

## **Measuring What Matters: Are Government Schools Supporting Learning? Investigating Physical and Psychosocial Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

School environment – a significant contributor towards students' learning, consists not only on physical infrastructure but psychological and social factors also. This study was designed to investigate the physical and psychosocial factors of learning environment of government schools. Thirty-six schools from six districts of Punjab province were selected through multi-stage sampling technique. A self-developed questionnaire was used to collect the data. The research instrument was validated and improved in the light of experts' opinion. The Cronbach's Alpha value of the instrument was 0.82. More than 800 students of grade IX and X were involved in the study. Using this quantitative data, the study found a relatively positive student-teacher interaction, but the students don't feel themselves psychologically and physically safe at school. Students are assigned heavy homework and don't get proper feedback. It was further found that though schools have sufficient learning resources, yet these resources are not properly utilized in enhancing students' learning. So, it can be concluded that physical, psychological and social aspects of school learning environment are not conducive for learning. The government should improve physical infrastructure of the schools, while students' social and psychological well-being should be focused in pre-service and in-service teachers' trainings.

**Keywords:** Government schools, Learning environment, Physical environment, Psychosocial environment, student learning

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## **Introduction**

The students are supposed to spend a significant period of time at school in formal education system. It is natural that the environment where a child spends a lot of time has a substantial impact on his learning. There are plenty of empirical evidences from across the globe that school and classroom learning environments significantly impact students' learning and academic achievements (See, Fraser, 2015; Shernoff, Tonks, & Anderson, 2014). If a school provides a better and conducive environment for learning to its students, it is more probable that the students will learn more and vice versa. One of the notable supports what a school can provide to its students is the provision of a positive and conducive learning environment.

Furthermore, teaching-learning process cannot take place in a vacuum. It requires some tangible and abstract interactions among its physical and human components i.e. physical facilities and psychosocial aspects. Physical component denotes all those tangible objects provided at school or in the classroom to support learning e.g. furniture, condition of the classrooms, lighting, science labs, etc. While psychosocial aspect covers the nature of interactions mainly among teachers-students and student-students. The patterns of both components generate a specific learning environment which impacts students' overall development. School or classroom learning environment is usually considered the collection of the following components.

- Teacher-student relationship – teacher's empathy and warmth
- Violence prevention – protection from harm, cruel or humiliating punishments; bullying
- Discipline that promotes socio-emotional development – happiness of being cared for
- Reasonable workload – monitor assigned work
- Equity
- Learning and/or physical resources

The schools are responsible and remain focused on providing an environment to its students which is conducive for learning. The learning experiences at schools are very vital for the overall development of the students. This study is designed to investigate learning environment of the government schools to what extent they are supportive to learning. Both the major component of leaning environment i.e. physical and psycho-social, were focused.

## **Literature Review**

The available literature repeatedly discusses the following factors which can be collectively categorized as 'Supportive Learning Environment'.

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**Teacher-student Relationship**

Students feel safe and secure in school when teacher-student relationship is positive and supportive (O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2011). Students' social and academic performance is enhanced when they are supported by their teachers in learning environments (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005). The presence of care, warmth and positivity in teacher-student relationship results in a learning environment where students can engage themselves in more productive academic and social activities (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). It is more interesting to note that the positive teacher-students relationship has more significant impact on students' academic achievement with low income backgrounds (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). One of the possible reasons of students' higher academic achievements in learning environments where teachers have good relations with students is higher motivation of students. Motivational theorists have found that students' motivation significantly depends on their perceptions of relationship with their teachers (Fan & Williams, 2010). In better teacher-student relationship environments, teachers have higher level of expectations from their students, which also keep the students motivated almost all the time (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999). The inherent qualities of positive teacher-student relationship are caring, knowing, trust and mutual respect support the students to achieve the best (Gillespie, 2002)

**Violence Prevention**

Students' feeling to be safe and secure in schools is one of the key indicators of supportive learning environments. Children experience harmful, cruel or humiliating punishments and bullying at schools which makes the learning environment unlovable. Recently, UNESCO published an article by Selim (2018) that stated very discouraging facts around the globe. He stated that 50% of the school students face violence in their schools from their teachers and peers; every third child in the world is exposed to bullying. Further, he argues that violence has a lifelong impact especially on children. Physical and psychological violence by the school staff (though emphasized less) is not less intimidating for the children as compared to peer abuse and physical violence (though emphasized more). Violence against children from their peers and teachers effect their physical, emotional and psychological health and development (Kim et al., 2000). A school must strive for providing positive learning environment to its students where they can feel free from physical and psychological violence inflicted by their peers and teachers. Perceived school safety has a significant positive relationship with students' academic achievement. Milan, Furr-Holden and Leaf (2010) have reported a significant increase of 16-22% in academic achievement among students of urban high schools.

**Happiness of being cared**

The effective schools care their students and consequently the students feel themselves as a part of school community. Community can be referred to as a two-folded entity: the territorial or geographical unit; and the quality of human relations (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Community can only be made by the 'sense of belongingness' (Solomon et al., 1996). This belongingness can only be developed if there is a sense that the individuals are cared. This is the same environment which is reflected in the great works of Dewey and Vygotsky who view education as a social process rather than individualistic. Empirical researches over decades have identified three major factors of belongingness: positive relationship with peers, support from teachers and general sense of belongingness. Though focused on the quality and nature of relationship among and between school leaders, teachers, students and their parents but the essence of all relationships is the teacher-student relationship (Anness, 2003). The positive relationship is a kind of social capital which results in effective academic work (Adams & Forsyth, 2009) and the absence of this positive relationship is destructive to students' overall development along with academic achievement (Opdenakker, Manulana, & Brock, 2012). So, the learning environment which provides a sense of belongingness increases the likelihood of better students' academic outcomes and personality.

**Reasonable Homework and Positive Feedback**

Homework has been an integral part of schooling especially at high schools for decades. Homework is defined as learning tasks assigned to the students to complete during non-instructional time (Cooper, 2001). Seminal meta-analysis in this regard was done by Cooper (1989) who found that the students given with homework assignments had higher academic achievements than the students given no homework. The same results repeated in the subsequent studies which confirmed that homework increases students' achievement. Next, there is an established link between the amount of homework and academic achievement of the students. The studies focused on time spent and size of the homework and their effect on academic achievement of the students. Nordenbo et al. (2010) analyzed 71 studies published between 1990 and 2008 but a pattern couldn't be developed. It means that though homework has a significant effect on students' learning, yet the most desirable amount of homework remains unknown which compelled to use the term 'reasonable homework'. Apart from the homework, another important factor that has been researched is the quality of feedback on the given homework.

**Equity**

Inclusion and equity have received considerable attention during the last two decades and considered as basic requisite for learning. In this regard the school functions and policies changing a lot to accommodate inclusion in the school environment (Windchief,

2019). Inclusion implies that schools will accommodate every child regardless of disability, and equity is the fair treatment with all the children. On a wider level equity also deals in providing equal opportunities to all children and access to all facilities available in school. The ultimate purpose of creating inclusive and equitable environment in a school is to reduce disparities (Kinzie, McCormick, Gonyea, & BrckaLorenz, 2018). Disadvantaged students are suffering through poverty, hunger, and lodging insecurities. Such situations exposed to negative elements e.g., violence and traumas which ultimately affect their learning and behaviors (Kyriakides, Creemers, & Charalambous, 2018). Quality education in school is dependent on inclusion and equity indicators. School has to ensure that every child is dealing on fair basis according to their needs and abilities.

### **Learning / Physical Resources**

Physical resources are of great importance that children are comfortable and happy in school environment. A proper learning environment is based on school resources and facilities, such resources are not only important for learners but also for educators and school administration (Asiabaka, 2008). The definition of physical resources is very broad covering all the aspects of learning and physical resources e.g., cleanliness, toilets, number of classrooms, library, laboratory, sports facilities, classroom facilities, furniture and gardens etc. (Walford, 2003).

A proper learning environment is crucial for transfer of quality education to children and to create a positive leaning environment in school. Akpan (2003) identified in their research that parents appreciate and satisfied with those schools where they find maximum facilities. Physical resources can also be linked to students' motivation and school achievement (Akomolafe & Adesua, 2016). Students feel comfortable and motivated in those schools where they have maximum facilities and modern infrastructure which can contribute in instructional delivery. Similarly, school resources and facilities also play an important role to create a positive and interesting environment of the school where children cannot not only learn in a facilitative environment but also enjoy their leisure time in school (Adewunmi, 2000).

### **Learning Environment of Pakistani Schools**

This is an established fact that a positive school environment is the prime contributor in students' learning. Above mentioned literature provided a based to understand the detail of this key concept. Since this study is being conducted in a Pakistani context thus it is pertinent to know the real situation of Pakistani school. Although, sufficient literature is not available in this field with reference to Pakistani context, yet a few researches and some local evidences help to understand the prevailing situation in public schools.

After a lot of criticism on the attainment of millennium development goals, developing countries turned to achieve sustainable development goals; Pakistani government became very active to meet these goals and was forced to take visible measures to improve educational standards in public schools. Finance is the major concern to achieve these targets, Pakistan is currently spending 2.1% of its GDP on education but it should be 4-6% (Bourn, Hunt, & Bamper, 2017). This is the major hurdle to achieve the set targets. This little investment is the main reason of the school deterioration (Institute of Social and Policy Sciences, 2015). However, Pakistan is struggling to improve its public schools in terms of infrastructure development - providing the basis needs in schools, preparing teachers for their effective role and ensure quality standards; developing curriculum according to the current needs and trends, engaging stakeholders in schools; maintaining equality and equity standards; using ICTs in schools for effective learning; preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms; developing mechanism for monitoring and evaluation of schools etc. (Government of Pakistan, 2016). Putting together, these are prerequisite for school performance and effectiveness and this paves the way for psychosocial environment of school where teachers can develop their positive interaction with students and student to student.

This type of school climate could be an ideal environment where school can perform up to the given standards. When school compliance the above mentioned prerequisite a safe and healthy environment created in school where students' well-being and health get promoted, they feel comfortable in school environment (Ahmed, 2019). Hence the objective of the study was to explore the physical and psychosocial factors of learning environment of government schools.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Is physical environment of the government schools supportive to students' learning?
2. Does psychosocial factor of learning environment of government schools help in enhancing students learning?

### **Research Methodology**

Learning environment is a complex phenomenon. Measuring learning environments cannot be limited to their observable characteristics only (Kangas, 2010), which demands deep subjective perceptions of the students (Frenzel, Reinhard, & Goetz, 2007). The students are considered the best and closest observers of their learning environment; majority of the researchers across the globe have assessed the learning environments through the perceptions of students (Burke, 2007; Mobeen-ul-Islam, 2011; Piispanen, 2008; Smith & Parr, 2007).

Keeping in view the age and literacy level of high school students, quantitative research designs are used in most of studies. Almost all the well-known scales used to investigate school and/or classroom learning environments are based on the quantifiable perceptions of the students (e.g. See, Learning Environment Inventory, Classroom Environment Scale, My Class Inventory; What Is Happening in This Class – WIHIC). This study also used quantitative research design and used questionnaire as the research instrument. A self-developed questionnaire was used as none of the above-mentioned scales (or any other like them) best suited the context of the study. The available scales were focused upon and keeping the theoretical framework and the context of the study, the questionnaire was developed. The research instrument was validated from five experts and piloted on 40 students. The reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.82.

The study was conducted in the province of Punjab. Multi-stage random sampling technique was used to select the respondents of the study. Six districts were selected randomly. In the next stage, one tehsil from each district was randomly selected. From each tehsil, six schools were conveniently selected. Though not equal yet representation from both male and female schools was ensured. All the selected schools were visited. The students of class IX and X were briefed about the importance of research and their true responses. The students were requested to participate in the study on volunteer basis. Twenty students from one school were intended but where more than 20 students were willing to fill the questionnaire, they were not refused. In total, 882 responses were received from 36 schools. Some of the responses were incomplete while seven responses were found as outliers. The responses of 802 students were analyzed to draw the conclusions.

## Results

The responses obtained through the questionnaire are presented in the tabular form. Every table focuses on one of the factors of school environment.

*Table 1*  
*Teacher student relationship*

No.	Statement	<i>f</i>					Mean	SD
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always		
1	Appreciation on good work	26	152	222	263	139	3.42	0.96
2	Positive interaction during teaching	23	138	233	265	143	3.46	1.08
3	Teachers' soft behavior on	109	183	200	171	139	3.06	1.26

4	low performance School-parent communication	290	252	173	68	19	2.09	1.06
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The students reported that mostly they receive appreciation from their teachers on good work (M = 3.42, SD = 0.96); their interaction with their teachers and other fellows during classwork is positive (M = 3.46, SD = 1.08); and their teachers remain soft when they show low performance (M = 3.06, SD = 1.26); but they think that the desired level of school-parent communication is missing altogether (M = 2.09, SD = 1.06).

Table 2  
*Violence prevention*

No.	Statement	<i>f</i>					Mean	SD
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always		
1	Facing teachers' harsh behavior (verbal taunts)	34	48	102	467	151	3.81	1.12
2	Severe corporal punishment	127	96	285	204	90	3.04	0.91
3	Danger of peer violence	110	361	209	75	47	2.49	1.02
4	Unhappy on way to school	93	109	262	211	127	3.21	0.82

The responding students were of the view that they face both verbal taunts (M = 3.81, SD = 1.12) and physical punishment (M = 3.04, SD = 0.91). Though they do not feel higher level of peer violence (M = 2.49, SD = 1.02) yet sometimes they do not go to their schools happily (M = 3.21, SD = 0.82).

Table 3  
*Happiness of being cared*

No.	Statement	<i>f</i>					Mean	SD
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always		
1	Teachers' concern on my absenteeism	121	157	326	116	82	2.85	0.91
2	Class fellows' concern on my low	175	198	273	93	63	2.59	1.07

3	Love my school	80	153	200	241	128	3.23	0.86
4	Happy on long vacations	41	79	348	161	173	3.43	0.99

When asked whether they are cared or not at school, majority of the students told that neither do their teachers show any concern on their absenteeism ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) nor do their class fellows have any concern on their low performance in their studies ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ). Majority of the students claimed that they love their government schools ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ), still they reported that they feel happy when their school goes off for long vacations ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ).

Table 4

*Reasonable workload and its monitoring*

No.	Statement	<i>f</i>					Mean	SD
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always		
1	Teachers assign homework	23	59	170	231	319	3.95	1.19
2	Feel burden of homework	81	96	209	183	233	3.49	0.94
3	Get enough time for recreation	205	167	230	141	59	2.60	0.87
4	Positive feedback of homework	161	212	236	128	65	2.66	1.23

Majority of the students reported that their teachers regularly assign homework ( $M = 3.95$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) but do not often provide feedback on it ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ). Furthermore, they feel burdened to complete a heavy homework ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) and cannot spare enough time for recreation ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ).

Table 5

*Equity*

No.	Statement	<i>f</i>					Mean	SD
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always		
1	Equal treatment of all students	41	38	138	170	415	4.10	1.18

2	Teachers' help when needed	23	35	176	269	299	3.92	1.01
3	Special attention on missing a class	229	302	124	80	67	2.32	1.32
4	Teachers aware of my needs	101	138	196	281	86	3.14	0.90

Majority of the respondents believe that teachers treat all students equally ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). Although the teachers are not only aware of the students' needs ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) but also help their students when needed ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) yet the students are not provided special attention if they remain absent from a class ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ).

Table 6

*Learning resources*

No.	Statement	<i>f</i>					Mean	SD
		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always		
1	Use of AV aids	261	243	201	77	20	2.19	1.07
2	Use of school library	393	162	140	73	34	1.99	1.18
3	Use of computer lab	425	141	139	70	27	1.92	1.16
4	Use of science lab	452	184	125	36	05	1.73	0.93

As far as the utilization of the available learning resources was concerned, a few students reported their proper utilization. While an overwhelming majority of the students believed that all of the available resources i.e. AV aids ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ), Library ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ), computer lab ( $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) and science lab ( $M = 1.73$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ).

## Discussion and Conclusions

These studies found that majority of the students are quite satisfied with the behavior of their teachers. The finding is in accordance with the findings of some earlier studies (Iqbal, 2012; Mobeen-ul-Islam, 2011). But at the same time, the students reported verbal taunts and bullying from their teachers and peers and they don't usually walk to school happily, and feel happy on long vacations from school. Teachers are supposed to create such an environment where the students feel themselves socially, emotionally and physically safe, and do not use any strategy that might have negative effects on students' personality (Government of Pakistan, 2009). But unfortunately, child friendliness at

government schools is missing; corporal punishment at schools still exists; and resultantly the students of government schools do not find their schools attractive (Government of Pakistan, 2016).

The study further found that the students believed that there is a lack of communication between school and their parents. This lack of communication has already been concluded in many earlier studies and has negatively affected the satisfaction level of the parents (E.g., Akhter, 2016; Hussain, Zulfqar & Hameed, 2018). Teacher-parent communication has of significant importance in students' higher academic achievements (Mahuro & Hungi, 2016).

This study found that heavy homework is assigned to the students but do not receive the desired feedback from their teachers. Shah (2017) has deeply investigated the problem and found that assigned homework always remains textbook oriented and only the corrective feedback is provided which is also rare. He further concluded that inadequate professional training, lack of interest of school administration and absence of clear guidelines in the government policies are the main causes of this lack of positive feedback on students' homework.

The study revealed that despite sufficient availability at government schools, learning resources are not properly utilized to enhance quality of students' learning. No doubt, government schools in Punjab do not face any serious scarcity of learning and physical resources. Since the inception of Education Sector Reforms in 2011, they have been provided missing physical and learning facilities on priority basis (Government of Pakistan, 2008). But due to different reasons, these learning resources are not being utilized properly. According to Hussain, Hameed and Malik (2015), lack of operational and current budget, difficult procedure of drawing and spending of allocated budget, lack of teachers' interest, and the examination system based on rote learning are the major reasons on non-utilization of available learning resources.

Overall, it can be concluded that the physical environment of the government schools is to some extent supportive to students' learning, but a lot is to be done in psycho-social perspective. We are unable to provide a socially, physically and emotionally safe learning environment to our students of government schools. One of the major reasons of students' low academic achievement might be the lack of environment conducive for learning.

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