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Framework For Building Community In 21st Century Intermediate Elementary Classrooms

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FRAMEWORK FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY IN 21ST CENTURY
INTERMEDIATE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOMS

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts in Teaching

By

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To my amazing family for their continuous support and inspiration that allowed me to complete this work. Thank you Mom, Dad, Nina, and Finnley. Thank you to my capstone committee for your guidance and expertise. And special thanks to my students, past and present, whose boundless energy and spontaneity provide the daily excitement that makes these ideas come to life.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Teachers are trying to save the world. We want our students to grow to be happy, healthy, well-rounded members of society. There are some basic characteristics that a person needs to be one of these positive contributors to their community and the world around them. Among these, one could argue, is an ability recognize one's own strengths, remaining resilient in the face of challenges, having an empathetic spirit, and being able to build and maintain strong relationships with the people around them. Given the inequity of young people's upbringings, it is no surprise that many of our students grow up without understanding how to build and maintain these important skills. It can be argued that those who fail to understand and demonstrate some of these concepts will have a harder time becoming and remaining positive members of their communities. It will be more difficult for them to navigate higher education, hold on to jobs, secure and maintain healthy relationships, and - ultimately - contribute positively to society.

That is why I believe we have a window of opportunity, when children are in their intermediate elementary years of 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade, to explicitly teach and instill the lifelong skills necessary to function as positive contributors in their communities. I would assert that there might be a direct link between experiencing a nurturing, challenging, flexible and exciting classroom community, particularly in the upper elementary grades, and long term positive student outcomes. In this work, I will examine the influence of a

classroom community on students' overall well-being, what it means for their futures, and what extra steps teachers can take to promote these positive outcomes. Which leads to the central question of this work: *How can intermediate elementary teachers create student environments that foster social-emotional growth?*

Part of what I intend to explore is my belief that students in grades 3-5 are in a sweet spot and are absorbing the people and the world around them in a way uniquely different from children of any other age. Because they are in a very malleable state, their identities of who they are and how they fit into the community and world around them are still very much in flux.

In my observations, students in kindergarten, first, and second grades have yet to form as much of these identities. While student attitudes to change in middle school become more static, and attitudes to their social identity and levels of self-efficacy are much harder to change.

Students aged 8 to 11 understand elements of the world around them, but are still learning the cultural mores that impact their daily lives. They are growing up in a different world than any previous generation where life comes at them faster than ever. Exposure to mature subject matter and complex conversations about big topics in life come at the students of today much earlier than they did for the kids of even twenty years ago. Because of this, giving students the tools to process and manage these messages within a social learning community is more important than ever.

I suggest that providing an environment in which this unique age group of learners can learn and grow as healthy individuals is increasingly more important than

teaching them the traditional curriculum. Throughout the chapter, I will describe my own experiences growing up, the start of my career teaching young people, and my first-hand observations of how a classroom community can impact a student's life. This will provide a rationale for my work and an understanding of the background that has led me to this project.

Early On

I have been a fifth grade teacher for six years now, but I have grown up with the world of education all around me. My mother was a teacher for many years and then she spent all of my childhood as an elementary school principal. As a child, I would rarely hear her tell stories of kids who earned good grades or how a student had passed a state assessment. The measure of how well students in her classrooms and schools were doing was discussed through their struggles or successes as members of the learning community. I would hear her discuss how a student may have demonstrated long-term challenging behavior, but by the end of the year, he or she would no longer be visiting my mom in the principal's office on a daily basis. I would hear stories of how her students had implemented a community service learning program where they met and interviewed the neighbors who lived near their school, culminating in students presenting projects to honor elderly men and women in their community. These were the successes. As a child, I also remember seeing her knocking on a door, and dropping off winter coats for two siblings whom she noticed coming to school ill-prepared for Minnesota winters. While my mother made sure teachers were successfully implementing the necessary curriculum, she also understood that the basics of developing each child's overall well-being were

paramount to any math or reading lesson. While academic curriculum and standards remain the backbone of what we teach in schools, I think that, from a young age, stories of civic engagement and behavioral change like this instilled a sense of where real educational successes lie.

My dad was not a teacher, but the focus of this project would not be complete without mention of his influence. As a kid, playing little league baseball, my dad was one of the volunteer dads who coached our teams. My dad played sports as a young person, baseball among them, but he would always explain to me that he was never as good as some of his peers or even as knowledgeable as some of the other coaching dads. What I remember is how my dad would value every teammate and help us understand how to play as a team. These were competitive games, but he would not get caught up in winning and losing like some of the other dads. He helped us all see the value in all our teammates' successes. When our least athletic player would get a clutch hit, make a game-saving catch in the field, or show steady improvement over the course of the season, these were the times for celebration. These are the stories that we still fondly remember today. My father demonstrated a genuine interest in the overall well-being of each kid on the team. I remember him driving way out of town to pick up a player on the team with no ride to the game, and trading an old glove from our house to a player who didn't have one that wasn't falling apart. He made each kid, regardless of talent level, feel valued and appreciated as a part of our team.

These experiences might seem insignificant or, at best, only somewhat related to the topic of a high-quality classroom community, but they instilled in me the value of

building each other up and learning how to see the positive impact that each individual could bring, if given the chance. Even though he would downplay his own efforts as a coach, he helped us learn how to have fun together, how to put forth our best effort, and how to win and lose with dignity even as nine-year-olds. I believe these same ideals need to be demonstrated in a healthy, vibrant classroom community.

Won't Care Unless They Know You Care

I have thoroughly enjoyed the six years that I have spent as a fifth grade teacher. A guiding vision for my life in the classroom, has been the educational idea that *students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care*. I have seen this play out in reality. Once kids know that I am a supportive, understanding teacher, who will consistently challenge them, they realize they are capable of growing and learning, often beyond what they felt possible. It is an exceptionally rare student who will perform to his or her potential no matter what encouragement the environment provides. Most other students need an accepting, nurturing, challenging, empathetic, resilient classroom community in which to learn, grow, and succeed.

There are many ways to successfully establish a stimulating and nurturing classroom environment. Part of my objective in choosing this topic is to successfully define what this classroom is, what it sounds like, what it feels like, and - maybe most importantly - what the teacher does to create this environment for the students entering our classrooms today. It exists in a teacher's subtle reactions to unpredictable situations and in how they plan to solve larger systemic issues that may be happening in and around the classroom. Some of these moments can be planned out and embedded within lessons

and some cannot. For instance, teachers can plan out morning meeting activities that engage and inspire kids to listen and learn from each other. But other teachable moments present themselves randomly, like how a teacher reacts to a student who freezes during their presentation, to someone demonstrating racial insensitivity, or to a student caught cheating. How a teacher thinks and processes these endless moments during the year, has a distinct impact on how students think and process these same moments in their own lives outside of the classroom. When I reflect on my teaching, I recognize the significance of how my respectful treatment of all students is critical to the likelihood that my students will, in turn, demonstrate the same kind of concern and kindness toward each other. We will encounter conflicts within a classroom environment, but we can also establish a classroom climate that recognizes and affirms the importance of mutual respect and consideration. This is what I love most about teaching, and it is what sometimes keeps me up at night. This stuff matters, and how the events of the school day unfold just might have a lasting impact on students for years to come.

Obsessed

At its core, the most important element of a classroom community, is the understanding and the realization from each student that they matter to the success of the class, both academically and socially. In my observations of fifth graders throughout my career, there is one concern that is paramount to their self-esteem: how they perceive themselves as a member of the group. From the most brilliant problem-solvers, to the best athletes, to those who struggle academically, and those new to the school, the most important factor in student success and self-esteem is social acceptance. In Maslow's

Hierarchy of Needs (1943), these concerns would fall at the “psychological need” stage - just behind food, water, shelter, and safety in importance. At their core, fifth graders are social beings. I observe them in class, at lunch, and on the playground, being silly, being serious, working hard, or hardly working. They are driven, and sometimes obsessed, by how their actions, words, and attitudes make them appear to their peers. It can cause problems for many students. While there exists a wide spectrum of the level of concern from one student to the next for their social status, I still find it to be a driving factor in nearly all of their actions during the school day. Because of this, a failure to acknowledge or an attempt to dismiss the social importance of student interactions is a great disservice to them. Therefore, making students feel valued and accepted by their peers for their uniqueness and for their contributions to the whole, is an essential part of creating a dynamic and welcoming classroom community.

Spectrums

At the beginning of fifth grade, kids seem to think they know who they are. “I’m dumb and bad at math, ‘cause I was in the low group last year,” or “everything is supposed to be easy for me, because I am a good athlete and usually get 100’s.” I hear the same sentiments, usually not shared as openly, about social status. “She always has, like, a lot of friends,” or “I don’t have any friends because people don’t like me.” One of the challenges as a teacher is bringing all of these kids together and slowly diminishing these preconceived notions throughout the year. It is also imperative for us to remember that our students are coming to us with tremendously diverse home situations. It is our challenge as teachers to create a safe and welcoming environment for all students.

Whether they come to us from affluence or poverty, homes with one or two parents, living environments that are unsafe or healthy, it is incumbent upon us to develop a learning climate where they can feel comfortable to take risks without fear. Getting students whose upbringings look and feel so different to empathize and understand each other is a challenge that good teachers embrace. I believe it is where our biggest impact can be felt.

When having discussions with my students about having a “growth mindset” (the idea that you can improve if you work hard and practice) (Dweck, 2006), I try to help them understand how it can be applied to social situations as well as academic ones. During my time as a teacher, I have felt this is where a significant portion of the real classroom magic happens. Can you get a classroom full of kids of diverse backgrounds and different talents, fluctuating attitudes, and possibly raging hormones to understand, empathize, value, and respect each other through their words and actions? I think the answer is ‘yes... sometimes, but it depends.’ I believe this can be what separates some teachers from others in providing truly life changing experiences for their students. In fifth grade, it is easy to observe how students behave when they feel valued by their peers and how they act when they do not. Naturally, students who feel validated by the classroom community take risks, work harder, show more creativity, and produce higher quality work than if the opposite is true. The same could be said of all people in all situations. People are social creatures and, to different degrees, crave social acceptance. When we have it, we allow ourselves to take risks, put our best selves forward, and reach new heights.

Thank You Cards

I have found that the end of the school year is a time where many kids and parents also take time to reflect on the year, and at times even share appreciative thoughts with you in conversation or in a card or email. While I value all of their feedback, the pieces that hit home the most are the reflections on how their son or daughter changed as a person this year. Sometimes the kids themselves express sentiments on how they think differently than they did at the beginning of the year. Others even detail how certain conversations that I had with them really helped them process a difficult time. Obviously, there are plenty of generic ‘thank yous’ and ‘I really liked social studies this year’ mixed in, but I have found myself examining why kids and parents might be compelled to give a note of genuine thanks for something that was not in the syllabus. It appears to me that, for many kids and parents, a teacher’s role in shaping a student’s life proves to be much more influential and instrumental to their success than what might be in a lesson plan.

This reflective nature to the culmination of a school year has me pondering why these experiences are significant to so many students and parents. And after informally compiling my own observations, gathering anecdotal evidence from parents and students, and hearing examples from colleagues in my building, it has become apparent to me that the building of a dynamic classroom community is not experienced by every child each year. I have been genuinely surprised to hear or even observe that some teachers just do not make a conscience effort to develop a classroom climate where kids are accepted for who they are, challenged them to become better citizens, and encouraged to learn and grow as individuals within a diverse community. I would like to believe this is not

intentional on these teachers' parts. It may be because of curriculum or testing pressures leaving less time for anything else, or perhaps they haven't been properly educated to its importance for our young people. Many schools formally consider these factors to be part of a social curriculum that is designed to affirm students and support them as learners. Perhaps some teachers naively think they are accomplishing this by having a token morning meeting. I have observed teachers give up on the social environment of their classrooms. In the short term, it leads to apathy, disrespectful behavior, and a lack of interpersonal growth. As part of this work, I hope to examine the effect, if any, on these students' futures in the long term as well.

An Exclusive Event

Having a parent tell me that their son or daughter is upset because he or she will have to miss school is one of the most rewarding compliments I can receive as a teacher. This is especially satisfying, when accompanied by the parent explaining to me that their son or daughter "used to hate school." A product of having a dynamic, student-centered classroom is that it becomes contagious and kids want to be a part of it. They don't want to miss out on the enjoyable, special events of the day. The magic of the classroom cannot be 'completed as make-up work.' One of my goals in this project is to successfully outline and define what this means. In my journey as a young teacher, I know I have made many mistakes, but I have viewed building a dynamic classroom community as an overall strength. I remember a professor of mine at Hamline reminding us to "remember what it's like to sit in the little chair." This sage advice causes me to reflect on what it feels like to be a student in my class.

Besides building social learning into instruction and group work, I have found success with these extras: starting each day with a handshake and a personal greeting from their peers, practicing how to share and listen to each other's stories, being spontaneous and changing a lesson on the fly (and explaining why), listening to songs they like during transitions, having an impromptu lip-sync contest, preparing for an assembly with a discussion of the larger implications of audience behavior, stopping instruction to tell a relevant story, and ending each day with a compliment for a classmate and then someone making a basket on our classroom basketball hoop (much more to come on this). I believe providing an environment where students feel free to be themselves, to grow and learn how to participate as members of a team, and to celebrate and appreciate individual differences is the most important thing I do each day.

Change is possible and, as teachers, we are on the front lines of affecting positive change on a daily basis. I like to think about how all students' futures could be forever altered by being a part of a dynamic classroom community during these formative years and beyond. If all of our students grew into adults who understand and demonstrate empathy, resilience, respect, teamwork, and responsibility, I think we would live in a better world.

Looking Ahead

In Chapter Two, I will explore the professional literature related to the elements that make up the tenets of a thriving classroom community, including building empathy and resilience. The review will look at how diverse intermediate elementary students can be taught to become educated citizens ready to solve important societal issues. I will also

investigate the developmental level of students at this age that allows them to be receptive to learning from social-emotional lessons, and some of the commonalities and differences of some popular social-emotional learning curricula. Finally, the chapter will discuss the findings of some educational researchers who have conducted longitudinal studies on the long-term implications of school “connectedness” in elementary grades and what that means for students as they grow up.

In Chapter Three, I will describe the culminating project of this capstone: an easy to use website that will provide an updated framework that teachers and administrators can utilize to build a thriving community of learners. I will also explain how some of these “extra” classroom routines, which build empathy, resilience and overall excitement, can happen for all classrooms on a daily basis - specifically in third, fourth, and fifth grades.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Overview

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the following question: *How can intermediate elementary teachers create student environments that foster social-emotional growth?* This review will feature an examination of the qualities that contribute to the significance of a high-quality classroom community, especially when taking into account the social development of intermediate elementary students. Two characteristics that individuals learn in these communities, resilience and empathy, will be highlighted for their importance in creating a healthy diverse citizenry. Then, as the driver of the classroom environment, the role of teacher behavior and the resultant teacher-student relationship will be examined. This review will also explore specific ways this environment becomes a reality in a classroom including a look some popular social-emotional curricula. Finally, this literature review will look forward to the potential implications of student experiences in a high-quality classroom as a long-term predictor of student success in the future.

Community

In order for successful student learning to occur in a classroom, a shared sense of community needs to be developed (Kent & Simpson, 2012). This community, defined as “a student's experience of being a valued, influential, contributing participant in a group whose members are committed to each other's learning, growth and welfare” (Schaps & Lewis, 1998, pg. 22), provides the fertile ground for the growth of young people in our

schools. Students spending their school days in thriving classroom environments feel better about school, demonstrate social-emotional competency, and are more capable of handling the demands of challenging curricula (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). In the absence of a rich and rewarding environment, student potential is limited, behavior problems arise, and student growth, socially and academically, is slowed (Schaps, 1998). In this respect, it is important to examine the research about how this happens and understand why it makes a difference for students psychologically.

A Social Enterprise. When students start kindergarten, they are embarking on a journey that will evolve academically and socially as they mature through childhood into adolescence. Young people start to build invaluable academic skills that will allow them to hopefully gain employment in a chosen field with a set of skills necessary to get the job done. They will also need to learn equally important interpersonal and intrapersonal skills like getting along with others, sharing resources, recognizing others' good ideas, and understanding others' perspectives. Schools are places where all of these things need to happen.

The dynamics of a student's experience in school is not the same as if one were in a one-on-one tutoring situation. Education is "fundamentally a moral and social enterprise, as well as an intellectual one" (Schaps, 1998). It is impossible to separate the social aspects of friendship, acceptance, or "connectedness" (Battistich, 2001) from the purely academic pursuits in the classroom environment. Furthermore, "interactions between students and other students, between teachers and students, and between students and texts or other curricular materials constitute most of the learning that occurs

in classrooms” (Meltzoff, 1994, p. 15). Learning is relational, and the experiences that students have in schools depend on the quality of the environment where they take place. Fortunately, creating a thriving, high-quality classroom community does not detract from academic learning. In reality, it is the opposite. Or, as Schaps (1998) describes, a sense of community is “pivotal for children’s ethical, social, and emotional development and also for academic motivation.” When students feel connected to the learning community, they perform better academically, too (Battistich, 2001).

Not the 19th Century. Traditional notions of what classroom learning looks like are based out of a 19th century ideal of what was needed for the Industrial Revolution (Gibbs, 2006, p. 4). As large factories were built and people moved into cities, the idea of the neighborhood school where caring and sharing took place, was traded for a more industrialized version of schooling (2004, p. 4). These large factories required workers “who were punctual, could do repetitive tasks, and wouldn’t make changes” (2004, p. 4). Providing workers to fulfill these factory roles became the job of the public school system. Teachers were supposed to deliver academic content to or at the students and it was the student's job to absorb the material. Schools were tasked with molding future employees who could be standardized, “using standardized texts, taught by standardized teachers” (p. 4) and more specifically in the last 30 years, measured by standardized tests. Although many recognize this way of educating as outdated, sadly, despite calls for revamping the structure of our schools, most haven’t changed significantly.

As we move from the Industrial Age into the Information/Digital Age, it becomes obvious that these outdated ways of educating the youth of our country will not be

effective in preparing the difference makers of new generations. To be successful in the future, educators will need “to realize that ever-changing data combined with rapidly changing systems and situations require critical thinking and collaborative skills” (Gibbs, 2006, p. 19). Employment in the future will increasingly rely on these social and emotional abilities, so to ignore them as a part of education will constitute a disservice to students, potentially leaving meaningful employment out of their reach. As cited in Gibbs, (2006) according to the Department of Labor Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, the requisite skills to be successful in the 21st century feature many interpersonal and collaborative competencies. Basic skills of Reading, Writing, Mathematics, Listening, and Speaking are still deemed important and featured on their list. However, they also outline six specific thinking skills: Creative Thinking, Decision Making, Problem Solving, Seeing Things in the Mind’s Eye, Knowing How to Learn, and Reasoning. They go on to describe five personal qualities as well: Responsibility, Self-Esteem, Sociability, Self-Management, and Integrity/Honesty (p. 20). It is easy to see that only learning the “three R’s” does not fully prepare an individual for future success in our world. Of the Department of Labor’s recommended skillset, more than half rely on emotional or interpersonal aptitude beyond the purely intellectual. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides another description of five “core competencies”:

- Self-awareness* - The ability to accurately recognize one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.

-Self-management - The ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations — effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself.

-Social awareness - The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

-Relationship skills - The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups.

-Responsible decision-making - The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms.

As educators prepare students of the 21st century, it is imperative to provide them opportunities to hone these “non-academic” skills. Successful people increasingly need to be “good and thoughtful, as well as capable” (Schaps, 1998). So it becomes the task of the educator to not only provide meaningful ways for students to access academic learning, but also to nurture their social-emotional learning as a part of the classroom community.

Integration. Advocates of social-emotional learning, or character education also argue that these competencies cannot always be taught in isolation, but need to be embedded within daily curriculum to be able to build a healthy classroom community (Schaps, 1998; Lloyd, Kolodziej, & Brashears., 2016; Gibbs, 2006; Meltzoff, 1994; Lickona & Davidson, 2005). While team building activities have become more popular

in schools, they cannot be separated from the rest of learning that takes place. “The emphasis on intellectual learning apart from individual human development is a misguided political solution that dismisses nurturing the social, emotional, physical and spiritual assets and wholeness of children” (Gibbs, 2006). While resources like Tribes or Responsive Classroom call for daily “morning meetings” or “community circles,” these cannot serve as the only means of providing for social-emotional learning. From science (Gardner, 2012) and math courses (Sanzeni, 2000), to humanities like language arts (Gibbs, 2006) and social studies (Sanchez, 2008) effectively incorporating social-emotional learning enables a classroom community to form around any subject matter. Attending to these factors provides an environment where not only are students’ interpersonal needs met, but their academic pursuits are enhanced, as well.

Citizens. The quote, “We all do better when we all do better” from the late U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone (1999), provides the tone for why creating a classroom community that promotes social-emotional competency is ultimately so important. As teachers, we realize that we are molding people who live, with ever increasing influence, in the same world that we do. Educational leaders since John Dewey have recognized the fact that “for most of our history as a nation, preparation of citizenship has been the primary goal of public schooling” (as cited in Schaps & Lewis, 1998). Since elementary students will grow up one day to join the workforce, voting population, and society at large, it becomes imperative for young people to understand and demonstrate how to function in a group.

While productive citizens understand that they are not more important than others in the group, they also advocate for themselves. Or as Schaps and Lewis described, “Good citizens are neither doormats nor narcissists, neither blindly self-sacrificing nor ruggedly self-serving” (1998). Students need to learn how view themselves as a valued member of the community, but not so far as to put their own needs ahead of all others. With current political challenges in our world, this ideal will likely increase in importance in the coming years.

Good citizens understand and are committed to justice and fairness. They work to ensure these promises for those around them as they understand how it benefits the whole. In a classroom, a sense of fairness can be central to student commitment to one’s own learning and development. Students who grow to understand this concept “work to develop in themselves the considerable thoughtfulness and self-control needed to achieve this alignment” (Schaps & Lewis, 1998).

And finally, developing quality citizens requires opportunities to learn that every social interaction - small or large - reflects upon themselves and their communities. As teachers carefully model this behavior in the classroom, students will begin to understand how this applies to them, as well. Their words and actions, with specific intentions or not, have consequences toward the way others perceive them. Good citizens realize “their interpersonal behavior reflects their values, and their considerate actions prompt others to respond in kind” (Schaps & Lewis, 1998).

The education needed to become a “good” citizen can be promoted further in secondary education through specific citizenship training or civics education (Smith, 2006), but

will be most influential when these classroom experiences are begun at an earlier age (Schaps & Lewis, 1999) because “society needs to foster the growth of people who are skilled at personal and interpersonal relationships, as interpersonal moral development precedes civic virtue” (Meltzoff, 1994, p. 25). Or, as Schaps & Lewis (1998) described:

This learning is gradual and diffuse, beginning in infancy and continuing throughout life--not just in school between the ages of 5 and 18. But school is the first public venue most children experience, and the most important in terms of intensity of exposure and consequences for later success. Schools inescapably influence children’s civic development through the content they teach directly and, perhaps more importantly, through the hidden curriculum of relationships with others, classroom management and discipline and organizational climate and policies. (p. 23)

This critical role that our schools play in the development of future stakeholders of an informed, empathetic, and resilient citizenry cannot be overstated. In our world, we have had “too many examples of highly schooled and cultured people committing wayward acts -- and even well-educated whole societies committing horrific ones” (Schaps, 1998). From an early age, students need to gain experience in shared decision-making, group problem-solving, and responsible citizenship that are so imperative to a healthy democracy.

Empathy. “A student's ability to ‘see into’ (recognize, understand) another’s state of mind and emotions” (Responsive Classroom, 2017) is an important part of becoming a member of a healthy classroom community. They must allow themselves to

appreciate differences in others and have “concern for others’ welfare, even when it doesn’t benefit or may come as a cost to one’s self” (Responsive Classroom, 2017). People are “evolutionarily programmed” to seek out contact with others (Major, 2014), and therefore, the classroom community takes on an important role in shaping how an individual “sees” the others around them. According to Jolliffe and Farrington (2004), the teaching and learning of empathy can be especially significant when examining that understanding and demonstrating empathetic behaviors are “consistently associated with prosocial and altruistic attitudes and behaviors” (as cited in Williford et al., 2014). Considering student differences in race, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or gender, the classroom provides, in some cases, a student’s first experience in learning to understand those different from themselves.

As the populace of our schools continues to shift toward a more culturally diverse make-up, understanding and practicing empathetic behaviors will continue to be critical to the creation of a healthy classroom community (Gibbs, 2006, p. 22). Teaching children to understand their neighbors’ perspectives, and not just surface level differences of race and culture, is of utmost importance. Or, as Mako Nakagawa explained:

It is less important for students to learn to appreciate ethnic foods than it is for students to understand equal rights. Yet, much of what we have taught under the rubric of multicultural education has fallen into the trap of “Tacos on Tuesdays.” That is, the trap of teaching about cultures and about cultural differences without teaching an understanding of how cultural differences, or gender, class, and other

differences, contribute to the unified whole of a democratic nation (as cited by Gibbs, 2006, p. 22).

It becomes important then for teachers to gain an understanding of where their students are coming from, physically and culturally (Hamm, 2014). Designing opportunities, whether formally or informally, for students of diverse backgrounds to gain genuine understanding and build empathetic perspectives should become part of creating a classroom community that prepares students to contribute positively to an increasingly pluralistic society (Gibbs, 2006; Hamm, 2014).

It is particularly important to reach elementary aged students before they go on to middle school where bullying can become more prevalent. As children developmentally change into adolescents, they are “faced with new social challenges and must renegotiate their social identities” (Williford et al., 2014, p. 536). Giving students the tools to develop empathetic competencies to enhance the learning community proves a worthy cause, while failing to give attention to empathy training and allowing students to build up an increased “self-focus,” can lead to a “lack of awareness for others” and bullying (Williford et al., 2014, p. 538). If a student has a “connectedness” to their learning community, concern for others, enjoyment in helping others, kindness becomes a mutual benefit (Schaps & Lewis, 1998). If we want our students to grow up caring for the people around them, modeling and explicitly demonstrating empathy in the classroom is imperative.

Resilience. A sometimes overlooked aspect of building a classroom community and helping the individuals within it grow and learn, is modeling and teaching resilience.

Helping young people find constructive ways to cope with stress, disappointment, and frustration is an important part of educating the whole child (Frydenberg, Care, Freeman, Chan, 2009; Gibbs, 2006; Kriete & Davis, 2014; Lee & Stewart, 2013; Skinner, Pitzer, & Steele, 2016). Increasing a “student’s tendency to complete assignments in a timely and thorough manner and to the best of their ability, despite distractions, obstacles or level of challenge,” (Responsive Classroom, 2017) have become essential to preparing students to be successful in their lives. While a person’s ability to deal with stress is influenced by personality and life experiences, much can be done in the classroom to “maximize coping abilities” (Frydenberg et al., 2009, p. 262). Skinner et al. described five adaptive coping skills as “strategizing, help-seeking, comfort-seeking, self-encouragement, and commitment” and six maladaptive coping methods as “confusion, mental escape, concealment, self-pity, rumination, and projection” (2016, p. 2105). They go on to explain how students may benefit from “expanding their entire repertoire of strategies, strengthening adaptive responses as well as reducing reliance on maladaptive responses that tend to undermine persistence” (2016, p. 2114).

While we “can’t eradicate stressors” (Frydenberg et al., 2009) from our students’ lives, through providing “protective factors” (Gibbs, 2006), we can help their severity become reduced (Frydenberg et al., 2009). These protective factors that a classroom and school community can provide have been shown to have great impact on a student’s resiliency and therefore positively impact their futures, even for students who are considered at high-risk for criminality, alcoholism, or mental health problems (Benard, 1991). Resiliency in students has also been linked to overall emotional well-being and

school connectedness (Frydenberg et al., 2009) making it an essential part of creating a high-quality classroom community. This persistence is not always a specific skill we can teach once and move on, it exists in what we do to change the environment around the children in our classrooms (Gibbs, 2006, p. 41). Teachers can play an impactful role here in modeling resiliency while honestly and tactfully discussing their own struggles, showing students how to calmly and effectively deal with stress. As a part of this, a teacher's respectful interactions with students and other school professionals in stressful situations can be critical to the development of a positive classroom climate.

Teacher-student relationship. The overriding factor in whether a classroom community is perceived by students to be high-quality or low-quality is based on how they perceive their relationships with the teacher (Deci & Ryan 1985; Poulou, 2009; Schaps & Lewis, 1999; Spilt & Hughes, 2015). Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1993) describe the teacher's role "as being the single individual in every classroom whose decisions, opinions, and outlook count the most in giving shape to the environment" (as cited in Schaps & Lewis, 1998, p. 217). In direct instruction, discussion facilitation, small group work, or one-on-one situations, the teacher's role in instilling a culture of mutual respect, valuing diversity, and challenging student capabilities is paramount, and is shown to have lasting effects (Spilt & Hughes, 2015). As children emulate the words and actions of the adults around them, a teacher's words, when respectfully communicating their own emotions --including frustrations and constructive criticism--take on particular importance. The teaching and learning happening in these significant moments in the classroom community promises "to be as influential in the

long run as any of their technical skills” (Jackson et al., 1993, as cited in Schaps & Lewis, 1998, p. 217). While the teacher’s role in building and maintaining the class environment is important in all areas of education, it is of particular importance in elementary classrooms, places where “emotional intensity” and “personal closeness, and expectations of professional warmth in continuous and enduring classroom relationships create a solid basis for emotional understanding” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 824). Getting to know our students, understanding who they are, recognizing where they come from, and determining how to reach them becomes a central task for any teacher before any meaningful teaching can take place. In a study of perceived teacher-student relationships, Spilt and Hughes found that on “the basis of attachment theory and social motivational perspective on learning, positive affective relationships with the teacher believed to foster emotional security and engagement in school activities” (2015, p. 307). Furthermore, they found that these associations can have serious consequences especially for students of color. In their study, African-American children who themselves perceived to have negative teacher relationships in elementary school, were found to be at “increased risk for underachievement in middle school” (Spilt & Hughes, 2015, p. 307). At the heart of creating a high-quality classroom community is the teacher. Recognizing the significance of the teacher-student relationship is imperative to achieving positive student outcomes and creating citizens ready to contribute to a 21st century society.

Intermediate Elementary Learners

Students in their upper elementary years or intermediate years, defined here as 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades, are at a particularly important juncture in their development as people. The biggest difference between upper elementary students and those in primary grades is an ability to have a greater understanding of their place in the world around them. Most students in the intermediate grades are in what Piaget described as the Concrete-Operational Stage within in his Four Stages of Cognitive Development (1936). In this stage, children are more capable of thinking relationally, able to generalize, and understand and use cause and effect relationships. Socially, they are still oriented to parents, enjoy group play, are still sometimes unaware of how their behavior affects others (as cited by Gibbs, 2006, p. 39). At this age, students are receptive to developing resiliency strategies, learning collaborative skills for group work, understanding feedback on their behavior, learning specific decision making and problem solving skills, and are impressed with older role models (as cited by Gibbs, 2006, p. 39). Compared to the previous Preoperative stage of development (age 5-7), students in intermediate grades are increasingly looking for validation from their peer relationships. As students progress through this stage they become increasingly close to Piaget's (1936) next stage of development where more sophisticated abstract problem solving and increased social acceptance become necessary for success academically and emotionally. This teaching become especially important for fourth and fifth grade students as they increasingly "pay attention to social status and need skills to deal with gossip and peer pressure" (Committee for Children, 2017).

Important years. Because of this critical juncture of development, the teacher-student relationships and classroom climate established in the intermediate grades take on a heightened importance relative to a student's future. As students form their social-emotional identities in these grades, learning how to understand and relate to the world at this age has lasting impact on their lives. Furthermore, positive social-emotional learning in an enriching environment in these grades can potentially right wrongs from previous grades. Spilt and Hughes (2015) found that while students with conflicted teacher-student relationships throughout elementary school were categorized as "underachieving" in middle school, those "who perceived conflicted teacher-student relationships in early school years, but declining (conflict) levels afterward showed only minor or no underachievement in middle school" (p. 307). It seems that students in intermediate grades are not only learning important academic skills that form the foundation of more complex skills, but they are also forming and recognizing their own social-emotional identities as individuals within the group. Because students in the intermediate grades are in a state of flux where their bodies and minds are changing rapidly, a healthy, nurturing - yet challenging - classroom community can change their lives and set the stage for future success.

How is a high-quality classroom community created?

Over the past half century, as educational researchers have begun to understand the importance of educating the whole child, there has been an increase in awareness of social-emotional learning and, therefore, an increase in authors and organizations developing materials that introduce and develop these concepts in classrooms. In this

section, the literature review will highlight the main concepts of some of the most widely adopted programs used in social-emotional/classroom community building education, as well as examine some of the commonalities among them. The thoughts of authors Nancy Meltzoff, a classroom community researcher, and Eric Schaps, founder of Development Studies Center, will be outlined, along with features of social-emotional programs like Responsive Classroom, Tribes, and Second Step. It should be noted that given the large number of social-emotional learning programs available on the market today, only a few will be evaluated within the context of this review.

Discourse. There is one commonality that seems to stretch across any kind of social-emotional learning or classroom community building program: positive discourse among participants. The value of healthy discourse is essential to relationship-building, understanding, and learning in classrooms (Responsive Classroom, 2017; Meltzoff, 1994; Sanchez, 2008; Lloyd et al., 2016; Gibbs, 2006; Kent & Simpson, 2012; Committee for Children, 2017). Healthy discussion breeds and facilitates learning in a community (Kent & Simpson, 2012) and, therefore, can “purposely promote independent thinking and self-efficacy” (Lloyd et al., 2016, p. 292). As learners become comfortable with their environment and the people in it, they can express authentic thoughts and feelings which allow for personal and interpersonal growth, empathy, and respect to take place. In meaningful classroom sharing or in-depth literary discussion, quality discourse can be a tool for deep conversations that allows students to feel validated and heard (Kent & Simpson, 2012). This can eventually create an “egalitarian society” where students and teachers are equal participants (Lloyd et al., 2016). When

the basis for this healthy discourse is established, opposing viewpoints within a classroom allow for students to disagree in civil and respectful ways (Sanchez, 2008). It is also a time when students can learn and practice the important skills of how to listen actively and respond meaningfully (Sanchez, 2008; Gibbs, 2006; Kriete & Davis, 2014). As Sanchez explained, “students and teachers learn together; disagree with one another; and examine historical dilemmas, societal inequities, and problems of significance to the group” (2008, p. 53). Whether large group, student-to-teacher, or student-to-student, at its core, meaningful discussions (where students feel comfortable to be themselves and offer their authentic voice) provide the opportunity for critical social-emotional learning within the classroom community.

Relationship, The Fourth ‘R’: The Development of a Classroom

Community. In her 1994 article, Nancy Meltzoff explains how a classroom can become a “whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.” Through her case study of a kindergarten classroom, Meltzoff outlines ten characteristics of how a high-quality classroom community is maintained.

-Shared Leadership - Teachers and students share in decision-making and responsibility for learning (p. 16).

-Communication - Students learn and practice literacy skills, turn-taking in conversation skills, “saying no and setting personal boundaries,” and clearly expressing feelings in a respectful way (p. 18).

-Responsiveness - Students learn how to read what works for “I”, for the “We”, and for the environment as a whole (p. 18).

-Moral Unity - Teachers and Students share common values and beliefs that work toward the common good, and know how to “reach a moral consensus” (p. 19).

-Cooperation - Students learn and practice the “fine art of winning and losing, sharing, helping, turn-taking, and befriending” (p. 20).

-Shared Environment and Shared History - Students learn to share the physical environment (tables, reading corner, supplies) and the workload needed to keep it cleaned. Through the sharing of their own stories, they share the meaning of their experiences, as well as develop new “group traditions, rituals, and ceremonies” (p. 20-21).

-Identification/Involvement - Students “form meaningful associations within the community, and they participate in group-decision making, rule-making, and problem-solving” (p. 21).

-Wholeness - Students learn to recognize each other as a “multi-faceted person--physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual” and keep a positive concept of self and others worthy of mutual respect (p. 22).

-Interdependence - Students learn that their behaviors are inextricably bound together and affect their classmates throughout the year (p. 23).

Meltzoff uses these ten areas to describe how a successful classroom community can come together. She also emphasizes that these strands are “woven” (p. 15) together throughout the year, as the relationships between them form the basis for how students

can learn to “evolve as mature citizens, skilled in the intricacies of relational living” (p. 25).

Breeding Citizenship. Eric Schaps, the founder of Development Studies Center in Oakland, CA, and executive consultant to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in Chicago, IL, describes with co-author Catherine Lewis, in their 1998 article, “Breeding Citizenship,” five practices that create a caring community within the classroom:

- Regular class meetings in which children help shape classroom norms and practices and engage in problem solving.

- Opportunities for students and teachers to get to know one another as people and to build a sense of unity, by creating class traditions, class books or art projects.

- A disciplinary approach that fosters students’ desire to do what is right and engages them in active self-improvement, rather than relying primarily on rewards and sanctions.

- Collaborative learning that emphasizes challenging academics and respectful treatment of fellow students.

- Curricula that engage students in studying the ethical issues at the heart of history and literature, such as what it means to be a principled, compassionate person and what values enable diverse individuals to live together (p. 25).

Ultimately, Schaps and Lewis’s ideas are very similar to Meltzoff’s, only differing semantically and in the way items are grouped. Both offer that for a successful

classroom community to exist, students must have a “say” in the classroom, and they must feel supported by the other members of the environment.

Reaching All by Creating Tribes Learning Communities. The curriculum known as “Tribes,” was developed in the 1970’s by Jeanne Gibbs as a way to establish a high-quality classroom community through the forming of small heterogeneous groups within the class that support each other throughout the year. With its latest publication in 2006, Gibbs describes its mission “to assure the healthy development of every child so that each has the knowledge, competency and resilience to be successful in today’s rapidly changing world” (p. 31). Tribes emphasizes “four agreements” that guide interaction in the groups: “attentive listening, appreciation/no put downs, mutual respect, right to participate/right to pass” (p. 33). Through these small groups, the teacher attempts to gradually “transfer responsibility to the group” (p. 71), as learning and a sense of community grows throughout the year. The curriculum describes this journey as a three-step process on page 71:

Inclusion - where a sense of belonging, and needs and expectations of being acknowledged happens.

Influence - valuing differences, setting goals, managing conflict, making decisions, solving problems, and celebrating diversity.

Community - working together creatively, group challenge and support, constructive thinking, social skills, shared responsibility, calling forth personal gifts, and celebrating achievements.

Tribes Learning Communities also focus on removing stereotypes (p. 54-56) and reaching children through Gardner's (2011) "nine intelligences: verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, body/kinesthetic, musical/rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, existential, and naturalist (p. 58). It also defines seven-steps in teaching collaborative skills: (1) engage students in identifying the need for the skill, (2) teach the skill, (3) practice the skill regularly and seek student feedback, (4) transfer responsibility for the skill to the tribes, (5) inquire about use of skill elsewhere, (6) acknowledge when students are using skill successfully, and (7) acknowledge and celebrate when skill becomes a "natural behavior in the classroom or school" (p. 91). The lengthy curriculum provides an extensive guide for teachers that includes the power of "community circle" as a morning meeting (p. 81), how to teach children to use "I-messages" (p. 111) to express themselves in disagreement, and how to handle situations when students feel like their tribe is not working successfully (p. 95). While the logic and ideas remain mostly comparable to Meltzoff (1994), and Schaps and Lewis' (1998) work, the major difference between "tribes" and other social-emotional learning curricula is the reliance on the formation and sustained use of supportive, consistent small groups within the larger classroom.

Responsive Classroom. Responsive Classroom is another social-emotional learning curriculum that focuses on educating the whole child rather just addressing academic needs. Similar to Meltzoff (1994), Schaps and Lewis (1998) and "Tribes," its core mission is aims to assist students in learning "a set of social and emotional competencies—cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy, and self

control—and a set of academic competencies—academic mindset, perseverance, learning strategies, and academic behaviors” (2017).

Responsive Classroom also emphasizes the importance of interactive modeling and specific teacher language that allow students to successfully engage in academic and social-emotional learning. It also espouses the importance of interactive learning structures and logical fair consequences to misbehavior (Responsive Classroom, 2017).

One slight difference between Responsive Classroom and Tribes is an increased focus on a morning meeting time within the Responsive Classroom model. Kriete & Davis (2016) describe it as a “daily arena for rich, structured conversations...an integrated experience...to develop foundational thinking and language skills...listening attentively, speaking clearly, asking purposeful questions, answering thoughtfully, giving reasons for assertions, and agreeing and disagreeing respectfully” (p. 17).

Similar to Tribes (Gibbs, 2006), Meltzoff (1994), and Schaps and Lewis (1998) and other social-emotional curricula, Responsive Classroom has a focus on shared responsibility for the community in the classroom. It advocates for students to take an active role in the establishment of the classroom community, involving them in reflection and decision-making, and shaping the environment in which learning is taking place (2017).

Second Step. Produced by Committee for Children, based in Seattle, WA, “Second Step” is a social-emotional learning program that features specified core lessons each week, and daily skill-building activities for each day. While its mission remains similar to the goals explained by Meltzoff (1994), and Schaps and Lewis (1998), and to

the missions of Responsive Classroom and Tribes, Second Step prescribes specific social-emotional learning targets for the class. Less emphasis is placed on teachers or students to adapt to the natural lives, successes, and struggles that members of the class experience. While volunteers are asked to share from their own lives, these stand alone weekly lessons do not necessarily coincide with what the members of the classroom community may be currently experiencing. However, Second Step gives students guided practice with social-emotional situations. Through discussion, videos, handouts, and available home links, Second Step pushes students to engage in perspective taking, critical thinking, consequence processing, and then prescribes ways that students can practice these skills in real life (Committee for Children, 2017).

Lasting Effects of a Classroom Community

Finally, the last and possibly most important purpose of this literature review is to explore the lasting effect that a high-quality classroom community will have on an intermediate elementary student's success in the future. The implications at stake here for the future of our society are serious. As Yale child psychiatrist James Comer has said, "In every interaction, you are either building community or destroying community" (as cited by Schaps & Lewis, 1998). Every aspect of the time students spend in schools inherently shapes the character of our citizenry and society (Schaps & Lewis, 1998; Meltzoff, 1994). As previously stated, membership in a healthy classroom environment has an immediate and positive impact on student academic achievement (Lickona & Davidson, 2005) and social-emotional learning (Gibbs, 2006; Spilt & Hughes, 2015; Kriete & Davis, 2004; Horsch, Chen & Nelson, 1999; Frydenberg et al., 2009). This

includes fewer instances of drug use, delinquency, and victimization (Battistich & Hom, 1997). It is important to note that there is also research pointing to the lasting positive effects of a healthy classroom environment even after students leave elementary school. Students who experienced a high-quality classroom community, took part in positive social-emotional interventions, or identified positive teacher-student relationships in elementary school showed higher achievement in middle school (Spilt & Hughes, 2015). Conversely, underachievement in middle school was shown to be linked to students who did not view teacher-student relationships or their school's sense of community positively (Spilt & Hughes, 2015). Furthermore, "underachievement (that) manifested itself after six years coincided with length and timing that children had conflictual relationships" (Spilt & Hughes, 2015, p. 307) with teachers and their school community. Also, in a longitudinal study of approximately 2000 early adolescent students, "poor school connectedness was found to be a predictor of future mental health problems" (Shochet et al., 2006, as cited in Frydenberg et al., 2009).

In Victor Battistich's 2001 study of the lasting effect of elementary school "connectedness" on middle school students, he studied students who had been in classrooms classified as "caring communities of students." These classrooms are characterized by supportive relationships, "collaboration between students, staff and parents; responsiveness to student needs; accessible and engaging curriculum; and opportunities for student participation in the decision making," (p. 3). In this study, he found that compared to students who had not participated in these high-quality classroom communities, students from "caring communities" had higher "educational

aspirations,” “more trust in and respect for teachers,” and “liking for school” (p. 5). They also had a higher “sense of efficacy,” reported “being victimized at school less often,” “engaged in less misconduct at school,” and were “engaged in fewer acts of delinquency” (p. 5). Battistich also determined that these students from caring communities “reported that more of their friends were positively involved at school” and that “fewer of their friends were involved in misconduct at school, used drugs, or engaged in delinquent behaviors” (p. 6). In addition to these social-emotional behaviors, Battistich (2001) found that these students “had significantly higher test scores and grades in core academic subjects” in middle school (p. 7). Through these studies, it can be concluded that the lessons learned in their classroom communities continued to influence them years after they left the elementary setting.

Studies have also shown that these effects of classroom community can last to the beginning of adulthood. In a 1999 study, Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill studied the “long-term effects of an intervention combining teacher training, parent education, and social competence training for children during the elementary grades on adolescent health-risk behaviors at age 18 years” (p. 226). Compared to a control group, participation in elementary classroom community programs was “predictive of enduring significant positive effects through age 18 years on students’ bonds to school, achievement, and school behavior” (p. 231). They also “experienced lower rates of lifetime violence, frequent drinking, and sexual behavior through age 18 years” (p. 231). In their study, they also compared those who had participated in these community intervention programs their entire elementary years against those who only had

interventions in fifth and sixth grades. They noted that “dose effects” were observable in many of their results, showing that those that had participated fully in intervention programs saw the most positive results, but those that experienced late intervention programs in fifth and sixth grade still saw more positive results than the control group (p. 231). This shows that while social-emotional learning from an early age yields the best results, gaining social-emotional skills in a thriving classroom community for the first time in intermediate grades still has a lasting positive effect.

The authors of this study also point out that the community-based interventions were only conducted when these students were in elementary grades without any “boosters or follow-up interventions in the following six years” p. 233). They offer a theory to explain why this type of community-based intervention from an early age might be even more successful at preventing social behaviors related to violence, substance abuse, and risky sexual behavior than even middle or high school programs specifically aimed at avoiding these health-risk behaviors.

Developing a strong commitment to schooling in the elementary grades may set children on a developmental path toward school completion and success that is naturally reinforced both by teachers responsive to eager students and by the students’ own commitment to schooling (p. 233).

The findings of this study shed some light on the value a high-quality classroom community can have on its participants for years to come. It becomes obvious to see the serious implications that an elementary student’s experience can have for their future successes in life.

Conclusion

Creating a healthy, nurturing, and engaging classroom community is a complex weaving of social-emotional competencies and academic standards that does not happen quickly or easily, but its effects can be far reaching. Breaking away from the more traditional classroom approach of the teacher lecturing to passive audiences, building and maintaining a classroom environment that harnesses and values each student's contributions and commitment to the group is increasingly gaining traction as the best way to prepare our students for success socially, emotionally, and academically. Integration of community-based learning embedded within subject-based lessons, with a focus on creating empathy and resilience, has been shown to provide students the tools they need to become healthy and informed citizens of our society. As a guiding factor to the creation of these high-quality classroom communities, the teacher-student relationship is one that takes on an almost sacred position in the lives of students, especially in the formative intermediate elementary grades. No matter what method or program schools choose to guide their teachers in forming healthy classroom environments, honest discourse is critical to their success. Before setting out to plan academic lessons for the classroom, teachers are wise to take the time to set the stage for a respectful and thriving classroom environment. Within an atmosphere where they feel comfortable taking learning risks, students will achieve beyond their expectations. The lasting implications of a healthy social-emotional education can provide students with a path that can lead to their ultimate goals and create an educated citizenry prepared to contribute positively to society.

Looking Ahead

In Chapter Three, I will describe the culminating project of this capstone: an easy to use website that will provide an updated framework that teachers and administrators can utilize to build a thriving community of learners. I will also explain how some of these “extra” classroom routines, which build empathy, resilience and overall excitement, can happen for all classrooms on a daily basis - specifically in third, fourth, and fifth grades.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

As Chapter Two outlined, the implications of cultivating social-emotional skills through a healthy classroom community are significant, not only to the future of the students involved, but for the future of our society, as well. Therefore secondly, and perhaps equally as important, *How can intermediate elementary teachers create student environments that foster social-emotional growth?* Given the importance of building these skills in our intermediate elementary classrooms, I believe teachers will benefit from an additional guiding resource with ideas that bring new excitement to students while building their social-emotional skills. In this chapter I explain how I am creating an accessible, easy-to-use website that will provide ideas teachers can add to the community-building strategies for their own classrooms.

In this chapter, I discuss why I have chosen a website to provide this resource. It describes the target audience and the standards necessary for this website to function as an effective resource. It outlines how I plan to incorporate selected links to existing social-emotional curriculum resources with my own original contributions. Chapter Three also provides insight into how this site can contribute to public scholarship in general, as well as how I plan to promote the viewing and utilization by other educators, in hopes that it strengthens their own classroom community-building practice.

Why a Website?

In the current fast-paced lifestyle of a teacher, time is at a premium. Whether it is during the summer or school year, extra time to spend exploring teacher-edition versions of curricula or searching through books written on the inner-workings of enhancing one's teaching practices is hard to come by. For this reason, I have chosen to create a website to display the contents of this work. I would like this site to serve as a quick resource for an idea that a teacher could implement that same day. Most of the ideas featured do not require expensive or hard-to-find materials, nor do they take much time to prepare. For instance, I would like a teacher to be able to find "handing back graded work" and be provided with an idea for a social-emotionally framed discussion he or she can have with students about empathy and resilience that same day before handing back those assignments. It is important to me that this website can serve as a quick reference, as well as something that educators can explore further when they do they have the time. Because it is web-based, an internet connection is required but, increasingly, this is standard in most classrooms. And while printed references still have their place, the ease of accessibility provided by a website, compared with printing costs and distribution, makes it an uncomplicated choice of delivery.

Increase the Fun

While social-emotional curricula, like the ones mentioned in Chapter Two, are becoming more commonly adopted, what seems to be missing from many of them are strategies to make team-building relevant and exciting for the intermediate elementary students of today. Among the published curricula, there is commonality of purpose: children needing to feel appreciated, being able to experience successes and failures in a

healthy manner, having their thoughts matter to the existence of the classroom community, feeling a connection with their teacher, and developing positive relationships with their classmates. However, what many of these curricula lack are examples of how to accomplish those goals in fun, enjoyable ways that resonate with students. Providing opportunities for social-emotional growth, while simultaneously letting students enjoy themselves is at the heart of building a successful classroom community. By using specific examples of how to create fun, team-building experiences, this website can readily serve teachers as they bring theory into practice and provide their students with additional, exciting opportunities for social-emotional learning.

Target Audience

The intended audience for this website project is intermediate elementary teachers in grades 3-5. As mentioned in both Chapters One and Two, providing a thriving classroom community for students of this age-group is of paramount importance. If all teachers in these grades consistently provide their students with a nurturing, challenging, and inspiring classroom where mutual respect and appreciation of others is promoted, the positive implications for these children and the future of our society will be tangible. For at least some teachers in this age group, it is my hope that this website will provide useful tools, add to their pedagogy, and ultimately benefit their students in ways that will make a difference in their lives.

Importance for all students. The setting where I have implemented many of the elements featured on the site is a fifth grade classroom in an affluent suburb of Austin, TX. The average household income of residents in the district is \$195,117, with roughly

93% of those 25 years of age or older having at least some college education, a college degree, or graduate level degree. Less than 3% of the district students qualify for free and reduced lunch. On State of Texas standardized tests, the school's students have a 94.3% passing rate, compared to the average for the state of Texas at 76%.

On the surface, the academic achievement of the students at this school and district paint a picture of significant success. But for the purposes of this reference, it is important to note that current measurements of student and school success, at least at a state level, do not take into account any measures of social-emotional learning or school connectedness. Academic excellence and family affluence do not necessarily equate to good mental health, empathy, respect, or positive interpersonal skills. In a similar respect, some might argue that social-emotional learning and community building is less important for children of affluent families with more social supports like the students in this school. However, another school of thought, given the inequities of our society, would indicate it is increasingly important for students from affluent families to understand and demonstrate empathy, respect, and responsible citizenship as we work to achieve more just and fair communities. Helping students build community through skills that teach empathy and resilience, is important for teachers across all income levels, no matter the socioeconomic or racial makeup of their students. This can be achieved both through the adoption of a commercially-prepared social-emotional curriculum or the implementation of an informal, but well-articulated, curriculum developed by the teacher.

Quality Web Design

Maintenance of the website's content will be an important aspect of the functionality. As we increasingly live our lives online, we all can understand the frustration of a site that doesn't function effectively. For its intended audience, this site must allow teachers to access material quickly and understand the ideas within moments of finding them. The "usability," defined as the user's "perception of how consistent, efficient, productive, organized, easy to use, intuitive, and straightforward it is to accomplish tasks within a system" (Dept. of Health & Human Services, 2006), will be especially important here. It will also be important to seek peer teacher feedback "to develop an understanding of their users' expectations through task analyses" (Dept. of Health & Human Services) to make sure this site can be used for what it is intended. For this site to be effective for teachers, an important function will be its searchability for specific ideas. For example, one could click on "end of day ritual" and find specifically described ideas to use to build their students' social-emotional growth at the end of each school day. I look forward for this tool to surprise users of the site with relative ease and usefulness, so that they can put ideas into action effectively and efficiently.

Incorporation of Ideas

This website incorporates many appropriately cited excerpts from the social-emotional curricula outlined in the literature review of Chapter Two, combined with the original ideas that I have incorporated to help build a healthy and dynamic classroom community. My hope is that this site can provide a menu of ideas that teachers can easily implement in their classrooms. While I believe I have created some exciting, innovative ways to accomplish this, building upon what experts have already assembled

will make this site a more complete resource for teachers. With names protected, I will also add testimonials and anecdotes from current and former students and parents on how these ideas helped shape these young people's overall growth. In the future, as new ideas emerge (possibly even from others' feedback to the site), I hope to update and revise the contents of the site so it remains a current and relevant resource.

Contribution to Public Scholarship

My hope is that this website will become a resource that contributes to increased awareness of the importance of social-emotional learning and its lasting impact for the future of students and of our society. As mentioned in an earlier section in this chapter, the website will be intended for teachers of intermediate elementary students. While schools differ demographically, philosophically, and structurally, the essence of social-emotional learning is a universal truth that all teachers should embrace, if not focus upon, for the betterment of all our young students.

Sponsorship and Marketing

Obviously, my hope is that this website is utilized by teachers across the globe. While that may be a lofty goal considering similar sites on the web, what I hope will set this site apart is its ease and usability, as well as the simplicity of the ideas set forth and how they can create new, enjoyable community-building opportunities for students.. I intend to start this marketing process by having my home district's website provide a link to my site. While I will be solely responsible for the site's creation and maintenance, linking to this site where hundreds of teachers, as well as parents of nearly 9,000 students access information about their son or daughter's school, will allow the site increased

viewership. My district also has taken an increased focus on social-emotional education this year, so it will fit nicely with this district initiative.

Project Description and Example

My goal for this project is to produce an easy-to-use website for teachers that showcases the major highlights of my literature review and provides ideas for teachers to increase the quality of the community environment in their own classrooms. The website features research-based models for conducting morning meetings, interactive group assignments from leading social-emotional curricula, as well as providing a collection of “new” community building activities and lessons easily adaptable to intermediate elementary classrooms. The website serves as a quick reference for teachers seeking a quick one-time activity, or maybe even for an idea that can become a ritual and tradition in their classrooms. The next section serves as a sample explanation of one of the community-building exercises featured on the site and one from which my students and I have realized a significant benefit.

Basketball hoop. When students first see that I have a mini-basketball hoop in my room, they often think that it will be used to goof around in class. While the essence of having a reminder of something fun in view works for some students as a token morale enhancer, the way it can be used for a daily team-building exercise is much more impactful on the classroom community. As a part of our end-of-the-day ritual, before the school day can end, one student needs to make a shot on the hoop.

Facilitation. At the end of each day, students gather and stand around the hoop in a scattered array, arranging themselves wherever they choose, some close, some farther

away. I stand near the hoop and control the ball to start. I randomly select a student to take a shot at the hoop, get the rebound when they miss, and then quickly select the next student to attempt a shot. I purposely do not let a student shoot a second time unless everyone else has had a chance (which usually doesn't happen). To eliminate students from trying to scramble to get a loose rebound, they know they have to pass the ball back to me, and then I will pass it to the next shooter.

Specifics. The hoop is miniature-sized, with a rim about 8 inches in diameter, and it can fit lodged on top of a door or bulletin board. I have it approximately 7 feet off the floor. The ball I use is a very soft, rubber, replica basketball about 4 inches in diameter; small and soft enough not to hurt anyone or damage any classroom equipment or materials. The specifics of the height of the hoop and type of ball are important to making this ritual successful as a community-building exercise. Making a shot needs to be slightly difficult, but not impossible. Students need to feel like they have a chance (even if it's a small one) to make the shot, but not so much that there is any implied expectation that any one individual will make a shot, or feel embarrassment if they don't. This encourages a shared goal, and shared ensuing celebration when someone does make the shot to send the class home for the day. The hoop is high enough, where some taller fifth graders can jump up and dunk the ball, but even short shots are not guaranteed to go in.

Daily ritual. Each day, as a part of our end-of-the-day ritual, one person from the class must make a shot in the basketball hoop before we can go home for the day. This immediately creates an opportunity for classmates to root for one another and experience being on the same team. We use this as a time when we need someone to "step up" and

come through for our group. When someone does make a shot, we get a chance to briefly celebrate that person's contribution to the group. The sense of pride -- albeit brief and on the surface seemingly frivolous -- serves as a confidence builder for the student and natural bond former for the individual to the rest of their classmates. For students who do not always get a chance to have their "work" celebrated or acknowledged by their peers, having a room full of their classmates cheering their accomplishment becomes a big deal. Of perhaps equal significance is the fact that we get to end each day with a moment of mutual celebration. Cheering, high-fiving, and building an overall excitement level keeps students engaged and looking forward to coming back the next day.

Differentiation. While some students wish they could always be the one to make the shot, others shy away from the role, not even wanting to make an attempt. This is one of the most valuable parts of the ritual. Because it is slightly difficult to make a shot and, not much pressure on anyone to make it, the vast majority of students (even those not drawn to athletic competition) typically volunteer often. Since students can choose where they want to shoot from, they can control the difficulty level of their shot themselves. Some will attempt to shoot from really far away, while others might opt for shorter, easier shots. Some students who feel very athletically inclined and confident will find it frustrating when they don't often make their shot attempt, which is also valuable learning. Because it is somewhat difficult to make a shot, there is an element of luck that comes into play. Students who don't feel like they are athletically coordinated and don't have much confidence in their shot attempt are often surprised to see the ball go in the hoop and their classmates whoop and cheer in their honor. These learning moments are

priceless for the building of community and play out naturally in the daily ritual at the basketball hoop. Not every student gets to shoot each day. This also creates social-emotional learning opportunities in that not every situation seems fair all of the time, but they start to realize that, sooner or later, they will all get plenty of chances to take a shot.

As well as providing ideas for important discussions and social-emotional learning experiences, this basketball hoop activity is an example of one of the strategies featured on the website. My hope is that it will serve as a resource for 21st century teachers to enhance their own community-building techniques in the classroom and, hopefully, develop their own.

Summary

Creating a healthy and nurturing, yet challenging, classroom environment proves to be of utmost importance in providing a social-emotion education for the students of today. This chapter provides a glimpse into the resulting project website, with a view of its functionality, and its potential contribution to the advancement of community-building, social-emotional learning for future use by other educators.

Looking Ahead

In Chapter Four, I will reflect on the professional journey that this Capstone Project has provided me. I will review elements of the literature that proved most influential through this process, as well as which played the most significant role in the creation of my project. The chapter will also explore the future utilization of this website

and how it can be a living work that evolves over time. Finally, I will conclude with a final reflection and acknowledgement of the entire process.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Four is to discuss applicable conclusions and reflections from my work investigating the question: *How can intermediate elementary teachers create student environments that foster social-emotional growth?* Educators are increasingly acknowledging the importance of creating classrooms where young people can build empathy and develop resilience. These social-emotional skills are the building blocks that put kids on the path to finding personal success and becoming positive contributors to society in the future.

This chapter will reflect on the direction that this work has taken me. I will discuss expected and unexpected learnings and revisit the most significant highlights of the literature review. Future next steps with this work will be discussed, including potential policy implications related to the redistribution of resources. Finally, the chapter will outline strategies for building awareness and promoting classroom community strategies featured on my website, as outlined in Chapter Three. It will also provide insight as to how this work can benefit the teaching profession as a whole and, ultimately, improve the lives of the young people in our classrooms.

Learnings

Throughout this process, it has been interesting to hear others' positive reactions to the social-emotional focus of my work. Other teachers recognize the significance of acknowledging and reaching the whole child. They understand that only teaching the

subject specific curriculum does not mean their students will succeed socially or emotionally. Thus, responses to the details of my rationale in Chapter One, as well as the findings of the literature review in Chapter Two, have been received with head nods and confirmations signaling “Yes, exactly, someone finally said what we all know.” Most teachers with whom I have spoken about my topic of study have been excited to see the highlights of the research in hopes that the importance of social-emotional learning will continue to impact their campuses and receive continued or increased focus for their students going forward.

It has also been interesting to consider how a teacher becomes adept at building social-emotional teaching into their daily routines in the classroom. While reflecting on this process, it has occurred to me that the competencies necessary for teachers to effectively implement these lessons are more closely tied to their own personalities than perhaps learning to teach a new math skill that they have never taught before. Building authentic social-emotional learning experiences becomes a more specific reflection of their own social-emotional competencies. Adult teachers are also in their own process of becoming more resilient and empathetic. As a math teacher would instruct a math skill according to their own understanding, a teacher might emphasize a certain social-emotional skill based on their own strengths and weaknesses as a person. Teachers who are handed a specific social-emotional curriculum like Second Step, will not necessarily be able to make the lessons resonate for students. This challenge is sometimes based on their own social-emotional competencies. The key, it seems, is not just acknowledging the need for social-emotional learning. Rather, the actual modeling,

implementing, and putting these competencies consistently into action is what becomes most important. Whether a specific social-emotional curriculum is being taught or not, it seems children can tell the difference between someone who builds their confidence, resilience, and empathy and a teacher who does not seem accessible, understanding, or model friendly behavior on a consistent basis.

Another interesting takeaway has been the hesitancy from those outside the teaching profession to understand the significance of social-emotional learning. It seems while everybody understands that these skills are important, many don't recall where exactly they learned them. Resilience, empathy, and other interpersonal skills are so ambiguous and hard to define as "mastered" or "learned" that emphasizing their explicit teaching is hard for some outside the teaching profession to recognize. Most adults today did not receive specific social-emotional instruction at school, so understanding the need for it today can be difficult.

Influence

Throughout the process of researching and writing the literature review of Chapter Two, many findings regarding the significance of social-emotional development in the classroom stood out as particularly insightful. First, the notion that it is impossible to separate the feelings of school "connectedness" from academic achievement (Battistich, 2001; Gibbs, 2006; Kriete & Davis, 2016) reflects the overall importance of my work. It illustrates the widespread influence of social-emotional skills over all learning in schools. Students simply do not perform to their potential unless they feel comfortable, respected, and valued by the classroom community. Secondly, the emphasis

of the teacher-student relationship and how a teacher's every action is imperative to the forming of a thriving classroom community (Deci & Ryan 1985; Poulou, 2009; Schaps & Lewis, 1999; Spilt & Hughes, 2015) remains a key element to the project's purpose. Also, it's worth noting that the value of healthy classroom discourse that "promotes independent thinking and self-efficacy" (Lloyd et al., 2016, p. 292) provides opportunities for most of these interpersonal competencies to be understood. Without healthy, open discussion, most of this type of learning would prove difficult. Finally, the lasting impact of children experiencing a healthy classroom community is profound (Hawkins et al., 1999; Schaps & Lewis, 1999; Spilt & Hughes, 2015). Elementary students with positive and nurturing, yet challenging, educational experiences become more resilient, empathetic, and productive as they continue on in school. And as continued school "connectedness" is linked to more positive social behavior outside of school (Battistich, 2001; Hawkins et al., 1999), the importance of capitalizing on every opportunity to build these skills while students are in elementary school is imperative.

Policy Implications

As school districts everywhere make tough decisions regarding the allocation of money toward curriculum resources, they would be wise to consider the impact of enhanced social-emotional learning for their students. Not only does community-strengthening instruction allow students to become better equipped for the rigors of school life, and productive citizenship, it can be cost effective, as well (Belfield et al., 2015). The early interventions that social-emotional learning provide can save school districts in the long run, compared to tackling difficult mental health issues and

substance abuse challenges for older students (Belfield et al., 2015). I would advocate that every school should adopt official measures to ensure that their students are experiencing positive school and teacher connections from an early age, especially during the formative intermediate elementary years of third, fourth, and fifth grades. In many districts, evaluation of a teacher's ability to provide an environment where students can build social-emotional competency is an increased measure of teacher effectiveness. I would argue that these elements should take on an increased weight over heightened subject curricula and elevated testing standards that too often dominate attention in today's school culture.

Limitations

I have realized there are two different limiting factors for my work on social-emotional learning. First, as much as this work has touted the influence and importance of a classroom and school community and the teacher's role in providing opportunities for learning empathy and resilience, educators cannot, unfortunately, control every facet of a child's life. Some students' lives outside of school do not provide the emotional or physical stability to allow a young person to thrive. While teachers can go to every length possible to help a child build empathy and resilience, if there are factors existing at home to negate or de-emphasize that learning, the road is tough. In most cases, parents and home experiences still provide more influence, whether positive or negative, than a child's school experience. This, however, does not diminish or detract from the importance of a continued school focus on social-emotional learning or make it a worthless enterprise in the face of home influences. For most kids, a balance between

school and support at home is needed for building empathy, resilience, and strengthened interpersonal skills. And in situations where a child lacks positive influences at home, school “connectedness” (Battistich, 2001) can provide hope for a better life.

Secondly, to understand the truly lasting impact of an elementary student's experience, studies longitudinal in nature are needed. While some of these are featured in Chapter Two (Battistich, 2001; Hawkins et al., 1999), most only extended to age 18 or 21. I would be interested in further long-term examination of the lives of students as they grow into adulthood. Does experiencing a thriving classroom community in elementary school translate into increased job fulfillment, relationship satisfaction, and a consistent voting record? As increased awareness of social-emotional learning and research occurs, I hope to see studies addressing these questions in the years to come.

Next Steps

In the future, I hope my work on this project can be understood and utilized by as many teachers as possible. The purpose of carrying out this research and developing the website is to make social-emotional learning strategies more accessible and enjoyable for teachers to implement in their classrooms. While there are many choices available to districts for official and comprehensive social-emotional learning curricula, the ideas featured on my site can bridge the gap between district-selected, official curriculum like Second Step, Tribes, or Responsive Classroom, and a teacher's own toolbox of individual strategies to make their classroom a unique place for students. The ideas featured on the site can be adapted to a teacher's own personality and preferences and can be differentiated, as necessary, relative to the strengths and weaknesses of the group of

students currently in the classroom. For example, ending the day with a “classmate compliment” is an easy way to build in a team building experience. Depending on the makeup of the students, this may necessitate a lengthy discussion of its purpose or a class may have the maturity to grasp this idea quickly and put it into action easily.

The site is featured on my district’s website as a Social-Emotional Teaching Resource and as teachers increasingly go online to find quick ideas for their rooms, I will also use social media platforms of Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to gain views of my work. As districts and individual educators increasingly emphasize this type of learning, I would hope that more and more teachers will see my site and adapt these ideas to give their students increased opportunities for building resilience and developing empathy. I also hope that teachers realize that these ideas enable them to bring in more of their own personality and fun to the classroom, making their days more enjoyable, as well as expanding students’ interpersonal competencies.

Summary

This chapter considers the process through which this project has taken me. Individuals inside and outside of the teaching profession have shared interesting and valuable viewpoints and interpreted the focus of this work through the lens of their own social-emotional competencies. The research on this subject continues to stress the significant implications of successes and failures of this type of learning at a young age. Although limitations regarding the reach of the school’s influence are present and further longitudinal studies are necessary, the importance of social-emotional learning is immense. Perhaps we will see a shift in the distribution of resources as districts and

state-level decision makers continue to understand these issues. If, in some way, my website project can help increase the professional and community awareness for these topics, then it will have been proved a success.

Conclusion

Teachers today attempt to fill the impossible role of saving the world through the impact of their work with the students in their care. Heightened curriculum demands and elevated testing standards (with less and less planning time) threaten to make successful teaching unattainable. However, in these noble pursuits teachers can find comfort in the simplicity of the ideas laid out by social-emotional learning. If teachers and schools can provide environments where students can take chances, learn, and grow as part of a thriving community where individual differences are valued, and build empathy and resilience, then these students will be able to find success in the future. They will be able to make healthy choices and positive contributions to society. As important as tonight's math homework or tomorrow's test score may be, cultivating students who can think critically, act responsibly, and treat others respectfully will always prove to be more imperative to their growth as individuals and the betterment of society as a whole. Every day and every moment in the classroom matters. Teachers have this power.

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Appendix A: Parental Permission for Photo Release

10-15-17

Dear Parents,

I am in the process of finishing my Master of Arts in Teaching degree from Hamline University in St. Paul, MN. My work centers around the question: *How can intermediate elementary teachers create student environments that foster student social-emotional growth?* This research has profiled the lasting impact that a positive classroom community environment can have on long-term student success.

As a part of my final capstone project, I am putting together a website that other educators can use as a resource when looking for ideas to help students build empathy and resilience in their own classroom community. For this site, I wish to include some photos to help explain some of the team building activities that are a part of our routine in our 5th grade classroom. Upon completion, you will be able to access the site via the internet.

As a parent or guardian of this student, you have the option to give consent for your son or daughter to be included or not. In no way will participation in this project impact the student's grades, participation in normal daily activities, or standing in the classroom. The taking of these photographs will not take away from any instruction time in the classroom.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns regarding this project.

Thanks,
Scott Norman

___ Yes, I give consent for my child to be included in photographs for this website project. I do this with full knowledge and consent and waive all claims for compensation for use, or for damages.

___ No, I do not authorize for my child to be included in any photograph for this website project.

Parent Signature: _____ Date: _____
Student's Name: _____