

# **Give Them What They Want: Using Student Perception of Teacher Behavior to Create the Ideal Classroom Environment**

## **ABSTRACT**

So what is it that students want? What can teachers give their students that will encourage them to succeed and still be happy at the same time? The goal of every teacher should be to foster a classroom which is advantageous for the students. When people are pleased with their surroundings they generally tend to perform better, whether it be adults or children at school. A problem arises when an individual feels as if he/she can do nothing to please the person in charge. They soon lose all motivation to perform. Children have fragile egos. Once that ego is shattered, it is hard to piece it back together. What many teachers fail to see is that sometimes they can be at the root of this problem. Classroom environment studies give us much insight as to what type of environment students prefer to learn in. This study of classroom environment delves into the idea of actually giving students what they want so they will feel like performing at the peak of their ability. This paper will evaluate students' perceptions of their teachers' behaviors and tell us how those perceptions can make or break the picture of having an ideal classroom environment.

## INTRODUCTION

Some teachers wish nothing but the best for their students. These teachers are driven by the heart and are not afraid to accommodate to the needs of each and every student (Wolk, 2002). They wish to foster an environment in which every child feels valued and motivated to learn. High expectations and positive interactions are the focus of these teacher's thoughts. Unfortunately, not all educators have the same goals. Some loose sight of what brought them to the field in the first place. These teachers are negative in their interactions with students and make them feel dissatisfied. They show no apprehension for how students view their behavior or their classroom. This is not fair. Nobody wants to perform when they are in an environment that is not favorable to their wishes. It is most beneficial for educators to discover how their students view their classroom environment in an effort to better motivate them to learn.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **Classroom Environment- What is it?**

The educational community defines the ideal classroom as one which is conducive to maximum learning and achievement. (Byrne, Hattie, & Fraser 2001) It is a common belief that students will perform best in an environment that is congruent with both their academic and social needs. Classroom and learning environment studies are crucial in determining what type of classroom the students want. "Learning environment research should do more than report results to teachers", it should *show* them how to create an ideal classroom environment. Essentially, an ideal classroom environment should empirically "enhance and motivate student learning" (Chiew, 1997; Lorsbach & Jinks, 1998)

## Teacher behaviors

A significant amount of behavioral research has consistently proven that teacher behavior may be a powerful influence on student behavior. (Beamen, 2000) For the purpose of this study, behaviors of teachers will be classified into two general categories: Positive, or approving behavior and negative, or disapproving behavior. Teachers who possess positive behavior qualities make use of praise and empathy in the classroom. The term 'praise' comes from the Latin word *pritiare* which means to value highly. (Shepell, 2000; Burnett, 2002)

In an article written for teachers on "Cultivating a Healthy Classroom", Susan Glaser implies that "healthy oral, facial and body expressions set the tone that facilitate emotionally stable and eager learners" (2001). She urges educators to address students in a manner in which they themselves would prefer to be addressed. Praise is a tool teachers can use to motivate students by applying it to desirable behaviors. (Burnett, 2002) A study performed by Burnett in 2001 (n=747) showed that 91% of students prefer to be praised often or sometimes while 9% reported that they never want any praise. (Burnett, 2002) Burnett also reports of a British study performed by Merret and Tang in 1994 (n=1779) where students were asked about their preferences for rewards, praise, reprimands, and punishments. Again, an astounding 90% of the students preferred to receive praise often or sometime. Obviously, students prefer an environment where they feel appreciated and adequate as opposed to one where they feel deficient.

Negative behavior qualities of teachers result in, but are not limited to, reprimanding and use disapproving remarks in the classroom. Reprimanding is "defined as verbal or non-verbal behaviors reflecting hostility or negative feelings of the teacher, including negative feelings of the teacher evaluation of student behavior, expressing anger or criticism" (Beamen,

2000) Students also view attitudes that are strict and coercive to be negative. (Jamtsho, 1999) Reprimanding directions “diminish students’ self confidence and illustrate negative teacher behavior” (Glazer, 2001).

### **How do we measure student perceptions of the classroom environment?**

Several scales have been developed to measure classroom environment. Among these scales the most frequently used are the Individualized Classroom Environment Questionnaire (ICEQ), the Classroom Environment Scale (CES), and the My Class Inventory (MCI). All of the above instruments measure preferred classroom environment as well as the actual, or perceived environment. All scales are based on a Likert system in which students are asked to check one of three to five boxes (depending on the individual scale) that indicates how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement.

Usually, scales are modified from their initial version to meet the needs of the individual researcher. “The original versions of these instruments, as well as subsequent variations, have provided a rich store house of data regarding teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the psychosocial learning environment” (Lorsbach & Jinks, 1998).

While the above scales display a reasonably amount of reliability, for the purpose of the research being conducted, an instrument called the Inventory of Classroom Environments (ICE) will be used. Due to the straightforward nature of its items, the ICE is more useful in determining preferred and actual environments of elementary students. (Sinclair & Fraser, 2002) This instrument also measures more on a personal level than on a class level. Students can give their own feelings about their own personal experiences. The main goal for this research is to assess the attitudes of the teachers perceived by the students. For that purpose, the ICE used in this study has been modified from its original version with 30 items to an

instrument with only 8 items that will evaluate only the scales of cooperation (cohesion), teacher support, and equity. Cooperation is defined as “the extent to which students cooperate with each other (and the teacher) during class and activities” (Sinclair, 2002). Teacher support is “the extent to which the teacher helps, encourages, and is interested in the students” (Sinclair, 2002). Finally, equity is “the extent to which the teacher treats all students equally” (Sinclair, 2002).

### **What do students prefer?**

Out of the five categories on the MCI and the four categories on the ICE, studies show that students overall rate Cohesion (or Cooperation on the ICE) as the most important climate in a classroom. Cohesion is defined as well-developed relationships among students. Goh Swee Chiew performed a study in 1997 using a modified version of the MCI (n=557). Results show that a positive classroom environment includes students and teachers who are cohesive, or cooperative. “Cohesion and Satisfaction are dimensions that appear strongly in all classes” (Chiew, 1997). Sangay Jamtsho performed a study in 1999 using the MCI to assess student’s perception of their class environment in Bhutanese schools (n= 1018). Positive teacher attitudes were found to be correlated with learner perceptions of Cohesiveness and Satisfaction. Strict and coercive attitudes by teachers were associated with an increase in the perception of Competition, a climate which was rated extremely low among students. (Byrne, et al, 1986; Jamtsho, 1999)

Using the ICE (n= 745), Sinclair (2002) studies the classroom environment of urban middle schools and reports that students prefer a classroom with high levels of Cooperation, Teacher Empathy, and Task Orientation. In this same study the teachers’ actual, or perceived environment had relatively high levels in all three of these areas.

In addition to these studies, Byrne and Hattie (1986) report that elementary pupils prefer a teacher who is “friendly” and “makes the classroom pleasant.” These qualities together create a classroom that is more cohesive. It is agreed across most literature on the subject of preferred classroom environment that students desire a classroom where there is a high level of cooperation (Cohesion); this creates a high level of Satisfaction.

## **DATA COLLECTION**

### **Participants**

All data was collected from one K-6 school. The school is a private school in an urbanized area of Dallas, Texas. The student population is predominantly African American with a small population being Hispanic. Approximately 60 percent of students attend this private school because they have been granted a scholarship on the basis of economic need. Students come to the school from all over the Dallas metro-plex.

The sample surveyed consisted of four teachers and all of their total 72 students. One teacher has two classes and two different surveys were administered, one for each class, totaling five teacher surveys. The teachers all volunteered to allow the researcher to come into their classroom and perform the research. The teachers were all African American females. Grades 2-5 were surveyed. Because of reading levels, grades lower than second were not asked to participate. Sixth grade was also not asked to participate because in many school districts sixth graders attend middle or junior high school. The purpose of the research was to test only elementary aged children.

### **Administration**

The survey was administered to all students in each participating classroom. The teacher sat at their desk while the researcher administered the survey. Directions were given

by the researcher at the beginning along with the purpose of the research. Students were made known that the teacher would never see their answers in order to make them feel more comfortable about answering truthfully. The completion time for the students was about 7 to 10 minutes. While the students were taking their survey, the teacher took a version of the survey called “Teacher’s Actual Environment” where they rated the type of environment that they feel they provide (See Appendix C).

The items on the actual form (See Appendix A) and the preferred form (See Appendix B) are parallel. For example item 1 on the actual reads, “My teacher likes me.” Item 1 on the preferred form reads, “I want my teacher to like me.” The actual form was printed on one side with an apple icon at the top so that students would remember they were rating their actual environment. The back side was to rate the preferred environment and so there was a pear printed on it. Answers were recorded directly on the questionnaire which permitted easy hand scoring by the researcher. Items responses were made by selecting from a five-point Likert type scale consisting of Always, Often, Sometimes, Seldom, and Never. Scoring was completed by assigning a value of 3 for every Always or Often response, 2 for a Sometimes response, and 1 for a Seldom or Never response.

### **Validation of the ICE**

Data was collected from the 72 students and 4 teachers and factor analysis was performed. Table I below shows the factor loading for each of the items in the actual format. The original instruments used by the researcher to evaluate actual and preferred environments are shown in Appendix A and B, respectively. Only 8 items total were on each survey with 2 measuring Cooperation, 2 measuring Teacher support, and 4 measuring Equity. Items were arranged in blocks with all items measuring one scale next to each other. Upon scoring, the

researcher discovered that 23 percent of the students had not answered 2 of the items assessing Equity, as there was a type error in the items. Items 6 and 7 on the originals were omitted during scoring due to this problem, leaving only 6 items, 2 for each scale.

Table 1

Factor Loadings for Student Actual Form of the Modified  
8-Item Inventory of Classroom Environments (ICE)

Item	Factor Loading		
	Cooperation	Teacher Support	Equity
1	0.84		
2	0.83		
3		0.84	
4		0.9	
5			0.78
8			0.81

Table II below shows the reliability for each scale in the actual form. Analysis was performed at both the individual and classroom level. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach alpha) for the different scales ranges from 0.68 with the individual student and 0.76 to 0.88 with the class. According to the Cronbach alpha coefficient ratings and the factor loadings the survey is able to effectively show the perceptions of students in their classroom environment.

TABLE II

Number of Items, Sample Item for Actual Form, Internal Consistency Reliability (Cronbach Alpha Coefficient) for Student Actual Forms for each ICE scale for Two Units of Analysis

Scale	Number of items	Sample item	Unit of Analysis	Alpha Reliability
Cooperation	2	My teacher likes me.	Student	0.78
			Class Mean	0.82
Teacher Support	2	My teacher wants me to do well in class.	Student	0.68
			Class Mean	0.76
Equity	2	My teacher is fair to all the students in class.	Student	0.84
			Class Mean	0.88

**Results**

Research findings for this particular school are impeccable. Table III below reports the results in terms of average items means (i.e. the scale mean divided by the number of items in the scale) for the classroom environment scales of Cooperation, Teacher Support, and Equity for both the actual and preferred form.

TABLE III

Differences in Students' Actual and Preferred Environments		
Scale	Average Item Mean	Average item standard deviation
Actual		
Cooperation	2.79	0.22
Teacher Support	2.89	0.14
Equity	2.78	0.25
Preferred		
Cooperation	2.94	0.09
Teacher Support	2.86	0.21
Equity	2.91	0.14

Sample: 72 students in 5 classes

The average item mean is the scale mean divided by the number of items in that scale.

A score of 3.0 would be a perfect score and the mean for all three of these scales is between 2.79 and 2.89. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the average items means on the ICE for rating the actual and preferred environments for the students along with the actual environment for the teachers. This is for the whole sample of 72 students and 4 teachers (with 1 teacher taking the survey twice for her 2 different grade level classes). Overall, the teachers' actual environment rated the highest with a perfect score by them stating "Always" or "Often" to every item. Next was the students' preferred environment. While the students do not prefer an absolutely perfect classroom, they do have high expectations for their environment. They desire Cooperation the most in the classroom, followed by Equity, and then Teacher Support. This is consistent with many other classroom environment studies. (Byrne & Hattie, 1986; Fisher & Fraser, 1994; Majeed, Fraser, & Aldridge, 2002; Sinclair & Fraser, 2002) This graph shows that while actual classroom environment ratings are still considerably high, there is still room for improvement. The most noteworthy feature is that the two scales that students desire the most in their classroom are the lowest in terms of how they rated their actual environment.

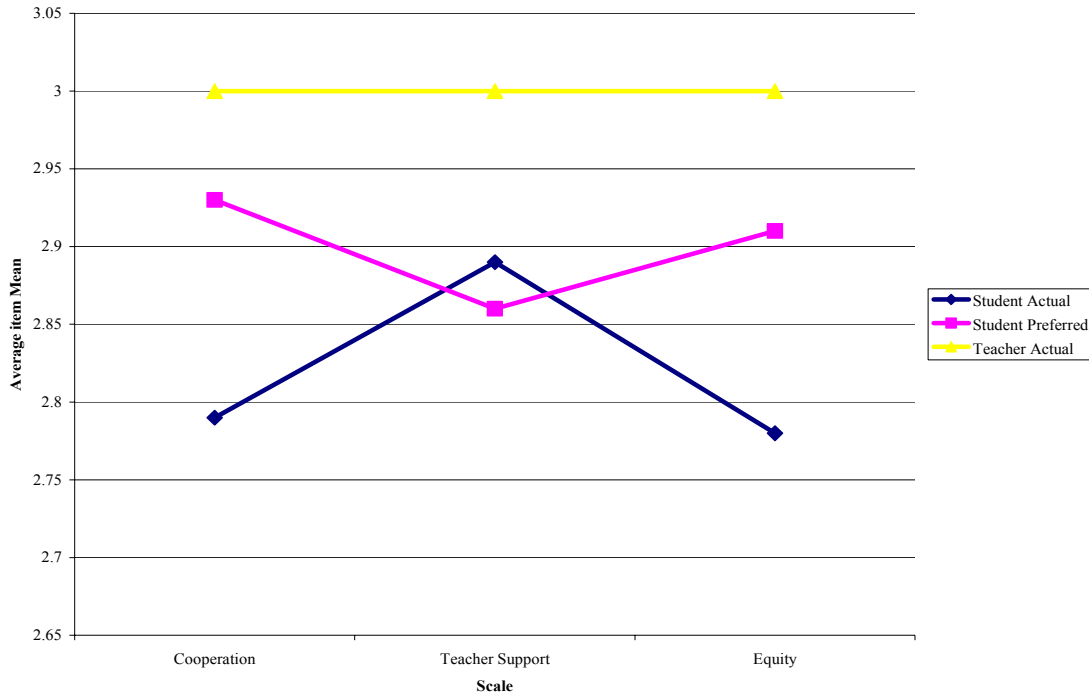


Figure 1. Profile of average item means for ICE scales for the whole sample.

Figure 1 just reports the mean averages of the sample group as a whole. The findings are significantly above average. But when the study is broken down by individual class, the results come out a little different. Figure 2 shows the percentage of students per class that replied “Often” or “Always” to each scale. (The individual percentage for each scale was determined then divided by the number of items per scale.) Teacher A, the teacher of a fourth grade class, received nearly perfect results. The results of teacher B are very similar. Teacher E and C scored very low on the scales of Equity and Cooperation. While all teachers answered that they felt they provided an environment that was “Often” or “Always” high in Cooperation, Teacher Support, and Equity, not all of their students agreed.

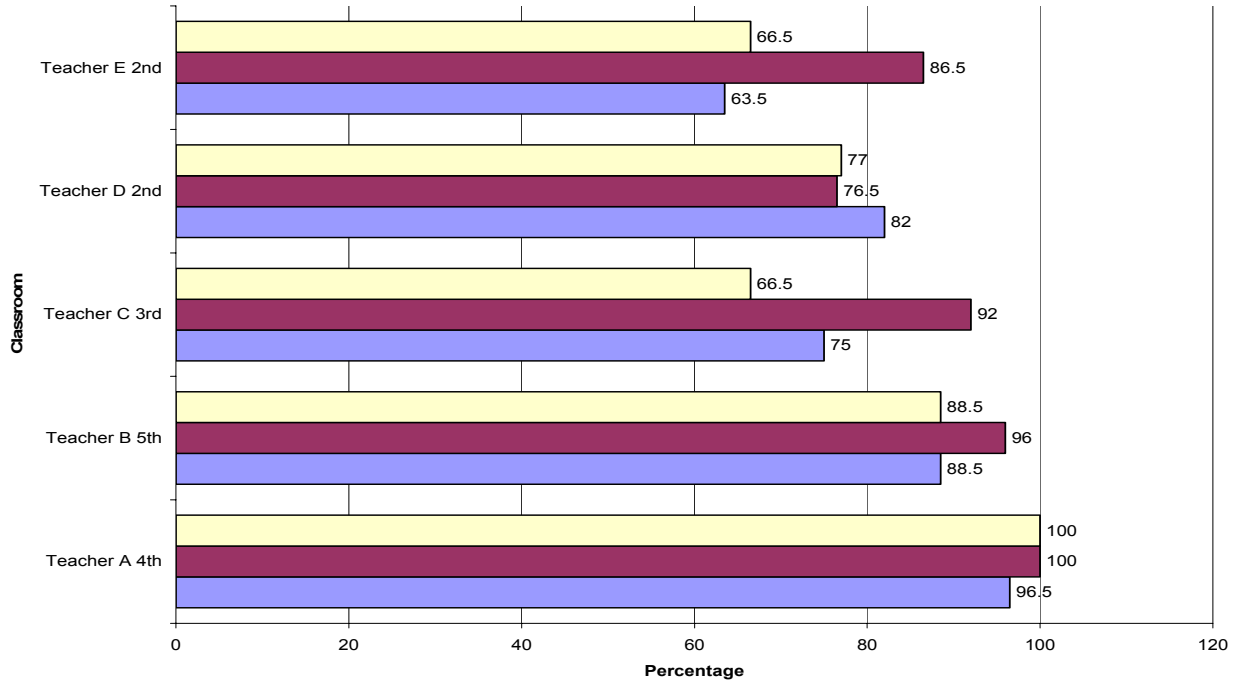


Figure 2. Percentage of students who responded “Always” or “Often” in each individual classroom.

## Complications

The original plan for this research subject was to survey the sample and analyze the data, then on the basis of intensity sampling, perform interviews on particular students and teachers. Teachers who had classroom that rated high on the scales, for example Teacher A, or teachers whose classrooms scored very low on the scales, for example Teacher E, would be asked to interview with the researcher. Students who rated these teachers particularly high or low would also be pursued for an interview to determine exactly why a certain classroom is like it is and how a certain type of environment makes a child feel. Due to time constraints, the full research project could not be completed at this time, but will be at a later date.

**Which behaviors from teachers create the “ideal classroom environment”?**

In order to fully answer this question, the above described interviews would need to be completed. However, as proven by many previous researchers, the ideal classroom is one that is high in levels of Satisfaction, Cooperation, Equity, and Teacher Support.

Wouldn't students perform best in a setting in which they are valued highly and encouraged? The research reviewed shows that using positive remarks are the best way to create that preferred classroom environment where there are high levels of Cohesion and Satisfaction. These climates lead to motivation, thus, creating the ideal classroom environment.

When someone is held in high regards, this provides motivation for them to continue to succeed. We all enjoy succeeding! In a book titled Teaching with Love & Logic, Jim Fay states, “human beings will perform best for the person they love” (Fay & Funk, 1995).

**CONCLUSION**

By evaluating the available literature on classroom environment research and the research on the effects of positive motivation in the classroom, one could safely assume that a positive environment which owns cohesion and satisfaction is essential to creating the ideal classroom environment in which all students are motivated and learning at their maximum potential. The use of reprimanding, negative remarks create friction and competition; decreasing motivation.

While the evaluation of classroom has been done, there are still many questions left unanswered. What do those teachers who scored so high do in their classroom as opposed to those who scored so low? In the students' opinion, what would make a difference? What would the student like from the teacher that would help them succeed and perform at their top

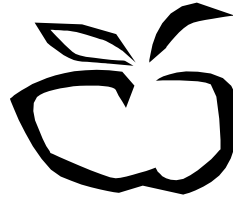
ability? Would this teacher fit into a more “positive” category or a more “negative” category? (As described above in the review of literature) Clearly, more research is necessary.

Overall, it is most beneficial that teachers pay close attention to the words they use and how they use them. The ideal educator should “make a conscious effort to foster a sense of cohesion and bonding among all their students, irrespective of the type of classes they teach in, and the students, in turn, would find the environment satisfying and motivated to learn in” (Chiew, 1997). Children have fragile egos and nobody performs well when they are being spoken down to and scrutinized. Children love to be loved and they will perform at their maximum ability when they feel comfortable to do so.

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APPENDIX A



Revised Form of the Elementary and Middle School Inventory of Classroom Environments

STUDENTS' ACTUAL ENVIRONMENT

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ GRADE \_\_\_\_\_  
TEACHER \_\_\_\_\_

Directions

THIS IS NOT A TEST. The questions below are to find out how your classroom really is. Please answer all the questions truthfully. Your teacher will never see your answers. Neatly draw a line through the word that you feel is the best answer.

ALWAYS= if you feel the answer is true all of the time

OFTEN= if you feel the answer is true most of the time

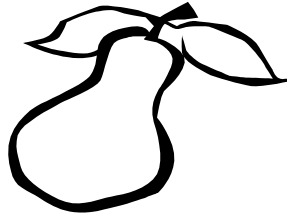
SOMETIMES= if you feel the answer is true some of the time

SELDOM= if you feel the answer is true not very much of the time

NEVER= if you feel the answer is never true.

- |  |        |       |          |        |       |
|--|--------|-------|----------|--------|-------|
| 1. My teacher likes me.                                      | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 2. My teacher cares about my feelings.                       | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 3. My teacher helps me when I have a problem with my work.   | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 4. My teacher wants me to do well in class.                  | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 5. My teacher treats me the same as other students in class. | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 6. My teacher is a friendly to me as to other students.      | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 7. My teacher likes all the students in my class. .          | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 8. My teacher is fair to all the students in my class.       | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |

APPENDIX B



Revised Form of the Elementary and Middle School Inventory of Classroom Environments

STUDENTS' PREFERRED ENVIRONMENT

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ GRADE \_\_\_\_\_  
TEACHER \_\_\_\_\_

Directions

THIS IS NOT A TEST. The questions below are to find out how you would like your classroom to be. Please answer all the questions truthfully. Your teacher will never see your answers. Neatly draw a line through the word that you feel is the best answer.

ALWAYS= if you feel the answer is true all of the time

OFTEN= if you feel the answer is true most of the time

SOMETIMES= if you feel the answer is true some of the time

SELDOM= if you feel the answer is true not very much of the time

NEVER= if you feel the answer is never true.

- |  |        |       |          |        |       |
|--|--------|-------|----------|--------|-------|
| 1. I want my teacher to like me.   | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 2. I want my teacher to care about my feelings.                          | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 3. I want my teacher to help me when I have problems with my work.       | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 4. I want my teacher to want me to do well in class.                     | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 5. I want my teacher to treat me the same as other students in class.    | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 6. I want my teacher to be as friendly to me as other students in class. | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 7. I want my teacher to like all the students in my class.               | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |
| 8. I want my teacher to be fair to all the students in my class.         | ALWAYS | OFTEN | SOMETMES | SELDOM | NEVER |

**APPENDIX C**

Revised Form of the Elementary and Middle  
School Inventory of Classroom Environments

**TEACHERS' ACTUAL ENVIRONMENT**

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ GRADE \_\_\_\_\_  
TAUGHT \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions**

The questions below are to find out what type of environment you feel that you provide for your students. Please answer all the questions truthfully. Neatly draw a line through the statement that you feel is best.

ALWAYS= if you feel the answer is true all of the time  
OFTEN= if you feel the answer is true most of the time  
SOMETIMES= if you feel the answer is true some of the time  
SELDOM= if you feel the answer is true not very much of the time  
NEVER= if you feel the answer is never true.

1. I like my students.	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETMES	SELDOM	NEVER
2. I care about my students' feelings.	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETMES	SELDOM	NEVER
3. I help my students when they have problems with their work.	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETMES	SELDOM	NEVER
4. I want my students to do well in class.	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETMES	SELDOM	NEVER
5. I treat every student the same in class.	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETMES	SELDOM	NEVER
6. I am equally friendly to all of my students.	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETMES	SELDOM	NEVER
7. I like all of the students in my class. .	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETMES	SELDOM	NEVER
8. I am fair to all the students in my class.	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETMES	SELDOM	NEVER