

Community Building in the 5-Year-Old Kindergarten Classroom to Promote Children's Well-Being

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ABSTRAK

Community building in a kindergarten classroom refers to teachers' intentional efforts to foster a friendly, inclusive, and collaborative atmosphere in which children feel valued and connected to one another. This process entails building relationships between student and teacher which are critical for establishing a feeling of belonging. Children are at a vital period of social and emotional development when they are five years old. Therefore, building a solid community may have a big influence on their overall well-being.

Keywords: *Children's Well-Being; Community Building; Early Childhood Education; Kindergarten Classroom; Social Development.*

INTRODUCTION

At the age of five, children are in a vital developmental stage in which social interactions and emotional ties have a big impact on their overall growth. Schools are the primary places for children to spend their time after their families. Therefore, creating a friendly and supportive environment inside a kindergarten classroom is critical to promote children's well-being. Early childhood experiences and schooling impact children's capacity to manage social, emotional, and behavioral demands (Ciani et al., 2010). Research suggests that seeing the classroom as a community might increase motivation for learning and develop a sense of responsibility through group belonging (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). This study examines the concept's potential for increasing children's emotional and social development.

Research indicates that students who have experienced chronic stress or trauma may struggle to acquire and integrate new material (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010). Chronic childhood stress and complex trauma have an influence on brain growth and function, impacting children's emotional, cognitive, social, physical, and behavioral development (NSCDC, 2014). Chronic stress and trauma can cause harmful behaviors and relationship issues, as well as problems with emotional self-regulation, poor self-esteem with feelings of shame and guilt, hostility and distrust in interpersonal interactions, and depression. As a result, harmed children frequently struggle to form friendships. They tend to avoid the quality of experiences and social contact that may compromise their socialization (Luecken & Lemery, 2004).

Teachers should promote young children's social and emotional development and form their behavior to foster a sense of belonging and respect in class. Consider the classroom as a supportive environment for children who have social and emotional issues. This study examined how people in The Wellbeing Classroom project were influenced by the concept of class as a community (McInnes et al., 2015). The classroom's major aspects were identified using a community-based approach throughout project execution.

The Wellbeing Classroom initiative utilized sociocultural theory, which suggests that meaning is actively formed via daily interactions in the learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's theory of the socially formed mind suggests that individuals build their minds via interactions with important people. The socially formed mind theory suggests that community plays a crucial influence in children's intellectual development. Expert scaffolding in learning situations may diminish the role of the instructor while increasing learner competency.

Sociological study defines 'community' as a sense of belonging, emotional connection, need fulfillment, and influence inside a group (Nowell & Boyd, 2014). Groups can be formed based on area, cultural practices, identification, or cohorts to fulfill members' desires for belonging, influence, and

connection. A sense of community in the classroom may generate a feedback loop for students, leading to a sense of accomplishment, efficacy, and identity. Individuals who have challenges in the group are not ostracized, but rather encouraged to communicate and adjust to fit their requirements. The Wellbeing Classroom initiative defined 'community' as a setting for children's learning, relationships, healing, and growth. The classroom provides a community-like setting for children to learn social and emotional skills, receive guidance, and correct mistakes. Perry (2009) found that the classroom provides children with several opportunities to acquire and relearn socially suitable thinking and behaviors, which are not achievable in individual treatment settings. Additionally, reputable people serve as role models and teach necessary skills.

According to McInnes et al. (2015), classroom communities may foster trust, power-sharing, and non-judgmental interactions where all students are respected. This technique requires instructors to cede authority and teach children about both their own and other people's feelings, emphasizing the need of acknowledgment. Teaching social and emotional skills is vital in settings like this. Children learn norms of society and practice prosocial behaviors in low-risk settings (McCaskill, 2007). Classroom engagement fosters a sense of community, teaching students to support one another emotionally and provide space and support when disturbed. This strategy ensures that children feel protected, respected, and welcomed at school. A strong sense of community significantly improves children's emotional well-being. When students feel secure and encouraged in the classroom, they are more inclined to express themselves freely and explore their feelings without fear of being judged. This emotional security promotes resilience and helps children to deal with problems both inside and outside of the classroom. Furthermore, positive relationships with peers and teachers can boost self-esteem and confidence.

In this situation, the teacher is likely to require assistance. McInnes et al. (2015) observed that throughout the project's early deployment, teachers were supervised to execute key changes before progressively becoming independent. Teacher could use two materials to enhance children's social and emotional abilities during the project. Street et al. (2004) describe that play is the way as a cooperative physical games program that encourages children to work together for positive outcomes. Structured activities and language encourage peer support, trust, respect, and understanding by activating children's emotions. Children need emotional control to engage, understand others' needs and interests, and collaborate for success (McCaskill, 2007).

Classroom as community approach involves parents, creating a safe transition between home and school. Parents of children with chronic stress and trauma typically face comparable pressures. The community strategy includes organizing evening activities for families and encouraging informal connections with teachers. Children apply what they've learned about dispute resolution to their daily lives. According to Perry (2009), parents have a crucial role in creating supportive environments for children who have experienced trauma. Knowledgeable and effective parents increase the likelihood of successful support. This is because community building extends beyond the classroom walls, involving families as educational partners. When schools actively incorporate parents in activities or strategies for communication that encourage family participation, the home-school connection improves. This collaboration not only helps children learn, but it also strengthens their sense of belonging to both their school community and their family group.

RESEARCH METHODS

Building a sense of community in a kindergarten classroom is crucial for promoting children's well-being. Hence, the study used qualitative approaches, including direct observations of classroom interactions and organized interviews with the teachers. Both observation and interview are aimed to understand and enhance community building. Qualitative observation is a research approach that focuses on understanding persons' experiences, behaviors, and interactions in their natural settings. In the setting of a kindergarten classroom, qualitative observation can reveal important information on how community building activities affect children's well-being. This method enables educators and researchers to collect comprehensive, descriptive data that can influence activities aimed at creating a supportive and loving environment for young children (McCaskill, 2007).

Observations were carried out for two weeks, starting from 1st July 2024 to 12th July 2024. There are 7 (seven) five-year-old children from a kindergarten in Sunshine, Victoria, who comes from a

variety of backgrounds, including Australian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Chinese. The data was also collected from two reflective interviews with kindergarten teacher and her educator assistant. This research aims to capture the dynamics of the classroom setting, with an emphasis on how students interacted with one another and their teachers throughout various activities. Interviews with instructors gave insights into their tactics for establishing community, while interviews with students revealed their ideas of belonging and friendship in the classroom.

The research used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where participants' remarks were categorized by theme. Thematic analysis helps researchers analyze and summarize participants' experiences, meanings, and realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81), resulting in fresh discoveries. There were some strategies used by the teacher for community building approach. Teacher practiced professional learning and embraced a 'classroom as community' approach, drawing inspiration from several resources, including Making Space for Learning (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010). Then, the teacher developed trusting connections with and among the children, which included starting with them and modeling emotional self-regulation. At the end, the teacher provided an explicit social-skills intentional experience plan based on Play is the Way (McCaskill, 2007), incorporating its underlying ideas and vocabulary into ordinary classroom interactions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Community building in a kindergarten classroom is essential for fostering children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. This research focuses on a small cohort of seven children and two kindergarten teachers, exploring how community-building activities can enhance children's well-being. The findings are based on observations as well as interviews with teachers and 5-year-old kindergarten children.

1. Social Interaction and Peer Relationships

Structured group activities such as circle time, collaborative games, and shared projects led to improved social contact among the children. These activities enabled children to communicate effectively, share resources, and form friendships. Teachers saw that children who were initially hesitant or reluctant to participate became more active with time. This transition was linked to the supportive environment created by community-building methods. Based on the observation, the writer found although classrooms have the potential to be communities, they are not always 'communities' as Nowell and Boyd (2014) describe them. Collaborative learning experiences allowed children to engage in problem-solving together, enhancing critical thinking skills. For instance, group projects required negotiation skills and collective decision-making. Observations indicated that children who participated in these collaborative efforts showed improved academic engagement compared to those who worked alone.

"I saw that children were engaging the time when we were having a project to create a poster. It was when we asked them to find any food picture in the magazine, cut it with the scissor and paste it in the big poster. They had discussed each other with their peers, then they built various questions and answer to form effective communication." (Kindergarten Teacher interview)

"I like to talk about food with my friends. Because it makes me happy" (Children Interview 1)

"We asked each other about our favorite food. I found a box of chocolate in the magazine, but I don't like chocolate, so I cut that picture and give it to my friend. Because she likes chocolate" (Children Interview 2)

Both teacher and children considered this class as a community. This method facilitated children's secure social and emotional development. The teacher used Individual approach to see the classroom as a sequence of experiences involving each student.

2. Emotional Support and Security

The existence of a cohesive community in the classroom gave emotional stability to the students. Teachers established routines that included daily check-ins for students to share their feelings. This method allowed children to feel appreciated and understood. Children reported feeling happier and more secure when they knew their peers were available to help them through difficult activities or disagreements.

“Every morning around 10 am, we have a group time. And during that time, we always discuss about feelings. We have several types of emotions in front of the board. We ask all children to raise their hand to talk about their feelings on that day.” (Kindergarten Teacher interview)

“I’m sad today, my mom forgot my water bottle at home” (Children interview 3)

“I’m happy. My grandma bought a new toy for me” (Children interview 4)

3. Sense of Belonging

Activities designed to promote inclusivity such as “All About Me” presentations helped each child feel recognized as an integral part of the classroom community. This sense of belonging was crucial for their self-esteem. The teachers emphasized creating a culture where differences were celebrated, which contributed positively to children’s perceptions of themselves and others.

“We always celebrate Ramadan, Eid Fitr, Christmas, Halloween, Anzac Day, Easter, etc to promote diversity and sense of belonging for all children” (Teacher Assistant interview)

“I’m not Christian, but I like the time when I received a gift from Santa” (Children interview 5)

“My neighbor gave me a box of cookies during Eid Fitr” (Children interview 6)

Classroom development of communities relies heavily on a sense of belonging. The strategy fostered an inclusive school environment where students felt valued, even if they exhibited antisocial behavior. A strong sense of belonging, emotional connection, need fulfillment, and influence are essential for the children.

4. Teacher-Child Relationships

According to the Australian Childhood Foundation (2010), teachers should prioritize one-on-one interaction with students. Teacher-initiated exchanges help create connections. The two teachers in this paper played a pivotal role in community building by modeling positive interactions and establishing trust with each child. Their approachability encouraged open communication. Regular feedback sessions between teachers and students fostered an environment where children felt comfortable sharing their thoughts about classroom dynamics.

“I believe it is good to getting to know each student personally. I learned during counseling training that we need to emphasize the need of understanding a person's difficulties before assisting them. I try to pay attention to what children say, especially during casual interactions. To understand more about the children, I typically sit with them over lunchtime and talk to a couple of them.” (Kindergarten Teacher interview)

“We’re trying to create a happy learning environment for all children. So, they will enjoy their learning by doing” (Teacher Assistant Interview)

“I love my teacher. Because they are very nice and always help me” (Children interview 7)

Discussion

The findings highlight the relevance of purposeful community-building initiatives in the kindergarten environment for children's overall well-being. Educators can significantly improve children's experiences during this formative stage by fostering social interactions among peers, providing emotional support, creating a sense of belonging, encouraging collaborative cognitive development, and nurturing teacher-child relationships. Morgan et al. (2015) suggest that teachers should shift their focus from delivering content and achieving quantitative outcomes to developing true relationships with their students. According to Nolan et al. (2014), teachers who establish trustworthy connections with their students can serve as emotional management role models. Establish trustworthy connections could be from casual interaction or group time. This is aligned with Mary (2014), group time and collaborations can significantly increase children's empathy and comprehension over time. This aligns with the teacher's focus on teaching social and emotional skills explicitly.

The implications for practice imply that kindergarten teacher should incorporate community-building efforts into their curriculum design. Training programs that focus on successful inclusiveness techniques can provide educators with the tools they need to create a healthy classroom environment. Furthermore, constant evaluation of community dynamics should be incorporated into teaching techniques to allow for adaptations in response to children's changing needs. Investing time and resources into building a strong classroom community not only benefits individual children but also contributes positively to the overall educational environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Children at the age of five are in a crucial stage of development where social interactions and emotional connections play a significant role in their growth. Creating a supportive and friendly environment in kindergarten classrooms is essential for promoting children's well-being. Research has shown that children's early experiences in school can impact their social, emotional, and behavioral development. Teachers should view the classroom as a community to enhance children's motivation for learning and sense of responsibility. Observations and interviews conducted in a kindergarten classroom revealed that community-building activities positively impacted children's social interactions, emotional well-being, and sense of belonging. Structured group activities and routines that focused on emotions and inclusivity helped children develop social skills, build friendships, and feel secure in their environment. Teachers played a crucial role in establishing community-building efforts, modeling positive interactions, and fostering trust with each child. By prioritizing one-on-one interactions and providing regular feedback sessions, teachers can create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Encouraging collaboration and celebrating diversity further strengthens classroom communities and promotes positive outcomes for children's overall development. Building a sense of community in kindergarten classrooms is vital for promoting children's well-being and fostering their social, emotional, and cognitive development. By focusing on creating supportive environments, encouraging social interactions, and developing strong relationships between teachers and students, educators can significantly enhance children's educational experiences and overall growth.

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