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(Re)Developing Habits of Gratitude and Kindness in an Elementary Classroom Post-Pandemic

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**(Re)Developing Habits of Gratitude and Kindness
in an Elementary Classroom Post-Pandemic**

by

Michaela Callahan

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how elementary school students learn to be kind to one another and what role teachers might play in creating an environment for this learning, particularly following a pandemic during which most students spent learning in online, asynchronous and hybrid formats. To achieve this goal, this study integrated a theoretical framework inclusive of CASEL's practices for Social Emotional Learning, models for Teaching Kindness and, finally, the Responsive Classroom approach. The researcher conducted qualitative research, through the use of daily gratitude journaling and various lessons in social emotional learning with students from a low income elementary school. Additionally, the researcher focused on the impact of COVID-19 on students' emotional well being as it relates to being kind in the classroom. The findings highlighted seeing and looking for kindness in students, finding opportunities for inclusion and the ripple effect of kindness, and how the students found "Play" supported them in being authentic, open and mutually supportive. These findings have important implications for how teachers can emphasize the importance of play for student development, as well as "learning to see" the kindness already innate within each student as a way of supporting a caring learning community. These findings also support a need for professional development time for cohorts of teachers to collectively work together to develop strategies as a school to build community in the classrooms and on campus as a whole as well as the introduction of policies to support kindness as a core school and classroom practice in order to facilitate productive learning environments.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The researcher had expected the 2021/2022 school year to be focused on her continued work as a student. She was finishing her summer vacation and waiting to begin her final year of college and her Master's Thesis when a job opportunity in her hometown suddenly became available. She applied, not knowing that in just two days she would be accepted and that her first day as a first year teacher would start almost immediately and two weeks late into the school year for the cohort of fourth graders. When the researcher shadowed the teacher, who had been teaching the class, but had decided to leave the school on short notice, the researcher quickly realized that what she had learned in college had not prepared her for this classroom environment that she was going to have to recreate after the teacher had left. In short, the students were regularly getting into physical fights with one another as well as arguing with each other and the teacher. The researcher learned that parents were angry that their students' teacher was leaving without notice and were shocked when they saw that the incoming teacher, the researcher, was a first-time teacher who was also still only twenty-two years old. While shadowing, one of the students asked the researcher if she was going to be as strict as their current teacher. Not knowing what to say, the researcher naively noted that she would hold the same expectations as their teacher and that nothing would be different. This could not have been further from the truth.

Statement of Purpose

Previous research has noted that teaching kindness through social-emotional frameworks is important to the classroom community and overall culture of the school environment, because it promotes positive social, emotional, and physical well-being for students (Allbright et al., 2019). Two frameworks that have been created to help guide educators to bring social emotional learning (SEL) practices into the classroom are CASEL and Responsive Classroom. These two

frameworks work in conjunction with one another to provide a model for how SEL practices can be implemented in the classroom. Based on these frameworks, teachers should promote relationship skills, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision making through the use of times like morning meetings (CASEL, 2022). Building on SEL practices and increasing independence in students encourages them to make their own decisions, which promotes students in their ability to be kind to one another and make the conscious effort to continue to be kind (Bhatti et al., 2021).

While there was a lot of research that supported the notion that it is important to teach kindness in classrooms and focus on the social emotional learning of students, there was a gap in the research where the literature did not identify the importance of focusing on the small advancements or increments that students make in regards to being kind and of supporting one another. The literature also suggests that playing is important for students' mental health (Tatgenhorst et al., 2019), but did not discuss the innate cooperation that develops as a result of play. The students naturally gravitated towards one another when it was P.E. or recess time, despite the differences that they were having in class.

The purpose of this study was to understand the central phenomenon of students' ability to be kind to one another in a school year following the COVID-19 pandemic where students spent the previous year and a half utilizing hybrid learning environments in which expectations were not the same as they had previously been. The researcher wanted her students to want to be kind to one another, because they previously were in a classroom environment that did not promote kindness and empathy.

Overview of the Research Design

To research the strategies that best support the students in their ability to be kind to one another, the researcher utilized a qualitative study that supported a pragmatic worldview. A pragmatic approach looks at a problem and then takes initiative to tackle the problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study looked at the students' lack of kindness towards one another and put forth the effort to teach the students how to be kind and continue to consider others. This study included students' perspectives and experiences on being kind and what it means. The researcher designed this study to find the best strategies to support the social-emotional well-being of her students in the classroom as a first year teacher. The researcher used a qualitative approach to answer three key research questions:

- Can students develop a habit of showing kindness and gratitude?
- What strategies and approaches positively and consistently impact students' ability to be kind to one another and learn from one another post-pandemic?
- How do students' views of themselves affect how they treat others in the classroom?

The researcher used ongoing interviews to check-in with the students about how they were doing throughout the study as well as collecting data through online surveys that took place after kindness and gratitude lessons were taught. The students also kept gratitude journals where they were asked to write about things that they were grateful for as well as other various writing prompts. The participants consisted of twenty-seven of the researcher's students who were predominantly Latinx who identified as male or female, and all of whom attended the same low income, title 1 school.

Significance of the Study

Major findings emerged from this study. The findings of this study suggested that teachers should look for the “little wins” when teaching students to be kind, especially more challenging students who have a hard time showing kindness towards others. Many of the students in the researcher’s classroom had a hard time initially being kind to others. There were a few students in particular who struggled with this. With a lot of relationship building, the researcher was able to connect with these students and discovered the compounding positive impact of noticing small increases in the amount of kindness that they were showing others. Moreover, when the researcher allowed opportunities for inclusion among the students, they found joy in being able to play with one another.

Additionally, and despite at first not getting along in the classroom, when the students were able to play together, it was observed that they naturally got along. They would receive compliments from other teachers for their ability to work together and show good sportsmanship. The students were learning how to be kind through the use of play.

Research Implications

The findings of this qualitative research show that students are capable of being kind to one another when the expectations are clearly set up and practiced daily. According to the study, schools should employ play as a way to promote kindness amongst students. This can be done through the use of school wide days of play, where students are encouraged to play together and have fun with a theme surrounding kindness, as well as strategic integration of play-based learning into individual classrooms, as the researcher learned for herself. This study also shows that teachers, administrators, and other educators should come together to develop a baseline definition of kindness and what it looks like on their campus so that everyone knows what the

expectations are. School policy-makers should also ensure that there are standards similar to SEL standards that are in line with teaching kindness in schools and are required to teach, much like English or math standards. It is also believed that there should also be an allotted number of minutes for students to be able to play, similarly to the allotted number of minutes that teachers are required to teach various curricula.

As students learn to be kind to one another, teachers can continue to focus on social justice and equity. Themes and concepts that are aimed at teaching students how to be kind are in line with themes of social justice and equity. Social justice and equity refer to including all students in learning and ensuring that all students have a proper education that they deserve. Students can not learn in an environment where they do not get along and do not feel like they belong, because they may be worried about outside influences rather than learning in their classroom environment. However, when they feel as though they can be included, perhaps through the use of play or SEL lessons, as suggested in the findings, they will be able to thrive in their school learning community, thus promoting social justice and equity. Building positive relationships with the students can continue their growth and support them in being kind to others.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There are various studies about the positive effects associated with implementing social emotional learning (SEL) in elementary classrooms (Bhatti et. al, 2021; Cressey, 2019; Jones et. al, 2017). However, there is little information in the literature about how the COVID pandemic has affected children's behavior and social emotional learning experiences in classrooms. Making the transition back to the physical spaces of classrooms (from online learning spaces) has been challenging for some students, because they may have experienced trauma and/or emotional turmoil related to learning during the pandemic (Torres-Pagen et. al, 2021).

The push for SEL in schools has not only affected policies at the district and school level, but at the federal level as well. Recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was implemented in order to hold schools accountable and ensure both an equal and quality education for all (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). DeMink-Carthew (2020) explored the emphasis on social-emotional learning and how personalized learning could potentially provide students with the building blocks they need for stress coping and positive peer experiences (DeMink-Carthew et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted educators' "normal" in-person teaching styles. It was the first time for many to teach online and was certainly a first for schools to immediately make the switch from in-person learning to online learning. When correctly implemented, SEL can promote positive social, emotional, and physical safety for students (Allbright et al., 2019).

This review of literature provides an integrated analysis of the CASEL model for social emotional learning models for teaching kindness and the Responsive Classroom

CASEL Model for Social Emotional Learning

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a highly regarded aspect of teaching in elementary schools (Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021). One prominent framework is known as CASEL 5 (CASEL, 2021), with the stated mission of this model is to “make social and emotional learning part of a high-quality and equitable education for all” (Casel, 2021).

CASEL 5’s Areas of Growth

The creators of the CASEL 5 have identified specific areas for social emotional growth: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2021). The CASEL 5 breaks SEL into five different components that make SEL more clear for teachers to develop units and lessons and to implement SEL strategies into daily teaching.

Self Awareness. CASEL describes self awareness as the ability to understand one's emotions and thoughts, then use that understanding to make better decisions and acknowledge how emotions impact individual behaviors (Ross & Talon, 2018). A supposition of this thesis is, if students can learn the skills to connect the ideas of what it means to be kind, and why people are kind, maybe their outlook on being kind to others will change. When students learn to be aware of their own thoughts and feelings, they will be able to take into consideration others feelings and comprehend better why others act the way they do. In the wake of COVID-19, Zieher et al. (2021) note that it is important to understand students and determine what they need emotionally. Additionally, these researchers argue that one way that students can truly learn to be kind to one another, is if they are able internalize what it means to be kind and how kindness makes them feel, then connect those values to the real world on their own.

Self-Management. Self-management refers to the way that students manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (CASEL, 2021). When students are able to regulate their emotions and how they interact with one another, they will be able to be more empathetic, because they understand what they like and do not like and then can apply that to how they interact with others (Gayl, 2017). If students are aware of their emotions, they will be able to regulate how they interact with one another. They will be able to exhibit self-discipline and self-motivation.

Responsible Decision Making. Responsible decision making refers to students' decisions to make "caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations" (CASEL, 2021). Responsible decision making is an SEL strategy that aids students in learning who they are and the choices that they want to make. When students have adequate responsible decision making skills, they will do better both academically and mentally (Gayl, 2017).

Relationship Skills. The CASEL model describes relationship skills as the ability to navigate in diverse settings and to sustain lasting, healthy, and kind relationships (CASEL, 2021). Students with more developed SEL skills tend to fare better in school than their counterparts with lower levels of SEL competencies (Marion et al., 2017). They are characterized by dispositions and behaviors conducive to learning, including increased classroom participation, positive attitudes and involvement in school, increased acceptance by peers, and a student teacher relationship in which teachers provide more instruction and offer more positive feedback (Denham, 2015; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). Relationship skills include "the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups, communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist

inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed” (DiFazio & Roeser, 2020). The authors also note that having good relationships with peers will build a more positive environment, because students are able to be vulnerable with one another while also accepting the differences that each one of them brings to the table. In addition, the first step to building relationships is to first create a relationship individually with each student. If students take the time to learn what it means to have positive peer relationships, they may choose to be more kind to one another. This will help develop a kind classroom environment, which will enhance SEL skills and build social awareness.

Relationships with Teachers. It is necessary that teachers facilitate and develop caring relationships with students, to aid in their growth (Hajovsky et al., 2020). Hajovsky et al. (2020) have shown that students may not always remember the academics that teachers teach, but they will remember that relationship and bond that the teacher created with them. Post-COVID, students have returned to in-person school and teachers, among other things they are doing, are focusing on building positive relationships in the classroom (Pascal & Bennett, 2021). Weissbourd (2003) has documented that teachers can establish trusting relationships with children by communicating high standards for moral behavior with children, carefully listening to them, and showing appreciation for their perspectives. As teachers work to redevelop relationship skills, they are also redeveloping empathy and caring skills, which helps children be more responsive, enjoy closer friendships with their peers, and work more collaboratively with others to solve problems (Griggs et al., 2009).

Researchers have strategies for how they will directly teach students to build better relationships and create a positive foundation with their peers; however, some parents may not value these standards as much as teachers do (Gwernan et al., 2015). Children may not learn to

care and be kind, unless they are directly taught to care and have a present and positive role model to represent what kindness and empathy look like (Blystad & Hansen, 2022). Thus, it is important for teachers to build these relationships with their students. CASEL's model includes relationships, because when students have these positive relationships, especially with their teachers, they will be more willing to stand up for others and show kindness, because they know that they have someone that will stand up for them and show them kindness

Social Awareness. According to the CASEL model, social awareness includes “the abilities to understand perspectives and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures and contexts” (CASEL, 2021). Teachers are responsible for teaching students academic knowledge, but they are also responsible for teaching students basic social skills and how to interact with one another (Kholodniak et al., 2020).

CASEL Serving Transitions

CASEL helps students have a healthy transition back to the social setting of the class and facilitates better decision making skills. CASEL's goal is to “emphasize the importance of establishing equitable learning environments and coordinating practices across key settings of classrooms, schools, families, and communities to enhance all students' social, emotional, and academic learning” (CASEL, 2021). It involves bringing teachers, families, and students together to learn what it means to be kind, develop relationships, build self-awareness and social awareness skills, as well as give implementation strategies to continue building those skills.

Teaching Kindness

Binfet (2015) noted that kindness definitions are usually in terms that are accessible for adults, but not children. By contrast, Binfet (2015) mentioned, “kindness, from the perspective of young children, is an act of emotional or physical support that helps build or maintain

relationships with others” (p. 36-37). Children see kindness in a different light than adults might see it, so it is important to make sure that before direct instruction in teaching kindness begins, teachers ensure that students understand what is expected of them when they are telling them to be kind to one another. If students connect the ideas of what it means to be kind to how it makes them feel when they are kind or when others are kind to them, maybe their outlook on being kind to others will change, further developing the idea of social awareness, empathy, and self awareness.

One way of developing kindness is by making sure that one understands their own emotions before they move on to understand someone else's emotions (Vaughn & Fredrickson, 2006). Furthermore another supposition of this thesis was, it is important that while teachers facilitate kindness, they also allow students the opportunity to make those choices on their own.

Teachers' Perspectives on Kindness

Teachers note that the moral values that should be taught in schools are: respect, kindness, and tolerance (Kholodniak et al., 2020). In the U.S. education system, Common Core emphasizes skills where students must work together as a team to problem solve. Students are expected to discuss different viewpoints in regard to the task that they are working on and explore democratic processes as they work out their differences. This emphasizes the importance of kindness amongst diverse groups. Common Core and CASEL's frameworks may be different but both structures work to train teachers how to teach kindness.

Binfet (2015) has pointed out the need to focus on teaching in the direction of kindness as opposed to teaching away from problem behaviors, such as bullying. When the emphasis is on identifying and addressing problems and behaviors that are unkind, students are not necessarily being taught kindness, rather they are being taught how to respond to negative feedback. Instead,

Binfet (2014) found schools and teachers should promote prosocial behaviors such as kindness to mitigate negative behaviors and promote positive ones. Students may internalize the behaviors that teachers are expecting, engaging in positive behaviors instead (Binfet, 2015).

Kindness in the Classroom

If teachers and other outside influences force their students to be kind without giving context for why it matters, students will not necessarily want to be kind. When a school gives students opportunities to decide and make moral decisions on their own, the school environment thrives on the positivity that comes from that (Bhatti et al., 2021). Researchers also noted that when implemented effectively, kindness lessons that are purposeful will be valuable to students in the long term and skills that are learned from those lessons will be used in the future (Kaplan et al., 2016).

Kind Campus. Kaplan et al. (2016) introduced a program called “Kind Campus.” The goal of this program was to foster the positive impacts of kindness and analyze its effects on students, their families, faculty, and staff. The program that they introduced had four components: the Kind Mind, Self-Kindness, Social-Kindness, and Kindness in Action. Kind Campus fully implemented kindness and SEL pedagogies while also teaching students the importance of treating others with kindness. While they did not utilize CASEL 5, the goals and values that influenced Kind Campus mirrored those of CASEL frameworks, further emphasizing the importance of those values.

Kind Campus suggests that having an effective kindness program will create a common ground for school students and staff to be able to discuss kindness and the positive impacts. Additionally, it will provide another framework similar to Responsive Classroom or CASEL that

allows people within the school to acknowledge kindness that is taking place around them and be able to practice and implement it towards themselves and others (Kaplan et al., 2016).

Scenarios and Reflections. Another way to implement kindness into the classroom is to facilitate direct lessons that teach kindness. Teachers can deliberately assign students the task of treating someone with kindness then report on how it made them feel and how it affected the other person. Utilizing kindness acts as lessons, helps teachers find students who struggle with kindness in general. Sometimes, students are unkind, not because they want to be, but because they do not necessarily have the coping skills to be kind (Binfet, 2015). For example, in one study, Roeser (2020) described a scenario in which a fourth grade class of students was given a list and then asked to identify which feelings were the most important to them. Then, in groups, the students used certain sentence frames to share their thoughts and opinions (Roeser, 2020). This lesson directly taught students about emotions and empathy. The teacher could have expanded the lesson by having students go outside of the classroom and attempt to evoke those positive emotions in those around them. Students could then write how it made them feel treating others with kindness and report what it meant to them. Having students show their learning in multiple ways, uses the Universal Design for Learning framework, which is a framework that focuses on engagement, representation, action, and expression to help support all students in learning (CAST, 2018). By allowing students to physically be kind and then present their findings in the form of writing, they are internalizing and thinking about their self-awareness as well as social-awareness. This allows students to continue to build on their kindness and gratitude, as they have to relate other people's feelings to their own, further building their self-awareness and relationship skills.

Kindness Projects. Binfet (2015) notes that teaching kindness should be intentional and each lesson should have both meaning and value. This is a common theme that the researcher focuses on throughout her research on teaching kindness. Binfet (2015) laid out a foundation for what intentional kindness should look like in the classroom. Summarizing the research findings of several other writers, Binfet found that, “increasingly, social and emotional competencies are recognized as the foundation for strong academic engagement, leading to optimal academic achievement” (p. 50). For the different skills that fall under the category of self awareness, the students were allowed to create a project in which they showed how they learned best. Then, they were asked to present their work. One student explained:

It was mostly just like you, and you had the freedom to play around, I guess, a little bit or try to figure out what’s the best way for you to learn or how you wanted to present it, instead of having someone tell you. And I think for me, the freedom of just being able to learn more about yourself. So I think that was the freedom part, being able to learn more about you and how you learn. (DeMink-Carthew, Netcoh, & Farber 2020, p.171)

Gratitude

Gratitude, or the act of expressing thanks, is an important skill that allows individuals to build relationship skills through kindness and love. According to Haslip et al. (2019):

Love and kindness are among the highest reported character strengths present in the personalities of primary school teachers and student teachers, as measured by the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). When parents have been asked for a narrative description of their children’s (age 3–9) character strengths, love and kindness are the two most prevalently mentioned traits. (p. 1)

Researchers found that there is a direct correlation between the strengths that teachers possess and the strengths that their students have (Haslip et al., 2019). Furthermore, having kindness as a character strength means prevalent “niceness.” Kindness describes the tendency to be nice to other people, to be compassionate about their welfare, to do favors for them, and to take care of them. A supposition of this thesis is, students can practice gratitude by writing in journals everyday, writing what they are grateful for and why. By implementing this into a daily routine, teachers are instilling a habit of gratitude in their students. Another activity that could help students build feelings of gratitude, is having them verbally sharing with others what about them they are thankful for.

Gratitude allows students and teachers to reflect on themselves and use that reflection to determine the decisions that they are going to make in the future (Dhiman, 2010). Practicing gratitude is beneficial to students as they learn to be kind, because it will help them appreciate their peers and teachers. Gratitude is a skill and with all skills, practice will enhance the ability to show it.

Responsive Classroom

Responsive Classroom is an evidence-based framework for teachers that promotes positive relationship building as well as effective classroom management and a positive community (Cressey, 2019). Cressey (2019) notes how a Responsive Classroom further develops SEL, because it encourages students to take control of their own learning.

Morning Meetings

According to the Responsive Classroom approach, morning meetings are not just meetings in the mornings with students where they get to share how their weekend went. Morning meetings include the following: greeting, sharing, group activity, and a morning

message (Responsive Classroom, 2021). There is an exact method to the morning meetings that provide the SEL competencies that students need in order to effectively learn to be kind that begins with a nuanced form of welcoming. According to Shields et al. (2020):

Classroom greetings offer more than a simple hello. It can welcome students “in” and signal that they matter. A greeting says, “I see you, I welcome you, and I want to know more about you.” The act of saying hello, the ritual of shaking hands or hugging, and taking the time to exchange information enacts relational values of “We”-ness, of belonging (p. 43).

Furthermore, by implementing greetings into daily morning meetings, teachers are allowing students to promote their social emotional well being. Daily greetings create a collaborative environment that serves to build positive relationships (Shields et al., 2020).

Building Positive Community

According to Responsive Classroom, building a positive community translates as the creation of a safe, inclusive, and predictable space where all students feel like they belong and have significance in the classroom (Responsive Classroom, 2021). Bhatti et al. (2021) note, for instance, that having basic school rules while also allowing students to make choices and moral decisions on their own, provides an environment for students to develop their own moral compass. This makes the classroom safe for students and creates an overall positive school environment for individuals to thrive.

If teachers teach their students to be kind and why it is important, everything else, both academically and socially, will follow (Binfet, 2015). Muharib & Pennington (2019) points out that by building a positive classroom environment, students will learn to cope with adversity and maintain a kind and positive attitude in an emotionally stressful situation. A positive classroom

environment facilitates a safe space for students to raise their hand and speak out in class, allowing them the opportunity to learn better (Allbright et al., 2019). This aids in the development of their self-confidence (Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). Students will want to participate in group settings more as they develop social awareness, because it will be less stressful and more fun (Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007).

Effective Classroom Management

Gambino (2019) shows how having effective classroom management builds on creating a positive classroom environment, as students will better understand what is expected of them. Gambino (2019) found that establishing rules in the classroom was the most effective aspect of the Responsive Classroom approach. Gambino interviewed a principal and eighteen teachers at the school were involved in the study which analyzed whether Responsive Classroom was an effective classroom practice.

Providing Choice. Choices are another Responsive Classroom strategy that aids in having effective classroom management (Bhatti et al. 2019). Bhatti et al.(2019) show how giving students the opportunity to make a good choice on their own teaches them so much more than being told what to do. This creates a sense of autonomy and allows the students to be in charge of their own learning (Bhatti et al., 2021).

Functional Communication Training. Functional Communication Training (FCT) is when an educator teaches a student how to properly communicate their emotions rather than exhibit an undesired behavior like being unkind (Muharib & Pennington, 2019). Examples of functional communication responses include: teaching a child to hold up a signal when they are feeling overwhelmed or even giving a verbal sign to let their teacher know that they either need assistance or space. Muharib and Pennington (2019) documented the steps of this practice. For

instance, one teacher who noticed undesired behavior in their students took notes on when the behavior occurred and what was happening at the time. Once the teacher was able to identify the patterns and behavioral norms of the student she was able to focus on replacement behaviors. Instead of blurting out that the assignment was “stupid and boring,” the teacher asked the student to raise their hand and ask for help. The next part of the process took more time and patience. The student needed to practice the skill before they were able to complete the task without prompting. During this time, the teacher collected data that allowed them to analyze whether or not the student needed to be prompted to give the request for help or not. When the student began to ask for help without being prompted, the teacher responded to the student fairly quickly. Eventually, the teacher was able to delay the response to the student and they understood that the teacher would be able to help them in a moment (Muharib & Pennington, 2019).

Functional Communication Response. This additional “functional” approach helps build effective classroom management and supports a Responsive Classroom approach, because it allows students to be in charge of how they are feeling in order to effectively communicate what they need, further promoting their self-awareness. FCT can be very beneficial for all students including those with autism in a mainstream classroom (Muharib & Pennington, 2019). Muharib and Pennington (2019) further note how the teacher decides what the student is capable of and focuses on teaching the student the functional communication response (FCR) to replace the one undesired behavior. When the student is able to give the FCR without prompting, then the teacher will know that the student has completed their training for that behavior. It is important to decide which behavior to tackle first and when to work on it. For instance, if the

student exhibits the behavior during math, that is when the training should happen (Muharib & Pennington, 2019).

Barriers

While the Responsive Classroom approach is beneficial in many ways, some teachers described barriers to the approach (Gambino, 2019). As examples, the time that it takes to implement the practices into the classroom was excessive, implementing morning meetings and closing meetings every day can be very time consuming (Gambino, 2019). However, when time is set aside and it is done properly, it proves to be very beneficial to students. Researchers also discussed with teachers things that they wanted help with when they are implementing a Responsive Classroom approach (Gambino, 2019). Teachers noted that one thing they wanted help with was the time management aspect of it. Sometimes, implementing a morning meeting everyday can seem time consuming and daunting. Gambino (2019) ensured that despite the challenges, by incorporating morning meetings, closing meetings and actively engaging in building a positive classroom community, teachers are actively engaging in a Responsive Classroom, and ensuring that their students are learning what it means to be kind and have self-awareness and social-awareness.

Conclusion

Overall, teaching students to be kind and have empathy for one another is vital to their development as individuals (Csaszar et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic put a pause on the social emotional skills that had been part of some approaches that teachers use to effectively and fully integrate SEL in the classroom including the CASEL 5, models of teaching kindness, and Responsive Classroom. These frameworks work in conjunction with one another to ensure that

students are learning how to be self and socially aware, providing them with the capability and desire to build healthy relationships.

Chapter 3: Methods

Teaching kindness has been recognized as an important practice that provides direct instruction in such skills as self awareness and builds better classroom relationships, which translate into more academically productive learning environments (Kaplan et al., 2016). By virtue of the amount of time enrolled, students develop many social-emotional skills while they are in school. For nearly two years, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, students were forced to stay home and away from the interpersonal skill-developments available through in-person schooling. There have been many studies emphasizing the importance of implementing SEL into the classroom. However, little research has been done on the effects a global pandemic has on students' attitudes towards one another and how such impacts affect the overall school environment.

This study focuses on the impact that COVID-19 had on students' social-emotional well-being, specifically in the classroom. It looks at students who are in an elementary classroom together following the COVID-19 shut down and being separated for nearly two years. This study aims to find strategies that help students build their social-emotional skills and give them the tools needed to navigate through a classroom of their peers.

Research Questions

This research was conducted through an immersive approach as a qualitative study focusing on students' ability to get along with their peers in the classroom post-pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic was a time during which they did not have the opportunity to practice or acquire new social skills. The research was based on the following questions:

- Can students develop a habit of showing daily kindness and gratitude?
- What strategies and approaches positively and consistently impact students' ability to be kind to one another and learn from one another post-pandemic?
- How do students' views of themselves affect how they treat others in the classroom?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

To better understand strategies and approaches that positively and consistently impact students' ability to be kind and learn from one another post-pandemic, the researcher implemented kindness lessons and daily gratitude journaling that focused on emphasizing social-emotional skills that the researcher felt the students were lacking. This qualitative study supports two worldviews: pragmatic and constructivist.

Pragmatism holds the belief that there are multiple ways in order to support research, and seeks practical solutions for identified problems. It focuses on “actions, situations, and consequences rather than antecedent conditions” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 10). And in this way, the researcher is focused on the problem and research questions rather than the methods that the researcher will use to solve the problem. Specifically, this study supports a pragmatic approach, as the goal of the research is to directly address the problem of the students' lack of social-emotional skills, and take action to reach the goal of kindness in classrooms.

Constructivism places a strong focus on the participants rather than the researcher. The goal is that the participants make meaning of the world around them and then the researcher uses that meaning to further develop the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The methods of the study were based on the students' responses to the various lessons and strategies that the researcher utilized to implement kindness and positivity in the classroom. The researcher was trying to elicit what is important to the students and why, directly from the students. The goal

was to obtain information from them and seek their individual interpretations on kindness and how they are going to integrate it into their daily lives. This allows for students to navigate and guide their own learning.

Qualitative research is based on open-ended discussions designed to “elicit views and opinions from the participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187). This approach involves both observing the students’ behaviors and patterns, and collecting feedback directly from the students. Following the data collection, the researcher analyzed the social emotional skills of her students and used it to guide the rest of the research. The research relied on the use of open-ended interview questions and writing prompts that allowed students to interpret information in whatever way they chose, providing the researcher with a better understanding of the students’ perspective and the context of their understanding. The researcher embedded herself into the learning process of her students. She spoke with the students everyday, and used daily curricula to collect data about how the students were feeling and why, on a day-to-day basis. Throughout the study, she kept records that helped with the data analysis at the end of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Research Design

This study sought to understand how elementary school students could learn to be kind to one another and develop a habit of gratitude and kindness in a post-pandemic year, after spending the previous two years with little to no contact with their peers. Furthermore, the study also aimed to understand how teachers play a role in creating a kind environment in the classroom by implementing SEL practices. The study aimed to use the collected data to determine if students were feeling more included and safe after each kindness lesson. The collected data was also used to determine if students were beginning to learn the following skills:

self awareness, responsible decision making, better relationship skills, and social awareness.

Research Site and Entry into the Field

This research was conducted at an elementary school in northern California, which is referred to in this study as Delta Elementary. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the school, the students, and any other staff that was interviewed. Delta Elementary serves 695 students in grades from kindergarten through fifth grade, including two special education classrooms for these ages. The population is comprised of 40.9% Hispanic students, 28.3% white students, 4.2% Asian students, 8.2% African American students, 0.7% Pacific Islander students, 5.5% Filipino students, 7.1% students who are two or more races, and 5.2% students who did not report their ethnicity (California Department of Education).

The researcher is a first year teacher at Delta elementary with 33 students in her fourth grade class. There are three students in the researcher's class who receive special education services, with diagnoses ranging from dyslexia to autism. This school site was chosen because it is the researcher's place of employment.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

The twenty-seven students in the researcher's fourth grade elementary class at Delta Elementary were invited to participate in this research project. The researcher chose to work with those students because the research was based on the attitudes that they held with one another throughout the year. In addition, between three of the twenty-seven students from the researcher's classroom of fourth graders were recruited to participate in on-campus, on-going individual interview sessions. The researcher had a relationship with the student participants prior to the study, as their classroom instructor.

Students were introduced to the research study and informed about the invitation to

participate verbally in class. The researcher also sent a consent letter home to the parents of all students that outlined the purpose of the study and provided details on how the kindness lesson and writing prompt data would be collected and used. Additionally, it addressed how the data, interview process, and interview question details would be kept private and confidential. While all students participated in the unit lesson, only students who returned the parental consent form had their work, responses, data, and interviews included in the research and analysis. In addition, all students in the cohort were informed about and invited to participate in one-on-one interviews.

Methods

The teacher provided an Exit Ticket pre-unit survey to establish a baseline of responses to questions about toleration and community (see Appendix A for sample Exit Ticket questions). Participants engaged in weekly kindness lessons and daily gratitude lessons during Morning Meetings, and a debrief at the end of the day during a closing meeting. During the morning meeting kindness lesson, the teacher gave students a goal to focus on throughout the day. To facilitate reaching the daily goal, she also provided them with activities that promote kindness. These activities included reading short stories on kindness from the class library, art-based inquiry projects, and community circle/team building exercises (see Appendix B for a sample lesson). Then, at the end of every day during the closing meeting, the teacher gave students a writing prompt that asked about their goal for the day. The students responded by writing at least three sentences, describing their understanding and personal journey to reach the goal. The teacher put the goal on the board for the students to be reminded throughout the day, as well as while they were writing their end of day reflection. The teacher also provided sentence frames for students who needed encouragement structuring their thinking (see Appendix C for sample

prompts and sentence frames).

Students who did not opt to participate had to be present during the lessons, but did not have to complete the writing prompts for use in the data collection method. Instead, they were given time to work on an assignment that goes with the kindness lesson that was given that day.

At the end of the designated time for the lessons-based research, the researcher invited the students to consider how they might like to share their individual and collective insights and discoveries, and how and to whom they might want to share those findings. They were invited to collaborate with one another to decide what type of activity, such as a presentation for school staff or for another class, they might want to create. The unit concluded with the Post-Unit Exit Ticket Survey, which was the same set of questions as the Pre-Unit Exit Ticket Survey (see Appendix A).

In addition, individual interviews were conducted with three students in the classroom whose parents had given consent (see Appendix D for sample individual interview questions). The interviews occurred on campus at Delta Elementary in the teacher's classroom. The interviews occurred in weekly 10-minute sessions that were scheduled between January and March; these sessions did not disrupt their education.

Data Analysis

Data was collected for the written responses and used to track how the students' attitudes towards one another were changing over time. The responses were also used to understand how a student's self understanding affected the way they interacted with each other in the classroom.

During all qualitative open-ended interviews, the researcher took notes and wrote analytic memos immediately after. Students who felt more comfortable with answering individual interview questions in writing rather than speaking were allowed to do so. Written information

never included any names or identifying information (e.g., addresses, phone numbers, personal references).

Analytic memos were written immediately after each interview, categorizing the data using coding and connecting strategies to one another. Furthermore, by creating analytic memos post-interview, the researcher was better able to support her findings and compare and contrast interviews between students as well as tracking how they individually changed over time. Writing the analytic memos allowed the researcher to fully listen to what the interviewee had to say. The recording was used to serve as a reinforcement to what the researcher remembered. The researcher observed the body language of the interviewee in order to understand them better as the interview was happening. Using analytic memos while interviewing allowed the researcher to understand the context and conditions surrounding the student's interview. If the student in the interview was having an off day, the researcher was able to note that, because it clearly affected their responses to the interview questions.

The researcher started with an open-coded and emergent coding strategy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This coding strategy allowed the researcher to find patterns in the interviewees' behaviors and ways that they speak to one another as well as feel about one another, and then look for those same patterns in future interviews. It kept the researcher open to any information that became available while also allowing the researcher to search for patterns and categorize them based on what the interviewee was saying.

Coding was used before, during, and after each interview. After coding, the researcher used concept mapping and connecting strategies to find similarities and differences between the experiences of each student.

Validity

The researcher is a first year teacher of the student participants. Because the researcher had a relationship with the participants as this was her first class of students, this had an influence on the emotions the researcher held during the study. She noted that while teaching her students how to be kind, she was also learning how to both embody and then teach these concepts without prior experience. Overall, the researcher's goal was to allow the students to organically understand why it was important to show gratitude and to be kind, but she had her own ideas about why it was important. The researcher was aware of these biases.

To enhance the validity of data, the researcher implemented various strategies. First, while the intensive long-term involvement made her more invested in the outcome, it also allowed her to interpret and understand the richness of the data. Rich data allows the researcher to “provide a full and revealing picture of what is going on” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126). The researcher also looked for discrepant evidence (Maxwell, 2013).

Qualitative data was collected through respondent validation by “soliciting feedback and data from the participants interviewed” (Maxwell, 2013, p.126). Writing prompts and gratitude journals were used as well as transcribed interviews with student participants. The triangulation of data sources increased the validity of the project because the data was analyzed to find themes and similarities between what the students were experiencing (Maxwell, 2013).

Chapter 4: Findings

This study sought to understand what strategies and approaches teachers could implement to positively and consistently impact students' ability to be kind to one another and learn from one another post-pandemic. The researcher had a goal of creating a classroom culture based around kindness and the impact that it can have on students, because they had been very unkind to one another in the beginning of the school year. For instance, the environment in which the researcher entered was a place where it was not uncommon for students to use profanities towards one another. They also had the habit of speaking out over the researcher during class to argue with one another, to the point where it was difficult to complete lessons without an argument. These students also had a habit of disrespecting other teachers on campus by talking back when told to do something they did not want to do. On the playground, they often would not follow directions of the yard duty staff, and would run away when consequences were given.

Through the course of research, the researcher found that she was able to see the kindness in students, despite the classroom climate that was in place. It became evident that the students wanted to be included, that they just did not know how to go about it in the best way, and that they often did enjoy playing outside with one another, even when they struggled to get along in environments for learning and in relationship to teachers.

The researcher came to the class as a first-year teacher, two weeks late into the school year. It was reported that the previous teacher, who had abruptly left, had been very strict and did not leave a lot of room for the students to make mistakes and grow from them to become their better version of themselves. In addition, this was the first time that the students were back in-person after almost two years of hybrid learning. This group of students had been in second

grade in March 2020, when they heard that their Spring Break was going to be extended for an extra two weeks. Those two weeks turned into nearly two years.

When the researcher came to shadow the classroom, before she officially accepted the position, she noticed that one specific student, Noah, was not included with the rest of the class. The resigning teacher communicated that Noah had issues with the other students and that was why he was not allowed to sit with the rest of the group. Throughout the day, he would get out of his seat often and complained of a headache and stomachache. When it came time to take the spelling test, he became very anxious. The researcher observed the resigning teacher read through the spelling list so quickly that many of the students were struggling to keep up, especially Noah. The words that were on the spelling test were also considered diagnostic words, so the students had never had time to practice the words, and for many of them, this was the first time that the students had even heard some of the words. When Noah asked the teacher to slow down and repeat the words again, she said that she would get back to it later. Noah broke his pencil and walked out of the classroom. The teacher told him to go to the office to go home and he did not return for the rest of the day. The researcher also observed how the students would tell one another to “shut up” often, as well as become physical when they did not listen to one another. This became a regular protocol as the resigning teacher rang her bell for the students to quiet down. The students would immediately put their hands on their heads and if one spoke out of turn, she would call them out and ask the other students to explain what that student did wrong. It was a very punitive environment which made the students fearful of making mistakes.

A Note on Reintegrating after the Pandemic

These students experienced school primarily online and eventually in a hybrid format. During an open response exit ticket question, the students were asked “What were some of the

things that you thought used to be important before the pandemic?” Many of them noted that they were excited to participate in school plays, have friends to play with all of the time, hug others, give high fives, be social with one another, and be able to see others’ facial expressions. Students were not allowed to have the same in-person interactions that they would have “normally” had in a normal year. When asked what was important now that they were back in school, many of the students mentioned that they have to focus on washing their hands more often, wearing masks, and staying away from people. They did not really have the time to think about being kind, because they were afraid of getting sick.

Seeing the Kindness in Students

Initially, the researcher struggled to find the increments of kindness in her students. Despite the effort that she was putting in to create a classroom culture based on kindness, they were still seemingly constantly fighting and arguing with one another. As the researcher was implementing kindness lessons and teaching how to incorporate habits of gratitude into their daily lives, she was not noticing the change that was taking place in some of the students, because she was focused on the negative aspects of the classroom climate. Two specific students really stood out when the researcher was looking through her data for kindness-Noah and Ashley.

Noah and Ashley were proof that kindness and growth takes place in increments. While the researcher was focusing on how her class was misbehaving, she was missing the fact that two students who initially struggled with being kind to others, were no longer the main focus when it came to engaging in unkind behaviors. Once the researcher noticed this, she began focusing on the small aspects of growth that her class as a whole was taking, which in turn changed her mindset, allowing her to find more positives every day. The “little wins” mattered, and that

became very evident. Noah taught the researcher to find increments of improvement in the class as a whole and notice the small changes. Ashley taught the researcher to learn to look for the good in others, even when she thought the class was being poorly behaved overall.

Building on Small Increments of Growth

The student who seemed most affected by the environment that the previous teacher had created was Noah. The researcher, who took over as the classroom teacher, talked with him daily during the first few weeks she was in the classroom, reminding him why it was important to be kind and how his actions were affecting others in the classroom. The researcher tried many different strategies to help Noah become more comfortable with not only himself, but the rest of the classroom. He would often call other students names or retaliate against them physically when they upset him. The researcher kept in contact with his parents throughout this time as well, but their responses were usually in support of Noah's actions.

During the research process, the researcher sent out an initial survey to see how the students felt about school. When asked what would make a safe classroom environment for him, Noah answered, "I will never feel safe in a classroom." During this time, Noah was a very reactive student who never chose to give others the benefit of the doubt. He always assumed that others were bumping into him on purpose. If another student was looking at him, he assumed that they were looking at him because they thought he was weird. He would lash out and become physical with other students or even walk out of the classroom and run to the nurse so that he could call home and leave early. These behaviors became a nearly everyday occurrence.

Additionally, while Noah was reacting to others in a disrespectful manner, he was also treating teachers this way. He often acted as if the rules did not apply to him, and became upset when teachers redirected him. One day, Noah was swinging on the swings and then jumping off

at the top. It is an established and known rule at Delta Elementary, that students were not allowed to jump off the swings. When a teacher approached Noah, he began to yell at the teacher, saying that he should not be in trouble because there were other students that did it the other day, and that he is allowed to jump off the swings at home. The teacher noted that she would continue to look out for others, but right now the problem was that he was jumping off the swing. She commented that if he is allowed to jump off the swings at home, then that is up to his parents but she cannot have him getting hurt while at school. Noah responded, “Well then, you are a bad teacher and all you care about is money, not your students.”

During another initial survey question, Noah was asked, “What was something that used to be important to you before the pandemic but is not as important anymore?” Noah responded: “I used to have to make myself look happy because even when I am not upset my face looks mad.” This showed the researcher that Noah like other students may not always be showing on the outside how he is feeling on the inside. It was also possible to surmise that Noah had built a wall between himself and other students because that was easier than explaining himself all of the time.

Throughout the research process, the researcher offered multiple kindness lessons as well as daily check-ins. The check-ins were often informal. With Noah in particular, the researcher would ask him how he was feeling on a scale from 1-5 daily. Initially, he would always say a 0 or 1. Then one day, the researcher mentioned to Noah during one of their check-ins that he does not ever have to be a 5 or even a 4, but he could always try to make his day just a little bit better. When she asked his daily rating, he said a 2. She said, “Let’s try to get to a 2.2 by the end of the day.” Noah looked at the researcher, confused, and said, “But, that is barely anything.” Again, the researcher noted that days do not always have to be the best day ever, but if you lay your

head on your pillow at night and think about your day, you can say that at least your day got a little better. This daily check-in with the numbers only getting better a little at a time slowly turned into a higher rating at the beginning of the day. In a parallel development, the researcher realized that she could similarly begin to look for and see small increments of growth in their relationship and the class as a whole.

You Can Have Half My Pencil. Once both Noah and the researcher started looking for smaller increments of improvement and kindness, it became increasingly evident through the course of the research period, how Noah became more positive. He started helping students in class, instead of scoffing at them when they had a question that he already knew the answer to. The most notable shift occurred when another student asked the researcher for an extra piece of lead for their pencil. She kept lead at her desk for students to use when they ran out of lead in their mechanical pencils. The researcher ran out, though, and did not have any more to give. When the researcher sent the student to their desk with no lead, Noah stood up and said, “Wait, I have a piece that I will break in half.” He did not have any extra lead, but he had the piece that was currently being used in his pencil. He snapped it in half without hesitation and gave it to the student that needed another piece. This small act of kindness shocked the researcher, but also made the other student so happy. Noah had a huge smile on his face; it could be seen through his mask. He was happy that he was able to help someone and when he saw their reaction, he appeared even more genuinely happy.

As Noah made a change throughout the course of the research, so did a few other students. His was the most noticeable considering where he started from. Among other things, the daily check-ins became something that Noah looked forward to everyday, because it was a time for him to be seen and heard in his own self-reflection.

Shifting to See the Good in Others

Another student, Ashley, made a lot of progress in regards to how kind she was to others throughout the course of the research. Ashley was a student who found herself in the middle of a lot of drama on campus throughout the beginning of the school year. There were regular incidents where girls were arguing with one another at recess and threatening violence, and Ashley often seemed to be at the center of it. She would often get caught stealing things from others' desks and backpacks when the researcher was not looking. Other students began to realize that she was engaging in these behaviors and, consequently, became reluctant to be her friend. Her mom was involved in conversations with the school, asking what administration and the teacher could do to help Ashley make more friends and stop being picked on by her peers.

There were multiple occasions at recess when Ashley would threaten other students, or physically push or kick them. She would threaten people and tell them that she was going to beat them up if they told on her. There were multiple cases where she would use profanity towards students and then tell them that they were not cool enough, because they were not also using profanities. When the researcher pulled her aside to ask why she was acting this way, she broke down in tears because she said she did not know; she just wanted people to like her. During this time, the researcher realized that for Ashley, making friends was challenging, and just like Noah, she wanted to be accepted by her peers, but did not know how to go about it.

Filling Up Other's Jars with Kindness. Interestingly enough, during the kindness lessons, Ashley was the most engaged student. She enjoyed listening to the read-alouds, and always participated in the activities that followed. During a lesson where students were asked to walk around the classroom and fill other students' jars on papers with kind words and compliments, Ashley ensured that everyone was full. She wanted others to like her and she

wanted to be involved, so it did not make sense that during recess and lunch, she was threatening to kill people. During daily check-ins, Ashley always noted that she was having a great day and that she was hopeful that it would get better. She had a positive attitude towards school and she genuinely wanted to be there. Throughout the twenty-one day period, Ashley participated in daily gratitude journaling. When she was able to think about things that she was grateful for, the researcher noticed that she became more and more aware of how she was treating people, and during the daily check-ins Ashley started to enjoy reflecting on things that went on in her day and how her day could get better, or how she could do things differently to have a better day the next day.

Soon, when given the opportunity to work with partners, there were multiple people that wanted to work with Ashley. She was happy. One day at recess, a student from another fourth grade class was being picked on by a fifth grader. They were teasing the student about the way he looked and dressed. Ashley saw what was happening, and went and stood up for the student who was being picked on. When recess was over, Ashley went straight to the researcher to mention what had happened during recess. The researcher immediately got the principal involved and the principal was elated to hear that Ashley was the one to report it and stand up for the student who was being bullied. Administrators knew Ashley by name because of the number of times that she had been sent to the office for bullying and threatening people. Over time, and similar to Noah, she had learned strategies to be kind and show kindness to others when it mattered. She modeled kindness and showed others in the class as well as on the playground that she is capable of being a friend to others and that she wants to be a friend to others.

Finding Opportunities for Inclusion: the Ripple of Kindness

The researcher chose to incorporate into the class study on kindness, *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. This is a book about a fifth grade student named August who has facial deformities. He has never been to public school, but has reluctantly decided that he wants to go to public school so that he can make friends and have a seemingly normal life. He goes through many trials and tribulations throughout the course of the story, with being bullied as the center of his problems. He just wants to be included and welcomed by others, so that he can know what it feels like to be included. The researcher chose this book because of how closely August's desire for inclusion mirrored the experience of this group of students.

As a consequence, inclusion became a topic that was very prevalent for the rest of the study. Many of the kindness discussions had to do with topics and themes that arose in *Wonder*. August was very fixated on what others thought about him, because he constantly saw people stare at him as he walked by. He knew that sometimes, people did not always mean to stare –but he looked different, so it shocked many people when they first saw him. After the researcher read this part in the book, the class discussed how sometimes they might have a certain facial expression that could be misconstrued as being mean. The students discussed with one another what it would feel like to have others stare at you for something that you cannot control.

The discussions with the students about August led them to think about how differences can make each other more whole. They discussed that having differences makes people more interesting. To them, feeling whole meant feeling completely themselves and being able to act themselves around their peers at school. They talked about how if everyone was the same, they would be bored and would not have anything to talk about. This discussion led to some students bringing up different learning disabilities that they had, including dyslexia, autism, and attention

deficit activity disorder (ADHD). The students talked openly about how they learn best and why that makes them different from one another. As the students shared with one another, they fully listened to and understood each other. One student in particular, Ben, had a hard time cooperating with his peers. He liked to irritate others, but became very sensitive when his peers got upset with him. It might be possible to say he even felt some sense of joy in irritating others. He would laugh uncontrollably when others were uncomfortable. And when other students asked him to stop messing with them, he would do it more. Yet, he would often cry or become overwhelmed during group projects when he had to work with others. One day, he was having an especially hard time. He was struggling to figure out how to complete a certain task during independent work time, so he became frustrated, threw his paper on the floor, and began to cry. While doing so, he was also poking other students with his pencil. Eventually, another student, Amelia, approached him and asked if she could help him on the assignment. His eyes lit up. It seemed that he just wanted to understand the assignment, but did not know how to ask for help. When Amelia showed Ben kindness and support, his whole attitude towards the classroom changed. He was no longer doing things to irritate others, and most importantly, he felt supported.

Additionally, while reading *Wonder*, students began to notice when others were not being included. Whereas before, the students did not care to try to include their peers if they were not already with them. They also excluded students in the classroom during classwork, because they were not initially friends. In the researcher's class, there was a group of three students who were best friends. They spent all of their time together. They played together during recess, sat together during snacks, and sat together during lunch. One day, two of the students were absent. The third student, Lily, walked to lunch alone, grabbed her lunch, and then sat down by herself at

a table where no one else was sitting. She began eating her lunch when another student from the researcher's class came over and asked Lily if she wanted to sit with them so that she did not have to eat alone. Lily's face lit up with joy at the fact that someone was approaching her to sit with them. She no longer felt like her only friends were gone, because she had other people to turn to whenever she needed. When the researcher checked in with Lily after lunch, she spoke about the fact that she felt happy when she got to sit with someone else at lunch. Throughout the rest of the research period, Lily would sometimes choose to sit with the other students that she sat with that day.

Seeing the Kindness in Students

As other students were showing kindness for each other, the researcher noticed a ripple effect happening. More and more students were learning how to get along with each other. It also was not about just learning to get along in the classroom, which was the expectation held by the researcher, but the students wanted to understand and get to know each other. When Noah broke his pencil lead in half, it became common for other students to offer their supplies when another student needed something. The students were taking initiative when one of them needed help. In addition, more students were offering to help each other when they needed help on assignments and other projects. During group work, the students were collaborating with one another instead of sitting next to one another while working independently. They cared about how their peers felt. The students showed empathy and compassion towards one another.

The Joy and Innate Cooperation of Play

At the start of the research, the students' attitudes towards one another was not kind; fights were common, and so were unkind words. However, the researcher noticed that while the

students were playing games either outside, on the blacktop, or in the classroom, the students began to get along any time they were able to simply play with each other.

Before the study began, it was hard for the researcher to get through an entire lesson without a few of the students arguing with one another. One morning, the physical education (P.E.) teacher, Mr. S, dropped the students back off in the classroom like he always did, but this time he asked the students to stay outside while he spoke with the researcher. He noted that this particular group of students had great sportsmanship and got through more P.E. activities than any other class in the school, because of how well they work with one another. He recalled that it seems like they enjoy being in P.E. and he really appreciates how well they work together. When Mr. S and the researcher walked out of the room to greet the students, Mr. S thanked the students and praised them for how hard they were working and getting along.

In the larger context of what the environment had been like, this success was astonishing. The students were proud of themselves, but also acted as if it was no big deal that they were doing so well in P.E. For example, when the P.E. teacher told the researcher about how great the students were, their response was, “We like P.E. because we get to be outside and run, while also playing together.” It was normal to them, because they wanted to play the games and more importantly, play together. The researcher pulled the students in the classroom for a whole group discussion. The students unanimously agreed that they really enjoyed when they got to play outside, and the competition made them appreciate one another, because they had to work together to win. They noted that it did not matter if they won or lost, they genuinely just liked to play outside.

After receiving their compliment, the students began to choose to play together at recess more often. They would play the games that they learned in P.E. One of the games that the

students began to bond over was Wall Ball. When the researcher asked the students, in a survey, what they were excited about that day, the majority of the students in the class responded that they were excited to play Wall Ball at recess with their friends from class. After they came back from recess that day, conversations were not about who won or who did better; instead, they were encouraging one another for their efforts, as well as praising each other for their accomplishments in getting a hard-to-hit ball. Rather than conversations being discouraging and hateful like they were before the study began, the conversations were uplifting and positive. The kindness lessons encouraged and taught the students how to speak to one another with empathy and compassion.

How the Puzzle of Kindness Finally Came Together

Another activity that had profound results was a puzzle activity. The researcher asked the students to put together a puzzle with five hundred pieces. She did not give directions, but simply put the puzzle pieces on the back table and told all thirty-three of the students to participate. It took about five minutes before some of the students were pushing and pulling pieces out of the hands of other students. Some of the students wanted to sort the pieces first, while others just wanted to get started right away and find pieces that fit together. After five minutes of arguing, the researcher asked the students to sit back at their seats to discuss what happened. Many of the students made mention of the arguing and pushing. They said that it would have been easier if everyone in the class had a specific job, or if they went back there in smaller groups so that they were not all speaking over one another. The class then took a vote and all decided that they wanted to try again, but in smaller groups, which the researcher allowed.

She sent them to the back table in groups of five where they were allowed to have five minutes to work on the puzzle. Within twenty minutes, more than half of the puzzle had been put

together. The researcher then sent out a survey asking the students what worked and what did not work between the first and second time they were sent to complete the puzzle. Many of the students brought light to the fact that their team was able to work well together because there were fewer students, so they were able to communicate with one another more efficiently. The researcher then brought this to the attention of the students to emphasize that, being working well together, being kind, and completing things as a team all has to do with communication. At the end of the twenty-one day period, the researcher brought the students back together to complete the puzzle one more time. They first discussed what needed to happen in order for their teams to work together efficiently and effectively. At the end of the twenty minutes (five minutes per group), the researcher sent out a survey that asked if everyone felt like they were able to contribute to the puzzle. Initially, the researcher observed many of the students not able to contribute, because of the lack of teamwork that was taking place. The students almost unanimously agreed that they felt as though they were able to contribute to the puzzle in some way. This was completely different from what occurred the first time they completed the puzzle.

Throughout the twenty-one day period, the students were learning how to communicate with one another, in order to effectively work together. When they came back together to solve the puzzle one more time, there was no fighting and many of the students who were shoving and yelling during the first puzzle experience, were the same students who stepped up and tried to figure out how they were going to solve the puzzle together. When asked if they were able to work together to complete pieces of the puzzle, the majority of the class unanimously agreed that they were able to effectively work together as a group. A few of them mentioned specifically that they were able to work together better this time, because they were not pushing and shoving each other. They said that they were able to contribute, because others were not talking over them or

telling them to stop talking. Additionally, many of the students noted that they felt like they were able to contribute, because their group was listening to each other and they were able to put some of the pieces together by themselves.

The puzzle was a moment where the students were forced to work together and get along. It naturally taught the students that if they do not communicate with one another, they will not be able to get very far in completing the puzzle. They learned that speaking over one another and creating a chaotic environment was not an effective way to work together. The researcher did not have to teach that, because it naturally happened. This became a strong piece of information for the researcher and the students. After the puzzle activity, the researcher noticed a small shift in the way that students were communicating with each other. During lessons, they were actively listening and hearing what the others were saying. They were learning how to learn from one another and that was a really strong finding.

Conclusion

Looking for the little wins became the most important aspect of the study. As the researcher would come home feeling overwhelmed because she was not noticing the changes that were taking place, the researcher's boyfriend asked, "What was a little win today?" At first, this question seemed odd, because the researcher was ranting about how overwhelmed she was because her class seemed to not be learning from her. When he asked this simple question, it put into perspective for the researcher the amount of work and effort that she was putting in and the small wins that were coming out of that hard work. This became a daily question that changed the entire mood and mindset of the researcher. She was now excited to come home to explain to her boyfriend the little wins and positive changes that she was noticing in her students everyday.

Overall, the research suggests that students want to feel included and cared about by their peers. Sometimes, they have to be explicitly taught how to engage with others in a respectful, kind way. The findings from this research study indicate that when students feel as though they are cared about, they are more likely to show kindness towards others. In addition, as teachers and other staff members learn to see the small increments and look for kindness in others, they will be able to see more positive changes in their students and the overall classroom environment. As students learn to be kind to one another and implement it into their own lives, it will have a rippling effect on other students as well. When students are able to play with one another openly, they will continue to learn the skills necessary to be kind and get along with each other.

The activities used in this study consisted of team building activities through the use of solving a puzzle as a team, kindness lessons that explicitly taught about what it means to be kind, activities where students practiced showing kindness by filling jars with kind words, and a daily gratitude journal. The activities aimed to respond to the following research questions. First, how can students develop a habit of daily kindness and gratitude? Second, what strategies and approaches positively and consistently impact students' ability to be kind to one another and learn from one another post-pandemic? And, thirdly, how do students' views of themselves affect how they treat others in the classroom?

In general, throughout this research process, the researcher learned how vital it is to look for the positives in students. It can be easy to be bogged down by the consistent negative behaviors that students are engaging in. Making the transition from focusing on those negative behaviors to finding the positive things that took place throughout the day really transformed the

researcher in many aspects: the way she teaches, the attitude that she has towards the students, and the overall feeling that she has throughout the day.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this study showed that it is important to see the kindness in students, there are opportunities for inclusion and the ripple effect that kindness has, and there is an innate cooperation of play among students. Seeing the kindness in students allows the researcher to notice the positive changes that are happening in students, even if they are small. The small changes do not always stick out right away, it is important to look for them. Moreover, when students are given the opportunity to include one another, there will be a ripple of kindness that follows. As student show one another kindness, they will continue to show kindness and that will inherently migrate to other students as well. Lastly, students enjoy playing together. They want to play together and when they are able to play together, they get along, regardless of how they are interacting with one another in the classroom. Additionally, when looking for successes in small increments, teachers will notice the positive changes in students more so than when they are looking for changes all at once.

Initially, the researcher felt discouraged at the lack of kindness that was taking place in the classroom while she was teaching. Throughout the research, though, the researcher realized that there were important changes taking place. When she took a step back to see what changes the students were making, even small ones, her focus was able to change to encourage the students to build on the kindness that they were already showing for one another.

In the following discussion, the researcher outlines the similarities and differences between the findings of this research and what has been previously established in the theoretical frameworks presented in the literature review; she also addresses the limitations and provides implications for further research in the classroom and in school communities that can be developed on teaching kindness.

The findings of this research reinforced the CASEL model framework in a few ways. Like CASEL suggests, this study also identified the value in developing the skills of communicating effectively, developing positive relationships, and resolving conflicts constructively (CASEL, 2022). As the researcher's students were learning how to collaborate positively with one another, they were learning how to be more kind as well. When the researcher made an effort to develop a relationship with Noah, he made an effort to develop a relationship with his peers, causing a dynamic shift in the way that he treats others and others treat him.

Another supposition of this thesis was, CASEL and Responsive Classroom work together to encourage educators to teach students SEL by building positive relationships and creating a positive learning community with effective classroom management and developmental awareness. When the researcher implemented communication building, relationship building, and positive classroom community strategies and practices into the classroom, the students were better able to communicate with one another as well as actively listen to one another.

Third, teaching kindness played an important role in the research of this study. For instance, the literature suggests that finding a baseline definition that is in "kid-friendly" language will encourage them to be more kind, because they know what the expectations are (Binfet,2015). As one example, when the researcher discussed with the participants what it meant to be kind, they realized that all of them had their own version of what being kind meant. So, the researcher and the students created a list of synonyms for the word kind and unkind. This eliminated any confusion for what being kind meant as well as gave students the expectations that they needed in order to know what the researcher was expecting for them in regards to being kind.

Implications for the Literature

The foremost finding of the research was both to, first, look for kindness in students, and second, to do so in increments. Through the research, the researcher felt discouraged, because the impact of the lessons was not immediately transformative of the classroom community. It seems obvious in retrospect that change takes practice and time, but the context of the classroom really needed a new cultural relationship, and it was still too widely evident that the students were still unkind to one another and other staff members on campus.

For an entire year previous to this research, the students had not had to go to school and take part in classroom procedures where they would have learned kindness strategies. Although the literature focused on teaching kindness through the use of resources like Responsive Classroom and CASEL, it did not teach how to look for kindness in increments and how that could be beneficial to the classroom environment, nor what the conditions might be after coming through a pandemic during which schools were mostly online. The literature did not focus on the little wins of teaching kindness, especially with more challenging classes. When focusing on the little wins that students in a classroom have, the teacher is able to look at the classroom with a more positive outlook, which then allows the students to see more of the positives in themselves. The two models also did not highlight the importance of play and explain how it could be beneficial to the social-emotional aspect of teaching.

Research did not discuss the importance of finding opportunities for inclusion and the ripple effect that follows it. During the research, when students were given the opportunity to show kindness, not only did they choose to include one another, but they enjoyed it. Furthermore, when students were making the choice to include one another, more of the students

in the researcher's class were also choosing to include others. There was a ripple effect in which students were choosing to include one another and thus choosing to be kind to one another.

Additionally, another major finding was the innate cooperation of play. The literature discusses the importance of play, but it does not focus on students' perspective on play. Children naturally want to play with one another and be included, which was a major finding of the research. Throughout the research, the researcher found that the effects of allowing students to play was beneficial in all aspects. The students were able to learn how to get along with one another, while also enjoying what they were doing. Throughout the research, this happened naturally. They were openly cooperating with each other and in doing so, they were having fun and it was being recognized by other teachers.

Furthermore, there was a common theme on the impact of teacher-student relationships. When the researcher was creating a better connection with Noah for example, he was able to focus on *how* he was being kind, which also prompted him to be more kind. The literature states that it is important to have a positive relationship with students, but it does not speak to the specific value of kindness. In the classroom, as the researcher was making an effort to check-in with students daily, they were having a more positive outlook on what the day was going to look like. Noah's daily rating slowly changed at the start of the day every day. He started by saying that he was having a "two out of five" day. By the end of the research period, he named his starting rating around three and then explained how he was going to try to improve his day. When the researcher chose to look for the small increments of kindness that Noah was showing, she began to see all of the positive changes that he was making, rather than focusing on negative aspects of his days.

Implications for Practice and Policy

In the classroom, teachers can focus on integrating play to promote kindness in various ways. Integrating structured play not only gives students the space to play with one another, it does so in a supportive environment. Throughout the research, the researcher found that the puzzle activity was beneficial to the students, because it allowed them to communicate with one another while also playing a game together. The students had to work together to solve the puzzle. It encouraged them to utilize different strategies to put the puzzle together, while also teaching them to accept the mistakes of one another and learn and grow from them. Puzzle activities work well for students, because they can be differentiated to different groups of students as well. Some of the puzzle groups could work together on a smaller puzzle and then work their way up to larger puzzles, depending on what the specific group of students need.

Another way to integrate play that could be utilized to cultivate kindness in the classroom is through structured games. Students can be given time during the day to go outside and play different team building activities. The teacher can create lessons in which students have to work together to overcome obstacles or move onto the next task in an activity. Team building exercises are fun for the students and gives them the opportunity to play, while also teaching them to work together. It builds communication skills and requires students to get along with each other in order to effectively complete the team building activities. Team building exercises can be done both indoors and outdoors, which allows students to get outside of the classroom when needed.

Furthermore, while integrating play is important, teachers should also be looking for incremental growth in their students. When there are a lot of challenges in a school year, whether behaviorally or because of outside stimuli, it is important to look at the incremental growth that

students are making. Teachers should come together to celebrate the little wins that their students are creating. The recognition that students receive from their teachers allows them to then be recognized by their peers, which hopefully creates a domino effect that spreads across the school community.

In the bigger picture of schools as a whole, schools could adopt a kindness policy where they have the same expectation for students and teachers across the entire campus. This would eliminate any miscommunication around kindness at the school. Administrators could host assemblies on the importance of kindness where they model for students what kindness looks like and why it is important. Promoting kindness across campus would be something that all teachers have to come together and be properly trained on expectations. Baselines have to be set on what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. Administrators could also set up professional development days that are specifically aimed at teaching kindness baselines and standards. During this time, teachers could be given time to explore what a productive learning community built on kindness looks like, and how they would create their school community around kindness.

Additionally, teachers should come together as a cohort to establish an understanding of kindness and play to collectively cultivate the same modality across campus. Activities that schools could create to incorporate play as a way to bring students on campus together include field days or days of play. This is when schools allow their students to all come together and engage in a full day of structured play. Activities can be set up for different classes to play and be together for an entire day. They would be let out of their regular activities for the day and would move from one activity to the next activity together as a class. This allows the students to play together while also giving them the freedom to be with their friends and have fun in a safe,

structured environment. Students could also participate in designing and be given a “kindness shirt” that is integrated with the overall theme of the field day.

Schools are allotted a certain number of minutes for various curricular activities to teach the standards throughout the day. For example, Delta Elementary requires that teachers conduct English language development (ELD) for at least fifteen minutes a day. That means that teachers are required to work one-on-one with ELD students for a minimum of fifteen minutes a day. There should be a policy put in place where teachers are given an amount of time that they should be implementing kindness procedures, specifically through play. This could include team building activities and other activities where students play with one another outside of their learning environment. The teacher then could incorporate those minutes into the day however they choose. They could decide to play for forty-five minutes with fifteen minute intervals of math, reading, or writing curriculum. The teacher could choose how to integrate play with curriculum, or schools could work together to make a school wide policy surrounding cooperation of play.

Moreover, there should be standards that require students to play with one another to further promote kindness. Physical Education teaches students how to be in shape and be healthy, but it does not always focus on playing together to promote kindness. At the state level, there should be specific standards that require teachers to incorporate kindness into their classrooms. By creating standards that require teachers to teach kindness, there would be specific training that help teachers learn how to teach kindness in their classrooms, thus creating the baseline for what kindness should look like in the classroom, schools, and across districts. Before beginning teaching, much like obtaining a teaching credential, teachers can go to pre-service training where they learn how to teach kindness and what it looks like.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Limitations of the study included the small population of students who were included in the research. In total, there were only twenty-seven students who participated in this research. The study was limited to one fourth grade class at one school specific site in one geographic area. Most of the students are classified as low income, as the school is a Title 1 school. Moreover, the majority of the students in the researcher's classroom were Latinx, limiting the diversity of the study. Additionally, the length of time that the research process took place was only three weeks. This limited the number of lessons on kindness and gratitude. Lastly, the researcher only obtained perspectives from the students, instead of including other teachers (such as the P.E. teacher who had offered some passing insights), administration, and parents.

In the future, the researcher would like to work with multiple classrooms across multiple grade levels and schools. The researcher also believes that parents and administrators should also be included in the research process, as they all play an important role in why students behave the way that they do. Understanding how administrators and parents feel about their children being kind and being able to play more openly with one another could offer alternative results to the study that could be very beneficial. If the researcher was able to work with multiple schools and grade levels, this could allow access to a higher diversity index of students. While developing the study across multiple schools and classrooms, the research could be developed as a longitudinal study where the students are tracked over time. If the researcher was able to track the kindness of the students over time, there would be more information on whether or not the kindness lessons and gratitude journaling encourage students to continue to be kind.

Initially, the researcher was focused on only kindness and how to teach students to be kind. Throughout the research, the researcher found that play was an important aspect of the

students and how kind they were to one another. In the future, the researcher would like to continue teaching kindness and the importance of it, while also incorporating play and centering that as a focus for study as well.

Conclusion

In all, the goal of this research was to understand how to take a class full of students who do not get along and learn strategies to teach them how to understand one another and in turn learn how to appreciate and be kind to each other. The findings suggested that when students have a positive relationship with their teacher, the ripple of kindness will translate into them being kind to one another. Practicing SEL in the classroom allows students and educators to learn from one another and build a foundation for success.

This study provides proof that students are capable of learning how to be kind during unprecedented times, even when expectations are constantly changing. The practices that teachers should use to further develop social-emotional learning in students mirrors the approaches that the CASEL model and Responsive Classroom provide. The findings supported the idea that students are able to be kind, but teachers and other staff should help students develop their ability to be kind in increments. When doing so, it is more evident that students are being kind to one another. The findings also support play as a way to increase kindness amongst students in a school setting. The students in this study enjoyed playing with one another, even when they were not getting along in the classroom. Building relationships with students also increases their willingness to be kind and see the potential to be kind in themselves that teachers and other staff may see.

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Appendix A:
Initial and Final Exit Ticket Response Form

1. Do you feel happy when you come to school?
 - a. Why or why not?
2. Do you feel like you matter in this classroom?
3. Do you feel like your teacher has your best interest in mind?
4. Do you feel like COVID changed how you interact with people at school?
 - a. Why or why not?
5. When you are on the playground, do you play with anyone from our class?
6. What three words best describe you?
7. Describe a classroom environment where you feel the most safe.
8. When I am feeling upset, Ms. Callahan can help cheer me up by... (explain)
9. Do you feel like you can volunteer to answer questions in the classroom without fear?
 - a. Why or why not?
10. Does school feel like a safe place for you to come to?
 - a. Why or why not?

Appendix B:
Sample Lesson

Lesson Plan	Class: Delta Elementary	
Topic: Gratitude Jar		
Learning Objectives	Standards	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students will understand what the term gratitude means. ● Students will know how to write a statement that shows gratitude for someone in their class. ● Students will know how to show gratitude for their peers by filling their “jars” with gratitude statements. <p>Materials: Gratitude Video: https://youtu.be/yA5Qpt1JRE4 Empty Jar Printout Colored Pencils for students</p>	California’s Social and Emotional Learning <i>Guiding Principles</i> : 3. Build Capacity: A. Positive Relationships and Belonging - To cultivate resilience to adversity and build the foundation for social and emotional growth, ensure every student and adult feels that they belong, have value, and have a network of caring peers to rely on. (https://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/documents/selguidingprincipleswb.pdf)	
Introduction <input type="checkbox"/> Discussion Question <input type="checkbox"/> Media <input type="checkbox"/> Activate Prior Knowledge		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. TTW introduce the lesson by asking students to brainstorm what gratitude means and how they can use it in their daily routine. 2. TTW give students five minutes to think/pair/share what it means and then will call the attention back to the front of the room. 3. TSW share out what gratitude means and ttw write it down all responses on an anchor chart. 4. TTW then play the gratitude video for students to hear what gratitude means. 		
Instruction <input type="checkbox"/> Whole Group <input type="checkbox"/> Small Group <input type="checkbox"/> Cooperative Learning <input type="checkbox"/> Centers		
Overall, after the video and discussion. Students will participate in a gallery walk to “fill” each other's jars anonymously with gratitude that they have for one another. Then, students will have time to read their jars and share out one thing that made them feel important that they read on their jar.		
Assessment <input type="checkbox"/> Observation <input type="checkbox"/> Worksheet <input type="checkbox"/> Test <input type="checkbox"/> Project <input type="checkbox"/> Presentation <input type="checkbox"/> Published Work <input type="checkbox"/> Rubric		

Differentiation		
<i>Approaching</i>	<i>On Level</i>	<i>Enrichment</i>
<p>The teacher will provide sentence frames for any student that needs help framing their thinking:</p> <p>I am thankful for _____.</p> <p>I appreciate that you _____.</p> <p>I am grateful for _____.</p>	<p>Students will also be provided sentence frames.</p> <p>Students may also pace themselves and think about what they are going to write before they participate in the gallery walk.</p>	<p>Students will be encouraged to take this activity beyond the classroom and show gratitude in person as well as writing it down.</p>
Follow Up <input type="checkbox"/> Re-teaching <input type="checkbox"/> Homework		Writing Prompt Sample
<p>Writing prompt will be given in the afternoon closing meeting with sample questions.</p>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did you practice gratitude today outside of the classroom? 2. How could you practice gratitude at home with friends and family? 3. Show gratitude by coming up with an activity that you could complete in the community this week. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Bonus points if you complete the activity and write about how it made you feel and the person that you showed gratitude to.

Appendix C:**Sample Sentence Frames and Sample Writing Prompts for End of Day**

1. I am thankful for _____.
 2. I appreciate that you _____.
 3. I am grateful for _____.
1. How did you practice (skill of the day: gratitude for example) outside of the classroom?
 2. How could you practice (skill of the day: gratitude for example) at home with friends, family, or people in the community?
 3. Show (skill of the day: gratitude for example) by coming up with an activity that you could complete in the community this week.
 - a. Bonus points if you complete your activity and write about how it made you feel and the person that you completed the activity for.

Appendix D:
Sample On-going Interview Questions

1. What's something you've achieved that you're most proud of and why?
2. How do you feel when someone in class challenges you?
3. When have you felt demotivated in class?
 - a. How did you overcome it or how could you have overcome it?
4. How would some of your closest friends describe you?
5. What kind of behavior makes you angry/annoyed?
6. Tell me about a time when your mood had an impact on your work (this could be positively or negatively).
7. What is one of your proudest moments at school?
8. What is something that you think you should work on bettering?
9. Do you think about your emotions when you're at school? Why?
10. How did you use the skill that we worked on this week in your daily life?
 - a. School?
 - b. Home?
 - c. With friends?