

Defining a Safe Learning Environment in an Assessment for Learning Model from Teachers' Perspectives

تعريف البيئة الآمنة للتعليم المتضمنة بأنموذج للتقويم من أجل التعلم من وجهة نظر المعلمات

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Abstract:

Objectives: This paper aims to define such an environment by describing its characteristics.

Methods: The researchers used the Grounded Theory approach in qualitative research to analyze the data collected from (85) primary and early learning female teachers who attended an online three-day Assessment for Learning workshop in Riyadh.

Results: Results showed seven assertions that describe a safe learning environment: physical function, fear free, learner empowerment, peer power, teacher empowerment, skill-building instruction and assessment, and professional development.

Conclusions: These assertions gave a detailed description of the safe learning environment that would facilitate the best teaching and learning experiences and would give the best learning outcomes when applying assessment for learning strategies in classrooms.

Keywords: Assessment for learning; Learning environments; Early learning Teachers; Primary teachers; Instruction.

الملخص:

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تعريف البيئة الآمنة للتعليم عن طريق وصف خصائصها.

المنهجية: اعتمدت الباحثتان على منحنى النظرية المجردة في البحث النوعي لتحليل البيانات التي جمعت من (85) معلمة من المرحلة الابتدائية والصفوف المبكرة اللاتي حضرن دورة التقويم من أجل التعلم المقامة في مدينة الرياض لمدة ثلاثة أيام.

النتائج: أظهرت النتائج سبعة تأكيدات تصف البيئة الآمنة للتعليم: الوظيفة الفيزيائية، خالية من الخوف، تمكين المتعلم، قوة الأقران، تمكين المعلم، التدريس والتقويم المعتمد على بناء المهارات، التطوير المهني للمعلمات.

الخلاصة: أعطت هذه التوكيدات وصفًا دقيقًا لبيئة آمنة للتعليم تهيئ أفضل خبرات التدريس والتعلم، وأفضل نتائج التعلم عند تطبيق استراتيجيات التقويم من أجل التعلم داخل الصفوف المدرسية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التقويم من أجل التعلم؛ بيئة التعلم؛ معلمات الصفوف المبكرة؛ معلمات المرحلة الابتدائية؛ التدريس.

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1 Introduction

Assessment for learning has shown to have strong positive effects on learning and achievement through a wide range of studies. Vast research was conducted to study the effects of applying different assessment strategies during classroom learning activities that would enhance children's learning and educational attainment. Black and Williams (1998) analyzed 250 studies regarding classroom assessment practices and concluded the importance of implementing certain strategies that can raise achievement by an effect size of (0.7). Assessment for learning was defined as "the processes used by teachers and students to recognize and respond to student learning in order to enhance that learning, during the learning" (Cowie & Bell, 2001, p. 540). Which means that assessment tools should be carried out during the instructional process for the purpose of improving teaching and learning.

Different Assessment for Learning models were developed since that time to determine the best strategies that have maximum effects on children's learning (Torrance & Pryor, 2001; Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004; Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam, 2005; Shirley, 2009; Chueachot, Srisa-ard, & Srihamongkol, 2013; Alabdulkarim & Alshaye, 2016). The most salient strategies in these models were: sharing learning goals and success criteria, eliciting evidence of learning, feedback, self-assessment, and peer assessment. The model developed by Alabdulkarim & Alshaye (2016) showed a size effect of 1.61 on achievement. This model found that these strategies would function and provide their optimal effects in a safe learning environment. To obtain the highest benefits of the model, this article will focus on defining what is a safe learning environment.

1.1 What is a Safe Learning Environment?

Different aspects of a safe learning environment must be addressed when trying to determine its components. Beginning with the physical conditions, basic classroom requirements include large spaces, ventilation, light, comfortable chairs, and tables for children to work at for a period of time. Arrangement of seating with flexibility and versatility encourages active engagement in learning activities through a community of learning and has a strong influence on class participation (Thompson and Wheeler, 2008; Mutlu and Yildirim, 2019; Abu Rayash, 2016, Calp, 2020). Mutlu and Yildirim (2019) investigated the persistence of learners in learning environments, specifically, learners' continuous efforts during learning activity when they encounter challenges or difficulties. Results showed that the strongest factor that affected learner persistence to learn and overcome difficulties was the material classroom environment.

The intellectual aspect of a safe classroom environment focuses on curriculum standards, objectives, learning and assessment strategies that provide a rich learning experience. Challenging tasks and activities that require problem solving, critical and creative thinking and project-based learning enhances children's thinking skills (Abu Rayash, 2016). These activities should also be engaging and fun for students (Calp, 2020). Learning objectives should be clearly shared with learners from the beginning of class. Clear shared goals among learners foster communication skills, group work, peer and self-assessment (Alabdulkarim & Alshaye, 2016; Turner and Harder, 2018, Harjunmaa, Maatta and Uusiautti, 2023). The curriculum's ability to consider children's preferences and learning styles and relating to them all, is also an important aspect of the safe intellectual environment (Thompson and Wheeler, 2008). Using authentic assessments that are congruent with reality makes learners more persistent in learning as they relate to their real lives. Exposing children to alternative assessment procedures that are more authentic and measure meaningful learning is crucial to a safe learning environment (Mutlu and Yildirim, 2019). If the appropriate forms of assessment are not used in schools to measure attainment during learning to enhance learning and foster active and engaged learners, and instead used only to measure learning outcomes, then they will foster rather passive learners (Crick, McCombs, Haddon, Broadfoot & Tew, 2007).

Sharma (2015) emphasized the importance of promoting learners to be active participants and risk takers in classrooms to be higher achievers. Working in groups gives learners opportunities to assess and moderate their learning in a less threatening context without fear of asking questions or making mistakes before engaging in class discussions. Turner and Harder (2018) described this psychologically safe learning environment as environments where learners can make mistakes without negative consequences, therefore, the learners are able participate in complex situations without fear of making mistakes or being held responsible for these mistakes. This sense of safety encourages learners to take risks, thus learning from their mistakes. These learning environments nurture innovation, stimulate support and collaboration between peers, and encourage learners to speak up when noticing errors or learning gaps, this in turn enhances their learning.

These important qualities of a safe learning environment led to studying the qualities of a good teacher. The role of the teacher is mainly focused on constructing a safe learning culture by planning a learner-centered environment that listens to learners' voices, helps them develop their ideas, advances creative and critical thinking skills through challenging learning activities and builds self-esteem (AbuRayash, 2016; Crick et. al, 2007). Other essential qualities of a good teacher are being accessible, flexible, and approachable without learners fearing to express their learning, then providing immediate constructive feedback to help them close their learning gaps. Learners need to feel safe to challenge ideas, be creative and critically incorporate concepts into their personal knowledge (Gurm, 2015). It is also crucial for the teacher to have academic optimism; a positive belief about the ability to teach all learners through encouraging them to engage in academic tasks. If teachers believe that they can affect the learner's learning, then they will set high expectations, exert greater effort, and persist in the face of difficulties. It also explains directed teacher behaviors, practices, or actions to increase the quality of classroom instruction to reach a higher level of learner achievement, which is the cognitive side of a safe learning environment (Alhendal, Alshatti and Alnwaieem, 2017).

An emotionally safe environment is dependent upon the quality of the relationship the children have with their teacher, and among themselves; the quality of time, support, respect, trust and openness that children are given by teachers and peers within the learning process. Teachers apply social justice by acknowledging and respecting children's differences, their different cultures, socio-economic backgrounds and treating them equitably (Gurm, 2015; Abu Rayash, 2016; Lim and Fraser, 2018; Turner and Harder, 2018; Calp, 2020). Evidence suggests that learning may not happen in a classroom that lacked these components, because emotions play a key role in the physical process of learning (Thompson and Wheeler, 2008), therefore requiring teachers to continuously respond to challenged, or emotionally disturbed children during classroom activities (Mutlu and Yildirim, 2019, Harjunmaa, Maatta and Uusiautti, 2023). Attamimi (2020) found that there are teacher professional development needs to create safe learning environments according to the requirements of socioemotional learning; mainly in areas such as promoting learners' self-regulation and learning, encouraging learner social and emotional development, and facilitating a positive social climate that supports positive human relations. An interesting factor promoting human relations was diversity; positive association was detected between learners' cohesiveness and the number of ethnic groups in the classroom. Classes with more children diversity are important for feeling belonged and not isolated, diversity can be used as a tool to create a strong and cohesive safe learning environment (Brok, Fisher, Rickards and Bull, 2005).

Looking at the other side of Safe Classroom Environments Barrett (2010) argues that the safe classroom with the definition of 'a metaphorical space in which learners are sufficiently comfortable to take social and psychological risks by expressing their thoughts, beliefs, opinions, experiences, and creativity' (Barrett, 2010, p.5) may come at the expense of other children's emotional safety in the learning environment if they were targeted, thus wondering if a classroom can be a safe environment for all children.

2 Method

To address the research question, the researchers utilized the Grounded Theory in qualitative research which was explained by Creswell (2013, p83): a design in which the inquirer generates an explanation (a description in this case) shaped by the views of many participants. The participants in the study were asked about their perspectives towards a safe learning environment that enables them to implement assessment for learning strategies after attending a three-day workshop in Assessment for Learning using the Alabdulkarim & Shaye (2016) model presented by the first researcher. A total of ten online workshops were held in Riyadh during the period 25/8/2022 until 10/11/2022 (the first semester) by the Administration of Training/ Ministry of Education as one of many free programs available for teachers to enhance their pedagogical skills. This program was specified for primary and early learning teachers to boost assessment skills during classroom teaching and learning. The workshops were conducted in Arabic and were open for all female primary and early learning teachers in Riyadh to attend, but registration closed when the number of attendants reached (30) in each workshop.

Data was collected from teachers after the end of the program through an open-ended questionnaire which was given to all who participated in the workshops (298 teachers); only (85) teachers answered and returned the questionnaire to the researchers, all of them had experience that ranged from 11 to 28 years.

The questionnaire asked the teachers to freely describe a safe learning environment from their perspectives regarding (5) aspects: Teacher, Learner, Peers, Instruction, and Assessment. Validity of the

questionnaire was obtained through peer-review of seven university professors to determine if it will measure what it is intended to measure (Arsilan, 2022), the questionnaire was updated according to their feedback.

Data was analyzed and then open coded by both researchers separately, the transcripts were read line by line then reread multiple times by each researcher, identifying a wide range of ideas and perspectives, looking for emerging patterns and concepts. This was followed by axial coding which involved a more focused examination of the data, to establish connections between the concepts, exploring how they relate to each other then labeling and categorizing them into emerging themes (Del Siegle, 2023; Creswell, 2013), then translated into English. The researchers agreed on most of the themes, and therefore documented; different themes were negotiated then settled between researchers. Reliability is measured by the stability of categories across coding stages and through coder agreement on how data was categorized (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The themes were then developed into assertions that describe the Safe Learning Environment under study.

3 Results and Discussion

Data was collected from primary and early learning teachers to describe the components of a safe learning environment that would give optimal effects of applying assessment for learning strategies during teaching children in classrooms.

Data analysis showed seven assertions that would make classrooms a safe learning environment:

3.1 Physical Function

To describe a classroom with physical function teachers needed to imagine their classrooms with the materials that make teaching and applying assessment for learning strategies easier for them and learning easier for children. They shared a few components for such classrooms: Large adequate space for tables and chairs for all the children in class, good ventilation and adequate light (preferably natural) were the most important factors mentioned. Classroom space is needed for the teacher to move freely between children to apply assessment for learning strategies such as eliciting evidence of learning through probing questions, monitoring learning, observing group discussion, and then giving feedback to enhance the learning. Space is also needed for the children to collaborate in learning tasks to provide immediate peer assessment that also advances learning. Overcrowding classrooms with children would interfere with learning:

"An overcrowded classroom does not allow me to move freely to apply different learning and assessment strategies." Teacher 7.

"Children deserve educational spaces that meet their personal and social needs." Teacher 5.

"We teachers face hindering factors that prevent us from applying assessment for learning strategies such as crowded classrooms and little spaces for implementing learning activities." Teacher 9.

"Classrooms should not be crowded so children can participate in learning activities and teachers can move freely between them." Teacher 49.

Other important safe physical environment factors include the abundance of learning material, tools and aids. These tools assist teachers in providing ways to build meaningful concepts by showing pictures or videos explaining abstract concepts, then eliciting evidence of learning through a variety of assessment tools to determine learning gaps, which then should be closed in a short period of time. Teachers suggested funding schools that lacked these tools to keep up with recent modernized technology:

"The environment should be attractive to children and equipped with educational equipment and resources." Teacher 16.

"Schools should be provided with up-to-date teaching aids and tools that help learners internalize new concepts. These tools should also be enjoyable to motivate learning, such as using iPads to search for videos that support knowledge being learned." Teacher 4.

"Teachers need tools and modern technology to assist in learning assessment." Teacher 25.

"A safe environment for teachers is not overcrowding classes, providing technology and teaching tools essential for teaching." Teacher 73.

Children working together in a comfortable zone and being able to move freely in the classroom where technology is relied on for learning and assessment raises learning motivation. Thompson and Wheeler (2008), Mutlu and Yildirim (2019), and Abu Rayash (2016) discussed the importance of physical conditions, including large spaces and seating arrangements for children to work with colleagues to encourage active engagement in learning activities throughout class time and sustaining productivity.

3.2 Fear Free

A safe, emotional, and social environment is crucial for any learning space; Children must feel the comfort and security of the learning environment; no fear, no anxiety, feeling a sense of belonging, having high self-respect and high self-esteem.

Good relations with the teacher and their peers are the foundation of such an environment. Learners feel safe and that they belong in class, and are free to contribute their ideas with peers, encourage them, and help each other to learn. Children can freely express their ideas without fear of criticism or mockery from others. Learners feel safe asking questions about any part of a topic they haven't totally understood, or ask for help if they have problems constructing lesson concepts in their mental schemas.

Working in groups also builds emotional relations between children, giving them the comfort and ease to assess each other's ideas before presenting them to the classroom, or giving each other feedback on certain topics they are discussing, thus they all reach a high level of goal mastery. Being open to positive criticism, acknowledging mistakes, using them to enhance learning, giving feedback to others and complimenting their work displays high self-esteem. In this environment, learning will be successful, enjoyable, and attainment will reach its full potential.

"One of the most important characteristics of a safe learning environment is being threat free: a social climate that stabilizes high moral values." Teacher 50.

"Children freely express their ideas and ask questions." Teacher 11.

"A reactive environment that motivates thinking, and where the learners feel equity and reassurance, far from fear and anxiety." Teacher 22

"Learners feel total comfort asking questions during the lesson to clear up any uncertainty or misconceptions acquired while working on lesson activity and proceeding to achieve its goals." Teacher 47.

"It's important that the teacher gives the learners the comfort to express their understanding without fear of being wrong." Teacher 58.

"Providing a secure and protected environment eliminates fear and uncertainty and encourages children to exert their best efforts in learning." Teacher 69.

"A school environment is important for providing children's emotional and social needs. Also eliminating punishment, threat in classrooms, and mockery or bullying between children." Teacher 76.

As Thompson and Wheeler (2008) emphasize on the role emotions play on the process of learning, these findings confirm their work and assures the importance of a fear free environment to implement important assessment for learning strategies that helps the learners to freely express their learning without fear of punishment, so it may be assessed by peers or teacher, or even self-assessed, then putting efforts in closing the gaps. They also confirm the work of Sharma (2015) and Turner and Harder (2018) on the importance of a fear free environment and the ability to make mistakes without consequences to make the learners risk takers and engage in complex tasks without fear of making mistakes, thus developing learning to reach its highest outcomes.

3.3 Learner empowerment

A safe learning environment should be designed to give learners a main positive role in the classroom, changing their roles from knowledge recipients to active, engaged participants in challenging learning tasks using critical and creative thinking, searching for certified resources, self-monitoring, and acquiring different skills through these processes. Using teaching strategies such as project-based learning gives them opportunities to plan, display ideas, innovations, and creations.

Assessment for learning strategies gives children mental security because they focus on enhancing performance and not reducing learning time. Starting the lesson by sharing learning targets and success criteria helps direct children during learning, enables them to self-assess their learning, and receive feedback from teacher or peers. In addition, freedom in expression will reveal all misunderstood topic concepts, hence enabling learning scaffolding and redirecting it to the intended learning goals. This gives learners a sense of safety and encouragement and ignites motivation while working on lesson tasks.

In this environment, children have no feelings of threat or fear nor anxiety, they feel motivated and have a strong passion for learning, acquiring self-learning skills, and taking responsibility for their own learning. This, in time, will build personality and lift attainment results at the end of the year.

"Learners feel safe and put all their efforts into learning and achieving." Teacher 13.

"Self-monitoring and self-development are the results of unlimited confidence in the learner's potential and their capability in achieving, even if they repeat their attempts multiple times. Whereas confidence cannot be promoted in a teacher-producing knowledge environment." Teacher 15.

"A safe teaching environment gives learners the sense of belonging which makes them accept tasks, help others, be more flexible and more committed." Teacher 38.

"Learners don't have the feeling of intimidation nor anxiety, so motivation to learn is increased." Teacher 45.

"A classroom is a place that nurtures learner learning and their growth, motivates them to put all their efforts into learning, thus attaining broad knowledge in desired study topics." Teacher 51.

"Empowering learners with learning skills gives them the ability to learn at all times, even without the teacher." Teacher 52.

Abu Rayash (2016) talked about the importance of providing challenging tasks and activities to empower learners in the classroom. Project-based learning gives them opportunities to lead their own learning and enhances their thinking, social, and motor skills. Sharma (2015) also emphasized the importance of empowering children in classrooms, and to be active participants and risk takers, and only through active participation can the learners acquire the planned skills and reach the highest levels of achievement.

3.4 Peer Power

In a safe learning environment learning tasks should be implemented through working groups. Children working with each other creates opportunities for collaboration, challenging difficulties, exchange of experiences, and enhancement of social and personal skills. Sharing ideas and experiences, encouraging each other, and giving each other feedback improves learners' weaknesses and boosts overall achievement. It also boosts motivation, self-confidence and reduces shyness and reluctance to participate in class since ideas have been already peer-assessed.

Learners feel responsible for their fellow peers, helping them to engage in learning activities, which in turn develops their own skills in assessment, management, and organization. It also stimulates critical and creative thinking, communication and fluency, building relationships with mutual respect.

"Helps learners to communicate, solve problems, collaborate, make friends and break the fear and shyness barrier." Teacher 2.

"Peers help each other to reach the highest level of learning, creating a comfortable, friendly and motivating learning environment." Teacher 8.

"Peers help each other improve their skills and knowledge by closing the learning gaps. Assessment strategies should include self-, peer-, and teacher assessment." Teacher 31.

"Peers in a safe environment support each other by learning from each other, sharing their strengths, and supporting each other." Teacher 47.

"Correcting misunderstanding, broader knowledge, exchanging experience, and innovating new ideas." Teacher 55.

"A great way to stimulate thinking." Teacher 58.

"Sharing ideas and discussing them makes a suitable learning environment." Teacher 77.

Good peer relationships were discussed previously as an important factor for an emotionally safe environment; respect, support, and trust between children is crucial to support the learning process. Children feel more confident to share ideas with peers compared to the teacher due to convergence in characteristics (Gurm, 2015; Abu Rayash, 2016; Lim and Fraser, 2018; Turner and Harder, 2018). Turner and Harder (2018) described a psychologically safe learning environment where learners can learn together without fear of making mistakes, where they can collaborate, support, and encourage each other.

3.5 Teacher Empowerment

A teacher's role is basically preparing a stimulating, exciting, and motivating learning environment by preparing teaching and assessment strategies that develop children's thinking skills and help them acquire knowledge. That includes planning lesson goals and success criteria, learning tasks, and utilizing tools to measure children's learning during class. Other responsibilities include accurate observation of their learning, building children's learning skills, making them feel the importance of what they're learning, praising their efforts, studying their behavior, and using assessment strategies to enhance learning and not to judge it.

"Teachers are the essential foundation in the classroom next to the learners; preparing a motivating learning environment with teaching strategies that develop children's thinking skills." Teacher 19.

"Accepting children's mistakes and their curiosity, motivating their learning and assessing it through good planning and assessment strategies." Teacher 85.

"Motivator, corroborative, learner supporter, introduces learning through suitable strategies, feedback and sharing success criteria." Teacher 37.

"The teacher is able to grasp her or her learners' strengths and weaknesses, enhance her or their work, celebrate learners' success, which will lead to better learners' learning outcomes." Teacher 55.

Facilitating a moral and social learning environment is also important. Providing the means of emotional safety to their learners by containing and encouraging them and treating them with equity. Building strong relationships with the children and inspiring them to connect with each other helps shape a united community and strengthen the feeling of belonging.

"The teacher should have certain role model characteristics such as calmness and patience." Teacher 63.

"The sense of belonging helps to overstep the challenges of learning, thus developing the learning outcomes." Teacher 36.

"The environment must give learners motivation, a sense of belonging so they are ready to engage in learning. Good relations between teacher and learners, and among learners themselves helps." Teacher 64.

The teacher is the director of all the learning procedures, therefore empowering teachers to apply and experiment with new ideas, and choose appropriate teaching styles and methods that acquire learners lots of life-needed skills, and not limiting them to closed molded teaching systems is essential for an innovative and creative environment. Many of the teachers' sample complained of obstruction of innovation efforts by supervisors and restricting them to systematic teaching procedures. Empowering teachers leads to constructive professional development, which in turn leads to constructive teaching.

"There should be regulations eliminating restrictions on teaching practices within system regulations." Teacher 74.

"Systems and regulations governing teaching procedures should be flexible and scalable to match learners' interests and needs. Teacher creativity should be encouraged and rewarded." Teacher 4.

"Decision making should include all teachers concerned, and not be limited to the school principal. Teachers should concentrate on practical and applied aspects of the curriculum which qualifies learners to serve the community." Teacher 8.

"Teachers are given enough space to practice different teaching strategies, assess their effects on learner learning to reach the best attainment results." Teacher 40.

Preparing a stimulating and motivating learning environment by the teacher through careful planning of a learner- centered environment that enhances creative and critical thinking skills through challenging learning activities was discussed by AbuRayash (2016) and Crick et. al (2007) and is considered the foundation of any safe environment that builds learners' skills and knowledge and boosts self-esteem. Monitoring their learning and providing constructive feedback helps children close the learning gaps producing high learning outcomes. Gurm (2015) mentioned other good qualities of a teacher similar to the ones mentioned in this research, and the most notable is the need of learners to feel safe to challenge ideas without the fear of expressing their learning. Lim and Fraser (2018) and Turner and Harder (2018) also emphasized that an emotional safe classroom is composed when the teacher treats all children with trust and equity.

The sample in this research added the importance of empowering the teachers to experiment with different teaching and learning strategies to meet the needs of the learners' styles and preferences to maintain the highest outcomes.

3.6 Skill-Building Instruction and Assessment

From the sample's perspective a safe learning environment is reflected through learner academic achievement and based on understanding and caring for the children, fostering their growth and development. The curriculum content should be enriched with real world tasks that present purposeful learning experiences and promote all areas of growth. Constructive teaching strategies should change from focusing on the teacher as a knowledge source to a learner-centered instruction that builds children's life skills through different approaches such as project-based learning, problem-solving, discovery, critical and creative thinking, and teamwork.

"Careful previous planning can change a teacher's role from a knowledge source to learning director, giving children the opportunity to build learning skills by obtaining knowledge from its different sources. This will make instruction and learners active." Teacher 55.

"Learning content should be related to learners' lives and interests and introduced through a variety of learning activities and tasks, with adequate time to work on them, motivating the children and leading them to master desired learning goals." Teacher 50.

"Using a variation of learning tasks, tools, strategies and challenging questions help children acquire new and different skills." Teacher 63.

"Activating high order thinking skills in learning tasks, assessment strategies increase retainment of skills and knowledge acquired." Teacher 68.

"Interesting content, alternative tasks, positive role learners, and being able to work in teams." Teacher 20.

These teaching strategies encourage and value children's ideas and creativity and often motivate children to be persistent learners, raise their self-esteem and self-respect, keeping them exerting their efforts until they reach the desired learning goals. Motivation is also boosted through group work where members build social relationships and skills through collaboration, communication, mutual respect, and empathy.

"Instruction should be motivating and enthusiastic and should be effective on learner learning." Teacher 44.

"Teachers show value to the learner's ideas and encourage them to develop these ideas; building learner creativity." Teacher 47.

"Learning should motivate thinking, make learners use their imagination and be creative." Teacher 10.

"Instruction focuses on developing skills and raising self-esteem." Teacher 35.

"Using encouragement to build social skills, self-esteem and respect." Teacher 65.

"Lack of motivation can be a strong hindering factor of learning." Teacher 60.

In a safe environment, assessment should not be separated from learning, and should not be used only to enhance learning and fulfill desired goals, but also to discover creativity potentials in children. Continuous assessment strategies are used to monitor learning during activities and to immediately close any learning gaps that may develop. Sharing learning targets and success criteria at the beginning of each lesson helps direct children to intended goals to be mastered, assisting them in monitoring their progress towards achieving these goals and redirecting themselves in case they drift away from them. Self-assessment is an important life skill that needs to be cultivated in classrooms. Other assessment strategies, such as continuously eliciting evidence of learning using a variety of tools that activate high order thinking skills helps teachers and children to discover learning gaps and develop these skills. Then descriptive feedback should be provided to take the necessary procedures to close the gaps and reach mastery level.

"Continuous assessment strategies to determine strengths and weaknesses then directing them to improve their learning." Teacher 65.

"Teachers consider individual differences between children. Evaluates learner performances not learners themselves and should target the goal of improving learner achievement." Teacher 45.

"Using a variety of assessment tools and sharing learning targets enables closing learning gaps through peer and self-assessment." Teacher 38.

"Immediate concept assessment through strategies that lets the learner continuously reflect on her or his learning and the progress toward learning objectives, hence taking responsibility for their learning and making decisions to reach mastery." Teacher 69.

"Activating high order thinking skills in learning tasks, assessment strategies increase retainment of skills and knowledge acquired." Teacher 68.

"Teachers should respect and value learners' ideas, encourage developing them, regularly look for misconceptions and immediately take the needed procedures to clear up any misunderstanding. Assessment includes all learners with equity and using a variety of tools, thus ensuring they all have mastered the planned lesson goals." Teachers 47.

"Assessing performances and behavior, and not people. And providing feedback using descriptive phrases." Teacher 45.

Applying assessment in this manner not only increases attainment, but also assesses the teaching strategies used, thus helping teachers to develop their strategies and performance to obtain the highest level of learner achievement and self-satisfaction.

"Assessing children during learning has an impact on teacher self-satisfaction, seeing their learners mastering the desired learning goals, the creativity and new ideas inherent with it, gives the teacher their daily teaching reward, joy of helping their learner to reach their highest achievement." Teacher 61.

In similar findings Abu Rayash (2016) talked about the importance of including challenging activities of problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and project-based learning to enhance learner's thinking skills. Turner and Harder (2018) emphasized sharing learning objectives with learners from the beginning of class to foster communication skills, group work, peer and self-assessment. Mutlu and Yildirim (2019) found that motivation increased when using authentic assessments as they relate to their real lives, helping them obtain persistence and reliance during their academic life.

3.7 Professional Development

One of the most important aspects of a safe learning environment is professional development; a place that encourages skill building, and proficiency growth of both learners and teachers. Teachers need to keep up with

modern instruction and assessment strategies using various means of professional development. Training, self-learning, and professional learning communities are among the most popular methods. Discouraging teacher professional development limits them to traditional teaching strategies and tools and out-of-date technology.

"Many teachers need professional development to assist them to master modern teaching technology. In the absence of this training, teachers will limit their teaching to the old traditional methods." Teacher 36.

"A safe teaching environment empowers teachers to produce more and collaborate more with other teachers by sharing experiences and knowledge." Teacher 38.

"An innovative and creative environment that offers opportunities for teacher self-development through research and training." Teacher 53.

"Professional development: teachers are obligated to self-develop and self-train to keep up with new generation life and learning skills." Teacher 58.

"A safe environment provides training programs to enhance teaching practices like professional learning communities." Teacher 69.

"It is important that the supervisor is flexible and open minded to new ideas and does not restrict teachers to traditional instructional strategies." Teacher 4.

These findings coincide with Attamimi (2020) which found teacher professional development needs in the area of socioemotional learning to create safe learning environments.

4 Conclusions

Qualitative research was conducted to determine the characteristics of a safe learning environment that promotes the best educational results when applying assessment for learning strategies as described in Alabdulkarim & Alshaye (2016). The Grounded Theory was utilized to analyze data collected from (85) primary and early-learning teachers (Creswell, 2013: p83). Emerging themes were then developed into seven assertions that describe the Safe Learning Environment: (1) Physical Function, (2) Fear Free environment, (3) Learner Empowerment, (4) Peer Power, (5) Teacher Empowerment, (6) Skill Building Instruction and Assessment, (7) Professional Development.

Abu Rayash (2016), Calp (2020), Mutlu and Yildirim (2019) and Thompson and Wheeler (2008) found similar results regarding classroom spaces which suggested that large classrooms and comfortable seating arrangement encourages active engagement in learning activities through a community of learning and has a strong influence on class participation. The large spaces facilitated teacher and children's movement in class and enabled them to implement important assessment for learning strategies: collaboration in learning, peer and teacher assessment, which was followed by suitable procedures to help children immediately close the learning gaps (Alabdulkarim & Alshaye, 2016).

Working in class with no fear, no anxiety, as well as having a strong sense of belonging will help children freely express their learning so it may be improved. Turner and Harder (2018) found that these environments in which learners can make mistakes without punishment encourage learners to participate in complex situations. Sharma (2015) emphasized the importance of risk taking and learning from mistakes in classrooms to deeply learn the scientific concepts. This will only happen if there is a sense of safety and no fear in the classroom.

Empowering children and making them active and engaged participants in challenging learning tasks, thus acquiring self-learning skills and taking responsibility for their own learning is a very important life skill. This starts with clearly sharing learning objectives with the students at the beginning of class, then persuading them to use critical and creative thinking, and to collaborate with their peers, and rely on peer and self-assessment to achieve the required goals (Alabdulkarim & Alshaye, 2016; Turner and Harder, 2018, Harjunmaa, Maatta and Uusiautti, 2023). Gurm (2015) states that learners need to feel safe to challenge ideas, be creative and build their personal knowledge.

Peer collaboration by working in groups, sharing ideas and experiences, and giving each other feedback to improve their learning is known to improve learning (Alabdulkarim & Alshaye, 2016). This form of cooperation depends on the quality of relationship children have with each other in class; this includes having trust, respect, and support (Abu Rayash, 2016; Lim and Fraser, 2018; Turner and Harder, 2018). Sharma (2015) explained that working in groups is a safe, less threatening environment as learners assess and moderate their learning without fear of asking questions before they engage in class discussions.

Teacher qualities in a safe environment have been studied by AbuRayash (2016) and Crick et al. (2007), these studies listed important teacher roles as constructing a learner-centered environment that listens to

learners' voices, planning challenging learning activities, encouraging children to develop genuine ideas using creative and critical thinking skills, and helping them build self-esteem. These teaching skills can be enhanced by empowering and enabling teachers to experiment with new ideas and choose the best teaching strategies that suit their learners and keep up with the latest technologies and make classrooms innovative and creative environments.

Skill-building instruction and assessment embedded in a curriculum enriched with real world tasks with real world learning experiences that build children's life skills are crucial for a safe learning environment that bonds learning with real life. Abu Rayash (2016) mentioned that challenging tasks and activities that require problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and project-based learning enhance children's thinking skills. Mutlu and Yildirim (2019) found that using authentic assessments makes learners more persistent in learning as they relate to their real lives. Crick et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of applying alternative assessment procedures that are more authentic and measure meaningful learning to foster active and engaged learners, rather than passive learners if assessment was used only to measure learning outcomes.

Professional development through continuous programs to develop teaching skills and reach required proficiency to implement modern instruction and assessment strategies was one of the requirements to obtain a safe learning environment. Attamimi (2020) found that there are professional teacher development needs in socioemotional learning; how teachers can build a safe learning environment that supports positive human relations and promotes learners' self-regulation and learning. In this research teachers talked about the need to develop skills in pedagogy, modern teaching technology and self-development through professional learning communities.

According to the sample's perspectives these assertions gave a detailed description of the safe learning environment that would facilitate the best teaching and learning experiences and would give the best learning outcomes when applying assessment for learning strategies.

4.1 Recommendations

To obtain a safe learning environment according to the research results, the authors recommend the following:

- Adapting a school code that describes spacious classrooms, equipped with modern technology, and comfortable seating that enables the safe movement of children and teachers to carry out assessment for learning strategies.
- Strengthening teacher- children and peer relationships in classrooms, enforce equity, respect, trust, and accept diversity to ensure a fear-free learning environment.
- Empowering children by using effective instruction and assessment strategies to make them active and engaged learners.
- Empowering teachers to choose suitable teaching and assessment strategies that motivate their learners and persuade them to exert their highest efforts in learning.
- Planning skill-building instruction and assessment with real world learning experiences to connect children with the real world.
- Providing continuous professional teacher development programs to enhance their ability to create a safe learning environment.

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