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Evaluation of Social Studies Classroom Learning Climate in Colleges of Education from Trainee Teachers' Point of View

Justice Kwame Sibiri*, Mariama Appiah, Samuel Abanga Akudugu

Department of Social Sciences, Gbewaa College of Education, Pusiga, Ghana

Email: sibirij@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper reports on a study that sought to investigate the kind of learning climate that exists in Social Studies classrooms in Colleges of Education from trainee teachers' point of view. Questionnaires were administered and responded to by 231 trainee teachers from 3 selected Colleges of Education using a convenience sampling technique. The quantitative data generated from closed-ended five (5) point Likert type scale items in the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Precisely, means and standard deviations. The study found that Social Studies Tutors do not create an effective classroom climate for learning, where trainee teachers are active participants as individuals. Considering the responses from trainee teachers on all the 13 items, the mean response was less than 3. This means that a large majority of the respondents view their Social Studies classroom climate as unfavorable since the greater majority of the responses range from Rare to Never indicating there is a serious problem regarding the kind of environment that exists in our Social Studies classrooms. Based on the findings, it is important for Social Studies Tutors to create an enabling learning environment in their classrooms for trainee teachers.

Keywords: social studies, trainee teachers, classroom climate, learning climate, social studies teaching

1. Introduction

The role of every teacher in the 21st Century classroom requires changes in teachers' knowledge and classroom behaviors which will enable learners to develop knowledge, understanding, skills, and competencies through a combination of social constructivism and social realism. This includes using pedagogical approaches that ensure that every learner benefits from the teaching and learning process. This can become a reality when teachers establish a safe, supportive, and positive learning climate or environment for all students. Darling-Hammond, L.^[8], Carroll, T. G.^[6], Purnama, N.^[25] believe that a positive classroom learning climate fosters cooperation among students, encourages students' curiosity and intrinsic motivation to learn, makes students feel valued, and communicate effectively. Gang, R.^[12] opines that, today's learners seek a learning climate or environment that is not as obsolete as traditional classrooms but that is specifically engineered to support thinking. He argued that students prefer the learning climate that pushes their learning capacity with altering strategies and teaching practices since they want to be a part of an impactful learning setting that provides a sense of achievement while they can be adaptive and interactive with fellow learners as well as tutors.

Dörnyei, Z, Murphey, T.^[10], Brown, H. D.^[5], Commitment to the Role of Teacher as a Facilitator of Learning^[7] see collaboration as the thread for all students learning since it ensures that the curriculum used in a classroom develops higher-order thinking skills and effective communication skills in Social Studies. They further explain that knowledge of technology that students will need for 21st-century careers and the increasingly globalized environment is essential. Regardless of the roles teachers assume, they shape the culture of their classrooms and improves student learning. They also influence practice and production and therefore, their ability to carry out these effectively will depend to a large extent on the rapport they establish with their students and of course, on their own level of knowledge and skills^[4,22]. Thus, learning environment or climate is a great attribute to the success of the learner since it offers a positive ambience to feel motivated and engaged since an ideal learning setting encourages the interaction with learners/instructors and eventually establishes a sense of support according to BrainMass^[4]. Positive classroom therefore will promote students' active participation in the teaching and learning process and this will make the students feel valued and supported in their learning.

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1.1 The concept of classroom climate

The concept of climate as it applies to school (classroom) has been viewed from many perspectives and defined in several ways by different writers^[11]. Adelman, H. S., Taylor, L.^[1] see classroom learning climate as the learning environment and have used terms such as atmosphere, ambiance, ecology, and milieu to describe it. The Impact of classroom learning climate on students and can be beneficial for or a barrier to learning Social Studies. Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., Norman, M. K.^[2] on the other hand define classroom climate as “the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which our students learn” (p.170). This definition agrees with Huston, T. A, Dipietro, M.^[14] who see the classroom learning climate as the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environment where students can learn as a by-product of the social interactions between and among teachers and students. They opine that students experience the classroom as not just an intellectual space, but also as a social, emotional, and physical environment.

In another development, Reid, L. D., Radhakrishnan, P.^[26], Barr, J. J.^[3], describes the classroom climate as a reflection of students’ opinions of their academic experience. In the view of Barr, J. J.^[3], this includes students’ perceptions of the rigor of the class, their interactions with their instructor and class peers, and their involvement in the class. This means that, various aspects of the classroom climate contribute to student development since they interact with each other to have an impact on student learning and performance. Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., Norman, M. K.^[2] highlight intellectual and social identity developments as being salient aspects of student development that have important implications to shape classroom climate. According to Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M.W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M.C., Norman, M. K.^[2], for college-level students, a significant area of their development arises from identifying themselves with certain social groups. Also, students walk into the classroom with different levels and forms of intellectual capacity. Depending on the stage of the students’ intellectual development, the way they react to what is taught shapes a particular climate in the classroom.

Huston, T. A, Dipietro, M.^[14] opines that classrooms that subtly or indirectly exclude certain groups of students tend to be common from the students’ perspectives and that students will have a particularly negative reaction to teachers who fail to acknowledge the consequential local or national events.

1.2 Aspects or dimensions of classroom learning climate

The dimensions of classroom climate address “the intellectual, social, emotional, and physical environments in which students learn^[2]. According to Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., Norman, M. K.^[2], classroom climate is determined by a constellation of interacting factors that include faculty-student interaction, the tone instructors set, instances of stereotyping, student-student interaction, and the range of perspectives represented in the course content and materials. All of these factors can operate outside as well as inside. Importantly, the classroom climate has implications for learning and performance. This is an indication that a negative climate may impede learning and performance while a positive climate can energize students’ learning^[2,23].

According to Ross-Bernstein, J., Menning, N.^[2,27] the intellectual indicators include a lesson that develops students’ disciplinary knowledge, skills and attitudes, students’ regularity in practicing disciplinary skills, giving challenging tasks as well as prompt and specific feedback. The social aspect of learning climate talks about behavior expectations that are explicit where students have opportunities to work together, ensuring equitable and respectful student interactions, approachability, resourcefulness, and being. The Physical covers how students can interact with and see each other, have equal access to physical and online materials, and having access to classrooms that are free from distractions. Lastly, the emotional aspect entails the atmosphere that is non-competitive, motivating and productively addresses all kind of stereotypes and students’ backgrounds, etc. In the view of Hattie J., Stronge, L. W., Grant, X.^[13], effective teachers build a classroom learning climate where students’ mistakes are welcomed, student questioning is high, engagement is the norm, and students can be respected as effective learners^[13]. Adelman, H. S., Taylor, L.^[1] argues that a positive classroom climate is related to important educational outcomes such as enhanced academic achievement, constructive learning processes, and reduced emotional problems.

1.3 Characteristics of effective social studies classroom learning climate

Island, P. E.^[15] posit that since there is an accelerating pace and scope of change in 21st-century classrooms, students of today cannot prepare for life by merely learning isolated facts. This makes problem-solving, critical and creative thinking, and informed decision making essential for success in the future by students^[15]. This means that the Social Studies learning environment should contribute significantly to the development of these critical attributes. Since any effective instructional environment incorporates principles and strategies that recognize and accommodate varied learning styles,

individual differences, and abilities that students bring into the classroom^[15]. Invariably, the nature and scope of Social Studies also provide unique opportunities to do this. Therefore, teaching methods, techniques, and strategies should foster a wide variety of experiences to ensure actively engage all students in the learning process^[15]. Adelman, H. S., Taylor, L.^[1] see classroom climate as a major determinant of classroom behavior, learning, and understanding. Therefore, establishing and maintaining a positive classroom learning climate is fundamental in improving schools^[1].

According to Adelman, H. S., Taylor, L.^[1] research suggests that, there is a significant relationship between classroom climate and student engagement. This shows that, if classroom climate conducive to students, it will impact their behavior, self-efficacy, achievement, and overall quality of school life negatively. In view of this, Demirkaya, H.^[9] opined that active learning should be carried out in a safe environment where clear expectations and positive relationships are encouraged at the highest level since active participation affects learning positively. In the view of^[9], individual differences of students should be taken into account when teaching in order to provide an effective learning environment where every student will have the opportunity to take part in the learning-teaching process. This can only be possible in learning environments where individual differences are taken into account and active participation by students in the teaching and learning process is provided^[9].

Teacher Characteristics that demonstrate highly effective teaching and learning have been recommended by Kentucky Department of Education^[16] with five components which are learning climate, classroom assessment and reflection, instructional rigor and student engagement, instructional relevance, and content knowledge^[16]. These characteristics by the Kentucky Department of Education posits are based upon some of the most current findings from several resources. In our discussions, however, we have linked these characteristics to Social Studies teaching and learning with an emphasis on the learning climate component which outlines the following teacher characteristics;

Social Studies teachers should create learning environments where students play active participation either as individuals and as members of a group. According to NCSS^[19], NCSS^[18] admonishes teachers to be aware of and meet the needs of students in order to make Social Studies instruction effective. According to the Social Studies literature, students' attitude towards Social Studies course and related factors are significantly affected by two factors: (a) active participation and willingness of the teacher; (b) the perceived value of the subject field^[29] and these should guide teachers in their dealings with their students. Besides, it is important for teachers to motivate learners by ensuring a positive classroom climate. Teachers can do this by developing love, mutual respect, tolerance, critical thinking skills, democratic ideals, etc. among students^[16].

Again, the department is of the view that, classroom learning climate can be effective when teachers develop the value of multicultural understanding and diversity in students^[16]. Based on this, the NCSS^[20] identifies five principles that will give students social information which are essential characteristics of any effective Social Studies teaching and learning. The principles are that Social Studies teaching and learning should be complementary, meaningful, value-based, most intriguing, and active learning environment^[20-21]. Furthermore, an effective classroom learning climate requires that teachers encourage students to accept their responsibilities to make their own learning^[16] since learning rest with the individual. The teacher can do this by making use of effective teaching methods, techniques, and strategies in lesson delivery.

Lastly, Kentucky Department of Education^[16] links sufficient classroom management, access to technology, providing productive time to students, and building of constructive relationship with each student as a way of creating an effective classroom climate.

1.4 Statement of the problem

The classroom environment constitutes an important factor that affects student learning in any higher educational institution. Research shows that students can learn better when the learning environment or climate in which they are engaged are positive and also supportive^[1,31]. Young, J.^[31] see a positive learning environment as the one in which students feel a sense of we-feeling, trust others and feel encouraged to face any challenges, take risks, and ask questions in the teaching and learning process. According to Young, J.^[31], such an environment should provide all the relevant content, clear learning outcomes, and constant feedback in order to give opportunities to learners to build social skills and strategies to help them to succeed. Therefore, teaching Social Studies in higher institutions of learning in this 21st century will require a learning climate that is safe with teacher support. This will help to promote the culture of lifelong learning for students who will continue to develop their intellectual capacities and abilities which will enable them to cope with technological and other changes in the global world.

In order to make Social Studies teaching and learning more meaningful, teachers need to make their classrooms safe, interactive, participatory, and, democratic where students can learn with zeal. This research, therefore, set out to evaluate the kind of classroom environment that pertains to Social Studies classrooms in Colleges of Education.

1.5 Purpose of the study and research question

This study sought to evaluate the Social Studies classroom learning climate in Colleges of Education from trainee teachers' point of view. The research question which guided the study was what learning climate exists in Social Studies classrooms in Colleges of Education?

2. Methodology

A survey method was used as a design in this study to explore trainee teachers' evaluation of the Social Studies classroom learning climate of their tutors. The nature of the design was a cross-sectional survey. Because, data was collected at a time from 231 trainee teachers to represent the larger population of trainee teachers. Quantitative data was collected to enable the researchers to get a broader picture of how trainee teachers perceive the Social Studies classroom learning climate is based on certain Tutor characteristics is used to determine highly effective Social Studies classroom learning climate.

2.1 Population

Polit, D. F., Hungler, B. P.^[24] defines a population as an aggregate of all the objects, subjects, or members that conform to a set of specifications. In this study, the participants were all trainee teachers of Colleges of Education in the Upper East, Upper West, and North East Regions. The Convenience sampling procedure was used to select 3 Colleges of Education (Gbewaa, Gambaga, and Tumu Colleges of Education. Convenience sampling is selecting participants because they are often readily and easily available^[28]. In all, 231 research participants (Trainee Teachers) were sampled for this study.

2.2 Instrument

A frequency five-point Likert scale type questionnaire was administered to gather information from trainee teachers. The questionnaire consisted of items that elicited trainee teachers' view of the kind of Social Studies classroom learning climate of their Tutors. In view of this, rating scale questions were used. "A rating scale questions requires a person to rate a product or brand along a well-defined, evenly spaced continuum"^[30]. The questionnaire was adapted from the Kentucky Department of Education of Characteristics of Highly Effective Teaching and Learning. The items were a five (5) point Likert type where the respondents had to choose from Always, Very Often, Sometimes, Rarely and Never. The instrument was reliable and valid based on the source it was adapted from.

2.3 Data collection procedure

In ensuring a high return rate, questionnaires were administered personally by the researchers. All the questionnaires were completed in the presence of the researchers which took about 15 minutes. All 231 questionnaires were administered with a 100% return rate. The number of respondents from each College of Education was Gbewaa 91, Tumu 68, and St. Gambaga 72. The data collected from the field was presented and discussed using descriptive statistical tools such as means and standard deviations.

3. Results and discussion

The researchers sought to find out the kind learning climate that existed in Social Studies classrooms in Colleges of Education using certain characteristic components of classroom learning climate from the student teachers' point of view. Major findings emerged from the study.

Table 1. Social studies classroom learning climate from trainee teachers point of view

Statements: Tutor (s).....	Number of Trainee Teachers = 231						
	A	VO	S	R	N	M	SD
1. Promotes a learning environment where trainee teachers actively participate in learning tasks.	0	2	69	46	114	1.82	1.894
2. Creates learning environments where trainee teachers are members of a larger group.	5	10	48	67	101	1.92	1.006
3. Tutors nurture trainee teachers to learn in a safe and healthy environment which develops compassion and mutual respect.	8	8	47	53	115	1.88	1.069
4. Cultivates multicultural understandings and cherish diversity in classrooms.	6	18	68	44	95	2.12	1.115
5. Encourages trainee teachers to own their responsibility for learning.	6	7	27	56	135	1.67	1.976
6. Encourages trainee teachers to accept the different learning needs of all students.	7	15	40	37	132	1.82	1.118
7. demonstrates effective classroom management that promotes comfort, order, and appropriate trainee teachers behaviors	13	14	52	51	101	2.08	1.188
8. Provides trainee teachers technological tools and time and pace to promote equity.	37	30	74	34	56	2.82	1.365
9. Fosters social interaction and civic engagement.	8	13	50	56	104	1.98	1.099
10. Promotes lifelong learning, inquiry, active participation, in teaching-learning processes.	6	18	61	50	96	2.08	1.106
11. Design lessons that allow prompt feedback as a tool to improve learning and promote understanding.	5	21	50	49	106	2.00	1.113
12. Knows each trainee teacher individually and responds to each one insightfully.	27	44	65	39	56	2.77	1.323
13. Builds a constructive relationship with every trainee teacher	16	17	65	52	81	2.29	1.214
Grand						2.10	1.12

Key: A-Always; VO-Very Often; S-Sometimes; R-Rarely; N-Never

Results in Table 1 (see item 1) shows that respondents were unanimous that Tutors did not always promote a learning environment where trainee teachers actively participate in learning tasks. Furthermore, the low mean response (1.82 < 3.0) coupled with the small standard deviation underscored consistency of respondents views on this item.

In social studies discipline, cooperation is widely valued^[5,7,10]. It can be said that cooperation is the center of gravity with which other embodiments revolve round. It was, therefore, necessary to ascertain the level that social studies tutors facilitate this process among trainee teachers (item 2). From the results, it was evident that the mean response of 1.92 was far below the average of 3.0. This means that trainee teachers felt tutors are not doing much to foster an environment where trainee teachers are members of a larger group.

In social studies, active learning is highly valued and students are expected to actively participate in lessons by co-creating knowledge and challenging one another's views in a healthy atmosphere^[16]. Tutors are key stakeholders in helping trainee teachers to take up responsibility for learning. Item 5, sought to measure respondents' views on this subject matter. The results, however, indicate that (item 13) recorded the lowest mean score of 1.67. This suggests that tutors did not do much to help trainees take responsibility for their own learning.

One of the objectives of social studies is to promote lifelong learning, inquiry, active participation in teaching-learning processes^[9]. Item 10 thus sought to find out from the respondents how this lofty goal is being implemented in the classroom. The results as in Table 1 shows that the mean response was 2.08, less than the average response of 3.0. The results suggest that a greater majority of the tutors are not doing much promote lifelong learning and inquiry minds among trainee teachers.

Knowledge of each trainee teacher individually (item 12) and provision of ICT tools and time and pace to promote equity (item 8;) were the only two items whose mean responses were closer to the average response. It is therefore refreshing to learn that tutors are conscious of the demand of technology^[16] in the current scheme of things.

In summation, the overall findings show that majority of the trainee teachers were of the view that their Social Studies tutors do not create an effective classroom climate for learning. Considering the responses from trainee teachers on all the 13 items, it can be seen that the mean response is less than 3. This means that a large majority of the respondents view their Social Studies classroom climate as unfavorable since the greater majority of the responses range from Rare to Never indicating there is a serious problem regarding the kind of environment that exists in our Social Studies classrooms. The Standard Deviation of the individual items also ranges from 0.89 to 1.37 which is quite small. The small Standard Deviation indicates that there is less variation of responses. Thus, the overall individual response is uniform. The Table shows that the mean response of each item on this scale is less than 3.00. This paints a picture that a majority of respondents had a less satisfactory view of the prevailing climate in Social Studies classrooms in all the individual items surveyed. On the overall items, the grand mean response is 2.10 with a standard deviation of 1.12. This again, is indicative

that the trainee teachers view Social Studies classroom environment to largely unfavorable.

The findings are reflected by Adelman, H. S., Taylor, L.^[1] who think that classroom climate is a major determiner of classroom behavior and learning and that understanding how to ensure a positive classroom climate is fundamental in improving schools. Adelman, H. S., Taylor, L.^[1] are of the view that classroom climate has implications for students learning and performance and that negative climate can impede learning and performance. It is worth noting that a positive classroom climate also energizes students' learning^[1,2,23]. This indicates that Colleges of Education do not have a positive classroom climate in their Social Studies classrooms. The findings go contrary to Young, J.^[31] assertion that students learn better when they consider the learning environment as positive and supportive where trust, active participation, and rapport amongst them and their teachers in the teaching and learning process are valued.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

The study concludes that a positive classroom learning climate is beneficial to the success of trainee teachers since what they learn and how much they learn lies in the balance if effective classroom learning climate does not exist. Trainee teachers perceive their Social Studies classroom climate as unfavorable since the greater majority of the responses range from Rare to Never, an indication that there is a serious problem regarding the kind of environment that exists in our Social Studies classrooms. By this Tutors should demand that trainee teachers in a constructivist classroom takes up much of the work allowing the Tutor to perform a facilitator's role in line with Kentucky Department of Education^[16].

Tutors in Colleges of Education should make classrooms that serve as a learning environment more friendly and suitable for active participants as individuals or groups. Tutors should ensure that learning interests are safe and healthy to promote love, mutual respect for different learning abilities by cultivating and motivating learning desires in a safe, healthy and supportive environment in which trainee teachers will develop love, mutual respect, tolerance and hope.

Since the climate in a classroom has an important effect on the quality of teaching and learning, Tutors should create a learning environment where trainee teachers actively participate in learning tasks. This can be done when Tutors employ different teaching methods, techniques and strategies and also provide learning activities that are important in ensuring trainee teachers participation in the teaching and learning process. Tutors should also encourage trainee teachers to be responsible for meeting their own learning needs and accept their responsibilities to make their own learning since learning rest with the individual by helping to learn through the use of effective methods, techniques, and strategies.

Lastly, Tutors should also dedicate enough academic time to trainee teachers by engaging them in learning activities discussions, debates that have a direct link to the content of learners who are tasked by College authorities. If these learning environments are created and promoted, trainee teachers will value and appreciate the learning tools that have been designed by their Tutors for them.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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