Rethinking Learning Environments to Counter Stress and Anxiety

By
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Abstract

Childhood stress and anxiety are becoming more and more prevalent in educational settings. Many youth today experience anxiety, stress, depression and other mental health disorders that negatively impact their social, emotional and academic achievements. With youth mental health issues on the rise, educators must work toward building positive, nurturing learning environments to counter these negative impacts on student development. This qualitative, narrative study explores the classroom experiences of two York Region elementary teachers and their observations about the implications of student stress and anxiety in a learning setting. The research and data also answer important questions regarding what exactly a positive classroom environment is and how to effectively implement such a space in one’s own classroom. Key factors explored in this study include: the social/emotional environment, the physical design and organization of space, and specific pedagogical approaches that alleviate classroom anxiety and build community.

Key Words:
Anxiety
Stress
Student development
Positive classroom environment
Classroom design
Student-teacher relationships
Inclusion
Teaching strategies
Hierarchy of needs
TRIBES
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Rethinking Learning Environments to Counter Stress and Anxiety

Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

Background to the study:

As a researcher and educator, I am interested in the impact of stress and anxiety on student learning and academic performance. Not only did I experience classroom stress and anxiety as I matured through middle and high school, but I have also experienced first-hand the effect of classroom anxiety on the students with whom I have worked with in my practicum experiences. These observations have led me to an interest in exploring the effects of positive learning environments on students who are prone to classroom anxiety. But what is a positive learning environment and how can we create it to reduce student anxiety? In recent years this topic has begun to receive more attention, however, much of the research in this area has revolved largely around reducing test anxiety. In their book entitled *Emotions in Education*, Schultz and Pekrun (2007) raise a significant discussion to my area of study:

“…what about student emotions other than test anxiety? And what about teachers’ emotions? What do we know about students’ and teachers’ unpleasant emotions, other than anxiety, such as anger, hopelessness, shame, or boredom; and what do we know about pleasant emotions, such as enjoyment, hope, or pride in educational settings? Until recently, the answer to this question had to be ‘next to nothing’ (p. 3).

Reading these poignant questions and viewpoints has caused me to reflect on the wide range of emotions students encounter in a day and how these feelings may affect their academic performance. I began to consider the social-emotional environment as equally important as the physical classroom space and the pedagogical approaches employed by the teacher.
**Purpose of the Study:**

This study is important to the education community because it will shed some light onto the delicate situation of student anxiety and stress in the classroom. I believe that if teachers spend more time building positive classroom environments, student anxiety and stress levels will dissipate to more manageable levels where students are better able to function academically and socially. Student success is a key component to any well developed curriculum, and the purpose of this study is to outline how positive classroom environments can alleviate student stress and anxiety and thus enhance student success with the curriculum.

**Research Questions:**

My goal was to expose some triggers that made students more prone to classroom anxiety and stress and to offer solutions for building positive, nurturing classroom environments to diminish their pressure. I conducted interviews with two in-service teachers at the elementary level in York Region, Ontario, one from the public board and one from the Catholic board. By analyzing their experiences with anxious learners, their beliefs about the causes and triggers of learning anxiety, and their perspectives on the most effective ways to reduce anxiety among students, I address the following overarching question:

- How do elementary teachers respond to the needs of students with general learning anxiety?

Using this overarching question to guide my research, I explored the following sub-questions:

- What are elementary teachers’ experiences with anxious learners?
- What are elementary teachers’ beliefs about the causes and triggers of learning anxiety?
- What are elementary teachers’ perspectives on the most effective ways to reduce anxiety among students?
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What are elementary teachers’ perspectives on the link between general learning anxiety and academic performance?

How do elementary teachers define a positive learning environment?

How do elementary teachers foster a positive learning environment for their students?

I used these specific sub-questions to guide my research and inquiries into teacher experiences with classroom stress and anxiety.

Background of the Researcher:

I bring a diverse and interesting background of experiences to my studies on classroom anxiety. I have been a student coping with a generalized anxiety disorder for many years; in fact, I began to experience symptoms as young as 9 or 10. I can remember and appreciate the difficulties that anxious youth experience when they are placed in a learning environment that lacks feelings of positivity, equity and community.

I studied Early Childhood Education at Seneca College and graduated with honours in 2008. Seneca’s ECE program gave me a strong background in child-development and psychology, knowledge that has become increasingly more useful as I undertook this research endeavor. Immediately after I graduated from Seneca, I attended York University for a four-year BA degree in English Literature and History. Throughout these years, I gained a wide spectrum of knowledge, specifically in English Literature and East Asian Histories. While studying at York I worked along-side a diverse spectrum of people, further developing my interpersonal and communication skills. My past academic experiences with Seneca College and York University have taught me to be open minded and sensitive toward people, situations, communities and histories, qualities that have allowed me to effectively perform my own research interviews.
After graduating from York, I worked for two years as an ECE for the YMCA of Greater Toronto. My experiences as a preschool teacher offered me unique first hand perspectives on classroom management, stress and anxiety for students (as adults, we forget how stressful it can be for a three year old to be separated from their parents), differentiated instruction, and the value of daily physical activity (DPA) in the classroom. I also gained perspective on how to build a positive and happy classroom atmosphere that is conducive to student development. I look back on my experiences at the YMCA with fondness and appreciation because they truly enhanced my interest in and knowledge of student anxiety and the effects of a positive classroom environment. I brought all of these experiences with me on my journey to strengthen my own and others’ knowledge on the effects of classroom anxiety.

Personally, I believe that educators need to place a stronger emphasis on classroom environment; socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively. I believe that fostering a positive classroom climate by employing effective teaching strategies tailored to the individual needs of students can enhance classroom self-esteem and thus help to alleviate student stress and anxiety. I also believe that careful attention needs to be paid to classroom set up and design. Teachers should consider the learning environment a resource to extend student experiences, and if the space is disorganized, lacks light or windows, is absent of natural features, or is over cluttered with unnecessary furniture, students will almost certainly feel more overwhelmed. I also believe that teachers need to be aware of students who may be more prone to experience stress or anxiety. When a teacher is in tune to catalysts for stress and anxiety, they are better able to help their students regulate these feelings to achieve their academic potential.
Overview:

Chapter One includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, and information on how I came to be involved in researching student anxiety and learning environments. Chapter Two contains a review of the literature I consulted to prepare for my interviews and data collection. The works of several major thinkers in the area of student anxiety and resiliency are discussed, including that of Bonnie Benard and Jeanne Gibbs. Chapter Three provides the methodology and procedure used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter Four identifies the participants in the study and describes the data as it addresses the research question. Chapter Five includes limitations of the study, conclusions, recommendations for practice, and further reading and study. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter Two: LITERATURE REVIEW

I have read over and researched an ample amount literature related to the topics of student anxiety and building positive classroom environments. The following will review some of the books, chapters, and articles I have read on the topic of classroom stress and anxiety. These resources discuss topics related to my own feelings on the subject matter and will connect to the research I conducted on this topic.

Student Stress and Anxiety: What is it and Who is more likely to Experience it?

Child and youth mental health diagnoses are on the rise, a phenomenon which deeply impacts the classroom atmosphere. According to the 2010 Ontario Caring and Safe Schools Mandate released by the Ontario Ministry of Education, “...one in five children and youths in Ontario will struggle with his or her mental health. More than 500,000 young people in Ontario suffer from a diagnosable mental health problem, such as anxiety, that may manifest itself in behaviour such as bullying or an eating disorder” (p. 29). If this data is accurate, it means that in a class of 25 students, up to five of them will suffer from an anxiety based mental health problem. That equates to up to 20% of one’s students being affected by anxiety and mental health issues.

When aiming to promote a positive classroom environment, educators should take time to consider students in their class who may be at increased risk for stress and anxiety. There are many articles that shed light on specific groups of students who may be predisposed to such negative feelings. One such article is “Supportive School Climate and Student Willingness to Seek Help for Bullying” by Eliot, Cornell, Gregory and Fan (2010). This article discusses the implications of bullying on student mental health:
“Studies show that victims of bullying suffer from a range of serious consequences, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and increased risk for suicide. Longitudinal studies have found that victimization is associated with poorer social and emotional adjustment (Esbensen & Carson, 2009), physical health problems (Fekkes, Pijpers, Fredriks, Vogels, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2006), and increased incidence of anxiety disorders in young adulthood (Sourander et al., 2007)” (p. 2).

Through analysis of this article, it becomes obvious that students who experience bullying behaviours are more prone to have lower self-esteem and higher instances of anxiety, exhibited by social isolation, physical illness and even panic attacks. It stands to reason that this kind of anxiety will impact their learning.

While Eliot, Cornell, Gregory and Fan discuss the increased risk of anxiety for bullied students, Olivares-Cuhat (2011) notes that students from high poverty demographic groups are at increased risk for stress and anxiety as well. The article states that participants displayed low level of emotional intelligence in the interpersonal, stress management and adaptability categories, stressing the need for supporting these students’ psychological well-being. Olivares-Cuhat’s article thus points to the notion that students from high-poverty demographic groups may experience higher levels of stress and anxiety. The author of the article offers pedagogical recommendations, which state that by providing more differential instruction and promoting a wider range of learning styles, the gap between students of high-poverty, urban middle schools and students of low-poverty middle schools may be lessened.

Jeanne Gibbs is the founder and original pioneer of the pedagogical approach known as Tribes, a teaching process that grew out of California in the 1970’s as a response to the high drug usage and dropout rates among students. What started as an initiative to reduce student drop-out rates, however, has blossomed into an international pedagogical phenomenon. I truly believe that when students are enveloped by a culture of caring, positivity and community, tendencies toward anxiety, stress and school avoidance become significantly lessened. In the following
excerpt, Gibbs describes the implementation of Tribes culture and how it encourages an environment of student resiliency:

Given that the focus of a Tribes school is student-centered, the next question becomes, ‘How do we create an ideal culture for learning?’... The culture in Tribes school communities is based on the three well-proven principles that foster human resilience: caring relationships, positive expectations and beliefs, and opportunities for participation and contribution (Benard). Its components are those of an ideal learning culture. Namely, it is participative, proactive, collaborative, communal and given over to constructive meaning (Bruner, Fosnot). The safe and caring culture is created and sustained by the students, teachers and the whole school community through daily use of the four...Tribes Agreements: Attentive Listening; Appreciations/No Put downs; The Right To Pass; Mutual Respect (p. 5).

I have seen the Tribes model in action in several classrooms, and I can honestly say that the students, the teachers and the classroom community as a whole seem to work so much more cohesively and holistically. It really is amazing to see such harmony and cooperation amongst a group of people.

Bonnie Benard, a prominent name in the field of student resiliency nicely supplements Gibbs’ discussion in her 1995 article on resiliency, by stating:

Research suggests that when schools are places where the basic human needs for support, respect, and belonging are met, motivation for learning is fostered. Reciprocal caring, respectful, and participatory relationships are the critical determining factors in whether a student learns; whether parents become and stay involved in the school; whether a program or strategy is effective; whether an educational change is sustained; and, ultimately, whether a youth feels he or she has a place in this society. When a school redefines its culture by building a vision and commitment on the part of the whole school community that is based on these three critical factors of resilience, it has the power to serve as a "protective shield" for all students and a beacon of light for youth from troubled homes and impoverished communities (p. 4).

Her point that school culture has the ability to act as a “protective shield” or “beacon of light” for students from difficult home situations really struck me to the core. As teachers, we hold more power then we may be aware of. We have the ability to help an anxious child feel calm, focused and peaceful.
The Importance of a Supportive Teacher: The Role of Student-Teacher Relationships

Forming healthy student-teacher relationships is a critical factor in student emotional, social, and cognitive development. If students perceive they do not have an adult in their corner to support them, they are much more susceptible to become anxious and reluctant learners. Heather A. Davis (2003) writes in depth about the role of positive student-teacher relationships, arguing that “Relationships with adults are important for child development because of their “affordance value,” that is, the extent to which adults bring to the relationship resources to support a child’s intellectual, social, and emotional development that would have otherwise been unavailable” (p. 1). The article goes on to discuss the positive effects of teacher connections, noting the impact of such relationships on students’ self-regulatory skills; “...positive relationships were associated with competence with peers, tolerance of frustration, academic and social skills” (p. 4). Finally, Davis states that student’s perception of their student-teacher relationship is 100% true to them, regardless of whether or not the teacher feels that positive attention and interaction has been fostered. According to Davis, positive student perception equates to more positivity in the classroom; “The perception of teacher support and school belonging in turn predicted increased academic self-efficacy, positive school affect, and academic achievement” (p. 7).

Much like Davis, Roeser, Midgely, and Urdan (1996), stress the importance of considering student perception of student-teacher relationships. In their article “Perceptions of the School Psychological Environment and Early Adolescents’ Psychological and Behavioral Functioning in School” the authors discuss the implications of positive student perceptions of relationships with educators; Perceiving positive teacher-student relationships predicted positive school-related affect and this relation was mediated through feelings of school belonging.
Feelings of academic efficacy and school belonging in-turn were positively related to final-semester academic grades” (p. 1). The authors go on to discuss specific qualities that students seek out of their teacher-student relationships: “…students who perceive positive teacher-student relationships in school characterized by respect, supportiveness, and care will report a greater sense of school belonging. Positive feelings of school belonging, in turn, are hypothesized to predict increased positive feelings toward school and decreased self consciousness in learning situations” (p. 3). Thus, Roeser, Midgely, and Urdan effectively demonstrate the value of forming positive student-teacher relationships.

**Teaching Strategies that Alleviate Student Stress and Anxiety**

Educators can do a lot to positively impact the stress and anxiety levels of students by utilizing teaching strategies that effectively encourage inclusion of all students, student autonomy and self-esteem. In Kim’s (2005) article, two student groups in Korea - a control group taught in a more traditional manner (i.e. blackboard and text book work) and an experimental group taught using the Constructivist teaching approach - are examined. Kim (2005) defines constructivism by stating: “…learning is an active constructive process rather than the process of knowledge acquisition” (p. 9). In other words, students are not empty buckets for teachers to pour knowledge into, but they are rather constructors of their own knowledge. Hands-on experiences, small group peer explorations and self reflective critical thinking are all examples of the Constructivist teaching approach. The data collected and analysed showed that students in the experimental group experienced lower levels of anxiety and had more motivation and enthusiasm toward learning:

... the students of the constructivist teaching group employed more learning strategies in attitudes to learning and interest, motivation to learn the use of time management
principles for academic tasks, anxiety and worry about school performance, information processing and reasoning, the use of support techniques and materials, self testing, reviewing and preparing for class... (p. 14).

This study suggests that employing a Constructivist teaching approach is more beneficial when compared to more traditional teaching methods, notably in the reduction of “anxiety and worry about school performance” because… Teachers must be more realistic and consider the fact that not all children are verbal/linguistic or mathematical/logical learners. Constructivist teaching approaches and hands-on learning activities therefore support the notion that teaching strategies need to be diverse and meaningfully planned when attempting to employ a positive classroom learning environment.

In an article by Gabriella Olivares-Cuhat (2011) entitled “Learners in a High Poverty Urban Middle School”, data collected from students dealing with high-stress situations is analysed and the types of learning styles they tend to utilize most effectively in an educational environment is brought to light. The ideas and information in this article uncover how to effectively build positive learning environments that alleviate stress on students’ learning experiences. The pedagogical recommendations provided by the researcher offer some useful, research based answers to this question. Overall, this article offers useful knowledge on learning implications of childhood stress and how to build optimal learning environments. As the author explains, learning styles preferred by the participants were not well matched to traditional teaching styles, further demonstrating the need to promote differentiated instruction, a theory encouraged by Gardner (1993) through his work on Multiple Intelligences.

**The Physical Space: Designing a Stress-free Classroom**

One aspect to promoting a positive classroom environment is the careful planning of the physical environment. Students are almost certainly going to feel more overwhelmed in a
classroom that lacks careful physical planning. Classrooms that are overcrowded, cluttered, lack
natural light and have no obvious link to the natural world present an array of problems to both
students and teachers alike. Aesthetic aspects such as natural lighting, presence of plant life, and
the use of natural fibres and textures can all contribute to a healthier social, emotional, and
cognitive classroom atmosphere. These sentiments are mirrored by the Organization for
Economic Co-Operation and Development. In their document, “21st Century Learning
Environments” (2006), they discuss the value and importance of designing classrooms with
integrity; “Quality indoor environments can result in health and productivity gains for all users of
the building: students, teaching and non-teaching staff, and the community. Designers and their
clients can work together to provide optimal learning environments that mitigate the negative
effects of inadequate lighting, lack of day lighting and poor air quality” (p. 33). Indeed, careful
thought and consideration are required to design an optimal learning environment.

McCreery and Hill (2005) discuss the significance of appropriate lighting to the design
of the physical learning space; “Lighting needs to be carefully addressed in new construction and
modernization projects because controlled daylight and appropriate artificial illumination are
critical to the quality of student performance” (p. 1). McCreery and Hill further expand on the
idea of relationship between lighting and student performance by commenting on links to student
health; “Studies in Sweden and Canada have also noted improved student behaviour and health,
including fewer days of absence per year.” The Canadian study pointed out that day lighting
allowed for downsizing in heating, ventilating and air conditioning systems, which improved
classroom noise levels — another plus for the learning environment” (p 2). It should, however,
be noted that not all schools have the resources or funding to make such physical changes in their
classroom spaces. If adding windows and enhancing classroom lighting are not an option, there
are other ways to enhance the physical space that are less costly and easier to implement. Several more economical solutions to enhancing the physical classroom environment are highlighted below.

Bringing aspects of the natural world into the classroom environment has a significant positive effect on students. In a study on the impact of plants on student efficacy and overall behaviors, Daily, Burchett and Torpy (2010) discuss the benefits of plant-life to students and educators alike:

...although grades were not significantly affected by plant presence, there were significant differences in student satisfaction ratings. Those with planted classrooms rated their [teachers] more highly on organization and enthusiasm than those in the group without plants, indicating perhaps that both staff and students were happier with plants in their workspace (p. 2).

This discussion on the positive effects on plant-life in the classroom is interesting and enlightening. Plants can be inexpensive and there are several varieties that can survive with minimal to no natural lighting. They can be placed in many different classroom locations and serve as a more economical solution to enhancing the physical space. The notion that plants help to enhance classroom morale and happiness is certainly worth looking more closely at.

Similarly, Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007) discuss the importance of adding natural elements to the classroom environment in their article *Children and Place: Reggio Emilia's Environment as Third Teacher*. These Canadian university professors analyse the Reggio Emillia approach to education, especially the notion of the natural environment as a third teacher; “...natural environments stimulate social interaction between children, are important to children’s development of independence and autonomy, buffer the impact of life stress on children and help them deal with adversity, and improve children’s cognitive development by heightening their awareness, reasoning, and observational skills” (p. 4). Using wicker or wood
containers instead of plastic for storing classroom materials, bringing aspects of the outdoors inside (have a collection of rocks at the science learning centre for example), and teaching some lessons outdoors are simple ways to adopt a Reggio-style approach. According to Strong-Wilson and Ellis, learning environments that are carefully planned, contain ample lighting and infuse aspects of the natural world can help to alleviate stress and anxiety on both students and teachers.

**In Conclusion**

Reading through these articles helped to better inform my personal viewpoints and opinions related to the topic of student anxiety and classroom stress. With a wider perspective on the subject, I returned to my original question: how do elementary teachers respond to the needs of students with general learning anxiety, and how can educators help to alleviate this problem by fostering a positive classroom environment? This question was met with data collected from in-service teachers through face-to-face interviews. Through their stories, feelings and opinions, they were able to shed wider light on the subject at hand.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Procedure

This qualitative study explored the experiences of junior/intermediate teachers from varying grades who foster positive classroom environments to counter stress and anxiety in their students. I conducted informal face-to-face interviews with consenting participants. The aim of these interviews was to gain insight into educators’ current knowledge of and conscientiousness about student stress and anxiety, as well as their strategies (if any) to counter such negative feelings. Interviewees also included other professionals from within the field of education.

I conducted informal face-to-face interviews because I planned on composing a narrative research paper. According to Cerswell (2007); “Narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals” (p. 71). I feel that the personal stories of experienced professionals truly opened a window to shed light onto countering student stress and anxiety in a positive classroom setting in an organic and natural way.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Completing a thorough literature review on the given subject was a starting point for me to collect data as I commenced my study. Reading a wealth of research and referencing previous studies in similar areas was a great way to build the background knowledge necessary to design and conduct meaningful and professional interviews. The interviews were my primary means of data collection. Through these interviews I was able to obtain data that spoke to the value of positive classroom environments on students’ capacity to learn and develop. I formed succinct
and meaningful questions about countering student anxiety for the participants to respond to. By answering my interview questions, my participants were able to expose what teaching strategies and classroom management tactics they found to be most effective in alleviating student stress and anxiety. A full list of interview questions is included in Appendix A.

3.3 Participants

To ensure a wider variance in data, I sought participants with specific qualities. I aimed to interview teachers from a variety of grades; one educator from the junior level (grades 4 through 6) and one educator from the intermediate level (grades 7 and 8). I interviewed teachers from across several grades for two reasons. First, I am a junior/intermediate teacher and will be teaching children between grades four and ten. Second, I was interested in exploring how student stress and anxiety differs as students mature into adolescents. My participants are employed with the York District and York Catholic District School Boards. I selected the York Region area because it is where I live and will be applying for jobs there in the future. I wanted to obtain data from teachers in both the public and Catholic boards because I am interested to see if there is a variance in teaching strategies and methodologies between the two school boards.

Selecting research participants was not an easy task. I had to reach deep into my bag of professional contacts and acquaintances to find educators I felt consciously fostered a positive classroom environment that alleviated students stress and anxiety. To do this, a teacher must rely not only on themselves, but also on the teaching community around them. For example, I selected “Christina” as a research participant because she displayed many of the characteristics I read about in Fullan and Hargraves’ book, *Professional Capital* (2012). “Christina” constantly strives to improve and extend her teaching skills by reaching out to her teaching team, sharing
ideas and feedback with others, attending professional development events, being well organized and prepared at all times, and reflecting on how her teaching methods and strategies have impacted her students. The following quote outlines some of the ways that I feel “Christina” embodies the aforementioned characteristics “…getting good teaching for all learners requires teachers to be highly committed, thoroughly prepared, continuously developed, properly paid, well networked with each other to maximize their own improvement, and able to make effective judgments using all their capabilities and experience” (p. 42-43). “Christina”, in my opinion, fits the mould of a teacher engaged in pursuing Professional Capital, making her an ideal candidate for data collection on my topic. Building a positive learning environment begins with the school as a whole, not just a single classroom. “Christina” seems to build, encourage and facilitate a solid network of colleagues to collectively extend positive learning environments throughout the entire school community.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

As Creswell (2007) states: “I visualize data collection as a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions... a qualitative researcher engages in a series of activities in the process of collecting data” (p. 118). I underwent a process very similar to what Creswell is describing in my own research. My process followed a logical sequence unfolded in the following way:

- I began by identifying potential participants appropriate to the study and built rapport with them.
- I invited each individual to participate in my study and obtained verbal and written consent from them.
- I conducted face-to-face interviews that were audio recorded. I also took anecdotal notes on the participants’ body language, any hesitations or elaborate responses, and what my own responses were to interviewee answers.

- I replayed the recordings and transcribed them into a hard copy that was easily legible and I transcribed my anecdotal notes as well.

- I read over the transcribed data and sorted out similarities and themes across the participants’ responses.

- I used the highlighting tool on my computer to colour code and identify different keywords within the transcribed data.

- I utilized tables to organize the data onto dominant themes. This helped me to identify the most dominant themes while highlighting which topics or ideas were less important, thus streamlining my collected data.

By going through this process of data collection and analysis, I was able to uncover correlations between positive classroom environments and reduced student stress and anxiety.

The common data analysis process described in Chapter 8 of Creswell (2007), which involves coding, developing themes, and providing a visual diagram of the data, is considered a straight forward and effective approach to developing thorough research conclusions. While Creswell does a fair job of outlining the process by utilizing charts to outline, compare and contrast each of the five research approaches, I must admit I had a hard time developing codes, common themes, and a visual representation of my data. Nonetheless I was able to overcome these difficulties and develop a color-coded set of codes, themes and tables to effectively sort my data into meaningful clumps. Through a difficult process, I have to admit it was effective in organizing and making meaning out of my large array of data.
3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

I followed the ethical review process outlined by the Master of Teaching Program at the University of Toronto. A consent form (Appendix B) was forwarded to each participant and this form was reviewed and signed before the interview commenced. I copied this form to provide each participant with a duplicate of written consent and I informed them that the original will be kept in my records. Participants were assured that pseudonyms would be employed in my report and that their places of employment would remain unnamed. Participants were also assured that collected data would be kept in a secure location and that all information would only be accessible to my research supervisor, Dr. Jackie Eldridge and myself.

3.6 Limitations

There are several limitations I faced in my research. One limitation was the small number of participants. I interviewed only two professionals from the field of education. I am aware that two people is a small data pool. Truly organic narrative interviews need to allow the participants to share their whole story, and thus time was a restriction. My participants were busy individuals and obtaining an hour or two of their time was quite difficult. However, the purpose of this study is to inform my own practice and that of interested readers. It was not designed to take on large-scale research and so I feel that my methodology was appropriate.
Chapter Four: ANALYSIS

Introduction:

My data collection process led me to several meaningful conclusions on the topic at hand. My participants were forthcoming, candid and provided me with meaningful data that was critical in the completion of my research. “Katherine” and “Christina” revealed several important points on creating positive classroom environments to counter student stress and anxiety. Some of those points are as follows: since classroom spaces are often confined, careful organization, design and set up are critical; spend September creating a positive social-emotional environment and carry it though the school year; building positive rapport with your students is critical to student academic success; anxiety is not limited to demographic/type of student - anyone is susceptible to experience anxiety; knowing the symptoms and cues that are typical of anxious students important to meaningful and effective intervention. In the following chapter I analyse the data collected from my participants and I elaborate on these points and others to illustrate the value of building positive classroom environments.

The organization of this chapter follows a logical sequence of themes, organized into headings and subheadings. The themes discussed are as follows:

- Theme 1: The Faces of Anxiety: Who Gets It?
- Theme 2: Symptoms and Visible Cues: What Educators Need to Look For
- Theme 3: Tribes Works: Success Stories of Effective Implementation
- Theme 4: Defining the Positive Learning Environment
1. The Faces of Anxiety: Who Gets It?

I would like to introduce this section with a quote from one of my participants that truly expresses the extent to which anxiety is present in the classroom. When asked if she felt that there were certain students who experienced more stress and anxiety than others, she replied; “I would like to say yes, but every year I learn something new and come across a new ‘type’ of student who displays these behaviours. It ranges from LD’s (learning disabilities), socially awkward, tough home life, high achieving, supportive families, bullied and the list goes on. When kids are under a lot of stress outside of school so it usually transfers into school.” (Interview Notes, 2014) While the following will discuss specific types of students who may be more prone to anxiety, it is important to note that in this fast-paced and highly competitive world, anyone from any walk of life can fall victim to feelings of anxiety.

1.1 Anxiety Among High Achievers

High achieving students put an immense amount of pressure on themselves to do well. Sometimes this pressure is self induced, however, many time it is the student’s family or cultural beliefs that lead to enhanced classroom anxiety. While having supportive parents is definitely crucial to student success, it has been noted by both of this study’s participants that occasionally parents can put excessive pressure on their children to succeed, thus causing the student to experience enhanced classroom anxiety. As stated by a participant during my data collection process; “High achievers ... experience the most anxiety. It may be because of outside sources like parents or guardians but they also put so much pressure on themselves to do well.” (Interview Notes, 2014) This enhanced pressure has the power to either propel a student forward or, conversely, prevent the student from focusing on the task at hand.
High achieving students may also become anxious or stressed when faced with opposition about their responses, or when they receive a less than perfect grade. Perfectionism seems to be a key trigger of anxiety for them. For example, one participant “had a student who was the perfect example of a high achiever. She was someone who wanted to answer every question and became extremely defensive and hostile if she was ever told incorrect.” (Interview Notes, 2014) Another participant provided a very meaningful quote regarding the manifestation of anxiety attached to students who are high achievers:

I can always tell when I hand back work. Those students who are high achievers either want to know what other students got to validate their own effort or intelligence, OR completely shut down if they didn’t do so well. This might mean they sit silently at their desk and become more introverted. I’ve also seen students run out of the room to take some time alone in the washroom to calm down. It really depends on the individual student. Each person will exhibit stress and anxiety differently (Interview Notes, 2014).

Some anxiety to a certain degree is healthy, fostering a student’s focus and attention. Anxiety that becomes excessive, however, can easily become a scary reality for high achieving learners. This quotation provides clear evidence that high achieving children can suffer a wide range of anxious tendencies, and educators need to be in-tune to their students’ emotional well-being in order to help counter negative anxious tendencies such as these.

1.2 Students Who Lack Support at Home

While high achieving students often have ample support from their families that is unfortunately not the case for many students in today’s learning environment. Some parents, especially those of a lower socioeconomic status (SES), spend increased time outside of the home to work and support their families, leaving parents with limited time to support and assist their children with school related tasks. I have met single mothers who have to work three jobs each day to earn enough money to pay their monthly rent and put food on the table. It is
important that parents and teachers work as a team to ensure the support of every individual child. Unfortunately, not all parents have the time or resources to achieve this team-like rapport. Situations such as these present a complicated task for the student, the parent, and teacher alike.

As discussed in the previous literature review, Olivares-Cuhat (2011) discussed the prevalence of anxiety in students from low-income families. Her results suggest that students from low SES, inner-city, multi-ethnic schools have significantly lower levels of emotional intelligence in areas such as interpersonal, stress management, and adaptability. Her research provides support to the idea that students in low-income families are at increased risk for classroom stress and anxiety, in part because they lack the presence of parental figures in the home due to the need to work several jobs to support their families. Reflecting on these findings, I wonder what would happen if these students had more access to adult assistance outside of the classroom.

1.3 The Bully and the Bullied

Eliot, Cornell, Gregory and Fan (2010) talk in depth about the effects of bullying on students, the most extreme being increased risk for depression, anxiety and suicide. Teachers need to understand that bullying situations can significantly impact the ability of a student to effectively function in a classroom setting. Bullied students will struggle socially, mentally and cognitively as they attempt to navigate the learning environment, and thus it is necessary for teachers to intervene and make it a priority to put a halt to bullying in the classroom.

Bullying situations can significantly impact the flow and effectiveness of a classroom environment. Feelings of fear, animosity, insecurity and anxiety do not help students strive for
success. A participant revealed an effective strategy for relieving negative feelings such as these by dealing with classroom bullying head on:

If I see there is some issue going on in the class I have no problem throwing out my lesson and dealing with it head on. They’re not going to listen to what I have to say anyways. For example, in one of my grade seven classes I could see a lot of subtle bullying hints going on; whispers, glances and giggles particularly directed at one girl. Instead of me trying to continue teaching about gothic architecture, I said, ‘forget this’, and we did a whole writing assignment about bullying. I had them discuss the topic orally, and then do a written response about bullying at the school – their role in it, and how teachers are responding to it. I think a lot pressure was taken off and students relieved a lot of their stress, while also reflecting on their own behaviour. (Interview Notes, 2014)

Rather than centering out specific students, this teacher had her whole grade seven class discuss, reflect and write about the theme of bullying; ditching her day’s lesson plan to do so. She put the needs of her students’ social and mental well being ahead of those of the curriculum and it was successful in lessening the impact of bullying in her learning environment. If students do not feel accepted and safe their learning process will ultimately be disrupted. Why spend time carefully planning a lesson if you do not foster a social environment that encourages the feelings of safety that are critical to that learning? After all, there will always be time to learn about Gothic architecture tomorrow.

When considering the effects of bullying on students, we seldom consider that the bully may be acting out in such a way due to anxieties or insecurities of their own. As one educator mentioned in her interview:

I have seen several students from the past who displayed signs of stress and anxiety by turning into the class clown during awkward situations. They would divert attention from stress inducing situations by poking fun at others in a real mean spirited fashion. Usually loud and obnoxious comments and jokes would take the heat off of them and transfer it onto others. (Interview Notes, 2014)
Her perspective on the anxiety experienced by classroom bullies is one that is not often considered. As educators, we must view all situations through objective lenses. That means considering the feelings and emotions of all parties involved: both the bully and the bullied.

### 2. Symptoms and Visible Cues: What Educators Need to Look For

To build a positive classroom environment that counters stress and anxiety, it is important to be knowledgeable and aware of visible cues. Both of my participants described a vast array of cues and symptoms that they have observed in their own students. I have personally observed some of these cues myself during my pre-service practica. Some hints are obvious, where the students are clearly crying out for help. Other cues, however, are very subtle and can be hard to catch if you do not know what to look for. The following section will discuss specific observations, strategies and experiences with the visible symptoms and cues that educators should look for in relation to stress and anxiety in their students.

#### 2.1 Behavioral Outbursts

Between the experiences of my participants and myself, I have identified several general behavioral outbursts that were commonly observed by all parties. First is the scenario that involves the ‘Class Clown’ trying to avoid anxiety inducing activities. As one participant put it; “You could potentially have students who act out behaviorally, and disrupt the class in order to avoid an assigned task.” (Interview Notes, 2014) I, too, have seen this anxious tendency in students with whom I have worked. I once had a student stand up and start dancing in the middle of an independent work period. The class was silent and fully engaged their work, when all of a sudden a student loudly gets out of his seat and begins to mimic the ‘Gangnam Style’ dance.
Naturally, the class erupted in laughter and the focus was successfully taken off of the academic task at hand. Having a good rapport with this student, I knew that he would open up to me in private. I met with him in the hallway and we quietly discussed his inappropriate actions. Through teary eyes, this student explained to me that he was having a hard time understanding how to complete the assignment task. This was a real ‘lightbulb’ moment for me. Davis (2003) supports this notion of supporting students through anxious outbursts. The article discusses the importance of supportive adult relationships for self regulatory skills: “...positive relationships were associated with competence with peers, tolerance of frustration, academic and social skills” (p. 4). Understanding disruptive behaviors and why a student is ‘acting out’ can help a teacher better accommodate the specific needs of anxious or stressed out learners.

One of my participants gave a great example of how behavioral outbursts may be an indication of the need for more enhanced classroom accommodations, such as IEPs. In this anecdote, she stated:

A lot of stress and anxiety comes from those students who perhaps have exceptional needs. For example, providing appropriate accommodations or modifications can make a drastic change for a student’s attitude towards an assignment. I had one student who really struggled with his hand-writing. Any written task or assignment he would whine about or just disrupt the class by walking around, throwing erasers or calling out. However once the process went through and he was assigned a scribe, he could dictate orally his thoughts without any issues, and actually handed in quite good work. (Interview Notes, 2014)

This scenario is describes a student who becomes overwhelmed and then misbehaves because of frustrations to do with printing legibly. The teacher went through the process of obtaining IEP status for the student and he officially received a scribe. This story outlines the importance of providing accommodations for students to help them alleviate anxious outbursts in the classroom.
2.2 School Avoidance and Social Withdrawal

Growing up as a student with significant anxiety, I can relate all too well to the theme of school avoidance and social withdrawal. I began to avoid school when my anxiety got really bad in elementary school. Once in the 5th grade, I remember missing an entire month of school. I remember thinking ‘I wonder what my teacher thinks’, but he never called to check in. School was a dangerous place for me; a place where I was vulnerable and at risk of failure. Why would I want to be there?

My interviewees noted a couple of the same withdrawal tendencies in their students. One participant explained; “Sometimes they [anxious students] sit silently at their desk and become more introverted. I’ve also seen students quietly excuse themselves from the room to take some time alone in the washroom to calm down. It really depends on the individual student.” My other participant similarly noted that, “some [students] would withdraw from the situation. They may leave the room to use the ‘restroom’ or they may put their heads on their desk” (Interview Notes, 2104). I, too, have observed these tendencies in students with whom I have worked. It is important to note that school and social withdrawal do not always manifest themselves in complete absences from school. Students can be masters of self isolation while surrounded by peers and teachers.

One of my interviewees had a meaningful story to share regarding school avoidance and anxiety. As she unfolded her experience to me, I could not help but reflect back on my own experiences with school avoidance and social withdrawal:

One certain student I had most recently was not the strongest academically and he knew it. He assumed he would never improve and didn’t see the point in trying. His parents were supportive, but if he was down on himself they wouldn’t push the issue any further. He would avoid coming to school when a project was due or we were writing a test that
day. If he was present, he would excuse himself many times throughout the test. During oral presentations, he would completely freeze and/or speak so quiet we couldn't hear him... I had to break down his walls of insecurity and build a strong foundation of trust. He needed to know that I cared and that he mattered in my classroom. By providing him with additional one-on-one time with me and small accommodations such as an extra day to complete a task, he began to show huge improvements. (Interview Notes, 2014)

Here, my participant describes an all too common scenario. Many anxious students begin to socially withdraw and avoid school all together if they do not receive the support they need to succeed. Fortunately this student had an empathetic teacher who cared enough to check-in, dig a little deeper, and show that she cared. Her implementation of minor accommodations significantly helped to reduce the stress of her anxious student, effectively enhancing his educational experiences. I cannot help but wonder if my experiences in the 5th grade would have been different if my teacher had of simply showed that he cared.

2.3 Look a Little Closer: The Subtle Hints

Not all anxious students display obvious symptoms such as behavioral outbursts or school withdrawal. Some students live quietly with their anxiety simmering just below the surface. Through my interviews, I found consistent subtle hints that some anxious learners exhibit. Sometimes you just have to look a little closer to notice them.

My first interviewee noted several physical cues that can easily slide under a teacher’s radar, especially near the beginning of the year before getting to know one’s students well: “When I don’t know a child very well, in September for example, I can usually tell they are stressed by shifting in their seat, asking to leave for the washroom to avoid the situation or fiddling with certain objects.” (Interview Notes, 2014) This participant further noted that with time, attention and care, spotting a student’s anxious tendencies becomes much more obvious.
Before rapport is built, however, there are some very subtle visible cues to look for in one’s students as indication of enhanced classroom anxiety.

3. **Tribes Works: Success Stories of Effective Implementation**

   Jeanne Gibbs and Bonnie Benard, discussed in my literature review, are two of the central figures responsible for the successful spread of Tribes throughout Canada and the United States. Tribes is a process for building community and inclusion in classrooms. It is a process that helps teachers understand the importance of building a safe learning environment for all students. I would like to start this section by citing a couple of critical quotes from each of these women. First, this quote from Bonnie Benard (1995) discusses the value and innateness of childhood resiliency:

   Resilience research validates prior research and theory in human development that has clearly established the biological imperative for growth and development that exists in the human organism and that unfolds naturally in the presence of certain environmental characteristics. We are all born with an innate capacity for resilience, by which we are able to develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose (p. 2).

   With this being said, this second quote from Jeanne Gibbs (2007) expresses the Tribes mission, something that, when followed effectively, can significantly impact the positive learning environment: “The mission of Tribes is to ensure the healthy development of every child so that each has the knowledge, competence and resilience to be successful in today’s rapidly changing world” (p. 4). Resiliency and healthy child and youth development go hand-in-hand, and the Tribes model has proven to be an effective way to achieve both.

3.1 **Start in September and Keep it Consistent**
One of my participants was my first practicum associate teacher. She was able to show me that meaningful implementation of the Tribes model is actually possible. Visiting her classroom in late September for the first time, I was able to observe the implementation of Tribes near the beginning of the year. This participant talked in depth about how important it is to start the school year by introducing the Tribes model:

Setting the Tribes tone is a huge part of my September. I really believe that academics should be put on hold during that month because creating a peaceful and accepting classroom environment is much more important. Tribes is like my teaching Bible! I believe curriculum will be completed much faster once students understand the Tribes expectations and how to be successful in this type of environment. Once the expectations are understood, usually by the end of September, the classroom social environment becomes one of community and respect. (Interview Notes, 2014)

This quote is instrumental in outlining the importance of setting clear and reasonable classroom expectations and rules from the get go. These rules must be meaningful and relatable to all the members of the classroom, and the Tribes model certainly provides that.

Though she did not practice a formal version of Tribes in her classrooms, my other participant described a lot of Tribes-esque classroom practices. Much like my former AT, this participant placed immense importance of starting to develop feelings of community in September:

I really like a classroom where students are confident enough to share ideas and engage in discussions. I’m all about talking things through as a large group. Debates. Questions. Answering for each other. The only way to create this kind of environment is for a united classroom. A group of students who come together in a common goal or purpose and who strive to empower each other. And to be honest I think this is only really done by getting to know each other. I like to spend a lot of time in September getting to know my students but also having them get to know each other. (Interview Notes, 2014)
Both of my participants seem to agree that in order to develop a healthy community of learners as the Tribes model strides toward, it is necessary to begin in September and keep it consistent throughout the school year.

### 3.2 The Value of an Inclusive Social Environment

Truly inclusive social environments are those which foster feelings of safety, community, and empathy for others. In my experience, the teacher’s actions are critical to the development of such an environment. I have found that teachers need to be actively modelling and encouraging an inclusive classroom environment on a daily basis. One of my participants mentioned a specific daily routine she uses to enhance positivity and feelings of inclusivity in her classroom:

> A positive classroom environment is a place in which a student feels comfortable to come into. I never want my students to feel worried coming into my class. Bored, maybe. That happens. But not stressed. I usually stand at the door as they’re walking in each morning and greet them individually. As soon as I notice something is wrong with any of my students I stop them and encourage me to tell me what's going on. Even if they don’t feel like talking about it, the fact that they know I care about them, that they matter amongst their large group of 25 peers, can sometimes make all the difference. (Interview Notes, 2014)

Similarly, the other participant stated:

> Not creating a safe and inclusive environment where kids are accepted for whomever they are and whatever they bring to the classroom will definitely enhance the overall feelings of anxiety in the classroom... [students] need more predictable environments where they feel like trying and failing is a much better way to learn than being successful and perfect all the time. Encouraging and modelling inclusivity for your students plays a major role in this. (Interview Notes, 2014)

Placing these two quotes side by side allows one to truly notice the importance of fostering inclusion in the classroom. Educators must model, encourage and praise actions of empathy,
respect and inclusion to create a classroom where students feel safe enough to learn, succeed and fail.

3.3 Live it Out: Embodying the Four Tribes Agreements

According to Gibbs (2007), “A positive culture was built and sustained in classrooms by having students learn, practice and remind each other of the four Tribes agreements... Attentive Listening; Appreciations/No Put Downs; The Right to Participate/the Right to Pass; Mutual Respect” (p. 6). I have personally seen these agreements posted on the walls of many classrooms, however, merely posting the rules up in your learning space does not equate to a meaningful implementation of the Tribes model. If the classroom teacher does not model, implement and encourage students to follow these agreements, the Tribes model can quickly become mundane and meaningless.

My participant said it perfectly: “Kids will mimic what they see the teacher do.” (Interview Notes, 2014) I personally observed my former AT and research participant embody and model the Tribes philosophy through her daily interactions with her students. By doing so, she successfully encouraged an environment of community and inclusivity. It is in this type of environment that anxious learners will begin to feel at ease. This participant went on to state: “I spend a lot of time discussing the four agreements with students and using numerous Tribes based activities to gain trust and acceptance among them all. For example, we have a community circle every Friday where students feel safe enough to share their feelings or opinions.” (Interview Notes, 2014). This participant is a prime example of how teacher modelling of the four agreements is critical in the successful implementation of the Tribes philosophy.
4. Defining the Positive Learning Environment

What is a positive learning environment (PLE) and how can it be properly defined? This question is at the core of my research studies. The following section will explain in depth what my research has exposed as the five critical facets of a PLE.

4.1 Careful Organization and Planning

When I asked my participants about their classroom setups, several commonalities were noted. First, both teachers said that they were limited by their classroom size. In my own teaching experiences I have also noticed a discrepancy between classroom size and proper organization. One participant was quoted as saying: “We are limited in what we are allowed to bring in due to space restrictions.” (Interview Notes, 2014) With this being said, we all agreed that making the most of a small space with careful planning and organization is so important to the development of the PLE. My former AT was quoted as stating: “Organization is so important to me! Kids will follow suit if the teacher is organized. One of our weekly classroom jobs is cleanup crew so a group of students must help keep the room tidy every day. If I model respect for our classroom environment, my students are usually eager to help me out!” (Interview Notes, 2014)

One of my interviewees discussed at length her classroom organization strategies, and I tend to rely on a lot of these tactics as well. She describes her classroom organization as follows:

“I keep plenty of classroom materials, organized into bins and labelled for the students to use at their will. You forgot a pen? No problem, borrow mine. I also like to have a homework board at the front of the class for them to copy dates and tasks down, as well as to remind them. I keep the date up on the white board as well as the learning objective for each lesson, which we refer to throughout.” (Interview Notes, 2014)
This teacher described not only her physical classroom organization, but her organization of student learning. In addition to ensuring materials are readily available and organized, a teacher should encourage students to keep their learning organized. The employment of agendas, homework boards and lesson agendas help students to learn critical organizational skills necessary for school success.

My other participant focused more on keeping a tidy classroom and encouraging the students to actively participate in that; a meaningful and cooperative way to facilitate classroom organization. She stated:

At the end of each lesson I’ll take a look around and schedule in a couple of minutes for the kids to help tidy up. I like to walk around the class, so I tend to get a good look at how their desks are doing. A routine desk-clean out is important should be done often. Every 2 weeks I’d say…. I tell [the students] to take pride in our classroom because it’s as much theirs as it is mine! (Interview Notes, 2014)

Encouraging students to be active participants in classroom organization and cleanliness is so important to fostering feelings of appreciation for environment. Reducing clutter and mess is a good way to decrease feelings of chaos and disorder, an important tactic in fighting student stress and anxiety.

I conclude this section with a significant interview quote that, in my opinion, truly speaks to the importance of teacher choices in designing and organizing the learning space:

I think classroom design and organization is very important however I think it’s what the teacher does to the space that is what really affects student learning. I wasn’t given a large physical space however by arranging the seating plan and desks, putting up student work around the room, providing enough materials and resources, I think I can really benefit student learning. (Interview Notes, 2014)

You may be given a small classroom space, but as my participant to succinctly stated above, it's what you do to the space that will leave a lasting impact on your students.
4.2 Naturalistic Elements

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2006) state that quality indoor environments result in health and productivity gains for students, teachers and non-teaching staff alike. Classroom environments that include naturalistic elements such as day lighting and plant life can significantly enhance the PLE by positively impacting the student’s mental and emotional state, thus helping in the reduction of stress and anxiety.

In a discussion of naturalistic elements present in her classroom, a participant stated:

I keep several plants around and always have the blinds up to maximize sunlight. I cannot open the windows because they are bolted closed, but if I could I would! We also have a classroom aquarium with fresh water fish and snails in it which the students care for. During tests or quiet work times I will put on classical music or soothing nature sounds to calm their minds and often times turn the lights off or put the blinds down to help focus. (Interview Notes, 2014)

Naturalistic classroom inclusions are supported by Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007) and their research on Reggio-Emilia inspired learning spaces. Their article contains an in-depth discussion on the positive effects of the Reggio-Emilia teaching philosophy, an approach that encompasses an abundance of naturalistic elements such as the ones mentioned by my participant.

4.3 Positive Peer and Teacher Relationships

The relationships that students develop as they mature through the school system will forever make an imprint upon the people they are to become. These include relationships formed with peers, teachers, school administrative staff and community members. Relationships developed with adults have a specific impact on children and youth, which is why it is so important that teachers make significant effort to foster positive relationship both with and
among their students. As Davis (2003) tells us: “Relationships with adults are important for child development because of their “affordance value,” that is, the extent to which adults bring to the relationship resources to support a child’s intellectual, social, and emotional development that would have otherwise been unavailable” (p. 1). Both of my participants agree with Davis and the notion that positive adult relationships are vital to the development of youth.

One of my participants really advocated using humor as a way to build rapport with her students. While describing what her ideal classroom would look and sound like, she stated: “A classroom should be noisy with meaningful discussions and laughter. I really like to joke around with my students and I find that grabs their attention more. Even if the students are not necessarily a part of the joke, if they can listen to either me make fun of myself or share a funny moment with another peer, they’ll join in too.” (Interview Notes, 2015) While I agree that humor can be a useful tool in forming meaningful relationships with students, I would like to add that teachers must be careful not to blur the line between being their teacher and being their friend.

My other participant noted the importance of feelings of safety and trust amongst classroom members, both teachers and students alike. She argues that when student build positive, supporting relationships with their teachers and peers, they are more likely to succeed: “Emotional safety is just as important as physical safety at school. Kids need to feel supported by their peers and teachers in order for them to take risks and be successful. A safe space is a classroom with a positive atmosphere, kids are happy and eager to learn and supportive and helpful toward one another.” (Interview Notes, 2014) I personally agree with this idea that an emotionally safe environment lends itself to student success. Reflecting on my own experiences in classrooms, I can confirm that when a teacher models and encourages empathy and acceptance for her students, they will be more likely to take risks without the fear of judgement. In these
ways, positive peer and teacher relationships are critical to the reduction of stress and anxiety in the classroom.

### 4.4 A Guiding Set of Classroom Principles

Even though only one of my participants employed the Tribes philosophies in her classroom, I can definitely say that both teachers made use of some sort of guiding classroom rules or principles to help student self regulate their behaviors. I have learned that employing the use of a common set of classroom rules (whether they are the four Tribes Agreements or a set of student created principles to abide by) helps to build a sense of student accountability for their behavior. In one of my practicum experiences, a set of class created rules were posted on the wall by the classroom door. Every student had signed the document, indicating their acknowledgement of these rules. Not only did the students have to walk by this poster of rules several times a day, but the fact that they had drafted the rules and signed off on them personally allowed the classroom teacher to reasonably call them out for breaking their own rules. It was a very effective classroom management tactic that decreased incidences of bullying and increased positive peer-to-peer relationships. I highly recommend using a strategy like this or implementing the four Tribes Agreements. When students can follow a guiding set of classroom principles, the implementation of a PLE becomes much more seamless.

### 4.5 Student Centred, Constructivist Learning Experiences

I hold the belief that knowledge is not simply delivered, but rather is gained through hands on experiences. With the popularization of Gardner’s theory of M.I. (1993), the concept of teaching to a variety of learning styles has been becoming more widely followed by Canadian educators. Much of my research and both of my participants cite ‘hands-on learning’ or
constructivist learning as a critical way to get anxious or reluctant learners engaged. Student centred activities which allow for experimentation, collaboration and creativity are great ways to encourage self-esteem and positive peer relations. When asked what her ideal classroom would look and sound like, a participant replied: “It’s noisy but good noise. It has students talking and working together and lending a hand without the teacher asking. It has students moving around and using manipulatives. It has group work with kids sitting on the floor or crowding around a space working together.” (Interview Notes, 2104) This response is an ideal example of a constructivist learning environment. We must remember that no two students are the same, and thus it is only natural that students will exhibit different preferences for learning (i.e. manipulatives, small group work etc.). Constructivist learning, or student-centred learning, is a very important component to developing a PLE and as educators we must respect and nourish this in our students each day.

The previous analysis was a depiction of what my research and interviews revealed about my research topic, building positive learning environments to counter student stress and anxiety. While their responses proved to be very rich in content, there are still several lingering questions that have been left unanswered. The following chapter will discuss my research limitations, implications and recommendations for educators, and my thoughts and ideas around further study on this topic.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

1. Implications/Recommendations

1.1 Implications as a Researcher:

Going through this process has taught me a lot about both myself and the overall research process. First, I learned that I am a story teller. It has also taught me that the stories of my experience are connected to the stories of others. I use my personal experiences as tools in my quest for knowledge about child and youth anxiety in the classroom. I also really enjoy hearing about the experiences of others. Listening to my participants’ stories and anecdotes about their teaching experiences has taught me so much about the careful balancing act that goes on within the walls of a classroom. I do not think my role as a narrative researcher is over either. I plan to continue to add to my research, perhaps going through some of my limitations and answering them with narrative experiences. I have come to realize the importance of this topic and the ways my story may be able to help others. Therefore, conducting narrative research, in my opinion, is the ideal way to collect data on a subject as sensitive and meaningful as student stress and anxiety in the classroom. It is also a way to connect peoples’ stories.

1.2 Implications as an Educator:

This research project has given me the opportunity to really hone in on my research skills, thus enhancing my ability to look at current educational issues with a more critical perspective. I have learned that countering stress and anxiety in the classroom is a community endeavor, in that one person cannot make all the changes on their own. One of my participants said it best, when she stated:
If a student can recognize that they do suffer from anxiety and stress and the family is supportive, then they will perform well. They have tools to cope and families can help along the way. In the opposite situation you will see families in denial (or they’re the ones putting stress on) and the student does not recognize it either. It is difficult to make a difference when I’m the only one who sees it – when I am the only one implementing strategies to assist the student. Children with stress and anxiety need extended support outside of the classroom (Interview Notes, 2014).

The involvement of parents, professionals and peers is so critical to the countering of student stress and anxiety and the development of an effective PLE. The topic of positive learning environments (PLEs) is one that has become very important to me, and I don’t believe that there is enough research out there to define exactly what a PLE is. As I move forward as an educator, I will be working to build PLEs in the schools where I will work. I will share my knowledge about the topic with colleagues, expressing to them the value of building PLEs to counter student stress and anxiety. I would also like to facilitate a Professional Learning Community (PLC) where I can converse with like-minded colleagues about the implications of student stress and anxiety on academic achievement, and how to counter it in an educational setting by building PLEs. Ultimately, my practice will be forever impacted by the experiences gained through this research project. I believe that I will be a more knowledgeable, empathetic, and better adapted educator in this modern world of competition, technology, stress and anxiety. My goal now is to always create a safe environment where students feel comfortable enough to fall down, brush off their knees and try again. I will do this by fostering an environment that is socially respectful, community based, organized and accessible, and governed by a set of guiding equitable principles (such as Tribes).
2. Limitations

As discussed in my first chapter, this study had several limitations. If given the opportunity, I would really like to delve into some of these limitations to see if including data from these peripheral sources would change my overall research results.

2.1 Sample Size:

My first limitation was my small sample size. I interviewed and gathered data from only two teachers in the Junior/Intermediate division. It is certainly worth considering what the data may have revealed from a wider range of participants. Would my data have been more diverse? The possibility is quite likely.

2.2 Geographic Region:

My second major limitation was that I limited the geographic region my participants were from. This was in part due to personal convenience and logistics. My participants are both teaching in York Region school boards (One Public, One Catholic). I live in and plan to seek work in the York Region area, so selecting participants from this geographic region was meaningful for me. Data collected from this specific area may not necessarily be as meaningful to readers from other regions. It would be interesting to see if teachers from Downtown Toronto or northern Ontario would have similar experiences or if their perspective on student stress and anxiety would be drastically different.
2.3 **Experience Level of Participants:**

A third limitation in this study was the experience level of my participants. Both participants have been teaching less than ten years; one for eight years and one for four years. I wonder if teachers with more experience who are closer to the end of their career might have volunteered a more diverse set of data. It would be interesting to inquire whether or not experience is a defining factor or what other qualities must be present in order for teacher to truly understand student stress and anxiety.

2.4 **Lack of Male Participants:**

Finally, a fourth limitation to my data collection is a lack of male participants. For example, I would really like to discuss the topic of student stress and anxiety with a couple of male colleagues to see if and how their perspectives differ from those of my two female interviewees. It might be interesting to see if responses to student stress anxiety have any gender connections. These limitations create further questions for me as I move forward as a researcher and educator of Junior/Intermediate students. I feel that it will be important to continue to explore all of these limitations and to broaden the scope of my research in order to give a fuller picture of this topic.

3. **Further Study**

3.1 **Lingering Questions:**

Though I feel many of my questions were answered by my participants, there were several questions that have left me with less than complete answers. First, I wish that my participants could have shed greater light on the value of Daily Physical Activity and outdoor
activities to student emotional development. I truly believe that allowing students to take a ‘brain break,’ to move around and get the heart rate up for a few minutes is beneficial to the overall cognitive and emotional process. Second, I am still somewhat curious as to the incidence of anxiety between male and female students. Do they handle these negative feeling differently? Do they feel triggered by different stimuli? Do teachers respond differently to male and females? These are questions I still wonder about as this research project draws to a close.

3.2 Other Possible Research Studies Related to PLEs and Student Anxiety:

The data I collected through this research endeavor could be applied to other research areas in the field of education. I believe that my data lends itself nicely to studies of teacher professional development, as many pedagogical approaches are discussed and described that counter stress and anxiety. My data would also be useful in studies on classroom design, a topic that has started to receive more attention over the past few years. Finally, my data is conducive to studies on child development; cognitively, mentally, emotionally and socially. This is a wide field of research, and I feel that some of my data could shed greater light on the effects of student anxiety on overall child and youth development.

3.3 Future Research Endeavors:

With so many unresolved research questions and data limitations, I am definitely interested in pursuing further research on this topic. I want to add a component of the value of outdoor education to the reduction of student stress and anxiety. In my experiences, I have observed the positive impacts of being outdoors in a natural setting on children and youth. In
college, one of my professors would teach outside at least once a week in the warmer months. The fresh air, natural light and tranquility of nature always seems to have a calming, focusing affect on our class of young adults. Furthermore, as a pre-school teacher at the YMCA of Greater Toronto, I know how important outdoor periods are to the physical, cognitive and emotional development of young children. Being in nature spawns enhanced critical thinking, problem solving and creativity. I would really be interested to conduct a set of interviews to delve deeper into the topic of outdoor educations positive impacts on child and youth development.
Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

Students require a structured, predictable and nurturing environment in order to flourish and reach their full potential. The world that youth must navigate through today’s fast paced, competitive, highly tech-based, and very socialized. It’s no wonder that stress and anxiety are on the rise. But classrooms should be a safe space where student can escape the fast paced and high stress world. One of my participants gave me a wonderful quote, one that I would use as a final thought for you as readers:

Stress and anxiety ...become a problem when they’re about things you cannot control. You cannot control your parents’ financial situation. You cannot control if the guy you like has a crush on you. You cannot control the weather. But you can control your own actions, organizational habits and actions toward others which can minimize so much stress and anxiety for students” (Interview Notes, 2014).

It all comes down to a student’s need for control in a crazy and chaotic world. We live in a society where bullying follows you home on your computer, where parents are absent from the home a lot due to work obligations, and where the competition to achieve high grades and attend post secondary school is at an all time high. Students are surrounded by triggers for anxiety, and if we as educators can provide them with a safe, nurturing and predictable environment where they feel comfortable being themselves, their chances for future success become so much more lucrative.
References


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

General Questions:
1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What school board or organization are you employed with?
3. What grade or academic level are you currently teaching?
4. What grades or academic levels have you taught in the past?
5. What is your teachable/specialization?
6. What is your educational background? Where did you complete your credentials?

Student Anxiety and Stress
1. In your opinion, what do student stress and anxiety look like?
   i. Are there specific observable cues you look for? If so, what are they?
2. Are there students in your class (or in past classes) who exhibit signs of learning anxiety or stress?
   i. How can you tell?
   ii. Can you tell me about any specific students? (Names and other identifiable traits excluded) What were their symptoms? How did they fair academically and socially?
3. What do you think triggers classroom anxiety?
4. In your overall experience, do you find certain students are more prone to stress and/or learning anxiety than others?
   i. Which students? (Low SES, LD, developmental delay, bullied, high achieving, low achieving etc.)
5. How do classroom stress and anxiety affect the academic performance of your students?
6. Do you believe there is a link between general learning anxiety and academic performance?

Designing the physical space
1. Can you describe your classroom set up for me? Be as specific as possible.
2. In your opinion, how important is the physical space to student learning?
3. Do you have any natural elements in your teaching space? (Plants, wicker containers, rocks or other outdoor artifacts, uncovered windows for maximum natural light etc.)
4. Do you ever teach classes outside or in an alternative space? Why or why not?
5. Tell me about you classroom organization.
   i. Are surfaces like countertops clear?
   ii. Is your own desk tidy?
   iii. Are containers labelled?
   iv. Are materials easy for students to access when necessary?
6. Are students encouraged to keep their desks, lockers, and cloak areas tidy?
7. Do you encourage your students to have respect for the classroom environment, both socially and physically?

Teaching strategies to counter student stress and anxiety
1. Define what you feel a “positive classroom environment” is.
   i. What does it look and sound like?
   ii. What are the students like?
   iii. How does the teacher act?
2. How do you accommodate for students experiencing stress or learning anxiety? Please be specific.
3. How important is organization (both of space and of learning) to countering stress and anxiety?
   i. What organizational tools do you encourage students to use? (Agendas, graphic organizers, folders, binders, highlighters etc.)
4. How important do you feel inclusion is in the classroom setting?
5. How important is fostering a feeling of safety in your classroom?
   i. What do you consider a “safe space”?
6. Are you familiar with the TRIBES model of classroom management? If yes, do you find these strategies useful? Do you use them in your own classroom?
   i. If you are not familiar with TRIBES, would you consider attending a TRIBES training?
   ii. If you are familiar with TRIBES, but do not use it in your classroom, what is your reasoning behind it?
7. What are some specific strategies you implement in your classroom to facilitate a stress free and anxiety free classroom? Give me specific examples.
   i. Would you be interested in attending workshops or seminars on alleviating stress and anxiety in classrooms?
APPENDIX B

Letter of Consent for Interview

Dear ________________,

My name is Brittany de Beer and I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto. I am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate and I am studying the effects of positive learning settings on student stress and anxiety for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Arlo Kempf. My research supervisor Dr. Jackie Eldridge. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 60 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: Brittany de Beer
email: brittany.debeer@mail.utoronto.ca

Research Supervisor’s Name: Dr. Jackie Eldridge
email: jackie.eldridge@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name (printed): ___________________________________

Date:  ______________________

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Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name (printed): ___________________________________

Date:  ______________________