

Understanding the Relationship between Institutional Climate and the Mental Well-being of Pupil Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores the institutional atmosphere and its effects on the mental health of pupil teachers participating in teacher education programs at H.N.B. Garhwal Central University, Uttarakhand. The research focuses on the perceived systems of support and the difficulties encountered by pupil teachers, employing semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The results suggest that the institutional climate—defined by faculty behavior, peer interactions, administrative procedures, and academic workload—significantly influences the psychological well-being of pupil teachers. The study concludes that environments that are supportive and participatory enhance mental health and professional development, whereas rigid and unempathetic structures lead to increased stress and anxiety. The paper provides practical suggestions for policy and institutional changes aimed at fostering well-being in teacher education.

Keywords: Institutional Climate, Mental Well-being, Pupil Teachers

Introduction: The institutional climate found within teacher education institutions plays a crucial role in shaping the emotional and psychological well-being of pupil teachers. As individuals poised to become educators, pupil teachers undergo a significant transitional phase that requires them to navigate a complex interplay of academic responsibilities, personal challenges, and professional aspirations. In the context of India, many teacher education institutions are structured within hierarchical administrative frameworks that can create environments characterized by high levels of stress, overwhelming workloads, and intense performance evaluation pressures. These factors not only contribute to a significant amount of stress but can also adversely affect the mental health of pupil teachers.

The implications of this stress are far-reaching; the mental health of these future educators is critical not only for their academic achievements during their training period but also for their effectiveness and resilience in the classrooms they will eventually lead. Poor mental health can hinder their ability to engage with students, manage classroom dynamics, and make a positive contribution to the learning environment.

In light of these challenges, it becomes essential to understand how various institutional environments can shape the emotional and psychological outcomes for pupil teachers. This understanding is particularly relevant in the context of comprehensive educational reforms, such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which seeks to promote a more holistic approach to education. By examining the links between institutional climate and the well-being of pupil teachers, stakeholders can implement targeted interventions that foster supportive environments conducive to the development of competent and mentally resilient educators, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes for students in India.

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Review of Literature: Several studies have underscored the link between institutional environments and psychological well-being. Kyriacou (2017) highlighted that teacher stress arises from organizational pressures and a lack of emotional support. Agarwal (2019) found that transparent communication and participatory leadership significantly enhance motivation among trainee teachers. In the Indian context, Singh (2020) noted that collegial relationships and fairness within institutions reduce anxiety among pupil teachers. Recent research by Kaur (2021) emphasized that the absence of structured counseling units in teacher education programs contributes to emotional exhaustion. Globally, studies such as those by Van der Westhuizen et al. (2022) have consistently shown that institutional culture and psychological climate significantly predict burnout levels among educators. However, few qualitative inquiries have explored how pupil teachers in Indian universities perceive institutional climate and its impact on their mental health. This study fills that gap by providing a nuanced understanding rooted in participant experiences.

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore pupil teachers' perceptions of the institutional climate within their teacher education institutions.
2. To identify institutional factors that positively or negatively influence their mental health.
3. To examine perceived support systems and challenges related to mental well-being.
4. To suggest strategies for creating supportive institutional environments that enhance psychological resilience.

Research Questions

1. How do pupil teachers perceive the institutional climate of their teacher education institutions?
2. In what ways does institutional climate influence their mental health and emotional well-being?
3. What types of support mechanisms do pupil teachers perceive as effective in maintaining mental health?
4. What challenges within the institutional environment negatively affect pupil teachers' mental health?
5. How can teacher education institutions enhance their climate to promote psychological well-being?

Research Methodology: This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design grounded in an interpretive paradigm. The aim was to understand participants' lived experiences regarding institutional climate and mental health. The research was conducted at the School of Education, H.N.B. Garhwal Central University, Uttarakhand. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 26 pupil teachers (12 male and 14 female) from B.Ed. and I.T.E.P. programs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and non-participant observations. Thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), guided the data analysis process. Ethical clearance was obtained, and confidentiality was maintained throughout.

Results and Findings: The qualitative analysis, conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic approach, generated four major themes that explain how institutional climate shapes the mental well-being of pupil teachers enrolled in B.Ed. and I.T.E.P. programmes. Data from semi-structured interviews, FGDs, and non-participant observations were triangulated to ensure credibility and validity.

Theme 1: Supportive Institutional Practices Promote Emotional Stability: Most pupil teachers reported that a supportive institutional environment—characterized by approachable faculty, timely academic guidance, and cooperative administrative practices—positively influenced their emotional well-being. Students who felt encouraged by their mentors and experienced open communication within the institution described a high sense of belonging and reduced anxiety.

Observational data confirmed that classrooms where teachers fostered trust, respect, and active participation created a psychologically secure learning atmosphere. In contrast, rigid or unresponsive behaviour from faculty often led to hesitation, fear of judgement, and emotional discomfort among students.

Theme 2: Academic Workload and Assessment Pressure as Stressors: Across interviews and FGDs, pupil teachers consistently highlighted academic workload as a significant source of stress. The pressure of completing multiple assignments, preparing for micro-teaching, managing teaching practice files, and balancing both theoretical and practical components resulted in emotional fatigue.

Some students reported disturbances in sleep patterns, reduced concentration, and heightened anxiety during internship periods. Female pupil teachers, particularly those commuting long distances or handling domestic responsibilities, experienced comparatively higher stress levels.

Theme 3: Peer Support and Classroom Climate as Mental Health Buffers: Peer relationships emerged as a major protective factor for mental well-being. Students with supportive peer groups expressed a greater ability to manage academic challenges, practicum stress, and performance pressure. Collaborative learning spaces, encouraging classroom interactions, and group-based problem-solving enhanced pupils' confidence and emotional resilience. Observations indicated that interactive and learner-centered classrooms created an atmosphere of mutual support, whereas teacher-dominated or highly formal settings often restricted dialogue and increased student anxiety.

Theme 4: Perceived Inequalities and Institutional Rigidities Affect Psychological Comfort: Some participants shared experiences of favoritism, inconsistent administrative procedures, delays in practicum-related documentation, and unclear institutional expectations. These issues contributed to frustration, helplessness, and psychological distress. Inadequate grievance redressal mechanisms further amplified feelings of neglect and lack of recognition.

DISCUSSION: The findings demonstrate that institutional climate plays a substantial role in shaping the mental well-being of pupil teachers. The results align with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of supportive educational environments for emotional and academic development.

Supportive Institutional Climate Enhances Mental Well-being: Consistent with the work of Cohen et al. (2009) and Collie et al. (2012), the study found that supportive institutional practices—such as accessible faculty, transparent communication, and mentorship—create a sense of emotional security among pupil teachers. When students experience guidance and encouragement, their confidence improves, and stress levels decrease.

The findings further align with Darling-Hammond's (2006) assertion that structured support and constructive feedback are essential for promoting professional development and emotional resilience during teacher preparation.

Workload and Assessment Demands Contribute to Stress: The heavy academic and practicum workload was identified as a major source of stress, supporting the arguments of Kyriacou (2001) and Jalongo & Heider (2006), who found that teacher trainees often struggle with excessive responsibilities, leading to mental exhaustion. The pressure of deadlines and performance expectations compounds anxiety, particularly during teaching practice.

Peer Interaction as a Protective Factor: Peer support played a crucial buffering role, validating the theoretical perspectives of Roeser et al. (2012). Strong peer networks eased emotional strain and provided a sense of shared understanding. Collaboration not only improved problem-solving but also reinforced psychological safety.

Institutional Rigidities Can Undermine Psychological Safety: Experiences of inequality, unclear rules, and administrative delays negatively impacted pupil teachers' mental health. These findings align with Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017), who suggested that perceived injustices and rigid institutional structures contribute to burnout and emotional withdrawal.

Integrated Interpretation: Overall, the study reaffirms that mental well-being among pupil teachers is not solely an individual concern but is heavily shaped by existing institutional processes, faculty behaviour, peer networks, and administrative responsiveness. Supportive institutional climates foster positive mental states, whereas rigid or unresponsive systems contribute to psychological strain and diminished academic engagement.

Implications of the Study: The findings of the present study carry several important implications for teacher education institutions, policymakers, administrators, and mental health professionals. Since institutional climate directly influences the psychological well-being of pupil teachers, transformative interventions are required at multiple levels.

Strengthening Supportive Institutional Climate: The results highlight the need for institutions to cultivate a more supportive, empathetic, and student-centered climate. Faculty members must be trained in emotionally responsive pedagogies, mentorship practices, and communication strategies that promote a psychologically safe environment. A culture of openness, constructive feedback, and approachability can substantially reduce anxiety among pupil teachers.

Integrating Mental Health Support in Teacher Education: Teacher education programs should incorporate mental health awareness, stress management, and well-being modules into the curriculum. Workshops on emotional resilience, counselling sessions, and mindfulness-based interventions may significantly enhance pupils' coping skills, especially during internship and practicum phases. Institutions may consider hiring counsellors or designating a mental health focal person for student support.

Rationalizing Workload and Assessment Practices: The study indicates that assignment pressure, practicum documentation, and multiple time-bound tasks contribute heavily to stress. Teacher education departments should revisit their workload policies by:

- Distributing assignments more evenly,
- Prioritizing essential practicum activities,
- Providing flexible submission windows when needed,

- Reducing redundant documentation and file work.

A balanced academic rhythm may improve both learning outcomes and psychological well-being.

Establishing Transparent and Responsive Administrative Systems: Perceptions of favoritism, unclear rules, and delayed administrative processes reduce students' psychological comfort. Institutions should adopt:

- Transparent policies for practicum placement,
- Responsive grievance systems,
- Clear communication channels, and
- Timely dissemination of academic information.

Such measures create trust and fairness, which are critical for students' emotional security.

Encouraging Peer Collaboration and Support Networks: Given that peer interaction emerged as a major coping mechanism, institutions should promote collaborative learning environments, such as:

- Peer mentoring groups,
- Reflective circles,
- Group-based assignments, and
- Interactive classroom models.

These structures foster a sense of belonging and reduce emotional isolation among pupil teachers.

Improving Classroom Climate and Teaching Practices: Classrooms characterized by respect, open dialogue, and student participation lead to better mental well-being. Faculty should adopt learner-centered pedagogies—including discussion-based sessions, experiential learning, and inclusive teaching strategies—that encourage engagement and reduce fear of judgment.

Policy Implications at the Teacher Education Level: At the policy level, bodies such as NCTE, NCERT, and university authorities must emphasize institutional climate as a key quality indicator in teacher education Programmes. Mental well-being should be included in institutional audits, accreditation parameters, and quality assurance frameworks.

Implications for Future Teacher Readiness: Since pupil teachers will become future educators, their mental health directly affects the quality of school education. Enhancing well-being during training will enable them to:

- Better manage classroom challenges,
- Maintain professional resilience,
- Develop healthier teacher-student relationships, and

- Contribute to positive school environments.

Thus, investing in their well-being has long-term societal benefits.

This study provides significant contributions to the fields of educational policy and institutional management by illustrating how psychological well-being can be effectively enhanced through the establishment of supportive institutional climates. It is imperative for educational institutions to embed well-being initiatives within their organizational culture to promote a holistic development environment.

Implementing cost-effective interventions such as counseling services, mentorship programs, and participatory decision-making processes can significantly bolster resilience among pupil teachers. By prioritizing these initiatives, institutions can cultivate a nurturing environment that not only supports the mental health of educators but also enhances the overall educational experience.

Recommendations

- I. Establish counseling and wellness centers in all teacher education institutions.
- II. Integrate workshops on emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and stress management into curricula.
- III. Reduce excessive administrative and academic workload to prevent burnout.
- IV. Train faculty members in empathetic communication and mentorship skills.
- V. Encourage participative decision-making by involving pupil teachers in institutional committees.
- VI. Improve infrastructure and promote inclusive, safe, and hygienic learning spaces.

Conclusion: The study concludes that a positive institutional climate is integral to maintaining the mental health of pupil teachers. Empathetic faculty, supportive peers, and transparent administration foster emotional stability and academic motivation. Conversely, rigid hierarchies, performance pressure, and lack of counseling support exacerbate psychological stress. Teacher education institutions must, therefore, prioritize emotional well-being as part of their institutional mission to produce resilient and compassionate educators.

Limitations and Future Scope: The present study was limited to a small qualitative sample from H.N.B. Garhwal Central University. Future studies could adopt mixed-method approaches with larger samples across multiple states to validate findings. Longitudinal studies may also assess the long-term effects of institutional reforms on mental health outcomes among pupil teachers.

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