

<https://doi.org/10.48047/AFJBS.6.13.2024.1199-1210>



African Journal of Biological Sciences

Journal homepage: <http://www.afjbs.com>



Research Paper

Open Access

## YOUNG CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL: A PLACE FOR LEARNING, FOR 'FUN' OR FOR DISCIPLINE

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### Article Info

Volume 6, Issue 13, July 2024

Received: 02 June 2024

Accepted: 30 June 2024

Published: 24 July 2024

doi: [10.48047/AFJBS.6.13.2024.1199-1210](https://doi.org/10.48047/AFJBS.6.13.2024.1199-1210)

### ABSTRACT:

This paper explores young children's Perceptions of their schools, as whether they are places primarily focused on learning, or on 'fun' and participating in activities or aimed at maintaining discipline. To achieve these objectives the study meta-reviewed pervious literature related to this topic, and meta-analyzed the common themes related to how children view the purpose and functions of their school during early education. The research results indicated that children's conceptions are informed by multiple factors, including developmental level, school climate, teacher-student relationships, and home socialization of school functions. The results also suggest that young children tend to view schools mainly as places for acquiring academic skills, with 'fun' and behavioral control seen as secondary objectives. The results of this research reflects families' focus on the role of school as of schools mainly as places for learning academic skills, and they usually keep the role of discipline and determining 'correct' behaviors for themselves. Finally, the paper discusses implications of these Perceptions for supporting children's engagement and motivation during their early schooling.

**Keywords:** young children, Perceptions of schools, 'fun' and school activities, learning, discipline.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The School plays a vital role in shaping young children's development, since it is considered the place where they spend a significant portion of their day. Understanding how children conceive their school may be crucial for creating a positive learning environment that nurtures academic, social, and emotional growth (Chiu et al., 2016). Schools are not only recognized as places for learning, but also as a location where children acquire social skills and competencies essential both for their personal growth and well-being (Weismiller & Feldt, 2017). Schools, then, serve not only as places for learning and 'fun' activities but also as an environment where children learn discipline and develop important life and social skills. This has ramifications for the medical business, including the manufacturing of drugs and breathing apparatus, among other things (Alqudah, 2023). As children move forward into formal schooling, they start to shape attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about the role and purpose of this new environment; i.e. schools (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2010), whether they are meant to enhance learning and cognitive development, to maintain discipline through applying order and behavior management or to enrich 'fun' and school activities (Ruzek et al., 2016). However, regardless of how children view these goals, they tend to develop their own theories, which might influence motivation, relationships and adjustment during early education (Burr et al., 2018; Patrick et al., 2007).

Young children can develop their own perceptions of school based on various factors, including teacher-student relationships, classroom environment, peer relationships, and individual differences (Lessard & Juvonen, 2019). Teachers play a central role in shaping these perceptions by creating positive and supportive learning environments that account for the different needs and orientations of their students (Roorda et al., 2017). By understanding and addressing the factors that promote positive attitudes towards learning and foster academic, social, and emotional growth, teachers might finally lead children to more positive conceptions of their schools. For instance, Rucinski et al. (2018) found that positive teacher-student relationships were associated with higher levels of school engagement and more positive attitudes towards school among elementary school students. Hajovsky et al. (2020), likewise, reported that supportive teacher-student relationships predicted better academic outcomes and more positive school perceptions of young schoolchildren. Moreover, children's perceptions of school might be affected by a complex interplay of individual characteristics and environmental factors, including gender (Cohrdes et al., 2021), cognitive level, and school setting (Hajovsky et al., 2020). Rentzou (2019), for example, found that girls reported more positive perceptions of school than boys, regarding teacher support and school belonging. Additionally, socioeconomic status may influence children's perceptions, such that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face unique challenges more than children from high levels that affect their perceptions and pose negative attitudes towards their schools (Berkowitz et al., 2017).

Understanding these differences is important for educators and policymakers who strive to create inclusive and supportive learning environments that meet the different needs and interests of all students. The UPC plays a significant function in offering key types of assistance to characterize (Alqudah, 2022). These relationships between teachers and students were found to shape children's conceptions of school as a place for learning academic skills or for establishing control and discipline (Hughes et al., 2020; Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2010). More authoritarian and weaker student-teacher relationships contributed to stronger perceptions of behavioral control, whereas children viewed discipline to be a goal for elementary schools more than teach (Patrick et al., 2007). Positive and supportive school environments, on the other hand, established for academic learning more than behavior control and child discipline as a function of schools (Burr et al., 2018; Torres et al., 2020).

Peers also play a significant role in children's perceptions of their school; they influence sense of belonging, improving school climate experiences, developing positive academic attitudes and behaviors. Positive peer relationships, supportive group dynamics, and prosocial norms can contribute to more favorable school perceptions (Wentzel et al., 2021). Negative peer experiences, such as rejection and bullying, on the other hand, may lead to more negative school perceptions and create adjustment difficulties (Gardella et al., 2017). Educators and school professionals, then, should try their best to promote positive peer interactions and extinguish negative peer influences to maintain a supportive and inclusive school environment, and improve student perceptions of their school. Another factor that was found to influence children's perceptions of their school is the classroom environment that reflects the school climate where children spend much of school time. This includes the emotional setting in addition to physical facilities, which proved to leave an impact on children's conceptions of their school. Classrooms with more positive emotional climates enhanced higher levels of children's liking for their schools and their tendency to participate in schools activities (Fernandes et al., 2015). Moreover, some studies found that building an organized classroom environment, with better visual orientations may increase positive attitudes of children towards their school (Sisson et al., 2018).

A positive and warm classroom climate was found to be essential for enhancing student learning and success. A study by Alansari and Rubie-Davies (2020) found that positive teacher emotional support and classroom organization were associated with higher levels of student engagement in school activities and academic achievement; which might ultimately enrich their conceptions of their schools. Similarly, Aldrup et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment in fostering students' sense of affiliation, academic success and positive conceptions of their schools.

Related to this, teacher effectiveness, as indicated by their qualifications, may play a central role in creating a favorable learning environment, which can strengthen student conceptions of their schools. A study by Klassen and Kim (2019) found that teachers' self-efficacy as individuals and groups and job satisfaction, were positively associated with student achievement and engagement, indicating more positive conceptions of their schools. Moreover, Chetty et al. (2018) highlighted the long-term impact of highly qualified teachers on their students' educational achievement and enthusiasm for engaging in school activities. An aspect of teachers' effectiveness can be exemplified in their professional development programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), and aligning this professional development with school goals that support community systematic change (Kennedy, 2016). Effective instructional strategies could also be a key element in enhancing learning outcomes and improving student conceptions of school. A review by Schneider and Preckel (2017) found that providing clear objectives, using operational examples, and combining assessments with appropriate feedback, might be examples of effective instructional strategies that positively impact student learning and academic achievement. Furthermore, Sternberg and Kaufman (2018) added another instructional strategy, which was characterized by promoting creativity and critical thinking skills through problem-based learning and inquiry-based pedagogical tactics. Instructional strategies and teaching methods have to be adapted to meet the different needs of young students, as was suggested by Deunk et al. (2018), as well as Tomlinson (2017) who proposed a framework for the implementation of different instructional strategies, in an attempt to understand students' interests and learning styles.

Using modern technological devices, such as tablets and smartphones, in the classroom may have strong potential to enhance young students learning experiences (Sung et al., 2016). Moreover, these technological devices can improve students' conceptions of their schools if they are paired with effective pedagogical techniques, and when used purposefully and in alignment with learning objectives (Higgins et al., 2019). On the same line of argument, home

socialization, concepts and philosophy about school and education also leave a critical impact on children's perceptions of their school (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2010). Parents usually have certain ideas about learning, achievement strategies, types of responsibility and children's obedience to school regulations. Furthermore, they communicate those ideas and attitudes to their children so that children's understandings and conceptions of their school would be improved and enhanced (Hughes et al., 2020). These perceptions may carry implications for children's engagement, motivation, and adaptation to school rules, as children move through their academic school years.

Much research on the development of children's perceptions about school functions, differentiating among functions that focus on promoting growth and skills, providing opportunities for fun and practicing school activities or enforcing control and disciplining behavior (Hughes & Cao, 2018). Studies, in this context, which focused specifically on young students suggest that children tend to view their schools as places that focus mainly on enhancing their academic learning skills and education (Torres et al., 2020). For instance, Mantzicopoulos and Patrick (2010) interviewed children ages 5 -6 and asked them about their perceptions of kindergarten and preschool. Young children in this research mostly stressed the importance of learning experiences and opportunities afforded by the school as an indication of school significance. They emphasized reading stories, printing their names, counting, and drawing as favorable activities that advance their academic skills. Even when describing desirable or challenging social experiences, like making friends or getting in trouble, children related these to implications for learning opportunities.

Similarly, Hughes and Cao (2018) investigated the conceptions of elementary school students (grades 3-5), whether academically oriented or behaviorally controlling, and compared them to middle school students (grades 6-8). Their findings suggested that across age groups, children more significantly perceived schools as institutions that aim at supporting students' learning and education rather than institutions created mainly for discipline and behavioral control. This learning orientation, however, become weaker as children approach early adolescence, a result that was explained by the developmental improvement in abstract thinking, which allow older students to perceive schools as multifunctional and sometimes competing, institutions that could both nurture students' learning and discipline them at the same time. Nonetheless, the predominant conceptualizations of schools by those young children remained focused mainly on learning.

More studies support the finding that elementary-aged students tend to perceive school primarily as an environment that decides who they will become after acquiring knowledge and promoting their academic skills. Patrick et al. (2007), for instance, studied Kindergarten to six elementary graders' beliefs about why their teachers behave as they do. They found that those children perceived their teachers' behaviors as mostly inspired by enhancing their student academic competence and intellectual understanding. Another study by Burr et al. (2018) discovered that 5-7 year old children conveyed highly positive attitudes towards the function of school as an institution that encourages curiosity and desire for learning when asked open-ended questions about their school aims and objectives. Finally, Torres et al. (2020) carried out a comprehensive qualitative study, trying to explore how parental socialization practices influenced elementary-aged children to express their growing motivations towards school activities. A central theme of this study was students' perception of school classrooms as stimulating places that are aimed at satisfying their initiative and determination to accomplish academic learning and intellectual growth.

While schools are primarily recognized as places for learning, they also serve as essential environments for children to engage in fun and amusement activities during their leisure time (Vandell, 2021). There is no doubt that, in addition to viewing schools as places for acquiring

knowledge and academic skills, young children perceive schools as places for spending enjoyable time and participating in pleasant activities (Farb & Matjasko, 2012). This goal of schools is usually expressed by incorporating play and developing extracurricular activities into school curriculum and climate in an effort to create enjoyable learning environments.

Yogman et al. (2018), for instance, carried out a study which found that play activities enhances problem-solving skills, creativity and critical thinking skills. Moreover, the study revealed that participating in play promoted children's cognitive development in general. Prior to that study, Sim and Xu (2017) disclosed the significant role of 'guided play' in developing children's learning and cognitive understanding in many academic fields, such as mathematics and science. These developments, no doubt, will positively influence young children's perceptions of their schools. Sharing in fun and play activities at school was also found to influence young children's social-emotional development, as well as their physical health and general well-being. Ginsburg et al. (2017), for example, emphasized the role of play activities in developing children's social skills, emotional control and self-respect. Haslip and Gullo (2018), also, concluded that when children participate in play and cooperate in group activities, their empathy, collaboration skills and abilities of resolving conflicts will be improved significantly. There is no doubt that the improvement in those skills will eventually lead to better understanding and more positive perceptions of young children to their schools.

Not only play engagement and participation of children will help in their social and emotional development, but also in supporting their physical health and well-being. Bustamante et al. (2019), for instance, systematically reviewed the effects of group play activities on children's academic and non-academic aspects of their lives. They found that school activities, which are based on physical health programs can improve young children's fitness, enhance their motor skills and raise their overall health outcomes. This may, ultimately, lead to better and more positive perceptions of those young children for their schools. Other researchers, like Rasberry et al. (2015), have found that participating in physical activity not only was found to improve children's physical fitness, but also was associated positively with academic achievement. They indicated that investing movement and planned group play in school can benefit cognitive and intellectual development, in addition to physical fitness and general well-being. Many strategies were, as well, suggested to promote a school environment, which is found enjoyable by young schoolchildren and perceived as fun and play environment. One of those strategies were called 'playful learning' in the classrooms, which some researchers called game-based learning and imaginative play (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). Others emphasized the importance of what they called play-based learning in early childhood (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). Those researchers, however, advised that the activities be balanced between those, which are child initiated and those that are directed and guided by the teacher.

Play and game-based learning are not the only strategies that have such effect on children's personalities, but also all sorts of extra-curricular activities that are offered after, or with, classroom learning. Research on this field revealed that outside classroom activities could provide young children with feelings of 'fun' and 'joy' and refresh their academic and emotional outputs (Farb & Matjasko, 2012). Creating positive school climate, through offering extracurricular activities, can also help children to value feeling of fun and enjoyment, and ultimately promote their overall school experiences and perceptions (Daily et al., 2020). It can, moreover, foster young children's sense of belonging and social attachment and finally lead to positive perceptions of their school (Riekie et al., 2017).

Not only does school serve as a place for enhancing learning and cognitive development or for creating enjoyable school environment, but also it may be viewed as a place for developing basic life skills represented in acquiring the right and positive types of behavior. In order to promote positive behavior in young children, schools usually adopt one of three strategies. The first strategy is called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). This strategy

proved to be associated with better children's behavior and higher academic outcomes (Noltmeyer et al., 2015). That's why researchers recommended qualifying educators and teachers with professional development and train them on how to ensure the effectiveness of this strategy (Horner et al., 2017). The second strategy, which is called Restorative Practices, is built through strengthening positive relationships within the school community. The strategy expects that when people (children and teachers) at school have 'good' relationships with each other, cases of referrals to school counselors and suspension from attending school will drop and decrease (Gregory et al., 2020). Moreover, such interventions of applying restorative practices may enhance the school culture of respecting each other and feeling empathy for other children's and persons' events (Mansfield et al., 2018). Other programs that are linked with restorative practices include the social-emotional learning programs, which tend to enhance children's social and emotional skills. Examples of these skills may include self-awareness, self-management and decision-making competencies (Taylor et al., 2017). These social and emotional skills are intended to improve young children's positive perceptions of their schools, in addition to enhancing their academic achievement, cognitive development and overall well-being status.

The third strategy used in schools to foster disciplined and accepted young children's behavior is called Exclusionary Practices. This strategy, however, was found to have negative effects on young children, since it is mainly built on punishment (such as suspension and/or expulsion), which may negatively affect young children's existence at school (Noltmeyer et al., 2015). Those exclusionary practices caused lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates and increased engagement in juvenile actions that may lead to justice courts.

### **Definition of Terms**

Terms and concepts used in this research are to be defined as follows:

#### **A. Children's perception of schools:**

This concept refers to the varying views of how children see the main purpose of their school. Researchers such as Thornberg (2008), believe that those children's views are often complex and reflect their understandings of why they go to school. Children's perceptions are, of course, influenced by many factors, such as age, gender, culture, social relationships and many other individual and personal experiences.

#### **B. The learning function:**

A great number of schoolchildren view the main function of their schools as the achievement of academic learning skills. This, however, covers not only academic knowledge, but also critical thinking skills, problem solving and preparation for future careers. According to Dweck (2006), children's views of their schools as places for learning, can have significant impacts on their academic engagement and attainment in general.

#### **C. The 'fun' function:**

This term encompasses the social and the enjoyment aspects of school that can be noticed by young children. This function is, again, related to the learning function, such that, when schools are enjoyable and pleasant places for children (Fredricks et al., 2004), they will be more likely to engage in learning the required academic skills and improve their overall well-being and educational achievement.

#### **D. The discipline function:**

In order to fulfill the first two functions, there should be a third one that works as a monitor for achieving other functions. This monitor function is that of maintaining discipline and behavioral control. This is not by any way limited to enforcing the rules of schools, but also

includes teaching children self-regulation and other social skills necessary for enhancing their well-being (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Schools are advised, however, to focus on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), and avoid, as much as they can, depending on punishment and other punitive disciplinary measures. Based on the results, managers recommended that companies and their suppliers continue their partnership (Alqudah, 2022).

### **Research Problem**

The above discussion shows the significance of discipline at schools, since it is the appropriate way to implant behaviors that conform with the norms of the Micro-and Macro-systems of school young children (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). But maintaining discipline at schools is, nonetheless, not an easy job for educators, and faces some challenges that should be addressed. The first challenge is the excessive use of what we called earlier ‘the exclusionary practices of discipline’, that is imposing discipline in the classrooms by punishment and aversive methods. Suspension and expulsions from school proved to have many negative impacts on students’ academic learning, and caused high dropouts as well as getting involved in juvenile acts that may lead children to jail or court systems (Noltemeyer et al., 2015).

The second challenge is what may be called the ‘disproportionality of discipline practices’. This refers to the fact that certain groups of students are seen more subject to disciplinary practices than other groups of the same student community. Colored students, for instance, or students of special needs are usually subjected to discipline more than other groups in their school. This implicit bias and cultural mismatch has to be addressed and solved by training teachers and educators, in addition to introducing basic reforms on the system of disciplinary policies and practices (Welsh & Little, 2018). The third challenge refers to the lack of teacher qualification, preparation and support. Teachers who are required to take care of implementing discipline in schools should be adequately prepared and supported by school administration. Teachers need to feel well-prepared strongly-supported in managing the correct and social behaviors and highly protected by school rules and regulations (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Securing those professional skills and practices can be responsible for creating well-disciplined learning environment, enhancing young children’s social development and improving their perceptions of their schools.

### **Research Objectives:**

This research report aims at providing a comprehensive review of recent studies that explore how young children view their schools: are they places for fostering learning, for having ‘fun’ and engaging in school activities or for maintaining order and discipline. Moreover, the research focuses on the factors that influence these conceptions and their implications for further educational practices.

### **Research Questions:**

The present research aimed at answering the following questions:

- 1- How do young children perceive the main function of their schools?
- 2- Which school function dominates young children’s perceptions?
- 3- What are the implications of each children’s perception of their schools?

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD:**

This research adopted the method called meta-analysis, which is a statistical technique that analyses and combines together results from many independent studies that deal with a certain topic. This technique includes specifying the research question/s, systematically searching for the relevant literature, assessing the quality of the research and finally interpreting the results.

When conducted properly, meta-analysis can prove to be a rigorous, valid and reliable method of research. I reviewed recent studies related to the topic of the research, and analyzed each one as to the objectives, methods and results. First, I reviewed studies related to children's perceptions of their schools as places for learning and acquiring academic skills. Secondly, I reviewed the studies related to young children's perceptions of their schools as places for 'fun' and participation in social activities. Finally, I analyzed studies that are related to young children's perceptions of their schools as institutions that focus on controlling their behaviors and maintaining discipline.

### 3. CONCLUSION AND RESULTS:

This research was an attempt for a meta-analysis of the pervious literature that studied young children's perceptions of their schools. Young children look at their schools mainly as places for learning, which may be influenced by teacher qualifications, school environment, technological instruments and pedagogical strategies and techniques. These factors were found to foster children's academic success and improve their perceptions of their schools.

Young children also perceived schools as places for 'fun' and play activities. Enjoyable schools environment can enhance love for school and raise young children's overall well-being. This has clear impact on children's social-emotional development, reflected in positive perceptions of their school. It should be noted, in this context, that young children are strongly connected to play activities and 'fun' practices, to the extent that they prefer even learn through play movements and activities. Finally, children perceive their schools as places for developing disciplinary rules and regulations. This function, however, was found to be the one that received the least frequency of children's perceptions. One reason for this low tendency of perceiving schools as places for discipline is that most of the time those disciplinary rules are achieved by exclusionary regulations, which are usually tied with punishment school rules. Those harsh discipline rules create negative feelings in young school children, and cause certain challenges to appear in the face of school administration and teaching staff alike.

#### Implications:

Based on the above discussions and conclusions the following implementations may be suggested:

- A. School teachers are urged to make every possible effort to establish favorable relationships with each other, as well as with their students. Such relationships proved to be related positively with positive child perceptions of their schools.
- B. School administrations are encouraged to create all possible facilitations that help young children spend their time in play and useful activities. Those atmospheres were found to be connected with better academic and social outcomes, including perceptions of their schools.
- C. School administration and staff are encouraged to depend on restorative strategies in applying discipline in their schools. Moreover, they better avoid, as much as they could, all sorts of exclusionary discipline practices, since they were found to lead to negative outcomes in all fields.

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