



Quality learning environments

Creating conditions for learning



Summary

- The conditions of a classroom or school—the operating environment of the school— influence both academic achievement and students’ ability to develop the vital competencies in creativity, social-emotional learning, citizenship, and health that support long-term success.
- In a quality learning environment, teachers are supported and have time to take risks, experiment, and explore a range of pedagogic approaches.
- Team-based, collaborative assessment and planning are key elements of the learning environment.
- Focusing only on outcomes ignores the importance of the conditions, the opportunities, and the resources available in schools that are foundational in providing students with an equitable chance for long-term success.

qual·i·ty learn·ing en·vi·ron·ment (n.):

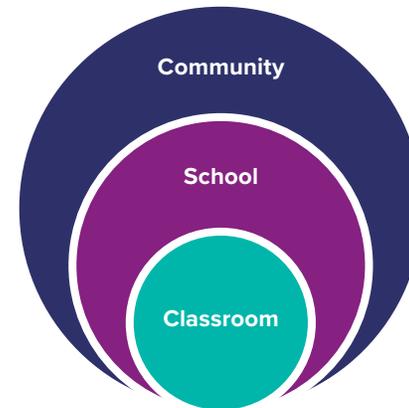
Classrooms support a dynamic interrelationship between students, teachers, and content.

The whole school mirrors ideals of citizenship in democratic societies, and supports social relationships characterized by trust, interdependence, and empathy among all members.

School-community relationships focus on students’ well-being, promote cross-cultural perspectives, and provide a range of diverse learning opportunities for students.

The impact of learning conditions

A school’s learning environment is both dynamic and complex. It should be viewed as a series of nested and interacting environments: classrooms within schools, and schools within communities (Bascia, 2014).



The learning conditions within classrooms and schools have an impact on:

- the quality and degree of students’ attention, and their interest and engagement with school.
- students’ ability to transition smoothly from home to school, from one classroom to the next, and between classrooms and other parts of the school.
- students’ responsiveness to teachers and other adults.

Building vital competencies requires attention to conditions

Despite coming from different scholarly disciplines and using different methods of study, experts in citizenship, creativity, social-emotional learning, health, and quality learning environments describe strikingly similar learning conditions as essential to support learning in each domain (Bascia, 2014; Ferguson & Power, 2014; Sears, 2014; Shanker, 2014; Uptis, 2014):

- classrooms support a dynamic interrelationship between students, teachers, and content.
- the whole school mirrors ideals of citizenship in democratic societies, and supports social relationships characterized by trust, interdependence, and empathy among all members.
- school-community relationships focus on students’ well-being, promote cross-cultural perspectives, and provide a range of diverse learning opportunities for students.

Deep links between learning conditions and competency development

Since 2015, educators from across Ontario have been field testing the use of a set of concrete, observable competencies in citizenship, social-emotional learning, health, and creativity.

In exploring how they might teach and assess these competencies, educators are considering the connections between learning conditions and students' progress in acquiring the competencies. For the purposes of this work, specificity in the language is important. Knowing exactly what competency is being targeted helps teachers shape the precise learning conditions they need to support students' development of that competency.

A number of themes are emerging from our work with educators on the ground.

For students: Feedback and opportunities to learn are key

In order to develop competencies in health, creativity, social-emotional learning, and citizenship, students need opportunities to practice and receive feedback in these domains. There is an inexorable link between the learning conditions students experience and the competencies they learn. For example, in developing citizenship competencies, students need opportunities to exercise agency and participate democratically in the school community.

If I want to see change in my students and build their competencies within the creativity domain... I need to make sure I am providing the opportunities for kids to work with [a creativity competency]... If I'm not providing them with the time to explore their ideas deeply, and if I'm not giving them time on consecutive days over a week or a couple of weeks, they can't demonstrate [that competency].

– Field trial educator

For educators: Flexibility and experimentation are key

For the educators working with the competencies, taking risks, experimentation, and exploration of a range of pedagogic approaches are critical in establishing conditions that allow students to express the specific competencies that the teacher is targeting.

Freedom to “try things out” is an essential element of schools' organizational culture. In order to integrate the competencies into their classrooms and schools, educators need the space to use trial and error, and follow professional hunches or intuition in their work. In this way, “failing” is not stigmatized, but instead is seen as a critical part of professional learning.

While it is important to have clear learning goals and plans, educators find that it is just as important to be able to adapt their teaching “in the moment,” in response to how students are learning. This type of flexibility does not typically thrive in systems with narrowly defined goals focused on standardized test results (e.g. Gillborn & Youdell, 1999; Kempf, 2016).

In the grade 1 and 2 classrooms, teachers were really curious about the domain of creativity – specifically [the competency] students think flexibly...In our first conversation they were saying, 'Is there anything I can do about that?...'Can we actually facilitate that in the classroom?...'Does it have something to do with the [classroom] environment?'

– Field trial educator

For the system: Support for teacher professionalism and collaboration is key

In the schools where the competencies are most effectively integrated into learning, teachers report that team-based, collaborative assessment and planning are key elements. This kind of collaborative work also supports educators' capacity to design and conduct assessments that are responsive to the many ways that students express the competencies. To do this work effectively, it is essential for educators to have the time and resources to work with their peers.

If we're thinking about what infrastructure we need for complex assessment, the key piece to [the teachers] is collaboration. It was striking in conversations where a music teacher, a physical education teacher, a classroom teacher, and I, as a special education teacher, [were] all talking about these competencies around the same kid...because now we have multiple perspectives around something that we're commonly agreeing on, but then it's nuanced differently in different subject areas.

– Field trial educator



Policy, resources, and accountability measures that honour teachers' judgement, while also supporting rigorous reflection and collaboration, are key elements of the learning conditions needed to support the systematic integration of health, creativity, citizenship, and social-emotional competencies into students' daily learning experiences.

Learning environments

School “learning environments” refer to the conditions in classrooms, schools, and school communities that may either support or inhibit learning. These conditions can include anything from **classroom instruction** (e.g. “Learning experiences are balanced and diverse – they include collaborative discussion, direct instruction, and individual and small group work”) to **school culture** (e.g. “School leadership prioritizes staff motivation and commitment, the school’s instructional program, and developing teachers’ capacities for leadership”) to **community partnerships** (e.g. “Schools work with external health services or community agencies to access treatment for students with mental health disorders”).

In the *Measuring What Matters* (MWM) paper on quality learning environments, Dr. Nina Bascia speaks to the dynamism and complexity of classroom environments. Rather than viewing the learning environment as a single structure, or as a way of narrowly defining “school culture,” the places where students learn should be viewed as a series of nested and interacting environments: classrooms within schools, and schools within communities (Bascia, 2014). Bascia emphasizes the importance of recognizing the complex interactions between school resources, processes, and culture. She also warns against viewing each domain (creativity, social-emotional learning, citizenship, and health) as a distinct entity when considering how the MWM competencies might be further developed and implemented.

According to Bascia (2014, pp. 4-5):

- The domains are complementary and interactive. They are not discrete subjects/skills for students. For example, when Uptis (2014) argues for qualities of experimentation and risk, she is also touching on Shanker’s (2014) points about student and teacher self-efficacy, as well as students’ ability to develop resilience.
- Like literacy and numeracy, each domain exists within a wide array of subjects and school practices, from extra-curricular opportunities to subject areas like science, arts, and geography.
- Measuring discrete indicators in isolation from each other will, and often does, narrow and limit what is measured and what is taught, potentially constraining opportunities for schools, teachers, and students to exhibit critical, creative moments in learning and teaching.

Supporting collaborative inquiry

Research in the area of teacher inquiry

and collaboration has gained attention worldwide for its capacity to engage stakeholders, build teacher leaders, and solve contextual problems that can only be solved from the field. Programs that aim to foster such capacity, like Ontario’s Teaching, Learning, and Leadership Program, see the value in supporting teachers to ask the questions, inquire, collaborate and shift their practice and learning accordingly.

One of the concerns with accountability-oriented, top-down, professional development is that it is not sensitive to the local context, and doesn’t make use of the rich knowledge within school communities. Furthermore, this approach disregards the teacher’s critical role as a professional decision maker. By engaging teachers in a collaborative, inquiry-based, critical examination of teaching, more meaningful and effective professional development will emerge, as will important links between collaboration, teacher inquiry, and educational change (Butler & Schnellert, 2012).

Measuring What Matters

Across the world, educators, policy-makers, and experts agree that success in both school and life will take more than literacy and numeracy skills and academic content knowledge. Students need opportunities to develop skills, knowledge, and habits in social-emotional development, creativity, democratic citizenship, and health.

In alignment with this global shift, People for Education proposes that:

- the development of competencies in creativity, citizenship, health, and social-emotional learning is as essential as traditional areas of academic achievement.
- the school environment itself – the opportunities and conditions that support these areas of learning – plays an essential role in ensuring students’ overall success.

Since 2013, we have been working with partners from universities, foundations, and government, as well as education stakeholders from across Canada, to understand how to define, support, assess, and embed these broader competencies into teaching and learning in our publicly funded education system.

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