



MEASURING WHAT MATTERS: QUALITY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

QUALITY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Schools are dynamic learning environments that influence students' academic, affective, social, and behavioral learning.¹ The school's learning environment influences students' opportunities to use the educational system as a foundation for further education. Ultimately, quality school experiences contribute to students' long-term outcomes, including meaningful and satisfying adult lives in a democratic society.²

Different factors in the school's learning environment contribute to student learning, but the learning processes within a school cannot be reduced to any single factor like *school leadership*, in isolation from others factors like *trust amongst teachers and students*.³ Thus, to understand the learning processes within a school, it is important to understand the dynamic and interactive reality of schools—how collegiality amongst educators, for example, works in tandem with other elements, such as educator professional learning, to influence what and how students learn.

Examining learning environments by measuring a wide variety of school indicators and the way these indicators interact provides rich information on the quality of resources, people and activities that shape students' learning experiences.

POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS WITHIN SCHOOLS

Schools with positive learning environments typically exhibit high levels of trust amongst school leaders and teachers. These schools focus on academic achievement but do so through a collaborative environment in which risk taking and experimentation is valued. School members exhibit confidence, intellectual engagement and a strong sense of belonging.

School factors that contribute to quality learning environments are connected, rather than discrete, and work together in concert. A school's environment can be understood from a consideration of the variety of places in which student learning occurs within classrooms and across the school outside of the classroom—the hallways, school yard and school library amongst others. Equally, the places in which educators meet and interact both in the staff room and in non-teaching meetings are critical to the working environment within the school.

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that instruction and other factors in the classroom environment have the greatest impact on student learning. At the classroom level, teachers' instructional practices are of paramount importance to the learning environment.⁴ Quality instructional practices such as linking learning to factors that are important in students' lives;⁵ using a variety of different teaching methods;⁶ making adjustments for different learning styles;⁷ maintaining and communicating high expectations for all students;⁸ using formative and summative assessments in a systematic manner;⁹ setting objectives and providing regular feedback;¹⁰ providing opportunities for participation in classroom activities;¹¹ and helping students to draw connections between different disciplines¹² all exert a powerful influence on student learning.

The classroom environment includes much more than the teacher's instructional practices. The quality of life in the classroom is of great importance to students and affects how and what they learn.¹³ Teachers create a quality classroom environment by creating an atmosphere in which diversity is respected and individual differences are appreciated;¹⁴ treating social and emotional learning as a valuable and teachable subject;¹⁵ fostering positive relationships;¹⁶ using systematic classroom management strategies and consistent, non-coercive approaches to discipline.¹⁷

The classroom environment and student outcomes are influenced by a number of school features beyond the classroom. Teacher communities within the school have a strongly positive impact on student learning when teachers participate in professional learning communities that: maintain a clear and consistent focus on student learning; engage extensively in reflective dialogue about curriculum, instruction, and student progress; use a variety of classroom-based data to inform and refine their work; and have access to new pedagogic ideas and professional development opportunities.¹⁸

Teachers' working conditions also shape student learning. School level factors that have repeatedly been identified by teachers as critical to the quality of their work include manageable workload and class size; time available for professional, non-teaching work; resource adequacy; collegiality and stimulating professional interactions; opportunities to learn and improve; support for professional risk-taking and experimentation; ability to influence school decisions; and congruence between individual and organizational goals.¹⁹ School leaders contribute to quality learning environments by identifying and articulating a vision that inspires staff and students to reach for ambitious goals, and by ensuring that teachers have the resources they need to teach well.²⁰ School leadership is most effective when it is shared across the school's staff, adapted to the needs of the school, and models ongoing learning for all stakeholders.²¹

School learning environments also operate through a "hidden curriculum," the unspoken messages students receive from structures of authority and the values implicit in the operations of school. When these messages include high expectations for achievement and school level policies, practices, expectations, norms and rewards favour academic achievement for all students, the hidden curriculum contributes to quality learning environments.²²

Feeling physically, socially and emotionally safe—for both students and staff—is another component of school environments that support successful student outcomes.²³ The physical structure of the school is a part of the school environment and affects how and how well students learn. Clean, well-maintained and appropriately resourced facilities have been linked to higher achievement scores, fewer disciplinary incidents, better attendance, and more positive attitudes toward learning among students.²⁴

Schools are located within an external environment that includes parents, the community, the economic conditions present in those communities, and the values espoused by that community. The external environment includes curriculum standards, achievement

In a democratic and socially cohesive society, people must be capable of understanding the impact of their behaviour and decisions on others. In order to do this, they need to imaginatively take the role of another. They need to judge their own actions from the perspective of other people. They need to consider the consequences of the actions they advocate.

expectations, programmatic requirements, and other policy directives from school boards and ministries of education. The presence of caring and supportive adult relationships, opportunities for meaningful student participation in their communities, and high parent expectations regarding student achievement all contribute to quality learning environments.²⁵ Policies that are congruent with positive learning environments also affect student learning through their influence on the school’s organization and operation.

As detailed, students’ school experiences occur at many levels. Factors at the level of the classroom, teacher community, school, and external context combine to create productive learning environments. While classrooms are of central importance to a schools’ learning environment, there are many other contributing factors. These factors are related and connected. In attempting to define and measure positive learning environments within schools, the relational quality of these factors—the connections amongst the various factors—is an important part of what is measured, who is measuring and how they are measured.

MEASURING QUALITY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Many of the factors that contribute to quality learning environments can be measured. Data on learning environments can be collected through a variety of methods, including: focus groups, observational methods, interviews, town hall discussions, and surveys. Any measurement approach should include students, teachers, staff, and parents, and should assess the full range of factors that shape student and educator experiences of the learning environment.²⁶ The table below provides a sample of factors that contribute to quality learning environments. It is helpful to break these potential indicators down in relation to where they occur in order to get a holistic sense of a school’s working practices. However, the potential indicators listed in the table below need to be considered as an interactive set. For example, establishing a *clear school vision across the school* can occur through ongoing *teacher community dialogue and collaboration* that also serves to enhance *opportunities for students to participate in the classroom*.

Classroom	Teacher Community	School
Learning is linked to students’ lives	Teachers participate in professional learning communities	The school leadership articulates a clear vision that includes achievement, respect, and care
Connections are made between different disciplines	Teachers maintain a clear and consistent focus on student learning	The school leadership models continuous learning
A variety of different teaching methods are used	Teachers discuss curriculum, instruction and student progress	Leadership and decision-making are shared
Different learning styles are respected	Teacher-teacher relationships are positive and collegial	Leadership practices are adapted to the school’s needs
High expectations for all students	Teachers have time for common academic planning	Individual and school level goals are congruent
Formative and summative evaluations are used systematically	Teachers have non-teaching professional time	The principal provides instructional leadership
Teachers set clear objectives, monitor progress, and provide feedback	Teachers have access to new pedagogic ideas and professional development	The school leadership articulates a clear vision that includes achievement, respect, and care
Opportunities for classroom participation	Teachers use classroom-based data from a variety of sources to inform and refine their work	The school leadership models continuous learning
Diversity and individual differences are respected		Leadership and decision-making are shared
Social and emotional learning is valued		Leadership practices are adapted to the school’s needs
Positive student-teacher and student-student relationships		Individual and school level goals are congruent
Classroom management strategies are systematic		The principal provides instructional leadership
Disciplinary strategies are consistent and non-coercive		

Measuring the learning environment can provide critical information about what schools do that has an impact on student learning. Data on learning environments can inform individual schools about the areas where they excel and the areas that require improvement. Such data can also be informative at the system level, helping decision-makers to determine the effects of policies and reform efforts.

ENDNOTES

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People for Education – working with experts from across Canada – is leading a multi-year project to broaden the Canadian definition of school success by expanding the indicators we use to measure schools’ progress in a number of vital areas.

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