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The Role of a Positive Emotional Learning Environment in a Secondary Religious Education Classroom in Toronto Canada

Practice Based Enquiry Dissertation
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Abstract

This qualitative research study aims to provide an understanding of how the implementation of a positive emotional learning environment supports students in their learning. In order to explore this, research was conducted in Toronto, Canada in a religious education centre in a classroom of grade 8 students. The researcher implemented a positive emotional learning environment in her classroom and used questionnaires, focus groups and student journals to gain a student perspective on what best supports them in their learning. There is vast research on how the physical space can hinder or enhance student learning, however there is very little research that focuses on the emotional learning space, and the factors that contribute to it. Literature suggests that there are certain needs students have in order to thrive in their educational settings. These needs were incorporated into a checklist that was used by the researcher to create a positive emotional learning environment. This study found that by creating an emotionally positive and secure environment, student learning was enhanced, students were more confident, and that they engaged more in classroom activities and discussions.

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List of Abbreviations

IIS	Institute of Ismaili Studies
IOE	Institute of Education
ITREB	Ismaili Tariqah Religious Education Board
REC	Religious Education Centre
STEP	Secondary Teacher Education Programme
UCL	University College London

Glossary

Term	Meaning
Allahu Akbar	Arabic term meaning *God is Great*
Bait Ul Ilm (BUI)	Arabic term meaning *House of Knowledge*. Religious education centres in Canada are commonly referred to as BUI.
Gucciest	Gucciest is a slang term, stems from the popular and posh clothing brand Gucci. When someone says “you’re Gucci”, it means that you’re ‘hype’ you’re awesome, you’re really cool, etc.
Ismaili	A sect of Shi’a Muslims – known as Shi’a Imami Ismailis. The research was conducted within an Ismaili based community. All participants involved are of this religious background.
Jamat Khane	Place of worship and gathering for the Shia Ismaili Muslims.
Mawla	*Mawla* is one of the terms used to describe the Spiritual Leader of the Ismaili Muslims.
Tariqah	Path or Interpretation of Islam

Chapter 1: Introduction

"The strength of our student relationships makes the difference in transferring our passion for teaching into their passion for learning" (Morrow, 2016, p.1).

My entire life has centred around being inside a classroom. When I was just over two years old my parents put me in day-care. I then moved onto primary school, secondary education, and then attended Queen's University in Kingston Ontario where I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Education. I knew from a young age that I wanted to be a teacher, and that is exactly what I did. I taught Grade 1 at an American curriculum school in the Middle East for three years immediately after I graduated, and for the first time in my life I stood on the opposite side of the classroom. Even though I was still learning new things, I was no longer a student in the conventional form. After three years had passed, I decided that I wanted to go back to school to further develop my teaching practice. Once again I was back in the classroom as a student, and it was at that moment I realised just how similar and different the teaching styles of all my teachers had been to my own. I began to compare and contrast different behaviours and constantly thought to myself, "I would never do that if I was this teacher" or "I would definitely use this in my teaching practice". I began to reflect upon my earlier years in school and the things that stood out to me the most about my teachers were either how kind they were to their students, or how awful I thought they were. This was of course subjective, but I was able to look back at the teachers that positively impacted my life, and realised that one of the most important qualities that I wanted to possess as an educator was the ability to create a strong rapport with each one of my students. I believe that in building these relationships, a teacher is taking a step towards creating a safe and positive learning environment for his or her students, and this has become something that I have centred around my personal teaching philosophy.

Before exploring the link between learning environments and student learning, I first had to differentiate between them. Learning environments are heterogeneous; and were categorised three types First there is the *physical* learning environment which Asiyai (2014) describes as “classroom surroundings including the spatial arrangement of furniture, walls, ceiling, chalk board, lighting, fittings, decorative and all the physical enablers of teaching and learning in the classroom” (p. 717). Secondly there is the non-tangible *social* learning environment, which occurs when collaborative and social learning is present (Torres-Diaz et al., 2015). This implies development of “skills, attitudes, and values necessary to form relationships and successfully negotiate social interactions” (Nolan, 2016, p. 18). Finally there is the *emotional* learning environment, which has been the primary focus of this dissertation. Aydogan (2012) defines emotional learning environments as “the extent to which the teacher displays positive (warm and respectful) or negative (anger, sarcasm, and irritability) emotions toward children, how sensitive he/she is to children’s levels of academic and social functioning, as well as how responsive he/she is to the needs of children in these areas of functioning determine the level of emotional support provided to children” (p.18).

Each of these environments are catalysts for “intellectual stimulation” and important factors “in strengthening the child’s educational development” (Asiyai, 2014, p. 717). Before reading Aydogan’s (2012) research I had never been exposed to the term *emotional learning environments*, or their significance in the classroom and thus felt it appropriate to focus on components of the one learning environment which can really effect change in the classroom; the emotional learning environment.

Rationale

Secondary students are at a stage in their lives where emotions play an important role in their behaviour (Vadeboncoeur and Collie, 2013). Like students, teachers’ emotions also play a powerful role in the way they behave, and execute their lessons. I can still remember how unpleasant my grade 11 Biology teacher was. She would call students names like ‘stupid’, put them down in front of the class by insulting their intelligence, and use language like “don’t piss me off today” on a regular basis. My friends and I constantly felt the hostility in that class, and her behaviour establisehd a dynamic in the classroom which was markedly different than that of our other classes. My teacher’s behaviour and interactions created a ‘negative emotional learning environment’ within that classroom, and my experiences have made me believe that negative emotional learning environments are more prevalent than we think. This is why I wanted to look at the implications of a positive emotional learning environment, and how it impacts student learning. Aydogan’s (2012) characterization of emotional learning environments weighs the teacher as the primary catalyst of controlling the atmosphere of emotional environments; which has been my working definition for this dissertation, and is what has shaped the platform for my main and subsidiary research questions.

Research Questions

Main Research Question:

Does introducing a positive emotional learning environment into my classroom support my students in their learning?

Subsidiary Research Questions:

1) In what ways does creating a positive emotional learning environment facilitate student engagement and success?
2) What do students feel leads to a positive environment in the classroom that is conducive to learning?
3) How do teachers establish a positive emotional learning environment in their classrooms?

Purpose

The purpose of this research will be to explore how students respond to the implementation of a positive emotional learning environment. I think that creating a positive emotional learning environment into daily teaching practice can positively influence student learning and behaviour in the classroom.

Context

This small-scale practice-based enquiry (PBE) was conducted in Toronto, Ontario Canada over a period of ten weeks. The *Ismaili Tariqah* Religious Education Board (ITREB) placed me in a community-based religious education centre (REC) for *Shi'a Ismaili* Muslim students. These students attend their secular education classes from Monday to Friday, and would attend their religious education class once a week. My class took place every Saturday from 12:30pm- 2:45pm, with a fifteen-minute lunch break in between. I taught a Grade 8 class of fifteen registered students, but approximately eleven would attend on a regular basis. All religious education centres mandated by the Ismaili Tariqah Religious Education Board (ITREB) use the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) religious education curriculum. Of the eight modules that comprise the curriculum, I taught Muslim Societies and Civilizations Volume Two. All educators teaching this curriculum have completed the Secondary Teaching Education Programme (STEP) situated at the Institute of Education (IOE) at the University College London (UCL). This program rewards its candidates with two Master level degrees upon completion. In Toronto alone, there are over fifteen RECs that Ismaili students can attend and learn about their religious and cultural identities, along with the practices of the Shi'a Ismaili faith.

Aims

The aim of my small-scale intervention was to understand students' perceptions of a positive emotional learning environment, and how that environment impacted their learning and motivation. I was curious to find out how this type of learning environment facilitated student engagement with the classroom content, and how teacher-student relationships played a role in my students' learning. My teaching goal throughout this process was to gain a better understanding of what emotional learning environments are and how they impact my students learning. I wanted to use my findings as a means to inform my own teaching pedagogy. My personal goal for this small-scale action research was to gain a better understand of what practitioner-based research is, and how I can use that to better inform my teaching practices in the future.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of the following chapter is to critically engage with the existing literature surrounding my topic of enquiry. It will discuss and critique the research claims that have been made regarding positive emotional learning environments, including motivational theories, student-teacher interactions, word choices and verbal praise; all of which would fall under a positive emotional learning environment. This literature review discusses in depth the implication of each of these practices within a classroom, and how these teacher behaviours motivate students in their learning.

Motivational Theories

Before considering the literature that examines teacher-student relationships and language use in the classroom, it would be appropriate to understand some of the root causes of intrinsic motivation for student learning. Two theories that will be briefly outlined are Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Deci and Ryan's theory of self-determination.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's model of human motivation classified people's basic needs into five categories: "physiological, safety and security, belongingness, [self]-esteem, and self-actualization" (Lester, 2013, p. 15) (See Appendix 2). The premise behind it is that once the physiological needs are fulfilled, people are then motivated to attain their safety and security needs. Once each need is accomplished, the next need on the pyramid is what motivates humans to behave in ways that allow them to achieve that need (Chandler and Munday, 2011). If this is true, then it can be assumed that fitting in at school, acquiring friendships, and teacher approval motivate students that have attained the first two categories on the pyramid. It is safe to say that basic human needs motivate individuals to behave or act in certain ways, however I am unsure as to what degree the Hierarchy of Needs can be applied to an individual basis. Hofstede (1984) has evaluated and described Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as ethnocentric. He describes a cross-cultural study that concluded that the only country that "ordered their need[s] and their need satisfaction" in the exact order of Maslow's hierarchy was the United States, and that "other nationalities showed more or less deviant patterns" (Hofstede, 1984, p. 396). The Hierarchy of Needs does not consider the cultural differences within societies and "their unique social and intellectual needs" (King-Hill, 2015, p. 55). This is probably because Maslow developed this theory at a time when it was assumed that all new concepts developed in the West could be applied on a universal scale, and at a time where western culture "stressed individual achievement" (Gambrel and Cianci, 2003, p. 152).

Another criticism of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pointed out by Tay and Diener (2011) is that the order in which people fulfill their needs may be skewed depending on the context in which they live. For example, a student in a North American context may be motivated by earning respect or love from his or her peers, even though their safety needs may not be met. In this example, psychosocial needs are more important to that individual than their basic needs of safety and security. An individual's context is a stimulus for what dictates their basic needs, which goes against Maslow's hierarchy (Tay and Diener, 2011). Maslow's lack of a culture-wide approach has been a topic for criticism, however the underlying principle that basic human needs motivate people is still appreciated today. Another theory that supports this principle is Deci and Ryan's theory of self-determination.

Self Determination Theory

According to Pianta et al. (2012), Self Determination Theory suggests that "children and youth are most motivated to learn when adults support their need to feel competent, positively related to others, and autonomous" (p. 372). According to Gagné and Deci (2014), Self Determination Theory emphasises the "essential nature of autonomy" to a large degree; which has been explicitly differentiated from "independence, individualism, defiance and detachment" (p. 6). Autonomy, according to Gagné and Deci (2014), means "volition and endorsement of one's behaviours" (p. 6). Jang and colleagues describe it in more detail as "the need to experience one's behavior as integrated within and endorsed by the self; when [students are] autonomous, [they] initiate and regulate their behaviors with a high degree of volition and a sense of choice" (2009, p. 644). Like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Self Determination Theory has been criticised for its assertion that autonomy is a universal psychological need, when in actuality it is a concept familiar to western societies where "independence and individualism are valued", and irrelevant in "East Asian collectivist cultures, where interdependence and deference are valued" (Gagné and Deci, 2014, p. 7). According to the common Article 1 in International Law, "All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development" (Tenson, 2016, p. 2). If we assume this, then "peoples" (referred to in this context as governed states) are the ones who collectively regulate the self-determination of a population. Are its' citizens then subjected to less or more autonomous behaviours? If they are, then we have to accept that Self Determination Theory is not only influenced by external factors, but also takes away a small portion of an individual's freedom. To most, freedom is considered "highly valuable" (Seebaβ, 2013, p. 3), but in a classroom context how much freedom do students actually have? What I mean by that is although students are provided with choices, for example when teachers differentiate lessons; these choices are limited to what has been outlined by that teacher. Flink et al. (1990) conducted a study that showed when teachers use control strategies (e.g. "directives, evaluation, avoidance of providing choice options") in their classrooms, it impairs their students self-determination (p. 916). If teachers and other adult figures can support their students "autonomy" by providing some form of choice, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated (Flink et al., 1990). In addition to students obtaining autonomy, there are other ways teachers can motivate and support student learning. In the next section of this literature review, I discuss how the relationships between teachers and students are crucial to the ways in which students learn.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Secondary students spend a significant amount of their academic careers with their teachers. That being said, the relationship they carry can be rather impactful to both parties. The "nature and quality" of these relationships are essential to "understanding student engagement" (Pianta et al, 2012, p. 365). Engagement can be defined as "being actively committed", and to be engaged is defined as "to involve oneself or become occupied; to participate" (Fredricks et al, 2004, p. 60). Pianta and colleagues have provided an extension to the definition of engagement as

> "a relational process. It reflects students' cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and motivational states and capacities but is conditioned in part on interpersonal relationships as activators and organizers of these states and capacities in the service of some larger developmental task or aim" (2012, p. 366).

From this we understand that engagement involves active participation, but also that it is a process with many components, one of these being the positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students. These relationships have the ability to elicit progressive emotional and motivational states. If this is true, then we can assume that a negative teacher-student relationship may provoke digressive emotional and motivational states, resulting in "greater classroom disengagement" (Archambault et al, 2017, p. 1702). Leitão and Waugh's (2007) define positive teacher-student relationships as being:

> "Characterised by mutual acceptance, understanding, warmth, closeness, trust, respect, care and cooperation. The success of any interpersonal relationship is dependent to a large extent upon input from both parties" (Bruney, 2012, p. 14).

I have chosen this description of positive teacher-student relationships to be my working definition throughout this dissertation because it underlies a very important aspect of these relationships, and that is *mutual acceptance.* If one party is not cooperating, a positive relationship cannot be constructed. One thing worth mentioning is the word *closeness* in the definition, which can be interpreted in multiple ways. Adopting an extreme form of attachment to a teacher, and vise versa can cause a spectrum of problems that may lead to conflict and avoidance, in turn disrupting the dynamics of the classroom. For example, if a teacher is too kind to his or her students in order to develop that sense of closeness, students may take advantage of their kindness. When this happens, students do not associate their teacher as an authoritative figure, resulting in “highly chaotic classrooms” (Brophy, 1976, p. 44). Classroom management is then lost, resulting in a lack of participation.

Another example is when teachers develop “primarily affective attitudes about their students” (Brophy and Good, 1974, p. 129). If a teacher develops a stronger bond to a particular student, it may subconsciously grow into favouritism. I appreciate Leitão and Waugh’s definition of positive teacher-student relationships, however I think the disclaimer is that, unfortunately we will not have identical relationships with each of our students. As teachers subconsciously, or consciously label students, those labels are reflected in the ways that teachers act towards students. For example, a low achieving student, or a student with a negative demeanor may repulse a teacher; contrarily, a teacher may be attracted to a student that has positively contributed to the class and works hard (Brophy and Good, 1974). How students interpret other relationships in the classroom may be detrimental to their own relationships with their teachers (Brophy, 1976). There are several factors that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship as Bruney (2012) describes; however, all of these factors may not always be present.

The harsh reality is that today's generation of students "can no longer be counted on to automatically respect and comply with the behavioural and academic expectations imposed by teachers" (Fredricks et al, 2004, p. 59). The question now is how do, and why should educators develop meaningful relationships that promote student engagement? Educationalists including Pianta and colleagues have outlined domains that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship; this section has touched upon the topic of teachers as moral agents, but primarily focuses on the importance of an emotional interaction domain within a classroom. Each topic has been highlighted below and is accompanied by commentary from academic scholars who have researched these areas.

Bowlby's Theory of Attachment

Bowlby's attachment theory has been used to explain how bonding experiences between infants and their caregivers have longstanding effects on "personality development" and "interpersonal functioning" (Levy, 2013, p. 1133). It suggests that human beings have naturalistic tendencies to remain close to "attachment figures (supportive others)" in order to protect themselves "against psychological or physical threats" when they are "in distress" (Richard and Schat, 2011, p. 169). If attachment figures are sensitive and receptive to the individual, it provides a "sense of security" for infants, implying that a lack of response promotes self-doubt and insecurity (Richard and Schat, 2011, p. 169). If this happens, "children can develop insecure patterns of attachment that are negative for children's development" (Fosen, 2016, pp. 33-34). Teachers are representative of "supportive others", which would mean that fostering a relationship that allows students to feel secure and confident is imperative to a students future relationships and their learning. Research demonstrates that the stronger their emotional connections are with their teachers, the more likely it is that students will "demonstrate positive trajectories of development in both social and academic domains

(Pianta et al., 2012, p. 372). In their research, Pianta et al. (2012) assessed student engagement through standardised observation methods. They used the Teaching Through Interactions (TTI) framework (See Appendix 3) as a measurement tool to observe "teacher-student relationships and interactions" (Pianta et al., 2012, 378). Through this they were able to identify three dimensions of emotional supports in the classroom: "classroom climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives" (Pianta et al., 2012, p. 378). Whilst their study supports the purpose of my action research, their methods are confined to only observations and other theoretical studies. Student voice is not taken into consideration and their solution to promoting student engagement in the classroom assumes that it would work on a universal scale. It does not discuss other geographical, cultural or religious contexts that may not be able to use the framework provided. It would be understandably difficult to conduct research that could be applied on a universal scale. I will therefore assume it is reliable, in hopes of determining that fostering a positive emotional climate is imperative to student development.

Emotional Climates

Positive emotional environments encompass "the degree to which students experience warm caring relationships […] and enjoy the time they spend in the classroom" (Pianta et al., 2012, p. 373). Some elements rooted within "warm caring relationships" are teacher sensitivity, a teacher's high regard for students' perspectives and instructional learning formats (which focus on the "extent to which teachers provide interesting activities") (Pianta et al., 2012, pp. 374-376). If you reference this back to the checklist (See Appendix 1), you will notice that all of these are components of what has been defined as a positive emotional learning environment. On the contrary, negative emotional climates are "those in which students experience frequent yelling, humiliation, or irritation in interactions with teachers" (Pianta et al., 2012, p. 373).

These types of aggressive behaviours manifested by teachers share a direct correlation with the downward spiral of student engagement and achievement (Archambault et al., 2017). There are some issues with how a "negative climate" has been labeled and outlined here. As Romi et al. (2011) point out, aggressive behaviours cannot be universally defined. Teachers have to constantly respond to "serious provocation" from students, which requires "an effective and timely response to protect the rights" of other individuals in the class (Romi et al., 2011, p. 232). It is imperative that teachers respond in ways that do not have detrimental effects on student learning, however responses will vary depending on the teacher's individual, cultural and geographical contexts. For example, a study conducted in Zimbabwe by education psychologist Almon Shumba (2007) suggests that the ways that teachers respond to their students can be categorically defined as emotional abuse. Shumba (2007) defines emotional abuse as (but not limited to) "verbal aggression, humiliation, belittling, shouting, scolding, labeling, and terrorizing of pupils by teachers in schools" (p. 140). He suggests that emotional abuse in the Zimbabwean classroom is frequent because it is a culture that is unfamiliar with the term "emotional abuse", what constitutes as emotional abuse, and the long-term detrimental effects of it (Shumba, 2007, p. 140). Shumba's results demonstrate that emotional abuse causes severe symptoms including a shift in self-perception "from positive to negative", headaches, stomachaches, school avoidance and depression (2007, p. 141). All are a direct result of a negative emotional climate created by teachers.

However, Shumba fails to acknowledge that emotional abuse is not solely based on cultural or geographical contexts, but is based on the individual teacher. Shumba's 'fuzzy' generalizations paint a negative picture of teachers in the Zimbabwean classroom context as being emotionally abusive, and he fails to discuss how teachers in western contexts are capable of similar types of behaviours. In fact, it is not abnormal for teachers to label or yell at students in many western contexts. Emotional abuse may be interpreted differently based on the individual teaching context, meaning that a teacher may be oblivious to the idea that they are being emotionally abusive, possibly due to the heavy connotations that term carries. For example, some teachers may not associate yelling with emotional abuse, and sarcasm with humiliation, and although subjective depending on the situation, it is important to be sensitive to each students needs. Teacher sensitivity is referred to as teachers being "attuned and responsive to the individual cues and needs of students in their classrooms" (Pianta et al., 2012, p. 373). If we look back at the narrative I shared in the introduction chapter, Shumba's (2007) definition of emotional abuse is precisely what I described about my grade 11 Biology teacher.

The indications above are all factors of both positive and negative classroom climates. Andersen et al. (2012) conducted a study that explored student perceptions "of their teachers' feelings in everyday classroom contexts" (p. 99). Seventy-nine students participated in focus groups that discussed questions about their experiences at school, and responses were thematically categorised (Andersen et al., 2012). One of the findings that emerged from this study was that if teachers can establish a warm classroom climate, it means that they have created an environment where their students are "generally happy and engaged, enjoy being in the class, and feel emotionally secure" (Andersen et al., 2012, p. 200). However, we need to bear in mind the above definition that was used for positive teacher-student relationship and acknowledge one of its key components: *mutual acceptance.* Like any work environment, teachers too have limitations in creating a warm climate. It is not uncommon for most individual students to experience a wide range of emotions everyday (Andersen et al., 2012). These emotions have the ability to cause a severe impact in classroom dynamics. For example, in the United States of America, approximately five to ten percent of students "display clinically significant forms of aggression" (Alvarez, 2007, p. 1113). That means that in a classroom of twenty or less students, at least one student will behave in an aggressive manner. Regardless of whether this aggression has stemmed from his or her peers, teachers, community or home environment, it is vital that teachers are prepared to make “rapid decision[s] as to how to handle these emotional expressions, whether to attend to them, whether to validate them, and whether to suggest strategies for the children to manage them” (Andersen et al., 2012, p. 200). It is very easy to say that by doing “x” in the classroom students will be highly engaged, but unless “x” is practiced to a significant degree and researched on a global scale, it will never be a universal fact. However, research done by Pianta et al. (2012), Andersen and colleagues (2012), and others do provide recommendations on how to build positive teacher-student relationships as we have discussed. In addition to creating emotionally warm climates, Schwartz (2007) in her research suggests that when teachers represent moral agency, students are more susceptible to positive relationships with their teachers.

Teachers as Moral Agents

Schwartz (2007) conducted a study relating specifically to modeling moral character in the classroom and the positive effects it had on students. She concluded that if teachers model ethical and moral behaviour, then students would do the same. Schwartz identified seven attributes associated with moral character which include:

1. Shows obvious moral concern and care for others;
2. Engages in actions that indicate a commitment to the intellectual and/or emotional development of others;
3. Demonstrates congruence between the individual’s moral statements, understanding, and actions;
4. Grants leeway to self and others;
5. Demonstrates self-reflection and reasoning skill;

6. Regulates his or her own behaviour and emotions in accordance with the social good of others; and
7. Demonstrates empathy and perspective taking (2007, p. 7).

Campbell (2013) describes teachers as having moral agency and being ethical practitioners when they are “reflective” and “attentive” in “how his or her intentions, decisions, conduct, and personal and professional qualities express […] fairness, honesty, patience, empathy, trustworthiness, constancy, and integrity” (p. 414). When teachers become moral agents, students have a primary role model that exhibits these behaviours, enticing them to model the same behaviours. One thing worth mentioning in Campbell’s definition is that it does not explicitly list things or give examples of what does not contribute to moral agency. That being said, all the qualities listed could very well be present in a teacher that also exhibits undesirable traits. According to Campbell’s definition, a teacher can be a moral character, but also fail to build meaningful relationships with his or her individual students. Likewise, a teacher that creates positive rapports may not exhibit moral character traits. The way teachers develop an emotionally warm climate in the classroom, in my opinion, should also be a characteristic of moral agency. Combining moral agency and emotionally warm classroom climates would be ideal in activating student engagement and positive teacher-student relationships. Embedded in both of these ideologies is language, and how the words used by educators in a classroom have monumental implications for how students learn, engage and develop their sense of self.

Word Choices & Verbal Praise

It is important to acknowledge the ways in which students internalise and make meanings from words. For example, the difference in a teacher introducing a spelling test by saying to students, “let’s see how many words you know” verses “let’s see how many words you *already* know” is monumental (Johnston, 2012). The microscopic change in the latter suggests that "any words the child knows are ahead of expectation and, most important, that there is nothing permanent about what is known and not known" (Johnston, 2012, p. 2). It is a subconscious compliment directed towards the intelligence of his or her students. In his book, *Choice Words* Peter Johnston describes language as not only carrying "content", but that language also "bears information about the speaker and how he or she views the listener and their assumed relationship" (2004, p. 6). Whilst Johnston bases his information on his own observational research conducted in multiple classrooms, what he does not take into consideration are the multiple factors such as language barriers and emotional obstacles that may be under the surface. If we exclude these factors, then it would be easy to conclude that positive language will have positive effects on student learning. As educators, we are continuously improvising our responses to students' questions. Certain processes go through our minds like, "do I answer the question? How do I answer the question? If I do not answer it, what do I say in lieu of answering his or her question?" Each response carries the potential to change the child's thoughts and the subsequent interactions with that class (Johnston, 2004). The language that teachers use in the class sets the tone for student motivation, behaviour and teacher-student rapport.

Wolfram (2013) did a study on language prejudice in the classroom and claimed that students acquire and adopt attitudes about language differences early on in their lives. Although Wolfram was referring to dialects different to their own, there are still hints in his study towards the way children perceive the languages that surround them, and how students use their own context as a baseline for what is the correct use of language and what is not. If this is true, then we can assume that students with teachers that are from considerably different cultural backgrounds than their own may not necessarily learn, or be motivated to learn as much as they normally would if they had a teacher with the same, or similar dialect to theirs. The point to be made here is that language, and all its jurisdictions including foreign dialects and word choices, have a significant impact on student learning. Hensley and Burmeister (2004) validate this theory in their commentary on the artistry of communication. They claim that successful leaders recognise that through using effective language, “relationships are built, trust and credibility are established, and respect is gained” (Hensley and Burmeister, 2004, p. 31). This seems rather obvious, but what do we know about implementing effective language and all of its dimensions in our classrooms?

Research has suggested using verbal praise as an intrinsic reward can be used as a tool for student motivation (Morris and Zentall, 2014). Brophy has defined praise as the way we “commend the worth of or to express approval or admiration” (1981, p. 5). He goes further to distinguish between feedback and praise, and suggests that statements inflicted with praise “express positive teacher affect (surprise, delight, excitement) and/or place the student’s behavior in context by giving information about its value or its implications about the student’s status” (Brophy, 1981, pp. 5-6). However, the type of language that is compounded into these sentiments can be detrimental.

Andrei Cimpian (2010), who discusses the implications of generic language in his research conducted a study in which he tested the effects of generic verses non-generic praise on students. He hypothesised that children would be less motivated if generic language was used, and found that exposure to generic language can “impair children’s motivation regardless of whether the expectations it conveys are negative or positive” (Cimpian, 2010, p. 1338). He uses the example of praising a child’s success on a drawing assignment with “You are a good drawer” verses “You did a good job drawing” (2010, p. 1333). The former causes students to “react more negatively to later mistakes” because of its subtle implication to an existing skill or talent (i.e. drawing), which is more likely to be threatened by future mistakes, leading to a stronger reaction

(Cimpian, 2010, p. 1333). “You are a good drawer” is explicitly linked to “unchangeable traits” whereas the latter can be linked to “malleable factors such as effort” (Morris and Zentall, 2014, p.1). The minimal difference between the two acknowledges how subtle differences in the language we use can have consequences for children’s success. Research has indicated that children that receive verbal praise directed at unchangeable traits tend to be less motivated “after failure” than children who “received praise directed explicitly toward effort” (Morris and Zentall, 2014, p. 1). In all of its simplicity, it seems rather easy; however, it is not uncommon for educators to use vague terminology that outlines fixed characteristics like “good” or “super” to describe student work (Wiethoff, 2005, p. 2). When this happens, students are susceptible to these permanent “traits and (in)abilities” (Johnston, 2012, p.10). These characteristics have now defined them, and any “mistakes or unsuccessful attempts” at something, have become “indicators of those fixed characteristics” (Johnston, 2012, p. 10).

We can understand now, that the snowball effect of generic language has long-term effects on student motivation and learning, so how do educators produce an environment where the use of verbal praise is being used to the student’s advantage? Wiethoff’s (2005) research indicates that teachers need to start responding “systematically” as opposed to “spontaneously” to students’ achievements in order for praise to be effective (p. 2). Verbal praise needs to be “contingent”, it must “specify clearly the behaviour being reinforced”, it must be “offered soon after the occurrence of the behaviour being reinforced”, and lastly that it must be “believable to the recipient” (Hancock, 2000, p. 384). If verbal praise does not meet these requirements, it prevents students from attributing “their success to effort and ability” (Wiethoff, 2005, p. 2) and continues to confirm their beliefs of “fixed characteristics” (Johnston, 2012, p. 10). By attributing a student’s success as “smart” for example, we affirm that their failures are evidence of being dumb (Johnston, 2012). Layering fixed characteristics on students as verbal praise can have impacts as severe as deepening their self-esteem issues (Johnston, 2012). On the contrary, using praise in a conscious and systematic way not only motivates students intrinsically, but research shows that when teachers use positive statements at least 70% of the time, between 70-100% of students stated that "they liked school" and it "increased the number of words students read per minute and decreased the amount of errors per minute" (Wiethoff, 2005, p. 2). The social and academic benefits of praise seem to be only advantageous; however Brophy considers the disadvantages of praise and discusses the potential effects it could have on students. In his research he claims that praise creates an environment where boundaries between the teacher and student are created. The person "distributing praise", that is the teacher, takes the role an "authority figure who is judging the behavior of the person being praised", i.e. the student (Brophy, 1981, p. 7). For teachers that want a "more egalitarian relationship with their students", they may dismiss using verbal praise (Brophy, 1981, p. 7). Brophy uses no evidence to support these claims, nor does he justify how using praise would evolve into a less "egalitarian" environment. He further insinuates that avoiding praise allows students "to think for themselves rather than depend on them (the teachers) for guidance" (1981, p. 7). One of his biggest weaknesses is that he generalises praise, and does not consider praising contingently until later on in his paper. To claim that teacher-student relationships may weaken as a result of verbal praise needs to be validated with more research that outweighs the positive effects it has in the classroom.

To be more conscious of the language that educators use in the classroom would be an understatement, especially when there is a direct correlation with selective language and teacher-student rapports, as Wiethoff and Brophy suggest. This review of literature has touched upon the different motivational theories presented by Maslow, and Deci and Ryan. It also discussed teacher-student relationships and what they entail, specifically highlighting how the use of language in the classroom context affects the ways in which students learn and engage with content. Each of these sections was looked at in detail prior to going into the field to conduct my research. In the next chapter, I describe the methodology and methods that were used, and discuss in detail the ethical considerations that took place.

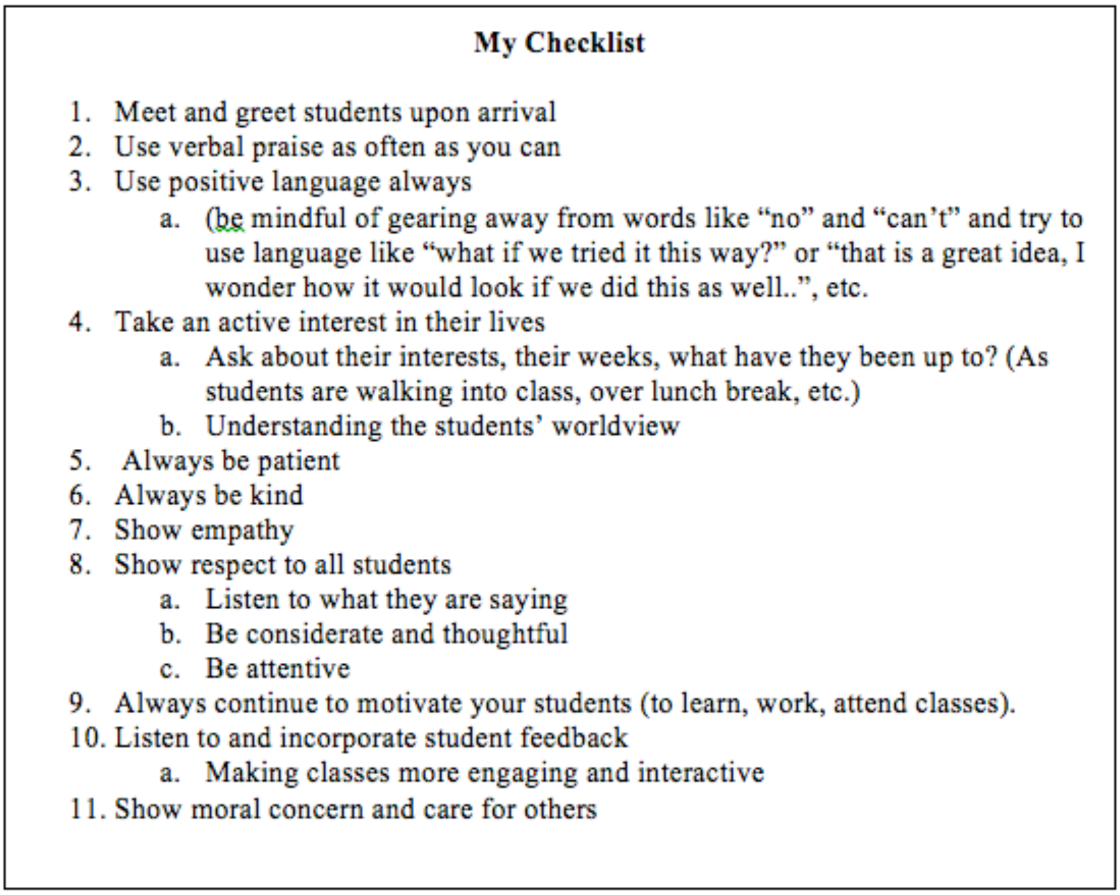
Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

When reflecting upon how I was going to measure the impact of emotional learning environments, I knew what I wanted to find out, but the question of *how* I was going to do that remained uncertain. Silverman (2005) suggests that "Prior structuring of a research design […] is worth considering in more qualitative work". Taking this into consideration, before arriving to Toronto and beginning my research, I submitted a research proposal that outlined the methods I wanted to use. For reasons that I have outlined below, I decided that observations, interviews, focus groups and journal writing would be the best-suited methods for my research topic. I was keen to begin this process, but a week after arriving into the classroom I realised that observations and interviews were not going to work for my enquiry. I decided against using observations because I had no way of objectively observing my action research, and myself as a teacher. I was able to observe student behaviour, however I could only see the positive things that were coming out of my intervention. I was subconsciously being biased, which ultimately led me to my decision of not using observations as a primary data collection tool. I also decided against using one-on-one interviews because of the nature of my enquiry. My action research required participants to comment on their teacher (myself) and discuss their feelings towards my behaviour and the lessons that I implemented. I wanted to ensure the validity of my findings, but was unconvinced that one-on-one student interviews would provide me with honest and accurate data. There would be no way of knowing whether or not my students were being truthful, or if they were simply saying things that they thought I wanted to hear. I had also already planned on using focus groups which would still be problematic; however I believed that placing participants in a group setting might provide comfort and help students respond in a more authentic way. Removing observations and one-on-one interviews meant that I still required a third data collection tool for successful triangulation in my research. I therefore decided to use hard copy paper questionnaires as my last method, which would be distributed to my year 8 students and filled out anonymously. Selecting data collection tools was the biggest challenge in designing my research, as I needed participants to be open and truthful without feeling like they would be reprimanded for any negative feedback. In order to limit this I made sure that the questionnaires and student journals were anonymous, and reminded students that their participation in the focus group interview was optional.

This chapter will outline the design of my study by explaining the type of research I conducted, my intervention, the data tools I used, and will provide a justification of each method. It will describe the benefits and limitations of each tool, as well as discuss the collection procedures whilst also outlining the subjects that participated in the study and describe the ethical considerations that took place. Before I describe the aforementioned chapter components, I would like to give attention to the purpose of this research.

Purpose of Research

As previously mentioned, my purpose for undertaking this action research project was to know how employing a positive emotional learning environment into a grade 8 classroom would effect my students' learning. In order to test this, I created a checklist that incorporated attributes of a positive emotional learning environment, which included Schwartz's (2007) theory on key attributes that encompass moral character, and my own perceptions of what good teaching practice entails.



My Checklist

1. Meet and greet students upon arrival
2. Use verbal praise as often as you can
3. Use positive language always
    a. (be mindful of gearing away from words like "no" and "can't" and try to use language like "what if we tried it this way?" or "that is a great idea, I wonder how it would look if we did this as well..", etc.
4. Take an active interest in their lives
    a. Ask about their interests, their weeks, what have they been up to? (As students are walking into class, over lunch break, etc.)
    b. Understanding the students' worldview
5. Always be patient
6. Always be kind
7. Show empathy
8. Show respect to all students
    a. Listen to what they are saying
    b. Be considerate and thoughtful
    c. Be attentive
9. Always continue to motivate your students (to learn, work, attend classes).
10. Listen to and incorporate student feedback
    a. Making classes more engaging and interactive
11. Show moral concern and care for others

I used the above checklist and implemented these specific behaviours into my practice. In addition, I received student perceptions and feedback through focus groups, questionnaires and reflective student journal writing, and analysed each piece of data to see if students responded to my intentional behaviours, and how that, if at all, impacted their learning. These tools drove my research and aided me in answering my main and subsidiary research questions.

My Intervention

In order to implement a positive emotional learning environment I displayed *moral* and *positive* behaviours in my classroom during each lesson and enquired on how students responded to them. These behaviours included (but were not limited to) being warm and respectful, greeting students upon arrival to class, the use of praise, and using positive language inside the classroom. According to Aydogan (2012), creating an environment that is consistently high in emotional support directly impacts and "fosters children's learning" (p. 19). The literature review describes and outlines Schwartz's (2007) seven attributes that he uses to describe teachers as moral agents (See Appendix 4). I combined Schwartz's (2007) "non-academic characteristics of a quality teacher" with my own ideas of what a quality teacher looks like, and created a checklist (See Appendix 1) that I would use before each of my classes as a conscious reminder of what behaviours I wanted to model throughout the lesson (Nolan, 2016, p. 36). In order to examine the actual influence of this practice, I analysed participant questionnaires, focus groups and their student journals, which have been discussed below.

Methodology

Silverman (2005) states that methodology is "a general approach to studying research topics" (p. 109). Cohen et al. (2007) specify further and describe the aim of methodology as helping "understand, in the broadest possible terms, not the products of scientific inquiry but the process itself (p. 47). And lastly, Hogan (2017) provides a video link to Pachler's definition of research methodology where he states that it is "about finding the most appropriate ways of identifying collected data to answer specific research questions with a view to yielding the sort of evidence one needs" (p. 3). I have encompassed all three of these definitions within this report, describing methodology as the approaches I took to conduct this research, the process that I went through, and how and why I selected the data collection tools that I did, to help aid in answering my research questions. The latter part of this section aims to explain the methodology part of this dissertation.

This project has made use of an action research methodology to investigate the topic. Action research can be defined as "a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 297). It is "research that impacts on, and focuses on, practice" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 29). Going back into my classroom context in Toronto provided me with the opportunity to create and implement, what I would define as a positive emotional learning environment. I was curious as to whether or not positive emotional learning environments in a religious education classroom would support my students in their learning. An action research approach would allow me to implement a small-scale intervention, and explore the effects of it in a qualitative and quantitative way. It was the best methodology to use because I wanted to implement a change in my teaching practice, and see what the effects of that change would be. According to Denscombe (2014), action research has four defining characteristics: *practical nature*, where it deals with "real-word problems", *change,* "as a way of dealing with practical problems and as a means of discovering more about phenomena, *cyclical process* where the research "findings generate possibilities for change which are then implemented and evaluated" again, and lastly *participation* where practitioners continue to be active in their research process (p. 123). This helped me understand the importance of implementing change in my classrooms, but also helped me understand that action research is a continuous process that needs to be actively engaged with. However, due to the evidently small-scale of this research, it becomes difficult to formulate "genuinely new insights" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 311). Any small-scale intervention such as this one may be "accused of being either too minimal to be valid, or too elaborate to be feasible" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 311). However, the practitioner side of me wanted to see how this research could inform my teaching practice now and in the future.

Although there are quantitative components to my investigation, it is primarily qualitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2015), in my opinion, best define qualitative research as "understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). The following chapter provides an analysis of my data and discusses how these findings have informed my practice. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) go further and cite Braun and Clarke's (2013) simplified distinction between quantitative an qualitative research as, “qualitative research […] uses *words* as **data**...collected and analysed in all sorts of ways. Quantitative research, in contrast, uses *numbers* as data and analyses them using statistical techniques” (p. 6). The analysis section of this report focuses largely on words, however I have used numbers and charts to put emphasis on specific pieces of data. Qualitative approaches are commonly “linked to a constructivist theory of knowledge because qualitative methods tend to focus on understanding experiences from the point of view of those who live them” (Rudestam and Newton, 2007, p. 35). I took this approach to better understand my enquiry in my specific context. Many qualitative researchers believe that the most practical way to understand the nature of one’s research “is to become immersed in it” by moving “into the culture” so that it can be experienced first hand (Atieno, 2009, p. 14). However, qualitative data is ambiguous in nature, which leaves room for interpretation when analyzing the data. It is also disadvantageous as its’ findings “cannot be extended to wider populations with the same degree of certainty that quantitative analyses can” because its’ findings “are not tested to discover whether they are statistically significant or due to chance (Atieno, 2009, p. 17). However, it was more important for the researcher to be situated in the context to better understand the dynamics of the environment for the action research. In order to collect data, researchers have to use a variety of instruments or tests (Creswell, 2013). This qualitative research used three primary data collection instruments. The first was hard-copy paper questionnaires, the second was semi-structured student focus groups and the last one was reflective journals.

Questionnaires

In their essence, questionnaires are merely a list of questions designed to collect data for the purpose of, in this case, my action research. In his book *The Good Research Guide,* Denscombe (2014) has outlined three criteria for research questionnaires. The first is that “they should be designed to collect information which can be used subsequently as data for analysis”, the second is that “they should consist of a list of questions” and the third is that “they should gather information by asking people directly about the points concerned with the research” (p. 166). This was the criterion I used when designing my questionnaire. In most cases, questionnaires give respondents the option to answer “in their own words, or by choosing from a set of responses” prepared by the researcher (Rugg and Petre, 2007, p. 142). The questionnaire used for this action research was made so that students could fill it out anonymously. Students were encouraged to be as critical and honest as possible and reassured that nobody, including the researcher would know who filled out which questionnaire. According to Cohen et al. (2007) questionnaires are easy to administer, useful for “collecting survey information”, provide structure and they are usually “straightforward to analyse” (p. 317). The questionnaire used in this research was administered to a total of eleven students and contained a total of nine questions. Questions regarding what motivated students, how interesting and meaningful they thought the curriculum was, how important the social aspects of religious education were, and about their relationship with their religious education teacher were asked throughout the questionnaire (See Appendix 5). The questionnaire was framed in a way so that each answer would provide some insight as to what students believed were important qualities of a religious education classroom, a religious education teacher, and what they believed their teacher’s role entailed.

A total of eight closed questions and one open question were asked, and space was left at the end of the questionnaire where students could make any additional comments of their own. I strategically decided this because closed questions are easier for participants to answer as “they require less physical and mental effort” than open questions do (Peterson, 2000, p. 40). This also resulted in a rapid response rate, and because I was able to get students to fill them out without taking up too much time, a high completion rate as well; both components of a successful questionnaire (Denscombe, 2014). If my questionnaire contained more open questions and had been more time consuming, my sample population and completion rate may not have been as high as it was. Although closed questions traditionally “do not enable respondents to add any remarks, qualifications and explanations to the categories”, I left room for participants with the option to provide more information if they wished to do so (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 321). I did this to decrease the “oversimplifying or mischaracterizing” responses, making the questionnaire as valid and reliable as I could (Peterson, 2000, p. 39). My questionnaire primarily consisted of dichotomous questions, which have “only two possible answers or response categories” (Peterson, 2000, p. 39). On my questionnaire, the questions look as though there were more than two possible choices, making them seem multi-categorical, however, they are simply closed questions with a “series of dichotomous questions” (Peterson, 2000, p. 39). Consider question #1 on the questionnaire (See Appendix 5). It lists off a variety of answers, but the respondent will go through a ‘yes or no’ process for each answer that is applicable, making it dichotomous.

Although the qualities of a questionnaire are appealing, their drawbacks can deter researchers from using them. This is because data that has materialised from questionnaires may be considered invalid and unreliable due to the fact that there is no way of measuring the authenticity of participant responses. “Self-completion questionnaires offer little opportunity for the researcher to check the truthfulness of the answers given by the respondents” (Denscombe, 2014, p. 182). The nature of close question questionnaires also places limitations on student voice, leaving the researcher with a lack of data that may have been provided with an open question questionnaire. Additionally, for the researcher questionnaires take a considerable amount of time to prepare and create, and often need to be checked and revised before being administered. If the questionnaires are not done through an online database, they can also take the researcher a substantial amount of time to collect and calculate responses. When I constructed my questionnaire I had to continuously ask for feedback from my colleagues and revise it until I believed it would get me the information that I needed to meet my objectives. In some instances I had colleagues question the relevance of certain questions, which helped me redevelop it. I self-administered my questionnaire and participants filled it out in my presence. Cohen et al. (2007) explain that this allows for participants to ask for clarity, it ensures a “good response rate”, and that the researcher (myself) is able to assure that all questions were filled out before receiving it back (p. 344). However, it could also establish a “sense of compulsion, where respondents may feel uncomfortable about completing the questionnaire, and may not want to complete it or even start it” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 344). Participants may be hesitant to be honest to avoid disappointing their teacher, or in fear of getting in trouble at school. In order to avoid this I told students that it was entirely optional for them and that they did not need to fill it out and mentioned that it was anonymous and they only needed to put their names on it if they wished to do so.

Each participant was posed with the exact same questions, leaving “little scope for the data to be affected by *interpersonal factors* or the manner in which the questions [were] asked” (Denscombe, 2014, p. 181). By using questionnaires I was also able to easily evaluate participant responses by creating a visual representation for each question as part of the data analysis. I had difficulty reconciling with the idea that some of my students may have just wanted to finish it as quickly as possible, and there was no way for me to check the veracity of their responses. This is why I opted to use focus groups as my second method of inquiry. The results of the questionnaire helped inform my focus group questions, which allowed me to follow up and explore the authenticity of their responses.

Focus Groups

Focus groups usually consist of two to ten people that “share a common experience and agree to participate in a 1- to 2-hour facilitated discussion” (Jones, 2015, p. 565). The interviewer acts as a mediator and facilitates “the interaction within the group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher, yielding a collective rather than an individual view” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 376). A total of two focus groups were conducted, consisting of seven participants each, and all of them were Year 8 students in my religious education classroom. Cohen et al. (2007) describe the inefficiency of conducting only one focus group as it leaves the researcher unable to distinguish “whether the outcome is unique to the behaviour of the group” (p. 377). Because of this, I planned two different focus groups so that I could evaluate whether or not the responses were unique to each group, or if there were striking similarities between the two groups that could be used to validate my research. I decided on seven participants each because it falls under Denscombe’s (2014) recommendation between six to nine people which “is a large enough number to allow a range of views and opinions to be present among the group but not too large as to be unmanageable in terms of the discussion” (p. 189).

I started my focus groups with a brief introduction, and continued by asking the participants what they liked about their religious education classes. This discussion took a natural flow, and students began to talk about what they enjoyed, what motivated them and what troubled them about their RE experiences. These focus groups allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how my students feel about, and what influences their feelings in their religious education environments. I planned to use this data to draw connections between what my students were saying, and the checklist that I created for my positive emotional learning environment. Prior to going into the field I wanted to conduct one-on-one interviews in addition to focus groups to collect as much data as possible. However, it became clear after administering the questionnaires and conducting the focus groups, that one-on-one interviews for my context may not be as beneficial. I noticed that my students continuously fed off of each other's responses, and different dialogues triggered other memories or thoughts. The benefit of this Denscombe (2014) argues, is that "it reveals the reasoning and underlying logic used by participants. It thus gives the researcher an insight into not only what people think, but also *why* they hold those views" (p. 189). Morgan (1997) argues that this may not necessarily be advantageous, in fact quite the contrary. Individuals may shift their behaviours or opinions depending on their surroundings, and could therefore leave the researcher with misconstrued interpretations (Morgan, 1997). However, I felt that my data was rich and for the most part authentic, and that individual interviews would not provide me with a significant amount of additional substantial data. Morgan (1997) references a study done by Fern (1982) that demonstrates and concludes, "two eight-person focus groups would produce as many ideas as 10 individual interviews" (p. 14). Focus groups are "economical on time" and would provide me with a "large amount of data in a short period of time" even though Cohen et al. (2007) would argue that they produce "less data than interviews with the same number of individuals on a one-to-one basis" (p 376). The amount of time saved alone in gathering that data implies that focus groups are much more efficient (Morgan, 1997). My decision to eliminate individual interviews was not solely based on the above-mentioned reasons. There were also time constraints that I faced. I had to arrange and book focus group sessions on Friday evenings when students did not have classes. Conducting focus groups and interviews during class time was not feasible; I therefore had to arrange a time that worked for my participants and myself outside of their regular RE classes. Students were more enthusiastic to complete the focus groups on a Friday evening rather than individual interviews that could take up to an hour long. In order to avoid limiting the information I would receive from a focus group, I gave students the opportunity to continue with a one on one interview if they wished, and told them that they could write any additional thoughts in their student journals. All students opted to write in their journals due to time restrictions and scheduling conflicts.

Student Journaling

Similar to Hume's (2009) action research, I wanted students to use journals as a way of "communicating to me their classroom experiences" (p. 247). Having provided students with reflective journals in the first class, at the end of each class I would present a question that linked to their learning, and provided a subsequent question that asked them to describe if and how their learning was supported, and how they felt throughout the class. This was to see if students made any links between their learning and the emotional learning environment that was created throughout the class. They could also write any additional thoughts that they wanted, and I made sure to reiterate that they had free rein to write anything, and encouraged them to include critical feedback on my teaching style. Every week after class I read and responded to each student, and in some cases asked follow up questions that they would then respond to, in addition to writing their reflection for that week. Pavlovich (2007) describes journal writing as not only a "mechanism for developing reflection skills" but as a means to capture the "personal experience" of individual students (p. 284). I wanted to gain a better understanding of what my students experienced on an emotional level in that class. Pavlovich (2007) continues to say that, "the act of writing facilitates deeper analysis of the experience through assessing and articulating it. This activity assists the writers to stand outside the experience, to see it more objectively, and to become detached from the emotional outcomes" (2007, p. 284). I wanted my students to be able to really think about what they learned that day and what sorts of things, if any at all, elicited certain emotions throughout their learning experiences. Additionally, I wanted to know if students would comment on anything that related to creating a positive emotional learning environment, without explicitly stating it. This would help me triangulate data to see if students noticed if their learning was supported through teacher interactions, behaviour, and their emotional learning environment. Student journaling can be achieved in many different forms, but the underlying benefit is that it should provide a platform for teachers to "understand and support the development of student thinking" (Finley, 2010, p. 1). There is no formal data collection tool title for this, however I have referred to it as student journaling throughout this dissertation and it was the last tool I used that helped triangulate my findings. Student journals help with developing the "ability to identify and analyse their difficulties, make suggestions for solving problems and ask and pursue questions on their own" (Mahlanze and Sibiya, 2017, p. 79). Journaling is a method of reflection that has the potential to "deepen students' understanding of experiences and to foster thinking skills that actively engage them in learning" (Pavlovich, 2007, p. 283). I decided to use student journaling as one of my methods to provide an "effective medium for facilitating deep reflection (Dyment and O'Connell, 2011, p. 82). It also serves as a platform "for voicing out opinions, feelings and disturbing issues that concerns the student" and they "can be utilized to teach and guide students to develop higher order thinking skills e.g. reflection, critical thinking and problem solving skills" (Mahlanze and Sibiya, 2017, p. 80).

As advantageous as journal writing can be, it does come with many weaknesses. The first is that students may feel an obligation to write, and not necessarily want to engage in reflective journal writing. If this occurs, students will write superficial entries, making the data unreliable. Dyment and Connell (2011) have reported students as having a lack of interest in journal writing. Some were quoted saying that journal writing is a "pointless ritual wrapped in meaningless words" (Dyment and Connell, 2011, p. 82). Journal writing is a process, and as Hume (2009) points out, it is a "far more complex and multifaceted activity" than we think it is (p. 252). Not only do students have to want to engage with it for it to be meaningful, they also "need to trust the person who will read their reflective journals and this develops over time" (Mahlanze and Sibiya, 2017, p. 80). Unfortunately, I had only met my students that morning, so their level of engagement with these journals would have to develop over a period of time. I noticed an increase in their writing as the weeks continued, and their material had become more substantial. I also needed to ensure that enough time was given to students so that they did not feel rushed to complete their journal entries. I would give them between ten to fifteen minutes at the end of each class, and if they needed more time I would stay after until they had completed their journals.

The triangulation of these three data collection tools have provided concrete evidence in answering my research question of how, if at all, positive emotional learning environments support my students in their learning. I used my questionnaires to inform my focus group questions, and used both of those methods to develop my journal reflection questions that I presented to my students every week. Multiple themes and patterns emerged from this data that I have presented in the following chapter. However, before I begin I would like to outline the ethical considerations that took place throughout this research process.

Ethical Considerations

As a researcher, one of my primary responsibilities is to always "act in an ethical manner, which includes having [my] research reviewed for its adherence to ethical standards by an independent review committee" (Rudestam and Newton, 2007, p. 275). Prior to collecting any data, I submitted my statement of ethics to my supervisor which was reviewed and approved on December 13th, 2016. This included all the measures that I would take, including collecting voluntary informed consent from all participants involved in the study, including from parents of participants under the age of eighteen (BERA, 2011). Informed consent can be defined as "the procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decisions (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 52). Participants must have the "sufficient information about a research project so they can make an informed judgement about whether they want to participate" (Peterson, 2000, p. 7). In order to execute this in an ethical manner, each potential participant was given an information sheet (See Appendix 6) that outlined specific knowledge about the research project. In addition to the information sheet, I had an in-person session with potential participants where they were able to ask any questions they had about the research. I also provided my contact information if they wished to clarify anything at a later time. Study participants were told that the entire process was voluntary, and that they did not need to participate if they were not interested or comfortable in doing so. Additionally, I told them that the "privacy of study participants" would be respected by remaining anonymous throughout the report, and that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities (Peterson, 2000, p. 7). Once I gave out all the necessary information about my research project, students were told they they could see me if they wanted to give their voluntary informed consent (See Appendix 7a & 7b). I reassured them that it was okay to not give their informed consent, and that no consequences would arise from doing so. It would only mean that I would not include any data received from them in my report. Participants were also told about their right to withdrawal at any moment if they did not wish to continue to participate.

In addition to voluntary informed consent, all data collected has been securely stored on my password proteted laptop. I have been the only individual that has had access to any data collected thus far. Once my dissertation has been submitted and given a passing grade, I will remove all data from my device, and any hard copy information such as consent forms.

The data that has emerged out of this research has been framed by multiple themes that I have provided in the subsequent chapter. Through my own analysis, I have concluded on how emotional learning environments influence and support student learning and follow it with a discussion that refers back to the literature.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter explores how I analysed my data and outlines the step-by-step procedures that allowed me to generate my data. In the discussion component of this chapter I refer back to the literature presented in chapter two to see how the literature speaks to my findings and research claims.

Analysis Procedure

After collecting my questionnaires, focus groups and student journals, I went through each piece of information to see if any themes or general findings emerged from my data.

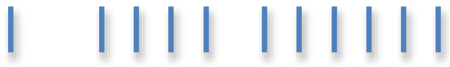
Questionnaires

I collected a total of eleven questionnaires, and placed them in front of me, side-by-side so that I had a visual of all of them. I had the original questionnaire on my laptop, and started my analysis process by looking at each individual response to each question. I tallied up every answer, and put everyone's responses on the original copy that was on my laptop. I did this to create a master copy questionnaire (See Appendix 5b) that entailed every single response on it. Before the analysis, I set a note at the top of the copy that read:

- Note:
  - When I write **very** (throughout the report) that means students circled either a 9 or a 10
  - When I write **not very** (throughout the report) that means students circled between 1-4
  - When I write **somewhat** (throughout the report) students circled between a 5-8

Once I had completed the master questionnaire, I was able to identify patterns and see similarities and differences in responses, which allowed me to generate findings. Questions that had a ranking scale allowed me to see the range of answers that students selected. This gave me a foundation to refer back to when I was putting together my findings.

For example, question number six read:

> 6) On a scale from 1-10, 1 being not important at all, and 10 being very important, how important is it that you get along with your teacher? Please circle.
>
> 
>
> 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 **(1)** 9 **(4)** 10 **(6)**

When I calculated the participant responses, six students circled 10, four students circled 9 and one student circled 8. Therefore, one of my findings concluded that ten out of eleven students claimed that it was **very** important that they got along with their teacher, with one student reporting that it was **somewhat** important. This suggests that there was a high level of agreement amongst students regarding the importance of getting along with their religious education teacher.

Focus Groups

Once my focus groups had been completed, the first thing I did was re-listen to the audio recordings. I looked out for similarities and differences, and made hardcopy notes of any words that were continuously repeated, and anything else that caught my attention. I recorded the time it was said so that I could go back to the audio recording if I needed more clarity. I then re-listened to them again, but this time I had begun the transcription process. I used an online software called Otranscribe to listen to the focus groups and typed them out into a Microsoft Word document. Once the focus groups were transcribed, I colour coded the similarities, and organised the differences into a separate table so I could have a clear visual representation of my data. I used this data and compared and contrasted it with the information that emerged out of my questionnaires.

Student Journals

Every week I would read and respond to my students' reflections. I observed that many students had noticed and wrote about my behaviour in the classroom, and made interpretations based on what they were writing. I re-read their journals several times, and then photocopied, highlighted and made notes on words or themes that would reoccur. I typed up most of the entries, and then categorised them under different headings: what engaged them, notes on teacher behaviour, and critical feedback. Once they were placed under these headings, it was easy for me to pick out prominent themes from the discussions and reflections students had contributed. The themes that emerged from my student journals were then used to compare and contrast the themes that came out of my focus group and questionnaire analysis'.

Results

Upon completion of my action research and data analysis, I was able to highlight three themes that emerged from my research: the impact of teacher behaviour and actions on student learning, friendship as a motivating factor for students to attend religious education, and the differences in the students' religious and secular education environments. The themes that emerged from my data were very interesting to me as a teacher, however I found it challenging to connect them to my research questions. My initial enquiry was to explore how a positive emotional learning environment supported my students in their learning, but I noticed that I was slowly shifting away from the positive emotional learning environment and finding results that discussed teacher behaviour, actions and personality traits and how those impacted student learning. My findings also reported on how the social aspects (i.e. friendships) in the religious education environment motivated students to attend their classes, and finally that there were key differences in how my students viewed the role of their religious and secular education environments. As I tried to connect my research questions to my findings, I found that there was only one element of a positive emotional learning environment that I could confidently report on; that making classes more engaging and interactive did in fact support my students in their learning. The rest of my findings did not naturally fit in with my initial enquiry, however they did provide me with a new understanding of how my students learned best in their religious education environments, which is something that has informed my practice as an educator.

Impact of Teacher Behaviour and Actions on Student Learning

Whilst analyzing my data, I noticed that much of my raw data pointed to students discussing the role of their teachers, and how that behaviour impacted their learning. My data lead to multiple findings that have been outlined below as sub-themes of this category.

Finding #1: Students learn more when there are interactive activities and open discussions

I was curious to find out what students thought about the ways in which teachers executed and conducted their lessons. I enquired on how students learned best, and what types of teacher behaviours and instruction they thought best nurtured their learning. I found that students learned best through a variety of interactive activities and discussions, and were usually bored when teachers read from textbooks, continued to repeat the same activities, or when they had do textbook work. This was conclusive from my triangulation of questionnaires, focus groups and student journals. In my focus group, one participant claimed that she was not engaged in her religious education classes because “the teacher would teach us a lesson on the board and we would all just be bored” (Morgan in focus group 1). Sarah, another respondent in the focus group said, “the only ‘interactive’ thing we’ve played in past years is Jeopardy, and that’s so boring for us now”. Both of these statements discuss student disengagement based on activities implemented by the teacher. Learning or reviewing content through repetitive games creates too much of a familiar atmosphere for students, that they become detached to the lesson. This makes me wonder about what teachers take into consideration when lesson planning. It is clear that Sarah likes interactive activities, but the only one she has been able to engage with has been Jeopardy, and although that may have been fun when it was first introduced to the class, it eventually lost its appeal. Games are known to be a fun way to review material, but if it is too repetitive then students like Sarah, tend to be disengaged. In his student journal, Shafiq said that religious education would be more "meaningful if the activities were interesting to us". In his statement, we see that Shafiq needs activities to be engaging otherwise religious education becomes less meaningful for him. Keeping student journals was beneficial for me as an educator because students were constantly giving me feedback, and I was able to incorporate their suggestions where possible.

Through my action research, I tried my best to engage students with hands on and experiential learning. "Students favoured learning and teaching styles that involved socially interactive learning, visual learning and experiential learning" (Buchanan, 2009, p. 99). The table below outlines examples of each of the categories:

Table 1: Examples of Preferred Learning Styles (Buchanan, 2009, p. 100):

Socially interactive learning:	Discussion, Group work, Debating, Sharing ideas and receiving feedback from teachers.
Visual Learning:	Films, Cartoons, Dramatisations, Role Plays, Presentations.
Experiential Learning:	Community service, Ministry Retreats, Tutoring Refugees, Reflection and Meditation.

I have highlighted all of the different examples that were implemented throughout my action research. Many of the activities that have been highlighted above were implemented into my classroom as a result of verbal and written feedback from students. In Zak's journal, he wrote that:

> "One thing I liked was the discussions and debates that we've had during class. We all got an equal voice and I liked how you added on to all of our points so no one could feel like our perspectives were out of place".

Katherine expressed in her journal how discussions allowed her to actively engage in the classroom, something that she has struggled with before.

> "Before today, I actually haven't engaged in a class conversation before. I liked that my opinions were respected in the class and that I'm going to engage more. I felt very intellectually enlightened during class; I got to listen to many points of views, which helped me expand my knowledge. For example, the class convo about co-existence"

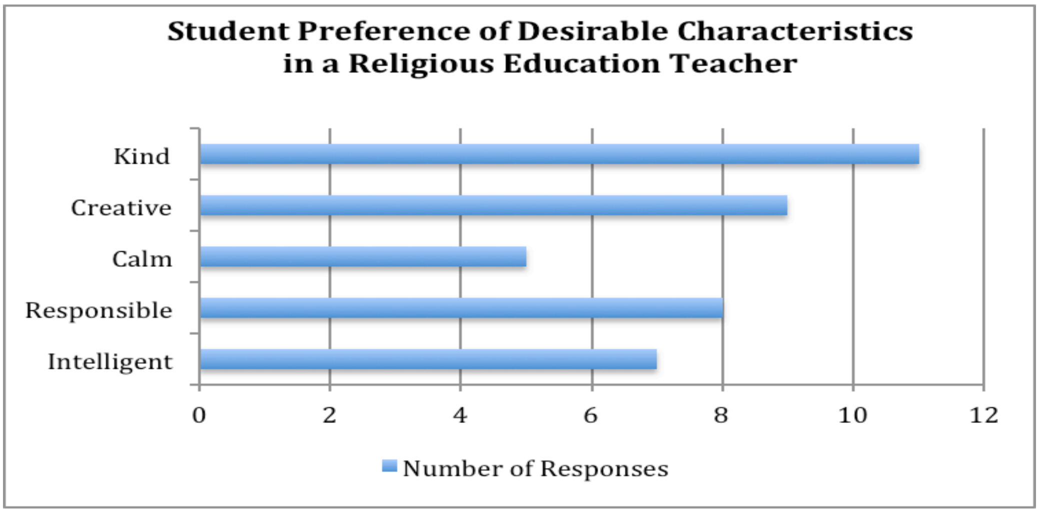
This informs the significance of teacher facilitation, and the importance of creating an environment where students feel respected and confident in expressing their opinions. Katherine was able to engage and feel "intellectually enlightened" simply from the facilitated discussion that took place in class. In his journal, Omar wrote: "I feel like overall, the best method that allowed me to absorb knowledge was classroom discussions. In my opinion, it's easier to listen to a wide variety of opinions than reading a textbook". Adam wrote: "I also liked how we just didn't sit down and learn about Spain but we did some role play to learn it. I would like that every class we do activities while learning".

From these reflections it can be assumed that Omar and Adam have experienced disengagement due to a lack of interactive activities, but would like to see more of social and visually interactive learning. Marque, another student discussed how her learning was enhanced due to social interactive learning. "I feel like I learned better because we did a lot of group activities, and that's better than just handing us a piece of paper". The norm seems to be that classes are lacking in interactive activities. The data above suggests that students prefer, and learn better when engaging in interactive activities. What should be made clear is that this data is not generalizing the idea that all classroom contexts need to encompass interactive activities and facilitate group discussions. Even within the literature I have presented, it focuses on religious education classrooms, and does not apply to the general education classroom context. The takeaway from this is that by incorporating student feedback, educators can gauge how students want to learn, and how they are best motivated and supported. With the particular context that I was teaching in, interactive learning styles helped students create a platform that allowed them to feel respected, confident, knowledgeable and engaged. However, the role of an educator goes beyond the ability to plan engaging lessons. Teachers also need to be mindful of their own social interactions with their students. This leads into my next finding, which discusses how students notice certain teacher qualities, and how these qualities impact student learning.

Finding #2: Students are impacted by teacher personality traits and teacher involvement

My intervention was based on creating a positive emotional learning environment by implementing a checklist of actions and behaviours (See Appendix 1). I wanted to enquire on whether not students would notice certain teacher behaviours and personality traits, and if they did, would they acknowledge these in their responses to the questionnaire, focus groups and or student journals. Figure 1 on the following page outlines the qualities that students wrote down when asked to describe what they looked for in a religious education teacher.

Figure 1: Student responses to questionnaire on teacher qualities



I was very surprised to see that the only characteristic that showed up on 100% of the questionnaires was *kind* (or its' synonyms). This suggests that students explicitly looked for warm or kind behaviours in teachers, more than a teacher's intelligence or creativity. Evidence from my data suggests that when the opposite of those qualities are demonstrated in the classroom (i.e. aggressive behaviour), it has the potential to negatively impact student learning. In their focus groups, students discussed how they picked up on aggressive teacher behaviours. Students said that teachers who "pick on them" or raise their voice directly at them makes students feel disrespected, unworthy and feel like they are being emotionally attacked. In the focus group discussion, two participants discussed their views on 'aggressive' teacher behaviour:

Sarah: "I feel like when somebody raises their voice at me, in one second I am going to start to tear up. I don't know if that's just me, I don't know I just feel like so emotionally attacked, especially when it's a BUI teacher".

Facilitator: "Is it important to you that they are not super aggressive with you guys?"

Frank: "The teacher should be nice, but they should be strict at times, when we are all like fooling around. He should be able to scream at us or yell at us".

Facilitator: "But what about when you are being yelled at by your BUI teacher, someone just said that they'd feel attacked".

Frank: "Well not yell, but slowly raise their voice. Like "kids quiet down" and then get louder if they need to".

Sarah expressed how she felt when teachers, “especially when it’s a BUI (*Bait Ul Ilm*) teacher” yells at her. This suggests a variety of different things. The first is that negative emotions including sadness and anxiety build up in students when their teacher is yelling them at. The second is that that there seems to be another realm of connectivity that Sarah has built with their BUI teachers. Sarah’s emphasis when she says *especially when it’s a BUI teacher* indicates that she has differentiated the relationship between her BUI teachers and the secular teachers in her life. The degree to which it has been differentiated cannot be assumed, however based on her above statement I would infer that she holds a deeper emotional connection to her religious education teachers, possibly because of their shared religious identity. Frank on the other hand did not seem to mind if his religious education teacher needed to yell. However, when I reminded him about some students feeling emotionally attacked when they are being yelled at, he quickly changed his phrasing, but still stuck to the fact that religious education teachers have the right to “raise their voice” in certain contexts, like when students are misbehaving.

The same way students are affected by negative behaviours; it also appears that they have recognised the effects of certain types of positive teacher behaviours. For example, teacher kindness was a quality that Elysha, a year 8 student noticed on her first day of class:

> “I really liked how interactive our environment was. The activities were super fun and engaging. Furthermore, I was comfortable sharing my ideas in class. Especially being new, I feel like because of how kind you were it really made me enjoy class, and not be afraid to share my ideas”.

Elysha had arrived into the class halfway through the year. Her first day of class was also my first day teaching, but her journal entry made me think about how much power teachers have to ease the anxiety of his or her students. She infers that in past experiences she has been worried about participating in class, and being new in this situation would have probably increased her feelings of anxiety. By creating a platform of positive energy throughout that class, Elysha was able to engage and interact, and most importantly, it made her comfortable in her new environment. Elysha spoke directly to her teacher's kindness, and how that impacted the way she learned.

Positive teacher qualities and behaviours clearly contribute to student motivation and support students in their learning. According to educationalist Crispin Weston:

> "[Student] motivation is likely to be dependent on the personality of the teacher and his or her ability to develop a good relationship with [his or her] student[s], understanding the student's current world view, interests and experience, and framing the learning to be achieved in a way that makes sense to the student". (2013, p. 1)

I have used this frame of reference of student motivation as a way to inform my teaching practice. For example, I noticed that when I would meet and greet students at the door it would start the day off on a more positive note verses when I did not. Students have acknowledged the effects of positive teacher qualities and behaviours, and wrote about how certain teacher personality traits enhanced their learning experiences. I have picked out five other student journal entries that specifically referenced how certain teacher qualities improved their learning experiences:

Gemma: “To be honest, the class was very enjoyable and everyone co-operated with the lesson. [Our teacher] is very open minded and she makes learning fun cuz she’s chill”.

Shafiq: “What I liked about today’s class was that everyone was working together, listening to each other and sharing ideas. What I really like about you is you’re a cool teacher which I really feel comfortable around you”.

Serena: “Honestly the last couple of months you were here was my favourite times at BUI because you are the most nicest, sweetest, funniest, coolest, gucciest (See Glossary) teacher I have ever had. I wish you could have stayed longer. And you showed me how to become the most confident person I can be”

Zak: “What helped me learn in class was that you allowed us to learn based on our own conversation started by a thought a class mate shared. Something you’ve done to help me grow is by trying to empathize and understand our opinions and thoughts.

Adam: “Class was fun, I loved the project and the way you saved the money from the bank truly showed that you are a protective teacher –safe to be with and learn around”.

The reason why I selected these journal entries was to demonstrate the heightened awareness of these students. As an educator, I try to be cautious of my actions because I know how in tune our students can be. However, one thing that I learned from this experience was how aware students are of their surroundings and how much they notice regarding their teacher’s behaviour. For example, Adam comments on my involvement as the Banker in a classroom activity. For him, the act of the teacher’s involvement by being the banker, and saving the bank’s money was internalised as being a “protective teacher”, which provided him with a sense of safety.

Serena described the positive qualities that she felt her teacher possessed, which allowed her religious education experience to not only be positive, but also helped her gain the confidence she felt she was lacking. Other qualities that were mentioned in the student journals refer to being open-minded, nice, kind, empathetic, understanding and safe. These qualities are ones that could be categorised under Aydogan’s (2012) definition of ‘warm’ qualities presented in the Introduction chapter. If you reference back to the checklist that was used for this action research (See Appendix 1), many of these qualities have been outlined as part of what I wanted to implement in my practice. It is too obvious to say that if teachers are kind, students will have a more positive experience in the classroom. But, Aydogan's (2012) definition of positive emotional learning environments refers back to the extent to which these qualities are displayed. Simply being nice will not necessarily enhance their learning. As an educator, I am always looking for ways to self-improve. A large component of that is considering student feedback. The student reflection journals were a means to find out if my students recognised what I was trying to implement in the classroom.

Above we looked at students discussing how aggressive behaviours negatively impact students. However, there was also a student that rationalised teacher aggression. Frank suggests in his focus group interview that when teachers are too kind to students, students begin to take advantage.

> "I don't really like strict teachers or mean teachers, or teachers that like try to scare you into doing well. But at the same time it's kind of hard to have a teacher that's nice because the students will try to take advantage of that. And our teacher, kind of like when he tries to get our attention sometimes people won't listen to him because I guess he's just too nice".

From this statement, we can assume that Frank has had experience with 'strict or mean' teachers. Although he does not appreciate those types of qualities in a teacher, he acknowledges that there are certain situations that 'yelling' can be justified. He recognises that when teachers are too kind, students divert away from the learning, and teaching is more difficult because of issues stemming from classroom management. However, this could also be because the religious education system allows for students to decide which center and class they want to be in. Due to this, many students will choose a class that all of their friends are in so that they can be together. This directly links to my next finding, where students said that their friends are the primary reason for attending religious education classes.

Theme #2: Friendship as a motivating factor for students to attend religious education

Finding #3: The social aspect of religious education was the highest ranked motivating factor of why students attend Religious Education.

Unlike secular education, religious education in the Ismaili community is optional. Attendance is taken, but there are no repercussions for absenteeism or lateness, and because there is no formal assessment, students and parents tend to be more relaxed about not attending religious education. Because of this, I wanted to find out what was driving students to attend religious education. According to the student questionnaire, nine out of eleven students said that friends were the number one motivating factor for attending their religious education classes. This was validated in their focus group discussion on friendship circles in their religious education classes.

Facilitator: "Would you attend BUI if you didn't like what you were learning or your teacher?"

Morgan: "Yeah I would. That happened to me for a few years. I still went for my friends."

Leigh: "Yeah I think I would depending on the people in my class."

Marque: "As long as I have friends around me, I am fine, even if I didn't like my teacher."

Brittany: "Yeah because teachers you only have for one year, but friends you'll have until you die. So I would choose my BUI based on my friends."

Gemma: "I chose North West BUI over South York BUI because I knew people who went to North West. I didn't know anyone who went to South York."

Omar: "Yeah I only came to South York because of the people here. I've known them for a lot of years, and I got separated from them for one year. I kind of got depressed in that one year. I had no friends in BUI – it was more like a 3-hour camp I didn't want to go to every week. But I had to go. So I just went there, didn't talk much, came out after class and my mom asked how my day was, and I'd just be like 'eh'. So she said that I could transfer, so then I did so I could be with my friends."

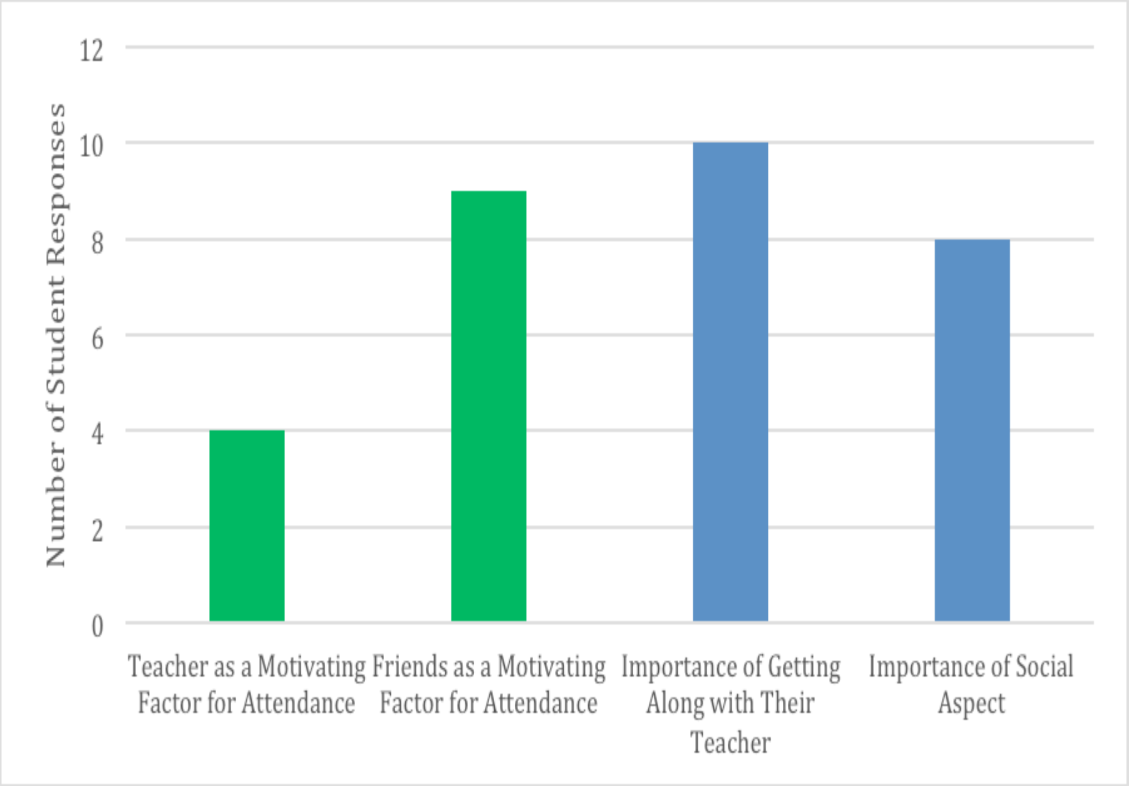
Note: North West BUI and South York BUI are the names (pseudonyms) of the Religious Education Centres in Toronto.

In the secular system you do not have the liberty to choose what school you go to based on your friendship circle. The religious education system allows for students to pick their schedules, and transfer in and out of classes if they are unhappy, which we saw in Omar's response. Later on in the discussion, Zak shared his experience of what he was feeling when a split between classes was happening mid-way through the year.

> "In BUI there were a lot of people I knew that went there, and I still have friends from there now. And since I am one year younger, the actual split that happened was a lot more panicking for me because I didn't know what to do. My parents just put me in [the] Afternoon 1 [class and] I was split from all of my friends and anyone I knew."

Zak's choice of words was stuck out to me because it made me realise how much anxiety students can feel upon entering a classroom without any of their friends. Zak's statement helps confirm my finding that student attendance is likely to increase when they have a circle of friends in their religious education classes. Friends were ranked higher than curriculum, food, parents, and teachers as motivating factors to attend religious education classes. Only 4 out of 11 students said that teachers were a motivating factor, which was interesting because on their questionnaires, 10 out of 11 students said that it was **very important** that students got along with their teacher. This suggests that regardless of the relationship that students have with their teachers, it will not influence their decision to attend religious education. Figure 2 on the next page demonstrates this in a bar chart. Students ranked the importance of getting along with their teacher higher than the importance of the social aspect of religious education, however 'teacher' was ranked the lowest as a motivating factor for student attendance.

Figure 2: Student Rankings of what motivates their attendance and what is important to them in their religious education settings.



This tells me that teachers are not as significant as friends are as motivating factors for students to attend their religious education classes, however the relationships that teachers build with their students whilst in class is more significant than the social aspect of religious education.

I assumed that students ranked the social aspect as the highest motivating factor for attending their religious education classes was because students felt it was important to develop friendships within their *Ismaili* community. This is because each of these students shares a distinctive commonality, which, according to the data makes the religious education environment a more emotionally secure and safe place for students.

Theme #3: Differences in their Religious and Secular Education Environments.

Finding #4: Students identified their Religious Education environment as more safe and secure than their Secular Education Environment.

From their focus group interviews, students were clear about the fact that their religious education environment provided a safer and more secure setting than their secular education did. When asked whether or not they felt safe in their religious education settings, students immediately started to compare their religious education and secular education environments. Students claim that this was because there is a shared common ground amongst their peers in a religious education environment that allowed students to feel more emotionally secure.

Adam made the following statement:

> "People here, because they understand you, they can empathize not just sympathize to what you are going through during your day. Maybe something unexpected happened that nobody really understands, but a lot of us might be going through the same thing. Like let's say there is a racist classmate or somebody who keeps saying that 'Oh you're Muslim. You're a terrorist' and the way you choose to respond to it, you might get mad or you might let it go. But it's really your friends at BUI that can comfort you and that tell you it's not true you don't need to listen to them. All you need to do is ignore them. And your friends here listen to you because it happens to them, and every single other Muslim."

The fact that we share a common religious identity is one thing, but the fact that *Ismailis* are a Muslim group has caused students to become victims of Islamophobia. Adam has raised the issue of racism that he has faced outside of his religious education classes, and has found enough comfort and safety in his religious education environment to share those experiences. Adam is not the only student who has felt like this. Gemma also shared a similar experience in her secular environment:

> "At school, I have some classmates that are pretty Islamophobic.
> They will randomly call out "*Allahu Akbar*" –and they are all atheists.
> They keep reminding me of old times and how Muslims have to kill
> any other non-Muslims. And I'm just like 'we aren't like that anymore',
> I am not like that."

Both of these students have experienced a sense of religious discrimination within their secular education environments. The space of a religious education center creates a boundary that provides both a physical and an emotional safety net for students. Serena validates this when she said, "I don't find only the religious part here […] in BUI I feel the most emotionally safe [because] I have never been teased for anything. They are all my friends. Everywhere else, if anyone says anything, I would take it personally. But here I don't."

On their questionnaires, all eleven students said that it was **very important** that their religious education teacher created a safe space for them in the classroom. Two out of eleven participants circled 9 on the ranking scale, and the remaining nine students circled 10. This implies that students believe that their teacher is responsible for creating a safe space, even more than their peers. Based on their student journals, I would say argue that students believe that it is more than just their teacher that creates the safe space. In Leigh's student reflection journal she wrote, "I didn't like how everyone interrupted each other during the treaty discussion" and in Zak's journal he wrote, "I feel that our class would be 10x better if everyone was more respectful". Leigh and Zak both expressed how negative emotions; such as their frustrations and annoyance arise when their peers are being disruptive and disrespectful in the classroom. In order to create an emotionally secure environment, multiple factors have to be taken into consideration including classmates and their behaviour. Even though Leigh and Zak associated negative emotions with the actions of their peers, students claimed that it was still the sole responsibility of the teacher to create that safe space.

On the questionnaire, one student mentioned that the religious education space made them feel safe because, "I know *mawla* will save me". This was interesting because this student's faith played a role in how they have perceived a safe space. By this we can infer that there is an element of faith that provides comfort to students in that physical environment. Students feel protected purely based on the fact that they are inside a *jamat khana* learning about their faith. It was conclusive from their questionnaires, focus groups and reflection journals that students felt as though their religious education environments provided a more safe and secure space than their secular environments. This led me to question how students define their relationships to their religious education teachers verses their secular teachers, and see how those relationships are perceived by students in the *Ismaili* community. I found that students did not really differentiate the relationship between the two, in fact, when comparing their own relationships to their religious education and secular education teachers, most students did not find a significant difference.

Finding #5: There was no significant difference in the way students described their feelings towards their Religious and Secular Education Teachers.

When asked how their relationship with their religious education teachers resembled their relationships to their secular education teachers, students responded with the following statements:

Frank: "The relationship with my secular and religious teacher are very similar"

Sarah: "In school, there's like 27 kids in my class, In BUI there's less of us. So like, you have, you can talk to the teacher, you have more attention from the teacher when you're in a smaller class. So BUI is more intimate. BUI teachers are more relaxed when there's less kids."

Shafiq: "We see our secular teachers more, which raises proximity, which means I get a better relationship with them. And I find her more useful for things. I can ask her more stuff, like about high school and stuff. And the religious teacher is just for BUI…so not really."

Katherine: "With my secular teacher, I usually go to them after school if I needed help on something. Or I can email my teacher if I miss homework or something. But in BUI it's just basically we learn something and then just go, and then come back the next week."

Adam: "I don't really find them different, they are both helpful and both try to help you learn, but one of them teaches you new things, like my secular teacher. She always tries to make things really interesting. We were just doing essays, and she's like guess what people we are doing the manikin challenge. And another time she said every ten days, we are going to have a hot drink day. She's just really fun and really innovative, which can be off the curriculum. But I feel like BUI teachers are more repetitive."

Above we can see that students expressed their feelings towards their teacher-student relationships in the religious education and secular system. Responses from Shafiq, Katherine and Adam all speak to the benefits of the secular teacher because of the larger subject matter, the closer proximity to teachers and the extra support provided, such as after school help. These responses juxtapose Buchanan's argument of the high expectations students have from religious education teachers. It sounds like from the focus group discussion that students have higher expectations from their secular educators. Buchanan's research is limited to two Catholic secondary schools for girls'; therefore generalisations beyond this are not conclusive. The religious identities and gender considerations in my research are substantially different than Buchanan's and must therefore be taken into consideration. This research is neither reliable nor valid simply because even within my own context, students' responses were inconclusive. Each response was dissimilar in nature, and no solid finding towards a stronger connectivity to religious education teachers was found. Benefits of both the secular system and religious education system were discussed, but there was more of an emphasis on the stronger connectivity to secular teachers. However, one thing that should be addressed is the student responses on the questionnaires to how they view their religious education teachers. Ten out of eleven students circled 'friend', and one student circled 'other' and commented, 'best friend'. There is clearly a dynamic that allows for wider boundaries in the relationship between religious education teachers and their students, even though the questionnaires and focus groups did not support each other's responses. This finding can be linked with finding #2, as I found that students do not make distinctions in how they describe their religious education verses secular teachers, they focus on the teacher's characteristics and personality as features that matter the most.

The three main themes that stemmed from this analysis look at teacher behaviour, motivating factors for attendance, and the differences between students' secular and religious educational environments. Overall, I found that introducing positive teacher behaviours and actions into a classroom can enhance student learning; this can be done through a variety of factors including integrating student feedback into the class, being self-aware, and by showing empathy and kindness towards students. Students are aware of teacher behaviours and can gain feelings of confidence and eagerness to learn when they feel safe, secure, and respected. The next chapter discusses the similarities and differences in my findings, and juxtaposes them with the findings presented in my literature review.

Chapter 5: Discussion

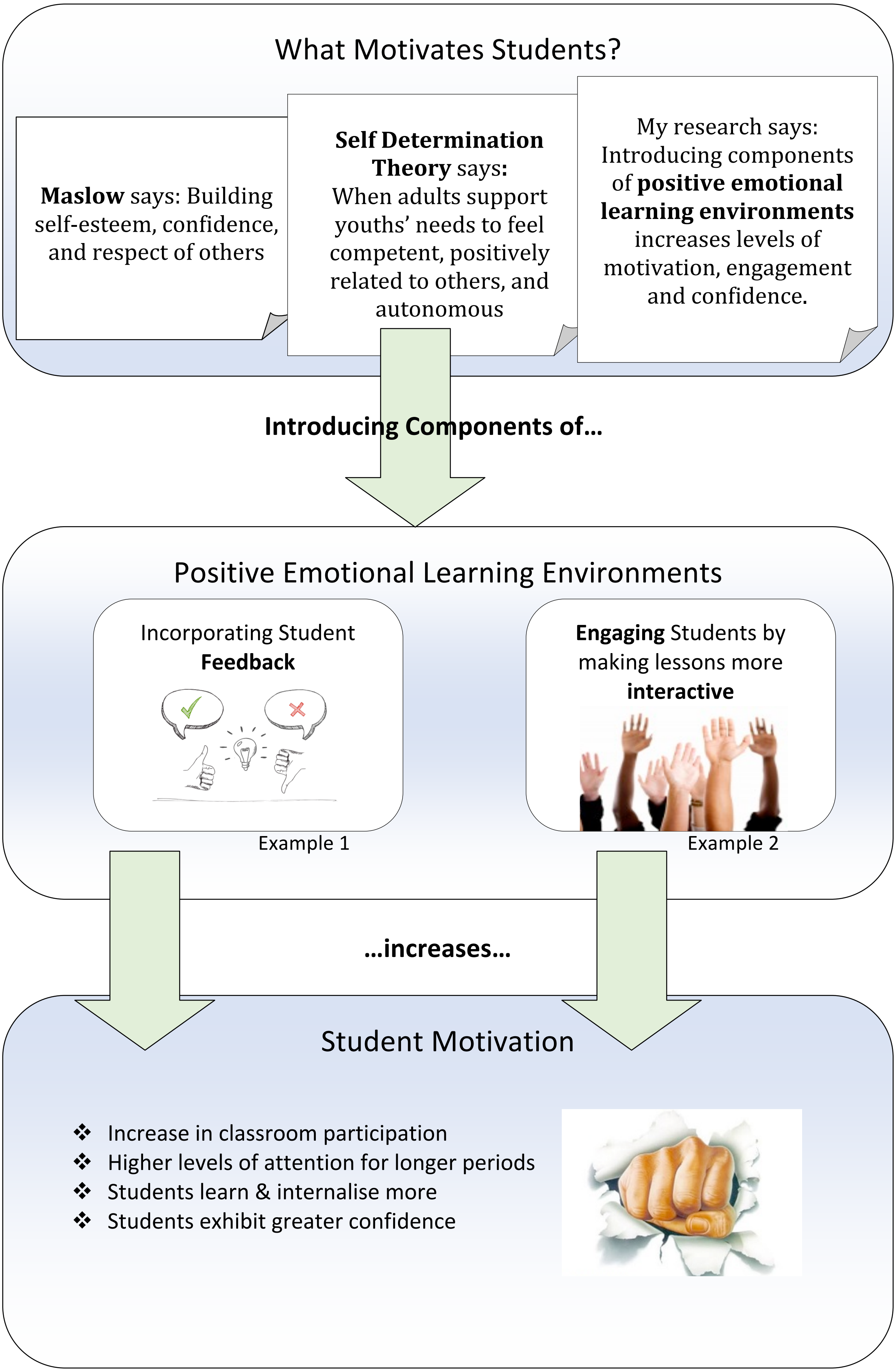
The previous chapter presented the key themes and main findings that emerged from this research, and provided an analysis of each of the results. This chapter is going to refer back to the main ideas presented in the beginning of this dissertation, and discuss how my findings speak to the literature discussed in chapter two of this dissertation. I explain the relationship between my main and subsidiary research questions, discuss the ways in which my findings respond my enquiry, and present the limitations that were associated with my research.

The purpose of this enquiry was to determine the effects of a positive emotional learning environment on student learning. My initial hypothesis stated that if a positive emotional learning environment were established in the classroom, students would be more supported in their learning. I was interested to find out what exactly caused students to become more engaged in their learning, and how their emotions played a role in their classroom participation. I have categorised this chapter into three sections based on my subsidiary research questions, and close this chapter with a personal reflection of my own learning about conducting small-scale practitioner research.

In what ways does creating a positive emotional learning environment facilitate student engagement and success?

The first finding that came out of my action research was that students learned more when socially interactive learning, visual learning and experiential learning took place. Finding #1 discusses the significance of incorporating interactive activities into your lessons, and by doing this students are more engaged; resulting in motivation to learn. For me this was important because introducing interactive activities as part of my teaching practice meant that I was incorporating that component of a positive emotional learning environment. This also meant that I was taking student feedback into consideration. When I referred back to my checklist of things involved in generating a positive emotional environment, number ten discusses listening and incorporating student feedback into my lessons, for example making classes more engaging and interactive. We saw in the findings chapter that students enjoyed classes where interactive learning was occurring. Throughout their journals they expressed that more learning was taking place, and that it built a greater confidence in them to participate more. Figure 3 on the next page depicts this in a flow chart.

Figure 3: How Positive Emotional Learning Environments Increases Student Motivation



What Motivates Students?

Maslow says: Building self-esteem, confidence, and respect of others

Self Determination Theory says: When adults support youths' needs to feel competent, positively related to others, and autonomous

My research says: Introducing components of **positive emotional learning environments** increases levels of motivation, engagement and confidence.

Introducing Components of…

Positive Emotional Learning Environments

Incorporating Student **Feedback**

Example 1

Engaging Students by making lessons more **interactive**

Example 2

…increases…

Student Motivation

- Increase in classroom participation
- Higher levels of attention for longer periods
- Students learn & internalise more
- Students exhibit greater confidence

Figure 3 demonstrates how two components of positive emotional learning environments increase levels of student motivation. According to Brooks et al., incorporating student feedback “increased achievement scores and cooperation”, which they continued to say “was not surprising since the students felt respected” (2012, p. 555). The flow chart above also provides us with a glance of other motivational theories, and compares them to the findings presented in this research.

Based on their student journals and focus group discussions presented in the findings, I found that levels of confidence were raised in students when the teacher facilitated discussions in a way where students had an equal voice, and when the teacher added onto their viewpoints so that nobody felt like their perspectives were out of place, even it only meant thanking them for their contribution to the discussion. Brooks et al. (2012) discuss the importance of “strengthening a student’s feeling of wellbeing, self-esteem, and dignity” in the classroom (p. 551). They suggest that “a student’s sense of belonging, security, and self-confidence in the classroom provides the scaffolding that supports the foundation for enhanced learning, engagement, motivation, self-discipline, responsibility, and the ability to deal more effectively with obstacles and mistakes” (Brooks et al., 2012, p. 551). This research is an extension to both motivational theories discussed in the literature review.

Student Engagement through Teacher-Student Relationships

As an educator, I am often looking for the best ways to motivate my students to succeed. In the literature we looked at the multiple factors that contributed to student engagement presented by Pianta et al. (2012), where they claimed that engagement encompasses many elements, including emotional capacities of individuals. In the case of this practice-based enquiry, the interpersonal relationships that were focused on were the ones between the teacher and the student, and how that relationship could stimulate positive emotions for both parties, resulting in enhanced learning in the classroom.

Wylie and Hodgen (2012) also refer to the connections between relationships and student engagement. In their Competent Learners study, they found that

> "Teacher-student interactions, particularly responsiveness to individual students, active guidance and encouragement in activities, joining in children's play and asking open-ended questions, were enduring aspects of early childhood education experience that multivariate analysis showed still making a contribution to cognitive and social skills competency levels at age 16" (Wylie and Hodgen, 2012, p. 596).

Many of the interactions between the teacher and student can be paralleled to the components incorporated within a positive emotional learning environment. The findings chapter highlights data that speaks directly to each of these, where students voiced their feelings on how those interactions of responsiveness, guidance, involvement and discussion supported them in their learning.

Bruney's (2012) emphasis on mutual acceptance in her definition of positive teacher-student relationship juxtaposed my findings as students focused considerably more on teacher behaviour rather than their own. There was one student however that did discuss the importance of students showing respect in the classroom, and when that level of respect was not reciprocated it was okay for the teacher to "yell" at their students. It was briefly touched on in the focus group discussion that students need to also be respectful, but my participants placed a larger emphasis on the teacher behaviour.

As Brophy (1976) pointed out, student teacher relationships can be complex, especially when boundaries are not established between teacher and friend. We saw in the findings that students often recognise their religious education teachers as a friend. Literature suggests this can lead to anarchic classrooms, especially if students begin to dismiss their teacher as an authoritative figure (Brophy, 1976). However, the relationships that were built between teacher and students in this action research did not reflect this. This could be for a number of reasons, the main one being the lack of time that was spent between teacher and students, which will be discussed more in the limitation section at the end of this chapter. It could also be a reflection on Brophy's (1976) work, as it was intended to apply to the conventional education system, i.e. the secular school atmosphere. There are key differences between the two that situates the teachers (religious and secular) in entirely different roles.

Relationships between Secular verses Religious Education Teachers

Finding #5 in the previous chapter concluded that students did not see a significant difference in their feelings towards their religious and secular education teachers. However, the longevity of the relationship between a community-based *Ismaili* religious education teacher and his or her students is much greater than that of a secular schoolteacher. Although class time with their religious education teacher is significantly less to that of their secular education teacher, the "boundaries of the [religious education] space vary to a much greater extent than in the secular school system" (Printer and Zaver, 2017, p. 137). "Lessons can extend beyond the 'walls of the classroom' and hold more relevance to the everyday lives of students" (Printer and Zaver, 2017, p. 137). This opinion fails to take into consideration the religious education teachers that commute far distances to get to their classes, and only have access to their students bi-weekly for a total of three hours. Taking into consideration the multitude of contexts, it is important to note that all religious education teacher relationships cannot assume to have relationships that extend "beyond the classroom walls", nor assume that secular education teachers have relationships that are confined to only classroom walls.

Finding #2 in this action research found that students, irrespective of their environment (i.e. secular or religious education classes), said that their teacher's personality traits and involvement in the classroom had a significant impact on their learning. According to the literature, there is this underlying assumption that students have a stronger connectivity to their religious education teachers than their secular education teachers. Buchanan (2009) found that students believed that their relationships with their religious education teachers should be one in which

> “they could talk to their religious education teachers about matters other than the subject, […] and expressing feelings and concerns about the progress of their studies in other areas […] as well as life choices. Within the classroom context the participants from both schools did not perceive these issues as being appropriate to discuss with other subject teachers” (p. 97).

There was a strong emphasis on the fact that they wanted “a closer relationship” with their religious education teachers (Buchanan, 2009, p. 97). However, Printer and Zaver (2017) found that the roles of religious education teachers and secular education teachers are “less dependent on context than it is on character and disposition” (p. 134). Implying that students could have a stronger relationship with their secular education teachers depending on how that teacher has cultivated “a sense of openness to learning” and possesses a “passion for learning [and] a care for students” (Printer and Zaver, 2017, p. 134). Prior to this research, I assumed that students would have created a closer connection with their religious education teachers than with their secular education teachers. However, the focus group discussion quickly tarnished those assumptions. Teacher-student relationships, as discussed in the literature review leave long-lasting impressions on students, and influence the ways in which they learn. This finding was important because it was where my research had shifted from looking at a positive emotional learning environment to teacher behaviour and actions. This finding correlates with a very small part of what a positive emotional learning environment might look like, however the importance that it carries has informed my practice as an educator.

Student Voice regarding their learning

The second section of this chapter discusses the ways that students conversed about what impacted their learning the most in their religious education environment. Findings #2 and #3 in the previous chapter concluded that students said their teacher’s personality traits, their teacher's involvement, and their social environment in the religious education setting motivated them the most.

Teacher Personality Traits and Involvement

Schwartz's (2007) study on moral character was used as a reference throughout this action research because, as Campbell (2013) pointed out, teachers can have moral agency, but that does not necessarily mean that meaningful relationships are built between the teacher and the student inside the classroom. This enquiry has helped me realise that this practice is one that positively supports students in their learning, and brings out a new level of confidence in students. Finding #2 outlined in the findings chapter refers to the impact of their teacher's personality traits and teacher's involvement on student learning. My research concluded that from the students' perspectives, kind behaviours and involvement in the classroom by teachers motivated and supported them in their learning. Andersen et al's. (2012) research confirms this as they concluded students are "happy and engaged" and feel "emotionally secure" the most when teachers established positive classroom atmospheres (p. 200). I continuously try to incorporate positive teacher-student relationships into my practice, but never truly understood the importance of it. Although this enquiry started off as creating a positive emotional learning environment, it guided me in a direction that showed me how important it is for both students and teachers to build a relationship that both parties are happy and comfortable with. The focus of this enquiry started to become more about how positive teacher behaviours have a direct impact on students, not just with their learning but in building their confidence and overall motivation.

Social Dynamic

Finding #3 refers to the social aspect of religious education as being a motivating factor to attend religious education. This finding had no correlation to a positive emotional learning environment, and only speaks to student motivation to *attend* religious education. Students said that when they had friends in their classroom, it made it easier for them to amalgamate into the classroom community. They would select their religious education centres based on where their friends would go, and if their friends did not attend religious education classes on a particular day, they would not have as much fun. Having friends in the classroom is associated with finding comfort in the classroom, a comfort that cannot always be established by the teacher. Wylie and Hodgen (2012) discuss the connections between "school belonging and engagement in schoolwork" (p. 596). Students reported that both, "school belonging and engagement in schoolwork" were associated with "being absorbed in their learning, with positive classroom learning activities and with positive relations with their teachers" (Wylie and Hodgen, 2012, p. 596). Their research is an indicator of the importance of feeling a sense of belonging, which supports Maslow's hierarchy of needs; a need to have a sense of belonging (See Appendix 2). According to this action research, when students did not feel this sense of belonging due to unfamiliarity with a centre, or because their friends were not in their class, students experienced negative emotions such as feeling "panicked" and did not enjoy attending their religious education centres. There are certain areas that teachers do not have any control over, this being one of them. However, building a classroom community can help cater to students that may not already have an established friendship circle. This helps provide students with feelings of being emotionally and physically safe and secure, which does relate to the establishment of a positive emotional learning environment.

Establishing A Safe and Secure Environment

This action research project found that even though there was no difference in students' feelings towards their secular and religious education teachers, that the space of a religious education environment was more safe and secure than that of a secular environment. Prior to conducting this research, one of the assumptions I had was that students would say the religious education space makes them feel more safe and secure. Although this finding emerged, it was not for the reason I suspected. My rationale for this belief was because I assumed that within the religious education sphere, an element of faith was constantly present, allowing students to feel more protected. However, my research did not conclude that as the reason. Much of the data pointed to the fact that the shared religious identity as a Muslim living in the Western world helped students cope with struggles that they faced outside. Unfortunately, we are living in a time where Muslims are commonly depicted in a “negative or stereotypical way in Western media and popular culture” (Larsson, 2007, p. 53). Educationalist Kristy Cooper conducted a study on how classroom environments effect student engagement or disengagement amongst Latina students (2012). I have chosen to parallel this study with my own because it specifically focuses on students that share a common cultural identity. Cooper (2009) discusses the issues that Latinas face in North American high schools, including “racial or ethnic prejudice” that often creates “stress that interferes with engagement, persistence, and learning” (p. 491). Cooper’s findings have similarities to my own research in that they both focus on a particular identity that faces racial discrimination within their secular education contexts. Although my research does not indicate the same severity of the battles that Latina students are facing, my research is still an indication of how Ismaili Muslim students face discrimination in their secular education that they do not face in their religious education environments. Cooper (2012) conceptualises safe spaces as two dimensions. The first is that “psychological safety” is protected, and the second is that genuine care is conveyed (by the teacher) (Cooper, 2012, p. 503). She found that students described safe spaces as ones in which students felt “comfortable and unthreatened” (Cooper, 2012, p. 503), which can be compared to how participants from my action research described their religious education environment.

Limitations

The sample size for the research was limited to one community-based religious education class in Toronto Ontario. This class was comprised of fifteen registered students, of which eleven attended on a regular basis. Due to the nature of the religious education system in Toronto, there is no formalised system for assessment in place. Lateness and attendance are not accounted for, nor are they mandatory. Because of this, most classes were irregular in attendance, leaving each class in an unpredictable state. From my own experiences I have had classes with five students, and on other days the same class had fifteen students. I was situated in a class that took place every Saturday. Before arriving to Toronto, I was told that I would have a total of ten to twelve classes to conduct my action research, but after pre-arranged classroom field trips, long weekends, and Spring Break, those twelve classes that I thought I had, gradually became six classes. This meant that half of my time that I was supposed to use for conducting my research was gone. Because of this, I had to rearrange the dates and times of my focus groups. Initially my focus groups were going to take place at the end of each class, but I had to quickly reevaluate that due to the lack of class time. That, combined with irregular attendance, led me to conduct focus groups outside of our regular class time. Focus groups were conducted on Friday evenings after *jamat khana* ceremonies, and on both occasions a total of seven students showed up and willingly participated. I was able to complete the focus groups and receive a total of eleven questionnaires. These combined with my student journal entries helped triangulate my data in a way that would help validate my information. Based on my limitations, I cannot say that I collected a substantial amount of data that could be applicable to other contexts.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

I began this dissertation with a personal anecdote about a negative emotional classroom experience that occurred when I was in high school. I wondered about all the different ways my teacher could have engaged me more, but all I could recall were the negative feelings that I felt once I entered that classroom. I knew that if I ever became a teacher I would do everything I could to not make my students feel that way. The purpose of my action research was to evaluate how effective implementing a positive emotional learning environment would be on student learning. After collecting and conducting questionnaires, focus groups and student reflection journals, I am convinced that when teachers promote and implement certain components of a positive emotional learning environment within their classroom, students' levels of motivation increase and they are more engaged in their learning. There is very little research outside of this that specifically discusses positive emotional learning environments, which is why I continued to pursue this topic further.

I started my research by defining emotional learning environments, and ended up with focusing on teacher behaviours and actions in the classroom, and how they support students in their learning. My initial enquiry shifted throughout this process, and most of my findings did not align with my research questions. Even though I was unable to connect my findings with my initial enquiry, much of what I found has informed my practice as a religious education teacher. I was able to identify different factors that contributed to a positive emotional learning environment through educational research, but through my own action research was only able confidently support one element of a positive emotional learning environment, and that was element of making classroom activities more interactive and engaging. I was also able to support teaching personality traits such as kindness and empathy, and how those teacher qualities positively impacted student learning. As we have seen in the literature review, extensive research has been written on teacher-student relationships, word choices, motivational theories and verbal praise. All of these components lead to what a positive emotional learning environment is. By trying to implement all of its' components, I had began to study my own behaviour as an educator, which according to Santa and Santa (1995) is not uncommon for teacher researchers to do. Santa and Santa (1995) have suggested that in the teacher-researcher process, teachers are "encouraged to make use of a scientific inquiry process to formulate and answer questions that are of relevance to their own classrooms" (p. 440). I thought a lot about my teaching methods, and how this small-scale enquiry reflected my own practices inside the classroom. This allowed for me to examine how students respond to a particular component of a positive emotional learning environment, helping me determine what teaching practices are most beneficial for my students in that context.

This research has informed my practice by allowing me to consciously implement specific teaching behaviours. By being cognizant of certain behaviours, I was able to objectively look at all of the things that I was or was not doing, and seeing how these behaviours were impacting my students. This process has taught me that before teaching students curricular content, it is important that students feel emotionally compatible with the environment that they are learning in. If elements of a positive emotional learning environment such as positive teacher actions and behaviours are in tact, students' motivation increases, along with their willingness to engage and participate in classroom activities.

These areas are fundamental in establishing a positive emotional learning environment, but I wonder how my research would have changed if I could compare the implementation of a positive verses negative emotional learning environment. For ethical considerations I was not able to compare student learning in what a 'negative emotional learning environment' might be. However, I would be curious to see if there were studies done in the past that discuss the effects of ‘negative’ teacher behaviour on student learning, and how that compares to or contrasts with my findings. It would also be interesting to see which specific elements of a positive emotional learning environment support student learning. For example, by conducting separate research on each element of a positive emotional learning environment and looking at whether or not those specific components impact students in their learning. If I had to do this again, I would focus my study on one or two components of a positive emotional learning environment to better understand the implications of each element. I would be curious to see what students feel are the most important components of a positive emotional learning environment, and which elements best support their learning.

Overall, this action research showed me that positive teacher behaviour, actions and qualities supported students in their learning. However, the limitations within this action research put into question its reliability, validity, and generalisability. I would argue that my findings could be defined as internally valid, as the findings came directly from my data, making them trustworthy, however the data does lack depth due to the time constraints I had with the participants. The reliability of my data is uncertain. I cannot confidently say that if someone else were to conduct this exact same research that the results would be consistent (Rudestam and Newton, 2007). I therefore cannot generalise my findings to a wider context due to the small scope of my enquiry. There is literature that suggests it would; however because of the small sample size and the fact that my research catered to a very specific context, there is no way for me to be certain of its reliability or generalisability. In a Toronto Canada community-based religious education context, the components discussed are all ones that were incorporated into the classroom, to the best of the teacher’s ability, and some of these teacher behaviours reflected positively in students’ learning. As suggested above, this research could narrow in on certain components of a positive emotional learning environment, providing a more focused approach, or be used as a parallel to older research (if there is any) that discusses student reactions and impacts of learning on 'negative emotional learning environments'. I hope that as a teacher I am able to continue to practice implementing a positive emotional climate in any context that I may be placed in.

As teachers begin to practice and establish their own pedagogies, it would be valuable to look to research that not only helps their students learn to the best of their ability, but to look at practices such as this one, that encompasses moral behaviour and positive emotions that benefit students in non-tangible ways. I am in high hopes that these new types of practices attract students from the Ismaili community into the religious education classroom, and that these practices motivate students to attend, engage and learn. Such practices will not only facilitate academic and personal growth for students, but they have the aptitude to strengthen the entirety of the *Ismaili Tariqah* religious education platform as well.

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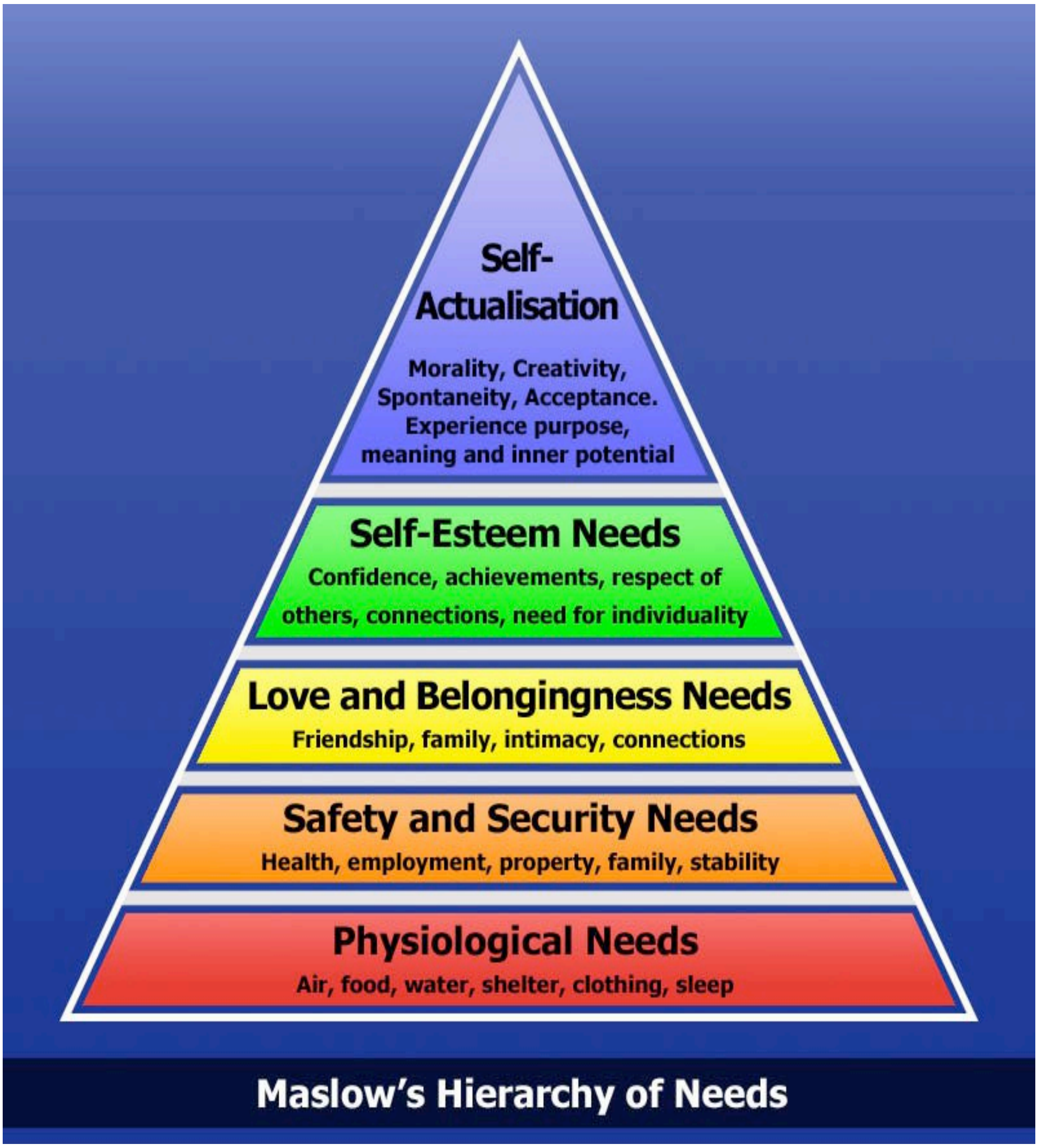
APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Checklist

My Checklist

1. Meet and greet students upon arrival
2. Use verbal praise as often as you can
3. Use positive language always
    a. (be mindful of gearing away from words like “no” and “can’t” and try to use language like “what if we tried it this way?” or “that is a great idea, I wonder how it would look if we did this as well..”, etc.
4. Take an active interest in their lives
    a. Ask about their interests, their weeks, what have they been up to? (As students are walking into class, over lunch break, etc.)
    b. Understanding the students’ worldview
5. Always be patient
6. Always be kind
7. Show empathy
8. Show respect to all students
    a. Listen to what they are saying
    b. Be considerate and thoughtful
    c. Be attentive
9. Always continue to motivate your students (to learn, work, attend classes).
10. Listen to and incorporate student feedback
    a. Making classes more engaging and interactive
11. Show moral concern and care for others

Appendix 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs


Self-
Actualisation
Morality, Creativity,
Spontaneity, Acceptance.
Experience purpose,
meaning and inner potential
Self-Esteem Needs
Confidence, achievements, respect of
others, connections, need for individuality
Love and Belongingness Needs
Friendship, family, intimacy, connections
Safety and Security Needs
Health, employment, property, family, stability
Physiological Needs
Air, food, water, shelter, clothing, sleep
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Appendix 3: Teaching Through Interaction Framework
Source: Hamre et al. (2013)

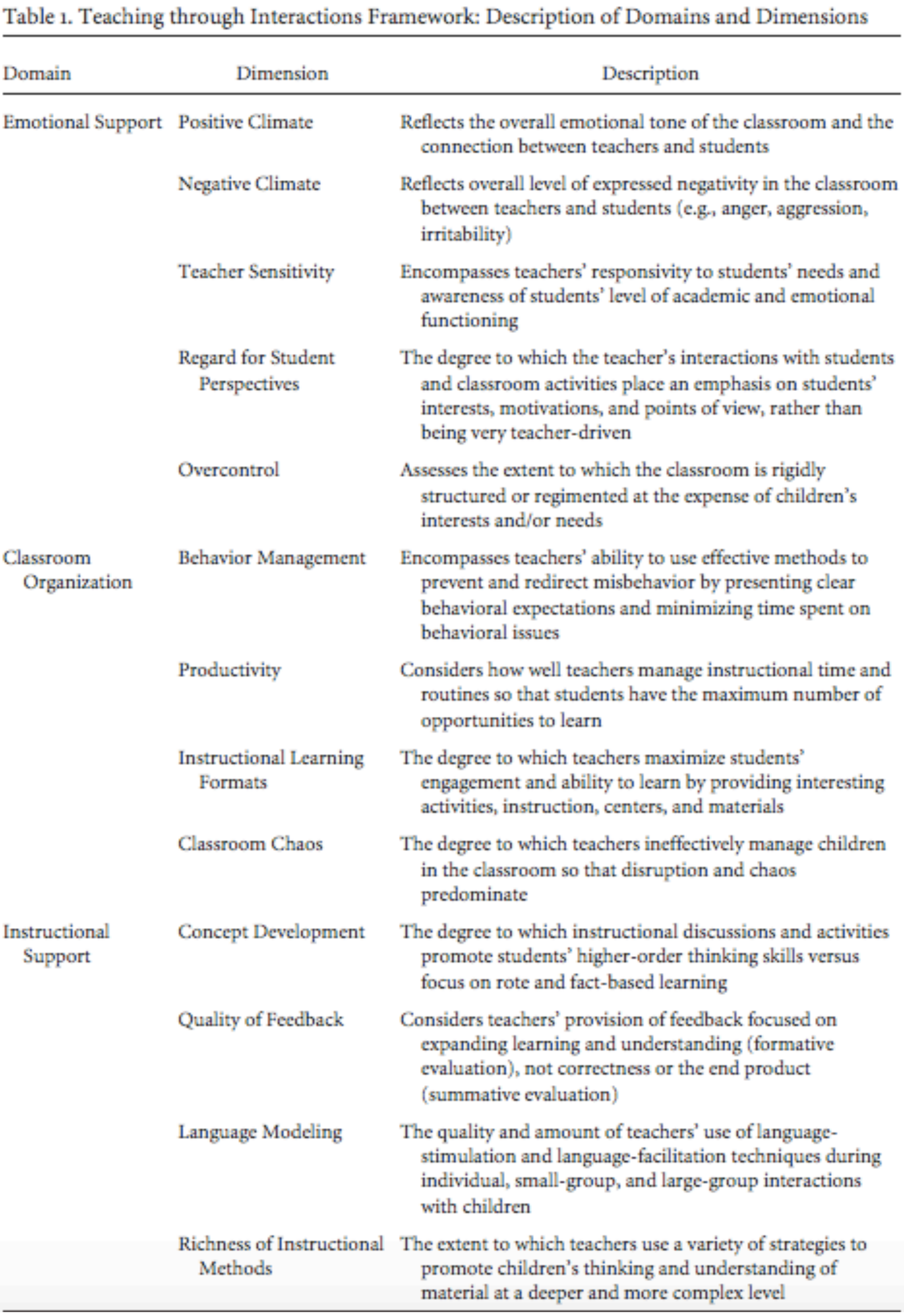


Table 1. Teaching through Interactions Framework: Description of Domains and Dimensions

Domain	Dimension	Description
Emotional Support	Positive Climate	Reflects the overall emotional tone of the classroom and the connection between teachers and students
	Negative Climate	Reflects overall level of expressed negativity in the classroom between teachers and students (e.g., anger, aggression, irritability)
	Teacher Sensitivity	Encompasses teachers' responsivity to students' needs and awareness of students' level of academic and emotional functioning
	Regard for Student Perspectives	The degree to which the teacher's interactions with students and classroom activities place an emphasis on students' interests, motivations, and points of view, rather than being very teacher-driven
	Overcontrol	Assesses the extent to which the classroom is rigidly structured or regimented at the expense of children's interests and/or needs
Classroom Organization	Behavior Management	Encompasses teachers' ability to use effective methods to prevent and redirect misbehavior by presenting clear behavioral expectations and minimizing time spent on behavioral issues
	Productivity	Considers how well teachers manage instructional time and routines so that students have the maximum number of opportunities to learn
	Instructional Learning Formats	The degree to which teachers maximize students' engagement and ability to learn by providing interesting activities, instruction, centers, and materials
	Classroom Chaos	The degree to which teachers ineffectively manage children in the classroom so that disruption and chaos predominate
Instructional Support	Concept Development	The degree to which instructional discussions and activities promote students' higher-order thinking skills versus focus on rote and fact-based learning
	Quality of Feedback	Considers teachers' provision of feedback focused on expanding learning and understanding (formative evaluation), not correctness or the end product (summative evaluation)
	Language Modeling	The quality and amount of teachers' use of language-stimulation and language-facilitation techniques during individual, small-group, and large-group interactions with children
	Richness of Instructional Methods	The extent to which teachers use a variety of strategies to promote children's thinking and understanding of material at a deeper and more complex level

Appendix 4: Schwartz’s (2007) seven attributes that he uses to describe teachers as moral agents:

1. Shows obvious moral concern and care for others;
2. Engages in actions that indicate a commitment to the intellectual and/or emotional development of others
3. Demonstrates congruence between the individual’s moral statements, understanding, and actions;
4. Grants leeway to self and others;
5. Demonstrates self-reflection and reasoning skill;
6. Regulates his or her own behaviour and emotions in accordance with the social good of others; and
7. Demonstrates empathy and perspective taking (p. 7).

Appendix 5a: Administered Questionnaire to Year 8 Students

Name (optional): ____

1) What motivates you to come to Bait Ul Ilm (BUI)? Circle all that apply.
   a. Food
   b. Teacher
   c. Friends
   d. Curriculum
   e. Parents
   f. Other: ____

2) What does motivation look like for you in your BUI class?
   a. Attending class regularly
   b. Completing tasks assigned by teachers
   c. Spending time with my friends
   d. Learning about my faith
   e. Other: ____

3) On a scale from 1-10, 1 being the least interesting and 10 being the most interesting, how interesting do you find what you are learning in BUI? Please circle.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4) On a scale from 1-10, 1 being not meaningful at all, and 10 being very meaningful, how meaningful is the curriculum to you? Please circle.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5) On a scale from 1-10, 1 being not important at all, and 10 being very important, how important is the social aspect of BUI to you? Please circle.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6) On a scale from 1-10, 1 being not important at all, and 10 being very important, how important is it that you get along with your teacher? Please circle.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7) On a scale from 1-10, how important is it that your religious education teacher creates a safe space for you in the classroom? Please circle.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

a) Could you explain why you circled the number you did above?

____

____

____

____

____

8) How do you view your BUI teacher? Check all that apply.
   a. Community member
   b. Friend
   c. Teacher
   d. Parent-like figure
   e. Other: ____

9) What do you look for in a BUI teacher?

____

____

10) Thank you so much for filling out this Questionnaire. If there are any other thoughts or comments in relation to the questions I have asked above, please feel free to add them below.

____

____

____

____

Appendix 5b

Master Questionnaire – Student Responses

1) What motivates you to come to Bait Ul Ilm (BUI)? Circle all that apply.
   a. Food 𝍷𝍷𝍷𝍷
   b. Teacher 𝍷𝍷𝍷𝍷
   c. Friends 𝍸 𝍷𝍷𝍷𝍷
   d. Curriculum 𝍸 𝍷𝍷
   e. Parents 𝍷𝍷𝍷𝍷
   f. Other: Older brother (1 student) .

2) What does motivation look like for you in your BUI class? (Circle all that apply)
   a. Attending class regularly 𝍸 𝍷
   b. Completing tasks assigned by teachers 𝍸
   c. Spending time with my friends 𝍸
   d. Learning about my faith 𝍸 𝍷𝍷𝍷
   e. Other: ____________________

3) On a scale from 1-10, 1 being the least interesting and 10 being the most interesting, how interesting do you find what you are learning in BUI? Please circle.

						𝍷𝍷	𝍸 𝍷	𝍷𝍷𝍷	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7 **(2)**	8 **(6)**	9 **(3)**	10

4) On a scale from 1-10, 1 being not meaningful at all, and 10 being very meaningful, how meaningful is the curriculum to you? Please circle.

			𝍷			𝍷𝍷𝍷𝍷	𝍷	𝍷𝍷𝍷𝍷	𝍷
1	2	3	4 **(1)**	5	6	7 **(4)**	8 **(1)**	9 **(4)**	10 **(1)**

5) On a scale from 1-10, 1 being not important at all, and 10 being very important, how important is the social aspect of BUI to you? Please circle.

						𝍷𝍷	𝍷	𝍷𝍷𝍷	𝍸
1	2	3	4	5	6	7 **(2)**	8 **(1)**	9 **(3)**	10 **(5)**

6) On a scale from 1-10, 1 being not important at all, and 10 being very important, how important is it that you get along with your teacher? Please circle.

| 𝍸|

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 **(1)** 9 **(4)** 10 **(6)**

7) On a scale from 1-10, how important is it that your religious education teacher creates a safe space for you in the classroom? Please circle.

|| 𝍸||||

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 **(2)** 10 **(9)**

a) Could you explain why you circled the number you did above?

- I want to feel safe
- I need to feel safe
- It will be peaceful and educational
- Unsafe environments are not fun and you cannot learn in them
- Safe learning space is the most important aspect of learning
- I know Mawla will save me
- I feel that if a student doesn't feel safe and secure in the BUI environment, the pupil will not be able to focus and take in the intellectual enlightenment
- Having a good teacher makes it easier to feel comfortable
- It's usually a safe environment, it's just the classmates can find a way to make it dangerous

8) How do you view your BUI teacher? Check all that apply.

a. Community member **(8)** 𝍸|||
b. Friend **(10)** 𝍸𝍸
c. Teacher **(11)** 𝍸𝍸|
d. Parent-like figure **(2)** ||
e. Other: Best Friend (included in "b")

9) What do you look for in a BUI teacher? (answers were combined and synonyms were presented as well).

Open with, cool, fun, go to with questions, friend, helpful, kind (11), caring, responsible (8), nice, kind, smart, not bossy, calm (5), intelligent (7) very lit, not boring, creative (9) teaches in a fun and exciting way.

Appendix 6: Information Sheet

Information Sheet
STEP MA Research

To be completed by the Researcher

Project Title:

Researcher's Name:

Contact Details:

I would like to invite your child to participate in this research.

Details of the Research Study

Why am I doing this project?

What will your child have to do if you agree to take part?

Will your child's participation in the project remain confidential?

What are the advantages of taking part in this project?

Are there any disadvantages of taking part in this project?

Do your child have to take part in this project?

What happens now?

If you have any questions about the Information Sheet, please ask the researcher.
It is up to you to decide whether to take part or not; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. If you do decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.
All data will be collected and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.
Thank you for taking the time to read this Information Sheet.

Appendix 7: Informed Consent Sheets

7 a) Informed Consent Form – Parent/Guardian of Student Participants
STEP MA Research

To be completed by the Researcher

Project Title:

Researcher's Name:

To be completed by the Parent/Guardian of Student Participant

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet.

Thank you for your interest in this research. Before you agree for your child to take part, the person organising the research must explain the project to you.

If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher.

Parent/Guardian of Student Participant's Statement

I agree that:

- I have read the notes written above and the Information Sheet, and understand what the project involves.
- The research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree for my child to take part.
- I understand that my child may be asked to participate in interviews, focus groups, complete questionnaires, and/or be observed in educational settings.
- I understand that my child may be asked to share educational material, e.g., activity sheets, journals, etc.
- I understand that my child's participation may be audio/video recorded.
- I consent to use of all of the above material as part of the project.
- I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998.
- Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained.
- I understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish my child to take part in this project, I can notify the researcher and withdraw immediately.
- I consent to the processing of my child's personal information for the purposes of this research study.

Parent's/Guardian's Name: ____________________________________

Child's Name: ____________________________________

Parent's/Guardian's Signature: ____________________________________ **Date:** _______________

7 b) Informed Consent Form – Student Participants
STEP MA Research

To be completed by the Researcher

Project Title:

Researcher's Name:

To be completed by the Student Participant

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet.

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research. Before you agree to take part, the person organising the research must explain the project to you.

If you have any questions about the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher.

Student Participant's Statement

I agree that:

- I have read the notes written above and the Information Sheet, and understand what the project involves.
- The research project has been explained to me and I agree to take part.
- I understand that I may be asked to participate in interviews and/or focus groups.
- I understand that I may be asked to complete questionnaires.
- I understand that I may be observed in the classroom.
- I understand that I may be asked to share activity sheets, journals, etc.
- I understand my participation may be audio/video recorded.
- I consent to the use of all of the above material as part of the project.
- I understand that this information will be strictly confidential.
- Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained.
- I understand that if I decide at any time that I no longer wish to take part in this project, I can notify the researcher and withdraw immediately.
- I agree to the processing of my personal information for the purposes of this research project.

Student Participant's Name: ____________________________________

Signature: ____________________________________ **Date:** ______________