



The association of school environment to student teachers' satisfaction and teaching commitment

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ABSTRACT

A supportive school environment is crucial to the enhancement of student teaching experiences. This study assesses student teachers' perceptions of secondary school environments, and then relates the perceptions to their satisfaction with school experiences and teaching commitment. The results show that considerable disparities between student teachers' perceptions of actual and preferred school environments and suggest certain directions for improvement. Student teachers' perceptions about their school environments, especially in the areas of professional interest and staff freedom, were positively associated with their satisfaction. Several school environmental aspects influenced the total years they planned to teach and their intention to teach at the placement schools.

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1. Introduction

Research studies have documented student teaching as one of the most important components for the preparation and retention of prospective teachers (Graham, 2006). During student teaching, student teachers actively process information, interpret their school realities, and internalize their field experiences. They often encounter difficulties, reporting frustration or tension in learning to teach, and perceiving dichotomy between the university and the real world at school (Applegate, 1985; Meijer, Zanting, & Verloop, 2002; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). Some of the difficult aspects of learning to teach for student teachers include preparing lessons, selecting appropriate teaching strategies, managing classrooms, knowing school resources and regulations, getting along with colleagues, and adjusting to school system (Hsu, 2005; Jones & Vesilind, 1995; Moore, 2003). A recent study by Fives, Hamman, and Olivarez (2007) further argues that, by definition, student teachers play the roles of both a student and a teacher, who must conform to the decisions made by their cooperating teachers with regard to instruction and their professional duties and have a limited amount of control of their work environment. Thus, they may begin to develop and experience the symptoms of burnout,

such as emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment, during their teaching practicum.

A student teacher's behavior is context-dependent. Types of schools, classrooms, and communities have impact on the relationship between student teaching and teacher development (Zeichner, 1986). How well the student teacher undertakes the transition from student to teacher roles depends on many factors, including the quality of school environment (Huang & Waxman, 1995; Kirby, Stringfield, Teddlie, & Wimpleberg, 1992). Prior research has noted that the school environment was associated with inservice teachers' self-efficacy, professional development, and retention (Fisher & Fraser, 1991a; Fraser, 1998; Taylor & Tashakkori, 1995). The school environment in terms of administrative support, autonomy, and collegiality, for example, has been found to be correlated with teachers' professional and organizational commitment (Riehl & Sipple, 1996). Various factors in the school environment, such as teachers' affiliation and professional interest, have been found to affect teachers' instructional practices, which in turn, influenced students' attitudes and achievement (Webster & Fisher, 2003). Research in this area, however, has rarely focused on preservice teachers or investigated the impact of the school contexts where they practice teaching on their affective outcomes.

The present study investigates a sample of student teachers in Taiwan where student teaching is mandated as part of educational preparation for elementary and secondary school teachers. As the

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first clinical placement, student teachers work at the placement schools that have contracted with the university as internship partners. Each student teacher is assigned a cooperating teacher who has teaching experience and often with exemplary practices. With the guidance and help from both the cooperating teacher and university supervisor, field teaching practices represent a unique opportunity for student teachers to develop and consolidate knowledge and skills at the school site.

The complicate, interactive, dynamic, and idiosyncratic nature of the process of learning to teach is influenced by the interplay between individual and contextual variables (Clares & Almeida, 2005). Investigating the quality of school environment is one of the approaches that have emerged in the study of the process of becoming a teacher because it helps to explain the complexities of this phenomenon. Over the past decade, educators have been placing greater importance upon the process of learning and are moving away from within-individual explanations for success and failure to system-oriented approaches that focus on evaluating the total context in which learning occurs (Burden & Fraser, 1993). Meanwhile, research on education environmental issues has escalated around the world (Fraser, 1999; Fraser & Walberg, 1991; Wubbels & Levy, 1993).

Noteworthy studies have clarified the abstract and complex nature of the school environment. The school environment has often been conceptualized as the psychosocial context in which teachers work and teach (Fisher & Fraser, 1991b). According to Freiberg and Stein (1999), it is the quality of the working environment that reflects the way which people interact and react, and a measure of school characteristics that teachers, administrators, parents, and policy makers consider to be important. It can foster resilience or become a risk factor in the lives of people who work and learn within. Exploring the school environment where student teachers engage in the last stage of learning to teach is not only important in its own right, but it may also reveal how various school environmental aspects influence their satisfaction with teaching practicum and their commitment to teaching career.

1.1. Theoretical framework

The theoretical foundation of the present study is linked to Lewin's (1936) *Field Theory*. The *Field Theory* is the proposition that human behavior is the function of both the person and the environment: expressed in symbolic terms, $B = f(P, E)$. In other words, the interaction of personal characteristics and the environment is a determinant of human behavior. This theory was applied by Murray (1938) to educational settings in a needs-press model, in which personal needs refer to motivational personality characteristics that tend to move toward certain goals, whereas environmental press provides an external situation that supports or frustrates the expression of personality needs (Fraser, 1994).

Accordingly, the present study assesses the current state of the school environment in which student teachers practice teaching and explores its impact from the student teacher's perspective. It hypothesizes that school environments may vary in ways associated with their support of student teachers' needs to develop professionally, and may correlate with both student teachers' general satisfaction with school experiences and their career decision. It tests whether and how student teaching outcomes might be mediated by the congruence of their needs for professional growth with the environmental support and enrichment they experience at the placement schools.

The school environment has been distinguished from the classroom environment (Aldridge, Laugksch, & Fraser, 2006; Fraser & Rentoul, 1982). Moos has acknowledged the distinction in between and developed two instruments: the Classroom Environment Scale (CES) which assesses students' perceptions of

characteristics of their classroom (Moos & Trickett, 1987), and the Work Environment Scale (WES) which assesses teachers' perceptions of aspects of their school work environment (Moos, 1979, 1986). The WES employs a three-dimensional model: (a) the Relationship Dimension which measures the extent to which people involved in the environment support and help each other; (b) the Personal Growth Dimension, which measures the extent to which personal growth and self-enhancement tend to occur; and (c) the System Maintenance and Change Dimension which measures the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectation, controlled, and responsive to change. All the three dimensions should be taken into account when trying to gain an understanding of working environment (Fraser, 1998; Moos, 1979). The WES has been used to compare the environments of different types of schools. Research has found that there was fair agreement among teachers in different types of schools about what they would prefer their school environments to be like. In contrast, teachers' perceptions of their actual school environments varied significantly in the areas of Involvement, Staff Support, Autonomy, Task Orientation, Innovation, Physical Comfort and Work Pressure, with elementary school environments perceived more favorably than high school environments (Docker, Fraser, & Fisher, 1989).

The WES model has been adopted to design new instruments for assessing the school environment by educational researchers. Among them, the School-Level Environment Questionnaire (SLEQ) (Fisher & Fraser, 1991a; Fraser & Rentoul, 1982; Rentoul & Fraser, 1983) is one of the most widely used instruments. The SLEQ was designed to assess teachers' perceptions of psychosocial dimensions of the environment of the school. It contains measures of both actual and preferred environments in eight scales: Student Support, Affiliation, Professional Interest, Staff Freedom, Participatory Decision Making, Innovation, Resources Adequacy, and Work Pressure to characterize important aspects of school environment (Fisher & Fraser, 1991b). The preferred form is concerned with the goals and value orientations and it measures the environment ideally liked or preferred (Fraser & Walberg, 1991). Researchers have used both forms of the SLEQ to compare actual and preferred school environments in order to guide improvement in the schools (Burden & Fraser, 1994; Fisher & Cresswell, 1998; Templeton & Jensen, 1993). In a person-environment framework, actual and preferred forms can be used to examine whether teachers do better in their preferred environment, or their performance can be enhanced by changing the actual environment in ways more congruent with the preferred environment (Fraser, 1999).

Both the WES and SLEQ have been designed over 25 years ago and validated with no Taiwanese sample. A relatively recent instrument, the Science Teacher School Environment Questionnaire (STSEQ), was thus developed along this line to assess the current indigenous conditions of school environment in Taiwan (Huang, 2003, 2006). The STSEQ was based on extensive interviews of local secondary teachers to ensure dimensions and items covered were salient to teachers. It also consulted existing instruments and findings in research literature to embrace global development in the learning environment research paradigm. The STSEQ has been applied to assess 900 science teachers at 52 secondary schools. The results indicate that most of these teachers perceived positively their school environments, and teachers' perceptions were related significantly to three variables: school location, school level (middle or high school) and teachers' intention to stay in teaching (Huang, 2006).

The present study involves modifying and validating the STSEQ to make it suitable for assessing the secondary school environment as perceived by student teachers in all subject areas. Adequate reliability and validity of this instrument have consistently been reported in previous research (Huang, 2003, 2006, 2007).

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