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Understanding Social and Emotional Needs as an Approach in Developing a Positive Classroom Environment

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Understanding Social and Emotional Needs as an Approach
in Developing a Positive Classroom Environment

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree of
Bachelors of Arts
in Liberal Studies

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, California

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SIGNATURE PAGE

This Capstone Thesis has been presented to and approved by the faculty of the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, Liberal Studies.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE..... 1

SIGNATURE PAGE..... 2

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 4

TABLE OF CONTENTS 5

ABSTRACT 7

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION 8

 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM 8

 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY 9

 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY..... 9

 BACKGROUND INFORMATION 10

 RESEARCH QUESTIONS 10

 DEFINITION OF TERMS 11

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 12

 UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY AND ITS EFFECT ON STUDENT BEHAVIOR 12

 TEACHER USE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE 13

 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE 15

 SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS 17

 SUMMARY 18

CHAPTER 3 METHOD..... 19

 OVERVIEW 19

 ETHICAL STANDARDS 19

PARTICIPANTS.....	20
PROCEDURES	20
DATA ANALYSIS	21
CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS	22
THEMES	22
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS.....	23
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS	24
DISCUSSION	24
LIMITATIONS.....	24
IMPLICATIONS	25
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS	25
RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS	25
CONCLUSIONS.....	25
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	25
REFERENCES	27

ABSTRACT

The classroom environment is an important aspect of classroom management that concerns many teachers. Properly engaging students in the classroom can foster a positive environment. This study examines social and emotional needs of students and its implications in developing a positive classroom. How can meeting social and emotional needs of children help teachers create an engaging and productive learning environment?

This study examines aspects of social and emotional needs as they are used in creating a positive classroom environment. The problem is that teachers have difficulty controlling student behavior in the classroom. While there are many approaches to behavioral management, most of them rely on teacher control without emphasizing student responsibility, internal control.

A review of the literature reveals that teachers need to be connected with their students by understanding their needs and seeing things from their point of view. Understanding the social and emotional components in student behavior is important in developing a constructive and positive environment for learning.

This study followed qualitative research design utilizing teacher interviews and researcher observations. Participants were purposely chosen for their expertise in social and emotional needs of students. The classroom observations took place in a 3rd and 4th grade combination classroom.

Results indicate that teachers need to focus on the positive aspects of the students to get them to exhibit positive behaviors. Teachers need to consciously address the social and emotional needs of children in creating a classroom environment that is productive and positive.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Teachers who are capable of understanding and meeting the social and emotional needs of their students are capable of creating an effective and positive classroom environment. Understanding these needs allows teachers to see the reason behind certain behaviors. When I had difficulty in school, a teacher took the time to adapt her teaching methods to meet my social and emotional needs. Since my teacher was aware of the problems I had, she was able to approach me and teach me in ways that were beneficial. With her help I was able to continue and progress with my education.

Statement of the Problem

Creating a positive classroom environment is a concern that all teachers face. When students exhibit disruptive behavior in the classroom teachers find it difficult to carry on with instruction. If a teacher is giving a lesson and a student disrupts the class, then everyone gets distracted.

Teachers today still have trouble controlling their classes because they do not have enough skills and know-how to create a positive classroom management. Disruptive classroom behavior can also lead to teacher job stress (Karaj & Rapti, 2013).

Some school personnel in the United States still use physical punishment as a form of discipline. This could lead to students becoming disinterested and unmotivated in school (Morones, 2013). A positive classroom environment helps keep the class in order, still a difficult goal for teachers achieve.

A way to help educators create positive classroom and reduce disruptive behavior is understanding and meeting the social and emotional needs of students. This study explores the

impact of social and emotional needs of students and how they affect classroom environment. By finding and understanding the reasons behind student actions, teachers are capable of responding appropriately to student behavior.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to help educators understand students' social and emotional needs in order for teachers to develop a positive and productive classroom in an elementary school. This study is important in reducing teacher job stress, in maintaining an orderly classroom, and in promoting student emotional wellbeing.

Teacher job stress is an important factor in teacher performance. Disruptive student behavior has been found to be a significant contributor to teacher stress. When students disrupt a lesson, it can cause distractions in learning for everyone. It is the teacher's responsibility to make sure that students are productive in class. It is difficult to stay on task when certain students prevent that from happening.

Student emotional wellbeing is important for teachers to keep in mind. Student behavior and classroom performance can be affected by student emotional wellbeing. When students disrupt a lesson, there may be a reason behind their actions. Understanding social and emotional needs of students can help teachers understand the reasons behind student behavior. Teachers may be able to reduce and avoid disruptive behavior if they understand what the students need and adjust teaching strategies to address those needs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gather information from teachers and observe classrooms to identify approaches in creating a positive and productive classroom environment. Teachers

can better respond to student behavior when they understand student social and emotional needs. The understanding of these needs can help foster a positive classroom environment.

Background Information

Understanding the students social and emotional needs helps teachers understand and better respond to certain behaviors. Disruptive behavior in the classroom is also a cause of teacher job stress; so, being able to reduce and avoid these behaviors can help teachers reduce their stress.

Drewery and Kecskemeti (2010) explain restorative justice system in New Zealand as it was used to reduce suspensions. The program focused on having adults create positive relationships with students. Educators, in an effort to create a positive school environment, were receptive to open communication between adults and students. “Restorative practice is not about making people behave so that they fit in to some predetermined whole, but about maintaining quality of relationship where inclusion, curious inquiry and equity are primary goals” (p. 111-112).

After testing the model, the researchers found increased success in reducing student suspensions. Other researchers interested in the positive findings looked to replicate this study in other schools. This work is making its way into the American school system and its classrooms with suggestions for teacher attention to the social and emotional needs of students in class.

Research Questions

This study addresses two research questions. The research questions are the following:

1. Does understanding social and emotional needs help teachers respond appropriately to disruptive student behavior?

2. What are the learning outcomes for children when social and emotional needs are met in their classroom?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study the researcher defines select terms. These definitions are based on an accumulation of information from classroom instruction, practices, observations, and research.

Social and emotional needs are the mental and psychological needs of students, such as feeling accepted, feeling confident, and/or feeling a sense of achievement. These are a part of a person's mental health. The needs of students are dependent on how they feel at school and their relationships with the teacher and students.

A positive classroom environment is where students and teacher share a mutual respect. In this environment, everyone exhibits productive and positive behaviors and there are few disruptive behaviors. This is the tone and atmosphere of the classroom. This is a classroom that is set up in a way that is conducive to a learning environment that promotes positive and productive behaviors.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of the literature indicates that much research has been conducted which addresses social and emotional needs of children and the implications for addressing these needs, leading to a positive classroom environment. The review of research articles is structured in the following subsections. Understanding diversity and its effect on student behavior describes teachers need to understand the diversity of students in the classroom to understand student behavior. Teacher use of emotional intelligence explains the use of emotional intelligence and how it can reduce teacher job stress. Emotional intelligence describes the meaning and importance of emotional intelligence in education. The subsection, social and emotional needs, explains how social and emotional learning can affect mental health in students.

Understanding Diversity and its Effect on Student Behavior

Manning and Bucher (2005) present the issue of classroom management and how it needs to improve. The main focus is that teachers still find it difficult to properly and effectively use classroom management. The authors focus on classroom management in middle and secondary schools because it is a major concern of teachers of these schools. The authors claim that even though laws have been passed to help with violence at schools, such as the Gun-Free School Act, the majority of the responsibility to ensure the students safety lies with the educators. It is possible for teachers to successfully and effectively use classroom management to ensure that learning is happening in a safe environment.

To find ways to improve classroom management, Manning and Bucher (2005) asked experts to write about what they observe in classrooms and what they believe contributes to classroom management and making schools safe. Each group or individual focused on different

aspects of the classroom dynamic. Some of the different focuses are as follows: the social and emotional growth of the students, managing student behavior in urban classrooms, human connection, and school safety. With focus on different aspects of the classroom, teachers can see the big picture of social-interpersonal communication. This is needed because of the diversity of student backgrounds in classrooms.

Several researchers came up with similar findings. The similarities were brought together to provide a solution to improve classroom management. It is essential that educators recognize diversity in the classroom and how it affects classroom management (Manning & Bucher, 2005). There are many factors that contribute to how students behave in the classroom, and teachers need to be aware of these to better manage their classes. The authors state that educators are becoming aware of diversity in the classroom and are using that awareness to improve classroom management and school safety.

Manning and Bucher (2005) created better understanding of the complexities of classroom management by providing details. There are many factors for teachers to acknowledge to effectively implement classroom management. One similarity in this article that relates to personal experience, is that teachers not aware of the diversity of their students. Since they are not aware of the implications of this diversity in the classroom, they have difficulty managing their classes due to disruptions.

Teacher Use of Emotional Intelligence

Karaj and Rapti (2013) conducted a study in schools in Albania and focus on four factors that contribute to teacher job stress. The four factors are students' disruptive behavior, relations with the school principal, relations with colleagues, and time pressure and workload. The main focus is how students' disruptive behavior affects teacher degree of job stress. In addition to

finding which factor is the most significant, the researchers also use the information to predict which factor will cause the most stress.

This study was conducted during the 2012-2013 school year. The authors used a structured questionnaire completed by teachers to find out how much each variable affects teacher job stress.

The population in this study consisted of 30,567 basic education teachers in Albania. Out of this population were randomly selected 540 teachers in 25 basic education schools in 5 districts. Out of these counties were randomly selected five schools (3 elementary schools and 2 secondary) and interviews were later made to all the teachers of these schools (Karaj & Rapti, 2013, p. 16).

The questionnaire had two parts: questions about the demographic of teachers and scales that measured job stress and related factors. One scale measured job stress and four other scales individually measured the four factors that contribute to job stress. Each scale had statements that teachers would choose to express the level or severity of a factor; for example, there are four levels for the students' disruptive behavior that ranges from not disruptive to very disruptive.

The data were analyzed by using computer software, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences or Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS). To determine the strength of the relationships between stress and the stress related factors, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, a measure of a linear correlation of two variables, was used, and to predict the extent of the four factors on overall stress, a multiple linear regression was used.

The correlation of the dependent variables and independent variable vary from low to substantial. The correlation between teachers' stress and students' disruptive behavior is "substantial, positive and significant" (Karaj & Rapti, 2013, p. 17). The data show that students'

disruptive behavior is the biggest cause of teachers' stress and it also shows that it is the biggest predictor of teacher stress. The second most significant predictor is the relationship with the school principal. The majority of the results from this study have been confirmed by other studies, which also found that students' disruptive behavior is a big factor in teacher job stress.

Teachers need to understand student behavior and know how to react accordingly. If teachers can get a better understanding of the reasons behind student behavior, and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly, then they reduce stress levels. This article confirms prior knowledge that students' disruptive behavior greatly affects the classroom environment and the teacher. Other factors contribute to how teachers respond to students and their performance in the classroom.

Emotional Intelligence

Gupta (2012) explains the idea of emotional intelligence and its importance in education. People with emotional intelligence "are aware of their emotions and the emotions of others. They use that information to guide their thinking and actions" (p. 17). Gupta claims that the field of education is where emotional intelligence can be witnessed by looking at the behaviors of students and teachers in the classroom. The article describes the methodology of the study and offers ways to measure emotional intelligence.

This study informs people of the importance of emotional intelligence and its effect in the classroom. Teacher knowledge and understanding of the concept of emotional intelligence can help in assessing student behavior.

Gupta (2012) uses definitions and studies to explain how emotional intelligence affects people and how they learn. There are two popular models of emotional intelligence: Ability Based Emotional Intelligence Model and Mixed Models of Emotional Intelligence. The ability-

based model defines emotional intelligence by focusing on mental abilities. In this model four mental abilities were proposed: perception, assimilating emotion in thought, help in understanding, labeling, and acknowledging emotions, reflective regulation of emotion. The mixed models method focuses on the personal aspects of emotional intelligence. Goleman states that instead of being born with this type of intelligence it can be learned and developing emotional intelligence it can improve performance in the workplace (Goleman as cited in Gupta, 2012). The mixed models conceptualize emotional intelligence using non-ability traits.

Emotional intelligence is an important concept for teachers to consider. With an understanding of emotional intelligence teachers need to recognize and respond to their own feelings and the students' feelings, which allows everyone to be more effective in their jobs. Teachers also need to encourage emotional states in the students as it relates to instruction, which will contribute to student learning (Gupta, 2012).

Emotional intelligence allows teachers build positive relationships with students, which helps in creating an engaging and motivating classroom environment. Teachers have three things to offer in the classroom: expertise in a subject, expertise on how to teach, and the teachers' applied emotional intelligences. Learning and teaching emotional intelligence in education is important for socio-emotional and personal development of students. "[I]t is highly beneficial to begin early in the educational process to organize learning around problem solving, critical thinking and dealing with issues arising from different fields for study and different aspects of real life conditions" (Gupta, 2012, p. 21). Emotional intelligence affects cognitive skills, which can help improve academic performance. It helps manage impulsive behavior and poor interpersonal and social skills. Emotional intelligence allows people to adapt to different

situations and environments because they have a better understanding of their emotions and the emotions of the people around them.

Understanding other people and their emotional needs helps the teacher respond appropriately to certain behaviors. Understanding one's own emotions and other people's emotions provides clarity, which can help individuals make appropriate decisions on how to act.

Social and Emotional Needs

Kabasakal and Totan (2013) discuss whether social and emotional learning needs are helpful "preserving the mental health of students during elementary level education" (p. 56). The authors claim that social and emotional learning needs affect mental symptoms in elementary level students. They provide data from an experiment that shows that it is effective in decreasing mental symptoms and avoiding problematic behavior.

The purpose of the study is to inform readers of the effects of social and emotional learning needs. Knowing this information can help teachers and schools shape the curriculum to help decrease mental symptoms and avoid problematic behavior.

The research data were collected from a form that is filled out by 310 elementary students in the Karsiyaka province of Izmir. Three instruments are used: Social-Emotional Learning Scale (SELS), Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), and Personal information form. The Social-Emotional Learning Scale addresses task articulation, peer relations, and self-regulation. The Brief Symptom Inventory addresses depression, anxiety, negative self-concept, somatization, and hostility. The personal information form provides the researchers the demographics of the participants. A form explaining the study is included along with an e-mail for participants to contact the researchers.

The analysis of the data illustrates that if social and emotional needs are met in students, then the occurrence of mental symptoms declines. Social and emotional learning combined affects whether or not a student will have mental symptoms and the severity of these symptoms.

The authors stress the importance of social and emotional learning needs and how it impacts student mental health. This article provided information on testing the effects of social and emotional learning, such as the Social-Emotional Learning Scale.

Summary

Many teachers use behavioral management techniques when responding to certain student behavior. The articles reveal that understanding the students outside of the classroom helps the teacher create a positive classroom environment. Understanding student emotions and their own emotions, teachers are able to better respond to disruptive behavior. Teachers can look beyond the behaviors and see the reasons behind them. Meeting the social and emotional needs of students can affect the mental health of the students and as they develop, mentally, physically, and emotionally. It is important for teachers to be aware of these needs and consider them when creating a classroom environment.

CHAPTER 3 METHOD

Overview

This research follows qualitative design using interviews of elementary school teachers using open-ended questions. Additionally, the researcher observed in elementary grade level, a transitional kindergarten where the teacher had an effective positive classroom environment using specific guidelines that emerged from her professional development work. Additionally, the researcher took notes in a separate classroom while observing how the teacher addressed student behavior. This research study addressed the following questions: Does understanding social and emotional needs help teachers respond appropriately to disruptive student behavior? How do teachers use understanding social and emotional needs help develop a positive classroom environment?

Ethical Standards

This study adheres to the ethical standards established by the American Psychological Association (2010) that safeguards participation of human subjects and research. Additionally, this study was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection for Human Subjects (IRBPHS), approved, and assigned number 10221.

This study followed qualitative research design utilizing teacher interviews asking open ended questions related to the topic of understanding and meeting students' social and emotional needs.

Interview Questions:

1. How do you respond to students' disruptive behavior, such as talking out of turn, distracting other students, or not staying on task?

2. Explain what you see as reasons behind students' disruptive behavior.
3. What do you think are the social needs of your students?
4. What are the emotional needs of your students?
5. How do these social and emotional needs affect your approach to responding to student behavior?
6. What is important for a new teacher to understand about the social and emotional needs of students?

Participants

The researcher interviewed two teachers who are currently teaching in an elementary school classroom in the greater San Francisco Bay Area and a special education aide who works in an elementary school in Toronto, Canada. The researcher observed 26 students in a 3rd and 4th grade mixed classroom. The researcher observed a teacher in a 3rd and 4th grade mixed classroom. Participants were purposely chosen because of their expertise in students' social and emotional needs.

Procedures

The researcher contacted one elementary school principal and several classroom teachers through phone contact and email in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. Other contacts occurred through personal connections at a local elementary school. Teachers were informed of the nature of the research and asked if they were willing to participate in a personal interview.

After IRB review and approval, the researcher contacted elementary school teachers and administrators in the San Francisco Bay area and set up a time to conduct my study. The teachers

were asked six open-ended questions. The questions pertained to the topic of social and emotional needs as an approach to developing a positive classroom. Additionally, students and teachers were observed in an elementary level classroom and took notes from my observations.

Data Analysis

After interviews were conducted, the researcher reviewed the notes and compared and contrasted the answers the participants provided. Common themes were coded to see how often they came up in conversation across participant interviews. The researcher used their responses to find effective ways to create a positive classroom environment in regards to student social and emotional needs. The answers the participants provided were compared to the observations that were done in an elementary school classroom. After observations, similarities and differences were examined between the day-to-day happenings in the classroom and the interview responses.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Themes

A common theme among the people I interviewed is that teachers need to focus on positive aspects of students instead of the negative aspects. One teacher reported that when a student would display disruptive behavior, she would take that student aside and relate that the student is a good person, but she is disappointed in his/her behavior. The teacher ends the conversation with saying that she knows that the student can do well. She starts with a positive comment and ends with a positive comment.

Students do not have an outlet to channel their energy. The students only have two chances in the school day during recesses to run around and get their energy out. For some students this is not enough. Also, their energy levels are running high when they come back from recess, which makes it difficult to transition from recess to lessons. One teacher has her students sit quietly after lunch to calm down. This quiet time helps her students prepare to be in a calm and positive learning environment. The teacher understands what her students' needs are and how to create the best learning environments with these needs in mind.

Teachers need to create an environment of respect and positive attitudes. A common response from the interviewees was that when students respect and understand their similarities and differences, it creates a more harmonious environment. A classroom is a community and it cannot function properly if people are being disruptive and disrespectful towards one another. If a student disrespects another student, one teacher explained that she would talk to both of the students to get both sides of the story; she has the students explain how they feel and what they should do to fix the situation. Talking to both students shows that the teacher has respect for

them and is not biased towards either. Teaching students respect prepares them for the future. The students need to understand that everyone is different and that they need to respect those differences, even if they do not understand them.

Summary of Findings

The main finding is that teachers need to emphasize the positive behaviors and attitudes to create a positive and productive classroom environment. Students want to be praised. If they see certain positive behaviors being praised, they will exhibit those behaviors to receive praise. With that constantly being reinforced, these actions will become intrinsic. Praise and approval meets a social and emotional need that many elementary school students have. These students feel the need to do well and to be recognized for their work. By emphasizing their good work and positive behaviors, teachers are able to meet some of the student social and emotional needs.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

A class cannot be positive and productive unless there is order. An orderly classroom is a classroom where students are on task and motivated to learn. Disruptive behavior is one reason why classes become unorganized. Teachers typically have a plan set up for what students need to complete during each lesson. If students disrupt the lesson, then certain tasks may not be completed and students may fall behind academically. Teachers can maintain order if they have a clear understanding of the social and emotional needs of the students. Some students need to have certain needs met, such as feeling confident, in order for them to learn. When teachers know what students need, they are capable of addressing those needs, which can help reduce and prevent disruptive behavior.

Teachers need to be positive to create positive classroom environment. When a teacher praises the positive and productive behavior, the students will continue to exhibit those behaviors to get the praise. Self-esteem is important for student learning and development; therefore, teachers are people who should help boost and maintain student confidence and self-esteem. Positive reinforcement allows students to do their work well and for teachers to help their students even more because less time is needed to keep students on task.

Limitations

This study was limited in terms of sample size and researcher access to many teachers in different school districts. The data received reflects the thoughts of a few, which makes it difficult to make generalizations and broad recommendations. The researcher had access to one elementary grade classroom. This made it difficult to witness how other classrooms functioned.

The limited sample size precluded researcher from observing a variety of approaches in instruction and response to student behavior.

Implications

Practical Implications

All the interviewees were in agreement that teachers need to emphasize positive attitudes and behaviors need to create the wanted environment. When teachers and students share a mutual respect, the classroom environment is harmonious.

Research Implications

Further studies are needed on understanding social and emotional needs of students and its effects on classroom environment. Observations and assessments of students in these classroom environments can reveal how students are affected.

Conclusions

A positive classroom environment comes from respect and understanding of student and teacher social and emotional needs. When teachers understand and meet the needs of students, it allows teachers to better respond to the students. When students understand the feelings and emotions of each other, it can help them understand which types of behavior are appropriate and which are not. It may be difficult to meet the needs of all the students, but this information can help teachers to have a better chance of doing so. This information can also help teachers start to realize that student social and emotional needs do affect classroom environment.

About the Author

Kristen Ozorio is a Liberal Studies senior preparing to receive a multi-subject credential at Dominican University of California in San Rafael. She was born and raised in the Bay Area.

During her senior year of high school, she took classes at a community college to receive high school credits and college credits in. Her focus was math and science to pursue a career in forensics and criminal investigations. She realized this was not the right career path, but still wanted to help people. After volunteering at a day-care center, she realized that she would like to work in the field of education. She believes that teachers and schools create the base for students to meet and exceed their potential.

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