

Article

“Keeping an Eye Out”: Students’ Experiences of School Personnel’s Noticing in Shaping or Hindering a Positive School Climate

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Abstract: A positive school climate is characterized by a higher degree of well-being among students, reduced bullying, and improved academic performance. While many initiatives are aimed at creating a positive school climate, discussions in both research and theory frequently fail to acknowledge the essential role of school personnel. This study examines a purposeful sample of Swedish middle-school students (4th to 9th grade) of school personnel’s noticing in fostering or hindering a positive school climate. Fifteen (15) focus groups and 19 semi-structured interviews were analyzed, covering 133 participants selected from three schools (age range 10 to 16 years) in a Swedish municipality. Drawing on a framework of professional noticing and positive school and classroom climate, the investigation was conducted using a case study approach and analyzed with the help of content analysis. The results highlighted the importance placed by students on school personnel noticing appropriate things/events and responding accordingly. For this to happen, personnel need to (a) notice and make themselves visible; (b) be actively observing as a prerequisite to their noticing; (c) be receptive to noticing; (d) notice and grasp a full picture, including students’ perspectives; and (e) connect their noticing with appropriate actions.

Keywords: school climate; school safety; bullying; supervision; noticing



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1. Introduction

School climate is central to students’ school experiences. A positive school climate is associated with better academic performance (Erdem and Kaya 2024; Hultin et al. 2019), fewer mental health problems (Aldridge and McChesney 2018), and fewer behavioral problems, such as externalizing behavior, harassment, and delinquency (Reaves et al. 2018). It is also linked to less violence (Steffgen et al. 2013) and a lower prevalence of bullying both at school (Cook et al. 2010) and online (Guo 2016). In schools with a positive school climate, students are more likely to intervene and help victims when witnessing bullying incidents (Waasdorp et al. 2022).

While the relationship between school climate and school safety is complex—and school climate often encompasses safety—school safety is most effectively promoted through a comprehensive, research-based, whole-school approach aimed at fostering and maintaining a positive school climate (Bradshaw et al. 2021). In contrast, research on the use

of security measures such as metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and security guards in schools has shown that increased use of these measures is associated with lower perceptions of safety among students (Hong et al. 2024; Mowen and Freng 2019; Perumean-Chaney and Sutton 2013) or has yielded mixed findings (see Johnson et al. 2018; Nickerson et al. 2021). Regardless, security measures cannot substitute the fundamental need for establishing a positive school climate.

Promoting school safety through the development of a positive school climate requires intentional, persistent, sustained and collaborative efforts from all school personnel, working in partnership with students and parents (Bradshaw et al. 2021; Voight and Nation 2016). In this study, the term school personnel is used to cover all adults working within the school environment—including teaching staff, school nurses, support staff and ancillary staff such as kitchen staff and groundskeepers. To promote a positive school climate, all these actors have to serve as supportive and caring adults in their interactions with students, consistently and fairly enforcing clear and reasonable rules, fostering social-emotional learning, and collaboratively creating a welcoming, trusting, respectful, orderly environment conducive to learning—where students feel connected to both their teachers and peers (Nickerson et al. 2021). To cultivate a positive school climate, schools must establish shared visions, values, and goals that school personnel uphold and implement consistently in both policy and practice (Voight and Nation 2016).

Despite ongoing efforts to create supportive school environments and the recognized importance of listening to, engaging with, and collaborating with students in fostering a sustainable, positive school climate, student voices remain relatively overlooked in the research literature. Research on how students themselves experience, interpret, and reflect on school climate is scarce. While qualitative studies on school climate are relatively limited and have primarily focused on the perspectives of teachers and other school personnel (Debnam et al. 2021; De Smul et al. 2020; Goodman-Scott and Ziomek-Daigle 2022; Martinsone and Žydžiūnaite 2023; Ozen 2018; Pandia and Purwanti 2019; Yücesoy et al. 2020), even fewer have explored the perspectives of students (Arora et al. 2024; Forsberg et al. 2021, 2023; Giraldo-García et al. 2023; Konishi et al. 2022). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to deepen an understanding of how professional vision may shape a positive school climate from the perspective of middle school students. This was achieved by examining how a purposeful sample of Swedish middle school students (4th to 9th grade) experienced fostering or hindering a positive school climate based on noticing by school personnel.

2. Previous Research and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Professional Vision and Noticing

Within the field of professional development, professional vision—particularly the concept of noticing—has been emphasized as essential for the (e)quality of social relations and education (König et al. 2022). Goodwin (1994) introduced the notion of professional vision, defining it as a social and perceptual phenomenon. It explains how professionals interpret and make sense of their work through collaboration, using specific cognitive and social frameworks. These frameworks, shaped by historical and cultural contexts, influence how meaning is constructed and expressed, both verbally and non-verbally. A shared professional vision enables a group to develop a structured way of understanding their collective environment, integrating both everyday experiences and specialized knowledge related to their field. What members of a profession are trained to notice and interpret is dictated by the demands of their discipline. According to Goodwin (1994), professional vision involves “the ability to build structures in the world that organize knowledge, shape perception, and structure future action” (p. 32). He argues that perception is inherently

shaped by social and discursive practices, communicated through language, and built upon historical experiences.

A key component of professional vision is the process of noticing, which involves selecting and interpreting relevant aspects of a situation in ways that are meaningful to a particular professional community (Goodwin 1994). In educational contexts, noticing is particularly crucial, as teachers' observations directly shape their responses and pedagogical decisions (Huang et al. 2023; Keller et al. 2022). Goodwin (1994) links teacher noticing to broader concepts such as perception, observation, and professional sense-making. It can also be understood as the ability to recognize and interpret significant moments during practice—deriving meaning through observation (Jacobs et al. 2018) and assessing their relevance within a professional context (van Es and Sherin 2008). Furthermore, noticing is frequently connected to reasoning (Keller et al. 2022; Kosel et al. 2021) and often informs professional judgment and decision-making, both of which are deeply interwoven with reasoning processes (Pouta et al. 2021).

Developing the ability to notice requires sensitivity and responsiveness to individuals, particularly in complex and unpredictable situations where previous knowledge and experience may not be sufficient (Mason 2002; see also Edling and Frelin 2016). Mason (2002) conceptualizes noticing as an active and reflective process in which an individual (a) remains fully present in the moment rather than relying on habitual responses; (b) systematically analyses observations to identify meaningful patterns; (c) explores potential actions through comparison and imaginative reasoning; and (d) validates decisions through professional dialogue and reflection. Given that students often use terms like “to see” or “seeing” [Swedish: “att se” or “seende”], the discussion here is based on a broad interpretation of seeing, encompassing related concepts such as perception, attunement, awareness, observation, and professional noticing. The notion of school personnel in this article is approached through the lens of the students and involves all adults in the school that students refer to in terms of noticing.

2.2. Students' Experiences of School Personnel's Noticing in Relation to School Climate and Bullying

School personnel play a crucial role in shaping students' experiences of school climate and safety (Arora et al. 2024; Forsberg et al. 2021; Giraldo-García et al. 2023). For example, Blossnich and Bossarte (2011) demonstrated that having school personnel supervising hallways was associated with a lower prevalence of peer victimization. However, perceptions of school climate vary depending on the perspective considered. A study by Ramsey et al. (2016) showed that students, compared to school personnel, reported more negative views regarding school safety and connectedness. While research on school personnel's professional vision and noticing is critical for understanding their role in fostering a positive school climate (Edling et al. 2024), it is equally important to include students' perspectives on how school personnel's noticing impacts the school climate. Despite this, few studies have examined how students perceive and experience vision and noticing in relation to school climate on the part of school professionals. Instead, insights may be drawn from research on closely related subject areas, such as supportive school climate, help-seeking, and students' perceptions of school personnel's awareness of bullying.

School personnel become aware of conflicts, harassment, and bullying among students either by noticing incidents themselves or by being informed of such. However, students often hesitate to report bullying to school personnel due to concerns about potential repercussions, including fears of not being believed or not being taken seriously (Wojcik et al. 2022), as well as lack of possible trust in the ability of school personnel to help, intervene or keep them safe (Bjereld et al. 2024; Boulton et al. 2017; O'Brien et al. 2018). Student–teacher relationships, characterized by trust, are linked to students' perceptions of

support and teacher responsiveness (Forsberg et al. 2023; Giraldo-García et al. 2023; Konishi et al. 2022). Positive student–teacher relationships do appear to encourage students to seek help from teachers and disclose victimization (e.g., Bjereld et al. 2024). Students are more likely to report bullying to teachers when they perceive teachers as intolerant of bullying (Blomqvist et al. 2020) and believe that teachers, if informed, will take action (Cortes and Kochenderfer-Ladd 2014). When teachers are unavailable during break times, students may feel unsafe (Forsberg et al. 2023; Konishi et al. 2022). Increasing adult presence—for example, by having staff remain nearby and actively monitor students during breaks—can help bullied students feel safer (Bjereld et al. 2021).

While students express a desire for teachers who are caring, kind, fair, and supportive—yet also firm and strict (Forsberg et al. 2021; Power et al. 2018; Raufelder et al. 2016; Thornberg et al. 2022), the actions of school personnel are not always perceived as helpful. Bullied students have reported experiencing unhelpful interventions when staff acted without fully understanding the situation, sometimes resulting in negative consequences for the victim (Bjereld et al. 2021). At other times, school personnel appeared unaware of ongoing disruptive behavior or bullying and responded passively by failing to act, intervene, or acknowledge the situation. Such inaction was associated with students feeling unsafe (Bjereld et al. 2021; Forsberg et al. 2021, 2023). Students often interpreted this lack of response as a sign that school personnel either did not care or lacked control and authority (Bjereld et al. 2024).

3. Method

3.1. Study Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach. According to Yin (2018) and Stake (1995), case studies should have well-defined boundaries and a focused scope to avoid delving into excessive detail. A case can be defined by its time, place, activities, or specific context (Creswell 2003; Miles and Huberman 1994; Stake 1995). Drawing inspiration from Goodwin's (1994) concept of professional vision—which emphasizes meaning-making as socially situated and historically shaped—this study focused primarily on identifying and articulating key concepts related to professional vision as explicitly articulated by a sample of middle school students. The goal was not to compare the three schools from which participants were drawn but to identify common patterns in how middle and high school students (4th to 9th grade) described obstacles and strategies for creating a positive school climate based on how they perceived the vision and noticing of school professionals. More specifically, how do students, based on how they perceive and experience the vision and noticing of school professionals:

1. Describe *obstacles* to creating a positive school climate.
2. Describe *strategies* for creating a positive school climate.

3.2. Settings, Participants, and Procedures

The municipality in which this study was conducted has been working systematically for nearly two decades to counteract bullying and other forms of peer aggression in its schools (approximately 11,000 students in 31 schools). The municipal strategy is based on a socio-ecological mindset, using a whole school approach. This strategy provides continuous information to students, staff, and caretakers of rules and regulations, supports professional development, actively promotes school safety in day-to-day work, activates preventive work when something occurs, and, based on patterns found in the biannual population surveys (encompassing all schools and approximately 80–95% of students) employs immediate intervention measures when signals of unsafety [various forms of violence] occur. While the municipality in question has regularly reported a relatively low

prevalence of bullying compared to national averages, there has been a notable rise in bullying among and of girls since 2017 (Edling et al. 2022, 2024). To ensure variation among participating students (see Yin 2018), three markedly different schools, located between five school buildings, were selected. One school had consistently reported higher levels of victimization over time, another had reported lower levels, and the third school had fluctuating reports of victimization. Because of ethical considerations and as requested by school administrators, any similarities and differences between these schools will not be elaborated on in relation to interview outcomes. Thus, the aim of this open sampling procedure was to “maximize variations in experiences and descriptions by using participants from contrasting milieus and backgrounds” (Hallberg 2006, p. 143), thereby increasing the analytical power of the study through the richness of the data gathered.

Research on creating a positive school climate has highlighted the significance of considering students’ views on what school personnel should notice and, at times, fail to notice. In this study, participating schools were asked to identify and select various students willing to participate and deemed capable of contributing to a discussion about school climate, with particular emphasis on addressing bullying and other forms of aggression. Schools were also requested to select students with diverse genders, ages, and backgrounds in order to ensure a representative (Yin 2018) and heterogeneous sample, further maximizing variation and data richness (Hallberg 2006). The interview questions focused on bullying, as well as the challenges and opportunities for creating a positive school climate. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

In all, 133 students from grades 4 to 9 (approximately six students per group) participated in 29 mixed-gender focus group interviews. The age range of participants was from 10 to 16 years. The interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024 and lasted between 30–60 min. The focus group interviews provided insights into students’ shared perceptions of school life. Because they talked about these issues together with their peers in their school, the focus group interview procedure enabled us to study *participants in context* (Fusch et al. 2022). By collecting and analyzing focus group data, we examined how students co-constructed meaning and understanding of social processes within their schools, their classes, and classroom environments. A further 19 individual, semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted in the year 2023. These student interviewees had not participated in the focus group interviews and were selected from grades 4 to 6 (9–12 years), with interviews lasting from about 30 to 70 min. These semi-structured individual interviews (with middle school students) were aimed at gaining a deeper insight into the reported increase in bullying victimization among girls, as indicated in biannual surveys from 2017 to 2023 (Edling et al. 2024).

The study received ethical approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2023), and informed consent was obtained from all participants. To maintain confidentiality, students are referred to anonymously in the results presented below.

3.3. Analysis

The transcriptions were imported into the ATLAS.ti-24 (robust qualitative data analysis software), which facilitated a structured and comprehensive examination of the data. The qualitative content analysis followed the methodology outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and consisted of six phases: (a) reading and re-reading (data were thoroughly reviewed to gain a deeper understanding, with a focus on students’ perspectives on school climate and professional vision within the school); (b) coding (initial patterns were identified based on the readings); (c) categorization (data were organized into themes based on similar patterns); (d) refinement (the themes were examined to ensure accuracy and completeness); (e) labeling (the themes were named to reflect their content); and

(f) drafting findings (the final step involved synthesizing and drafting the findings based on the identified themes). The content analysis was structured around two primary areas of focus: (a) identifying themes and concepts of relevance to the purpose of the present study; and (b) examining students' experiences of possible challenges faced by school personnel in noticing and their strategies for overcoming them.

4. Outcomes: Making Sense of School Personnel's Noticing

This study explored students' views on how they perceive and make sense of noticing by school personnel—both in terms of what they believe school staff should be aware of (i.e., included in their vision) and obstacles that hinder such noticing. The students' responses have been categorized under an overarching theme that emerged as the most salient and significant theme: school personnel's ability to notice aspects of school life that negatively impact students. A recurring concern in student interviews is the perception that adults fail to see or notice serious incidents such as bullying and other violations. Many students described this as a major obstacle. For example, one of the students reported, "If something happens during the breaks, they [certain school personnel] don't see it. That's what I think" (Individual interview: Irma, grade 4, School 1, 2023). School personnel's propensity to notice in situations where peer aggression, rejection or exclusion is occurring and thus becomes a central issue raised in the interviews.

Five sub-themes further elaborate on this theme. The findings highlight the significance students place on personnel's ability to notice relevant issues (as these affected students' well-being and safety in school) and respond appropriately. For this to be effective, according to the students, personnel need to:

1. Be noticing and be visible;
2. Be actively observing as a prerequisite to noticing;
3. Be noticing the full picture, including students' perspectives;
4. Be receptive to noticing;
5. Be connecting their noticing with their actions (acting);

These five sub-themes, which are deeply interconnected, are further elaborated below.

4.1. Noticing and Being Visible

Students repeatedly emphasized that mere presence plays a crucial role in ensuring that appropriate things are noticed. Their responses suggest that visibility has a quantitative dimension—the more personnel present, the more likelihood of their noticing:

Elin: It feels good that there are many who keep an eye on things [har koll or. kollar]

Gustaf: There are many teachers, and it feels good that there are many who see things. (Focus group interview: grade 4, School 7, 2023)

Even when discussing school safety, students explicitly linked it to the presence and attentiveness of school personnel, particularly teachers who are noticing what is going on among the students. Conversely, they also expressed concerns about school professionals who remain distant or absent from students' daily experiences and peer interactions. "You don't see the principals very much. But one thing they do to the students is that they usually stand at the door in the morning and say 'hello' to everyone" (Focus group interview: Peter in grade 7, School 5, 2024).

The lack of visibility among certain staff members—such as principals, counselors, and school nurses—was described as creating barriers, making these professionals seem inaccessible and disconnected from students' lives:

Bea: But we never see them. We hardly see them.

I: The principals . . .

Bea: Mmmm.

I: For example, you have a counselor, a nurse.

Bea: They are also nice. But we barely see them because they're down there [bottom floor], and then they're kind of more inward-looking, you know, so you barely see them.

Carl: If they talk to us now and then, but otherwise, you don't talk to the principals.

(Focus group interview: grade 9, School 5, 2023)

When professionals remain distant—both physically and socially—it risks rendering them irrelevant in students' daily lives. In contrast, many students linked visibility to supervision, perceiving it as a precondition for keeping an eye on students and their property. Visibility is seen as a precondition for both noticing and ensuring safety.

4.2. Actively Observing as a Prerequisite for Noticing

Closely linked to visibility, from the students' perspectives, is the idea that school personnel should actively observe and keep an eye on things. However, students did not describe this form of supervision as an oppressive form of control. Instead, they saw it as a way to promote a sense of safety, making students feel seen, cared for, and protected. "The teachers are there all the time and keep an eye on us so that it [bullying and violations] really doesn't happen again. But it's working well now" (Focus group interview: Björn, grade 6, School 4, 2023). The phrase "it's working well now" implies that supervision has not always functioned as expected. Students also stressed that supervision must be active—teachers should be aware of what is happening, not merely being present: "/.../see everything, that's when an adult is present, [they] should keep an eye on everyone—yes, have an eye on the situation" (Individual interview: Anton, grade 6, School 2, 2023). The presence (visibility) of attentive adults in the background, who remain observant without being intrusive, was also considered important. This made it easier for students to seek help when needed.

Benjamin: There are always these adults in the corridors who walk around and keep an eye on [us] and make sure everything is okay.

I: Do you think it's important that they're out there at break times?

Benjamin: Yes, it's good. They don't bother anyone. They just walk around and keep an eye on things. You can ask them if something happens. (Focus group interview: grade 8, School, 5, 2023).

Similarly, the presence of school personnel in outdoor areas was linked to ensuring school safety and that no student felt left out:

Fredrik: There are many teachers who supervise the schoolyard. It's kind of quite safe.

David: Same. Yes, they keep an eye on things so they notice if someone feels left out. If you're left out, someone can step in and invite you to join. (Focus group interview: grade 4, School 7, 2023)

Beyond visibility and supervision, students also highlighted the need for school personnel to be open to noticing, which requires an awareness of different perspectives.

4.3. Noticing the Full Picture, Including Students' Perspectives

Students expressed frustration over teachers making quick judgments without fully understanding a situation. This approach may result in inadequate emotional and behavioral responses, a failure to listen to all involved students, the wrongful blaming and punishment of certain individuals and, ultimately, the implementation of ineffective interventions that do not effectively promote school safety. The students emphasized that gathering all relevant perspectives is crucial for making informed decisions.

"They're not that quick, and they don't really get it. They don't see the bigger picture the way we do. They think a bit more like, 'This will be over in three days', while it actually lasts two weeks. Otherwise, it's quite good they are outdoors during breaks and so on".

(Focus group interview: Fredrik, grade 6, School 7, 2023)

When teachers failed to consider different perspectives, it seemed to create a sense of unfairness among the students. As one of the students put it, "In my class, some students secretly use their phones during lessons, even though it's not allowed. But usually, the teachers don't notice" (Focus group interview: Cecilia, grade 8, School 5, 2023). The excerpt illustrates how students sometimes feel that they notice things that school personnel do not. Their responses suggest that being receptive to noticing requires an openness to different perspectives rather than relying on assumptions or incomplete information.

4.4. Being Receptive to Noticing

A number of students in the interviews emphasized that some school personnel demonstrated an inability or reluctance to notice and acknowledge students' perspectives. As a result, students were often left to navigate conflicts and bullying on their own. This challenge was sometimes described as a form of double punishment where school staff neither listened to students' concerns nor intervened during breaks, yet became frustrated when students reported incidents after the breaks, when the staff was no longer present to witness them.

Camilla: The exact same thing happened to me on the football pitch with someone called 'XXX', or his name is not 'XXX', but we call him 'XXX'. He is a bit shorter than the rest of us. /.../ I took the football from him, and he admitted several times that I just took the ball. But she [the teacher] did not listen. It went in one ear and out the other.

Björn: The teachers don't listen to us anymore, and if something happens at break time, they tell us to solve it ourselves. /.../ Then, if we tell them after the break, they get angry because we didn't tell them during the break and so on. (Focus group interview: grade 6, School 4, 2023)

Beyond an unwillingness to notice, another obstacle students identified was the presence of biases. Some students argued that teachers need to adopt a more neutral (unbiased) and open-minded approach when assessing student interactions.

Benjamin: Yes; for example, when two people are fighting, and one of them pushes the other, a teacher might assume that the person who pushed is the one who did wrong, not the one who was pushed. The teachers don't know that, so they might just call home to that [wrong] student. But later, maybe when they talk to that person and maybe hear that the person who was pushed maybe said something offensive to the other person first. That's why that person reacted the way they did. That's why they [teachers] should remain neutral, helpful, and willing to listen. (Focus group interview: Benjamin, grade 8, School 5, 2023)

Preconceived notions among school staff could also hinder their ability to fully understand student interactions and see the complete picture of what was happening between them.

Cilla: There isn't much difference in how teachers treat girls versus boys, but there are stereotypes. Like Daniel said, [people assume] it's usually girls who gather in the bathroom. If there's a fight, they assume it's boys, not girls. But otherwise, there isn't much difference in how they are treated. (Focus group interview, student Cilla, grade 7, School 5, 2024)

Students emphasized that it is not only crucial for school personnel to notice the right things—that is, things that directly impact students' well-being, safety, and life conditions in the school, but also to act upon this noticing in order to bring about necessary change.

4.5. *Connecting Noticing with Acting (Actions)*

Many students shared examples of situations where school staff observed incidents but failed to act, either deliberately or out of negligence:

Daniella: One time, we were playing football against those who are two years younger. One of them, he's in our class, in sixth grade, fell and hurt his foot. A teacher was standing right there, watching him as he lay on the ground and in pain. But she just turned around and walked away, ignoring it completely. She [probably] thought that we're so old and he'll get up on his own, even though he was injured. (Focus group interview: student Daniella, grade 6, School 4, 2023)

This example illustrates how noticing alone is not enough. School personnel must also be willing to intervene when necessary. This expectation applies both to daily classroom interactions, such as noticing who raised their hand first and responding accordingly, and to noticing and acting to address more serious issues like social exclusion and bullying.

I: Do you get help when you need it?

Fredrik: Yes, they [the teachers] usually come as quickly as they can. But they also try to keep an eye on, for example in the classroom, who raised their hand first. They try to respond fairly and quickly. (Focus group interview: grade 4, School 7, 2023)

Similarly, students valued teachers who actively noticed and addressed social exclusion.

Daniel: The teachers often notice—, at least in our class, they are usually good at noticing when a student is left out. They sit down, talk to the students that the person has been with before, check what has happened, and try to solve it. They might even hold meetings, and in extreme cases, the student might need to change classes or groups, [or] they talk to parents and so on.

Felicia: The teachers are usually pretty good at noticing when someone is excluded from a group and asking why. It usually works out. In the worst case, the victim ends up switching classes or groups. (Focus group interview, grade 7, School 5, 2024)

Students made a clear distinction between merely watching and truly seeing. Teachers who truly see are those who recognize nuances in situations and step in when necessary. "If they [the adults] are seeing any conflicts, they step in immediately to stop them" (Focus group interview: Benjamin, grade 8, school 5, 2023). However, many students expressed frustration that, even when school personnel had the opportunity to notice and intervene, they chose to remain passive.

Blanka: We've told them many times, but nothing ever happens. For example, the other day, my little brother got knocked down, and they pulled his hair and everything. Others told a teacher, but the teacher didn't care. Then, they had been on the football pitch, which is wide open. You can see the football pitch from almost everywhere on the primary school side. But the teachers acted like they hadn't seen anything and did nothing about it. (Focus group interview: Blanka, grade 6, school 4, 2023)

The effectiveness of noticing and acting also seemed to depend on whether it was by a regular member of staff or a substitute:

Camilla: Sometimes things go well, but when the teacher leaves, it can get rather chaotic.

Björn: There's a lot of offensive behavior.

I: When the teacher isn't there?

Björn: Yes, and isn't paying attention either.

Camilla: It gets really bad.

Björn: Especially with substitutes /.../

Albin: I can tell you, there was this one guy—we'll just call him "[anonymous]" because, well, that's actually his name.

Daniella: He didn't do anything. He was mostly just on his phone watching YouTube the whole time. (Focus group interview: grade 6, school 4, 2023)

Students repeatedly expressed concerns about personnel failing to notice the right things, focusing on matters outside their responsibilities, or simply refusing to act when intervention was needed.

5. Discussion

Investigating positive school climate is a crucial research goal as it is associated with greater student psychological well-being (Aldridge and McChesney 2018), less antisocial behavior (Reaves et al. 2018), including violence (Steffgen et al. 2013) and bullying (Cook et al. 2010), and improved academic outcomes (Erdem and Kaya 2024; Hultin et al. 2019). In educational settings, professional noticing plays a vital role, as observations directly influence professional reactions and instructional choices (Huang et al. 2023; Keller et al. 2022). Additionally, noticing is closely linked to reasoning (Keller et al. 2022; Kosel et al. 2021) and significantly impacts professional judgment and decision-making, both of which are integral to reasoning processes (Pouta et al. 2021). While numerous initiatives aim to cultivate a positive school climate and enhance school safety (Bear 2020; Cohen and Espelage 2020; Mayer and Jimerson 2019), research on how students themselves experience, interpret, and reflect on school climate, particularly in relation to the role of school personnel in shaping it, through their professional vision, remains scarce. The vast majority of school climate research has employed a quantitative approach, relying on student questionnaires with structured scales or measures (Grazia and Molinari 2021; Konishi et al. 2022; Devleeschouwer et al. 2025). This reliance on structured quantitative data collection often tends to exclude students' own voices and perspectives. Thus, the goal of this study was to explore, through focus-group and individual interviews, how students in grades 4–9 experienced and discussed their school staff's ability to notice students' social interactions—particularly incidents of peer aggression, exclusion, and bullying—and how their ability to notice either enhanced or obstructed the development of positive school climate and safety.

A related study by [Edling et al. \(2024\)](#) examines school personnel's perspectives on professional noticing in the same sample of Swedish middle schools. The findings will indicate how staff considered it essential to genuinely see and notice students' daily interactions and to learn about seeing and noticing and learning from seeing in practice. Teachers also highlighted the barriers and opportunities inherent in professional observation, supporting the idea that informed decision-making plays a crucial role in fostering a positive school climate ([Edling et al. 2024](#)). In the present study, one of the central conclusions drawn from students' experiences—perhaps an obvious one—is that it matters greatly for them that school personnel notice events that negatively impact students and that they take action to address them. Students identified several key strategies for achieving this.

Firstly, many students emphasized the importance of having visible and engaged staff present in school areas predominantly occupied by students, particularly in corridors and playgrounds during breaks. This finding aligns with [Blosnich and Bossarte's \(2011\)](#) study on school safety measures, which showed that, among the safety interventions examined, only the presence of adults among students during breaks was significantly associated with a lower prevalence of peer victimization. In contrast, security guards, surveillance cameras, and codes of conduct were not significantly related to reductions in peer victimization. Additionally, students in [Cunningham et al.'s \(2016\)](#) study expressed frustration with teachers who failed to notice bullying incidents due to distractions such as cell phones or conversations with colleagues. Both staff in [Edling et al.'s \(2024\)](#) study and students in the present study highlighted the importance of professional vision and noticing. Notably, students underscored the quantitative aspect of staff presence, emphasizing that a greater number of adults actively noticing their surroundings fosters a sense of safety. This quantitative dimension was less explicitly emphasized in staff-reported data ([Edling et al. 2024](#)).

Secondly, while excessive surveillance can have negative consequences ([Fair 2023](#)), and security measures (such as metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and security guards) have been found to increase students' feelings of unsafety in school ([Hong et al. 2024](#); [Mowen and Freng 2019](#); [Perumean-Chaney and Sutton 2013](#)), students in our study frequently stressed the necessity of school personnel "keeping an eye on things" as a prerequisite for effective noticing. This aligns with research showing that bullying is more likely to occur in areas with minimal supervision ([Blosnich and Bossarte 2011](#); [Migliaccio et al. 2017](#)).

Evaluation of bullying prevention programs has demonstrated that improved playground supervision is among the list of effective anti-bullying strategies ([Ttofi and Farrington 2011](#)). In Sweden, this has also been evidenced through the implementation of well-developed and timetabled systems for monitoring break times based on students' identification of areas perceived as unsafe ([Swedish National Agency for Education \[Skolverket\] 2011](#)). However, environmental, social, and structural elements of school spaces—such as architectural design, school size, visibility, staffing and scheduling, student density, and interactional norms—do affect social dynamics. These factors influence the school staff's ability to notice and address bullying and other negative interactions ([Horton et al. 2020](#)).

In this context, noticing is not merely a matter of supervision; it is grounded in responsiveness, warmth, and genuine care for students' well-being. When such social-emotional support is combined with high expectations, fair and consistent rule enforcement, and discipline that is firm yet reasonable, respectful, fair, and caring, it fosters an authoritative school climate ([Bear 2020](#)). Research has linked authoritative school and classroom climates to lower levels of bullying and other forms of peer aggression ([Cornell and Huang 2016](#); [Cornell et al. 2015](#); [Fisher et al. 2018](#); [Kloo et al. 2023](#); [Thornberg et al. 2018](#)). In contrast, an overreliance on security measures, along with a punitive, harsh, and autonomy-undermining disciplinary approach, contributes to an authoritarian school climate. This

authoritarian approach is often characterized by a lack of warmth, responsiveness, and social–emotional support (Bear 2020).

The students in our study tended to associate supervision with school safety. They described supervision as essential not only for protecting personal belongings, such as locating a stolen jacket but also for fostering safe social interactions and preventing bullying and other forms of peer victimization. Lack of supervision, as a basis for noticing, should be understood as an obstacle to promoting a positive school climate since it risks increasing theft, insecurity, a stressful academic environment, peer violence and so forth. This result is in line with and strengthens a large body of research (see, for instance, (Bjereld et al. 2021; Forsberg et al. 2023; Konishi et al. 2022)).

Thirdly, students stressed the importance of fostering an openness to noticing, which entails an active willingness to observe, recognize, and understand nuances in students' school lives. This contrasts with an uninterested or indifferent approach. Furthermore, they emphasized that noticing should be free from prejudices that might distort perceptions. In other words, biases and reluctance to notice certain issues were seen as obstacles to a positive school climate. These insights can be further compared to findings from a qualitative focus group study examining student perspectives on the effectiveness of school-based anti-bullying efforts. In that study, students reported that certain school interventions were ineffective or even counterproductive when they involved disrespectful treatment, reputational biases, or unfair processes (Cunningham et al. 2016). Such findings underscore the importance of ensuring that school personnel's noticing and interventions are not only proactive but also fair, respectful, and supportive as a means of fostering a genuinely positive school climate. Similar concerns were also raised by school personnel in previous research (Edling et al. 2024; for a review, see Earnshaw et al. 2018). In Edling's study, teachers also identified additional barriers to effective noticing, such as time constraints and fear of involvement, which hindered their ability to recognize and respond to critical events (Edling et al. 2024). Student–teacher relationships play a vital role in shaping students' experiences of school climate (Bear 2020; Forsberg et al. 2023; Konishi et al. 2022). This was particularly reflected in students' experiences of substitute teachers, who were seen as less attentive and responsive than regular staff.

Fourthly, students highlighted the importance of personnel taking time to gather diverse perspectives before drawing conclusions about an event. Students' own accounts were considered crucial in this process. They expressed frustration when staff jumped to conclusions without thoroughly investigating situations. In such cases, students reported experiencing a form of “double punishment”: they were harmed by an event, unfairly blamed for it, and left to navigate the situation without support. This aligns with previous research showing that students sometimes experience unfair, biased, and disrespectful interventions (Cunningham et al. 2016) and feel school staff misinterpret bullying as a mere conflict between equal parties (Bjereld et al. 2021). The need for a comprehensive understanding of events (i.e., noticing the full picture, including students' perspectives) parallels findings from the study of school personnel, where participants (from the same schools as the students in this study) emphasized the importance of mapping multiple perspectives, noticing nuances and learning from interactions with students in dynamic and changeable school environments (Edling et al. 2024).

Finally, students in this study simultaneously underscored that noticing, in itself, is not sufficient. School personnel must also take action. There is substantial research indicating that staff may become aware of incidents either directly (through firsthand observation) or indirectly (through reports from students or others). However, victims often refrain from seeking adult intervention due to concerns about how staff are likely to respond. Key barriers include fears of not being believed or not being taken seriously (Wojcik et al.

2022), as well as a lack of trust in staff's ability to provide support or ensure safety (Bjereld et al. 2024; Boulton et al. 2017; O'Brien et al. 2018). In the present study, these concerns were reflected in students' descriptions of feeling trapped in negative situations without viable options. They reported that school personnel expected them to resolve conflicts independently but then became frustrated when issues were brought to their attention only after they had escalated rather than having been addressed earlier.

Research on how students themselves experience, interpret, and reflect on school climate, particularly in relation to the role of school personnel in shaping it through their professional vision, remains scarce. This qualitative study confirms some previous findings while further nuancing ideas of professional vision and noticing, but more research is needed. The concept of noticing and professional vision interconnects school visions and individual meaning-making with everyday practice [praxis]. This is a highly valuable step in gaining increasing knowledge regarding the promotion of positive school climates. A question that arises from this study is which themes students expressed as particularly important when it comes to professionals noticing. Using the themes uncovered in this study, it would be interesting to gather quantitative survey data from a representative sample of the population of students from which our interviewees were selected. In addition to focusing on professionals' vision/noticing and students' descriptions of what school staff should notice gained through interviews, observations of teachers and the gaze of school staff, in practice, using video recordings would be a valuable complement. Also, a comparison of visions of a positive school climate between various central actors, including students, teachers, additional school staff, school principals and parents, would hopefully uncover possible hindrances to and collisions of vision and noticing that might risk obstructing good practice and thus require being recognized and problematized.

6. Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the case study is anchored in a Swedish municipality that has been actively working to foster a positive school climate and reduce bullying since 2011 (Edling et al. 2024). Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within this particular context, which may differ from other municipalities, both in Sweden and beyond. Additionally, the study exclusively investigated those student experiences, which tend to shape their perception of reality. The data for this study do not take into account other influential factors, such as the actual experiences of school personnel, policy frameworks, and organizational structures, all of which are valuable when considering factors influencing school climate.

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