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Emotionally Safe Classrooms

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Abstract

This Capstone Project focused on creating an emotionally safe classroom. To learn more about how to effectively support students in the classroom environment, research was conducted to get an insider's perspective from a school that has effectively created a safe environment for students. A teacher and the principal of Cedarcreek Elementary School, located in Canyon Country, California were interviewed. Based on the information gathered from both a literature review and the interviews, it was decided that a "Fill your Bucket" program would be implemented at this school. The goal of this program is for students at Cedarcreek to gain more emotional stability and a larger insight into the emotions of others.

Introduction

Backstory

I have always been a shy person, especially in a classroom setting. As a student, you are surrounded by 20-40 other students and a teacher. So saying something, your true feelings, thoughts, or even just answering a question can be intimidating. There are so many people there to hear your thoughts, to judge on the way you think or feel, or if you answer something wrong. This intimidation always leads to me just sitting in class quietly and listening to what everyone has to say and keeping my views to myself.

In high school, I took a few college prep classes and in those classes I was always one of the smartest students. When the teacher would ask a question I almost always knew the answer. However, I would never raise my hand. Years of fear speared by the judgment of fellow classmates prevented me from being able to speak. There were multiple times where no one else knew the answer and since I was unwilling to raise my hand the teacher was forced to answer. Had I felt safe to share, like I truly had the support of my classmates, I would have felt able to share in class.

What is the Issue/problem, and/or Opportunity?

This fear steams back to elementary school, when there were multiple times that my classmates would giggle whenever someone made a mistake. If my classes had been emotionally safe, I would have been much more comfortable to speak in them and to let my personality show. So the problem we are faced with is how to create a classroom that is emotionally safe?

The Concern

I have spent most of my life too afraid to say anything in a classroom. As someone who wants to be a teacher, I never want a student to feel that way. As teachers, we are given the opportunity to actually create a more emotionally safe place for all of the students.

The Context

When I was in sixth grade I had one of my favorite teachers, Mr. G. On the first day of Mr. G's class he addressed the class saying that there is no such thing as a stupid question and to never be afraid to answer something wrong. As a class, we were to be a family, support each other, and to never make someone feel bad about not knowing something. That was one of the best years I had. Whenever I knew the answer to one of his questions my hand would shoot up into the air. Knowing that I would not be ostracized for a mistake I was so excited to talk. Mr. G was successfully able to create an emotionally safe environment in our class and it had a wonderful effect. I really want to be able to do this in every classroom, in every school. To help create a supportive generation who do not judge people on their mistakes but instead kindly guide them to the right answer.

The Stakeholders

Creating an emotionally safe classroom is a universal problem. This problem is absolutely relevant in our local schools because it is important for every classroom to be a safe place. While the majority of classrooms are physically safe, not all are emotionally safe. An added benefit of creating these safe classrooms is that it will hopefully lead to less bullying. Our community could greatly benefit from practices like these.

The Commonplaces

Many people just assume that classrooms are emotionally safe, and to a certain extent, they are. However, classrooms are, for the most part, not as emotionally safe as they should be.

The reality is that many classrooms still have many outbursts and issues that could be solved by helping students to understand their emotions.

Key Terms

When I say emotionally safe, I mean a classroom where teachers pay attention to the underling needs of students. When a student is going through problems at home, like a divorce, the teacher takes the time to talk to students about these issues and the feelings that arise. There is so much more that goes into being a great teacher than just caring for the students physical needs.

Literature Review

Creating an emotionally safe environment in the classroom is such an important part of teaching. However, many teachers do not see or understand that they do not always create one. Some teachers do not even understand the importance of creating this environment. To some, all that matters is that a child is physically safe. Being a teacher and protecting children is so much more than just their physical needs. Children need to be enriched in an emotionally safe environment so that they have a chance to express themselves and learn who they are without the fear of stigmatization.

When a child is unable to develop emotionally in an effective manner it can create many problems for them I the future. Children need to be able to develop emotionally if they will ever become a productive citizen. Krementizer (2005) emphasizes this by stating, "good early childhood teachers inherently know that they are a significant influence on the future academic and life success of their students" (p. 3). The first few academic years of a child's life can really shape their whole developmental process. Many teachers do not even notice that there may be problems with their students on an emotional level. Sometimes, the non-disruptive issues in the

classroom are completely ignored and that can lead to some very dire consequences (Dobie & Tacker, 2008). Bub discusses the further implications that can occur when a child is unable to develop emotionally (2009), "social and behavioral problems can interfere with a child's acquisition of age-appropriate skills, which may lead to antisocial behavior in adolescence and adulthood" (p. 130). If a child is unable to fully develop emotionally during their childhood, it can and more often than not, will affect them for the rest of their lives.

With the way schooling is set up right now, there is no time to take care of the emotional problems that children are facing. In today's classrooms, testing is becoming so important, according to Wepner (2006) it has gotten to the point that the "nation's schools now must use testing to label themselves as successful or unsuccessful to provide information for, among other things, the United States' international standing" (p. 136). Test scores are becoming more and more important for schools and according to Wepner (2006), "new teachers today must address standards and high-stakes testing at every turn because of their unmistakable prominence and permanence" (p. 137). With the increasing importance of test scores, some of the other responsibilities slip away. Dolls, Spies, and Champion (2012), further explain this issue, "In the current climate emphasizing academic standards, schools are quickly criticized for diverting any resources into school programs to strengthen children's social and emotional competence and psychological wellness" (p. 44). Schools are so pushed to do well on tests that teacher are forced to focus their time and energy on that instead of some other important problems like emotional issues that students may be having.

Within the classroom setting, there can be many mental health and emotional issues. These issues can lead to major disruptions in the classrooms, so much so that Conroy and Brown (2004) found that "teachers reported an average of three disruptive children per classroom" (p.

224). These children typically become disruptive because they are handling emotional issues that occur outside of the classroom. According to research conducted by Conroy and Brown (2004), "the relationship between environmental risk factors and the development of emotional or behavioral disorders (E/BD) in young children is well established" (p. 224). There is a direct link between the condition of the environment that a child is in and how well that child will develop behaviorally. Sadly, the problems within the children's environment that lead them to having these behavioral issues are not handles well by teachers. According to

Dobie (2008), "Issues are not addressed until they result in a classroom disruption and then are handled on a case-by-case basis" (p. 55). Waiting until the emotional issues become a bigger problem is not the way to deal with these concerns; this just leads to much bigger problems that could have been avoided.

There are many solutions that we could implement to help students with the emotional issues that they may be having, one of these solutions would be to have school assemblies. Baker (2012) asked teacher what they do to help students with their problems and "assembly provision linked to celebrating pupils' achievement, religious festivals and special days were raised as were times of quiet reflection, linked at times with sadness, death and concerns about a whole range of issues" (p. 158). School assemblies that promote student achievement and happiness can help with w wide range of problems. School assemblies can be helpful in teaching students important ethics (Clearinghouse, 2006). In a study done by Reynolds (2007) it was discovered that "to deal with problems in students' lives, teachers created lessons or units, used school units or assemblies, employed the help of guidance professionals, or adapted packaged

program materials and methods" (p. 55). School assemblies can help students a lot with the

emotional issues that they may be experiencing.

Another solution that can help children to overcome the problems in their lives is class

discussions. According to Clearinghouse (2006) in order to help students with their issues there

are "lectures, group discussions, and small-group activities are used with topical sessions that

include moral awareness, values definition, ethical analysis, and dilemma resolution" (p. 2).

Class or group discussions can be very beneficial to handling one's dilemmas in their life.

Group discussions where hypothetical questions are asked and where role playing is done can be

extremely helpful for students to understand each other better (Reynolds, 2007). Rearranging the

seats in the classroom so that everyone is able to face one another can make the class discussion

even more effective for the students (Ezzedeen, 2008). By creating this open environment and

allowing for students to discuss how they feel and giving them some strategies to deal with these

feelings, students can improve their emotional condition.

Another great way that emotional issues can be better dealt with is by implementing a

school wide program that addresses these problems. There are many different school wide

programs that can be used. One of these programs is Building Decision Skills, which is designed

to raise students' awareness of ethics, values, and dealing with ethical dilemmas (Clearinghouse,

2006). After implementing this program Clearinghouse stated that (2006) "the WWC rated the

program as having potentially positive effects in the knowledge, attitudes, and values domain"

(p. 3). Another great program is the Kindness Program which rewards children whenever they

say something nice to another student (De Souza & McLean, 2012). According to De Souza and

McLean (2012) the goal of the program is that "kindness potentially becomes an inherent trait so

that students non-consciously project such behavior without seeking a reward other than their

own satisfaction at having been kind to someone" (p. 178). These programs cost some money, but their benefits are great and outweigh the costs (Blonigen et. El., 2008). School wide programs can be extremely beneficial to helping students with their problems.

Method

Research Question

What do a Cedarcreek Elementary School teacher and the principal have to say about the best way to effectively create an emotionally safe environment in a classroom setting?

Action Project Significant/Need and Benefits

For many children it can be terrifying to share their opinions or to answer a question in class. These children are afraid to be ridiculed for being different or for giving the wrong answer. Many children can be harsh to one another and judge others for being different without even realizing they are doing so. We put so much effort into making sure that schools are a safe place by keeping weapons and violence out of schools. However, we do not seem to do such a great job at making sure schools are emotionally safe places as well.

After interviewing the principal and teacher from Cedarcreek Elementary School I have learned some of the most effective ways to create an emotionally safe environment. This is important because it will allow me and other teachers to learn from this particular principal and teacher on what they have done that has made their students feel safer.

The expected benefits include providing the participants an opportunity to evaluate their own views and processes involved in creating an emotionally safe environment. As well as helping a new generation of teachers to create an emotionally safe environment for their students.

Researcher

This project means so much to me. As a child and even to a certain extent today, I am a selective mute and I have social anxiety. I have always been afraid to speak in class because of how people would treat me based on what I said. There are many other students like me, afraid to share their thoughts for the fear of being ostracized or laughed at. However, this is not how a classroom should be; a classroom should be a safe place. If all students are taught to treat one another with respect and not to judge others for their views a classroom would feel much more safe and open to express oneself there. With all of my past experience I am a good person to conduct this research. I understand how intimidating a classroom can be and I also know how supportive a class of supportive students and teacher can be.

What makes me different from students now is that I have crossed the threshold from student to teacher. As for the teachers and principal, I am different from them because my experience has been in an affluent area. However, they work in an area where everyone is either lower middle class or just lower class. I have done my best not to let these differences cloud my judgment and taint my research.

Context

In order to create a useful solution to our problem it is important to conduct research in an actual classroom. For my research I have decided to look at Cedarcreek Elementary School. This school is located in Canyon Country, California. This area and school are mostly populated by Hispanics and by lower-income families.

At Cedarcreek, they really try to create a family atmosphere; they want to teach the students socially, emotionally, and academically. This school also strives to create a positive and support atmosphere where the students are able to become productive, responsible, and well-

educated people. With all that Cedarcreek believes in as a school, it is obvious that it is the ideal school for me to conduct my research.

Participants

I have invited the principal and one of the teachers to participate in this study. They are both members of the Cedarcreek staff and with different job positions they have different perspectives on the problem. The participants are both adamant about creating a safe and happy environment for children.

I, Jennifer Esswein, made initial contact with the participants through email. Any follow up contact was and will be made both through text messaging and in person; as I have a personal relationship with both participants.

There are minimal risks involved because this project is about keeping classrooms a safe place. My only goal is to create a respectful and supportive environment within the classroom and not to impose anything on anyone.

Procedure

My initial interviews were conducted via a phone call. I wrote out the questions that I had and emailed them to my participants so they could start thinking about their answers before the actual interview. When the participants were ready and at their earliest convenience, they called me so that we were able to discuss the questions together. I had the phone call on speaker and use a recording device to record the interview. Any follow up questions I had occurred via more emails or text messages. If my stakeholders have any questions for me they are also welcome to call or text me at any time.

Interview Questions or other data collection tool

For my interviews, my two stakeholders are the principal and one of the teachers of Cedarcreek Elementary School. I asked each of them a series of questions. The questions that I asked the principal are listed in Appendix A and the questions that I asked the teacher are listed in Appendix B. I also have included the interview protocol sheet in Appendix C. For these interviews I will just needed access to email, a phone, a tape recorder, and a notebook so I could take notes during the interviews.

Data Analysis

After the interviews and all of the other research I had conducted, I had a lot of information. To do my data analysis I simply just looked at all of it together till I could form some actual meaning from it all. I did my best to take commonalities from all of the research and use it to create this data.

Results

After conducting all of my interviews and finishing up all of my research for this project I was able to come up with some emergent themes. While looking at all of the information I gathered, I was able to find some commonalities. From those, I was able to truly find the important aspects of this project.

Emergent Themes

Specific problems and solutions to those problems were the main concepts that seemed to jump out at me when I was conducting my data analysis. Many times in the classroom, emotional issues go unnoticed or even ignored until an actual outburst occurs. TO prevent this from happening, look for these types of issues and address them when they first occur so it does not become a larger issue. Even without noticing it, children can say or do something that hurts another student emotionally. When this happens, talk to the class about what happened, without

using any names, and discuss how it can make someone feel. For the fear of being judged, some

students are afraid to voice their opinions and feelings. However, if you talk to the class about

how it is an open and safe environment and you continuously make sure to keep it that way, it

should be fine.

Problems	Solutions
Emotional issues are ignored until an outburst occurs.	Look out for emotional issues and address them immediately.
Children can be emotionally hurtful to one another.	When someone has done something hurtful, have a class discussion about it.
Children may be afraid to voice their feelings.	Have a discussion with the class about being open and accepting others when they are.

There can be many problems that arise when a classroom is not emotionally safe. By

creating an open environment for safe and kind dialogue the students will feel more comfortable.

The classroom environment will improve greatly when more students are sharing and they are

sharing their true feelings.

Action Project

Identification & Evaluation of Action Options

Identify Focus Issue or Problem

Classrooms need to be safe in all fashions. While most classrooms are physically safe;

many, do not take children's emotional well being into consideration. As teachers, we need to

find a way to make sure we care for the emotions of our students.

Action Options

There are many different actions that can be taken to solve this problem of classrooms not being emotionally safe. The first would be a school assembly that discusses how to treat one another in a fair way. A second would be to have a class discussion about emotions and treating one another kindly which should be revisited anytime an issue comes up. The last option would be to implement a program, similar to the Kindness Program, which helps students become more aware of others' emotions. All of these, if done correctly, can be extremely beneficial.

Evaluation of Action Options

There are many criteria that need to be considered when evaluating which of these three action options would be best to use. The main criteria that I am using to make my decision are potency (the strength of the action), reach, and reasonability.

	Potency	**Reach**	**Reasonability**
Assembly	Low	Mediocre	High
Discussion	Mediocre	High	High
Program	High	High	Low

Evaluation of Evidence

As shown in the graph, an assembly is low on potency since it is a onetime action, reach is mediocre because only the students who pay attention will learn anything, and it is high on reasonability because all you need is to get the teachers and principal together to create an effective assembly. A class discussion is mediocre on potency because discussions can be had over and over again, high on reach because it is harder for a child to zone out during multiple discussions, and high in reasonability because it is easy to take ten minutes once a week or so to

have a talk. As for the program, it is high on potency because every day the children will be

letting each other know when they did something good, high on reach because every student and

even staff members will be involved, and low on reasonability because it is harder to set up and

keep going.

Decision Making

Recommendation

After looking at all of the pros and cons for these different actions, I would recommend

doing a program similar to the Kindness Program. The way to implement it though, will be to

have both children and staff fill out little sheets to give their peers when the peer has done a good

or kind action.

Influence of Context and Assumptions

While this action may be harder to implement than the others, I do believe that in the end,

it will be well worth the effort. I have already talked to the staff at Cedarcreek Elementary

School and they fully support this decision and want to try it out. It is my assumption, that by

taking the time out of their day to thank one another for the little kind actions they make, both

the thanker and the thanked will feel a sense of happiness and appreciation. With this, students

should learn to be kind to one another and will become more aware of the emotions of each

other. With the help of this program, the students should, hopefully, become respectful citizens

who are conscious of others' feelings.

Your position

Concession

The two actions that I am not recommending do have some wonderful strengths as well.

Assemblies have the ability to reach many students at once and you have more adults included to

help reiterate the point being made. Class discussions are great too because they can be molded

to fit what is going on in the class and with certain students at the time of the discussion.

Limitations

To be honest, I could be completely wrong about this whole program. The program could

easily work for a few days then slowly is forgotten about and have no lasting effect. Also, the

students may not even care about the program and it may not make them feel anything when they

give or receive one of these slips.

Potential Negative Outcome

A possible negative outcome of this program is that only popular students are ever given

slips and the less liked children, who could use these slips the most, may be completely ignored.

Conclusions and Related Outcomes

There are some possible problems with this project, but overall, I still see it as a good

idea. I do truly believe that this will make students more conscious of each others' emotions and

how what they say and do can affect their peers. If this does work, then the popular kids will

realize that they need to include the less liked students as well. The possible benefits are well

worth the try.

Action Project Description, Documentation, Reflection

The action project I had decided to implement at Cedarcreek Elementary School is a "Fill

Your Bucket" program. The purpose of this project is to fill each other's bucket with notes that

state a positive action that was witnessed. There are different slips for staff members to give one

another and for students to give one another. Every student and staff member is given a small

metal bucket and some blank slips so that they can fill one another's buckets. When a student

witnesses a peer doing a positive action, such as following rules or keeping the school clean, they

fill out a sheet for their peer and give it to them. The same goes for staff members, when one helps another by sharing a lesson or making them smile, they fill out a sheet for their coworker.

Going into this project, I hoped that the students and staff would become more aware of the emotions that their peers experience. It was also my hope that students would feel good about pointing out positive actions to one another and that they would start to complement each other without any prompts to do so. In addition, by given people recognition for the good work they do, it encourages them to do good more often.

From what the staff at Cedarcreek and I have noticed, the program is working just as we hoped it would. My mother is the office manager at this school and she has told me that it really feels good to receive one of these slips and that she enjoys giving them out just as much. The students seem to be feeling the same way, they get this adorable little smile when they exchange slips. This program had started strong but I have noticed a little decline in its use.

If I were to ever try and do this again, I think I would offer a little more of an incentive so that these slips will keep being used. Maybe there could be a raffle every week; one for students and one for the staff. Every week they could put the slips into a jar and one could be pulled and the receiver and giver could both be given some kind of prize. Hopefully with this small incentive, the program would be utilized to its fullest potential.

While working on this action project I learned a lot about myself and about and about working toward change. I have realized that I really want people to be happy and that I never want someone to feel put down. As a future teacher, I am going to work extremely hard to make sure that my students understand that they need to treat each other with respect. However I will also do my best to teach them how to take criticism and how to not let what others say about them affect the way they feel. It is important to teach students how to be positive and respectful

citizens while still being prepared to deal with those who are not. Working toward a change is

really fun and rewarding. You find something that is not working very well and you try to

change it to better society.

Appendix A

1. Cedarcreek's vision and mission statement state the school's commitment to creating a

   family environment and teaching the children emotionally. What are some ways that your

   school creates this environment?

2. Is there anything specific that you try to have the teachers do to create this family

   environment?

3. Are there many instances where you see students, even unintentionally, putting others

   down emotionally?

4. When situations like that occur how do you react?

5. Some of the ways to create an emotionally safe environment is through readings,

   discussions, and assemblies. In your experience, which of these approaches have you used,

   and how well have the different approaches worked?

Appendix B

1. In an actual classroom setting what have you done to create a supportive environment?

2. What do you think has worked best for you to effectively teach students how to be respectful for one another?

3. In what ways do you feel you have done a good job of creating this supportive and emotionally safe environment?

4. How do you respond when you find one student disrespecting another?

5. Some of the ways to create an emotionally safe environment is through readings, discussions, and assemblies. In your experience, which of these approaches have you used, and how well have the different approaches worked?

Appendix C

CSUMB Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Project: Creating an Emotionally Safe Classroom Environment

We would like you to participate in a research study conducted by Jennifer Esswein, a student in

the Liberal Studies Department, to be used for a capstone project at California State University,

Monterey Bay.

The purpose of this research is to discover the most effective way to create an emotionally safe

classroom environment.

You were selected as a participant in this study because as a professional at Cedarcreek Elementary

School your insights into classroom environments would be very beneficial.

The benefits of participating in this project include the ability to evaluate your own views and

processes involved in creating an emotionally safe environment. As well as helping a new

generation of teachers to create an emotionally safe environment.

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to participate in a short interview.

The interview will be scheduled at your convenience and should take 20-30 minutes to complete.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you

will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your written or witnessed verbal

permission or as required by law. Furthermore, the data collected will only be used by the

researcher, who will change all names and identifying information in her capstone paper and

presentation. At the completion of this project, any audio-recorded interviews will be erased and

photographs destroyed.

Participating in this project is entirely up to you. You can choose whether or not to be in the study.

If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any

kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in

the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which

warrant doing so.

If you want to know more about this research project or have questions or concerns, please call me

at (661) 753-7539 or email me at jesswein@csumb.edu or call or email Dr. Deanne Pérez-

Granados, of the Liberal Studies Department (Phone: 831-582-4322, Email: dperez-

granados@csumb.edu).

The project has been reviewed and accepted by California State University, Monterey Bay. You

may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not

waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

If you have questions about CSUMB's rules for research, please call the Committee for Human

Subjects Chair, Chip Lenno, CSUMB Technology Support Services, 100 Campus Center,

Building. 43, Seaside CA 93955, 831.582.4799.

You will get a copy of this consent form. Thank you for considering participation.

Sincerely, Jennifer Esswein

Consent Statement

I understand the procedures described. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I

freely agree to participate in this study. I know what I will have to do and that I can stop at any

time.

I have been given a copy of this Consent Form.

_____	_____
Signature	Date

Signature of Researcher

In my judgment, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and

possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

_____   _____

Signature of Researcher   Date

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