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Adjusting Emotional Intelligence and Coping Mechanisms to Improve Classroom Behavior

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Abstract

Monterey Bay Charter School is a Waldorf K-8 school in Monterey, California that focuses on the restorative justice approach to discipline. Post-pandemic, student misconduct has increased 56% with 87% of schools nationwide reporting student behavior worsening (NCES, 2022). In one first-grade classroom at Monterey Bay Charter, a project was implemented to improve classroom behavior among a caseload of 5 students. The program consisted of students individually leaving class to participate in weekly emotional intelligence and coping mechanism workshops. At the end of the project, it was reported that 67% of participants improved their behavior, while 33% remained the same. The emotional and coping workshop initiative should be continued with young students as it is an effective way to improve classroom behavior.

Keywords: youth, coping, emotional intelligence, classroom behavior, classroom management

Agency, and Communities Served

The community being addressed and served are students in Monterey County. The specific agency being observed and served is Monterey Bay Charter School, with both campuses in Pacific Grove, California, and Monterey, California. The school's mission states, "Monterey Bay Charter School is a tuition-free public school using methods of instruction aligned to the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education's core values. As a County-wide charter school, students come from all communities – Seaside, Monterey, Marina, Pacific Grove, Carmel, Big Sur, and Salinas" (MBCS, 2022). The school provides several programs and resources including counseling, paraprofessionals, special education, and individualized education programs. The school is focused on whole child learning and restorative justice, stating its core principles as "image of the human being, child development, social change through education, human relationships, access and diversity, collaborative leadership, and schools as learning communities" (MBCS, 2022).

In the 2020-2021 school year, Monterey Bay Charter reported their student enrollment as 50.6% female and 49.4% male. 62% were white, 18.2% were Hispanic or Latinx, 3.9% were Asian, 1.2% were black or African American, 2.2% were other, and 12% were "two or more races." According to the school's accountability report from the same year, 20.6% of their students were economically disadvantaged, 11.8% were students with disabilities, and 5.1% were English learners (MBCS, 2021).

Problem Description

       Problem definition/description:

       Poor classroom behavior is disruptive to learning among elementary and middle school students. According to the Iris Center at Vanderbilt University, teachers report managing classroom disruptions as the most difficult part of their job. While not applicable to MBCS, in underfunded school districts, two-thirds of teachers report having disruptive children who should not be in the classroom (Adams, 2022). Additionally, if disruptive classroom behaviors are not addressed consistently, continuation could result in instructional time being decreased by up to 50% as well as lower achievement for all students present (IRIS, 2022). Communities have identified discipline as either the first or second most pressing issue facing schools, however, not many researchers are addressing the issue (Everston & Weinstein, 2006).

       Contributing factors to the problem

       Factors contributing to this issue include poor emotional intelligence in young students, discipline policies not being followed, and lingering trauma from the global pandemic.

       Emotional intelligence is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as the capacity to be aware of, control, express one's emotions, and handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically. While intelligence quotient (IQ) contributes to human success by 20%, emotional quotient (EQ) contributes to human success by 80% (Mcdonald, 2021). Data collected from 198 students across 15 schools in England showed that children with low EQ scores were often low energy, anxious, easily triggered into crying, and had few coping skills for classroom difficulties including peer and classroom conflict (Teaching Expertise, 2012). The American Psychological Association explains that when a student feels shame or embarrassment over getting an answer

wrong or not succeeding in a subject it can distract them from their work. If they have low emotional management abilities they will not be able to shake their negative feelings and will lose concentration (APA, 2019).

While restorative justice is ideal looking in theory, in practice it creates an inconsistency in policy vs reality. Teachers and administrators are accepting bad behavior because the restorative justice concept is so unclear. "Outbursts of student vulgarity and violence have become normalized as things that teachers and other students have to endure" (Adams, 2022). While schools may boast about detention, suspension, and expulsion rates decreasing it is not due to improving behavior. (Adams, 2022). Although the school, along with many modern schools, preaches restorative justice and low suspension rates, the policy contradicts this. The MBCS report card shows that in the 2018-2019 academic school year, there was a 1.78% rate of suspension compared to the district rate of 3.91% and the state rate of 3.47%.

Additionally, for the same year, there was a 0% expulsion rate for the school compared to the 0.8% rate for the State. Similarly, in the 2019-2020 academic school year, the school's suspension rate was 0.76%, the district rate was 1.15%, and the state rate was 2.45% (MBCS, 2021). Of the suspensions in the 2020-2021 academic school year, 83% were socioeconomically disadvantaged and 37% of them were female (MBCS, 2021). As stated in the Monterey Bay Charter School 2022-2023 policy manual, students may be suspended or expelled for misconduct on campus, coming to or leaving school, or at a school-sponsored event. Grounds for suspension and expulsion are extensive including but not limited to causing, attempting to cause, or threatening to cause physical injury, causing or attempting to cause damage to school or private property, possessing nicotine products, committing an obscene act of vulgarity or profanity, engaging in hazing, committing sexual harassment, etc (MBCS, 2022).

Students are experiencing post-traumatic stress responses at high rates, causing inappropriate classroom behavior to skyrocket. Having grown accustomed to interacting primarily online, many students have been saying harsh things to their classmates and teachers that they usually would only be brave enough to say online (Belsha, 2021). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 87% of public schools reported that the pandemic hindered students' social-emotional development, and 84% reported that the pandemic negatively impacted students' behavior. Student misconduct has increased by 56% since students returned from virtual learning, and disrespect toward teachers has increased by 48% (NCES, 2022).

Consequences of the problem:

Consequences of poor classroom behavior include classroom learning being disrupted, and a high level of teacher burnout.

Disruptions from students do not only affect the teacher and student involved. Peer pressure is present in childhood and when one child is acting out and not being disciplined, it may encourage the other children to do the same. It also causes a lack of focus for those not participating and a loss of instructional time (Miller, n.d.). More than 75% of respondents think that the learning of well-behaved students is sacrificed to the acceptance of inappropriate behavior (Adams, 2022). A study from the National Library of Medicine said that disruptions in the classroom negatively affect academic performance and are correlated with a lack of motivation and dissatisfaction with school (Gallegos et. al., 2020).

Teacher burnout is a psychological condition caused by chronic career stress including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Jang et. al, 2022)"Burnout is a work-related syndrome that stems from an individual's perception of a

significant discrepancy between effort (input) and reward (output)" (Friedman, 1995). The U.S.

Bureau of Labor Statistics projected that 102,500 elementary school teachers would leave the

profession annually over the 2016-2026 decade (BLS, 2018). Lynda White, a teacher for

twenty-one years, reported that post-pandemic behavior was so uncontrollable that she began

experiencing panic attacks before arriving at work; even as an experienced educator (Lambert,

2022). According to a UCLA study, 66% of teachers leaving the profession said teacher retention

would be improved with better discipline policies. One-third of the teachers cited student

discipline as the hardest part of their job. 57% of teachers leaving the profession cited burnout as

their reason for leaving with student behavior as a major contributing factor (UCLA, 2022). In a

survey of 615 teachers in the Midwest, over 50% said student behavior was the cause of their

resignation (Ward, 2022).

       Problem Model:

Contributing Factors:	Problem:	Consequences:
- Poor emotional intelligence - Discipline policies are not being followed - Trauma from the global pandemic	Classroom behavior is disruptive to learning amongst elementary and middle school students.	- Learning is halted - Higher teacher burnout rates

Solving the problem

While classroom behavior will take time and consistency to conquer, there are day-by-day implementations that can be taken to begin the process of improvement. Weekly meetings with disruptive students to discuss their behavior patterns and their feelings coming back from virtual learning may help in identifying the root of the problem. Activities in this meeting teaching them to productively express emotions and roleplay how to respond to frustrating situations may begin to assist in improving their behavior in the classroom. We will discuss their coping strategies and utilize roleplay activities and workshops to improve the skills that they lack.

Project Implementation

Over four months from January to April, I will be conducting weekly meetings with select students to discuss and teach emotional intelligence and coping skills in order to improve classroom behavior. Five students have been selected by observation of emotional expression over the last several months. One day a week, five students will have an individual meeting of up to thirty minutes during a classroom period in which they play different games and activities. In this meeting, they will complete a worksheet, participate in a relevant activity including situational roleplays, or talk out their classroom frustrations. Gathering information from sources including the American Psychological Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, I will use the mood meter method and character association in my sessions with the students. A mood meter is a chart with two axes of energy and pleasantness. The four quadrants are defined as mad, brave, sad, and calm. Children can use this tool to categorize other emotions and identify how they affect their energy and pleasantness. Character

association involves reading a book or story and completing sentences on how the character is feeling and how they are behaving as a result (Tominey et. al., 2017).

Roles and responsibilities are fairly minimal for anyone aside from myself. Worksheets and activities that will include emotional coping skills and small behavioral changes are developing. Support will be provided by the classroom teacher, my mentor, and the paraprofessionals on-site if necessary. The five children chosen to undergo these workshops are familiar with me and have shown positive responses when told that these workshops are a possibility.

Project Purpose

Returning to full-time, in-person instruction has been a stressful experience for many young children. School-aged kids are two grade levels behind socially and lack the emotional intelligence needed to control their behavior in the classroom. High emotional intelligence is linked to improved focus, better academic engagement, more positive relationships, and empathy (Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald 2007). The purpose of this project is to inform students who are lacking in social-emotional intelligence on how to handle these new situations. According to the American Psychological Association, learning to manage emotions in the classroom may even improve academic success; especially in English and History.

Project Justification

According to an academic blog, learning is most successful when all of the students are engaged and focused. Students become disruptive when they are bored or struggling to understand the material. These disruptions only get more intense when students do not know the behavior expectations. "When the classroom becomes something of a free-for-all – it is difficult for students to focus, and to feel that it is even worth focusing" (Jess, 2020). Lumiere, a

children's therapy organization says, "Big emotions can be difficult to navigate for adults and can be particularly difficult for children. Emotions can affect your child's quality of life." Failing to learn how to cope with these big emotions can later result in symptoms of depression and anxiety. "Knowing how to cope with emotions can help your child deal with difficult or new situations. It can also help them face challenges, disappointments, and even failures"(Lumiere, 2021).

Expected Outcomes

This program is expected to improve classroom behavior overall. Providing the students with the necessary tools to control themselves is expected to assist them in implementing better behavior awareness and control in the classroom. Behaviors including shouting out inappropriate things in class, physically disrupting other students, shutting down emotionally to become unresponsive, and physically disrupting classroom objects will be lessened with practice, workshopping, discussion, and implementation.

Assessment Plan

A combination of observation and teacher interviews will be utilized to assess the outcome. Upon the beginning of implementation in January, the classroom teacher will be briefly interviewed about each of the selected students to gain insight into behavioral tendencies before the project begins. Toward the end of implementation in April the teacher will be reinterviewed about each student in order to grasp the full scope of the behavioral changes; if any. Detailed observational notes will be kept throughout the implementation period to track different reactions to similar situations and behavioral changes. With these assessment tools in place, I will be able to fully recognize the changes in classroom behaviors and implementation of coping mechanisms in real-time.

Project results

Initially, the project concept had a caseload of five students. By the end of implementation, the caseload had gone down to two students consistently with one other occasionally participating in meetings. In keeping with the original idea, students were pulled out of class for approximately ten minutes once a week to complete an activity. In the first week each student and I read the book Hansel and Gretel; stopping when appropriate to discuss the emotions the characters might be experiencing and why. In week two we listened to several different pieces of classical music, defining how they made us feel and identifying a facial expression for each of those emotions. Then, for several weeks, we sang rhymes that I wrote about coping with big emotions, including excitement, disappointment, and frustration, appropriately in class. For several weeks after that, we discussed specific in-class behaviors and how they were handling them vs how they could be handling them better. The next week we drew pictures of emotions and worked on breathing techniques for calming down. For the last few weeks, we discussed specific situations with classmates and teachers and did situational role plays on how they were coping vs how they could be coping better. For example, when a student communicated that they were getting easily distracted, we used finger puppets to play out distracting scenarios and how they initially reacted and then played out what they thought was a more effective and productive way to respond. This allowed students to be open and honest about which of their behaviors they knew could be improved upon, which emotions they had more trouble coping with, and draft their own ideas on how to maintain good classroom

behavior. Additionally, whenever in the classroom, my main focus was my caseload of students and monitoring their behavior in order to help them cope and behave most effectively.

Data collection for this project was observation and survey-based. Weekly, after the lessons were held, observations were made of the select students in the classroom with special attention being paid to that week's topic. The biggest behavioral issues being addressed were communicating with classmates, staying in their seats, and following directions. One student, in particular, was consistently stellar at applying what we had worked on that day. For example, on a week where we worked through how to communicate their frustration with a friend effectively, they were observed using the tools discussed. They remained calm so as not to disrupt the class and used polite language to communicate their emotions and objective. The conversation was also quick and quiet, and the two students returned to their seats promptly. Prior to the project, a conversation between one of my students and the same classmate about the same topic was observed. However, in this case the student used a raised voice and impolite language; causing the other student to scream and cry while the rest of the class erupted into loudly sharing their opinions on the situation. Another one of my students had a tendency to cry loudly in the middle of classroom activities, ultimately halting all learning and focus for other students. During the week that we workshopped drawing how we saw emotions, this student began to cry and scream that they missed their sister. Together, we figured out how to both distract and channel the big emotion. They sat at a table in the back of the classroom, drew a picture of their sister, took deep breaths, put the picture in her backpack to take home, and sat back down quietly. This was a huge success, as this student would often take the entire school day to calm down, but with some guidance was able to channel their emotions into something productive and healthy.

When surveying classroom teachers involved, it was found that two students' classroom behavior had improved, while one's remained the same. It was also expressed that the overall classroom behavior improved from February to April. 67% of my caseload improved their behavior, while 33% remained the same, and 0% worsened. It was also reported that the entire class' behavior improved.

Behavior Changes Among Students

Remained the Same
33.0%
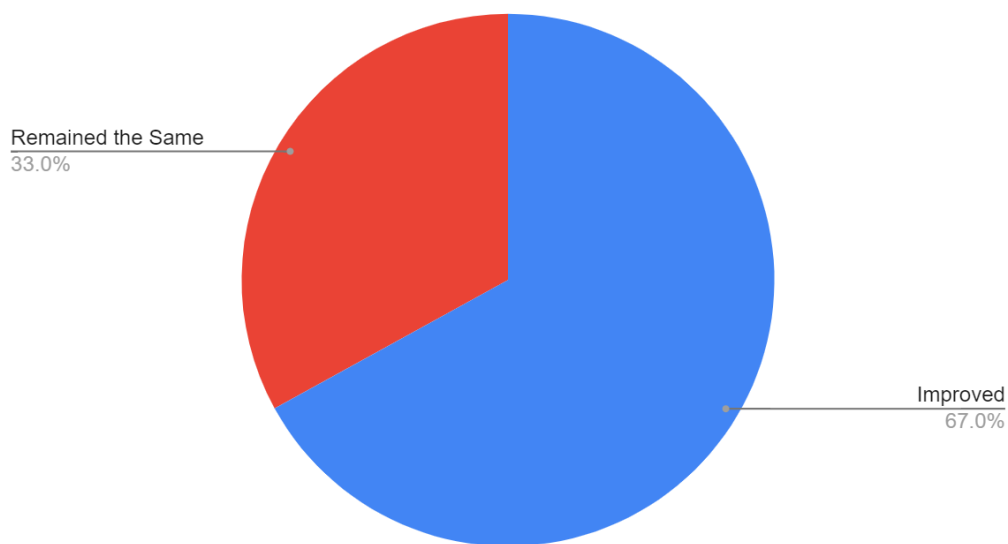
Improved
67.0%

This project overall was relatively successful. Objectively, the class's behavior did improve over the semester, and select students were observed using the skills taught in the lessons. It should be further acknowledged that there were many factors in this classroom improvement. Several teachers were brought in to pull students out or hold special lessons with the class, disruptive students were removed from the class altogether, and the daily classroom schedule was changed several times to improve the class structure. However, there is more work to be done. The student's behavior is still not ideal. It is recommended to continue emotional intelligence and coping mechanism lessons at MBCS in particular. Future interns can continue

this initiative and push these concepts into mainstream knowledge. Furthermore, restorative

justice should continue to be adapted for better understanding and better consistency. Students

need both structure, discipline and high emotional quotients to succeed in the classroom.

Personal Reflection

The amount of growth I experienced professionally throughout the internship is immense.

The hands-on learning style of being at an elementary school site was like no other. While I was

familiar with emotional intelligence, I had no idea what an impact it can have on concrete

behaviors for children so young. Additionally, learning about the impact the pandemic had on

classroom behavior was incredibly eye-opening and fascinating. A huge detriment of emotional

growth in students during virtual learning was the lack of one on one time and the immense

isolation. Having students meet with me one on one and in person gave me an insight into how

they thought and felt.

The amount of time that I spent with all students in the classroom was a major strength

for this project. I got to know every kid well and earned their trust. I was in the classroom for

almost the entire school day twice a week for four months. This created a bond with my students

that allowed for the greatest development. Additionally, as the project progressed, I adapted the

workshops to work best for my students and the workshops only got better and more productive

as the weeks went on. However, as with anything, there were challenges. I struggled with being

on a different campus than my mentor. She was still supportive and mentoring, but I got the most

information and day-to-day support from the para-professional on site. Additionally, during the

fall semester, while I was developing the basis of the capstone and establishing my professional

relationships with the younger campus, I was going through terrible challenges in my personal

life. I had a hard time talking to anybody or even getting myself to the internship weekly. My

personal life started to seep into my professionalism for a couple of months. The biggest

professional challenge I encountered was my caseload diminishing. Students were being pulled

out of the class or the school by their parents, giving me a level of inconsistency that challenged

my project. However, the students that stayed were consistent and open to adapting.

      The issue of classroom behavior does not only exist at this school. Schools nationwide

are dealing with behavior that burns teachers out. While emotional intelligence is being valued

more in modern day, it is still a concept that needs to be integrated into daily school life.

Teaching young children how to regulate and cope with their emotions in school is key as they

may not all be getting that information at home. As aforementioned, the restorative justice

concept should continue to be adapted. Currently, at many schools, we see restorative justice turn

into unclear boundaries and students getting away with unacceptable behaviors. Taking a look at

policies and following the discipline expectations more closely will be a good start to setting real

boundaries and clear expectations with students.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline	Supporting Staff
Creating emotional intelligence worksheets	Nine printed worksheets	January 25th	n/a
Selecting students for workshopping	Provide classroom teacher with list of students	January 25th	Classroom teacher