



# **AN EXPLORATION OF THE TYPES OF EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS DEEMED OPTIMAL FOR LEARNING BY STUDENTS**

**Tyana Graves<sup>1</sup>, Medha Talpade<sup>2</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>Graduate, Psychology Major, Clark Atlanta University*

*<sup>2</sup>Full Professor of Psychology, Clark Atlanta University*

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is guided by the theory of social learning to understand the essence of one's lived school experiences and the educational environments deemed optimal for learning by students. Past research (e.g., Cayubit, 2022, Hanaysha, 2023) indicates that educational environments deemed optimal for learning by students agree that there is a significant impact between educational environments and learning experiences and believe all schools should not only offer learning environments that enhance students' success but also promote enthusiasm and provide an opportunity for student involvement. Reports show one quarter (24.8 percent) of the U.S. population, are enrolled in school. Research states learning environments have a relationship and impact students' psychological and academic achievement (Mustafa, 2020). Past research has also stated that the school environment is important when evaluating students' well-being, and findings suggest that variables such as physical, academic, and social dimensions have an impact on the school environment (Tapia-Fonllem et al, 2020). Students' needs are often not met in educational environments, which end up impacting them significantly. Thus, this study is important because it explores school experiences, and describes what students deem optimal for learning. The research question of this study answered the following: what are the types of educational environments that are deemed optimal for students' learning? Participants were recruited through social media (Instagram). The data collection method was interviews through Zoom and was voice recorded. Participants, 3 key informants, were asked 15 questions, on their experiences in school. The data was then put into Atlas Ti which created themes from the students' experiences. Validation strategies included rich thick descriptions, member checking, and reflexivity. Results revealed the following themes: trust, communication, social dynamics, engaging educational environment, and growth. Implications of the results for future studies include looking into teaching styles versus student preferences. The results of this study can contribute to the field of school psychology help initiate positive change for students who are in school and allow for improvement in teaching for teachers and faculty.

## **Keywords**

Learning Environment, School Experiences, School Psychology

The education system is a widely discussed topic in America and many other countries, due to the positive impacts of personal development, social mobility, and the ability to equip learners with knowledge and tools to use in the real world. The education system consists of various ranges of educational levels, from early childhood, such as elementary school, and higher education, such as college. Much of the discussion on the educational system is the curriculum and academic standards set. However, the topic of what educational environment is deemed optimal for learning by students is not as widely discussed. While succeeding in class and gaining high scores are very important, students often are not put in appropriate learning environments that are deemed optimal for learning by students. Learning environments significantly impact one's learning outcomes, and how they will succeed in the classroom. Learning environments have many elements that contribute to a student's educational learning experience. The elements of a learning environment are the social dynamic, physical space, technological infrastructure, instructional materials, support services, and community/parent involvement. In the month of 2021, there were 4.1 million students in preschool, 4 million students in kindergarten, 32.9 million students in first through eighth grade, 17.3 million students in high school, 16.6 million students in undergraduate college, and 4.6

million students as graduate students (Fabina et al, 2023), students getting an education is on the rise; meaning it is necessary to understand what educational environments are deemed optimal for learning, to promote the success in all students.

The purpose of this study on the types of educational environments deemed optimal for learning by students is guided by the theory of social learning that relates/compares the experience of educational environments to what educational environments are seen as optimal for learning, controlling for participants at a historically black university (HBCU), a college in Long Island New York, and a middle school in Long Island. Past research on the types of educational environments deemed optimal for learning by students agrees that there is a significant impact between educational environments and learning experiences and believes all schools should not only offer learning environments that enhance students' success but also promote enthusiasm and provide opportunities for student involvement (Cayubit, 2022) and (Hanaysha,2023). The community of all students will benefit best from this research due to statistics showing different types of educational environments can be more optimal for students.

## Literature Review

Literature research on educational environments provides different understandings of what students deem optimal for learning based on diverse epistemological perspectives. This study focuses on what college students deem optimal, based on physical and psychological/social contexts that affect students' learning and achievement. Educational environments are a prime factor in a student's learning career. A study showed that there was a positive correlation between the educational environment and academic achievement (Mustafa, 2020). The term educational environment or learning environment includes human behavioral and cultural dimensions, learning resources, technology, modes of learning, and connections to societal and global contexts (Usman et al., 2019). Students should have learning spaces that meet their individual and collective needs, and to ensure this learning space is provided a student's physical, pedagogical, and psychosocial dimensions must be incorporated into the learning process (Closs et al., 2021).

### *Physical Educational Environment*

The aspect of the physical educational environment refers to the equipment, physical location, instructional materials, buildings, classroom furniture, and tools used in the school setting to provide effective teaching (Baafi, 2020). The educational environment should also be welcoming and warm, allowing students to feel calm and at ease. Research states that pupils become more enthusiastic when there is a lot of airy spontaneous cross-ventilation (Masud et al.,2023).

The physical education environment can determine how the school is perceived by the community and students of how important the school is. Researchers have seen through a student's physical education environment, they can "read" the physical environment and relate that to the school or society's values of the students (Edgerton et al., 2022).

### *Psychological/Social Educational Environment*

The Social educational environment was first established and developed by a psychologist named Albert Bandura, as the social learning theory. This theory discusses the bridge gap between behaviorist and cognitive learning theories and covers three factors motivation, attention, and memory (Firmansyah, 2022). Research from neuroscience, developmental science, and learning science points to a foundational principle that; brain development is malleable. The brain grows and develops throughout life due to experiences and relationships built, and these experiences and relationships matter greatly for one's development. Research says positive relationships are built on positive interactions, which both affect the brain. For example, when a teacher provides positive feedback the brain releases dopamine. The psychological aspect of an educational environment is similar to the social educational environment. The psychological educational environment refers to psychological safety and providing trust and communication within the environment to promote mental health and a sense of belonging. Research shows that psychological factors such as learning knowledge, gaining skills, students' attitude toward others, students' perception of educational information, and forming mutual understandings with people around them (Aprieliava, 2021).

## Relationship between Educational Environments and Student Success

Studies have shown there is a significant impact on the educational environment and a student's success. One study has shown that a classroom environment where students feel comfortable between themselves and their teacher, and their social and scientific needs are met, is essential to achieving target learning (Avar et al., 2020). Another study shows that international students at a university stated that the learning environment has a significant impact on academic performance. This has caused research to emerge new strategies that can promote the performance of students (Masud et al., 2023).

This study of the types of educational environments that are deemed optimal for students' learning is unique because it identifies the relationship between educational environments and from a student's perspective what they deem optimal as the best educational environment.

### ***Purpose of Study***

Past research indicates that there is a relationship between educational environments and what environments are deemed optimal for learning. The social learning theory also suggests that these variables will be related. Thus, the research question of the present study.

### ***Research Question***

The research question of this study is: what are the types of educational environments that are deemed optimal for students learning?

### ***Qualitative Research Orientation***

The qualitative research method is appropriate given the research question because when exploring a complex phenomenon, it allows for the researcher to explore the processes. This research method allows for the questioning of lived experiences (Tenny et al, 2022). Qualitative research would be best used to determine what educational environment is deemed optimal from a student's perspective because it allows the researcher to explore the process and lived experiences of students, allowing individuals to understand what students believe is the most optimal education environment.

## **Research Design**

### **Role of Researcher**

As a researcher, I acknowledge my biases, values, personal interests, and experiences in the areas of School Psychology, education, and mental health. The researcher being a student and having her own biases with what she deems optimal for her educational environment, interest in school psychology, and mental health, has allowed her to be aware of certain issues and have certain opinions related to the topic. My biases, values, personal interests, and experiences on this topic could affect the researcher's interpretations of the study's findings. To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of this study, multiple data validation strategies were used such as rich thick descriptions, member checking, and reflexivity.

### **Sample Size**

Three individuals (3 females) participated in the study. The participants were recruited from the social media platform Instagram and the researcher personally asked a parent can their child participate in an interview.

### **Sample & Context**

The participants were two African American women/girls and one Hispanic woman, who ranged from the ages of twelve to twenty-one years old. One participant attended a Historically Black College (Delaware State University) and is now in the process of transferring, one participant attends SUNY Old Westbury, and lastly, one participant attends middle school (West Hempstead Middle School). All three participants are from New York City. Lastly, one participant is a senior in college, one participant is a junior in college, and one participant is in eighth grade.

### **Sampling Procedure/Ethical Considerations**

The sampling strategy of maximum variation was utilized, this sample strategy was used to understand different individuals' experiences to understand how/why they deem certain educational environments more optimal. The researcher's goal was to understand not only different individuals' experiences with the school system but also what moments have led them to believe why they deem certain educational environments better and what contributes to making it more optimal for them. The inclusion criteria included having to have attended middle school, high school, or college.

Interviews were conducted through Zoom interviews and were voice recorded. Participants were asked 15 questions, and during the process of asking these questions written notes were taken during the interview by the researcher. The semi-structured interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour. The participant who was in middle school, first was approved by her parent to participate. The participants were also given a consent form, before each interview and were advised to reach out to their school's counseling and disability services, if participants wanted to speak to a professional about their experiences.

### **Data Validation**

The study used three validation strategies rich thick descriptions, member checking, and reflexivity. The researcher used rich thick descriptions by including quotations from the participant's human experiences, allowing for a depth

analysis and enhanced credibility. The researcher used reflexivity by reflecting on her own biases. The researcher is an African American Woman who is a senior Psychology major at Clark Atlanta University. Due to the researcher having her own experiences in elementary school, middle school, high school, and college, and having her own biases on what she deems as optimal in an education environment when interviewing one participant, she was told she made nonverbal responses (such as raised eyebrows). After looking back on each interview, the researcher noticed she had certain responses that she expected and gained enormous knowledge on how each student has a different story to tell about their school experience and what they deem as an optimal educational environment. Member checking was used by making sure to repeat all notes written down out loud to participants and make sure what the researcher wrote down was correct for what each participant said.

## Results

The written notes from the interview were put on a document and then uploaded to Atlas Ti 8.0. In Atlas Ti, quotations and codes were created, there were a total of 10 codes, which were then broken up and grouped into five themes. The five themes created were trust, communication, social dynamics, engaging teaching style, and growth.

### Themes

#### *Trust*

Two codes were combined to generate this theme. Two of the codes contributing to what students believed were optimal in an educational environment positively, were the codes feeling understood and feeling like they had a sense of privacy. Participant One stated “A time I endured a traumatic experience and felt understood by a teacher was in Social Studies class in 12th grade, during the presidential election...At the time, I was not a U.S. citizen and asked to talk to her after class and explained to her my predicament, instead of making it a sad and serious moment, she made me feel seen, we talked and she asked about my story, making me feel heard and understood.” Participant Three mentioned “My experience with my teachers is overall good. I feel like my teachers understand, and sometimes they don't but I feel like I can talk to most of them without them telling other teachers or telling other people or anybody like what I'm saying I feel like I could trust them.”

Participant Two discussed the code of feeling like she had the opportunity to remain private while expressing herself. Participant Three stated, “I was crying to my Spanish teacher about what was going on at the time, without stating the reason and she helped me the best way she knew how and recommended that I go see one of the school social workers, so I can get advice and just be able to express my thoughts, have a sense of privacy, and get it all out.” Participants also mentioned characteristics of their teachers that made them feel like they can trust them and maintain privacy were “honest”, “trustworthy”, and “generous”.

#### *Communication*

Two codes were grouped to create this theme. Two codes that contributed to what students believed optimal in the educational environment positively, were having a teacher-student relationship and advice. Participant One discusses the importance of having a teacher-student relationship. Participant One states “A teacher building a teacher-student relationship will allow for less grouping of students' problems. For example, if two students fail a test, a teacher would say oh okay both students failed a test, but instead don't think about how they may have failed due to traumas at home, not a good learning environment, school teachers are rough on them, and the student doesn't have the time to be happy and study vs a student who just hasn't tried and that's why they failed.”

Participant Three discusses the code of advice, Participant Three stated: “When my grandma died, I felt like life wasn't fair and I feel like my teachers made me feel better about it because they understood and they kind of knew what to say because they've experienced lost, being able to provide me with tips on how to grieve a family member lost.” Participant one discusses how a teacher giving her advice helped her in the real world, “In high school I wanted a Job at Chic fil a. However, my parents were immigrants and didn't know anything about a formal Job application, however, me feeling comfortable with a teacher allowed me to ask her for help on applying and advice on interview questions the teacher did not just say you do this and this or just filled it out for me, but instead helped and walk me through it and has now gave me the experience on how to fill out a job application, and I also know how to prep for an interview just due to a teacher giving me 30 minutes of her time.”

#### *Social Dynamic*

Positive energy and feeling misunderstood were two codes combined to create this theme. The code feeling misunderstood is what negatively impacted educational environments and the code positive energy positively impacted educational environments. Participant One stated “If I feel misunderstood, I'll be a lot quieter and to myself. Which doesn't help me grow because I would never break out of my shell. I would just remain to myself and never reach out to my peers or other teachers.”

Participant Two and Three discusses the code of positive energy. Participant Two mentions, “My favorite moment in class was when I was in 9th grade in Spanish class, and two boys kept talking about how they could

outrun each other... and mid-lesson made them get up and they went outside on the field and raced each other. Then went back upstairs for class and learned about vocabulary on restaurants. This was my favorite memory because it was very spontaneous, and you can feel the positive energy in the class due to having fun.” Participant Three states “When we all sit together and like act out the reading and we read together, we have fun doing that and everybody's laughing and having a good time, and you can feel the positive energy in the room.” Participants also discussed how the teachers had characteristics of having “positive energy.”

### ***Engaging Educational Environment***

Fun, interactive, and safe were the three codes combined to create this theme. The code's fun, interactive, and safe positively impacted educational environments. Participant Two states “I'll really focus, and I'll get better grades because I'm interested and I'm having fun and I'm happy to be there.” Participant Three states “An environment with people I can talk to, learning is fun and is the best educational environment for me.”

For the code interactive, Participant One states “The learning environment deemed most optimal for me is making content enjoyable, for example making up songs, and drawings, all allow for me to memorize the curriculum better. So basically, an interactive classroom.” Participant Two states “My favorite moment in class allowed me to express my creativity and be interactive with my classmates. For example, in college statistics, we were learning about charts and graphs. The teacher gave us a project which allowed me to work with my best friends...This experience allowed me to learn about graphs and percentages, but also do something fun and interactive on subjects I was into.” Participant Three when asked what the best educational environment is for her stated “A learning environment that is fun, interactive, and allows me to do things with my hands.”

The code safety was discussed by Participant One, who stated “Feeling understood in the classroom made me feel a lot safer.” participant Three stated, “When I feel like I can talk to people and trust them and it made me feel like going to school isn't a chore, and I felt safe.” Participants also mentioned teachers/professors creating a “Safe place in class to express themselves.”

### ***Growth***

The codes were succeeding and prepared. The two codes positively affect educational environments. Participant Two stated “I feel like being understood helped me succeed in the real world because although my teacher at the time kind of allowed me to vent and speak and like to let her know what was going on with me... she was very much like I know this sucks, but you still need to take my test because life goes on and I feel like it taught me the lesson of just because things are going on doesn't mean you don't do your work, you still have to get it done and you have to remain consistent.” Participants used descriptions such as “succeeding in their personal growth in the real world.”

Participant Two discussed the code of preparedness when asked how feeling misunderstood in the classroom made her feel. Although a negative resulted in positive growth, Participant Two stated, I feel like it just prepared me to know that there are some people that just take jokes too far and shouldn't be around or hang out with people if they're doing something that you don't like and they're not doing anything to make you feel better or benefit you.” Participant Three discusses the code prepared as well, “I'm in a business class called JVE and it's like an upper for the future class if you're interested in business... So, it just prepared me to know that not everybody's going to want to check out your business and not everybody's going to want to be supportive of you.”

## **Discussion**

The essence of this phenomenological study is students believe that the types of educational environments that have trust, communication, a positive social dynamic, engaging educational environment, and growth are contributions to an educational system that is most optimal. The five themes show the importance of social influence on one's educational environment and the impact on students' success. This finding is similar to the findings of a phenomenological research study on interactions with teachers and peers, the findings of this study suggest the relationships between teachers and students and peers and students are essential for a student's social, behavioral, and academic development in the classroom (Chen et al, 2020).

In the future, I would investigate teaching styles versus student preferences. The researcher will investigate different teaching methods such as lessons, group work, technology integration, etc., and then compare them to what students feel is more impactful for learning. This research will help educators understand and better the needs and interests of students.

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## Appendix

### Screening Question

1. Have you ever been a student?

### Research Questions

1. Describe your experience as a student?
2. Describe your experience with your teachers?
3. What were the personality traits of your teachers?
4. Describe your favorite moment as a student in the classroom?
5. Do you feel that your teachers understood that students go through different traumas?
6. Describe a time when you endured a traumatic experience and you felt understood by your teacher?
7. Describe a time when you endured a traumatic experience and you felt misunderstood by your teacher?
8. How did feeling understood within your classroom make you feel?
9. How did feeling misunderstood within your classroom make you feel?
10. How has feeling understood in the classroom impacted your growth within the classroom? Can you name an example of how it impacted your growth?
11. Has feeling misunderstood within the school system declined your growth within the classroom? Can you name an example of how it declined your growth?
12. How did feeling understood in the classroom help with your success in the real world? Can you give an example of how it impacted you in the real world?
13. How did feeling misunderstood in the classroom impact your success in the classroom? Can you give an example of how it impacted you in the real world?
14. What advice would you give students to help the teachers create a class climate of feeling understood?  
What advice would you give teachers to help students like you or those who are experiencing stress and trauma, on how to create a class climate of feeling understood?