Teacher Perceptions of Class Climate and its Connection to Student Mental Health

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Abstract: Over the past decade, the awareness and prevalence of childhood mental health problems have significantly increased in Canada. Because of increased challenges exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, addressing mental health concerns and establishing preventive measures in the classroom are timely and necessary. In this qualitative, phenomenological study, I examine the phenomenon of class climate through five interviews with teachers regarding their lived experiences. Data analyses reveal that establishing positive teacher-student relationships, creating clear boundaries and expectations, and using resources and strategies can create a positive class climate—a preventive measure to improve student mental health. Implications for practice are outlined, along with recommendations on how to create a more positive classroom environment.

Keywords: Class Climate, Student Mental Health, Teacher Perceptions, School Based Mental Health, Teacher Student Relationship

School climate is a broad construct that shapes the learning and development of students. It encompasses feelings of safety, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, and the larger environmental characteristics of the school, including the conditions and functioning of the physical structure as well as contextual values and norms (National School Climate Center, 2021). A supportive classroom is one where students "feel safe, supported, accepted, and can exhibit age-appropriate degrees of autonomy" (Oberle, 2018, p. 103). The overall school climate influences the class climate. Within the literature, there has been a wide emphasis on school climate and ways to improve attendance and academic achievement by examining teacher-student relationships and connectedness. However, few studies focus on class climate and student mental health.

Positive mental health refers to the ability to cope with life stressors while continuing to learn, work, grow, and simultaneously contribute to the development of family, friends, and community (World Health Organization, 2024). Awareness over mental health has grown in Canada in the past decade due to the increased public discussion and media campaigns that seek to normalize mental health in the same way that physical health is prioritized. For example, Bell Let's Talk is a nationwide campaign that has raised awareness and funded Canadian mental health initiatives and organizations that are improving access to mental health services in many communities (Bell Canada, 2024). Statistics demonstrate the increased concern over childhood mental health and the need for preventative measures: 70% of mental health issues in adults begin in childhood or youth and "one in five children and youth in Ontario have a mental health challenge" (Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario, 2024, Child and Youth section). Because the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the education of children worldwide with prolonged self-isolation, it may have exacerbated problems that impact students' academic, social, emotional, and psychological growth (Pfefferbaum, 2021).It is important to determine what preventative measures could be implemented to possibly improve student mental health. Understanding which components create a positive class climate is a valuable step.

The purpose of this research was to explore the phenomenon of class climate (in Ontario, Canada) and identify and understand class components from teachers' lived experiences that cultivate a positive atmosphere, and which can, in turn, positively impact student mental health.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the impact that school and positive class climate have on students, Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework provides a valuable lens. Researchers have used various frameworks and theories to understand the impact school has on its students. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological framework is widely used since it places children at the centre of multiple layers of influence, demonstrating that the school and the classroom environment can have significant impact on their development (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Wang & Degol, 2016). This framework suggests that the "conditions and structure of the [school] building, the disciplinary and curriculum practices, and the interpersonal relationships between students and teachers" influence student development (Wang & Degol, 2016, p. 319). Through this framework, educators can look at ways to facilitate positive mental health in students.

Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework (1979) demonstrates how students' inner characteristics, along with their surrounding interpersonal and social environments, shape their development. Figure 1 demonstrates the five intersected systems of Bronfenbrenner's framework and outlines the multiple influences they have on a student. I have adapted the framework to focus specifically on student development.
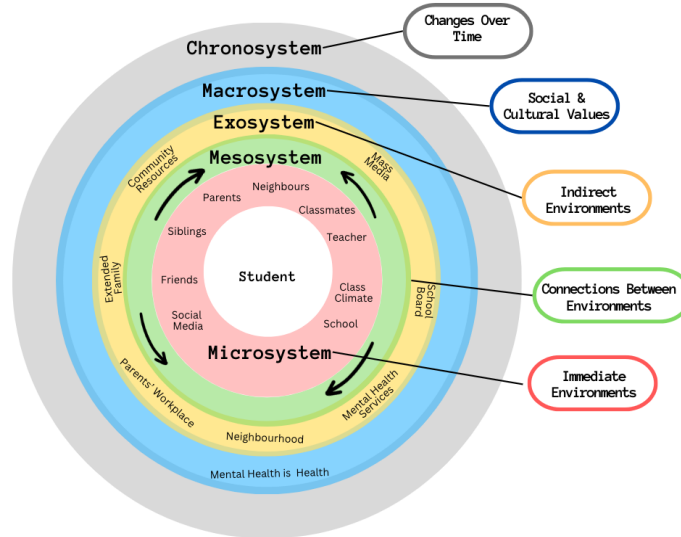

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Framework (1974) Adapted to Focus on Student Development

In the microsystem, the student is influenced by their immediate environment, including their school, classroom, social media, and the relationships they have on a consistent basis with parents, siblings, teachers, classmates, neighbours, and friends. These interactions influence students' beliefs, values, attitudes and actions. The mesosystem focuses on the connections between students' surrounding microsystems. The interactions between school, family, and community impact students' development. For example, if the interactions and communication between the family and the school are positive, it will have a positive impact on the student. The exosystem includes the indirect environments such as extended family, community resources, the parents' place of work, mental health services, policies and procedures of the school board, safety and support in the neighbourhood, and mass media. The indirect environment influences the immediate environment and impacts student development. For instance, if resources are limited for mental health support in the community, the student, especially those at-risk, will face challenges. The macrosystem, the fourth ring, represents consistent societal and cultural values. These may change based on "socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, and other subcultural groups, reflecting contrasting belief systems" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). The chronosystem, the outermost layer, includes changes that occur throughout children's life, such as the birth of a sibling, divorce of their parents, moving to a new community or a medical diagnosis for themselves or a family member. All these systems are interconnected and can influence each other, which in turn can impact students' development.

Positionality

As an educator with 30 years of experience, I understand the importance of creating a learning environment where students feel safe, included, and cared for and where they can share their thoughts, questions, and dreams without being judged. As an educator, teacher mentor and trainer, I have observed how a positive class climate can impact student wellbeing and academic success. As a parent of a child who has struggled with mental health, I have experienced the difference that compassionate, accommodating teachers made in re-engaging my daughter in school and facilitating her continued growth. My lived experiences have left me wondering which classroom components contribute to a positive class climate.

Review of Literature

The experiences students have in the classroom impact their academic achievement and social-emotional growth. Classrooms that are supportive and positive facilitate healthy development whereas unsupportive classrooms may lead to negative experiences in school and poor student mental health (Oberle, 2018). The overall themes that developed from the literature, which could directly or indirectly impact "positive class climate", include student engagement, teacher-student relationships, access to resources, and teachers' own mental health, as described below. Figure 2 illustrates how these themes are intertwined in a mutually influential way.
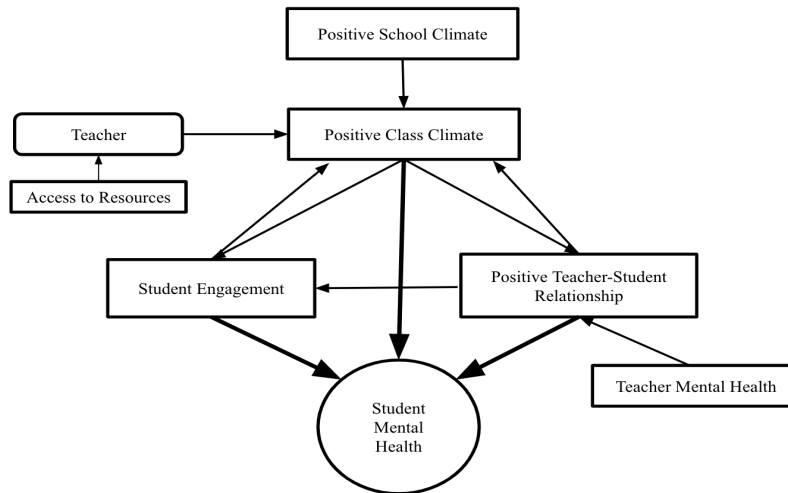

Figure 2: Themes Based on Literature Review

Positive Class Climate

Teachers play a pivotal role in creating a positive class climate. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) proposed a model of a prosocial classroom that looked at the impact socially and emotionally competent teachers can have on students and class climate. They found these teachers created lessons based on student strengths and abilities, which improved engagement, building strong interest and focus on tasks. They also found that students' relationships with teachers and their sense of connectedness to school promoted belonging and motivation, which were significant contributors to adolescent emotional health. The connection between student engagement, teacher-student relationships, and academic success was highlighted in the meta-analysis by Roorda et al. (2017) who found evidence that an effective teacher-student relationship is connected to student engagement and achievement.

Student Engagement

The literature on student engagement is closely tied to positive teacher-student relationships and positive class climate (Daily et al., 2020; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Oberle, 2018). When students feel connected to their school, educators, and peers, they show greater engagement, which in turn promotes positive mental health. Daily et al. surveyed over 14,000 students in middle and high school in West Virginia. They found school climate was positively associated with school satisfaction and improved student attendance and academic performance. When the schools emphasized the importance of positive teacher-student interactions, student engagement improved as well as school climate. Daily et al. also demonstrated that a positive school climate could act as a protective factor for negative effects culminating from poverty and social distress.

Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

Positive teacher-student relationships are essential since students learn best when they feel supported by caring adults (Oberle, 2018). Research has shown that a positive teacher-student relationship is positively

correlated with class climate and student mental health (Braun et al., 2019; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). A sound relationship is characterized by warmth, emotional support, open communication, high expectations, clear rules, and boundaries (Phan & Ngu, 2020). When students feel a sense of connectedness at school, it can act as a buffer against negative self-perceptions and reduce students' depressive symptoms (Zhang et al., 2021). It is evident that the teacher plays a pivotal role in creating a supportive and responsive classroom that facilitates emotional, social, and academic growth.

Access to Resources

Teachers' access to resources that support students is a contributing factor to engaging students and addressing their social, emotional, and academic growth. Oberle (2018) reviewed the extensive evidence that identified social emotional learning (SEL) as an effective strategy to improve class climate, nurture relationships and promote students' mental health. This emphasizes the importance for teachers to have access to resources that assist them in implementing and delivering SEL curricula. Several studies also looked at how implementing mindfulness practices in the classroom could help students cope with anxious feelings and promote more focused and engaged learning (Braun et al., 2019; Chorney & Eliuk, 2017). A supportive classroom environment is directly linked to students' emotional wellbeing. It is advantageous for educators to prioritize modeling and nurturing positive relationships as part of their daily programming (Oberle, 2018).

Teacher Mental Health

Teachers' mental health impacts the climate in the classroom and student mental health. Teachers have the responsibility of creating an atmosphere where all students can learn and grow. Several studies have linked teacher mental health and student mental health (Braun et al., 2019; Harding et al., 2019; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Braun et al. found that teachers who reported high stress levels were more likely to have poor-quality teacher-student interactions, low levels of classroom organization, and less effective behavioural management. Teachers who self-reported low wellbeing appeared to have less confidence in their capacity to support their students (Harding et al., 2019). Oberle and Schonert-Reichl found students' cortisol levels to be higher when their teacher demonstrated higher stress levels. This links the school experience to cortisol levels as an indication of stress in students and it also links teacher and student stress. By improving teacher wellbeing, student wellbeing improves too since teachers are more present and engage in more positive interactions with their students.

Although researchers have investigated the correlation between factors that impact student learning such as student engagement, teacher-student relationships, school attendance, and the implementations of mindfulness and social emotional learning, there is a lack of research that examines the phenomenon of class climate. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the phenomenon of class climate and its components that could promote positive student mental health. It is important to analyze educators' perspectives since they are students' primary contact in the classroom. Educators facilitate the formation of the class climate and deliver the curriculum. This phenomenon is examined through the lived experiences of five educators from middle and high schools in Ontario, Canada.

Methods

Research Design

Qualitative research investigates real-world problems by gathering the experiences and perceptions of participants. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to examine the shared meaning of a particular concept or phenomenon experienced by a group of people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the phenomenon under consideration was class climate. Through interviews with educators, a thick description of class climate was developed.

Participants

The inclusion criteria for participants were: teaching (a) in Ontario, (b) 5 or more years, and (c) students in grades 7-12. Five teachers in Ontario participated. Of these, four taught students in grades 7 or 8, and one

taught in high school. Participants had a variety of experiences such as teaching internationally, teaching in a private religious based school, and teaching in public education. The number of students they taught daily ranged from 20 to 170.

Procedure

After ethics approval, participants were recruited through the Faculty of Education at a mid-sized university in Ontario, through the networks of former education colleagues, and via social media. Following informed consent, each participant chose a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality and were interviewed virtually. The one hour interviews were semi-structured and included open-ended questions that led to a greater understanding and a description of class climate. Examples of questions from the interviews included: What do you interpret class climate to mean? Describe how you create a positive class climate? And what factors do you believe impact mental wellness in your classroom? To document my reflections and understandings, memos were taken during the interviews. I returned to these memos during data analysis. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Participants were entered into a draw to receive a gift card.

Data Analysis

A hybrid approach to data analysis was used with a combination of both deductive and inductive analysis (Azungah, 2018). In a deductive approach, the researcher starts with a list of themes that are predicted to be in the data. In this case, the themes were developed from the concepts discussed in the literature review. In an inductive approach, the focus is on developing themes based only on the experiences of the participants (Azungah, 2018).
Transcripts were read in detail ten times to get a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of class climate. Both memos and transcripts were examined and significant statements, which are excerpts that relate specifically to the phenomenon, were recorded in a spreadsheet. From the five interview transcripts, 266 significant statements were identified and organized based on theme. These statements provide an understanding of how teachers experienced the phenomenon of positive class climate.

Initially, deductive analysis was used to look for predetermined themes based on the literature review: relationships, resources, and engagement. Transcripts were reviewed and coded for the themes related to the participants' interpretations and experiences of a positive class climate. After reviewing the data multiple times, additional themes were identified from significant statements: boundaries, expectations, belonging, strategies, sense of feeling in the class, challenges, and recommendations. This approach is consistent with an inductive data analysis approach, where a researcher identifies themes based on the experiences of the participants (Azungah, 2018). Table 1 is a sample of significant statements for one of the identified themes, relationships.

Table 1: Examples of Significant Statements from Data Collection - Theme: Relationships

Pseudonyms	Shannon	Abby	Veronica	Ruby	Mita
Significant Statements	"Start the year with everyone getting to know each other"	"Understand and accept differences"	"Students interaction with each other"	"Critical to build relationships within your class"	"Spend time at the beginning of the year working on community of class"
	"Open and honest communication"	"Students interact with teacher in a positive way"	"Teacher interacting with students"	"Team in the classroom… everyone needs to be respectful of everyone"	"We're a team"

Next, similar themes were grouped together and a visual was created (Figure 3) to show how these themes are interconnected and how these components establish a positive class climate. The visual was revised based on feedback from colleagues and a faculty supervisor.

The themes of building relationships, boundaries and expectations, and the use of resources and strategies all contribute to the creation of a positive class climate. As components of a positive class climate, they are facilitated by the classroom teacher as shown by the circle around Figure 3.
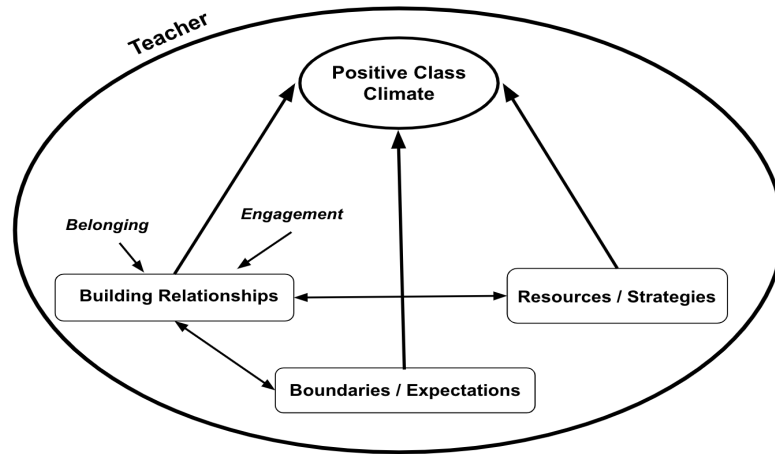

Figure 3: Themes Developed from the Data

Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify what components created the phenomenon of positive class climate. There were many similarities in the participant responses. A positive class climate was defined by participants as "the feeling you get when you walk in the room" or "the temperature or vibe in the class." This feeling is created by many interrelated components, most importantly the relationships cultivated between the educator and the students, the boundaries and expectations set, and the resources available and strategies implemented daily. Three themes were identified as contributing to class climate: building relationships, boundaries and expectations, and resources and strategies.

Building Relationships

"The teacher-student relationship is the most important relationship in education" ("Ruby," Participant). There was overwhelming consensus that building relationships with students is the most important aspect of teaching. Teachers felt that connecting with students was "more important than getting through the lesson." Teachers "start the year with everyone getting to know each other, personalities, learning styles, knowing where students are coming from and where they are academically." Teachers also "spend time at the beginning of the year building a classroom community" and "make sure all students feel like they have a voice." The qualities needed to develop relationships with students were described as "approachable," "open and honest communication," willingness to "support students and figure out steps to move them forward," "trust and respect," and a "sense of humor." Educators recommended all teachers "learn at least one interest of every student," "learn their names quickly," "share information about yourself," and smile and make the students feel welcome.

Facilitating positive interactions between students is also a role of an educator who is building a positive climate. "Students are greatly impacted by their friendships and what happens at school with their peers." Creating an "atmosphere of a team whereby everyone interacts in a positive way" and is "willing and able to help each other" encourages a supportive environment where students "understand and accept their differences."

Creating a sense of belonging and engagement are also components of building relationships within the classroom. "When students feel they are welcome, the class has a nice positive environment." "Students feel recognized and part of a whole." Educators know that students who are engaged in some aspects of school are more likely to feel they belong and are happier. "If students are not engaged in academic, outdoor activities, or extracurriculars, that to me is a warning sign for some sort of mental health issue or a reason to connect with that student." Involvement in school is key to positive mental health. "Co-creating learning experiences that allow students to explore their own interests" and having a voice in "class expectations and decision making around good and bad consequences" is vital for the development of self-worth. Teachers who emphasize building strong, trusting relationships with students were more likely to promote student engagement, and all felt a sense of belonging was important in their classrooms.

Boundaries & Expectations

"Clear boundaries and expectations for everyone gives them [students] a sense you care" ("Ruby," Participant). Consistently setting boundaries and high expectations for all students was another important aspect of a positive class climate. Students will push back, so the educator reinforcing both on a daily basis is imperative for a calm, positive environment. The "teacher is key for setting the tone for the expectations." Teachers interviewed concurred that "students want to know what the expectations are and how they fit into that," "core values are talked about and we make sure they are upheld," and students take their cues from their educators so "teacher modeling" is imperative. It is also important that there is flexibility. The "teacher is aware of environmental stressors (such as flu season or Ramadan) and adapts the expectations" based on student needs. Student safety is crucial so the educator "explicitly teaches safe places in the building to eat lunch and do homework" and ensure everyone has "a person" they can go to if they do not feel safe. Teachers who felt that having "firm but fair" boundaries and expectations were more likely to have positive relationships with their students.

Resources & Strategies

"We [students and teachers] need to know where the support is and what it looks like" ("Ruby," Participant). Resources are defined as people support or programs. Teachers stated that having knowledge of and access to resources in the classroom, school and community give them the ability to meet a variety of needs in their classrooms while maintaining a positive environment. Teachers also stated that their schools did not have enough staff to support the needs of students. "It's hard for students to find a caring person to make connections with when the [teacher-student] ratios are so horrible." Social-emotional learning and character education resources were the most utilized. These programs give teachers the framework to teach important skills such as "mindfulness," "resilience," "grit," and "self care." Teachers stay connected with students through "weekly class meetings," "frequent check-ins," or "daily individual check-ins with a Google form." Teachers shared they make intentional decisions about what resources are in the physical environment such as "motivational quotes in the classroom (that are changed every few weeks)," "safe place sticker on the class door," "reading corner with pillows and blankets," "quiet space to work," "access to stress balls," "alternate work spaces," and "student names on their desks." Several teachers talked about how their style of teaching had changed during their careers. Some examples included "more one to one support," "more choices," a "classroom management point system," "show (model) their own failures," "focus on having harder conversations," give "tools students can use on their own and outside the class," and teach "yoga." They also talked about connecting with families more often through "ongoing phone calls and emails to establish a learning team" and learning about their students through "questionnaires completed by parents." One teacher talked about teaching parents the phrase "handle with care." Using this phrase conveyed to the teacher that their student was struggling without sharing personal details. The teacher was then able to make accommodations to support this student. The teacher chooses resources and strategies based on the needs of the students in their class.

"Teachers bring the energy to the class, high or low, and students feed on it" ("Mita," Participant). It is important to note that all the components that cultivate a positive class climate, (1) building relationships, (2) boundaries and expectations, and (3) resources and strategies, are brought together and cultivated by the teacher.

Discussion

In the current study, the phenomenon of class climate was investigated by interviewing educators about their experiences in the classroom. This study aimed to address a research gap by focusing specifically on the components that contribute to a positive class climate and which can facilitate positive mental health. *Findings from the study indicate that a positive class climate is cultivated by a caring and compassionate teacher who builds a relationship with each student by making them feel they belong; establishes clear boundaries; sets high, yet achievable expectations, and utilizes resources and implements strategies based on the needs, strengths and interests of the students.* When these components are in place, the teachers interviewed perceived students as more engaged and motivated to learn, and the impact on their mental health is positive.

These findings are consistent with Oberle (2018) who found that positive teacher-student relationships improve class climate and student mental health. Additionally, they are in alignment with a model of prosocial classrooms from Jennings and Greenberg (2009) where socially and emotionally competent teachers focus on student strengths and abilities. The relationships that they built with students led to greater feelings of belonging which contributed to positive emotional health. In this current study, participants overwhelmingly agreed that creating a positive teacher-student relationship was more important than the content they were teaching. They understood how connections with their students would lead to a greater sense of belonging, engagement, and positive mental health. Participants stated the importance of having appropriate resources to meet the needs of their students. In addition, having materials that assisted them in teaching social emotional skills was useful in creating a positive class climate. This is consistent with research completed by Oberle and Braun et al. (2018) which found social emotional learning and mindfulness practices to be effective strategies to nurture relationships and promote student mental health.

Theoretical Elements

In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological framework, the teacher microsystem plays a critical role in how the student interacts with other microsystems such as class, school and peers. By creating a class climate where positive relationships are facilitated, clear boundaries and expectations are explained, and resources and strategies are accessed to support all learners, the student understands how they interact within those microsystems (teacher, peers, class, and school). It can also impact the mesosystem where there are interactions between the student's microsystems. For example, a positive teacher-student relationship could have a more positive impact on the relationship between the teacher and the student's family. According to Bronfenbrenner, the influence of these systems impacts the student's development and how they interact with their environments.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications for Practice

Teachers play a vital role in facilitating a positive class climate. It is their responsibility to make connections with their students, set appropriate boundaries and expectations, and access and utilize available resources that are advantageous to themselves and the students in their care. A positive class climate not only enhances student mental health but also improves attendance, increases academic success, and decreases behavioural challenges. Teacher mental health impacts student mental health and it is imperative that educators are aware of this connection. Teachers need professional development that guides them to prioritize their own growth and the steps necessary to cultivate a positive class climate. School leaders also need to be aware of the connection between staff and student mental health and work to create a school climate where all staff feel valued and supported.

Recommendations from the Participants

The participants gave recommendations for what could be done in schools to create a more positive class climate. The first recommendation was a reduction in class sizes. All participants suggested classes, for students in grades 7-12, be capped at 20-25 students so teachers would have more opportunities to "talk,

connect and guide." Having an additional caring adult in the class also increases the chances of meaningful conversations. It is challenging to make connections when teachers teach 100 or more students in a day. Reducing the number of transitions and limiting the number of teacher contacts during the school day would slow the pace of the day. This would also allow teachers more time to get to know their students.

Another recommendation was an increase in purposeful professional development and training. All participants wanted to support students but did not feel they always had the right training. As one participant said, "building teacher self-efficacy is huge. They [teachers] need confidence in their abilities and knowledge on how to help students." For example, teachers recommended training on character development programs and student support so that they can identify and support students struggling with their mental health, facilitate meaningful conversations, and foster relationships with their students, especially the ones that are reluctant to engage. Having the support of their school leadership team was also important. Participants identified a need for ongoing communication within the school and knowledge of where to find support for themselves and their students. One participant commented that "overall student mental health and wellbeing should be part of the school improvement plan." "Having a good working environment where staff are happy and feeling good" would be beneficial to the whole school community.

There were also recommendations related to students. Every student needs to feel some connection in the school, so some teachers have created clubs and intramurals based on students' interests to get them involved. Participants recommended that these extracurriculars be offered at different times of the day to accommodate more students. The participants also agreed that adults are too quick to "rescue" students when they face a challenge or problem. They recommend allowing students to sit in their discomfort and instead teach them to "navigate and critically assess situations on their own instead of pulling them out or doing it for them." This strategy would develop student autonomy and resilience.

Limitations

The present research is limited by several factors. Recruitment was challenging due to a time constraint to recruit participants because of the parameters of the course for which this research was a requirement. In addition, the sample size was small with only five participants, and having additional participants to interview would have been advantageous. Another limitation was the interviews were limited to teachers and their lived experiences in the classroom. A future study could focus on students' (in grades 7 to 12) perspectives of class climate and the impact on their mental health. This would allow for possible correlation between teachers' and students' perspectives.

Conclusion

Student mental health concerns have increased over the past decade. It is imperative that educators look at ways to facilitate positive mental health for their students. One way this can be addressed is through the intentional design of the class climate. This study, conducted in Ontario, explored the phenomenon of class climate from teachers' perspectives and found that building relationships with students, setting clear boundaries and appropriate expectations while having access to resources and strategies based on their students' needs could lead to a positive class climate. Professional development for educators that focuses on creating positive environments is recommended since being part of a positive environment can contribute to positive mental health

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