

A survey of kindergarten through 12th grade teacher perceptions of the learning environment in the mid-atlantic region of the United States

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine what factors Kindergarten through 12th grade teachers identify as important for creating positive learning environments. Fifty four teacher practitioners were involved in a three week study to determine attitudes toward learning environments in educational settings. The teacher-researcher administered a survey, kept notes from class discussions, made observations of an “ethos walk,” and conducted interviews to determine teachers’ perceptions of learning climates. Results from the study indicated the importance of positive learning environments for ensuring students’ academic success. Four predominate themes of teacher perceptions regarding learning climate were identified. These were caring relationships, invitational and safe environments, quality academic programs, and diversity of students and teacher populations. The study also affirmed the importance of creating safe learning environments so friendships and interpersonal relationships can flourish and the integration of academic, socio-emotional, and psychomotor development can help to promote learning.

Keywords: Teacher Perceptions, Learning Environments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Both novice and experienced teachers have ways of looking at teaching and learning environments differently. Banks (2016) has identified five factors that influence the choice about selecting learning environments. These factors include personal and cultural knowledge, popular knowledge, mainstream academic knowledge, transformative academic knowledge and school knowledge. External and internal learning environments have a significant impact on students’ academic success and the quality of learning (Mullet, 2010). In light of this and expanding evidence, the teacher researcher has proposed to study how K-12 teachers perceive educational learning environments. The review of literature provides further insights into factors K-12 teachers identify for creating positive learning environments in educational settings including teachers’ perceptions of these environments. The section within this research review includes discussions on physical environment of the school social and ethics of care, and emotional environments. This research also examined factors at school which gives life and has potential to give life such as cleanliness and orderliness and variables that do not give life such as safety hazards.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following section describes the participants involved in this research study. It also includes a rich description of the research site, the students, and the teacher-researcher, the apparatus used to obtain data and the procedure used in the study.

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 7, Issue 2, pp: (68-82), Month: March - April 2020, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

Participants

The university from which the graduate student participants are selected for this research study is located in a rural-urban area with a population of 45,000 to 50,000 in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The area boasts a two-year community college offering associate degrees, four liberal arts colleges, and one state university. The area has elementary schools, secondary schools, one regional vocational/technical center and a regional governor's school. With over 1600 students the student/teacher ratio is approximately 10:1.

The participants attended a small, private liberal arts university of 1,400 undergraduate and graduate students. The university community is supportive of students and provides physical, emotional and social caring in addition to the academic work. People are hospitable to international students, providing rental homes for students who are willing to stay in the community. The university's brick buildings are renovated regularly and its natural beauty is maintained with flowers planted around the campus. The water fountain gives life to students and passersby as they walk around and relax on the college lawn. At the university there are professors and staff who work hard to ensure that the students receive good instruction.

The participants were teachers who were pursuing their Masters in Education degrees. They represented different schools in surrounding counties and school districts. These students represented various academic departments in their schools and were continuing their studies to strengthen expertise in the fields they have chosen to pursue. Teachers spend one week in class per course with a total of 43 to 45 hours of class instruction for which they earn three credit hours. The participants in this study included teacher practitioners from three separate cohorts named anonymously as Henry cohort (H); Wayne cohort (W); and Lamp cohort (L). There were 13 teachers in Cohort H, 16 in Cohort W, and 24 in Cohort L.

Apparatus

The apparatus used in this qualitative study included a Likert survey, note taking, observational checklist, and interview questions. This survey consisted of 13 statements assessing the perceptions of physical and learning environments. The scales used strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree to determine teachers' perceptions. An illustrative example is as follows: "*A positive social climate helps teachers and children feel good about school and learn to the best of their ability.*"

Factors K-12 Teachers Identify as Important for Creating Positive Learning Environments

The American Heritage Dictionary (1976) defines environment as the total of circumstances surrounding an organism or group of organisms, specifically the combination of external or extrinsic physical conditions that affect and influence the growth and development of organisms. The learning environment is a place where learning takes place. It includes the physical structures such as buildings, landscaping, and the general arrangement of classrooms, tables, chairs, computers and writing instruments, whiteboards and any other materials which can facilitate learning and the social-emotional environment. Teachers, students, administrators and support staff are inclusive in the social learning environment where mutual understanding is based on principles of love, peace and unity to forge positive working, and learning environments. The social learning environment may include how teachers and students relate with each other. How teachers teach, assess the learning and value each other's opinion comprise an environment of ethics and care, which influence the emotional climate for and of students.

Physical Environments of Schools

Teachers contended that the physical environment of the school design may influence students' achievement positively or negatively (Tanner, 2018; Zandvliet & Frazer, 2014; & Sungur, 2019). The school physical structure and environment should be well located, accessible and equipped to provide enough space for diverse learners to have access to education (Larsen, Gilliland, Hess, Tucker, Irvin, & He, 2019). Tanner, 2018, stated that good lighting, heating; ventilation, indoor air quality, noise control, and security may be factors to be considered among other variables when the physical environment of school is being decided upon by the stake holders. The absence of these physical facilities as mentioned above within a school may impact students' academic growth and negatively influence teacher morale (Huang, 2011).

Researchers have maintained that the physical environment is important because it influences students' attitudes, behavior formation and reduces school violence. Well planned learning environments help students to develop cognitively, socio-emotionally and become more adept at using psychomotor skills, thus creating space for total growth for all students

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 7, Issue 2, pp: (68-82), Month: March - April 2020, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

(Johnson, 2019). This model of thinking of physical learning environments resonates well with Erickson's theory of psychosocial development, (Hamman & Hendricks, 2015). The absence of any of the above may in one way or the other impinge or retard the students' progress. The learning environment can help students find their own identity and shape their future within any society.

Landscaping

Griffin (2018) defined landscape as the combination of physical features and the imprint of human occupation, the result of an ever-changing interplay between human activity and the physical environment. Landscaping is important within the learning environment because it provides the scenery of a land area providing, a picture of a school layout as an area which is attractively adorned with natural- looking features. Students as well as teachers are attracted to the land features that can accommodate their visual satisfaction. Smith (2012) has also connected landscaping with spatial intelligence which involves the potential to recognize and use the patterns of wide space in more confined areas. Miller (2019) believed good landscaping, provides natural beauty that enhance the learning environment where both students' and teachers' visual needs are well maintained.

A good physical learning environment should create the mental picture to the learner in which they can connect what is learned in class with what they can see outside the building. Wang (2019); and Holding (2019) observed that a good landscape can motivate or create objects and mental images within students' minds. Students connect what they study in class with what they see outside the learning environment. Students learn differently; visual learners can make use of landscape to connect and compose songs of what they see and interpret them into words (Holding, 2019). On the other hand, landscaping does not only to provide beauty but it also promotes healing. Therapeutic landscapes are structured by values, norms, ideologies, and cultural symbols, and are flexible and dynamic places for physical, mental and spiritual growth (Griffin, 2018).

Gymnasiums

Effective learning environments for K-12 must recognize the use of a gymnasium as a place for exercise. It is a place where movement and relaxation through exercise is done to help students stretch their muscles and burn calories. The failure of school administration to develop a well-furnished gymnasium will not only deny pupils freedom to exercise, but deny them a place of testing their talents and skills. Sullivan (2017) quotes Plato's writing that "You can discover more about a person one an hour of play than in a year of conversation". Character can be known of developed children also learn how to resolve conflict through active physical and social play (Durak, 2019).

Physical Learning Environment inside the Classroom

One of the most important parts of the physical learning environment is the classroom building. Good classroom design can determine the learning outcomes for students. Small classrooms do not provide adequate space for students' interaction and opportunities for student participation is reduced (Mechling & O'Brien, 2010). Spacious classrooms provide enough space/room for cooperative learning group work. The physical learning environments in classrooms should be well equipped and well furnished with the necessary learning instruments to accommodate diverse learning needs. The age of the learners and their learning needs should be a priority, if not a mandatory, when decisions are made for designing classrooms. He contented also that when classrooms are properly designed students have the morale, courage and enthusiasm for learning.

Tables and Chairs

The classroom cannot be complete without tables and chairs. Students and teachers need to sit and store their books; this cannot be possible without having appropriate tables and chairs for all ages. Saarni, Nygard, Kaukiainen and Rimpela (2017) have suggested that faulty chair or desk design can adversely impact posture, which affects comfort needed for academic success. Students spend so much of their time in classroom learning; they need to seat and lay their books on the safe table. Douglas and Gifford (2011) have evaluated the arrangement of chairs and tables as a way in which to promote learning communities within the classroom. Lane, Bishop, Gibbs, and Lane (2016) indicated that quality facilities not only leave a good impression with parents and the public, they also increase students pride and performance.

Computers and Whiteboards

A number of studies including Bradley, Sankar, Clayton, Mbarika, and Raju (2017); Parette, Quesenberry and Blum (2010); and Schmidt and Vandewater, (2011) discussed the importance of computers in making learning practical and real to students. According to this research, educators should orient students and physically arrange the computers in such a way as to reduce student anxiety.

The white board is considered important writing tool and influences the learning within educational settings. Lim and Morris (2019) have shown that people learn differently and that visual learners may grasp what they are learning when it is written on the white board. Jankowska and Atlay (2018) found that whiteboards allow teachers to blend instruction to deliver meaningful learning and to enhance students' engagement with their learning.

Social and Instructional Environments inside the Classroom

An African proverb which says "it takes the whole village to raise a child" is applicable here. This proverb is an indication that all human beings are expected to take care of children, but this is only possible when their learning environments are properly maintained. Educators and parents must give their time to take care of the learning environments. Learning begins from birth; failure to instill discipline for social emotional maturity at an early age means the child will miss the nurturing necessary to become a healthy human being.

A critical component of the learning environment is the social instructional climate within a classroom. A classroom serves as the shelter and umbrella for all instructional and learning activities within a school. How teachers and students relate with each other is a pre-requisite for the success of the students, teachers, parents and the school. Wu (2019), defined social environment as a "situation in which organisms relate with each other [and how] the relationship is [carried out between] teachers and students, and community. The social aspects are the components which make up the organism and are embedded in the social environment" (p. 160). The social learning environment plays a significant role in helping educational stake holders succeed. The classrooms become the social hub and center for academic learning and the improper relationship within the learning environment cannot allow student to succeed. Teachers and students are charged to cultivate good relationships in order to facilitate learning within the classroom. Wu (2019) noted three goals of excellent learning environments. First, improving the learning outcome; secondly, providing the learner with care support; and thirdly, inspiring and boosting the learning spirit to cultivate responsibility in the learner.

According to Shapiro (2014) the instructional learning environment in the classroom should be organized to create multiple opportunities for children to explore, discover, and grow. It is a place for learning where all the learners can integrate their experience and skills, and connects to what they learn. For primary aged children the classroom should feature blocks, dramatic play centers, toys and games, art, library and discovery centers. Students learn better when the classrooms are furnished with tables, computers, desks, wall pictures, flowers, chalk wall, and learning aids. The classroom arrangement should accommodate diversity and the learning needs of all students.

While meaningful learning activities are important teacher attitudes and self-perceptions may be more important according to Curwin, Mendler and Mendler (2018). A good classroom teacher should discipline with dignity and set the learning climate for inviting and caring relationships. Teachers should avoid sarcasm and ridicule. Respectful communication and caring relationships must be demonstrated if students are to feel safe in the classroom. Tonelson (2011) has emphasized that teacher self-concept is needed to create a healthy psychological environment for learning. Elementary classroom environments should be designed so that children have access to and learn how to use equipment. Equipment such as computers, microscopes, and document cameras should fulfill a learning purpose and should be used appropriately.

At the middle school and high school levels classrooms students should have access to classrooms that are spacious enough to allow students free interaction, movement, and freedom to express themselves. Cricks, McCombs, Haddon, Broadfoot, and Tew (2017) have recognized the need for young adults to be supported—this means the teenagers must get "emotional or personal support in terms of caring." When students feel supported emotionally by their teacher, they are likely to engage more fully in their academic work. This may mean that the young adults are asking for help when help is needed. Patrick et al, have suggested that young adults need support from their classmates too in terms of feeling and being cared for both as an individual and as a person regarding their academic learning. Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan (2017) indicated that for students to excel in academics, teachers and students ought to be free to affiliate, to be cohesive, to be

fair, to have mutual respect, and experience support from each other. These virtues mentioned above serve as a precondition to success which requires “an optimal combination of environmental conditions and humanistic factors” which favors learning.

Role of School Administrator

The most important person in the running of the school is the school administrator. S/he is expected to be effective, sound in mind and live above reproach. Collier (2015) stated that effective learning environments must have administrators who can discharge their duties and “practice what they preach.” An administrator who is not speaking the truth cannot succeed where truth is needed. The effective administrator is the one who encourages, motivates and helps teachers to accomplish their teaching task. Good administrators allow room for positive exchange of experience among teachers and support staffs and accept the challenges which come along. They create a learning atmosphere for all workers within the school—this means the workers input is valuable to any effective running of an institution as an organization. When the administrator is sick even the teachers and students become sick. Encouragement and motivation is a characteristic of effective leadership. Good leadership is associated with good academic performance (Zainal, 2018).

Administrators should have large hearts to listen to grievances (Lewis, Passmore & Cantore, 2018, p. 89) which come along with teaching. They are expected to give moral support to whomever is in need, whether it is from the teachers or support staff. They should set the stage for how they are going to hold the staff accountable for what they are doing in school. We are human beings; we do not know everything which happens within the learning environment but consultation and team work should be the guiding attitude to success. Purkey and Novak (2014) explained the significance of an invitational approach. They suggested that “everything the [administrators] do, as well as the manner in which they do it, incite the [teachers] to respond in some way or another and each response tends to set the [teachers’] attitude in some way or another” (p. 15). In other words administrators should check their conduct and manner in which their action can cause harm to others. They should have a faculty or trusted member in the teaching staff who will give honest feedback when one of them is causing harm to others.

Role of Caring Teachers in Classroom Management

Caring teachers are concerned with classroom management. McLennan (2019) support this view by asserting that “historically” for the success of classroom instruction, classroom management should be a priority. They view teaching as a complex profession which requires teachers to be effective in executing and maintaining order while delivering effective instruction. Caring teachers will first look for something that can help students succeed in classroom before beginning to actually teach. On the other hand, poor classroom management often leads to students’ misbehavior which will interfere with not only teaching and learning but also to tremendous stress. They also indicated that teachers who do exit the profession after do so because of the stress brought by undisciplined students. Teachers should be role model for students and learn from teachers for the purpose of building the society. By being a role model the teacher creates another way of setting an ideal climate for learning.

Caring teachers are able to help students set achievable goals. Hong and Shull (2019) discussed that “self-determined people possesses an optimal combination of attitude and ability in setting achievable goals, solving problems, making decisions, advocating for themselves, evaluating decisions, and adjusting accordingly to achieve their goals.” Caring teachers should help students set their educational goals for learning that can with stand the test of time. Also, Hong & Shull reminded teachers that “if students do not acquire the essential self-determination skills and attitudes before they leave school, they are less likely to be truly successful in life” (p. 261). In other words effective social learning environment is determined by how caring teachers help set the tempo of a social learning climate within the classroom. This involves how teachers and students relate to each other. Research has found that a “productive and stable classroom atmosphere is at the heart of teaching effectiveness, and that the quality of the climate is dependent on the nature of teacher-student communication” (Levy, Brok, Wubbels, & Brekelmans, 2013, p. 5). Teachers cannot be effective if they are not introduced to how they can best manage classrooms.

Turanli (2019) believed teaching is a moral act which covers the personal, social, and moral development of students. The practice of teaching is twofold and includes both academic and relational responsibilities. He proposed that academic and relational responsibilities should be integrated with other skills to make a holistic approach to learning. This includes

teachers who are responsible to care, inspire, and who can contribute to their students’ intellectual, moral, and physical growth. “Teaching is defined as an integrated practice that combines many virtues such as honesty, courage, care, fairness, and practical wisdom in both thoughts and actions” (p. 130). Teachers have a major challenge to help students acquire sustainable and generalized skills.

The appropriate learning environment should have teachers who are from diverse backgrounds and qualified as per the regulations which govern the schools where the learning takes place. Diversity in an educational setting allows students and teachers to learn from each other and recognize that we are who we are as a people of this world. Diversity brings the world of interrelated people together for the common educational well-being of every being. Another benefit of diversity among teacher is that they provide models for students. Successful learning environments must also recognize the presence of marginalized groups. Children in educational settings require a holistic understanding of the world, not only of their ethnic group point of view but of other groups. Spradlin and Parsons (2018) asserted that teachers must be advocates for their students, to practice team building skills with their colleagues, and work as change agents so that legislation and policy can be made to ensure equal opportunities for the marginalized.

Teachers are the important asset within educational settings because they are experts in the area of teaching. They are also expected to teach and assess their students, basing their instructions on the age group. A professional teacher behaves professionally. Purkey and Novak (2014) have stated that teachers who are professional should be inviting, caring, valuing and responsible for the day to day business of classroom affairs. They are expected to know their students by their names, their parents, and the place of their residency. Educational needs of students require teachers to have a curriculum which is designed according to students’ needs and which meets the state or country’s educational requirements.

Role of Support Staff

A very important part of the learning environment is the people who help with the daily office work. Their roles in the office depend on how the office or the department is structured. Administrators and teachers operate in an environment where they need to have people who will help speed their administrative duties. This may in particular include answering the phone, taking the letters to the post office and booking appointments. They are charged with receiving students’ complaints or problems they may encounter.

It is also crucial for the administrators to hire someone who relates well with people and who accomplishes the task on time. Purkey and Novak (2014) noted that support staffs are important and expected to be inviting and punctual, obedient, conforming to the needs in the office.” They are also expected to behave positively - this means that behaving well requires good moral conduct with good reputation and having good office dress depending on the weather of the day. They try to be updated with the current affairs of the world and to give their daily updates to administrators and teachers.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

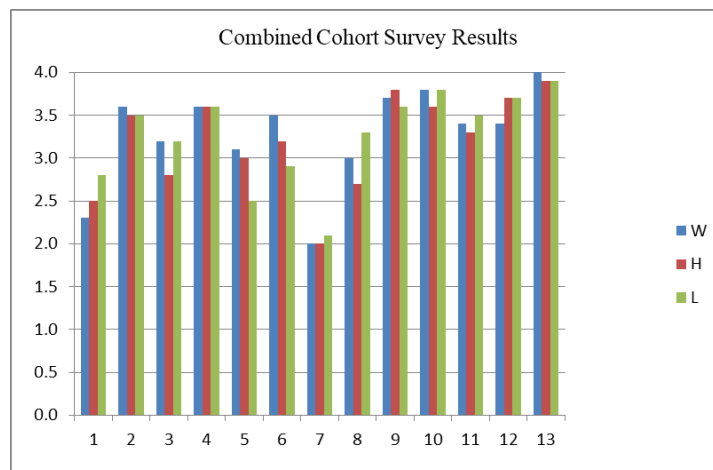


Figure 1: Combined cohorts

The results of the survey among the K-12 teachers regarding factors creating positive learning environments were obtained by the teacher researcher with four apparatus based on teachers' perceptions of creating positive learning environments. A Likert Scale consisting of thirteen questions was used to cover teacher perceptions of physical and learning environments. The teacher-researcher obtained participants' permission to conduct his research. Three cohort groups of teachers enrolled in a Master of Arts program for teachers located at a liberal arts university in the Mid-Atlantic area participated in the survey. The Likert Scale was scaled *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree* and *strongly disagree* to determine teachers' perceptions. The mean scores for each cohort were determined to show the level and degree or value of importance for the results. The cohorts were Wayne (W); Henry (H); and Lamp (L).

Question #13, *Teachers and support staff should be inviting and welcoming to students*, has the highest score. Cohort W rated this statement the highest with an average score of 4.0; followed by cohort H and cohort L with average scores of 3.9 each. The total mean score of all three cohorts was 3.9. Figure 1 below shows this comparison.

Question #10: *The daily routines and schedule create a sense of order so that students know what to expect* was 3.8 in cohorts W and L and cohort H was 3.6. The total mean score for the three cohorts was 3.7. Of the thirteen questions in the survey question 10 Figure 1 above shows this comparison.

Question #12: *Learning environments should have interest areas that offer multiple opportunities for students to explore, discover, and grow* received 3.7 in the H and L cohorts, with cohort W rating this statement with a score of 3.4. The average for question 12 was 3.6 which showed the third highest mean of 3.7. Figure 1 above has the mean score.

Question #9: *The positive social climate helps teachers and children feel good about school and learn to the best of their ability* were 3.8 in cohort H. Cohort W and cohort L rated 3.7 and 3.6 respectively. The total mean for all cohorts was 3.7.

Question #4: *Classrooms should be designed to enhance social interaction* is fourth in this category with an average score of 3.6 in the entire cohort. Teachers in these cohorts acknowledged the fact that the classroom is the most important social interaction place for both teachers and students for their learning.

Question #2: *Environments affect a teacher's job satisfaction* has 3.6 in Cohort W while cohorts H and L have the same score of 3.5. These scores of 3.6 and 3.5 are not far from each other. Environment can affect job satisfaction among the educators which may be either helpful or harmful to them in classroom delivery.

Question #11: *With the assurance that learning space is predictable and familiar; students can settle into learning and function as a group*. This question scored a total score of 3.5 in cohort L while cohort W has scored of 3.4 and cohort H has scored 3.3. The total average score of all the cohorts were calculated to be 3.4 which is the seventh in the category of thirteen questions.

Question #6: *Positive learning environments are determined by the teacher* scored 3.5 in the W cohort, 3.2 in the cohort H and cohort L showed 2.9. The total score for this question has an average of 3.2. I observe physical spaces for learning to determine if it meets my psychological needs has scored a total mean score of 3.1. Cohorts W and L have the same score of 3.2 while cohort H has 2.8.

Question #8: *Murals, paintings, displayed in a school reveal what the school values*. The participants gave it scores of 3.3, 3.0, and 2.7 in L, W, H cohorts. The total number of participants who supported this view was calculated to have an average score of 3.0.

Question #5: *Learning environment should be free from distractions* has 3.0 in cohort H; cohort W has 3.1 and cohort L has 2.5. The average score of all cohorts as per this result is 2.9.

Question #1: *Physical learning space is the most important variable in creating a positive learning environment*. Cohort H has a score of 2.5 while cohort W has a score of 2.3 and Cohort L scored 2.8. The mean score of all cohorts is calculated to be 2.5.

Question #7: The three cohorts have a mean score of 2.0 in one of the question asked to inquire whether *landscaping of a school indicates the quality of the education students will receive at that school*. Cohort L has a score of 2.1 as cohorts W

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 7, Issue 2, pp: (68-82), Month: March - April 2020, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

and H have the same score of 2.0. Out of the survey the three cohorts have nearly equal perception about the importance of landscaping in a learning environment.

The results showed that in each of the thirteen questions none of the cohorts recorded below 2.0 as the overall perception. Positive learning environment in the scale was reflected by how the cohorts responded very well for the questions asked.

Results from Note-Taking Apparatus

The purpose of the Note-Taking was to identify major themes taught to the respective cohort groups. This was accomplished by recording notes from class discussions held within a graduate class on Peace building and Conflict Resolution. The teacher-researcher attended all class sessions for each of three cohorts.

For cohort H the following two themes were identified:

Theme 1: Empathy, encouragement, forgiveness, and caring are essential to healthy, development of persons, regardless of age (CR).

Theme 2: Relationship building occurs when communication skills are used effectively and when conditions such as personal awareness and “mood” are regulated.

For cohort W the following two themes were identified:

Theme 1: Positive learning environments are shaped by teachers’ attention to physical surroundings including availability of natural light, safety and comfort, adequate physical space and organization and routine (Physical Environment).

Theme 2: Positive learning environments are shaped by teachers’ attention to respectful relationships, use of creativity, and when there is collective ownership in building classroom community (Caring/Relationship).

For cohort L the following themes were identified.

Theme 1: Learning is most effective when the curriculum is embedded with meaningful study that meets students’ needs (Curriculum).

Theme 2: Learning is most effective when teachers value students and empower them through caring relationships (Caring Relationships).

Theme 3: Positive learning environments are established when teachers create opportunities for students to help establish rules for building classroom community (Caring/Relationship).

Caring relationships are essential. Cohort W identified the role of curriculum in creating positive learning environments and cohort L identified caring relationship and curriculum for healthy learning. Cohort H identified the role of caring through empathy, encouragement, forgiveness and communication for academic success.

The teacher researcher participated in a class with students for the three separate weeks. Although three cohorts were involved in the study only two different locations were used. The majority of students stated they liked a positive learning environment where they experienced care and nurture and where they have job security. As the teacher-researcher took notes, the most important part of what he were three themes: caring, nurturing and security. Participants preferred an instructional environment where there is sense of order, routine schedule, nurturing and security. On the other hand, they were sometimes unhappy with how their administrators problems solved in their schools. Some principals were data driven and took little time to care for teachers inferring they cared more about data. Some principals tended to ignore problems and let individual teachers by themselves.

Some teachers complained that some schools have two hundred students for which only a principal and teachers are present. Schools with a population of 200 students or less did not qualify for having an assistant principal.

Result from Observational Checklist: Analysis of “Ethos Walk Tour”

Ethos walk tour included assessments of the following areas such as classrooms, auditorium, lounges and restrooms, gymnasium and locker rooms, dining room and hallways; offices and media center. The participants were asked to write three things they observed in their “ethos walk” about the aspects of the school that GAVE LIFE and write three aspects

of the school that had POTENTIAL TO GIVE LIFE. Participants gave their positive recommendations on the strengths and weaknesses of the school (see appendix C for more information).

The aspects of the school that gave life are things in a particular scene positively identified by students as attractive, properly organized, and neat or in a good shape that brings life to students. Potential to give life in the context of my research refers to things which are there or spotted which can be improved or relocated to be used later when they are repaired. One of the cohorts in the liberal arts university who visited a nearby school (Ukweli High School) noted that the admissions office is hidden in the building. Participants recommended that such an office should be relocated to a position nearby the entrance where it can be easily accessible to parents, visitors and students. Another example is an old carpet was sitting outside of the main entrance door of the auditorium; teacher practitioners recommended that such carpet be replaced with a new carpet.

The “ethos walk” data revealed that the way participants perceived the learning environments in a given context was different from those who grow up in the same area where they attended school. The “ethos walk” shows that teacher practitioners’ interest, grade and age level, context, location and background and individual differences and personalities may play a significant role in decision making. The most important factor is the participants visited the gymnasium and found the ground rules posted in 8 “x 11 1/2 sheet invisible for cohort H but visible for cohort W. Cohort L had a different high school in a different state and context than cohorts in W and H. Figure below illustrates this point.

The result of the ethos walk was helpful as almost the whole class preferred an environment where positive feedback is valued. The result of what their results indicated gave an impression that all people value things in a different way. To illustrate this point is to show how the participants were responsible in giving their reports after coming back from the walk. Their recommendations were good and helpful to the high school where the ethos walk took place.

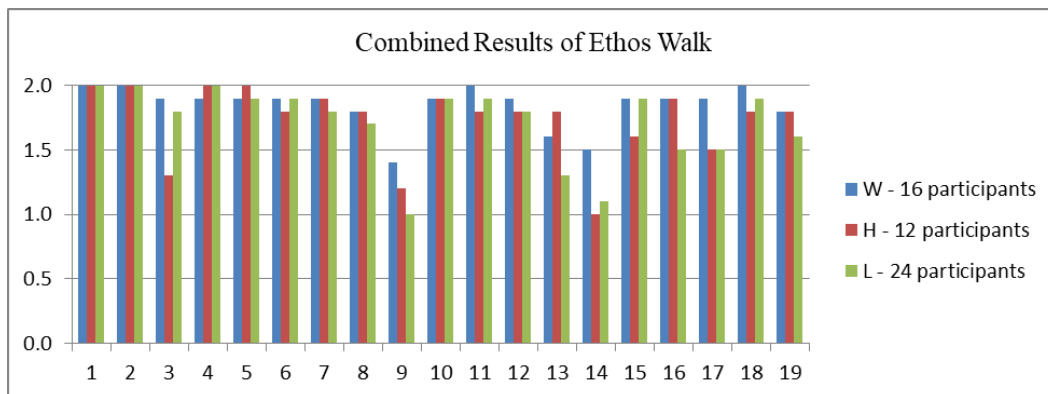


Figure 2: Combined Results of Ethos Walk

In the ethos walk all students in all three cohorts named aspects of the school that give life and the aspects that have potential to give life; this is indicated by the figure 2 as shown above. From students point of view the participants were happy to give both aspects which give life and aspects which do not.

Item 3: *Students name aspects that do not give life in a positive manner*; the figure above indicates how the three cohorts answered #3. Cohort H has 1.3 while cohort W and cohort L have almost 1.9 and 1.7 respectively. This shows how the cohorts view learning environments differently. A few members of cohort H were familiar with the nearby high school so the emotional feel of the school may have influenced the cohorts rating. Cohort W is only attending the class but not used to the place like those in cohort H who are used to the place and attending regularly for an event.

Item # 9 and 14 are ranked the lowest but above level of the average among others. In item #9 students in Cohort H did not say much about what they feel about describing *how signs/contents on walls and rooms are arranged when they went for an “ethos” walk*. Cohort W in #9 got 1.4 while cohort H has exactly 1.0. item 14 students were asked to identify something new in the school visited but the cohort H seemed to be falling in an average range compared with cohort W who visited the same high school and receive 1.5. Cohort L visited a nearby high school and also came out with things new in the context where the ethos tour was organized. It is only cohort W which was new to the place visited and scored higher than other cohorts in both items #9 and #14.

Drawing from the figure 2 above, one may say that the three cohorts have different perceptions about positive learning environments. Items #1 to #19 are not the same except # 1 and #2 which gave an impression of an equal value than the rest of the questions tested in all the cohorts. The overall summary one may draw from the figure above is that the way teachers perceive a learning environment may depend on many factors including the *family background, beliefs about teaching, personality, context, location and individual interests.*

Results from interview questionnaires

The participants in all areas took ten minutes answering 27 questions which ranged from background check, school life and their beliefs about teaching. The participants gave their perceptions about how the positive learning environment should be. This was reflected on how they interact to each other and answer questions in class. The participants indicated a preference for instructional environments where they are cared, nurtured and have security. The scale reflects the teachers’ values in positive learning environments.

Themes from Cohort W

Theme 1: Relationship, caring, inviting, and inclusivity became dominant with Cohort W.

Theme 2: Freedom, curriculum, physical arrangement, equipment and funding are among the themes pointed out in cohort W

Theme 3: Schedule is also categorized with cohort W to be among the themes in positive learning environments which guides the curriculum.

Relationship and freedom got the highest number of participants more than the rest in the category listed above.

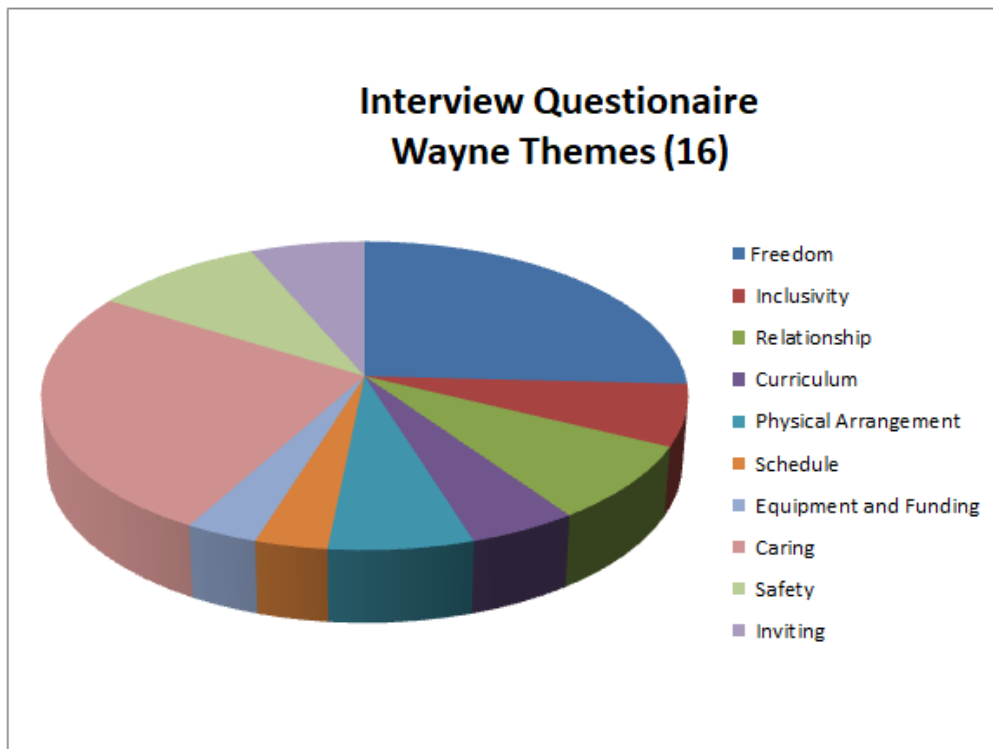


Figure 3: Interview Questionnaire: Wayne themes.

Themes from Cohort H

Caring, relationship, physical arrangement of learning environment, schedule, equipment and funding, curriculum, inviting and inclusivity were identified. A positive learning environment also requires a freedom where students are free to express or voice their opinions. Figure 2 below shows how cohort H rated the themes.

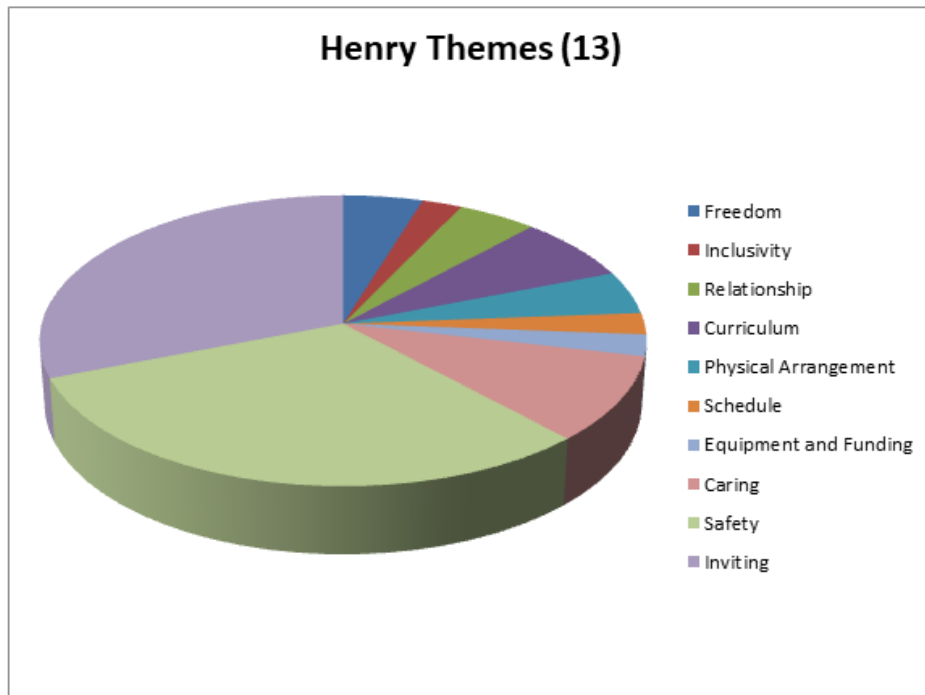


Figure 4: Showing how cohort H rated the themes

Themes from Cohort L

They identified beliefs, principles, and funding, curriculum, diversity/inspirational/communal, encouragement, empowering, and peaceful environment and safety/caring/inviting/comfortability/clean environment. The cohort also identified relationships, programs, affordability and programs as the major themes pointed out in this interview using questionnaire form.

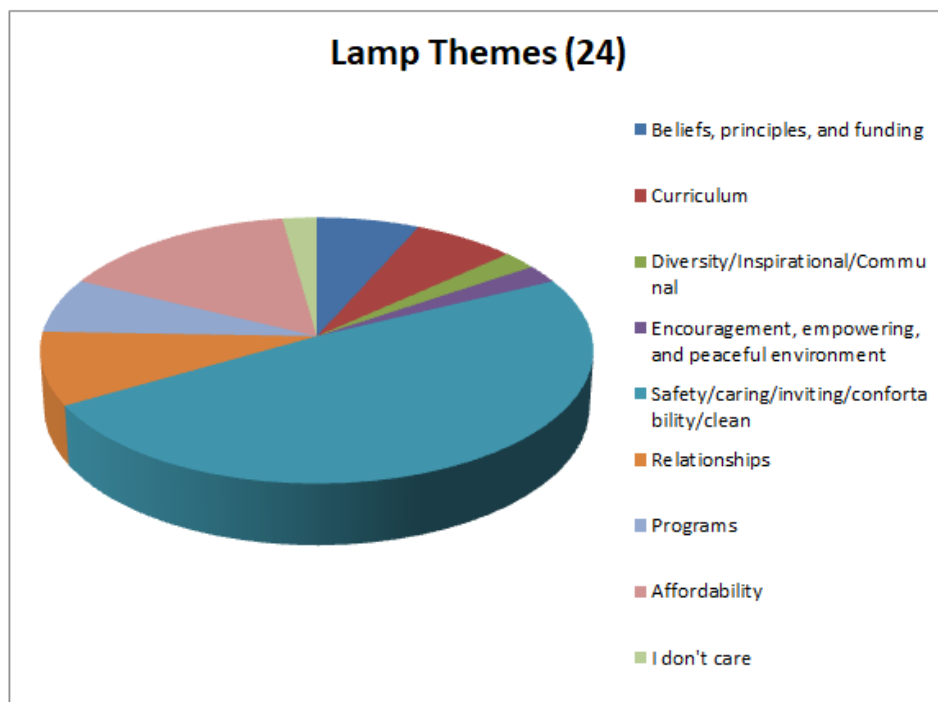


Figure 5: Shows the Cohort L themes

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 7, Issue 2, pp: (68-82), Month: March - April 2020, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

Summary: Every cohort has a genuine concern ranging from curriculum, caring, inviting and schedule among others. It is important to bear in mind that appropriate learning environment should have what has been identified in all the cohorts.

Triangulation

The teacher-researcher triangulated data from four sources primarily throughout the study Teachers perceptions focused on four predominate themes. These were caring relationships, invitational and safe environments, quality academic programs, and diversity of ethnicity.

4. DISCUSSION

The teacher-researcher identified four predominate themes of teacher perceptions on positive learning climates summarized and analyzed as follows. One theme teachers perceived to be critical for developing a healthy and positive learning climate was the establishment of caring relationships among students, teachers and administrators. Students look to teachers and administrators to create such an environment. This finding supports Collier's (2005) and McLennan's (2009) observation that administrators and teachers should foster a nurturing classroom environment, collaborate frequently with families and members of the community, and reflect on their personal teaching style. An environment where administrators, teachers and students work and learn together may be considered a healthy learning climate. Human beings need an environment where they can learn and grow in peace.

Success in academics requires an environment where administrators, teachers and students care for each other. This involves motivation, encouragement, cooperation and team-building spirit where all staff members are involved in promoting learning among their students. Academic success requires an environment where principals and teachers value students input and accept them the way they are. A healthy learning environment needs principals and teachers who care for the students' success. A society is built with people who care and are committed to change and success.

A second theme invitational and safe environment perceived by teachers is that are needed for a positive learning climate. K-12 teacher practitioners perceived that learning environments should be inviting. These environments include nicely designed school buildings, plants and trees and attractive landscaping. Some administrators, teachers and students should make their physical surroundings attractive and safe. Some teachers can help students appreciate how an inviting and safe learning environment will help them learn. This view also resonates with what Purkey and Novak (2014); and Rocha (2015) as they assert that a learning environment should be a place of preparing young future leaders who may help bring change and transformation through what they are learning in a school.

Safe environments are eco-friendly places. K-12 teacher practitioners should develop their own mission statements in which they strive to be fair and attentive to their work and to their students. A positive learning environment should be a part of this mission and attention to community building. This assumption is supported by Hong, & Shull; Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan (2017) who indicated in their research that teachers and students should practice fairness, show mutual respect, and experience support from each other.

Future studies might focus on educational context, background of students including their interests, diversity, and community of origin. When new schools are built or remodeled, school personnel should take into account those factors that contribute to a positive learning environment. U.S. is a melting pot for many people who voluntarily choose to live in it. Some migrate to America to work or because their governments are not friendly to them. They choose to migrate into countries where they can find safety and comfort. As immigrants come to live in the U.S. they come with their culture, tradition, and interests-this includes what they like and what they don't like. School districts must consider building a school where students feel comfortable. For example, a new school painted with a heavy red motif may feel uncomfortable because culturally the color red is associated with bloodshed. An example is Africa where war is ongoing and for some immigrants the color red signifies a place where people fight. Russian and Chinese cultures value the color red because it is associated with purity.

A third arena of perceptions included the general category of quality academic programs. K-12 teachers identified the quality of academic programs within a school as not only significant to the community but also important to the success of the student for living a fulfilled life. Broader society and local communities expect much from teachers and administrators because they have a right to do so. Schools should be well equipped with teachers who are highly

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

Vol. 7, Issue 2, pp: (68-82), Month: March - April 2020, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

qualified, competent and are able to deliver quality instruction. Collier (2015) and Zainal (2018) maintained that leadership is connected to good academic programs. Administrators should hire the right teachers to achieve the school's mission. Teachers and administrators who are committed to their duties are transparent and accountable to students. Students imitate what they learn and it stays with them until they become adults. Therefore, they have to be taught by teachers who value learning and are advocates for them.

Quality programs include a rigorous curriculum. School districts set challenging educational standards with an intention of helping students gain skills for work place and for professional development. The cohort groups W and L perceived that good curriculum development must include experts and community stakeholders to identify what their students should learn and achieve within a specific period. Saarni, Nygard, Kaukiainen and Rimpela (2017) supported this idea that curriculum should be designed so as to help students learn relevant skills which will lead them to contribute positively toward the society.

Quality programs may include how students respond to instruction and how their learning environments are equipped with chairs, tables and suitable space. Each age group should have chairs which are appropriate for their body size and placed in an arrangement to maximize learning. Whiteboards or any learning tools need to be appropriately arranged within classrooms a view held by (Saarni, Nygard, Kaukiainen & Rimpela, 2017).

Well trained teachers, well-furnished classrooms with tables, chairs and computers are significant assets within a learning environment. A positive learning climate and rigorous academic programs within a school will attract students as well as excellent teachers. To be effective, teachers need to work in environment conducive to meeting the needs of their students. When new schools are built or remodeled, architect and school personnel should first define the mission and educational goals held by the school so the physical surrounding of the school enable students in their learning.

A fourth area that K-12 teachers perceived to be important is diversity among students and teachers. Diversity among teachers and students is crucial to healthy perspectives in their views. They believe that different perspectives create powerful learning opportunities and also provide models for students. Well established K-12 schools should attract a diverse teacher and student population for this purpose. Spradlin and Parsons (2018) indicated that society benefits when minority voices are heard. Caring environments are supported when diverse learning environments are in place. In this study K-12 teachers perceived that diversity among teachers and students creates a sense of togetherness in the society, not a particular group of selected people who represent the elite.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In retrospect, the teacher researcher would recommend to persons conducting a similar action research project in the future to broaden the range of questions on the interview so that additional perspectives might be identified. A second recommendation would be to structure in-depth face-to-face interviews for purposes of asking follow-up questions. The response form did not allow for follow-up questions.

If I would have done the research again, I would have changed the questions that I used in the apparatus. Cohorts Wayne and Henry used the same place of instruction while Cohort Lamp was in another state which did not require the same set of questions as used in the apparatus.

Contributions to the Field of Research

The reasons why the teacher researcher chose this action research project are wide ranging. First, external and internal learning environments have significant impacts on students' academic success and the quality of learning. Teacher practitioners who read this study may confirm the importance of positive learning environments for ensuring students' academic success and growth. The teacher-researcher found that positive learning environments contribute significantly to the academic development of students.

The second contribution of this research suggests that teacher practitioners to consider a constructivist approach to pedagogy. Constructivist environments call for collaboration between teacher and student in building learning communities that are inviting and empowering. This study affirms the importance of creating safe learning environments so friendships and interpersonal relationships can flourish. Administrators, teachers, and students need one another in the learning process. The appropriate learning climate encourages and motivates the stakeholders so that educational success may be achieved.

International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning

 Vol. 7, Issue 2, pp: (68-82), Month: March - April 2020, Available at: www.noveltyjournals.com

The third contribution of this research is that little attention is paid to classroom environments. The study also affirms the importance of the integration of academic, socio-emotional, and psychomotor domains to promote learning. A positive learning climate requires the use of metacognitive, attitude building and promoting psychomotor domains for the academic, socio-emotional and psychomotor upbringing. A complete and positive learning climate recognizes cognitive, attitude and psychomotor.

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