n</i> = 8	
		Mean	S.d.	Mean	S.d.	Mean	S.d.	Mean	S.d.
S1	I enjoy working at this school	3.54	0.58	3.57	0.50	3.68	0.53	3.63	0.74
S2	I would recommend this school as a good place to work	3.41	0.62	3.46	0.51	3.49	0.60	3.50	0.53
S3	If I could decide again, I would still choose this job/position	3.02	0.71	3.06	0.59	3.21	0.66	3.25	0.71
S4	All in all, I am satisfied with my job	3.16	0.39	3.11	0.47	3.17	0.47	3.13	0.64
S5	I am satisfied with my performance in this school	3.10	0.43	3.03	0.45	3.09	0.43	3.13	0.64
S6	The advantages of this profession clearly outweigh the disadvantages	2.86	0.61	2.82	0.81	2.79	0.73	3.00	0.76
S7	I think that the teaching profession is valued in society	2.41	0.67	2.11	0.63	2.26	0.62	2.50	0.93
S8	I would like to change to another school if that were possible	1.70	0.73	1.66	0.59	1.6	0.64	1.63	0.74
S9	I regret that I decided to become a principal	1.68	0.61	1.63	0.55	1.51	0.58	1.50	0.76

Table 2 Differences in principals' attitudes towards their work, TALIS survey 2013, TALIS survey 2018, Author's survey 2022

	general ed. schools (2013), <i>n</i> = 111	VET schools (2013), <i>n</i> = 36	general ed. schools (2018), <i>n</i> = 133	VET schools (2022), <i>n</i> = 8
general ed. schools (2013), <i>n</i> = 111				
VET schools (2013), <i>n</i> = 36	DNSS			
general ed. schools (2018), <i>n</i> = 133	DNSS	DNSS		
VET schools (2022), <i>n</i> = 8	DNSS	DNSS	DNSS	

Note: DNSS-Difference is Not Statistically Significant in all statements regarding Job Satisfaction with 95% confidence

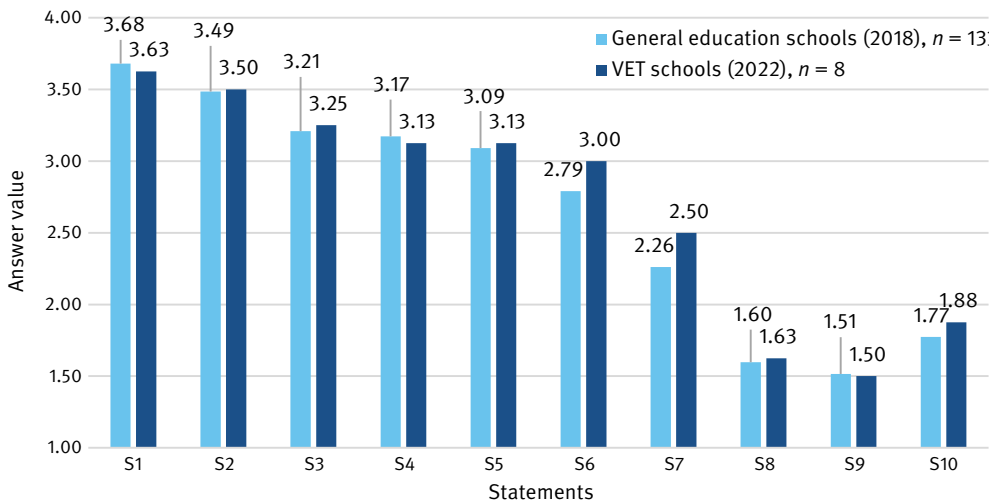


Figure 2 Similarities in principals' attitudes towards their work, TALIS survey 2018, Author's survey 2022

Table 3 Differences in school principals' views on school climate, mean values, OECD TALIS 2013, 2018 data, Survey 2022 data

Groups of respondents	Shortage of vocational teachers		Use/possession of drugs and/or alcohol		Unexcused absenteeism by students		Physical injury caused by violence among students		Shortage or inadequacy of instructional materials	
	Mean	S.d.	Mean	S.d.	Mean	S.d.	Mean	S.d.	Mean	S.d.
general 2013 (n = 111)	1.27	0.57	1.32	0.49	3.17	1.18	1.67	0.51	2.11	0.82
VET 2013 (n = 36)	2.11	1.11	2.08	0.77	3.75	1.05	1.44	0.5	2.50	0.81
general 2018 (n = 135)	1.24	0.58	1.24	0.45	–	–	1.58	0.58	1.66	0.74
VET 2022 (n = 8)	2.38	0.92	1.88	0.64	–	–	1.00	0.0	2.63	1.06

Note: difference in each pair is statistically significant with significance level 0.05

Two statements where the hypothesis was rejected (see Table 2) were reported as different in both measurement occasions, so these differences are permanent: “Shortage of vocational teachers”, “Frequency of drug and alcohol use by students” (Table 3). Data 2013 had one more rejected hypothesis in the answer regarding absenteeism by students. It is a more widely spread problem for VET schools. There were two trend items continuing both the measurement cycles and showing significant differences: VET schools are showing more care on “Shortage of vocational teachers” and “Students’ usage of drugs and alcohol”. These two statements showed no statistical difference in cycle 2013, but had a significant difference regarding “Physical injury caused by violence among

students” – VET schools are less worried, but in the question regarding “Shortage or inadequacy of instructional materials” VET schools are more concerned. Comparing results in groups of general and VET schools, year 2013, same tendency was highlighted: significant differences in opinion on school climate.

Discussion

This research shows positive viewpoint of principals to school climate not depending on time information was collected nor type of school.

Data collection in three cycles, the comparison between two groups mainly showed no difference in principals’ answers.

The in-depth view on answers regarding the evaluation of principals’ job show that greatest differences appear in statement S7 dif. = 0.24 and S6 dif. = 0.21. Such a difference might be connected with the specific difference of the school type, as VET school employees identify themselves as teachers and the specific field of profession they teach in school.

Significant differences in several answers regarding the school climate problems indicate systemic differences between general and VET schools.

Despite the low number of respondents, data 2022 indicate a trend towards the generalisation of data.

Review of literature presented strong connection to positive viewpoint of school staff and emotional wellness and academic achievements of students. Results show that principals of schools in Latvia have positive viewpoint on school climate in overall. There are just few differences between general and VET school climate. The climate in schools of Latvia is rated as good from principals of schools. That is fostering engagement and feeling of safety of students. Looking from viewpoint of principals, all school climate investments have good results. In a context of limited resources, school development should focus more on the external environment of schools, while maintaining the progress already made on school climate issues.

School climate includes several groups of characteristics. According to Osher et al. (2020), these groups are: engagement, safety and environment. School climate has a positive impact on teachers and principals’ willingness to work. School climate has a positive impact on student achievement and well-being.

Conclusions

The aim of the study “to find out the view of the principals’ of Latvian general and vocational education institutions on issues related to the climate of the institution they manage” was reached.

Research hypothesis “the opinion of school leaders on the climate of the institution they lead does not depend on the type of the institution (general or VET school)” is confirmed.

The objectives were fulfilled:

- the characteristics of school climate by analysing sources were identified,

- questions in the survey corresponding to the indication of the characteristics were proposed,
- OECD TALIS 2013 and OECD TALIS 2013 PROF data were analysed to find out whether the opinions of general education and vocational education leaders on school climate differ,
- data from the OECD TALIS 2018 and the author's adapted VET Principals' survey 2022 were analysed to find out whether general education and vocational education leaders have different views on school climate.

Teachers have a positive view on their school climate. Principals, too, have a positive view of their school climate. No significant differences were found in the opinions of general and VET school principals in the two phases of the study. The differences found are partly due to the specific characteristics of the institution, such as the lack of vocational teachers or teaching resources.

Strengths of this study in homogenous results regarding principals' opinion about their job and school climate in general not depend of measurement time or school type.

Weak point of this study is small number of participants from VET schools and discontinuation of measurements of VET schools.

This study is limited to measure school climate. To measure climate in other types of institutions, specific instruments need to be created respecting specifics of organization. Further studies can be connected with teachers' opinion and students' achievements as main task of school existence.

Suggestions

There is no reason to extend the 2022 study, as answers and the comparison show the same trends as in year 2013 with more respondents and internationally approved tools. However, many more respondents might be asked for data collection in next cycle using survey 2022 questions, to make measurements regularly and to avoid the strong individual impact of each respondent on results.

It is necessary to look towards the external environment to explore future directions for the development of schools in Latvia to foster the responsibility of the society for future development.

Issues related to the school climate need to be studied deeper to see the solutions towards the improvement of school climate. Teacher and student opinion on school climate should be measured to see the difference of perspective from process planning person to receiver of results. Although student questionnaire must be compared critically if compared general and VET students, as there are different levels of education and VET schools are mostly having students in secondary level and there are still (lower secondary) schools in general education of Latvia participating in TALIS questionnaire.

Additional questions should be added to measure the physical and mental health, culture and linguistic competence and emergency readiness to see the "whole picture" of school climate.

In the next TALIS data collection cycle, it would be very useful to conduct a parallel TALIS study on the national level in VET schools. As VET schools represent a large proportion of upper-secondary education, such an instrument is very important for planning of education on the local and national level.

From perspective of supply to labour market, principals of general and VET schools show good school climate in Latvia. Looking to satisfaction of employers, external impact of Education must be researched. Such as politics, finance investments, quality measurements, improvements, planning, and sustainability of education.

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