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Student Affective And Cognitive Environments In A Classical School

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Student Affective and Cognitive Environments in a Classical School

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's of Arts
in Teaching

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CHAPTER ONE

Classical Education and Student Environment

Introduction

In December 2017 I began working at a classical academy shortly after receiving my teaching license. In speaking with the administration and reading about the school, it seemed as though this was a stringent prep school that held their students to a higher standard than most. Students were expected to wear uniforms, stand when they were to address the teacher or class and read and decipher texts that many would consider being well above grade level. While all of these factors made the school environment a different one, I quickly found in my six months teaching that a student's behavior and academic achievement is influenced greatly by the type of school they attend. This realization and the sense of disillusionment from many of the students are the inspiration for my research and my research question, how do students in a classical education school describe the affective and cognitive environments of the school? The primary goal of exploring this research question is to understand where my students might experience a lack of connection and how our school can make our curriculum and programs more inviting for all students.

Being a classical academy means the curriculum and structure are heavily based on ancient Western philosophy, a philosophy developed mostly by and for Anglo students. There are strict academic standards and a lack of extracurricular activities. However, the school is extremely diverse, with students of color making up about 40% of the student population. This diversity made it easy for students to see a racial divide in how students grouped themselves.

This racial divide was even more apparent in math classes that are grouped by strength in that subject. This created a situation where as the teacher I sensed that many of my students felt that the school was not for them and that they were not getting the most out of their education.

My first chapter is broken down into four different sections. The first section is a definition and origin of classical education in the United States. This will allow readers to see how classical education came to be and what are the benefits and takeaways of this specific education form. The next section will be the professional context for the research question. This is my own personal journey in the realm of teaching and what has inspired me to pursue this research question. The third section is my rationale for the Capstone Thesis. This section lays out what my goals and hopes for my research are and what I hope to gain from this Capstone Thesis. My final section is a summary that will outline what the first chapter was about and what the reader can expect from the next chapters.

Definition and Origin of Classical Education

In the United States today, there are numerous types of education that our society provides children, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), project-based learning, Montessori, schools based on religious affiliation, etc. These educational offerings vary greatly; some are entirely research and project-based while others focus on a foreign language. The diversity of options available to families is one of the beauties of how the United States education system has grown and changed over the years and the true autonomy parents have when deciding on the education that their children receive.

This diversity of options can have both positive and negative effects for the student, however. For starters, different types of education just do not work for certain students. It can

sometimes be a guessing game when it comes to what type of school or educational philosophy works best for the child, and if the school is not the right fit for a student or vice versa it could have major impacts on how the child reacts. According to a study by Poverty Action Lab (Cullen, Jacob, & Levitt, 2006), school choice and student success do in fact correlate. In this research study it was documented that eighth-grade students who won lotteries to attend more prestigious charter schools in Chicago were more likely to have fewer disciplinary issues both in and out of school, however, their academic standing did not change much (Cullen et al., 2006). The relative academic standings of the students who won the lottery to charter schools performed slightly worse than their peers, most likely due to the competitiveness of the schools they were attending. Many charter schools allow students to have more rigorous academic experiences that they would not normally have in traditional public school settings.

One such type of school that has grown more popular over the years is the Classical school. A classical school is one that focuses on the classical ideals of education. A piece from CNN in 2013 summarizes the educational philosophy as “Classical schools are less concerned about whether students can handle iPads than if they grasp Plato . . . Students are typically held to strict behavioral standards in terms of conduct and politeness...” (Duin, 2013, ¶ 5). Duin (2013) continues that at classical schools students study Latin throughout their years at the school, study ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, typically wear uniforms and address the teachers as either Magister or Magistra. Those are specific attributes of my school, but many classical academies focus on ancient Western schools of thought in their curriculum. It is a formal education that is stringent in coursework and expectations of student behavior and academic success.

Classical education has long been a tradition in the United States, with the first public school in the United States, Boston Latin, being deeply rooted in the classical traditions (Cothran, 2011). Early Classical education fused together the logical thinking of classic literature with religious beliefs, with a premium being placed on reasoning and nature being the backbone of education (Corthran, 2011). My own personal experiences in the realm of classical and charter schools is a major inspiration for my Capstone Thesis.

Professional Context for Exploring the Research Question

I have long been fascinated with the different types of education in the United States. Throughout my own academic life, I attended traditional public schools. For my family there never seemed to be any other choice; one simply attended the school closest to them and that was that. However, since being a part of the teaching preparation program I have seen firsthand the different types of education and teaching philosophies there are and how these philosophies shape how schools are run. With all of the choices parents and students have, I often wonder how these different philosophies of teaching affect student learning and the overall learning environment.

In December 2017 I began working at a K-12 classical academy shortly after receiving my teaching license. At the school I work at there is no computer lab, no one-to-one technology, no sports teams in the traditional sense, nothing to distract students from their school work. It is a fairly new school, opening in 2012, with its first graduating class of seniors graduating in Spring 2018. The school is extremely diverse, with students of color making up about 40% of the student population. One of my biggest observations about the school is that our students of color at the school do not feel like they belong, and there is a sense of a racial divide amongst students

that gives them the feeling that they do not belong. This has led to students outwardly say to me that they will be attending other schools for their high school years.

My interest in racial equity at our school system is connected to my sense of disillusionment I observe in many of the students or hear they talk about. With its strict academic standards and lack of extracurricular activities, it is not uncommon for me to hear students describe that this school is not for them and that their voices are not heard by teachers or administrations. The rigidity of the school, both in its high academic standards as well as the behavior expectations of the students, can create a disconnect with students who might not be used to such structures, and the lack of diverse teachers does not help either. Our students talking about their disillusionment or acting disengaged are the inspiration for my research, not just to see where the lack of connection comes from but how we as a school can make our curriculum and programs more inviting for students.

Rationale for My Capstone Thesis

My main goal for this research is to see how I can best inform my teaching at a classical school so that all my students feel welcome and challenged. For me, in an engaged, welcoming classroom students are always on task, asking and answering questions in earnest and not being afraid to take risks as learners. In this thesis, my goal is to explore how the cognitive environment affects students who feel disillusioned by the prospect of classical education and how this environment plays a part in their overall academic success. Through qualitative measures, the goal is to gain insight into how and why students at the classical school experience the system and with the goal of serving all students. I am looking forward to not only improving myself as a teacher but also improving the ways my students learn overall. I want to see how a

school that has a classical education philosophy, one that was set in the Middle Ages, can be relevant in an ever-changing education environment.

The findings of this capstone thesis could benefit a number of stakeholders in the classical education system. One such stakeholder would be classical education teachers who teach a wide variety of diverse students. This capstone will look to serve teachers looking to give their diverse students a stringent classical education while also being culturally sensitive and giving them an education that benefits them in both a cognitive and affective way. Creating this type of environment is essential in reaching as many students as possible.

Summary

The main question I am trying to answer is how do students who are considered on the lower academic track in a classical education school feel about the affective and cognitive environments of the school? I am passionate about racial equity and the ways in which schools promote this, and my goal is to use the findings for positive change. In Chapter Two there will be a summary of key ideas identified in the review of the research literature for this capstone regarding how affective and cognitive environments contribute to student success and how classical education has grown and changed since its inception in American education in the 1800s. Chapter Three will detail the research strategy I will be implementing in order to answer my thesis question. Chapter Four will be the data analysis of the research I will be conducting with my eighth-grade class, while Chapter Five will summarize and conclude the thesis and describe where the research question will go in the future.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Chapter Overview

This Capstone thesis explores the question - how do students in a classical education school describe the affective and cognitive environments of the school? The goal of this study is to explore how middle school students enrolled in a classical education charter school describe the academic environment. In this Chapter, I will summarize key findings from my review of the research literature related to how the affective and cognitive environments of a school directly to relate to student performance. This is especially true in alternative forms of education, such as classical education. Because charter schools often focus on alternative forms of education, the ways in which student behavior and environment affect performance are critical, especially for students who come from a more traditional public school background. This chapter will detail the literature used to highlight how these environments affect the student experience. This chapter will also focus on classical education, it's history, and how it has evolved through the years as a means to bring education back to its roots of a Western entity.

Affective Environment

By definition, an affective environment is one that focuses on a students mood, feeling, or attitude toward their school. In the following quote, Epstein and Elias (1996) makes the case that educators must pay attention to the affective environment as well as the academic. Epstein and Elias (1996) states that

the relationships among children and between children and the world around them have become increasingly important to educators over the last several years. Many would agree that educational practices can no longer focus exclusively on academics in the traditional sense but must include basic life, social, and problem-solving skills. (Epstein & Elias, 1996, ¶ 13)

Another way to think about Epstein and Elias' (1996) quote is that besides knowing the basics of reading, mathematics, and scientific study, students need to have the social and emotional skills necessary to navigate the world around them.

Students in today's schools are faced with many challenges that did not exist even five years ago, especially in relation to feeling connected. According to a study (Daggett & Sheninger, 2014) conducted by the International Center for Learning Education, students are more connected than ever before through social media, technology, and digital platforms. As a result of this increased virtual connection that occurs outside of the traditional classroom, many schools are including social skills and behavior into the curriculum directly, allowing these lessons to foster a sense of community and inclusion in the student's affective environment.

For example, Douglas Fuchs and Lynn Fuchs (as cited in Epstein & Elias, 1996) have developed a three-part solution for developing effective inclusion in a classroom situation. Their three-part solution is described in the following quote.

Douglas Fuchs and Lynn Fuchs give a three-part prescription for effective inclusion: 1) direct efforts must be made to improve the social skills of all students by providing curriculum-based lessons in social skills and social/cognitive problem solving, 2) negative stereotypes must be unraveled by bringing classified and non-classified students

together in a structured group setting and by working toward increased interpersonal awareness and empathy, and 3) the classroom must provide a strong context for the development of friendships. (Epstein & Elias, 1996, ¶ 16)

In short, the goal of any classroom should be to bring interpersonal relationships to the forefront of student learning.

A lesson for teachers based on the work of Douglas Fuchs and Lynn Fuchs (as cited in Epstein & Elias, 1996) is that when bringing together diverse students is imperative when forming a strong affective environment is only created if those students. Students, especially students from diverse backgrounds, feel more comfortable and empowered to produce. This means that a strong affective environment is only created if all students feel included and when in an environment in which they feel a part of.

To do this again teachers need to make “direct efforts . . . to improve the social skills of all students by providing curriculum-based lessons in social skills and social/cognitive problem solving” (Fuchs & Fuchs as cited in Epstein & Elias, 1996, ¶ 16). An outcome of providing this direct instruction is that all students in today’s diverse classroom, instead of feeling “othered” will have the social-emotional skills to thrive in a diverse community. A positive affective environment allows for all students to bring what makes them unique and special to each social and academic interaction, allowing for more of a give and take with the teacher and a problem-solving mentality. When students feel like they are heard and supported by their teacher, then academic and social interactions become increasingly more positive.

Not only does the school need to provide a positive affective environment themselves, but the addition of parent support only increases the likelihood of positive student interaction.

Bartz, Hill, and Witherspoon (2018) described how “parents and other primary caregivers are expected to play an increasing role in their child’s education and teachers are implored to develop partnerships with families and to increase families’ involvement in education” (p. 12). I agree with Bartz et al. (2018) about the importance of teachers developing relationships with parents/guardians. For example, coming from a school with a diverse student body, it has been important to understand the ways in which students interact with their parents, how parents interact with students, and how parents interact with the school in general. This family involvement can oftentimes be difficult, with the strains of school social life making parental involvement seem like an impossible task. One important aspect of family involvement that Bartz et al. (2018) touches upon in the literature is trust. This development of student relationships that Bartz et al. studies are directly linked with student trust. If a teacher can build a strong relationship with a student, then the student is more likely to trust that teacher and feel safe and secure in the classroom. Dr. Christopher Emdin (2016) doubles down on these findings by focusing on teacher relationships with students of color.

According to educator and author Christopher Emdin (2016) of “*For White Folks Who Teach In the Hood,*” there is a distinct correlation between the cultural background of a family and how they react to public education. The author continues that for many families of color, there has been a long history of distrust between themselves and the system of the school. This distrust is oftentimes passed down from one generation to the next, causing a pattern of distrust to develop. This could be from no fault of the teacher in particular, but the institutional distrust of schools from people of color has been around ever since schools began segregating in the 1950s.

As Emdin (2016) describes it many families of color feel that schools are not for them, that schools are built on white privilege. In addition, the adults in some families of color, Emdin (2016) note may also have had a particularly difficult time in school. These attitudes can be passed onto children, who Emdin (2016) states may automatically feel this sense of being an outsider the moment they step into school. All this can create a situation where parents of color engaged in their school to protect their children so are on the defensive and may at times appear indifferent to the teachers of their children. In other words, families of students of color may be predisposed not to trust the teachers and staff of their children's school.

In order to fully understand the idea of trust in the school environment, one needs to realize that trust can be implicit bias, or an unconscious attribution of quality to a social group, from day one. For example, Bartz et al. (2018) in the following quote describes another way in which schools can privilege a certain type of parental involvement that may put the families of students of color or those in poverty at a disadvantage. Bartz et al. (2018) reports how "Wallace and others concluded that schools privilege parental involvement that reflects assimilation, deference, and supportiveness, but find other types of involvement, especially those engaged in by ethnic minorities as threatening" (Bartz et al., 2018, p. 13). What Bartz et al. is saying is that teachers will oftentimes feel threatened when dealing with the parents of their minority students, engaging with them in a way that is sometimes hostile and defensive. If some teachers feel threatened by parents of minority students what message might they be sending students? It is this type of unwelcoming behavior that causes students to associate school with negative feelings and emotions, and it is a trend that is especially pertinent in diverse student bodies.

As stated before, middle school students are particularly susceptible to negative feelings at school and at home (Bartz et al., 2018). As a teacher, it is my job to direct these feelings and make sure that my classroom is as inclusive as possible and to foster those feelings into expressive forms of positivity. As a teacher, it is my responsibility to create my classroom so it is a safe zone where students can feel how they want to feel and express themselves fully without worry or fear of being judged. And while classroom spaces are important to fostering a positive affective environment, many people forget about the other spaces occupied by students can feel isolating and promote exclusivity.

For example, Wellenreiter (2018) describes how middle school students occupy a number of spaces during their regular day: classrooms, hallways, locker rooms, lunch rooms, offices, etc. It is in these spaces where the need for rules and regulations can oftentimes be more crucial than in the classroom setting. Wellenreiter (2018) highlights how it is in these spaces where students often find the most trouble having their side of things looked at, which can cause an even further escalation of ill feelings towards the school. When schools take a closer look at their rules and processes in these non-classroom spaces, it is often to see what the negative implications of these spaces are and how students view themselves in school. Wellenreiter argues that making these spaces more socially just can have a positive impact on students and give middle school students the autonomy to learn and grow.

Wellenreiter (2018) also points out that these types of environments are oftentimes the most sensitive to students, who need to feel a sense of ownership of their spaces in order to trust the environment. The author notes how “Seeing the rules and processes of various middle school environments through various student-centered lenses, trusting student perspectives of these

environments, and working to contextualize the definitions of terms used in stated rules can help in their analysis” (p. 10). The major word again here is trust, as a trusting school environment can allow for students to feel a part of the school community instead of as an outsider looking in.

Using a student perspective can give an educator the chance to see where the rules of the school are failing and how to raise the overall affective environment to a more positive level. In order for students to have a positive experience at school and see it as a place of learning and discovery, then their mood, attitudes, and feelings must be in the right state of mind. School should be a place of welcoming and acceptance, where positivity radiates as students gain knowledge that will help them succeed for the rest of their lives. As students feel more comfortable in their environments socially, they will have more space to grow intellectually.

Cognitive Environment

Now that we have looked at how a school’s affective environment can play a role in student learning, let’s dive into another environment type. The cognitive environment of a school deals with how a school gives students the tools necessary to succeed academically, to grow as learners. While affective environment looks at how a school supports its students emotionally, cognitive environments deal with how students perform in the classroom. It is wholly important to a school and its faculty that students feel safe and secure in their cognitive environment, that they feel the freedom necessary to perform as well as they can and are set up for success by their teachers. This can be especially difficult for middle school students for a number of reasons.

For all of their trials and gusto, middle school students often times have the most difficulty when it comes to finding the motivation to reach their cognitive potential. Wilkie and Sullivan (2018) put it best in her study of middle schooler aspirations when she said: “Middle

school students have been pervasively described in the research literature as exhibiting disaffection, disengagement, and a lack of interest in mathematics classrooms” (2018, p. 235). While Wilkie and Sullivan’s (2018) research touches specifically on math classes, one can generally apply this to any classroom subject that is occupied by middle school students. As a classroom teacher, I often observe how disengagement can become a burden of any classroom; if my students are not feeling engaged like they want to learn and participate in the learning that is going on, then that can make it difficult for them to reach their full potential. It can be difficult, but a number of studies have been done that show how students in different educational environments have gained back that engagement by feeling like their strengths are being challenged and they are set up for success.

De La Paz et al. (2017) has studied one subject that has proven to be the bane of many students’ existence -writing or composition. The author’s research reveals that students feel that the time constraints required to create thoughtful and engaging prose is too great and a waste of time (De La Paz et al., 2017). What comes from this is a general lack of knowledge or skills when it comes to writing and literacy. I see this happen in my own classroom. Once my students go on the offensive when it comes to school, when they want to shut down and not try instead of taking on a challenge head on, it becomes increasingly more difficult to get them back on board.

In the study, De La Paz et al. (2017) explored how to engage students when it comes to literacy and how truly crucial the subject is when it comes to the other disciplines. The author states “No longer is literacy development the purview of English teachers only, nor is literacy simply a matter of developing facility with general reading and writing practices regardless of content”(De La Paz et al., 2017, p. 32). What the author means is that the teaching of literacy,

while an important aspect of any English class, must fall on teachers across all disciplines as it is pertinent for all subjects. So how do teachers get students on board and formulate a positive cognitive environment despite resistance from students?

According to De La Paz et al. (2017), one such way teachers can get students to feel positive about their cognitive environment is to allow them to make connections to outside of the school environment. Students need to be able to take what they are learning and apply it to the outside world or else it will remain stagnant in their minds. Changing the way students learn and the ways they think outside of the classroom is essential when it comes to student engagement. De La Paz et al. (2017) makes the argument that writing in history classes gives students this applicable writing. These authors point out that “We know from prior studies that writing essays in history can enhance students’ ability to integrate content from sources with their own thinking and promote historical thinking” (p. 33). Using essay writing as a means to have students engage in historical thinking allows them to understand not only where their own opinions and ideas come from, but also how the past affects their present and futures. The author continues that students who can make these connections between subjects and sources not only enhance their writing but also allows them to see how what they are learning connects to a greater picture.

As a teacher, the research of De La Paz et al. (2017) suggests to me that when students are placed in a classroom setting, it is wholly important to give them an idea of where the information they are learning comes from and how it is applicable to their lives outside of the classroom. By making these connections to the outside world, students find motivation in the fact that their learning comes with a purpose and that purpose will lead to deeper knowledge. Born, Meeuwisse, and Severiens (2010) identifies another factor that must be in place for

students to fully engage with the material they are studying and to form a positive association with their cognitive environment.

According to Born et al. (2010), it is crucial that the interactions students have with the teachers and fellow students in the class are positive ones. A recent study completed by the author described how these positive interactions, as well as study success and a sense of belonging, attributed diverse college student success. While college students in the Born et al. (2010) study are quite a bit different than middle school ones, the same basic principles of the cognitive environment apply.

Born et al. (2010) main conclusion “is that activating and cooperating learning environments foster peer and faculty interaction, and in turn, that this interaction positively affects generic learning outcomes such as levels of engagement and the decision to continue studying” (p. 532). This idea of a cooperative learning environment is one that comes up a great deal in cognitive learning, and one that has seen great success across grade levels.

Again Born et al. (2010) notes how this idea of a cooperative learning environment can be especially useful when it comes to classrooms with diverse students. The author suggests that if there is more general teamwork used in the classroom, if students feel like they are a part of a larger picture, then they are more likely to associate positive cognitive thinking with their environment. Again Born et al. (2010) notes how a school, especially for minority students, can feel like a particularly isolating place.

The out of this isolation as the members of the study wrote, “studies investigating dropouts have shown that for ethnic minority students, in particular, feeling like one does not belong (often referred to in terms of ‘not fitting in’) is an important reason for dropping out”

(Born et al., 2010, p. 531). A take away from Born's research for me as a teacher is for ethnic minority students there can be a general sense of "us vs. them" when it comes to students and their academic institutions. If students are not on board with their curriculum or how their teacher distributes that curriculum, it can make for a very difficult school year. A major conclusion of Born et al. (2010) work is that general sense of cooperation along with a strong sense of belonging are two traits that could help curb that feeling and bring about a more positive cognitive environment.

No matter what the type of school it is, no matter what the age of the students are, the cognitive environment is crucial to engaging learners. What comes from this are students who feel they belong in a classroom, who use their knowledge that they attain to seek out answers to questions they never thought they could. By giving students the tools to succeed, teachers bring out of students untapped potential and a place in the academic world. These worlds can vary greatly depending on the type of educational philosophy the school a student attends follows.

Charter Schools

Before a discussion can be had on Classical education and its benefits and drawbacks, it is important first to discuss the home where philosophies like this can manifest; charter schools. Charter schools have been prominent institutions in the United States in the fight for school choice ever since the first charter school opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1991 (Knaak, C. W. & Knaak, T. J, 2011, p. 45). Charter schools are public schools that are financed publicly but operate outside of the traditional school districts that lead public school systems. Because of this, "Charter schools are allowed to use different procedures, methods, and instructional hours than the standard public school that is constrained by state board of education standards..." (Knaak,

C.W. & Knaak, T.J., 2011, p. 48). This allows charter schools to create curriculum and rules that sync with their own educational philosophies.

C.W. Knaak and T.J. Knaak list out numerous reasons why charter schools became such a phenomenon and helped change the national conversation on school choice. The first of these factors was the disillusionment of legislators, parents, and teachers over the fact that school desegregation was not solving the education equity or opportunity gaps like was promised (p. 46). C.W. Knaak and T.J. Knaak explain how “Most of this frustration related to the perceived and widely publicized seeming inability of public schools to meet the politicians’ expectations of equality and equity,” (p. 47). Many thought that school choice would close this gap and allow students of different races, sexes, and wealth class to attend school together. The next factor was the idea that the public school system in the United States was vastly falling behind the rest of the world, thus new schools were needed to help pick up the pace and close this gap with the rest of the world.

The media’s adoration of charter school success was another major factor of the public’s growth in favor of the schools. “These statements add credence to a public concept that all charter schools are good and effective and, conversely, to the concept that public schools are ineffective and biased because they cannot seem to accomplish those objectives,” (Knaak, C.W. & Knaak, T.J., 2011,p. 47). The more the media glorified successful charter schools, the more the public declared that public schools weren’t working and that they needed to quickly follow the same models as the charter schools. Charter schools allow families to send their children to schools that do not fit with traditional public school values and rules. It is because of these institutions that educational philosophies such as Classical education can grow and thrive.

Classical Education

The backbone of this research question is that of classical education, so it is important to understand what classical education is and how it plays out in the modern American school system. In a sense, classical education is a type of education that takes its theories and practices from ancient western culture, mainly from ancient Greece and Rome. Daniel Walker Howe (2011) in his history of classical education in the United States, makes a point to define this type of education and its place in history.

According to Howe (2011) “ever since the Middle Ages, a classical education had represented a synthesis of reason and virtue. Classical history and literature presented a panoply of heroes to admire and celebrate” (p. 31). Howe continues that it was these ideas of reason and virtue that made classical education such an appealing form of education for young people. Most of this stemmed from its dealings with the basic principles of patriotism and liberty, with many Greek and Roman philosophies influencing much of the early American political literature (Howe, 2011, p. 32).

If this were to be a type of education for elites, an educational philosophy that helped to build this country and shape the minds of some of the best and brightest of early colonialism then it is no surprise that a certain demographic of people flocked to classical education. “It is, by and large, white males who filled seats in classrooms and were, therefore, beneficiaries of classical learning” (Howe, 2011, pp. 31-32). This idea of the beneficiary, of the white male being the primary benefactor of a type of education based on the stories and culture of the West, is the base of my primary question that surrounds this research: who is classical education truly for?

There are certain aspects of the school I work at in particular that makes this idea of inclusivity a bit more complex. All students are to wear uniforms that include the school emblem and colors. Students are to stand when they are giving an answer or reading out loud to the class. This is to promote strong public speaking skills and for students to be proud of their answers. As stated in Chapter One, students take Latin every year they attend the school, from kindergarten through high school. Because of this, and to promote the importance and use of the language, all of the major areas of the school (cafeteria, gym, common areas) are titled with their Latin names. Teachers are discouraged from giving students group work or allowing them to work through questions on their own. Instead, the teacher acts as the “sage on the stage,” doling out wisdom and lessons in lecture form. These distinctions make the school I work at a classical academy that promotes assimilation, rigor, and the expectation that classical

From what I have discussed previously, middle school students are learning and interacting during a very important developmental moment. My goal for this study is to see how students who are in the midst of this development (at thirteen or fourteen years old) feel about their classical education and how it affects them both emotionally and cognitively.

Summary

In this chapter, I researched and discussed three key topics that affect my research questions. The first of these was the affective environment, or the ways students emotionally navigate and are affected by their school. The second was the cognitive environment, where I researched how schools academically affect students. Finally, I researched the history of classical education and how it has risen in popularity since the days of early colonial America.

In Chapter Three, I will be detailing my research design and how I plan on conducting my research to mine the data on affective and cognitive environments of middle school students.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology of Research

Introduction

In Chapter Two of my paper, I used literature and research to inform my research question: How do students describe the affective and cognitive environment of a classical education school? In Chapter Three, I will be describing the research paradigm that guides the development of my research design and why. This chapter will describe my rationale for the research paradigm, the research method selected, why it was selected, and its design and the proposed analysis method. The chapter ends with a description of my selection criteria for the participants, how they will be recruited, background information, and the process of informed consent and obtaining IRB approval. A detailed description of the research setting is also included as the research paradigm.

Rationale for a Qualitative Approach to the Capstone Thesis

The qualitative view was appropriate because of my interest in the responses of my students. Creswell (2009) identifies three reasons for using a qualitative approach to address my capstone, and these include a transformative worldview, narrative design, and open-ended interview questions. In combining these three features, Creswell states that this study “the inquirer seeks to examine an issue related to oppression of individuals . . . stories are collected of individual oppression using a narrative approach” (Creswell, 2009, p. 17). I wanted my students to give their own personal accounts of their affective and cognitive environments while at school, and using a qualitative view allowed them to best share their lived experiences in school.

My goal was to collect the individual thoughts and feelings and concerns of my students and come to a conclusion of how the school's education philosophy affected the students. The idea of this research was to try to see the ways students feel about their environments falls in the category of the transformative worldview which "holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda . . ." (Creswell, 2009, p. 9,). My goal was to use my findings to help improve the overall classroom culture, so viewing this from a transformative lens helped with this goal. Much of this information I received was based on the design of the survey and the types of questions I asked.

Overview of Research Design

In this section, I will describe my reasoning for having my primary data collection tool be a researcher designed open-ended qualitative survey. This description will include the design and development process and how the survey will be implemented. Arlene Fink provided support for my decision to create an open-ended qualitative survey. She (2017) states in her text *How To Conduct Surveys*, "A common use of a survey is to find out whether people are satisfied with a new product, service, or program" (p. 40). As my goal was to explore how satisfied or not satisfied my students are with their environment at a classical academy, that was framed as both a service and a program, developing an open-ended survey is appropriate.

At this point, I anticipated that my survey would be four open-ended questions; two questions regarding the affective environment and two questions regarding the cognitive environment. My decision to structure the survey items as open-ended questions was because using pre-set answers would not allow the participants to provide detailed and more personal responses about their own individual experiences in a classical school. Using open-ended

questions also provided my students the autonomy to use their own experiences in their answers so that when I looked at their responses later, I could form a better understanding of their thoughts on the affective and cognitive environments of the school. These questions focused on students' feelings on a day-to-day basis in school, the support they did or did not have, and how their academic and social lives played off of one another.

My initial thought was to make this survey anonymous. By keeping the surveys anonymous, I was better able to have students answer the questions honestly without fear of having their names attached to their responses. Because students would not put their names on the essay, I placed a blue star in the corner of those students whose data I would use on the Capstone Thesis. My survey will be given on a hard copy, as our school does not have the technological resources necessary to facilitate an online survey. Students were given the entirety of class to finish the survey, as I wanted them to really take their time and be thoughtful about their responses and how they would fill out their surveys.

Just like all research methods, there are advantages and limitations to using the survey method. Some of the advantages that Creswell (2009) describes includes allowing the researcher to control the questions, my students can give personal answers to their questions that focus on their own academic lives, and it is useful when the participants cannot be observed directly. This historical background that the students gave was a great insight into where their cultural and academic backgrounds were.

Analysis of the Survey Data

Once I collected the data from the student surveys, I saw how their responses painted a larger picture of the student environment. I used the inductive approach when analyzing the data

reasoning with the student data, meaning I made broad generalizations based on specific data. For the specific responses my students give, I saw how they matched up with various student groups and classes (i.e. students of color, students by gender, students by academic standing, etc.). These responses allowed me to categorize how each student feels about their affective and cognitive environments, whether these environments show a more positive or negative correlation with the student, and what demographic the student falls under. Based on this data, I made generalizations on how different types of students felt about their affective and cognitive environments and saw what improvements could be made based on these results.

Research Setting and Participants

The setting of my research study was a kindergarten through twelfth-grade classical charter academy. The school houses around one thousand students through all of the grades, with the eighth grade, in particular, containing eighty students. I teach three sections of English and three sections of Composition, with each section containing twenty-five students. The students are split up into three groups based on which math class they are in (high, middle, low). These classes stay together through each of their core classes. So I teach a Composition class and English class for each math-level group of students.

Out of the seventy students in eighth grade, roughly ten have either an individual education plan (IEP) or a 504 plan. There are three English language learner (ELL) student in the grade and a 50/50 male to female population. The grade is about 40% of students of color, while the school as a whole is roughly 30% students of color. According to 2018 MCA (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment) scores for the seventh grade(this years eighth graders), 59.4% of students were proficient in reading, 56.5% were proficient in math, and 52.1% were proficient in

science. For my research, I gave my students a survey with open-ended interview questions that asked them about their affective and cognitive environments and how it related to a classical school. I gave out a consent form for students to give to their parents detailing my thesis assignment and the survey they would be filling out. Parents and guardians had the option to have their students' responses to the questions not used in the final research, but all of the students were given surveys anyways so as not to exclude anyone.

Confidentiality and Security of the Data

In order to maintain the anonymity of my student's answers, I kept the surveys students completed in a locked drawer in my desk at school. Only I had the key and access to the desk, so I was the only one able to open the drawer and access the surveys. I performed most of my data mining at home, so I had to transfer the surveys from the drawer to my backpack when I was ready to analyze my data. Only I was the one to study the surveys and see which student gave what response, and when I was done with the surveys they went straight back into the locked drawer in my desk.

Summary

In this chapter, I have detailed how I conducted the research portion of my thesis. I used qualitative findings through an open-ended question survey that students took in order to find the results and see how students felt about their affective and cognitive environments in a classical academy. Based on the specific answers students gave, I then made generalizations on how classical education and the classical model of school affects students emotionally, socially, and academically, and with these generalizations, I saw what improvements could be made in order

to improve students in these areas. In Chapter Four I will take a closer look at the data and make conclusions based on the open-ended question surveys and see what trends in the data there are.

CHAPTER FOUR

Analysis of Data

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter Four is to analyze the data collected from the student surveys that were handed out to my three classes of eighth graders. The purpose of this survey was to answer the thesis question *how do students in a classical education school describe their affective and cognitive environments*. In this chapter, I will provide analysis of each of the four sections of the survey in two areas: data from the Likert scale and data from the student responses. Each section of student responses includes a chart that states how many positive, negative, and total comments were written for each category.

The first section discusses how the survey was administered, how many students responded, and some of the potential outside influences that could have affected the surveys. The next section discusses the “social environments” question of the survey. The data from the Likert scale is discussed as well as how the students responded in the open-ended portion. “Class benefit” was the next question category, and I will explore the Likert scale responses by the students as well as the written responses. I will then dive into the “daily interactions” section of the survey, where the Likert scale and open-ended student responses will be analyzed. Finally, the “class support” section will be explored, with Likert scale data and student response data being reported on. The final section of the chapter will be a summative analysis of all of the data conducted from the surveys.

Administration of the Survey, Response Rate and Factors that Could Influence Responses

All of the students in my 4L class were given a survey asking questions about their affective and cognitive environments at school. Of the 70 students who were given an informed consent form, 38 students (roughly 54%) had the form signed allowing me to use their data for the Capstone Thesis. Students responded to four different questions. The four questions used a Likert scale and also allowed for open-ended responses to the questions.. In order to analyze the data, I assigned a four-point scale for each Likert chart, with four being assigned to the most positive and one being the most negative. Appendix A contains a copy of the survey completed by the students.

Three outside forces are likely to have had an impact on the final results, one that was planned and another two that were not. The students were asked about how they felt in my English class. Since I handed out the survey and told the students that I would be the only one reading them, there was definitely some bias. Knowing I would be the one reading their surveys, students more than likely rated my class higher than the rest. Another unforeseen circumstance that might have affected the survey results was the lack of school during the first two months of 2019. In the months of January and February, the school experienced six school closures due to weather. The weather-related school closings result in disrupted student schedules for two months. Given the time lost to school closings and delayed openings teachers had to switch around schedules to account for the days off. Had the survey been given during a time where there was more consistency in the scheduling, student responses might have been different than they did in the current survey results. Another unforeseen factor was the teacher turnover that occurred in the middle of the year. Two of the students' teachers left unexpectedly, with numerous substitutes taking their places. Teacher turnover can have a major impact on students, with the

lack of consistency oftentimes harming students both in and out of the classroom. The analyses of the school environments will be presented in the next section.

School Environment

The first question that was asked of students was to rate how positively or negatively they felt in six different school spaces: classroom, cafeteria, hallways, bus, office, and after-school programs. Students were asked to check whether they felt extremely positive, positive, negative, and extremely negative for each of the six spaces.

Table 1. Rating Scale

4	3	2	1
Extremely positive	Positive	Negative	Extremely negative

After reading through the 38 surveys and assigning point values for each of the four possible responses, there was a clear pecking order in terms of where students felt most positively and negatively.

For each one of the school spaces, I did a straight average to determine the overall positive or negative score the space received. Two school spaces, the office and after-school programs have an average score of 3 or better. For example, the average score of 3.05, the office was where students felt the most positive. A close second was the after-school programs at 3.04. However, many students do not participate in after-school programs. Out of the 38 students whose surveys could be used in research, only twenty-four students (63%) checked off the Likert chart for after-school programs.

Three of the spaces had average ratings in between 2 and 3 including, classrooms, halls, and the cafeteria. Classrooms had an average rating of 2.83, placing more on the negative side than positive. The hallways were rated a 2.71, while the cafeteria came in at 2.37. The lowest of the six school environments was the bus, close to an extremely negative 2.07. For the bus related question, however, just like the after-school programs, not all of the thirty-eight students checked an answer. Only 29 (76%) of the students take the bus regularly, and their answers were the ones averaged from the Likert chart. The average score for all of the environments was 2.68, a negative rating for all six environments. This overall negative rating was supported in reading the student's open-ended responses regarding their school environments.

School Environment Student Responses

The open-ended responses to the school environment section saw all thirty-eight students responding to the open-ended portion of the question. Students had a great deal to say when it came to their feelings on their school environments. Most of the negative comments were made about the bus. Examples of these comments follow.

“The bus is a negative place. Kids are loud and don't follow directions. They climb on seats and they don't listen,” one student stated. Another student lamented “I would say the bus is negative because we all have to squish together like sardines in a pack. Sometimes you either have to stand up or sit on the bus floor.” In finding student responses to report, my goal was to find comments that matched the extremely positive or extremely negative environments that students selected. Most students complained about the lack of comfort and structure on the bus, noting how dangerous a place it can be with all of the noise and calamity. Another space that students also wrote negative comments about was the cafeteria.

Much of the negative attention the cafeteria received had to do with the food and lack of direction in class. The same could be said for the hallway, where the lack of direction and actions of fellow students have caused them to avoid them altogether. A comment that reflects a common assessment of the hallway environment states that “the hallways are negative to me because its very crazy. It’s were many fights begin, people are bullied, rumors start, and etc. I try to get out of the hallways as fast as possible . . .”

The classroom spaces were also rated low by students, as many felt that they are disorganized, bleak, and give off a vibe of intimidation and dreariness. One student stated, “I selected the classroom as being extremely negative because often times it’s either musty or unorganized.” Much of the negative open-ended responses describe how teachers made students in that space. The following is representative of this and states “The classrooms are ‘negative’ in that certain teachers are not close/respectful enough with the students, additionally the teachers do not communicate about assigning homework only test(s) which results in overworked, low energy students.” So while most students did not write about the physical space itself, many felt that the energy in the classrooms given off by the teachers led to an overall negative feeling.

Table 2. Summary of Total Responses to School Environment Question

Space	Number of Positive Comments	Number of Negative Comments	Total Number of Comments
Classroom	6	5	11
Cafeteria	2	16	18
Hallways	2	7	9
Bus	0	15	15
Office	2	3	5
Off School Programs	1	4	5

Class Benefit

The second question I asked students with a Likert chart was how beneficial each one of their classes was to their academic lives. By “beneficial” I meant how students felt the class benefited them academically, both presently and in the future. The classes I asked about were English, Math, History, Languages (Latin and Spanish), Science and Electives (band, gym, art). For each of these classes, students had to check if the class was extremely beneficial, beneficial, not beneficial, or extremely not beneficial. Students were to check only the box that they felt most appropriately described the benefit of the class to them at the time (Table 3).

Table 3: Ratings Scale

4	3	2	1
Extremely beneficial	Beneficial	Not beneficial	Extremely not beneficial

Just like with the first chart, I assigned a numerical score for each of the benefit scores students could give a class. Extremely beneficial was a four, beneficial was a three, not beneficial was a two, and extremely not beneficial was a one. English received the highest overall score with a 3.84. As stated above, there was some bias with the English score because I was the one administering and reviewing the survey results, possibly causing students to grade my class higher than others. Because I assign students their grade in English and was administering the survey, students were more likely to rate my class higher so as not to make me feel badly. This power differential was something I did not anticipate in my initial development of the survey. The next most beneficial class was math at 3.62 out of four. For the math class only 36 of the 38 surveys used for this analyses contained a rating for math. This was because two of the 38 students who gave consent to have their data used took their math classes at the University of Minnesota, so they did not put a check mark on the math section.

Two classes tied with an average score of 3.01, History and Science. Students at Parnassus take both Latin and Spanish throughout their time at school, and both languages averaged a 2.72 on the Likert chart. Coming in last was Electives, which include band, art, and gym. These classes averaged 2.67. However, not every student gave a check for this category, with 36 of the 38 students writing a response. The average score for all of the classes was 3.15, just slightly above the beneficial rating. These results were supported by the types of comments students wrote in their response sections.

Class Benefit Student Responses

Students had a great deal to say when it came to how beneficial the classes they took at Parnassus were. Students, for the most part, rated the languages (Latin and Spanish) very low, stating that they did not see the academic benefit of either class. An example of one student comment that was typical of languages not being of academic benefit was “Latin is not useful at all since it is a language that nobody speaks. Spanish should be an elective and NOT mandatory because there are lots of languages people want to learn.” A different survey participant highlight another reason why they thought there were [need to see the scale to determine this wording] academic benefit of languages stated that they learned the same things in Spanish every year, and the repetitive nature of the classes made for a boring, mundane learning experience. Two students commented on the lack of student choice when it came to the elective classes they were able to take.

Math and English were the classes students scored the highest in terms of academic benefit. A representative response to the open-ended prompt about the benefit explains that “Math, like English, is beneficial by keeping the class engaged and continuously providing challenges,” one student stated. Another student placed a high value on math, stating “Math teaches and requires critical knowledge that are important in adulthood when dealing with finance or if they choose to obtain an engineering career, teacher, etc.” Students put a premium on classes that seemed to offer them a clear benefit for the present day; classes that forced students to think in abstract terms and did not provide a clear benefit to their everyday lives.

Table 4: Summary of Total Responses for Class Benefit

Class	Number of Positive Comments	Number of Negative Comments	Total Number of Comments
English	13	0	13
Math	10	2	12
History	2	8	10
Languages	4	11	15
Science	3	4	7
Electives	4	7	11

Daily Interactions

In order to better understand the affective environments of my students, I decided to use my third question on the survey to ask them how positively or negatively they felt about their daily interactions with the people around them. I chose five different types of people that students would interact with on a daily basis: their friends, fellow classmates (those fellow students who are not considered close friends), teachers, staff (such as office staff, lunch staff, bus drivers, etc.), and administrators. For each of the sets of people, students had to check if they felt they had extremely positive, positive, negative, or extremely negative interactions with these people on a daily basis.

Again, a four-point scale was used to determine which people in the school building had the most and positive and most negative interactions with students. Four points were given for extremely positive, three for positive, two points for negative, while one point was given for extremely negative. All thirty-eight participating students answered the question. The overall

highest grade the students gave was for their daily interactions with friends, which came as no surprise. Friends averaged a 3.71, almost an extremely positive score. The next highest, at 2.99, was school staff (office, lunch, bus, etc.). Three of the 38 students did not check an answer under staff, so only 92% of students answered the question. Coming in at a close third was the administration with a 2.95. Again not everyone checked this box, with 37 students answering the question. The next highest was classmates, with the average score being a 2.92. Coming in at a 2.84, Parnassus' teachers came in the least favorably, with students overall feeling as though they had negative experiences with the group. The overall daily interaction rating for the entire school was 3.08, an average of positive interactions.

Daily Interactions Student Responses

There was no surprise from the results that students felt they had the most positive daily interactions with their close friends. "Being with my friends is extremely positive," one friend stated, "because they help a lot and make me happy." The table below illustrates the number of positive and negative interactions students felt they had with each group of people. The total number of comments for each group was very interesting. Students commented most on their friends (sixteen comments), their classmates (fifteen comments) and teachers (thirteen comments). Because students spend the most time interacting with these three groups of people, it was not surprising that they had the most to say about each group.

As was stated above, it came as no surprise that students gave the most positive comments to the friend grouping. Students overwhelmingly stated that they best get through their school day by interacting with their friends in various ways. One response stated "sometimes because of others they help me focus more on my work and help me if I need it." These positive

interactions included students joking with one another, letting off steam from a particular class, or getting help and motivation from other students if it was needed.

However, the classmate student response was more divided. In looking at the chart below, of the fifteen comments made about classmates, six comments were positive while nine were negative. Many of these comments centered on the idea of students being rude and disruptive during the school day. “. . . some people in this school have been rude to me, which made my experience negative,” one student responded. “In this school you get a huge variety of behavior and to be honest most of the behavior is terrible . . .” another student lamented. These negative behaviors from their classmates had taken away from some students classroom experience, with the distraction being too much to get any positive work done.

The teacher category was another close one. Of the thirteen students who wrote comments on teacher interactions, five comments were positive while eight were negative. Some students felt that they did not get the respect from their teachers that they felt they needed to succeed. “Teachers, on the other hand, (a couple of them) ‘abuse’ their authority, which either makes me annoyed or angry” one student stated. One student summed up nicely the effect that these daily interactions can have on a student’s psyche on a daily basis, stating

my experience with scholars or teachers affect me drastically because if I have a positive day with my peers and teachers I’d have a positive attitude compared to when I have a bad day. All in all interactions affect a scholars attitude.

This cyclical notion that student attitude affects student interactions, and visa versa, tells me that interaction and environment go hand in hand with students in a setting such as Parnassus.

Staff and administrators both received the least amount of comments overall, with staff receiving seven comments and administrators five comments. Students were relatively split on positive and negative comments for the two groups, with one student saying “...while staff and administration sometimes don’t care if I need help with something and ignore some things.” Others noted the overall “dysfunction” of the administration and those who are in the most powerful positions in the school. However, others felt that staff and administrators were good people to go to when they had problems and needed them solved, with one student stating “these experiences add to my overall experience because whenever I talk to someone (staff/admin/teachers) I feel better about school.” The act of listening and taking into account student voices makes for a more cohesive relationship amongst administrators and students.

Table 5: Summary of Total Responses for School Interactions

Group	Number of Positive Comments	Number of Negative Comments	Total Number of Comments
Friends	14	2	16
Classmates	6	9	15
Teachers	5	8	13
Staff	4	3	7
Administration	2	3	5

Class Support

The final question asked of students was for them to rate how supported they felt academically in each one of their classes. All thirty eight students whose parents signed the letter

of consent wrote responses to the survey question. Support looks like students feeling welcomed in class, being able to ask the teachers questions, and how encouraged they are to complete their work at a high level. Students once again had to rate their six classes: English, Math, History, Languages (Spanish/Latin), Science and Electives (gym, art, band) based on how supported they felt in each class. Students selected that each class was either extremely supportive, supportive, not supportive or extremely not supportive. Each of the four supportive categories was scored on a one to four scale, with extremely supportive earning a four and extremely not supportive earning a one and so forth.

The highest rated class in terms of student support was English, which earned an average score of 3.66. Once again the survey administrator bias comes into play, as students were more likely to rate my English class highly because they knew I would be the one looking at the surveys. The next most supportive class according to my thirty-eight students was Math with a 3.24. Once again, the two of the 38 students whose surveys was analyzed who took their math classes at the University of Minnesota did not check a box for this question. After this were the two languages Parnassus offers, Spanish and Latin, which had an average support rating of 2.99. Electives came in next at 2.84, firmly sitting in the not supportive category. However, like in previous questions, not all of the thirty-eight students checked an answer under Electives, with one student leaving it blank. The second least supportive class was Science, with an average score of 2.79. The least supportive class of students at the time of the survey was History, with a score of 2.42, closer to extremely not supportive than not supportive. The average support score for all six classes was 2.99, just barely dipping into the not supportive territory.

Class Support Student Response

In reading through the student surveys, it seemed as though class support was where they had the strongest reactions and thoughts. The table below highlights the number of comments students made about each subject, as well as the number of positive and negative comments about each subject. According to the table, student wrote the most comments on English (fourteen comments), Math (fifteen comments) and History (fifteen comments). The most positive comments were written about English with fourteen, and the most negative comments were written about History with fourteen. It is important to remember the power differential when it comes to the results for my English class. Because students knew I would be looking at their surveys, there is a greater chance that my scores were higher because of the position of power I was in.

Students gave the most positive comments to English and Math, with students stating how helpful the class was to their overall academic benefit. “English is helpful because it helps expand our vocabulary and other things,” one student wrote. Another student stated “English and Math teachers know exactly what they are doing and treat students fairly.” The theme of fairness came up again and again in reading student comments on academic support, with students feeling some teachers were more fair than others. “I put extremely supportive for math because my teacher explains all the concepts to make sure students understand. If we don’t understand, I don’t feel nervous to ask a question,” one student wrote. Comfortability is a major factor when it comes to student engagement and the level of support a student feels in the classroom.

In classes where students felt less support, such as in History, Science, and the Languages (Latin and Spanish) curriculum applicability and teacher engagement were major factors. Students described “packets being shoved in their faces” and “having to cram facts in one class

period,” not having enough time to let information soak in and become relevant. A lack of student understanding in these courses leads to students feeling disengaged and disinterested in the material, with one student saying “...if you don’t understand something (the teacher) says it’s your fault, even if every person in the class except for maybe one or two people don’t understand (the teacher) will start comparing you to those students.” Students need to feel that their voices are heard in the classroom and that their questions and concerns are going to be accounted for by their teachers.

Table 6: Summary of Total Response for Class Support

Class	Number of Positive Comments	Number of Negative Comments	Total Number of Comments
English	14	0	14
Math	11	4	15
History	1	14	15
Languages	1	6	7
Science	2	7	9
Electives	0	4	4

Conclusions of Survey Analysis

Each of the four questions students were asked on the survey asked them to tap into their true feelings towards the affective and cognitive environments of their school setting. One trend that was not surprising was the fact that students wrote mostly negative comments in the open ended response sections than positive ones. When given the opportunity to state their thoughts

and opinions on all things school, students jumped at the chance to give them as honest and forthcoming as possible. A need for structure is another aspect of student life that many responders sought. The hallways and buses, in particular, were where students noted the lack of authoritative structure. Regardless of educational philosophy, this is a common issue no matter the school. The rambunctiousness of these spaces made students feel unsafe and uneasy, leading to overwhelmingly negative comments and scores on the Likert scale.

Student voice, or lack thereof, was another major theme found throughout the four categories on the student survey. The “class support” category specifically dealt a great deal with students feeling whether their voices were heard or not, with classes receiving not supportive and extremely not supportive ratings for not giving their students the proper spaces to speak their minds or share their thoughts or concerns. When students felt that they were in an environment that was fair with a teacher that was forthcoming about what was expected with clear and well laid out guidelines, students were much more likely to score the class as either extremely supportive or supportive. While the results were not directly in relation to the school’s classical philosophy, it was easy to note that the specific classes students felt strongly about were ones that connect to the philosophy specifically. Classical education places a great emphasis on the languages (specifically Latin), and students held many strong feelings regarding their language education. While not dealing directly with classical education, history classes at the school differ from public school social studies classes because of its lack of local history, while math classes follow a certain framework throughout the grades. Students thrive in an environment where they feel accepted, where they feel like their thoughts and personal growth truly matters, and where

they know they are fully supported by the school staff and faculty around them. The surveys proved these thoughts and then some.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Introduction

The environment where a student attends school paints a picture of the type of student the child will be. I had always grown up going to public schools, so in beginning to work at a public charter classical school, it was a major difference in both tone and style. In my school and classroom it was easy to notice the ways students interacted with one another and the school environment around them. My observation of these interactions lead me to wonder if there was a greater story of how students felt about the learning going on in school. It was through these observations that I decided to answer the question: how do students in a classical school feel about their affective and cognitive environments?

In considering this question, the goal was to give students a vessel where they could share their thoughts and opinions on their affective and cognitive environments. The decision was to give all seventy students in my eighth grade class a survey asking them four different questions regarding their affective and cognitive environments. Each question had a Likert scale that students check off and an open response portion where students could further extrapolate on their answers. The questions on the survey were based off of the research that was found on student affective and cognitive environments, much of which was based on middle school students like mine.

In the first section of the chapter I review the research I had found, relating it back to my survey and its results. Next I will make conclusions based on the data from my survey and figure out how it relates to my thesis question. I will then discuss the limitations of the survey and data collection and how I could have better performed and implemented the survey. This will lead into a discussion on what future research could be done on the subject and how studying and attempting to answer this thesis question has made me a better educator, student, and researcher.

Literature Review

In attempting to decide the direction to take my research, the decision was made to break it down in a way where each major piece of my thesis question would be accounted for. While I have focused a great deal of my time during graduate school studying student affective and cognitive environments and their relationship with students, the idea of how a classical environment could affect a student socially and academically was a new one. I decided to focus one section on affective environments and student learning, most notably during the middle school years. I then discussed students cognitive environments and how they relate to student grades and development. I spent a section of the literature review discussing the history and benefits of charter schools and how school choice affects student environment. Finally, I focused on classical education specifically, exactly what it entails and how it could affect student environment.

One of the most important pieces of literature that prompted me on my path was a quote from Trina Epstein and Elias (1996) stating that teachers needed to focus just as much on student social and emotional intelligence as their academic. For me the Epstein and Elias (1996) quote means that as a teacher there is a recognition that the interactions students have on a daily basis

greatly affect the way that students see themselves and the world around them. Epstein and Elias (1996), as well as the researchers Fuchs and Fuchs (1996), made it very clear that teachers needed to not only provide strong academic content for their students but to give them social and emotional tools that would help them in their everyday lives outside of schools. Reviewing research that explores how students interact with one another and their school environments, was a major inspiration for my survey questions on school environments as well as student interactions. As a teacher, it is important to have your students know that they have a voice in the classroom and that this voice is important. If students feel they are in a classroom that respects their ideas and values them as individuals, then those students will feel more at peace with their environment. Analyzing my survey results provided me a window into my students thinking and created a better understanding of why Epstein and Elias (1996), Fuchs, and Fuchs (1996) felt so strongly that social skills should be a staple of any formative student education.

The review of the research literature created strong support for the idea that the way students acquire knowledge in a school setting is paramount to academic success. The research focus on cognitive environments was very important to my survey and gave me a great number of ideas on directions to take the survey questions. Going into the research, the number one topic to find out more on was student disengagement. Both Wilkie and Sullivan (2018) and De La Paz et al. (2017) spoke extensively on student disengagement in the subjects of math and writing, respectively. De La Paz et al. (2017) stated that it was imperative that teachers give their students space to write to show what they know not only in their own classrooms, but in the outside world as well. Keeping student thinking in a box, not supporting their drive to learn or stifling their

creative thinking, will only keep students disengaged and unfocused on what is going on in the classroom.

The researcher Born et al. (2010) focused on how cooperating learning environments, that is positive student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions, create positive cognitive environments. If students feel like they are well supported, like they are apart of a larger group of scholars, then they will more positively associate their environments with gaining knowledge. Based on the survey results, it was clear that students felt a part of a larger group. Many of the students felt similar ways about certain classes or parts of the school, and this common bond was apparent in their responses. Student support was a major question on my survey and one that allowed me to gain a great deal of insight into the cognitive environments of my students.

The final piece to the literature puzzle was classical education, the backdrop to the entire capstone thesis. While I knew a great deal about the history of classical education and its many facets, much of the new knowledge was gained by examining researchers like Howe (2011). What was most striking about the literature reviewed for this capstone was the emphasis on who exactly benefited from classical education. Howe (2011) stated that it was mainly “white males” who benefited from the type of education, with assimilation to Western philosophies the primary reason for educating nonwhites and female students (¶ 5). This led to the question of who this type of education was truly for. Were the diverse group of eighth graders getting an education that was built for them, that would help them succeed and grow as learners and as people both in and out of the classroom? It was time to find out when gathering the results and drawing conclusions from the student surveys.

Survey Results

Now it was time to find results of my own, and it was decided to do so using an anonymous survey. I wanted to use qualitative data in order to gain a better understanding of the ways my students felt about different aspects of their school environments. I asked my students four main questions on the survey, two questions focusing on their affective environment and two on their cognitive environment. For each question I provided a Likert scale where they would rate certain aspects of the question on a four point scale as well as an open ended response section. This gave me two different data points I could look at for each question.

The first question was on student environments and how positively or negatively students felt in each environment. Students rated the bus as the most negative environment in the school, overwhelmingly stating how vastly chaotic and unstructured the bus was. That was a common theme among student data; the most negative spaces in the school were ones where chaos reigned. In a future literature review, it would be beneficial to take a look at what historically are seen as positive or negative spaces in a school. The hallways and classrooms were also two negative spaces for students, whereas the office was the most positive. I then had students rate how beneficial academically they felt each one of their classes were. Students rated the most beneficial class as English, however there were most likely some discrepancies in terms of how that course was rated (which will be discussed in the next section). Students then rated math as the next most beneficial class, stating that working with numbers would benefit them in their future math courses. The lowest rating was given to electives (gym, music, art) as students did not see any long term benefit for these courses outside of the confines of school.

Students were then asked about their daily interactions with different members of the school population and how positive or negative these interactions were. As was no surprise,

students found they had the most positive interactions with their friends, stating overwhelmingly that interacting with their friends was the most positive and rewarding part of their days. Each of the four other categories fell into the negative interactions column, with daily interactions with teachers coming in at the most negative. Lack of listening from teachers was the main student qualm, with many students feeling their voices were not heard by the people in authority at the school. Finally, students were asked about how supported they felt academically in each of their classes. English was the class rated the highest (again, to be discussed in the next section). Math came in as the second most supportive, while Science and History both came in at the least supportive end of the scale. Many of the comments were reminiscent of the studies done by Born et al. (2010) on student-to-teacher interactions. Students clearly felt the lack of classroom community, and if a student felt like they were being called out by a teacher or not supported academically, then they were more likely to give a negative rating. Student voice and subject applicability were two of the most common themes students wrote about, with a majority of students saying the least supportive classes did not give them enough opportunity to ask questions or connect with the material in any intimate ways.

Based on the Likert scale results and short answer responses, students overall feel negatively about their affective and cognitive environments at school. However, it is difficult to say whether or not this is directly related to the fact that they attend a Classical school. What was most striking about the results of the surveys was the juxtaposition between what the school labels itself as and how the students actually feel. The rigid power structures and “sage on the stage” mentality of teacher-student relationships is exactly the type of structure that students noted and disliked in the surveys. Students want to be able to connect with the people and

environments around them, to feel like they are being heard and listened to and supported. This was most evident within certain school spaces such as hallways and the cafeteria. Wellenreiter (2018) stated that these spaces were sacred ones, ones where students felt the most vulnerable and had the least autonomy. The correlation between the student survey results and Wellenreiter's study suggest that these in-between areas of a school are essential to student wellness and outlook. These needs are increasingly important, and if we as teachers cannot get on the same level as our students and are blind to where they come from then we are losing the battle of student-teacher connection.

Survey Limitations

While overall I feel as though the survey results were a success, there were a number of limitations and problems that I ran into that I did not foresee at the outset. Over the course of planning my survey, I wanted to make sure that students had as much time and space available to voice their ideas on the different subjects. For this reason, I decided not to have students write their names on the surveys to protect their anonymity and allow them access to say whatever they felt without having their name attached to it. And while this did help in several instances, it did not help students when discussing my own class.

Before posing the questions to my students, I did not foresee any bias that could have occurred with the results. I asked students about all aspects of their schooling, kept the surveys anonymous, and asked students to share as much or as little as they felt comfortable with. However, the students were made very well aware of the fact that these results would be contributing towards my final thesis paper for graduate school. On the top of the survey, it stated that I (Mr. Meaney) would be the only one reading these surveys and calculating the results. This

automatically put in the students' minds that they needed to say nicer things about my class (English) than the others because they knew I would be reading it. The results correlate; on both of the Likert scales that asked students to rate class benefit and student support English was by far the highest ranking class.

So what could have been done? To start, I probably did not need to put my class at all on the Likert scales. The data was far too skewed to add any relevance towards my conclusion, so not having students rate or respond to English class would have done more good than harm. Another way I could have avoided such a large upswing in positive comments for my class would have been to work with another teacher and have them administer the survey. The inherent power of me passing out and collecting their surveys more than likely had a correlation between their overwhelmingly positive comments towards my class. Had another teacher administered the survey and I not have been in the room observing, the results could have been much different.

Another interesting factor that was not foreseen at the outset was the weather. The week before the survey was administered our school, like many across the state, had a string of cold weather/snow days off that gave us nearly an extra week off of school. Lessons were moved around, students and teachers had to play catch up, and the whole school felt off kilter with the lack of days and tumultuous weather. Giving the survey out right after all of that upheaval more than likely had a negative effect on the surveys, as students were feeling out of sorts and tired from the lack of school. While it would have been impossible to predict such weather, and as Minnesota weather is notoriously nasty during that time of year, it was still not the ideal environment for students to take a survey detailing their in school experiences. Despite these

limitations, the survey has inspired new ideas on future research that could be conducted on student affective and cognitive environments.

Future Research

There were a number of aspects of student environment that I would have liked to dive more deeply into that would be beneficial steps to take in the future. I would have liked to take advantage of the diversity of my school and see how the results of the study would have looked between students of color and white students. Because our school is so diverse and the needs of our students change greatly, it would have been interesting to see what these diverse students had to say about these survey questions and to see how the diversity would correlate. Having a school that creates a welcoming environment for all of its students is no small task, especially in a school that is as diverse as mine. However, finding out where the gaps are and trying to fill those specific gaps would be an excellent step in the right direction in creating a safe and supportive environment for all students.

Another interesting step to take the research would be to expand who takes the survey within the school. Because the school I work at is a Kindergarten through Twelfth grade school, there are a number of different voices that have completely different experiences within one building. It would be a very interesting and beneficial task to ask each of the grade levels, all thirteen of them, these questions in order to get a broader sense of how the school as a whole is doing in terms of affective and cognitive environments. Another interesting aspect of the school environment that would lead to interesting results would be the attrition rate of the school. The school as a whole houses the three major school levels (elementary, middle, and high schools) in one building, and the overall number of students lessens as one moves from elementary to

middle to high school. It would be very interesting to use data from all three school levels to see what the correlation would be between student responses and attrition rates among the three schools.

Now of course this would be no easy task. I would need to reword and rework questions based on the level of schooling the students are at. It of course would not make any sense to give a student in second grade the same questions as a sophomore in high school, and visa versa. However, as long as the overall theme of the questions were the same then the data collected from them would tell us a much more detailed story of how we as a school caters to the wants and needs of our students. Surveying my eighth graders gave me an amazing amount of insight as to how they think and feel on a daily basis during the school day; imagine the conclusions that could be drawn from looking at the broader scope of a child's entire school life from Kindergarten through senior year. Taking the broadening one step further, it would be a benefit to classical educators to have the survey taken by all of the classical schools in the Twin Cities area. Not only would we have the data from my school, but numerous sets of data from students all over the area who have similar experiences but completely different environments. These present and future findings have the potential to make me a stronger teacher and researcher.

Growth as a Teacher, Student, and Researcher

When I first set out to find what my thesis question would be, I knew that I wanted to better understand the ways in which my students thought and felt about their time in school. I noticed a disassociation with some students, a feeling of being lost or left out that I myself had never quite seen before. I wanted to know if it was because the school was a classical one that made any difference in the ways they felt in their affective and cognitive environments. While

the specificity of the type of school they occupy definitely plays a factor, the results of the research and data collected from the surveys paints a much larger picture of the way students operate in not just a classical school, but any school.

When starting out as a teacher, I made assumptions about my students that looking back were completely unfair. Whether we want to or not, teachers tend to think all students will think and act like they themselves thought and acted when they were students themselves. I was no different. School was always a safe environment. It allowed me to explore subjects and ideas that I would not otherwise have thought to delve into. It was a place in which I felt at home at, a place I succeeded at, and a space that I felt that I belonged. Because I held these beliefs as a student myself, I foolishly assumed that most students were like I was. Through the results of this survey, it was very easy to realize that this was not at all the case.

What students crave more than anything, especially adolescent students, are structure and autonomy. If these results have taught me anything as a teacher is that those moments when students feel we are not watching, where they feel they are free to do what they please, is when they feel the most vulnerable. Places like the hallways, buses and lunchrooms (ones that scored lowest on the survey) in particular allow students to feel unwatched and unsafe. While they may not show it to us all of the time, students crave structure and knowing what will happen next. Too much open time leads to student disconnect. Keeping student voice at the forefront means not only listening to what they have to say, but utilizing what they have to say and making necessary changes that will benefit all students. A one size fits all model of teaching simply doesn't work, nor should it. Students are complex individuals who are the most impressionable, vulnerable versions of themselves, especially at the eighth grade level. Truly listening to what

students want and need both in and out of the classroom is something I will take with me throughout my years of teaching, and I hope my fellow peers in the field will do the same.

This thesis has proven that I cannot simply box myself in to a certain style of teaching. Thousands of scholars before me have been doing groundbreaking research to help generations of teachers succeed in the classroom, and it was naive of me to think that I had the answers innately. Conducting this research and studying the great thinkers before me have given me the tools necessary to give my students the best chance for success, whatever that may look like. If I ever doubt myself or find myself straying from the path, I will look to scholars and teachers of the past to help guide my thinking and find new ways to have an impact in the classroom. Just as we should be listening to the voices of our students and creating the most positive environments based on these voices, we also need not ignore the voices of those who have come before us. We as teachers are a powerful, strong group who want what's best for our students, so I hope my research shows that we need to be working together and listening to the voices of everyone to create the strongest environments possible.

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