

Classroom Environment and Academic Commitment

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Abstract

This research study examines the relationship between classroom environment and academic commitment in the classroom. The study, using data collected over a three-week period of elementary-aged students in interviews and observations, hypothesize that a positive classroom environment wherein students receive positive feedback and experience caring relationships between student and teacher have greater experiences of academic success. In this study, research data show a relationship between positive classroom environment and academic success.

Classroom Environment and Academic Commitment

Introduction

Classroom environment is an issue universal to school experience. Every student and teacher are subject to the overall “feel” of being in a classroom community. The importance of this element and how it relates to academic performance, as well as ways that it is achieved, are the focus of this research study.

The study is conducted at the local elementary school that houses grades second through fifth in Sitka, Alaska. For the purpose of this study, because classroom environment is something that every student experiences, the target research population was any student who attends the school. A sampling of two or three students from each grade level as well as observations in a class at each grade level allowed for a developmental view of the importance of classroom environment to research participants. Also, a review of school environment and related documents supplemented the findings regarding academic commitment and positive classroom environments.

Literature review

Creating a positive classroom environment is essential to student success. Research indicates that positive behavior management strategies, caring relationships, a whole-child approach, and strategies that support autonomy increase academic success and student engagement and decrease negative student behaviors. However, this positive environment doesn't come without a concerted effort and emotional cost on the teacher's part.

In Moore Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, and Wehby (2010) and Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, and Merrell (2008) the researchers found that praise in the classroom required

monitoring in order to increase or remain at a high level. Both studies were concerned with increasing praise as a classroom management tool in classrooms. Reinke et al. (2008) utilized a visual review system, called Classroom Check-Up or CCU, as well as a consultant-feedback system to increase praise. The researchers concluded that “the CCU plus visual performance feedback was most useful in improving teacher implementation of classroom management strategies, especially total use of praise, use of behavior-specific praise, and decreased use of reprimands. These changes in teacher behavior contributed to positive changes in student behavior through decreased classroom disruptions” (Reinke et al., 2008, p. 329). Moore Partin et al. (2010) used a more self-regulating system wherein the teachers kept track of their praise-giving behavior using a self-recording device and charting system over a set time period. They concluded that “the use of teacher praise to reinforce students’ appropriate behavior and the provision of increased rates of opportunities for students to correctly respond to academic demands are two strategies that have been found to both increase students’ appropriate behavior and decrease their inappropriate behavior” (Moore Partin et al., 2010, p. 177). The nature of praise was also at issue in both studies, as past research indicates that behavior-specific praise is more effective than general praise.

It’s not surprising that behavior-specific praise and opportunities for successful student response were found to be more effective in increasing appropriate behavior in light of the research that supports the importance of emotional relations between teachers and students. Yan, Evans, and Harvey (2011) were interested to learn how teachers, who were recognized by peers, superiors and parents as being emotionally engaged in the classroom, handled interpersonal interactions. Through many hours of observations of multiple classrooms, four key themes were

recognized in creating emotionally supportive environments: classroom relationships; interpersonal emotional management; emotional awareness; and the teaching of relationship skills. The researchers noted the importance of authentic conversations between emotionally-aware teachers and students that helped establish relationships. They write of their observations: “teachers managed relationships by showing that they knew their students and were working to know them even better” (Yan et al., 2011, p. 95). The relationships often extended beyond the classroom to after school activities and a general interest in their students’ lives, signifying a commitment above and beyond the standard school day. In the classroom, the researchers observed an ability by the teachers to get a sense of the emotional atmosphere and respond to that feeling appropriately. The researchers emphasized the holistic approach taken by teachers viewed as most caring in the classroom.

In fostering a caring relationship, it is clear that the feelings must be reciprocal to be authentic. Educators find this to be easier with some students than others. Yet, in order to make a successful learning environment for all students, relationships must be forged. In a case study addressing this issue, Newberry (2010) followed the development of a relationship between a teacher and a behaviorally-challenging student and addressed the importance of teacher commitment to bring about a successful result. The researchers identified four phases of relationship formation - appraisal, agreement, testing, and planning - and the progression and regression experienced in this study. The article discussed the emotionally demanding nature of this process. “Each individual student in any given population requires different kinds of relational interactions. Attending to both the range of academic and emotional needs of students is a great challenge for teachers” (Newberry, 2010, p. 1702). In approaching relationships with

students, the researchers wrote, teachers took either a natural caring approach (with easier students) or an ethical caring approach out of a sense of duty (toward more challenging students). The ultimate goal being a relationship based on the more natural state of caring. Despite the emotional cost required by educators in this process, to neglect the relationship altogether is to do so at the detriment of the individual student's learning and the entire classroom community.

The manner in which teachers forge caring relationships, build positive classroom environments through supportive interactions, and show interest in students as whole people contribute to how students engage in class and during lessons. Reeve and Jang (2006), in a study of teacher behaviors pre-determined to either support autonomy or control behavior, confirmed their hypothesis that students want to feel respected and in control of their learning environments. The researchers write of autonomy-supportive methods:

Teachers can provide students with high-quality interpersonal relationships - relationships rich in attunement and supportiveness - and out of that relationship context, students can experience and begin to exercise their own sense of autonomy. ...[Alternatively,] controlling instructional behaviors seem to forgo relationship-building qualities and instead represent the effort to take charge of the teaching situation so as to shape students toward the correct answers and desired ways of behaving (Reeve and Jang, 2006, p. 217).

Clearly the goal is toward more student autonomy when using praise and fostering relationships in the classroom.

Creating a positive learning environment, taking the time and effort to build caring relationships, and supporting student interests and control all lead to more successful classroom

environments. The cost to the teacher is making greater efforts to use praise, making an emotional commitment to build genuine relationships with every student, relinquishing total control over the learning environment, and showing an interest in the whole student.

Method

In this study on classroom environment, I take a qualitative inquiry approach examining a real world situation, without manipulating it. I take a naturalistic approach in this research, creating a basic qualitative study that is inquiry- and observation-based (Merriam, 2009). I choose this approach because it will provide useful information about classroom atmosphere and its impact on academic commitment in an authentic setting. In conducting this research, I hope to improve the efficacy of my classroom practice.

Participants

Participants are elementary students and their classroom teachers at the local elementary school that includes second through fifth grades. Participants are selected because I am interested in learning how classroom atmosphere, specifically a positive atmosphere, impacts academic attitudes. By interviewing and observing these participants I will gather information on what impact positive classroom environments have on academic commitment.

Interviews

Before conducting interviews or observations I will meet with the school principal about my research, explaining the purpose and methods I intend to use including my list of questions (see Appendix B) and the classrooms I would like to involve. Once that is completed, I will ask a classroom teacher at each grade level, second through fifth, if they are willing to participate in my research.

I will share with the teachers in a short pre-conference the purpose of the student interviews, the questions I would like to ask, the amount of time each interview will take (five minutes or less), and set up a time to come into class. At the pre-conference meeting I would also like to find a place around the class or out in the hall where I can ask my questions without other class members contributing to the interviewee's answers.

On the day of the interviews I will pull three to five students for questioning. I will write down their answers to the questions, as well as any additional information. In selecting the students for interviewing I will pull an equal representation of boys and girls from various cultural backgrounds.

The teacher interviews will be conducted at a time convenient to their schedules. Interviews should take about ten minutes or less and student answers will be written down, along with any additional information that arises.

Observations

For my research, because I am interested in the emotional atmosphere in the classroom and the relationship it has on academic success, I would like to observe four different classes, grades second through fifth. Before conducting the observations I will have a pre-observation meeting to discuss where I should position myself in the class to be least obtrusive, what the classroom teacher or myself should explain about my presence in the classroom, and a time when the observation should occur.

In scheduling the observations, any activities that reflect class dynamics between the classroom teacher and students will suffice. I would like to spend a whole day in each classroom in order to get a more accurate representation of the class atmosphere.

During the observations I will watch interactions between the teacher and students; the opportunities and frequency that students have to answer questions or share information; and other factors that contribute to the emotional environment of the class like the disclosure of personal information by the teacher or students. I will make notes about the classroom emotional environment during the course of the day: any significant changes, incidents, or exchanges.

A post-observation meeting with the teacher will discuss how the time period was similar or different from other days. This information will be included for the analysis of the observation.

Field note: Before making observations I will review the methods used by the teacher to encourage discussion participation such as wait time, verbal cues, or non-verbal cues.

Documents

In researching the relationship between classroom environment and academic success there are some current data available through the local school district related to this topic. A new survey was just released through the school district regarding student perception of school environment in the local school district (American Institutes for Research, 2012). I will review the contents of this survey as part of my document analysis.

Other documents that might help with my research would be looking at ways in which the school attempts to put forth a positive environment. This would include bulletin board contents in commons areas or posters hanging around the school and the multi-purpose room. The general appearance of the school and playground also reflects the school environment. I will take note of such factors. Also, noting the student work on the walls in the observed classroom would be helpful in setting the atmosphere. Finally, personal information the classroom teacher

reveals about themselves around the room will give me a clearer picture of important aspects of the environment.

Internal validity in this study is accomplished through triangulation, the analysis of multiple sources of qualitative data (Merriam, 2009). A narrative analysis of interviews, observations, and documents will be conducted. During this analysis, “the text is analyzed for the meaning it has for its author” (Merriam, 2009, p. 32). From this analysis I hope to gain a better understanding of the relationship between classroom environments and academic commitment.

Findings

In reviewing data from this project, some interesting trends and tendencies were observed. These were related to feelings about the importance of classroom environment; how classroom environment was perceived and developed; and how the relationship between students and teachers was described. Also, an analysis of relevant documents provided insight to the achieved and desired school environment.

With regard to the importance of classroom environment, it was found that there was a tendency for students who are strong academically to put less emphasis on classroom environment than those who find academic work more difficult. There may also be tendencies for girls to put a greater emphasis on environment; or even different individuals regardless of sex but differing in temperament to care or be affected more by classroom environment.

The shaping of classroom environment was affected by many variables. The variance in age and developmental level resulted in different methods used to form class environment. Students in younger grades were more open to terms of endearment such as “sweetie” or “kiddo”

from their teachers than students in fourth grade and beyond. Older kids were more skeptical about excessive praise, not finding it as encouraging or supportive as students in second and third grades. Teachers adapted their own behaviors accordingly, using humor or light-hearted teasing with the fourth and fifth-grade classes.

Classroom management techniques and the relationship to classroom environment were more often deduced through student comments and observing nonverbal reactions in classes to varying techniques. In asking students about ways that their teachers indicate when they are doing the right thing in class there was much said about specific praise and using on-task students as behavior examples. One student said that the way they knew they were doing the right thing was because the teacher wasn't actively correcting them. Numerous interviewees mentioned the use of candy incentives for correct classroom behavior.

Interestingly, in questioning students about the ways their teachers indicate incorrect behaviors in class some examples were given that may be construed as discipline based on embarrassment or shame: one student said their teacher would purposely call on students for answers when they knew they were not paying attention while other students said off-task classmates were required to sit in the corner, sit in the hall, or stand in front of the class and apologize for their behavior. These various forms of classroom management are probably recognizable to anyone who has attended a public school, but they contribute to the overall environment perceived by students and the ability of the teacher to form working relationships with students.

Information about the quality of relationships between teacher and student provided some insights. Students reflected a fondness for knowing information about their teacher's lives

outside of school. Perhaps this is a reflection of the student's belief that they feel like they have a bond with their teacher. One student described a "story time" during which the class would sit and listen to their teacher share memories from her life with them. The student felt this was noteworthy especially because she was a fifth grader and thought she was too old for "story time." Regardless, the student did feel this was a positive addition to her school experience. Sharing oral stories is more valued or more common in some particular cultures and may be a great addition to the local school district and help foster a caring environment.

In questioning how well the students felt like their teachers knew what they did outside of school, it was found that it was a mix. Some students felt what they did was known and some did not. Those who felt they did often remarked that their teacher's own children were involved in the same activities and they would see them at practices. Living in a smaller community, the likelihood of such overlap is greater. This was true of how well the students felt they knew their teachers as well. While some said they did not know their teachers well, some gave specific examples of unusual hobbies that their teachers shared with the class (i.e. has a float house and flew an airplane), which perhaps indicates that more of the mundane is shared than the students recalled. Again, this reciprocal sharing is reflective of the quality of relationship between teacher and student and integral to the process of building a caring relationship.

During student interviews and observations a few factors about classroom environment that were not considered during the design for this experiment arose. Students mentioned the impact peers have on classroom environment. Many, in fact, felt this was the largest determiner of classroom environment, stating that one student could make a class less enjoyable because of their behavior. This was observed often in classrooms: one student attempting to monopolize

the day. Teachers have control over their reaction to a difficult student – finding effective ways to handle behaviors is a vital teaching skill. The study about relationship building emphasized the need for all students and teachers to forge a working relationship regardless of initial impressions.

Another issue that arose during the course of this experiment was how the families or guardians of students affect the classroom environment. This can be to the positive or the negative. Teachers reported students who came to class with preformed ideas about school based on parent comments. They indicated the strength of role models in contributing to the attitudes toward school that they either got to work with or had to deal with. Also, especially in the younger grades, a habitually absent or tardy student interferes with that student's ability to feel secure and connected to the class and teacher through no fault of their own.

As an observer, it is easier to see the more subtle reaction to classroom environment. Throughout a typical school day a classroom teacher in a room with twenty or more students has hundreds of interactions. Research indicates it requires greater effort to consciously increase positive interactions. More training to this end for classroom teachers and support staff may increase the tools available to meet the demands of today's students. Schools are becoming more of a social training ground for positive behaviors and require more work in this area in order to be able to work effectively on the academic content.

The entire school can support these efforts and there were many indications that this was happening. Environmental support by the school administration and larger community was seen in reviewing the content of the bulletin boards within the main corridor of the school. Posted there include birthdays for the current month of every student in the school; students recognized

for positive peer interactions by staff members as part of a weekly behavior program; photographs from newspaper clippings of students involved in school and community activities; and other positive school happenings. Up and down the hallways each class has a bulletin board space that displays student work. Incentive programs to encourage music interest and library usage are in place. The playground is well-maintained and has popular equipment. Parents and families are encouraged to volunteer in the school and classrooms. Every Wednesday parent volunteers hold a “Wednesday Walkers” club during recess.

A recent study (American Institutes for Research, 2012) conducted on the local school district for the Association of Alaska School Boards asked students to respond to the issue of school climate. In summarizing some of the important findings, “schools that held high expectations for students, provided a safe environment, had a climate of respect among students and between staff and students, had adults who reached out to students, had a high level of parent and community involvement, and/or had good social and emotional learning among their students had significantly higher SBA [standards-based assessment] proficiency rates in all three subjects [math, reading, writing] than did schools that did not provide that kind of environment” (p. 5). This would support the idea that classroom environment is important to academic commitment. In the current survey, whose findings were compared with previous years’ results, the local school district saw a significant increase in scores for school safety and peer climate. Results showed stable scores for “High Expectations, School Leadership and Student Involvement, Respectful Climate, and Caring Adults” (American Institutes Research, 2012, p. 6). This seems to indicate a belief that local schools are seen in a positive light by students with regard to environment.

In summary, classroom environment was found to be especially important to students who are more emotionally fragile or academically weak. Environment was formed in many different ways and related to the developmental level of the students. Maintaining a positive atmosphere was a labor-intensive job helped out by building the relationship between teacher and student. Hindering classroom environments were students who had difficulty with peers and students with counterproductive home lives. Local administration and school staff support a positive environment through well-maintained facilities, caring wall decorations, and behavior programs. The importance of a caring classroom environment is closely related to academic commitment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research study confirmed my existing beliefs that a positive classroom environment should be a priority for every teacher. As a preservice educator I sometimes feel my efforts toward relationship building with students and positive regard are the result of limited practice. In many instances I have observed behavior from veteran and novice teachers and support staff that turns students off from school - be it sarcastic remarks, harsh tones, or humiliating disciplinary practices - and reasoned that in the future, with more experience, I, too, would find myself using these tactics. However, from this study I have learned that these negative practices occur because of fatigue and frustration and result in dire consequences to academic achievement.

My future practice will surely hold difficult student behaviors, days when problems outside the classroom attempt to color my in-class attitude, but I will take those adversities and remind myself to act in a way that strengthens my relationships with students and preserves their

commitment to learning and growth. There is a famous quote to this end for educators by child psychologist and teacher Haim Ginott (1975) that states:

I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, a child humanized or de-humanized. (page unknown)

Future research regarding this subject might concern issues that came up in the development of this study - parental attitude and peer relations - and their impact on classroom environment.

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Appendix A

<i>Raw data (quotes)</i>	<i>Common words or phrases</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Conclusions</i>
General apathy toward class environment: “it’s OK” “Don’t know” “Doesn’t matter.”	Strong academics	Importance of classroom environment and dependence on other variables	“Classroom environment is of more importance to students who are not as strong academically. Also, girls were more likely to be aware of class environment. Individual differences were seen in the awareness of class environment.”
Observations: Students hesitant to participate in whole-class discussions. General demeanors in class.			
5th grade girl: “I answer questions when I know I’m right.”			
“Starbursts” “Candy” “She points out kids who are behaving well”	Gender/Temperament differences		
Observations: non verbal, specific praise, amount in different classes based on age			
“Apologize in front of the class” “Asks someone who isn’t paying attention to answer the question” “Sit in the corner” “Sit in the hall”	How students know they are doing the wrong thing	Classroom environment development	“The development of classroom environment was dependent on the age group of the class. Many positive classroom environment instances were recognized by students. Students also felt negative behavior was related to shaming consequences.”
Observations: Verbal reprimands.			

<p>“Not really” (does teacher know what you do after school) “Yes - his daughter is at dance too” “Yes, other kids in the class go there (activity), too”</p>	<p>Student disclosures</p>	<p>Relationship formation</p>	<p>“While students may not be able to verbalize it clearly, there are signs that their teachers do disclose personal information about their lives to the class. Students also feel like their teachers know what they do outside of school, but this is sometimes just assumed.”</p>
<p>“No - except she said she lives in a float house sometimes” Not really, but I know she was in a plane crash” “Yes, she would tell us stories from her childhood”</p>	<p>Teacher disclosures</p>		
<p>Observations: Many instances of teacher sharing were observed in classes including photos of teacher families, pets and past times.</p>			

Appendix B**Interview questions**

I am interested in asking students such things as:

Do you volunteer to answer questions in class? Why or why not.

What ways does your teacher show that you are doing the right thing in class?

What ways does your teacher show that you are not doing the right thing in class?

Are you involved in many activities outside of school?

Does your teacher know what activities you do?

Do you know what types of things your teacher does outside school?

Do you feel encouraged by your teacher to share things about your life?

Do you think your teacher knows you well?

Probe: In what ways do they know you well?

Do you know your teacher well?

Probe: In what ways do you know them well?

I would like to ask a variety of teachers questions like:

Do you have a good representation of students who answer questions?

What methods do you use for classroom management?

Do you have interests outside school and the classroom?

Do you share your personal interests with your class?

Do you know your students well?

How do you get to know your students better?

Do you know what types of activities your students do outside class?