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School Climate in Conflict-Affected Societies: Between Collective Stress and Organizational Resilience

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Abstract

Schools in conflict-affected societies occupy a paradoxical position: they are expected to serve as stabilizing institutions that provide safety, continuity, and developmental support, yet they are simultaneously subjected to the destructive forces of armed conflict. This article examines the construct of school climate as it operates within societies experiencing armed conflict and protracted political violence. Drawing on ecological and organizational theories of school functioning, it analyzes how collective stress penetrates school boundaries, reshaping relationships among students, teachers, and administrators. The article integrates research on teacher burnout under conditions of war, the psychological toll of political violence on student populations, and the organizational mechanisms through which some schools manage to sustain positive climates despite external threat. It argues that the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory provides a useful lens for understanding how resource depletion and resource investment interact within school organizations under chronic stress. The article concludes by proposing that school climate in conflict zones should be reconceptualized not as a static attribute but as a dynamic, negotiated process that reflects the ongoing tension between collective vulnerability and organizational agency.

Keywords: school climate, armed conflict, organizational resilience, teacher burnout, collective stress, conservation of resources theory

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1. Introduction

Armed conflicts constitute one of the most profound disruptions to the fabric of social life, and educational systems are among the institutions most severely affected. Globally, hundreds of millions of children live in conflict zones where access to schooling is compromised by physical destruction of infrastructure, displacement of populations, and pervasive insecurity (UNICEF, 2023). The consequences extend well beyond the material: prolonged exposure to political violence reshapes the psychological landscape of entire communities, producing collective trauma that seeps into every institutional domain, including schools. Yet schools are not merely passive recipients of conflict's destructive effects. As organizational entities embedded within communities, they possess internal structures, cultures, and relational dynamics that can either amplify or attenuate the impact of external adversity. This is the terrain that the concept of

school climate seeks to capture.

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life, encompassing patterns of interpersonal relationships, norms, goals, values, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). A substantial body of research has established that positive school climate is associated with a range of beneficial outcomes, including higher academic achievement, reduced bullying and violence, stronger student engagement, and better teacher retention (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Berkowitz et al., 2017). However, the overwhelming majority of this research has been conducted in stable societies where schools operate under conditions of relative security. The question of how school climate functions, deteriorates, or is sustained in contexts of armed conflict and protracted political violence remains insufficiently theorized and empirically underexplored.

This article addresses this gap by examining the interplay between collective stress generated by armed conflict and the organizational resilience that schools may exhibit in response. It draws on multiple bodies of scholarship: research on school climate and school violence, studies of teacher wellbeing under conditions of war, literature on the psychological effects of political violence on children and youth, and organizational theories of stress and resource management. The central argument advanced here is that school climate in conflict-affected societies cannot be understood through the same frameworks applied to schools in peaceful settings. Instead, it must be approached as a dynamic, contested process shaped by the ongoing negotiation between external threats and internal organizational capacities.

2. Conceptualizing School Climate: From Stable Contexts to Unstable Realities

The concept of school climate has evolved considerably since its early formulations. Anderson (1982) was among the first to systematically review the construct, noting the considerable variation in how researchers defined and measured the school environment. Since then, a more consolidated understanding has emerged, centered on several core dimensions. Cohen et al. (2009) identified four major domains of school climate: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment. Thapa et al. (2013) expanded this framework in their comprehensive review, emphasizing that school climate encompasses the physical, social, and academic dimensions of schooling and that its effects extend to virtually every outcome of educational interest.

Within this tradition, the work of Astor and Benbenishty has been particularly influential in contextualizing school climate within broader ecological and sociopolitical frameworks. Their ecological model of school violence places the school at the center of nested contexts, including student body characteristics, family influences, neighborhood conditions, and macro-level cultural and political forces (Astor & Benbenishty, 2019; Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). Critically, this model posits that the school's internal context, including its organizational climate, moderates and mediates outside influences and helps shape students' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors (Benbenishty & Astor, 2005). In their research on what they termed "theoretically atypical schools," Astor et al. (2009) demonstrated that certain schools located in high-violence communities nonetheless maintained remarkably low internal rates of violence. The distinguishing features of these schools included strong principal leadership, consistent procedures, schoolwide awareness of safety concerns, and an "outward" oriented ideology that engaged rather than retreated from community challenges.

Berkowitz et al. (2017), in their synthesis of research on the associations between socioeconomic background, inequality, school climate, and academic achievement, concluded that positive school climate can function as a compensating, mediating, or moderating factor that reduces the impact

of socioeconomic disadvantage on student performance. Berkowitz (2022) further demonstrated that positive school climate was especially beneficial for ethnocultural minority students in Israel, suggesting that schools can serve as equalizing institutions precisely for those populations most exposed to systemic inequalities. These findings carry significant implications for conflict-affected settings, where socioeconomic disruption, ethnocultural tension, and inequality are typically intensified.

However, extending school climate theory to conflict-affected contexts requires a fundamental reconsideration of several assumptions embedded in the literature. Most school climate research implicitly presupposes a baseline of physical safety, institutional continuity, and community stability. In conflict zones, none of these conditions can be taken for granted. Schools may be physically destroyed or commandeered for military use (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2022). Teachers may be displaced, unpaid, or personally traumatized (Muthanna et al., 2022). Students may arrive bearing the psychological weight of exposure to violence, loss, and displacement (Kien et al., 2019). Under such circumstances, the relational and organizational fabric that constitutes school climate is not merely strained but fundamentally reconfigured.

3. The Penetration of Collective Stress into School Systems

Armed conflict generates stress that is not merely individual but collective in nature, affecting entire communities and the institutions embedded within them. Understanding how this collective stress penetrates school boundaries requires attention to multiple pathways operating simultaneously at different ecological levels.

3.1. Psychological Effects on Student Populations

Children and adolescents exposed to armed conflict exhibit markedly elevated rates of psychological distress. A meta-analytic review of studies on refugee and asylum-seeking youth in European countries found prevalence rates of 35% for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 25% for emotional and behavioral problems, and 21% for depression (Kien et al., 2019). These symptoms have direct implications for academic functioning. Trauma exposure has been associated with impairments in cognitive functioning, attention, memory, and school-related behaviors (Maynard et al., 2019). Students carrying the burden of traumatic experience may exhibit difficulties in concentration, reduced engagement with learning, increased behavioral problems, and compromised capacity for positive social interaction with peers and teachers.

What distinguishes the situation in conflict-affected schools from schools dealing with individual student trauma in otherwise stable societies is the collective character of the exposure. When an entire student body shares the experience of bombardment, displacement, or loss of family members, the normative peer environment shifts. Rather than a small number of traumatized students being absorbed into a generally functioning system, the system itself becomes saturated with distress. This collective dimension transforms school climate from within, as the emotional tenor of daily interactions, the quality of peer relationships, and the capacity for classroom engagement are all shaped by shared traumatic experience.

3.2. Teacher Stress, Burnout, and the Erosion of Professional Capacity

Teachers in conflict zones face a dual burden: they are expected to serve as caregivers and stabilizing figures for traumatized children while simultaneously coping with their own exposure to violence and loss (Harb et al., 2026; Sharifian & Kennedy, 2019). Research on educators in multiple conflict settings has consistently documented elevated rates of burnout, emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress. Weiland et al. (2024), studying 562 preschool teachers

across wartime Ukraine, found that trauma symptoms were a direct positive predictor of burnout, while resilience and social support served as protective factors. Deitcher and Alon (2025), examining special education preschool teachers during the Israel–Hamas war, reported that the combined weight of job demands and war-related stressors exceeded available resources, leading to significant declines in teacher wellbeing.

A particularly important finding from recent research is that it is the subjective experience of war-related stress, rather than objective exposure to war events, that most strongly predicts teacher burnout (Neustadter et al., 2026). This distinction has critical implications for school climate, because it suggests that the psychological interpretation of ongoing threat, the sense of helplessness and loss of control, mediates the relationship between external conflict and internal professional functioning. Teachers who feel overwhelmed are less able to provide the emotional warmth, structured instruction, and supportive relationships that constitute the relational core of positive school climate.

The emotional labor demanded of teachers during conflict is also distinctive. Research conducted during the Israel–Hamas war (Muzikant & Benita, 2026) distinguished between "deep acting," in which teachers genuinely attempt to feel the calm and care they display, and "surface acting," in which they suppress authentic feelings of fear and distress while projecting positive emotions. Surface acting was found to be strongly associated with burnout and depressive symptoms, revealing the psychological cost of maintaining an appearance of normalcy in conditions that are anything but normal. When considered at the school level, the cumulative effect of teacher emotional depletion constitutes a significant erosion of the human infrastructure upon which positive school climate depends.

3.3. Organizational Disruption and Institutional Fragility

Beyond the psychological effects on individuals, armed conflict disrupts the organizational structures and routines that sustain school functioning. Physical damage to school buildings, shortages of educational materials, loss of trained personnel, and the interruption of administrative oversight all compromise the institutional capacity to maintain a coherent educational environment. In Yemen, the war's impact on education has included displacement and discrimination among students, destruction of physical and mental health, exploitation of education for financial purposes, and normalization of violent behaviors within school settings (Muthanna et al., 2022). In Ukraine, the relocation of institutions, migration of staff, and sustained exposure to war-related stressors have been associated with progressive intensification of burnout among academic staff across multiple measurement waves (Tsybuliak et al., 2025).

These organizational disruptions do not merely reduce the quality of schooling; they fundamentally alter the nature of school climate by undermining the routines, norms, and interpersonal stability upon which positive climate rests. When schools operate in survival mode, with improvised schedules, overcrowded classrooms, rotating and underpaid staff, and the constant threat of renewed violence, the conditions for sustained, positive relational environments become extraordinarily difficult to maintain. The organizational dimension of school climate in conflict settings thus requires attention not only to relational quality but to the material and structural conditions that enable or constrain such quality.

4. Toward a Theoretical Framework: Conservation of Resources and School Climate Under Threat

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, proposed by Hobfoll (1989), offers a particularly apt framework for understanding how school climate functions under conditions of armed conflict.

COR theory posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect resources that they value, encompassing tangible assets, personal characteristics, conditions of life, and energy resources. Stress occurs when resources are threatened, actually lost, or when investment of resources fails to yield expected returns (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Two principles are central to COR theory: the primacy of resource loss, which holds that losses are disproportionately more impactful than equivalent gains, and the principle of resource investment, which suggests that individuals must invest resources to protect against future loss and to recover from past loss.

Applied to schools in conflict settings, COR theory illuminates several critical dynamics. First, armed conflict precipitates massive resource loss at every level of the school ecosystem: physical infrastructure is destroyed, qualified teachers flee or are incapacitated, curricula are disrupted, and community social capital is depleted. According to COR theory, such losses initiate "loss spirals" in which initial resource depletion leads to further deterioration, as the very resources needed for coping and recovery are themselves eroded (Heath et al., 2012; Hobfoll, 2001). At the school level, this manifests as a cascading deterioration of climate: teacher burnout leads to reduced relational quality, which increases student behavioral problems, which further overwhelms remaining staff, generating a self-reinforcing cycle of organizational decline.

Hobfoll et al. (2015) have argued that resilience in the face of major stress is fundamentally a property of resource-rich environments rather than simply an individual trait. Environments that provide access to resources, protect against resource loss, and promote resource growth create what Hobfoll (2012) termed "caravan passageways." In educational terms, this means that a school's capacity to maintain positive climate under conditions of conflict depends not solely on the personal resilience of individual teachers or principals, but on the organizational and systemic resources available to the school community. Schools that retain access to institutional support, that maintain collegial networks among staff, and that receive external assistance in the form of training, materials, and psychosocial services are better positioned to resist the loss spirals that conflict engenders.

COR theory also helps explain why the effects of conflict on school climate may persist long after active hostilities cease. Because losses accumulate more rapidly than gains and because loss begets further loss, the rebuilding of organizational resources and positive climate requires sustained investment over extended periods. A school that has lost experienced teachers, community trust, and institutional routines cannot restore these resources through short-term interventions alone. The theory thus predicts that post-conflict recovery of school climate will be slow, nonlinear, and dependent on the availability of "resource caravans," that is, aggregations of social, material, and institutional supports that travel together and reinforce one another (Hobfoll, 2012).

5. Schools as Sites of Organizational Resilience

Despite the considerable forces of disruption that armed conflict brings to bear on schools, evidence from multiple contexts suggests that schools are not merely passive victims of their circumstances. Some schools in conflict-affected settings manage to sustain environments that provide safety, support, and meaningful learning, functioning as what the humanitarian literature has termed "protective spaces" that shield children from at least some of the effects of surrounding violence.

Several organizational mechanisms appear to contribute to this resilience. The first is leadership. Astor et al. (2009), in their study of atypical schools in Israel, identified the principal as the single most important variable distinguishing schools that maintained low violence despite operating in high-violence communities. These principals did not rely on standardized programs

but instead adopted school reform approaches characterized by outward orientation, consistent enforcement of safety procedures, and deliberate cultivation of a caring school culture. The transferability of these findings to conflict-affected contexts is suggested by the observation that effective school leadership in crisis settings involves the capacity to provide psychological containment and institutional coherence in the face of uncertainty and threat.

The second mechanism is relational density and trust among staff. Research on teacher wellbeing in conflict settings consistently identifies social support as a protective factor against burnout and distress (Deitcher & Alon, 2025; Weiland et al., 2024). Schools where teachers share their difficulties, collaborate on problem-solving, and experience a sense of collective mission appear better able to withstand the erosive effects of conflict. This is consistent with COR theory's emphasis on resource caravans: when resources aggregate and individuals share their resources with one another, the collective capacity for resilience is enhanced.

A third mechanism involves the deliberate integration of psychosocial support into school programming. In multiple conflict-affected settings, including South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Palestinian territories, initiatives that train teachers in trauma-sensitive pedagogy, establish structured group activities for students, and create referral pathways for mental health services have shown promise in stabilizing school environments and reducing trauma-related symptoms (Newnham et al., 2015; Rolfsnes & Idsoe, 2011). These interventions represent an organizational investment of resources aimed at interrupting the loss spirals that conflict generates and establishing, however modestly, gain cycles of improved wellbeing and engagement.

Fourth, schools in conflict zones that maintain routines and predictable structures appear to provide important psychological benefits for both students and staff. The continuation of daily schedules, regular classroom activities, and familiar rituals creates a sense of normalcy and stability that functions as a counterweight to the chaos of the external environment. This observation is consistent with developmental research emphasizing children's need for predictability and structure, particularly in times of heightened stress. Routine functions as a resource, in COR theory terms, that helps preserve other psychological resources such as hope, a sense of agency, and social connectedness.

Finally, peace education and social-emotional learning (SEL) programs have been implemented in post-conflict and conflict-affected settings with the aim of rebuilding social cohesion and preventing the reproduction of violence within school communities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone, peace education programs have been integrated into formal educational frameworks, with evidence suggesting positive effects on mutual understanding among students from different ethnic backgrounds and on the development of conflict resolution skills (McLean Hilker, 2011; Mulalic, 2023). SEL initiatives that promote competencies in self-awareness, relationship building, and responsible decision-making have been shown to support the psychosocial wellbeing of resettled refugee youth, with implications for their integration into school communities (Stark et al., 2021).

6. Reconceptualizing School Climate in Conflict Contexts

The analysis presented thus far suggests that school climate in conflict-affected societies requires a fundamentally different conceptualization than that employed in research conducted under conditions of stability. Several reconceptualizations are warranted.

First, school climate in conflict settings should be understood as a dynamic and fluctuating process rather than a stable organizational attribute. In stable societies, school climate tends to change gradually and can be assessed through periodic surveys that capture relatively enduring

perceptions. In conflict settings, the climate of a school may shift dramatically from week to week or even day to day, depending on the intensity of external violence, the displacement of students or teachers, or the occurrence of traumatic events in the community. This temporal volatility necessitates measurement approaches that are responsive to rapid change and that capture the oscillations between periods of relative calm and acute crisis.

Second, the standard dimensions of school climate—safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment—take on altered meanings in conflict contexts. Safety, for instance, acquires existential rather than merely interpersonal significance: the question is not only whether students are safe from bullying but whether they are safe from bombardment, abduction, or recruitment by armed groups (UNICEF, 2023). Relationships are shaped not only by everyday social dynamics but by shared experiences of trauma, grief, and displacement. Teaching and learning occur under conditions where survival may take precedence over academic achievement, and where the curriculum itself may become a site of ideological contestation. These shifts in meaning require context-sensitive indicators and assessment tools that go beyond instruments validated in peaceful settings.

Third, the role of the community in shaping school climate, always important but often treated as background in conventional research, moves to the foreground in conflict settings. When communities are fractured by violence, displacement, and loss, the social capital that normally supports school functioning is depleted. Conversely, when communities organize around the protection and continuation of education, schools become focal points of collective resilience. The boundary between school and community, which is analytically distinct in stable settings, becomes highly permeable in conflict zones, as schools serve as shelters for displaced populations, as distribution points for humanitarian aid, and as sites of community gathering and mutual support.

Fourth, the agency of school actors, particularly teachers and principals, requires recognition not merely as professional competence but as a form of civic and moral action. Teachers who continue to show up for work in war zones, often unpaid and at personal risk, are performing an act of institutional preservation that sustains school climate through their very presence. This dimension of agency is largely invisible in conventional school climate research, which takes teacher attendance and institutional continuity for granted. In conflict settings, the decision to keep a school open, to maintain a caring classroom environment, or to provide psychosocial support to students represents a deliberate and effortful act of resilience that deserves theoretical recognition.

7. Conclusion

School climate in conflict-affected societies occupies the tension between collective vulnerability and organizational agency. Armed conflict penetrates school boundaries through multiple pathways: the psychological distress carried by students and teachers, the destruction of physical and institutional infrastructure, and the erosion of community social capital. These forces generate loss spirals that progressively degrade the relational and organizational fabric upon which positive school climate depends. At the same time, evidence from diverse conflict settings demonstrates that schools are not merely passive victims of their circumstances. Through leadership, collegial support, psychosocial programming, maintenance of routine, and the courageous daily practice of teachers and principals, some schools manage to sustain environments that provide meaningful safety, support, and learning even under the most adverse conditions.

The Conservation of Resources theory offers a useful integrative framework for understanding these dynamics, highlighting the centrality of resource loss and investment in shaping organiza-

tional outcomes under chronic stress. It directs attention not only to the deficits that conflict produces but to the conditions under which resource preservation and resource gain become possible. This has practical implications for policy and intervention: supporting school climate in conflict settings requires sustained investment in the organizational, social, and material resources that enable schools to function as protective environments. Short-term, externally driven interventions are unlikely to be sufficient; what is needed is long-term investment in the human and institutional infrastructure of schooling, including teacher training and support, psychosocial services, physical rehabilitation of schools, and community engagement.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal and context-sensitive approaches that capture the dynamic nature of school climate under conditions of conflict. Cross-national comparative studies that examine school climate across different types and phases of conflict would be particularly valuable, as would research that investigates the mechanisms through which specific organizational practices contribute to climate resilience. The voices of teachers, students, and principals in conflict zones should be central to this research, as their lived experiences represent the most direct evidence of how school climate is constructed, maintained, and reconstructed in the face of extraordinary adversity.

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