Understanding School Climate through Autoethnographic Immersion in a Rural Malaysian Islamic Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the school climate of a rural Malaysian Islamic secondary school through an autoethnographic immersion, guided by Cohen et al.'s (2009) four domains: safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and institutional environment. Over a two-month period, the researcher—positioned as both participant and observer—engaged in classroom observations, staff meetings, co-curricular activities, and informal conversations with teachers, administrators, and students. Data sources included reflective journals, observation checklists, institutional documents, and conversational interviews, analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings indicate that safety extended beyond physical protection to encompass moral and spiritual safeguarding, reinforced through religious rituals, constant security presence, and student prefect monitoring. Teaching and learning reflected an integration of naqli (revealed) and aqli (rational) knowledge, with creative adaptations to resource constraints. Interpersonal relationships were characterised by trust, collegiality, and leadership grounded in *shura* (consultation). The institutional environment, though modest, was sustained through collective stewardship and adaptive use of spaces. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how faith-based values permeate all four school climate domains, shaping a moral–relational ecosystem distinctive to rural Islamic schools. Methodologically, it highlights the value of autoethnography in capturing tacit cultural scripts often overlooked in survey-based research. Practically, the findings offer insights for educators and policymakers on sustaining positive school climates in resource-limited yet culturally rich contexts through value-integrated pedagogy, inclusive leadership, and community-driven resource management.

Keywords: Autoethnography, school climate, Kurikulum Bersepadu Dini, rural education, Immersion

INTRODUCTION

School climate has been widely recognised as a critical determinant of student learning outcomes, teacher effectiveness, and overall school improvement. It refers to the quality and character of school life, encompassing the values, norms, relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures that define the day-to-day experiences of students and staff (Cohen et al., 2009). A positive school climate fosters trust, mutual respect, and shared responsibility, while a negative climate can undermine academic engagement and wellbeing. Cohen et al. (2009) propose four interrelated dimensions of school climate: **(i)** safety, including physical and emotional security; **(ii)** teaching and learning, referring to quality instruction, high expectations, and support for learning; **(iii)** interpersonal relationships, which encompass respect, collaboration, and a sense of belonging; and **(iv)** institutional environment, including the organisation's physical conditions, resources, and facilities. Thapa et al. (2013) further emphasise that school climate integrates academic, social, and emotional learning, contributing to holistic student development.

The relationship between school climate and educational outcomes is well documented. Empirical research demonstrates that a supportive and inclusive climate is linked to higher student motivation, stronger academic performance, reduced behavioural problems, and enhanced socio-emotional wellbeing (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Wang & Degol, 2016). A positive climate also strengthens teacher morale, fosters professional collaboration, and encourages innovative pedagogical practices (Maxwell et al., 2017). In multicultural and religiously oriented settings, school climate serves an additional role as a cultural anchor, shaping values, identity, and moral character (Shah, 2019). As such, understanding the specific features of school climate in

unique educational contexts is essential for informing policy and practice that promote both excellence and equity.

In Malaysia, Islamic secondary schools—particularly those in rural areas—occupy a distinctive place in the educational landscape. Many of these schools implement the *Kurikulum Bersepadu Dini* (KBD), an integrated curriculum that combines Islamic studies (*naqli*) with modern sciences (*aqli*), aiming to produce well-rounded graduates grounded in faith and prepared for contemporary challenges (Hashim & Langgulung, 2020). Rural Islamic schools often serve as more than just educational institutions; they are centres for spiritual guidance, community engagement, and cultural preservation (Yaacob et al., 2022). However, their physical and organizational contexts are shaped by resource constraints, ageing infrastructure, and geographic isolation, which influence the lived experiences of students and teachers.
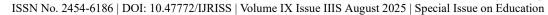
The interplay of faith-based values, community expectations, and material limitations creates a distinctive school climate in rural Malaysian Islamic secondary schools. For instance, religious rituals such as morning *dhikr* or recitations may serve as both cultural artefacts and mechanisms for fostering emotional safety and unity. Strong norms of respect for teachers, underpinned by Islamic ethics, can enhance interpersonal relationships but may also influence classroom dynamics and participation. Similarly, resource limitations may restrict opportunities for certain learning activities while simultaneously encouraging creative adaptation and collaborative problem-solving among staff and students. These factors together suggest that the climate of rural Islamic schools cannot be fully understood through generic frameworks alone; rather, it must be examined in ways that capture its cultural, moral, and organizational nuances.

Despite the acknowledged importance of school climate, research in Malaysia has tended to focus on urban or mainstream school settings, often employing quantitative surveys that capture broad trends but overlook the complexity of lived experience (Hamzah et al., 2020; Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2019). Few studies have examined how school climate is experienced, enacted, and sustained in rural Islamic schools, where cultural and religious values are deeply embedded in daily practices. Even fewer have employed qualitative, immersive approaches capable of revealing the subtle and often unspoken dimensions of school climate in such contexts. This gap is significant, as a nuanced understanding of rural Islamic school climates could inform targeted interventions to enhance student engagement, teacher wellbeing, and organizational resilience.

Autoethnography offers a valuable methodological approach for addressing this gap. By combining personal experience with cultural analysis, autoethnography enables researchers to document and interpret the meanings of everyday practices from an insider perspective (Ellis et al., 2011). Immersion in the school environment allows for sustained observation of interactions, rituals, and routines, as well as critical reflection on how these elements shape and reflect the school's climate. This approach is particularly suited to contexts where values, beliefs, and relationships are integral to the educational process, as in rural Islamic schools. Moreover, autoethnography facilitates the integration of multiple data sources—such as reflective journals, informal conversations, and document analysis—yielding a rich, multilayered account that extends beyond surface descriptions (Adams & Manning, 2020).

In this study, the researcher—positioned as both observer and participant—engaged in two months of continuous immersion in a rural Malaysian Islamic secondary school. This approach provided access to the tacit cultural knowledge, interpersonal dynamics, and environmental factors that collectively constitute the school climate. The study focuses specifically on four interrelated dimensions of school climate, adapted from Cohen et al. (2009): safety**,** teaching and learning**,** interpersonal relationships**, and** institutional environment. By examining these dimensions through an autoethnographic lens, the research aims to contribute a culturally grounded and contextually specific understanding of school climate in a rural faith-based educational setting.

This study aims to understand the school climate of a rural Malaysian Islamic secondary school through autoethnographic immersion, focusing on its safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and institutional environment. The findings have the potential to inform educational leaders, policymakers, and teacher educators about how to sustain positive climates in resource-constrained yet culturally rich school environments, ensuring that both academic and moral development are nurtured in harmony.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising School Climate

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life, encompassing patterns of experience shared by students, staff, and the broader school community (Cohen et al., 2009). It includes the norms, values, interpersonal relationships, organizational structures, and learning practices that collectively shape daily interactions in the school setting. Cohen et al. (2009) identified four interrelated dimensions: safety (physical, emotional, and disciplinary structures), teaching and learning (quality instruction, expectations, and support), interpersonal relationships (respect, collaboration, and trust), and institutional environment (physical facilities, resources, and organizational culture). Thapa et al. (2013) expanded this model by incorporating academic, social, and emotional learning as integral components, emphasising the importance of equity, diversity, and a shared vision in sustaining a positive climate.

Research consistently links positive school climate with enhanced academic performance, student engagement, and socio-emotional wellbeing (Wang & Degol, 2016; Aldridge & McChesney, 2018). In addition to cognitive outcomes, a supportive climate fosters moral development, resilience, and motivation to learn (Maxwell et al., 2017). A poor climate, conversely, has been associated with absenteeism, disengagement, and increased behavioural issues (Mitchell et al., 2020). Given its multidimensional nature, school climate serves not only as a predictor of educational outcomes but also as a lens for understanding how cultural, social, and structural factors intersect in shaping the school experience.

The multidimensional framework proposed by Cohen et al. (2009) is especially relevant for contexts where moral and cultural values are embedded in everyday school life. By mapping the safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and institutional environment domains to the realities of specific school settings, researchers can produce a nuanced understanding of how climate is constructed and sustained. This theoretical foundation underpins the present study's approach to examining school climate in a rural Malaysian Islamic secondary school.

School Climate in Rural and Faith-Based Contexts

In rural contexts, school climate is influenced by unique socio-cultural, geographic, and economic factors. Rural schools often face resource limitations, smaller staff complements, and geographic isolation, yet they may also benefit from strong community ties and a sense of shared identity (Aziz et al., 2022). These factors can lead to distinctive strengths—such as high levels of interpersonal trust—alongside challenges like limited infrastructure and fewer professional development opportunities for teachers (Liu et al., 2021).

Faith-based schools, including Islamic secondary schools in Malaysia, integrate religious values with academic instruction, creating climates that reflect both educational and spiritual goals (Shah, 2019). The *Kurikulum Bersepadu Dini* (KBD) exemplifies this integration by combining *naqli* (revealed) and *aqli* (rational) knowledge to promote holistic student development (Hashim & Langgulung, 2020). Studies in Islamic schooling contexts highlight that religious rituals, moral expectations, and communal activities often serve as key artefacts of school culture and climate (Hamzah et al., 2020; Yaacob et al., 2022). Such environments can foster a sense of belonging and moral discipline but may also present tensions between maintaining tradition and adapting to contemporary pedagogical demands (Mahmood et al., 2023).

Despite these insights, empirical studies on school climate in Malaysian rural Islamic schools remain sparse. Existing literature tends to examine either urban faith-based schools or rural schools in general without isolating the specific dynamics that arise from the interplay of rurality, religious ethos, and resource constraints. This gap underscores the need for contextually grounded research that can illuminate how the four dimensions of school climate manifest in rural Islamic schooling environments.

Methodological Approaches to Studying School Climate

School climate has traditionally been studied using quantitative surveys, such as the School Climate Survey

(SCS) or the Comprehensive School Climate Inventory (CSCI), which capture perceptions of safety, relationships, and learning environments (Bear et al., 2018). While such tools offer breadth, they often lack the depth required to uncover the tacit cultural norms, lived experiences, and nuanced interpersonal dynamics that shape climate in specific contexts. As a result, qualitative approaches—particularly ethnography and its variants—have been advocated to complement quantitative findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Autoethnography, which combines autobiographical narrative with ethnographic analysis, allows researchers to draw on their own experiences as both participant and observer (Ellis et al., 2011). This method facilitates the exploration of how cultural and organizational contexts shape individual and collective experiences, while reflexive analysis ensures transparency in interpretation (Adams & Manning, 2020). Immersion—sustained engagement within a school—enables the researcher to witness and participate in daily rituals, informal interactions, and decision-making processes that are often invisible in survey-based studies (Pasternak & Rigoni, 2021).

Few studies have applied autoethnography to the study of school climate in rural Islamic schools. In Malaysia, the method remains underutilised, despite its potential to reveal the intersections of faith, pedagogy, leadership, and community values in shaping climate. By adopting an autoethnographic immersion, the present study addresses this methodological gap, providing an insider account of how the four dimensions of school climate (Cohen et al., 2009) are experienced and enacted in a rural Malaysian Islamic secondary school.

Identified Gap and Link to Present Study:

While the literature affirms the importance of school climate in influencing student and teacher outcomes, there is a paucity of research exploring its manifestation in rural Islamic schools in Malaysia, particularly using immersive qualitative methods. Existing studies are predominantly quantitative, urban-focused, or generalised across school types, offering limited insight into the lived realities of culturally specific educational environments. The present study responds to this gap by employing an autoethnographic immersion to examine the school climate of a rural Malaysian Islamic secondary school, with particular attention to the domains of safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and institutional environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an autoethnographic design to illuminate the operational culture and, more specifically, to explore and interpret the four domains of school climate—safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and institutional environment—as articulated by Cohen et al. (2009). Autoethnography—positioning the researcher's lived experience as both data and analytic lens—has proven particularly valuable in educational research for revealing culturally embedded practices, meanings, and relational dynamics that are not easily captured through conventional observational or survey methods (Adams & Manning, 2020; Nguyen, Hwang, & Howley, 2020). Given the school's faith-based character and rural location, an insider–witness approach was required to document the interplay of leadership, values, pedagogy, and daily routines, all of which contribute to shaping the school climate. The researcher, a lecturer in educational studies, engaged in continuous two-month immersion, participating in staff meetings, classroom observations, co-curricular activities, and informal conversations with administrators, teachers, and students. Prolonged engagement strengthened contextual understanding and rapport, consistent with best practices for immersive qualitative inquiry in schooling contexts (Pasternak & Rigoni, 2021; Thomas & Schlesselman, 2022).

Research context

The research was conducted in a small, long-established religious secondary school serving a rural community. The school integrates Islamic studies and national academic subjects under KBD, with a modest staff complement shouldering multiple pedagogical and administrative roles. The site's historical facilities, close-knit relationships between teachers and students, daily religious rituals, and spatial constraints are integral to the organizational ecology, collectively shaping the school climate. Safety protocols included 24-hour on-site security guards, wardens residing in student dormitories, and active prefect monitoring to prevent bullying—measures that strongly influenced the perceived sense of safety within the school. These environmental,

relational, and cultural factors form the backdrop against which teaching, learning, and interpersonal interactions unfold. The researcher's positionality as a higher-education lecturer was explicitly reflexive throughout; field engagement was accompanied by systematic self-interrogation about assumptions, role transitions, and potential influence on participants and interpretations. Contemporary qualitative methodology underscores that reflexivity is not peripheral but central to the credibility of researcher-involved designs, including autoethnography (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Adams & Manning, 2020).
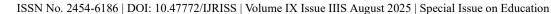
Data generation

Data generation combined reflective daily journals, contemporaneous field notes, brief conversational interviews, and institutional documents (e.g., schedules, meeting notes, curriculum artefacts). Method triangulation (Denzin, 1978) was employed by integrating autoethnographic reflective journals, systematic participant observation guided by an adapted School Climate Observation Checklist based on Cohen et al.'s (2009) four domains, and informal conversational data. The checklist provided structured observational prompts for recording safety practices, instructional interactions, relational behaviours, and environmental conditions, thereby enhancing the validity of the findings. Journals were written immediately after key events to capture affect, context, and emergent meaning before retrospective rationalisation, while field notes recorded descriptive detail on routines, interactions, rituals, and material settings. Informal dialogues with teachers and administrators provided situated explanations of practice and decision-making; such short, naturally occurring exchanges are well-established as credible sources within immersive designs when systematically recorded and triangulated (Pasternak & Rigoni, 2021). Documents were analysed to contextualise observations and to trace how formal policies (KBD implementation, assessment cycles, pastoral practices) were enacted in situ.

Data analysis

Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis as articulated in recent qualitative scholarship, privileging iterative engagement with the corpus over mechanical coding for reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2021). While initial coding remained inductive to capture emergent meaning units, the four domains of school climate (Cohen et al., 2009) served as a sensitising framework to guide the clustering and interpretation of themes. Data from reflective journals, observation checklists, field notes, and informal conversations were compared for convergence, complementarity, or contradiction, ensuring that interpretations were corroborated across sources. This meant that meaning units related to safety (e.g., discipline, emotional security), teaching and learning (e.g., pedagogical integration of Islamic and scientific knowledge), interpersonal relationships (e.g., collaboration, respect), and institutional environment (e.g., facilities, spatial arrangements) were examined both in their own right and in relation to the overarching conceptual model. Codes were inductively clustered into candidate themes and refined through a recursive process of checking coherence within themes and distinctiveness between them, moving back and forth between data extracts and developing thematic narratives. In keeping with reflexive thematic analysis, theme naming and boundary decisions were theoretically informed and explicitly linked to the study's aim, rather than treated as purely algorithmic outcomes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Throughout, reflexive memos documented analytic decisions and alternative interpretations to enhance transparency and interpretive depth (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed through several mutually reinforcing strategies aligned to contemporary qualitative standards. Credibility was enhanced by prolonged engagement, method triangulation (reflective journals, observation checklists, informal dialogues, and documents), and targeted member reflections, in which two senior teachers reviewed anonymised thematic summaries for resonance and factual accuracy—a practice advocated as a pragmatic form of participant validation in interpretive research (Birt et al., 2016). Transferability was supported by thick contextual description of the school's cultural–organisational rhythms, enabling readers to judge applicability to similar rural faith-based contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability was promoted through an audit trail of dated field entries, iterative codebooks, and analytic memos, documenting how interpretations developed over time (Morse, 2018). Confirmability was strengthened by continuous reflexive journaling about positionality, potential bias, and decision trails, acknowledging that the researcher is an instrument of the inquiry while making the interpretive pathway inspectable (Smith & McGannon, 2018;

Morse, 2018).

Ethics

Ethical considerations followed institutional and disciplinary guidance for immersive and self-involving designs. Prior to fieldwork, university ethical approval was obtained; the school's leadership granted access and endorsed the immersion plan. All individuals and the school are represented with pseudonyms; potentially identifying details in journal excerpts were altered while preserving meaning. Given the naturally occurring nature of most interactions, a processual consent approach was adopted: staff were verbally informed of the researcher's role, and explicit permission was sought for use of documents and any quoted material from dialogues. Recent methodological discussions emphasise that in autoethnographic and immersive work, ethical practice is ongoing and relational rather than a single event, requiring sensitivity to participants' expectations in context (Adams & Manning, 2020; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). All data are stored securely with restricted access in accordance with institutional policy.

Taken together, the design choices—prolonged immersion, multi-source data, method triangulation incorporating an observation checklist, reflexive thematic analysis, and layered procedures for credibility, dependability, and ethical care—align with current Scopus-indexed qualitative standards for rigorous autoethnographic inquiry in education. They are particularly suited to eliciting the complex, values-infused school climate of a rural religious school under KBD, where safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and institutional environment are tightly interwoven and best understood from within.

FINDINGS

Safety

Safety at the research site was shaped by both physical and emotional dimensions, with Islamic values playing a central role in fostering a respectful, orderly environment. Daily rituals, most notably the communal recitation of al-Ma'thurat each morning, provided a spiritual anchor and set a calm, focused tone for the day. This practice not only reinforced religious identity but also contributed to a sense of emotional security and collective purpose.

Daily Journal – Monday, Week 3: "This morning's recitation was particularly moving; even the youngest students recited with quiet confidence. The schoolyard felt united in purpose."
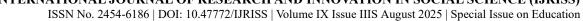
The school's safety framework extended beyond rituals to include structured systems of physical protection. A security guard was stationed within the school compound 24 hours a day, ensuring constant surveillance of the premises. For students residing in the hostel, wardens were formally assigned to oversee their welfare and were required to stay overnight in the warden's quarters within the dormitory area. This arrangement ensured immediate availability for emergencies and reassured both students and parents about safety and care.

Student prefects played an active role in maintaining discipline and peer safety. Their responsibilities included monitoring corridors during class transitions, intervening in minor disputes, and ensuring that incidents of bullying were prevented or addressed swiftly. This peer-led oversight, embedded within a culture of mutual respect, strengthened both student accountability and communal trust.

These interlocking systems—ritualized spiritual practices, formal security measures, and student-led monitoring—illustrate how safety in this rural Islamic school extends beyond procedural enforcement to encompass a shared moral and spiritual framework. The intertwining of religious norms, community vigilance, and structural safeguards reinforces a physically and emotionally secure environment, a point that will be further explored in the discussion in relation to climate theory and moral education.

Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning at the school were characterised by a purposeful integration of Islamic knowledge and modern sciences, reflecting the Kurikulum Bersepadu Dini 's commitment to harmonising naqli (revealed) and

aqli (rational) knowledge. Teachers actively linked scientific concepts to religious principles, thereby making abstract content culturally resonant.

Daily Journal – Thursday, Week 7: "During a physics lesson on energy conservation, the teacher linked the concept to the Islamic principle of avoiding waste. Students responded with nods and thoughtful expressions."

Instruction was further shaped by resource constraints, requiring creativity in lesson delivery. For example, limited laboratory space led to staggered group work, yet this did not dampen student enthusiasm. Teachers maximised available resources, often repurposing outdoor spaces for interactive activities. High expectations for academic engagement were balanced with moral guidance, ensuring that learning was framed as both an intellectual and ethical endeavour.

The integration of content and values underpins a climate where teaching and learning are inseparable from moral formation. This relationship between pedagogy, cultural relevance, and climate will be examined in the discussion through the lens of culturally responsive teaching and constructivist theory.

Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships within the school community were marked by warmth, trust, and reciprocity, extending across student–teacher and staff–staff interactions. Teachers described the workplace as a "second family," a sentiment reinforced through shared responsibilities and mutual support in navigating the demands of rural schooling.

Leadership played a pivotal role in sustaining this relational climate. The principal modelled compassionate leadership—firm in policy yet attentive to staff welfare. Staff meetings often began with words of encouragement, and public expressions of appreciation were common.

Daily Journal – Week 4: *"In the school assembly, the principal personally thanked and congratulates the teachers today for their extra work during the exam season. The gesture, though small, seemed to lift everyone's spirits."*

Collaboration was evident not only in administrative tasks but also in problem-solving around classroom practice and co-curricular planning. Decision-making processes were inclusive, embodying the Islamic principle of shura (consultation), and fostering a sense of collective ownership over school initiatives.

These relational dynamics illustrate how interpersonal trust, compassionate leadership, and collegiality contribute to a climate conducive to both professional satisfaction and student engagement. The interplay between these elements and the broader cultural framework will be addressed in the discussion, particularly in relation to transformational and distributed leadership theories.
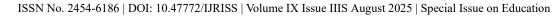
Institutional Environment

The institutional environment reflected the school's long history, having been established in the 1960s. Facilities were functional but modest, with spatial constraints shaping the organisation of teaching and co-curricular activities. For example, the small space ground compound for cocurricular activities.

Daily Journal – Week 6: "Today's Cocurricular activities was slightly cramped; the small open hall and compound meant students had to work in shifts. Still, their enthusiasm didn't seem diminished."

Despite these limitations, the school community exhibited resilience and ingenuity in maximising available resources. Outdoor areas were adapted for lessons, and maintenance of shared facilities was a collective responsibility. The pride taken in preserving the school environment was palpable, suggesting that the physical setting—though modest—was deeply valued as a communal space.

These findings highlight the reciprocal relationship between physical conditions and school climate: while resource constraints posed challenges, they also fostered a culture of adaptability and shared stewardship. The discussion will connect these observations to ecological perspectives on school environments and their influence

on climate.

Across the four domains, the school climate at the rural Malaysian Islamic secondary school was shaped by a combination of religiously informed norms, strong interpersonal bonds, adaptive teaching practices, and community-driven resource management. While certain structural limitations were evident, the moral and relational capital within the school contributed to a positive and cohesive climate. These findings will be analysed in the subsequent discussion, linking them to existing literature on school climate, faith-based education, and rural schooling.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the school climate of a rural Malaysian Islamic secondary school through an autoethnographic immersion, using Cohen et al.'s (2009) four domains—safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and institutional environment—as the guiding framework. The discussion moves beyond descriptive analysis by positioning the findings within a broader comparative and theoretical discourse, highlighting how rurality, religious values, and community-driven practices converge to produce a distinctive *moral–relational ecosystem* of school climate.

Safety: Extending the Concept to Moral–Religious Safeguarding

The findings reveal that safety in this context is not only a matter of physical protection, as outlined in school climate literature (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013), but also encompasses moral and spiritual safeguarding. This dual dimension reflects a broader Islamic educational philosophy in which the protection of faith (*hifz al-din*) and moral integrity is as vital as ensuring physical security (Hashim & Langgulung, 2020).

The integration of daily religious rituals, such as the communal recitation of *al-Ma'thurat*, into the safety framework parallels findings from rural Islamic schools in Indonesia (Raihani, 2018) and pesantren settings in East Java (Azra, 2019), where ritual practice fosters behavioural regulation and social cohesion. The combination of 24-hour security presence, hostel wardenship, and prefect-led peer monitoring illustrates a *multi-layered safety ecology* in which moral norms and structural measures reinforce each other.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings suggest that Cohen et al.'s (2009) "safety" domain could be extended to explicitly recognise moral–religious safety as a protective mechanism, especially in faith-based contexts where behavioural expectations are rooted in religious ethics.

Teaching and Learning: Integrative Pedagogy in Resource-Limited Contexts

The school's deliberate integration of *naqli* (revealed) and *aqli* (rational) knowledge reflects the philosophical underpinnings of the Kurikulum Bersepadu Dini and aligns with the concept of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018; Alhabshi & Ahmad, 2020). The practice of connecting scientific concepts to Islamic values—such as linking energy conservation to stewardship (*amanah*)—enhances cognitive engagement while reinforcing moral development.

In resource-limited rural settings, pedagogical adaptability becomes critical (Aziz et al., 2022; Yousaf et al., 2022). Here, resource scarcity did not diminish instructional quality; rather, it catalysed creative teaching strategies such as staggered lab sessions and outdoor practicals. This resonates with evidence from rural Pakistani madrassas (Yousaf et al., 2022) and African mission schools (Anderson, 2021), where adaptive pedagogy sustains academic quality despite infrastructural limitations.

Theoretically, these findings challenge the implicit secular orientation of the "teaching and learning" domain in school climate frameworks, suggesting that in faith-based schools, *value-infused instruction* is not peripheral but central to climate construction.

Interpersonal Relationships: Trust, Distributed Leadership, and Shura

The climate of trust, collegiality, and mutual care observed in this school echoes Thapa et al.'s (2013) assertion

that positive relationships are foundational to a healthy school climate. The principal's leadership—firm in policy yet attentive to staff well-being—demonstrates elements of distributed leadership (Leithwood et al., 2020) and transformational leadership in which relational capital is prioritised over positional authority.

A distinguishing feature here is the embedding of *shura* (consultation) in decision-making, which parallels findings in Islamic schools in Brunei (Abdullah & Hanapi, 2021) and pesantren governance in Indonesia (Raihani, 2018), where consultative processes enhance teacher commitment and communal ownership. This practice situates leadership within an ethical framework rooted in Islamic governance principles, suggesting that in faith-based climates, *ethical inclusivity*—not just interpersonal warmth—is a key relational driver.

Thus, Cohen et al.'s (2009) "interpersonal relationships" domain could be theoretically enriched by incorporating ethically anchored collaboration as a dimension, particularly relevant to religious schooling.

Institutional Environment: Resource Constraints as Identity Formation

The modest facilities of the school, while limiting in some respects, became a catalyst for ingenuity and shared responsibility. Outdoor adaptations for science practicals and collective maintenance of school spaces align with ecological perspectives on school climate, where physical environment interacts dynamically with social systems (Maxwell et al., 2017).

Comparable patterns have been observed in rural Islamic schools in Mindanao, Philippines (Ledesma, 2020) and rural Christian schools in Sub-Saharan Africa (Anderson, 2021), where physical limitations foster a *communal ethic of care* and reinforce institutional identity. In the present study, the physical environment was not merely a backdrop but a symbol of collective resilience, contributing to a sense of belonging that is integral to climate.

This suggests that in rural faith-based settings, the "institutional environment" domain should account for resource-driven identity work, where scarcity fuels cohesion and pride.

Towards a Faith–Rural School Climate Model

By synthesizing these findings, we propose a refinement of Cohen et al.'s (2009) four-domain framework for rural faith-based contexts:

1. **Safety** → Expanded to *Physical–Moral–Spiritual Safety*.
2. **Teaching and Learning** → Reconceptualised as *Value-Infused Pedagogy*.
3. **Interpersonal Relationships** → Infused with *Ethical Inclusivity via Shura*.
4. **Institutional Environment** → Recognised as *Resource-Driven Identity Formation*.

This adaptation acknowledges that in rural Islamic schools, religious values are not an overlay to climate—they are the structural and cultural foundation. Faith, community, and resource ecology interact to produce a climate that functions as a moral–relational ecosystem, where values permeate all domains rather than residing in a separate "ethos" category.

Methodological Implications of Autoethnographic Immersion

The use of autoethnography enabled the capture of tacit cultural scripts and micro-level relational dynamics that would likely remain invisible in survey-based approaches. Similar methodological advantages have been reported in immersive studies of rural faith schools in South Asia (Shah, 2019) and sub-Saharan Africa (Anderson, 2021). The reflexive stance adopted in this study—though robust—could be deepened in future research by incorporating critical incidents where researcher positionality influenced the field, thus enhancing transparency and interpretive depth.

Broader Contributions

This study makes several important contributions to the understanding of school climate, particularly in faith-based rural contexts. Theoretically, it extends Cohen et al.'s (2009) model by incorporating cultural and religious

dimensions, thereby highlighting how moral–spiritual values interact with safety, teaching, relationships, and institutional environments in ways that are not captured in secular frameworks. Empirically, the study documents a school climate in which values, relationships, and resources are not merely coexisting factors but are mutually constitutive, collectively shaping a moral–relational ecosystem unique to rural Islamic schools. Methodologically, the research demonstrates the utility of autoethnography as an approach capable of revealing subtle cultural and relational layers of climate that are often overlooked in large-scale survey-based studies. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that efforts to improve school climates in rural faith-based settings should capitalise on the existing moral capital of the community, embed leadership practices within consultative and ethical frameworks, and reconceptualise resource scarcity not only as a limitation but also as a potential driver of cohesion, creativity, and resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand the school climate of a rural Malaysian Islamic secondary school through an autoethnographic immersion, structured around the four domains proposed by Cohen et al. (2009): safety, teaching and learning, interpersonal relationships, and institutional environment. The findings reveal that the school climate is shaped by a distinctive interplay of religious values, communal cohesion, and resource limitations. Safety was ensured not only through the presence of physical measures—such as round-the-clock security guards, wardens residing in student dormitories, and active student prefects to prevent bullying—but also through a shared moral framework grounded in Islamic teachings. The teaching and learning domain reflected a strong emphasis on character development and religious knowledge alongside academic achievement. Interpersonal relationships were marked by close teacher–student bonds, respectful peer interactions, and leadership practices embedded in trust and mutual care. The institutional environment integrated religious rituals into daily school life, fostering a sense of belonging and identity among students and staff.

By employing autoethnography, this study addresses a notable gap in the literature—namely, the lack of in-depth, qualitative accounts of school climate in rural Malaysian Islamic schools. The immersive approach allowed for the capture of subtle cultural and relational dynamics often overlooked by survey-based or purely observational studies. The findings thus offer a culturally specific understanding of school climate that extends existing models by situating them within a faith-based rural educational context.
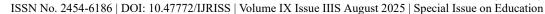
The study contributes to the broader literature in three ways. Theoretically, it enriches the conceptualisation of school climate by illustrating how Islamic values shape each of its four domains. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of autoethnography in uncovering nuanced, lived experiences that quantitative metrics might miss. Practically, it provides actionable insights for teachers, school leaders, and policymakers seeking to strengthen school climate in similar settings. For example, reinforcing the integration of religious and academic learning, ensuring visible and accessible safety measures, and fostering sustained teacher–student engagement could further enhance both student well-being and educational outcomes.

Future research could extend this inquiry to urban Islamic schools or compare climate perceptions between faith-based and secular institutions. Longitudinal designs may also help in tracking how shifts in leadership, policy, or community involvement influence school climate over time.

Ultimately, this study underscores that understanding school climate is essential not merely as an academic exercise but as a foundation for promoting student well-being, cultivating positive relationships, and achieving holistic educational success in diverse sociocultural contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Their invaluable assistance and cooperation have been fundamental in ensuring the smooth implementation of this research endeavour.

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