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Building Classroom Culture and Community with an Emphasis on Inclusive Practices

Adrienne Ducato
Dominican University of California

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Adrienne Ducato  
Candidate

Jennifer Lucko, PhD  
Program Chair

Matthew E. Davis, PhD  
First Reader

Zoe Bartholomew, PhD  
Second Reader
Building Classroom Culture and Community with

an Emphasis on Inclusive Practices

by

Adrienne Ducato

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

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to understand how inclusive classroom practices help cultivate empathy and community, particularly “post” pandemic and after learning conducted in isolated online and hybrid formats. The research is situated in a theoretical framework that integrates and examines inclusive educational practices, the role of empathy, and how diversity explored through literature can serve classroom culture. This study involved eighteen kindergarteners and six adult participants, including five educators and one counseling psychologist, and utilized a qualitative research design with a constructivist worldview to elicit from students how they understand and relate to empathy and inclusion. Students participated in literature based units that capitalized on building classroom community, celebrating diversity, and how small acts of kindness can help children feel included and allow them to flourish. They wrote reflections and participated in focus group discussions to share their views on cultivating wider circles of community through inclusive play and impactful empathetic words. There were three major findings. First, joining together through hill (strength) and valley (place for growth) pairings cultivates a community where all students are able to support and be supported. Second, it is vital to develop a practice of “catching a student doing something good” as opposed to focusing on the problems that are evident. It was highlighted how this practice is important between teachers and students, and also between students themselves. Third, students articulated how empathy and care ripples out as circles that start with the self and expand with care to the birds and the bees, along with the flowers and trees in the world. The implications for classrooms include the value of having open conversations to promote a more inclusive community, learning from the students, as well as creating opportunities for students to play together. At a school level, professional development on the implementation of inclusive practices and the promotion
of student voice should be mandatory for all educators. Students would benefit greatly if all teachers’ pre-service training had a deeper focus on cultivating an empathy-focused classroom community and facilitating dialogic classroom focus discussions to draw out student voices.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Teaching through a pandemic has been a whirlwind filled with a great deal of uncertainty. The last school year has been especially uncertain, where the students began learning on Zoom, transitioned to hybrid learning with half the class attending school in the morning and the other half in the afternoon, and finally returning to a full day of learning. Throughout this period, the academic and social-emotional learning at Redwood Elementary was intensely interrupted, if not completely disturbed. All of the stark changes felt like three school years wrapped into one. This was a lot to process for all involved.

While trapped inside of the squares on Zoom, students’ voices were often hindered by the mute button. The inability to be together in person resulted in a lot of uncertainty, frustration, and a great deal of loneliness. Due to isolation, the educators at Redwood found it difficult to foster a supportive learning space as they normally would have done, considering they had primarily gotten to know the students through a computer screen. Moreover, the school psychologist and resource specialist shared with me that they were struggling to adequately provide the necessary support to students with varying needs. As a student teacher, it was conveyed to me that the teachers had been asking how to create a welcoming classroom environment online and when students started returning to school, and how to ensure students felt supported through the unusually challenging circumstances.

As students returned to the classroom in hybrid ways, it was apparent that many of the kindergarteners were foreign to the concept of learning in a classroom. While for the others, it had been months since they were last in preschool learning and interacting with peers. With only half of the students attending school in the morning and the other half in the afternoon, interaction was limited. Students were only together for a little over two hours each day. I was
told that the classroom and school communities were struggling because teachers were required to cram learning into this time frame, leaving few moments for children to be children together through play.

A year into the pandemic, students at Redwood were back in the classroom all together for a full day of learning. It had become evident that educators were experiencing personal issues that in some cases even resulted in a leave of absence. In the depths of these disruptions, and still only a student teacher, I was then called to be a long-term substitute to support the completion of the school year for these students. The well-being of the community felt compromised. In addition, there was unusual evidence that students were having difficulty getting along. The struggle to cultivate a community built on inclusivity, support, and empathy is what ultimately inspired this research study.

On the twenty-third of August, I awoke early in the morning to begin the new school year as a paraeducator in the kindergarten classroom consisting of nineteen students. I was just getting over having had the Delta variant of Covid-19 and had been in isolation for the previous two weeks. The previous school year had taken a toll on many, but everyone was resiliently ready to begin anew.

I felt a personal sense of purpose in trying to understand how I could best support inclusivity in a mixed-ability classroom. I felt drawn toward researching empathetic communities. And as a paraeducator working with Madison, a kindergartener with centronuclear myopathy, I was particularly invested in how I could support her inclusion, and perhaps even more importantly, what I could learn from her.
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain knowledge on creating an inclusive learning environment that honors diverse student experiences particularly “post” pandemic after learning in isolation. This study also sought to understand how teachers’ understanding of community influences their ability to ensure a supportive and inclusive classroom for all learners. Further, the research aimed to determine the ways building classroom community and culture influences students’ sense of empathy and acceptance towards diversity.

An inclusive approach to learning has been well-established and developed over many years, and implementing inclusivity and equity into the classroom benefits all learners (Kefallinou et al., 2020). According to inclusive ideology, all members of the school and classroom community are valuable, regardless of ability or disability (Causton-Theoharis, 2009). Research shows that learning in inclusive environments not only builds meaningful relationships but awareness, respect, and embracement towards diversity (Gur & Yikmis, 2021). The research also suggests that an empathetic culture allows individuals the ability to embrace diversity and become more accepting of others (Hashim et al., 2019). Through empathy the classroom community learns to understand each other, which helps to build positive and trusting relationships (de Klerk & de Klerk, 2018). Literature fosters a greater sense of empathy by learning to empathize with characters, which allows students to feel and relate more strongly to their community members (Kent & Simpson, 2020). When students see themselves reflected in the stories a sense of belonging is fostered and when students are exposed to stories that show experiences other than their own their worldview is broadened.
Overview of the Research Design

The purpose of the qualitative data was to illuminate participants’ perceptions of community, as well as the effect of these perceptions on their ability to be inclusive and empathetic. As such, the researcher specifically sought to answer three research questions: (1) How does implementing inclusivity and empathy into the classroom help to drive successful school change and benefit all classroom members, with disabilities and without? (2) What ways can educators capitalize on diversity for the betterment of the classroom community? (3) How can educators create a supportive environment where all students are capable of learning and succeeding?

This study, involving eighteen kindergarteners and six adult participants (five educators and one counseling psychologist), utilized a qualitative research design with a constructivist worldview. The data resulted from focus group discussions with the whole class and writing prompts revolving around children’s literature read aloud. Interviews were conducted in-person with all of the adult participants and included open-ended questions, to give the researcher greater insight into their views and opinions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research methodology was designed to elicit participants’ voices and feelings.

The research site was a public elementary school in northern California. As the researcher, I acknowledge a possible bias given that I have worked at this site for the last four years; therefore, I maintained relationships with the adult participants for a prolonged period of time. Furthermore, I was also a paraeducator in the kindergarten classroom at the time of this study.
Significance of the Study

Findings from this research study indicate that joining together through hill and valley pairings cultivates a supportive community where the thoughts and feelings of all students are honored. Through hills and valleys, a more inclusive classroom community and empathetic culture is cultivated. Furthermore, the findings of this study unveiled commonalities in factors associated with kindness, as a major component being that making choices out of love results in the hearts of those within the community to grow bigger. Being mindful of the feelings and needs of others within the community fosters greater empathy. The kindergarten participants conveyed that through kind words, opportunities for inclusive play, hugs, and calm music, more meaningful community relationships are built. Lastly, the findings break up the concept of community into a multitude of circles that start with the self and expand outward with care to the flowers and bees in the world. Wonderful things happen when the circles of community around us widen. Shared experiences, shared successes, and shared struggles are all a part of making a supportive and successful community. Throughout and after the project, the kindergarteners showed more of an empathetic understanding of the thoughts and feelings held by others in their community, not just their own. Additionally, this study showed that literature is effective at fostering a sense of belonging when students see themselves reflected in the stories as well as exposes students to stories that show experiences other than their own thus, broadening their worldview.

The findings of the study further emphasize what has been known to be true, that literature is effective at fostering a sense of belonging when students see themselves reflected in the stories. Moreover, literature exposes students to stories that show experiences other than their own thus, broadening their worldview. Yet, the findings from this study differ from prior
research, in part by how it addressed creating an inclusive learning environment that honors diverse student experiences during a specific point in time, “post” pandemic. This study went on to explore kindergarten students’ perspective towards inclusivity, which was a gap in the existing literature.

**Research Implications**

The research revealed community as a circle that starts with the self and ripples outward with care. The findings demonstrate that cultivating community beyond the self is done through play and acts of kindness that welcome diversity with an open heart. While prior research brings light to the idea that community is a place where we all care about each other’s feelings and needs, findings of this study reveal the importance of valuing the world around us and all of its inhabitants; specifically, bees, birds, flowers, and trees. Making it apparent that everyone’s circles of community are ever growing with love.

This study also highlighted the importance of valuing the thoughts and feelings of kindergarteners to promote conditions for more open whole class conversations. This project addressed the gap in the literature regarding kindergarteners’ perceptions of inclusivity by revealing the way kind words, hugs, and play contributes to such analyses. At a school level, a shared sense of purpose around play should be cultivated. These opportunities are necessary in building the patience of students, which leads towards greater empathy for all. Students would benefit greatly if all teachers’ pre-service training had a deeper focus on pedagogical approaches to cultivating classroom community and culture. Lastly, providing training for pre-service teachers in facilitating dialogic classroom focus discussions would draw out student voices for the betterment of the community. No matter the students’ age or English proficiency, all students should be given the opportunity to engage in vitally important, collaborative conversations.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review seeks to understand inclusive learning practices in education, pedagogical approaches to cultivating empathy, and the role of literature in enhancing the classroom community. In this review of literature, I will explore inclusivity, in terms of what is being done in the field of education for peers with disabling conditions and without. Then, I will explore the vital role of empathy, as a means of establishing a positive, more accepting culture for all. Lastly, I will look at the ways literature establishes and enhances classroom community and the role educators play in promoting cultural diversity.

This literature review addresses ways educators can capitalize on individual differences for the betterment of the classroom community. Inclusive pedagogical practices hold the underlying belief that all members of the school and classroom community are valuable, regardless of ability or disability (Causton-Theoharis, 2009). Specifically, this study will highlight the incorporation of empathetic skills towards building classroom community and culture. An empathetic culture allows individuals the ability to embrace diversity and become more accepting of others (Hashim et al., 2019). Cultivating an authentic and more tightly knit classroom community and culture where diverse learner needs are responded to is key for schools to become more effective and inclusive (Kefallinou et al., 2020). And, gaining knowledge on implementing inclusivity, authenticity, and community into the classroom will help drive successful school change and benefit all classroom members (Turner, 2018). The focus of empathy is to embrace people of different races, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds, which diminishes prejudice against others (Hashim et al., 2019).

Furthermore, this research revolves around adolescent literature and storytelling and its connection to the classroom community. The literature review hopes to illuminate which pieces
of literature can be incorporated into the classroom to foster empathy. Through the lens of a broader and more empathetic worldview, students attain new perspectives and deeper relationships with those inside and outside the school environment (Hashim et al., 2019). This helps them to establish a positive, more empathetic and inclusive culture. This approach allows all students to receive education together, which is essential to fostering a meaningful education, which all learners deserve.

**Inclusive Educational Practices**

Creating a healthy and positive community culture is arguably even more important than the academic curriculum (Hashim et al., 2019). By ensuring all learners are supported in a more equitable manner they are better able to achieve and thrive in the classroom (Gjessing et al., 2018). This requires educators to understand the learning and emotional needs of all the students (de Klerk & de Klerk, 2018). Knowing these various needs will help the educator better serve all students in a more equitable manner (Rosenbaum & Gorter, 2012). Yet, a community culture is not established automatically. Kent and Simpson (2020) show that building an inclusive community culture in the classroom takes careful and consistent practice for change to be successfully maintained.

Inclusion holds to the belief that all members of the school and classroom are valuable, regardless of ability or disability. Causton-Theoharis (2009) defines inclusion as “a way of thinking, a way of being, and a way of making decisions about helping everyone belong” (p. 43). Inclusion ensures all are active members of the community and feel a sense of support and belonging. In an inclusive classroom, everyone is an integral member working together “in visible and invisible ways to make the dance appear effortless” (Causton-Theoharis, 2009, p. 37). This dance fosters greater peer collaboration and acceptance.
Kurth et al. (2020) define inclusive education as a process that prevails against barriers and enhances greater participation and achievement for all youth. More specifically, inclusive education is not simply a place but an ongoing process and practice grounded in promoting social justice. This inclusive approach to education is commonly referred to as mainstreaming. The practice of mainstreaming allows all students to receive education together, which is essential to fostering acceptance and empathy. Mainstreaming education helps individuals with disabilities to become more confident in society, as well as establish constructive psycho-social relations (Gur & Yikmis, 2021). In terms of typically developing students, “respect, help, tolerance and understanding are positively affected” through inclusive education (p. 228). Inclusivity is a vital component to providing a quality education as it enriches the lives of all in the learning community. Therefore, the final portion of this literature review explores the integration of equitable, inclusive educational practices for all students and the effect on student participation rates and building independence.

**Accessibility, Disability and Inclusive Education**

Kefallinou et al. (2020) argue that every child has the right to quality education and learning. Kefallinnou et al. (2020) further purport that, “The ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers” (p. 136). Inclusive systems allow diverse groups to grow side by side, which benefits all (Kefallinou et al., 2020). This approach to education is the most effective way to provide all youth a fair chance to learn and develop the skills needed to thrive.

Kurth et al. (2020) goes on to say that students with disabilities should have access to inclusive classroom placements to the maximum extent possible, as noted by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Gur and Yikmis (2021) further point out that “when individuals with disabilities are educated in the same environment with their peers, it is observed that their learning speeds increase in the academic and social sense and their communication skills are positively affected by observing and imitating their peers” (p. 227). It is imperative that every student, including those with the most intensive and extensive support needs, be integrated into the general education environment and taught alongside their nondisabled peers.

Without inclusive education, students are not treated with the dignity they deserve and are left on the outside looking in. Through effective integration and instruction, students with disabilities are more likely to be accepted and provided with the social justice that they deserve (Agran et al., 2020). By framing education around social justice it creates an equitable and inclusive environment for students to be able to participate freely, no matter their race or ethnicity, age, gender, ability, sexual orientation, language, religion, or socioeconomic status.

For the past thirty-five years, there has been widespread debate on the issue of inclusion (Agran et al., 2020). Agran et al. (2020) point out that educational inclusion leads to greater academic growth and achievement, increased communication and social interactions, improved self-determination skills, and greater growth in social skills for students with severe disabilities. Amongst the evident benefits of inclusion for those with disabilities, inclusive environments have proven to benefit peers without disabilities as well (Agran et al., 2020). Despite the value associated with inclusion, there is also a sense of unknown which has left many educators in fear of serving students with severe disabilities (Agran et al., 2020). Therefore, Kurth et al. (2020) suggest that for inclusivity to be positively embedded into instruction and school systems,
educators must be equipped with the knowledge and resources needed to support students with disabilities. This will help educators gain comfort in adapting lessons and aligning supports to promote student success.

Implementing inclusivity and equity into the classroom benefits all learners (Kefallinou et al., 2020). To drive change and enhance learner outcomes, these two components must guide all educational policies and practices. Developing a culture where diverse learner needs are responded to is key for schools to become more effective and inclusive. Inclusive pedagogy proves that “separate is not always equal” (Kefallinou et al., 2020, p. 138). As such, to effect successful school change, all learners must be educated together and on an equal basis regardless of ability or disability (Kefallinou et al., 2020). In order to properly implement inclusive practices, accommodations (“strategies that provide access to the curriculum”) and modifications (“make meaning of the curriculum”) must be made to support students accordingly (Kurth et al., 2020, p. 143). This will ensure students with disabilities are provided with access to the general education curriculum and the capability of making progress with the curriculum too. By setting students up for success, they are able to “dream for a future that is possible” instead of having others “decide for them what is impossible” (p. 462). This gives students with disabilities the skills and independence needed to thrive later in life.

Promoting Successful Participation

Rosenbaum and Gorter (2012) establish a set of six ‘F-words’ that are introduced as a way to better understand and advocate for children with disabilities. They go on to note how, “childhood disabilities are conditions that do, or are highly likely to, affect the trajectories of children’s development into adulthood” (p. 457). Utilizing the six concepts of function, family, fitness, fun, friends, and future is essential to improving the way ‘disabilities’ are viewed.
**Function.** The first ‘F-word,’ function, notes the way something is initially completed is not what ultimately matters, it takes gradual time and consistent effort. Function moves away from focusing on ‘impairments’ in body function and the “tyranny of ‘normal’” (Rosenbaum & Gorter, 2012, p. 459). Through function, the term ‘normal’ is thrown out. This ambiguous word is extremely isolating and serves no real purpose.

**Family.** This ‘F-word’ is representative of the essential ‘environment’ for all children. A family-centered approach to providing children with adequate services results in higher satisfaction and less anxiousness (Rosenbaum & Gorter, 2012). Through respectful engagement and collaboration with childrens’ families, goals are able to be achieved more effectively and efficiently.

**Fitness.** Fitness, the third ‘F-word,’ looks at all individuals for their abilities and focuses on ensuring a healthy lifestyle. This is essential for promoting long term, active participation.

**Fun.** This goes along with the last ‘F-word’ fun, which hones in on the importance of engaging in participatory activities. Rosenbaum and Gorter (2012) emphasize that “it is the doing, rather than a superior level of accomplishment, that is most meaningful to most children” (p. 461). Thus, emphasizing the importance of ensuring students are enjoying themselves and building up confidence in their abilities.

**Friends.** Rosenbaum and Gorter (2012) point out that peer connections are an essential part of personal development. Rather than the number, quality friendships are of the utmost importance. Opportunities to develop meaningful friendships enhance a child’s overall well-being and fosters a sense of belonging.

**Future.** This is what it is all about because children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, are in a constant state of ‘becoming’ (Rosenbaum & Gorter, 2012). The future of
children should never be decided for them, rather all children deserve to establish their dreams independently.

Approximately 6.5% of all American children have disabling conditions. Heah et al. (2007) argue that gaining knowledge on the most effective ways to motivate and foster successful participation is essential. Children with disabilities are more likely to face limited participation in school settings, which influences physical, psychological and social outcomes (Heah et al., 2007). For these reasons, “children with disabilities need to be provided with the same opportunities for participation as their peers without disabilities in order to experience the same benefits” (Heah et al., 2007, p. 39). By ensuring participation for all, inclusion and positive child outcomes become more closely connected.

Kefallinou et al. (2020) affirms that “inclusive education focuses on increasing participation for all learners, creating systems that value all individuals equally, and promoting equity, compassion, human rights, and respect” (p. 136). Inclusion prevents discrimination and exclusion from quality education. Inclusivity fosters an environment where all students are able to participate and succeed because of the support from the community members.

**Participation Plans**

The use of participation plans, which consist of ecological assessment, curricular sports, embedded instruction, and standards-based instruction, has shown to be highly effective at ensuring inclusive education for youth with disabilities (Kurth et al., 2020). In one study, Engel-Yeger et al. (2009) compare participation amongst youths with Cerebral Palsy (CP) and typically developing peers, and found that “participation leads to life satisfaction as well as a sense of competence and is essential for psychological and emotional well-being and skill development” (Engel-Yeger et al., 2009, p. 96). Therefore, all environments need to ensure that adaptations are
available for youths with CP to fully participate and perform activities outside of just their homes. By doing so, youth with CP are not limited and are less likely to experience growing isolation. Gjessing et al. (2018) emphasize this idea by stating, “Independence equals opportunity to participate” (p. 805). By building greater independence, participation rates are improved and confidence is boosted (Gjessing et al., 2018). Stevenson et al. (1997) discovered that “young adults with CP were less socially active, participated in fewer leisure activities, and were more socially isolated than typically developing peers” because of environmental barriers (p. 96).

**Independent Mobility**

Those with disabling conditions may require mobility devices so they can independently explore their environment and participate in everyday activities. Therefore, establishing independent mobility at an early age will help to avoid the development of “learned helplessness,” or reliance upon others (Causton-Theoharis, 2009). The implementation of accessible mobility devices from an early age will foster a means of self-initiated mobility so those with varying disabilities are able to enjoy their independence and achieve their full potential (Fernandes, 2006). For instance, walking aids, buggies, tricycles and bicycles, along with manual or powered wheelchairs all help meet the specific needs of thousands of children with disabilities. The utilization of these devices provides a new-found freedom that boosts self-esteem and confidence, as well as allows children with disabling conditions to realize their potential (Fernandes, 2006).

Suitable assistive devices are essential to ensuring inclusion (Gjessing et al., 2018). Lack of equitable access to this equipment leads to low activity levels (Gjessing et al., 2018). Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that all schools adapt and provide children with
disabilities the ability to participate through the use of assistive devices. Providing specifically
designed equipment will “lead to increased meaningful participation in physical activity among
children with physical disabilities,” thus, highlighting the importance of in activity (Gjessing et
al., 2018, p. 804). Gjessing et al. (2018) point out that for those with disabling conditions
independently participating in activities proved to be more important than worrying about
participating with the same looking equipment as their peers. Gjessing et al. (2018) showed how
through the use of assistive devices, feelings of mastery were developed and children with
disabilities were able to experience joy, the most motivating factor of all. Assistive devices help
children with disabilities successfully engage in activities they could not otherwise manage
alone.

Improving availability to assistive devices allows children with physical disabilities to
actively participate in activity alongside their peers, instead of just observing from afar (Gjessing
et al., 2018). This creates an equitable environment where all are able to experience
accomplishment and enjoyment. Equity ensures that a child’s impairments do not define nor
predict their outcomes. Well-adjusted assistive devices are essential to help bridge the gap and
promote inclusion. Opportunities to participate allow every child to undertake an activity,
enhance self-efficacy, and the ability to succeed (Gjessing et al., 2018).

Establishing an Accessible Environment

Every individual deserves to learn in an environment that is suitable to their needs. For
the benefit of all involved, this may require various adaptations to be made. Taking the necessary
steps to meet the needs of every child is of utmost importance to ensuring the space is inclusive
and supportive of success.
The Physical Space. Ensuring classrooms and schools are accessible helps build a more inclusive community for all students, especially those with disabling conditions. In order for mainstreaming to positively impact individuals with disabilities, “the physical structure of the classroom, materials used in teaching, adaptations in instructional practices and assessment” must be suitable according to the individual’s “disability status, interests, and skills” (Gur & Yikmis, 2021, p. 228). Physical inactivity among children with physical disabilities is linked to a variety of barriers, most commonly environmental and programmatic. Environmental barriers include, but are not limited to, grass surfaces or climbing apparatuses with no ramps (Houston et al, 2018). While “common programmatic barriers include not having enough or the appropriate staffing to support a child with disabilities during activity with enough knowledge to understand how to modify or adapt activity to meet a child’s individual needs” (Houston et al., 2018, p. 52). These barriers limit students with physical disabilities and discourage them from engaging in physical activity opportunities, which in turn can lead to secondary health conditions.

Staff Interference. Causton-Theoharis (2009) looked at five case studies on the detrimental effects of paraprofessional proximity. One of the case studies revolved around Adam, a student demonstrating learned helplessness. Adam strongly relied on the support from his paraprofessional and waited to engage in any activity until he received help. This is an example of how adult support can create barriers that interfere with the students classroom involvement. Kirsten was another student who benefited from the implementation of turn-and-talk, an instructional strategy in which all students participate in conversing with a peer on the content at hand. This strategy led her to become more involved and provided opportunities for natural peer interactions. Another student included in the study, Andrea, was unable to independently carry her lunch tray because of its weight. Overtime, steps were implemented to
increase her self determination and lessen dependence. This was done by taking two trips independently, or with the support of a friend. Moving away from intrusive supports is the primary objective to boost inclusion.

Supporting students requires identifying their various needs and taking the necessary steps to meet these needs. The need for support is essential for many students; however, when it becomes “consistently present, overbearing, and does not fade appropriately, the student learns to expect adult support” (Causton-Theoharis, 2009, p. 38). By overdoing support, students are likely to become dependent or to pull away because they lose their freedom. Thus, allowing for natural support to occur is essential and leads to positive development. Natural support flows in an authentic and effortless manner in the classroom and school community (Causton-Theoharis, 2009).

To ensure an effortless dance, there is a golden rule of support that has educators support students as they would wish to be supported. This support is to be done in a humanistic, respectful, and gentle manner. Causton-Theoharis (2009) breaks down support into four parts: plan to include, ask and listen, step back, and plan to fade support. In this approach, the best way to learn about a student’s needs is to ask how they would like educators to support them. This communication values student choice, “the most powerful resource in determining how to provide helpful support” (Causton-Theoharis, 2009, p. 41). Asking the students what their needs are is essential however, this requires active listening to ensure quality support. After learning the needs of the students, educators and specialists must take a step back when supporting to avoid being overbearing. Eventually, support should fade once the individual student has adjusted to the changes. This plan to fade must be implemented gradually and set up step by step to enable the student to experience the success of their achievements without supervisory
support. Every student is different therefore, this plan of support will vary. Keeping this in mind will help ensure students are better supported according to their diverse needs.

**Diversity is Beautiful**

Learning in inclusive environments not only builds meaningful relationships but awareness, respect, and embracement towards diversity (Gur & Yikmis, 2021). Differences contribute to a greater whole and enrich the classroom community. Respecting varying opinions and learning from different perspectives is essential to building a community of trust, acceptance, and empathy (Kent & Simpson, 2020).

**The Vital Role of Empathy**

Students need to know how to be empathetic towards others. Empathy motivates students to embrace people of different races, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds, which diminishes prejudice against others (Hashim et al., 2019). Hashim et al. (2019) affirms that the objective of empathy is to embrace differences while rejecting hatred or prejudice. Through the lens of a broader and more empathetic worldview, students attain new perspectives and deeper relationships with those inside and outside the school environment (Hashim et al., 2019). Thus, establishing a positive, empathic culture for all.

**Educators’ Experiences with Empathy**

Hashim et al. (2019) define empathy as “being an instinctive, affective and shared experience which one can feel what other people experience” (p. 15). Through empathy the classroom community learns to understand each other, which helps to build positive and trusting relationships, and thereby earning the trust of learners enables them to exhibit empathy (de Klerk & de Klerk, 2018). Hashim et al. (2019) purport that empathy allows for one to understand the feelings of others from their point of view. Hashim et al. (2019) further found that “Empathy is
about reaching greater concern, extended sympathy and sensitivity towards other people’s world in a strong, delicate and memorable way” (p. 20). Empathic awareness goes outside of one’s own personal world by prompting students to look as broadly as possible into the experiences and social backgrounds of others. A classroom centered around empathy teaches students to feel more deeply for those around them, which builds a greater understanding for those in their community. With empathy, students are given the opportunity to connect with each other on a deeper level. Moudatsou et al. (2020) suggests that empathy is considered essential for human survival. With empathy in the classroom, students are able to consider each other’s feelings and experiences.

Inclusive education settings require educators to possess empathetic sensitivity, which enables teachers to identify diverse learner needs. Where, the aim of inclusivity is to ensure equity, justice, and quality education, empathy has been found to be “a fundamental aspect in education, where educators are thus motivated to acknowledge every learner, with or without a barrier to learning, and help to fully understand their needs in order to provide the necessary education and equal learning opportunities for all” (de Klerk & de Klerk, 2018, p. 671). Hashim et al. (2019) recognize fostering the development of empathy as key to effective teaching and learning. Lavy and Berkovich-Ohana (2020) consider empathy as a requisite disposition to the teaching profession. This skill encourages educators to dive beneath the service to get to know others on a deeper level. Empathy skills enable care providers, specifically educators, to respond with more sincerity to the students they care for (Moudatsou et al., 2020). Teaching with empathy is crucial to identify and effectively respond to students’ needs (Lavy & Berkovich-Ohana, 2020).
Experiential Learning

The opportunity to integrate empathy in the classroom helps to engage the students, and teachers alike, in positive collaboration and team building (Hashim et al., 2019). Implementing empathy in education builds positive culture and strengthens community, which extends far beyond the four walls of the classroom. Empathy skills are achieved through experiences: frequent collaboration among students and discussions on issues of social justice (Hashim et al., 2019). Additionally, social interactions are considered central to fostering empathy amongst students (Reiss, 2017).

Benefits of Empathy Skill

An empathetic culture allows individuals the ability to embrace diversity and become more accepting of others (Hashim et al., 2019). The “benefits of empathy skill as a basic culture in the classroom are strengthening the communication among people in the class, encouraging positive attitudes and preparing students to be leaders of their own communities” (Hashim et al., 2019, p. 18). Moreover, Hashim et al. (2019) point out that cultivating empathy among students results in positive peer relationships, better communication, and collaboration skills within the community.

An empathetic person recognizes that others are struggling without minimizing their feelings. The focus of empathy is to experience the feelings and thoughts from other people’s point of view (Hashim et al., 2019). Empathy skill plays an important role in creating awareness of human perspectives, as well as strengthening students’ relationships with those of differing cultures, races, languages, and backgrounds. Empathy-based activities can foster students’ connection to learning contents and promote positive relationships between students and their peers, as well as their teachers (Lee et al., 2018). Hashim et al. (2019) points out that “by
grounding their projects in empathy perspective and user observation, students were challenged to witness the world as it is and begin crafting the world as it might be” (p. 16). By making oneself vulnerable to what others are feeling, a sincere connection is formed.

**Literature, Diversity and Classroom Culture**

The use of literature in the classroom establishes and enhances community, and a shared sense of community helps students feel “heard, known, and respected” (Kent & Simpson, 2020, p. 145). Classroom community consists of diverse cultures, as well as shared interests, values, and goals, and literature helps students to understand their own culture and learn more about others’. In addition, literature fosters a greater sense of empathy by learning to empathize with characters, which allows students to feel and relate more strongly to their community members (Kent & Simpson, 2020). Kent & Simpson (2020) state that purposefully choosing adolescent literature is one way to create a foundation of trust upon which students can express their care and concern for one another, their education, and the broader world. Therefore, ensuring the classroom and school library contain a variety of books that are inviting, relatable, and inspirational is of the utmost importance.

**Beyond a Hard Copy**

The power of literature is not only found in a book but in oral storytelling as well. Authentic storytelling, no matter the story or emphasis, can generate intense curiosity and a more tightly knit community (Turner, 2018). It allows for freedom because all members of the classroom community are creating the story together. A communal story is pure and helps everyone “feel tethered and connected as [they] navigate the beautiful but treacherous waters of getting along and learning the rules and culture of school life” (Turner, 2018, p. 76). Storytelling builds off the process of collaboration, which is the ability to work productively and equitably
while valuing others in diverse educational settings. Collaboration gives the class the opportunity to work together, as well as learn and grow from each other (Turner, 2018).

Establishing an environment where all work together to co-develop a narrative encourages an entirely authentic community (Turner, 2018). Turner (2018) points out that storytelling has proven to be more than entertainment. Storytelling connects the classroom community by fostering “a collective bond and motivation,” as well as working to “build a healthy and thriving emotional environment and class culture” (Turner, 2018, p. 74). Storytelling provides a pathway for developing classroom community and natural curiosity, which shifts each year (Turner, 2018). Through storytelling, themes of agency, voice, fairness and unfairness are explored.

**Exposure to Diverse Literature**

For the betterment of the community, it is essential that diversity is capitalized on throughout literature (Kent & Simpson, 2020). This requires classrooms and school libraries to contain a variety of books that foster a learning environment that embraces the richness of student differences (Adam & Harper, 2016). The classroom and school library are optimal locations for students to directly access meaningful literature (Howlett & Young, 2019). Ensuring there are diverse stories that reflect all of the students in the classroom and school is essential to honoring students’ backgrounds and cultures (Howlett & Young, 2019). When students see themselves reflected in the stories, a sense of belonging is fostered and when students are exposed to stories that show experiences other than their own their worldview is broadened. Students having a sense of belonging has shown to have positive impacts on their ability to develop meaningful peer relationships (Over, 2016).
Early exposure to diverse literature teaches students to genuinely relate to people of all walks of life (Turner, 2018). Kent & Simpson (2020) found that “celebrating, honoring, and respecting differences of the characters in the text lays the foundations for recognizing and respecting individual differences within the classroom community” (p. 146). Students become more accepting of their peers when diversity is valued.

To effectively select children’s literature, Howlett and Young (2019) recognize the value in first getting to know the children within the classroom. Selecting diverse literature opens pathways towards broader awareness and perspectives, as well as breaks down stereotypes and misconceptions. It is important that students are exposed to literature that acts as both a mirror and window. Literature that acts as a mirror helps to develop a positive sense of identity and belonging within the community (Adam & Harper, 2016). Through a variety of exposure to diverse characters within literature, children are able to identify their own characteristics, idiosyncrasies, interactions and feelings reflected and affirmed throughout the story (Adam & Harper, 2016). Reading diverse literature provides students with the opportunity to see another’s life in a different light. Howlett and Young (2019) believe that “It helps students reflect on themselves and others, change their attitudes, and understand different cultures” (p. 40). All together, diverse literature is a valuable resource for enhancing inclusivity and acceptance for all within the classroom community.

Challenges

There are challenges, however, that make the selection of diverse literature problematic. A major problem being that a great deal of children’s literature lacks authenticity and leads to an inaccurate portrayal of cultures (Adam & Harper, 2016). This results in educators bringing literature into the classroom that hinders awareness and understanding, instead of promoting
diversity. Thus, Adam and Harper (2016) focus on ensuring educators select children’s literature that properly addresses principles of diversity. Selecting literature that portrays realistic individuals, situations, and authentic illustrations is especially important (Adam & Harper, 2016).

**Valuable Guides to Selecting Children’s Literature**

Adam and Harper (2016) discuss the use of Bishop’s (1997) three categories to carefully assess the quality and validity of children’s literature for selection criteria. Specifically, Helen Adam lays out the first category, culturally specific/conscious, which is designed for people of other cultures to learn to appreciate and understand diverse cultures and experiences other than their own. On the other hand, the second category focuses on generically Australian (or American/British)/socially conscious. Helen Adam explains that this category assumes that children are white and thus, features stereotypical illustrations of characters part of ‘so-called’ minority groups. These stereotypical illustrations contain “few, if any, specific details that might serve to define those characters culturally” (Adam & Harper, 2016, p. 10). Lastly, Bishop’s (1997) third category revolves around a culturally neutral/melting pot as a way to feature people of color without providing any fundamental or authentic knowledge for the reader; rather, the story is entirely about something else (Adam & Harper, 2016).

Alternatively, Harper has established a checklist for educators to use for selecting and evaluating children’s storybooks that contain illustrations. This checklist serves as a highly valuable guide for potential literature to incorporate into the classroom to cultivate a more inclusive, tightly-knit community (Adam & Harper, 2016). Harper’s checklist guide encompasses eight elements for examining and selecting books for young children: author/illustrator, story, characters, setting, plot, theme, illustrations, and developmental
appropriateness. The first element looks at the qualifications of the author and illustrator. The second checks to make sure that the story is interesting, and uses both authentic language and accurate details. Next, the checklist ensures the characters within the story display realistic emotions, attitudes, needs, and experiences. A realistic depiction of characters allows students the opportunity to authentically relate and understand a variety of cultural perspectives (Adam & Harper, 2016). In addition, the guide includes looking at the setting to ensure it accurately represents a variety of places and time periods. The sixth element focuses on the plot of the story by checking to make sure real situations around class, culture, religion, and ethnicity are being depicted, not dismissed. The seventh element revolves around making certain the illustrations portray diverse populations through the characters to demonstrate respect for all people and cultures. Lastly, the eighth element centers around developmental appropriateness which encourages relevant and meaningful stories for children to be able to relate. By using this checklist as a guide to selecting literature students are exposed to multiple perspectives, values and cultures. This literary exposure serves as both mirror and window, which helps bring together a nurturing community. Adam and Harper (2016) claim that “When children appreciate commonalities among people rather than exaggerating differences, both unity and diversity are reaffirmed” (p. 12).

Conclusion

The overall consensus shows that building empathetic communities in inclusive placements allows individuals the ability to embrace diversity and become more accepting of others. This outlook is supported by existing literature that believes diversity is a strength and celebrates inclusivity (Gur & Yikmis, 2021). Learning in inclusive environments not only builds meaningful relationships but awareness, respect, and embracement towards others.
However, there is a lack of existing studies that explore kindergarten students’ feelings towards inclusivity. There is also limited research on their experience participating in collaborative sharing and play. These gaps are particularly pertinent to students with learning and physically disabling conditions, given that dominant discourse often decides for them what is possible, instead of allowing them to predict their own outcome. Thus, more data is needed to better understand how young students’ understandings of building a supportive classroom community and culture influence their sense of empathy and acceptance. The idea is that the students will define the outcomes of the research through collaborative sharing and play revolving around inclusive community, which will hopefully lead to greater academic growth and achievement, increased communication and social interactions, improved self-determination skills, and greater growth in social skills for all students, especially those with special needs (Agran et al., 2020).
Chapter 3: Methods

Research has shown that inclusivity is to be celebrated and diversity is an undeniable strength, that it is important for students to have feelings of acceptance, and for them to develop empathy (Hashim et al., 2019). Learning in inclusive environments not only builds meaningful relationships but awareness, respect, and embracement towards others (Gur & Yikmis, 2021). However, there is a lack of existing studies that explore kindergarten students’ feelings towards inclusivity. There is also limited research on their experience participating in collaborative sharing and play. These gaps are particularly pertinent to students with learning and physically disabling conditions, given that dominant discourse often decides for them what is possible, instead of allowing them to predict their own outcome. Thus, more data is needed to better understand how young students’ understandings of building a supportive classroom community and culture influence their sense of empathy and acceptance. The researcher designed the following methods with the belief that the student participants’ voices should be the direct authority and primary source of data on the subject of students’ empathy, acceptance, and experience participating in collaborative sharing and play.

Research Questions

This study focused on student responses to questions, presented in prompts and interview format to enrich the data collected. It also focused on student experience participating in collaborative sharing and play revolving around inclusive community. Therefore, this research was guided by the following questions:

- How does implementing inclusivity and empathy into the classroom help to drive successful school change and benefit all classroom members, with disabilities and without?
• What ways can educators capitalize on diversity for the betterment of the classroom community?
• How can educators create a supportive environment where all students are capable of learning and succeeding?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

To research kindergarten students’ and educators’ understanding of inclusive practices as it relates to classroom community and culture, the researcher conducted a qualitative research study with a constructivist worldview. A qualitative approach was chosen to ask open-ended questions and to provide participants with the opportunity to share their views and opinions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences with students, and to make meaning of celebrating diversity and inclusivity. Qualitative methodology focuses on gathering meaning from multiple perspectives from the participants on topics surrounding empathy, diversity, and inclusion. Collecting this information allowed the researcher to more clearly analyze and evaluate the data.

The researcher collected qualitative data through one-on-one interviews and a collaborative share and project revolving around inclusive community and empathetic culture. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, involving open-ended questions designed to “elicit views and opinions from the participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 187). The qualitative research was conducted in the kindergarten classroom over a three week period of time.

The constructivist worldview focuses on understanding the environment of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It stems from the belief that “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 7). Creswell and Creswell (2018) point out that constructivist worldview research acknowledges
experiences formed through interactions, along with the historical and cultural norms that exist in an individual’s life. This research is intended to promote the importance of students’ and educators’ thoughts and experiences in the change-making process, in addition to cultivating an inclusive community and empathetic classroom culture.

The implemented qualitative method, interviews, addressed educators’ and students’ understanding of community and the roles of empathy and acceptance. The research study aimed to discover the ways in which implementing literature, that revolves around inclusivity, empathy, and diversity, impacts the community and culture of the educational environment.

Research Design

Educators who agreed to participate in the study were individually interviewed by the researcher in one or more sessions, while the kindergarteners participated in collaborative focus discussions. Research questions were open-ended in nature, to give the researcher greater insight into the thoughts and experiences of the participants. The researcher observed the kindergarten students participating in whole group discussions revolving around their thoughts and feelings on inclusion, community, and the act of kindness. These conversations led students to create drawings and address writing prompts such as (1) “I can make someone feel welcome by. . .,” and (2) “When others feel down, I can help by…” Qualitative research led the students to become active participants by eliciting their beliefs, which prompted collaborative sharing and play.

Research Site and Entry into the Field

This research was conducted at an elementary school in northern California, which will be referred to as Redwood Elementary School. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for the school and participants. Redwood Elementary School is a neighborhood public school
that serves a total of 405 students ranging in grades from kindergarten to fifth grade. This school contains a diverse population of cultures, economic and religious backgrounds, race, ethnicity, and educational levels, with 37.8% of 153 students classified as English Language Learners. Additionally, 52.8% of enrolled students receive free or reduced lunch. The school’s population is 1.0% African American students, 0.5% American Indian or Alaska Native students, 3.3% Asian students, 1.8% Filipino students, 50.8% Hispanic or Latino students, 0.3% Pacific Islander students, and 38.5% White students (CA Department of Education).

This site was purposefully selected because the researcher has been working at the school for the last four years. Thus, the researcher had pre-existing relationships with the six professional educators invited to participate in this study. Participating educators were staff from Redwood Elementary School. Furthermore, the researcher had pre-existing relationships with the kindergarteners as one of their classroom instructors this school year. Of the nineteen students who were invited to participate, eighteen students participated. This study did not disrupt the school day or standard student services.

**Participants and Sampling Procedure**

Participants were purposefully selected, as they were individuals with whom the researcher had established relationships. There were a total of twenty-four participants in the study. Participants were introduced to the study with a general overview of the purpose and methodology. If they were interested in participating in the study, they were given an invitation to participate, which included a consent letter outlining the purpose of the study and how data would be collected, used, and protected. Six of the participants were school personnel, who included general education teachers and the school psychologist. The participants were selected to provide a variety of perspectives on the research topic. The six teachers in the study along
with the school psychologist all identify as female. Four of the participants had greater than ten years of experience within the field of education, while the two participants had less than five years of experience. All educator participants were asked to contribute to this study because they are the full-time classroom teachers at Redwood Elementary School. All of the educator participants have worked at more than one school site within their time in the field.

The adults in the classroom included a general education teacher and two paraeducators. The classroom teacher is a 55-year-old female who has been teaching in a general education classroom for twenty-one years, and prior to this in a special day classroom for ten years. One of the paraeducators is a 60-year-old female who was hired this school year by an outside agency to be a one-on-one teacher for the student with Centronuclear Myopathy and other health impairments.

The students involved in this research included eighteen kindergarteners from Redwood Elementary School, all of whom were fully included in the general education class for the entire day. Their ages ranged from five to six years old. Parent consent for the students was requested through a written letter sent home in the students’ take-home folders. A copy of the letter was also translated into Spanish, since many of the students are English Language Learners whose primary language was Spanish. The consent form outlined the study’s purpose, provided methodology and risk information, and detailed how data would be collected and protected. After parental consents were returned, the researcher began the inclusive practices unit which led toward collaborative sharing and play revolving around developing an empathetic community, as is the normal outcome and practice for units in this class and students at this age. The purpose of recruiting the students was to comprehend their understandings of inclusive community and culture in an educational environment.
Methods

Kindergarteners participated in tri-weekly inclusive literacy lessons. The lessons consisted of literature capitalizing on diversity, community, and empathy that encouraged the students to share and converse about their thoughts and feelings (see Appendix A for example lesson). Students responded to the lessons through drawing and writing prompt reflections to showcase their learning. Students were given prompts to help guide them and encourage them to widen their thinking (see Appendix B for post-lesson sentence frames). Students were able to draw or write their reflections, and the researcher provided assistance for those who needed to narrate their drawings, by recording and/or transcribing their reflections. The researcher provided the materials for each student who participated. All work was kept confidential and only looked at and read by the researcher. The researcher stored all papers in a locked cabinet file in the kindergarten classroom at Redwood Elementary School. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of each student participant. The literacy lessons were administered in February and March during class for those students who opted to participate. All students participated in tri-weekly literacy lessons revolving around community as a regular part of their classroom activities. Students who returned the parental consent form had their work collected for research purposes. As was always the case in this classroom, students were able to take a mindfulness break in the designated quiet space if they needed a break from any class activity. The unit led toward collaborative sharing and play revolving around inclusive community, which was the normal outcome and practice for units in this class and students at this age.

During the first week of research, students were introduced to the concept of community. The researcher read a variety of children’s literature revolving around building a classroom community, which included: All Are Welcome, ABC’s of Kindness, and The Circles All Around
These stories led to conversations around growing a more tightly knit community by ensuring others feel included. The students were then prompted to create a story, by drawing and if possible writing, on ways to foster classroom community. This elicited authentic student responses and ideas around building community. The researcher analyzed whole group conversations on the literature read, along with the drawing and writing activities while coding for phenomena. Throughout this first week, students explored the classroom library shelf that was filled with books relating to the topic of community and inclusivity.

During the second week, students were read stories that celebrated diversity. The stories read included: *The Day You Begin*, *Be You!*, and *The Skin You Live In*. This encouraged students to appreciate differences amongst those in their classroom community. Many of the students hold diverse perspectives and values, and are from various cultures yet all deserve to be regarded with respect. Throughout the second week, conversations grew richer in depth and collaboration. The thoughts and feelings shared by students displayed a sense of widened perspective. The kindergarteners were prompted to create a story, by drawing and if possible writing, that shined a light on the beauty of diversity. Then, the researcher analyzed whole group conversations on the literature read and the stories created while coding for phenomena. Again this week, students were able explore the classroom library shelf that was filled with books revolving around respect for diversity.

During the third week, the literature focused on empathy, and specifically on how small acts of kindness can help children feel included and allow them to flourish. This week the classroom library consisted of books that inspired greater understanding of others in children. The researcher read *A Wrinkled Heart*, *The Rabbit Listened*, *The Rainbow Fish*, and *Be Kind*. Students were prompted to collaboratively discuss as a whole group and with partners their ideas
on empathy and kindness. They were then instructed to create a classroom book that displayed what it means to be empathetic and how it feels to be treated kindly and to treat others kindly as well.

To culminate each week of research, the students worked collaboratively toward creating kindness rocks displaying empathetic words and heart-warming drawings to share with the community. These brightly colored rocks were dispersed outside in flower beds, near bushes, and on tree branches for the school community to enjoy. This project demonstrated the students’ understanding and shared beliefs on inclusivity and the value of empathy for the betterment of community.

In addition, whole group discussions were conducted with the kindergarten students once consent was given (see Appendix C for questions with students). The questions were open-ended, to allow participants to share their own experiences and to respond in a way that they were able to connect with, allowing the researcher to focus on individual meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interview questions were designed to answer the three primary research questions listed above. During the interviews, student participants were asked to answer questions such as (1) How do you think we can help include people here in our school or class? (2) Is our classroom a community? How can we create a community? The interviews occurred on campus at Redwood Elementary School in the researcher’s kindergarten classroom. The discussions occurred in ten separate twenty minute sessions scheduled between January and April. Eighteen students were included in the open discussions. All of which were audio recorded on the researcher’s laptop, which is password protected. Notes were taken during this time, and students more comfortable with answering questions in drawing were able to do so.
Illustrated information never included any names of identifying information (e.g., addresses, phone numbers, personal references).

Six staff members participated in individual interviews based on consent (see Appendix D for interview questions with staff). Participants were asked to answer questions such as (1) How do you work to build a more tightly knit community? (2) How do you celebrate inclusiveness and diversity in your classroom? Questions were sent to the interviewees prior to the interview, and participants were informed of their right not to answer, that they may stop the interview process at any time, and that they have the right to retract their agreement to participate at any point during the study. The use of interviews was essential to gaining a deeper understanding of the participants’ perspectives and experiences. Participants were individually contacted to arrange a mutually agreeable time for the interview to take place. The interviews occurred on campus at Redwood Elementary School in the interviewees’ classroom. The interviews occurred in one to two separate thirty minute sessions scheduled between February and March. All interviews were audio recorded on the researcher’s laptop, which is password protected. The interviews were later transcribed by the researcher and coded. Notes were taken during the interview, and participants more comfortable with answering individual interview questions in writing were able to do so. Written information never included any names of identifying information (e.g., addresses, phone numbers, personal references).

**Data Analysis**

The researcher collected data through qualitative open-ended interviews, discussions, and classroom observations. All of the interviews were audio recorded on the researcher’s laptop device, and then later transcribed for analysis. After the individual interviews or while re-listening to the interview transcriptions, the researcher wrote analytic memos to explore research
bias, intriguing findings, and to develop more ideas relevant to this study (Maxwell, 2013). By creating analytic memos, the researcher was able to compare and contrast the differences and similarities in multiple interviews and classroom observations. Moreover, the analytic memos provided initial insights for categorizing the data findings. Memo writing allowed the researcher to better understand the participants’ body language and tone as it related to their responses to the open-ended questions during whole group conversations.

The process of coding was used before, during, and after each interview and whole group discussion. Maxwell (2013) describes coding as a process that breaks down data to then rearrange into relevant categories. These categories were developed from recurring words, phrases, or ideas in the interviews, whether they were expected or not. The researcher open-coded the interview and discussion transcripts, looking for recurring terms that indicated significance to students. These codes were then transformed into a concept map for a more in-depth analysis.

Immediately following each interview and whole group discussion, the researcher recorded emergent themes. These emergent themes from the transcribed conversations became topics of the concept map, of which subthemes were also recorded. Concept mapping involved grouping the coded words from the audio and transcribed interviews into main sections revolving around classroom community and culture.

After concept mapping, the researcher used connecting strategies to find similarities and differences amongst the participants’ views and opinions. This made uncovering key words and phrases easier to keep track of for data analysis. The researcher incorporated focused coding into the study by looking for similarities in the words or phrases used by the interviewees. These were either the most commonly used words or phrases, or stood out as the most significant.
Determining these patterns allowed the researcher to more clearly describe the feelings and thoughts of the participants toward building an inclusive classroom community and empathetic culture.

**Validity**

The researcher is a paraeducator in the kindergarten classroom for the student participants, and a colleague of the adult participants. This relationship may have influenced data collection because the researcher holds a professional relationship with Redwood Elementary School educators, as well as a personal investment in wanting the implementation of inclusivity and empathy in the classroom to positively affect all of the kindergarteners. Having seen the benefits of building empathetic communities in inclusive placements, the researcher understands that this is a personal bias. The researcher cares wholeheartedly about developing an empathetic classroom culture because in her elementary schooling this was not at the forefront of education. Yet, throughout student teaching the researcher has discovered the power empathy holds in fostering a more authentic and tightly-knit community through the ability to feel with others, to care about their well-being, and to act with compassion. Real, human, personal connections come about through the celebration of diversity and inclusivity, a vital component of the researcher’s educational philosophy. The researcher went into this study aware of all objectives to ensure validity by looking for unexpected codes in the data.

To address the threats surrounding validity, the researcher conducted repeated classroom discussions on topics revolving around empathy, diversity, and inclusion. This led to more rich and accurate data (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, it is the researcher’s fourth year working at the site of research. Thus, close relationships have been formed with many of the adult participants and intensive involvement has taken place with the student participants. This has allowed the
participants to develop an increased sense of trust in the researcher, which is likely to result in more accurate and valid findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative data was collected through audiotaped and transcribed interviews and collaborative discussions with student participants, along with the school psychologist and teachers. This triangulation of data sources increased the validity of the study. In addition, by transcribing the conversations verbatim and taking descriptive notes, a clearer picture of the findings was provided (Maxwell, 2013). Throughout the study, the researcher used respondent validation to solicit feedback from the participants regarding the conclusions. By incorporating respondent validation into this research, the possibility of misinterpreting the participants’ thoughts and feelings in discussions and interviews was ruled out (Maxwell, 2013).
Chapter 4: Findings

This project sought to discover how students perceive community, how this perception impacts their sense of empathy, and as such, influences their words and actions towards others. Additionally, this study explored the impact of literature on students’ sense of kindness and acceptance of diversity.

Several overarching themes emerged through close examination of the data. First, I discovered the importance of joining together by finding hill and valley partnerships, while making an effort to incorporate humor to keep the classroom light and honor pop-up volcano creations. The second theme arose from commonalities in factors associated with kindness, as a major focus being that making choices out of love results in the hearts of those within the community to grow bigger. The third theme breaks up the concept of community into a multitude of circles that start with the self and expand outward with care to the flowers and bees in the world.

Joining Together in Hills and Valleys: Humor and Pop-up Volcanoes

The findings from this study show that a sense of connectedness fosters community and leads to student growth: ethically, socially, and academically. The findings demonstrate that a more tightly-knit bond amongst students is established through supportive classroom partnerships, big buddy relationships, and daily whole group team building. All of these become learning opportunities for students to become more accepting and inclusive of others.

Good Partners

In interviews, teachers shared that students need to be given the opportunity to explore collaboratively with their peers. These positive partnerships build the classroom community and ensure all are included in learning. Students are encouraged to broaden their community circles.
by working together. For instance, Ms. G, who has been a fifth grade general education elementary school teacher for over twenty years, compared finding productive partnerships to hills and valleys. Ms. G has previously also worked with students of various ability levels, and has also served previously as an elementary school principal. She shared that a central component of participating in positive partnerships is to build a more empathetic classroom community. She explained how she encourages partnerships, composed of students of varying ability levels, in her classroom. Because students in each partnership have different strengths and weaknesses, partnerships with varied abilities are a way of normalizing individuality and supporting each student’s intrinsic strengths and capacities for learning. Such partnerships allow each student to feel a sense of their own strength and ability to contribute, to be recognized and to feel connected to the community as an important member. Ms. G stated:

I always explain at the beginning of the year about hills and valleys and about how your peaks of like how great you are at certain things might not match somebody else’s peaks of what they’re great at, and your valleys of where you need to focus more might not match. You need to be always looking out for people who have a hill where you have a valley so that they can help you and we talk about making good partners for that.

Ms. G highlighted the importance by which students can actively support each other and be motivated to offer up their unique strengths in a valuable way. This drives a positive community where all are able to be successful learners in an inclusive space.

Ms. C, a second grade general education teacher, highlighted ways to bring students together in the classroom. Her reasoning for the value of having the students work together is to help with some of the most divisive situations. Allowing students the opportunity to take part in something simple and enjoyable with each other makes them feel special. She believes that
reading together, as well as collaborating on certain projects and domino challenges gives children the chance to build relationships with each other. Ms. C creates intentional and fun opportunities to be done in pairs between students who are struggling to get along, so that students gain a common positive experience together. Purposefully mixing up the groupings promotes a more inclusive classroom where all are able to intermingle.

Ms. M, a general education teacher, spoke further about the importance of joining together to build a more supportive community where everybody feels comfortable and safe to take chances. Ms. M is currently a fourth grade teacher who has worked in a variety of general education classrooms for many years. She expanded upon the value of exploring good partnerships by mixing up the groups so there is enough diversity in the levels. To Ms. M, “having people pair with people, and feel good about pairing with people that they don’t normally work with” is the whole point of community building. The idea behind this is for every child to be able to offer up their strengths and by extension learn to see value in what they are able to contribute to their classroom community. When they become motivated by the way they feel as a part of their classroom community, Ms. M believes they are building the intrinsic motivation that will continue to guide them forward in making an effort to do well in school.

Several teachers noted, however, that making these connections is not always easy and can really be a struggle for some students. According to Ms. M, a little “group therapy” and a lot of humor is a valuable way to overcome the challenges. Ms. M will ask the students if “this is the great debate of room 15” and whether or not they should “get out the pool noodles and whack each other over the heads until someone submits.” This helps students to be able to work proactively together and not be so stubborn or confrontational. Ms. M shares a story with her fourth graders every year, that every kid has something to offer if they are willing to figure it out.
I put these two girls and this boy together and they’re like, “Ms. M, so and so did that.” And I was like, oh, you guys are really missing out on an opportunity. And they’re like, “what do you mean? He’s just duh duh duh duh duh.” I replied that, well, he’s probably one of the most creative people in the class. Maybe if you guys, you know, figure it out. Like, what some of his visions were, you could really make this thing amazing. And they’re like, “mer mer mer.” But then they actually started to listen to him. And he was, he was all over the place. He was just kind of a goofball sometimes, but he was super creative and really artistic and they were making these pop up books, like volcanoes and glaciers and erosions and he had amazing ideas. And then, later they came and were like, “we’re so glad that he’s in our group.” I always tell the kids that, you know, you don’t know, but you got to take the time to just figure it out. And so just kind of that all the time just like you don’t judge a book by its cover, you know, they might have something really worth sharing. Everybody does.

For the betterment of the community, it is essential that diversity is capitalized on in partnerships. Diversity is beautiful. Students become more accepting of their peers when diversity is valued. All in all, differences contribute to a greater whole and enrich the classroom community.

**Learning Patience with Big Buddies**

Purposefully uniting older students with those in younger grades helps strengthen the schoolwide community. Opportunities for collaborating with big buddies every week has been one of the neatest ways the school has come back together as a community since the pandemic, as noted by Ms. C, a second grade general education teacher. Teachers and students alike identify the value this connection brings to enhancing empathy, inclusivity, and patience.
especially. Ms. G notes that “big buddies is huge because it helps [the older students] have patience with the little buddies, it helps them realize that they can pass on knowledge to somebody else.” This is another example of how teachers can emphasize the idea that all students have something to contribute to the circles of community around them, whether it be in the classroom or to other students at the school. Participating in big buddies creates more connections and provides all of the students with the opportunity to take part in lighter activities that serve a larger purpose while simultaneously having fun.

**Going into Every Closet: Making Sure We All Feel it’s Our Space**

Teacher interviews and whole group classroom conversations emphasized the importance of ensuring every individual feels valued and supported in the community. This encourages students to take ownership of their classroom community. Ms. G hones in on community in the classroom as a place where everyone feels they are equal members. Ms. G stated:

Making sure that it’s *our* classroom, not my classroom, making sure that they [the students] can access everything in the classroom. [...] That they have the ability to go into every closet every day. Just to make sure that they feel like this is really their classroom as well. Because if they don’t have buy-in for that, they’re not going to want to make it better...they’re not going to want to be a participant in it.

Educators Ms. G and Ms. C both share that focusing on the team, and not the individual, helps to not feed separation or resentment towards one another.

According to Ms. C, building lasting relationships amongst students is done through daily practice. Redwood Elementary, of which the research participant teachers are a part, made a collective and active effort to begin the days in a community circle with a whole group morning meeting. All of the teachers interviewed discussed the importance of these morning meetings,
which is a time set aside to share their feelings openly. Ms. M explains that during this time, the class will take part in team building challenges or questions of the day, “but sometimes it is just letting everybody talk.” Ms. C further explains these community morning circle meetings are a “time set aside to share about what’s come up: gratitudes, concerns, all of that.” In the kindergarten classroom at Redwood Elementary, students will share “what went well” at the end of each day. This gives them the ability to express to their community the good that happened for which they are grateful. These open conversations and team building opportunities provide students with the chance to make connections with other people.

**Catch a Kid Doing Something Good: Choices Out of Love**

During the interviews with teachers, many highlighted the importance of trying to always find the best in students. This was echoed in the whole group conversations had in the kindergarten classroom where students expressed ways they can ensure those in their community feel heard, valued, and respected. The findings emphasize the ways making choices out of love and noticing the good in all helps the hearts of those in the community to grow because perspective is consciously expanded.

**Choices Out of Love**

Ms. G believes that making choices out of love will always be the right choice, and these choices look to the needs of others. Ms. C further noted how these kinds of choices are selfless and filled with sincerity. The kindergartners shared a variety of choices they consciously make everyday to help others feel loved, supported, and included. Ms. M shared that acting selflessly is not always easy and takes a lot of work. She goes on to explain that being selfless requires one to look to the needs of others first and to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. Ms. M further
notes that no longer is the mind wrapped around the idea of me, me, me but rather one is conscious of someone else’s body language and facial expressions to know how they truly feel.

**Kind Words.** According to Ms. G, there are a variety of ways to make choices out of love in the community. Harper, a very impulsive and straightforward kindergartener at Redwood Elementary, spoke to the ways of ensuring everyone in the community feels valued and included. Harper’s impulsiveness has led her to hurt the feelings of others without thought in the classroom community. It seems that her unkind words and actions commonly surprise her, leading her to evade the reality of the situation. Yet, despite her tendency to be unkind she seeks for friendships. She loves deeply and you can feel it sincerely in her heart.

One afternoon, as the sun shined down onto the grass, the kindergarteners were sitting on a variety of brightly colored cushion squares eating their lunches. A group of five kindergartener girls sat in a circular shape eating and enjoying each other’s company, while another kindergartener, Grace, kept to herself on the outskirts of the circle. Harper quickly observed that Grace was alone and invited her to join the girls’ circle of community. Grace, smiling joyfully, promptly brought over her blue cushion and sparkly pink lunchbox. Harper scooted her red cushion over to make more room for Grace’s and helped place her lunchbox gently onto the grass. This small moment in time highlights the value of inclusivity and kindness for the community.

Similarly, on another day, while sitting on the colorful squares rug, the students were read *Be You!* by Peter H. Reynolds, a story that captures the power of kindness and encourages readers to make a difference in their world through their words and actions. *Be You!* shows the change children can effect in their community. After reading the story, students were prompted to discuss ways they can make the community a better place. All of the kindergartners
participated in turn-and-talk with two to three in every group. They each used the sentence frame “I can ___” to share their ideas. Every kindergarten student was then handed a paper with room to draw a picture and write a sentence conveying their role in making a better community.

Harper shared with heartfelt intent, “I can say I love you.” These words are very meaningful and show her care for others tremendously. Harper seeks to love and be loved, support and be supported, include and be included, all of which she is actively learning how to do.

From Tracy Hoexter’s story, A Wrinkled Heart, the kindergarteners were immersed into the day of Elliott, a young bunny. Elliott begins his day with a joyful heart but it slowly begins to fold and shrivel up. At breakfast, Elliott’s heart wrinkles a little bit after being scolded for spilling milk. At school, Elliott’s heart wrinkles even more upon encountering some friends who hurt his feelings and his heart wrinkles even more. By the end of the day his heart is all wrinkled up. This touching story pulled at the hearts of many of the kindergarten students. James blurted out during the story as Elliott’s heart first wrinkled, “I don’t like it.” Later, in the story Elliott’s friends and family apologize for the hurt they caused Elliott and try to take the wrinkles out of his heart. Elliott slowly begins to feel better, but the wrinkles are never fully healed and some wrinkles get left behind. While interviewing Ms. G, a fifth grade teacher, she expressed this same sentiment conveyed in A Wrinkled Heart by stating:

Empathy means that when you make choices, from a kid level, like what I’m looking for in my fifth graders, is that when you make choices that impact other people, that you actually are able to take their perspective into your mind and think about, oh, this is how this might play out. Or if they see someone having a bad day, instead of teasing them about crying, they’re going to help them figure out why they’re crying and help them feel better.
After reading *A Wrinkled Heart*, the students sat around the perimeter of the carpet in a community circle and were given a red heart of their own. The students were encouraged to share examples of what others have said or done that has hurt their feelings. The entire class would wrinkle their red hearts each time one of their classmates shared.

![Wrinkled heart activity. Used with permission from Vincent](image)

*Figure 1 Wrinkled heart activity. Used with permission from Vincent*

Through this tactile experience, the kindergarteners were able to take on the perspectives of others and feel their sadness. Being kicked, teased, laughed at, and excluded from play were among some of the hurt that causes the kindergartners’ hearts to wrinkle. Then, the students were prompted to share positive and uplifting experiences of ways others have made them feel good. The students slowly began unfolding their hearts. Saying “I’m sorry,” checking in on others by asking, “Are you okay?,” and receiving hugs were some of the ideas shared that help the hearts
of the kindergarteners to grow bigger and unwrinkle. Afterwards, the kindergarten students observed the impact various words and actions had on their hearts. The kindergarteners did their best to smooth out their hearts but wrinkles, holes, and tears were still left.

Figure 2 Wrinkled heart activity. Used with permission from Wilson

Hurt never fully comes out of the heart. Taking into perspective the effect hurtful words and actions can have on others is critical to cultivating an empathetic community.

Calm Music. Luke, an especially joyful and loving student, shared the idea of playing calm music to help others who are feeling down. Luke explained to the whole group that calming music comforts him, and that he believes it will likely help comfort others too. Being mindful of how others are feeling and finding ways to help bring ease or simply just noticing ways to help support others has a lot to do with empathy.
**Hugs.** As might be expected of students at this age, kindergarteners Hudson, Ella, Alexander, Catherine, and Eric honed in on the power of giving hugs. All five of them expressed that giving hugs to those in the community is a way they show kindness. Catherine, along with Luke, explained that giving hugs is what makes a good friend. Through classroom and playground observations, I have learned that in young students’ perceptions, hugs are one of the most effective ways to comfort a friend that feels upset.

**Play.** Many of the kindergarteners shared the way to show kindness to others in the community is through play. Specifically, the students focused on the idea of inviting others to create an inclusive and welcoming community. Ella wrote, “I can make others feel welcome by letting them play with me.” Everyday Ella embodies this in the kindergarten classroom and while out on the playground. Ella is always welcoming of others and will take them by the hand to join in play. She has the ability to make everyone feel part of the community whether they have been part of the class the entire year or their first day. Ella exudes authenticity; she is kind-hearted with a spitfire personality. Grace, a soft spoken but straightforward kindergartener, conveyed the same message. Through dictation, Grace shared, “I can make others feel welcome by saying yes to letting them play with me.” Grace, like Ella, is always willing to let others join her in play and take them by the hand to help them feel comfortable. Grace and Ella are a lot like mother ducklings, bringing others into their community circles as a way to be inclusive and show their love.

Hudson, a very curious and intuitive kindergartener, along with Luke, touched on inviting others as a way to welcome them into their community circles. However, their ideas extended beyond the classroom circle. Hudson stated, “I can make others feel welcome by inviting a person to my birthday!” Luke shared, “I can make others feel welcome by letting them come to
my house for a sleepover.” These ideas highlight the value of inclusivity in community. Community is a place where everyone feels part of the bigger group and everyone feels welcome. The choice to include is sincere and made out of care for others.

Wilson, another kindergarten student, further spoke on the idea of inviting people to show his kindness and to create a welcoming classroom environment. On the first day of the study, the students were all read Samantha Berger’s story, ABC’s of Kindness, which illustrates many ways young children can make the world a kinder place. For the letter I, the story reads, “I is for Including and Inviting everyone to the party.” Wilson shines light on this concept and adds that sharing is another way to show kindness. In the beginning of the school year, Wilson was very content with one friend and not very welcoming of the other students. Yet, many of the boys wanted to join in and be his friend. Wilson is a joy to be around with a bubbly personality. He is outgoing and goofy, but behind all of this is a very sensitive heart. Throughout the months of kindergarten, Wilson has learned to broaden his community circle at lunch and in play. Inviting people is the first step towards inclusivity but it goes beyond this. There are so many ways to share, Wilson states “I can make others feel welcome by sharing my toy.” This is not an easy task for most children but is a tremendous part of demonstrating everyday acts of kindness and generosity. Another kindergartener, Vincent, explained, “I can help my friends by giving them a treat.”

James further shared this idea by writing, “I am kind when I give [a] lollipop to my friend.” James has the biggest, most caring heart – beyond belief. James always brings a toy to school and invites his friends to play and share in the joy his toys bring. Whether it be his baby Yoda stuffed animal or his walking Pikachu dog, James’s first instinct is to always allow others to join in and play with him. James embodies empathy and loves to share with others. Ms. M,
expresses that, “Most kids feel better when they’re giving empathy, and they’re getting empathy.”

Eric, an English language learner new to the kindergarten class, adds to the ways all of us can make others feel welcome and included in the community. Making the choice to say “hello” to everyone is so simple yet so meaningful. This interaction acknowledges others and helps them to know they are seen. A few weeks after Eric started at Redwood Elementary, Arianna, another English language learner, joined the class. Eric was very observant to her presence in the classroom and to noticing she was having a difficult time understanding. Prompted by the teacher, Eric was given the opportunity to help ease her mind about being at school for the first time. He quickly took her by the hand to join him on the playground, in the classroom, and to get on the bus at the end of each day to go home. Eric is always conscious of where Arianna is and how she is doing throughout the day, which has helped create a community where Arianna feels heard, valued, and respected. Furthermore, Eric will discreetly crawl over to where Arianna is sitting on the carpet during whole group conversations and translate to her in Spanish all that is being shared aloud. Eric has a precious heart, he yearns to make choices out of love and does so without hesitation.

Noticing Kind Actions and the Effects

Ms. E, a general education education teacher, highlighted the value of bringing out the best in all of the students through positive reinforcement. Ms. E is currently a kindergarten teacher who has worked in a variety of types of education classrooms. From special day classes for students with mild to moderate disabilities, to private school education programs, she has seen the importance of building students’ intrinsic motivation to do well for the past thirty years. She highlighted how praise through positive reinforcement is done through making an active
effort to always seek out the best in every student even through the worst actions, and how this helps those in the community to understand that everyone in the classroom circle is awesome in their own way “because if you start picking on that kid, you’re showing [the rest of the students in the class] that they can pick on that kid.” Constantly checking on yourself, as Ms. E points out, to avoid comparing students and ensuring an active effort to see the beauty in all students is key. If a teacher fails to do so, the whole class could be sabotaged. Ms. E makes an active effort to bring light to the good by expressing to the whole group, “Wow, did you see how [blank] did that?” She also said “You know, you have to always find something to make those other children realize how awesome that kid is.” Ms. E believes this will encourage students to take leadership by noticing kindness in others.

Ms. G further emphasizes this reinforcement strategy by explaining that in her fifth grade classroom the positive reward system used in her classroom never focuses on the individual alone, but the individual as part of a team. Ms. G constantly looks for ways the individual can earn points for their team through the correct behavior. Point loss is not a component of positive reinforcement “because then the team turns against the kid that lost the points always.” Ms. G believes it goes against bringing out the best in the students and leads toward resentment, making a big deal of the good prompts a natural peer pressure and motivation to do well.

Ms. G says that for positive reinforcement to be implemented and carried out successfully, expectations must first be established, understood, and agreed upon by every student, and that continually looking back at those expectations and reminding the students is an important component of fostering a classroom community. Ms. G’s reasoning behind being upfront with the expectations is that “if you let a kid be unkind to kids regularly, they don’t trust you.”
Ms. M similarly lays this out to her fourth graders by explaining, “You’re being mean. That’s unacceptable. You don’t get to be mean in here. You don’t have to be best friends with this person. But you do not get to be unkind.” This is a proactive approach to handling unkindness. Ms. M is straying away from being reactive to the situation at hand and making a conscious effort to show the students that they are part of a larger group, a classroom community. As Rocelyn, a first year elementary school psychologist, points out, a proactive approach helps ensure everyone is kept safe and all are supportive of each other.

Claire, a kindergartener at Redwood Elementary, communicated the beauty of empathy and finding the good in others. Claire is a bright light in the classroom. She is a unicorn-loving, always excited, kind-hearted six year old. She is often the first to help a student in need and does so with much sincerity. Her eagerness to be a part of the community and show kindness to everyone is noticed by all. The way Claire makes an active effort to ensure everybody feels loved is inspiring to watch. I find that through Claire, I am constantly striving to be a better teacher, friend, and person over all.

While I sat in a clear acrylic rocking chair with a wooden base, the kindergarteners sat around in their reading spots. The students were read Alexandra Penfold’s story, *All Are Welcome*, and were prompted to share the ways they work together to make sure their classroom is a community and a place where everyone is cared for and treated with kindness. This story follows a diverse group of children in patkas, hijabs, baseball caps and yarmulkes through a day in their school, where everyone is welcome. *All Are Welcome* teaches all children that no matter what, they always have a place and space in their school community.

Claire reflected on the story and spoke to the impact of an empathetic and kind-hearted community by offering to the whole class that “if someone needs help we can work as a team
and when you work as a team your heart grows bigger.” Alexander, interjected and added, “bigger and bigger.” Alexander then went on to say that when an active effort is made to kindly welcome others into the community, “your whole body will be filled with your heart.” All of the students were in agreement with the idea that when your heart grows bigger, you are able to feel for others more deeply which creates a more loving and inclusive community.

**Listening**

The participant educators all shared that for an empathetic community to be fostered, students must be able to take into account the feelings and needs of others. Ms. R, a first year elementary school psychologist, emphasized the relation between paying attention to others and empathy. She expressed that empathy is all about noticing. She shared that:

> You can say that you’re empathetic all you want. But if you’re not noticing someone else that’s hurting or noticing that someone needs help, or noticing that things aren’t quite going in a friendly or kind way then, you’re not showing up… Even if you can’t help just noticing that, maybe they need support in some kind of way. And then like giving it to them or helping them get it.

Being mindful of the feelings and needs of others within the community fosters greater empathy. Ms. C echoes this idea by sharing that community is a place where all are valued, where everyone cares about each other’s feelings and needs. She goes on to say that by noticing and listening, everyone is more likely to feel part of the bigger group.

In conversations, students begin to understand that there are various ways of thinking, and not only one way. During the whole group kindergarten conversations, students have learned to ask questions to better understand the perspectives of others or will ask “Can I add on?” This gets the conversation growing and encourages students to be brave enough to share their
thoughts and feelings. Ms. E believes consistent practice is needed for this to truly be carried out and for active listening to be promoted. The kindergarten teacher, Ms. E, a mentor of mine for five years, has taught me the importance of not always praising the ideas shared aloud by students. Instead, I have learned to listen to what every student has to say and respond back with, “Wow, that’s interesting!” or, “Can you tell me more?” This helps model an open mindset and encourages more students to share.

To be able to work cohesively together, students must be able to actively listen to the thoughts of others. Ms. M encourages students to keep an open mind and to not always be waiting to talk. She will ask the fourth graders thought-provoking questions such as:

What does it look like to be a good listener?

Are you listening?

Are you just waiting for them to stop speaking so you can just jump in there and say what you want to say?

She advocates that listening is an essential component of fostering greater perspective beyond one’s self.

**From Me to the Flowers and Bees: Caring for the Circles of the World**

During the whole group conversations with the kindergarteners, Vincent, an intuitive boy, eagerly shared with the class that community is similar to a circle. He held out his hands in a circular formation and began swirling them around his body to emphasize the concept. This was echoed in the anchor chart the class collaboratively created where students shared a variety of ways a community looks and feels. The findings bring light to the idea that community is a place where we all care about each other’s feelings and needs, not just our own. Community consists
of a multitude of circles that extends far beyond the self. Viewing community as a circle with many ripples allowed the students to better grasp the concept.

**Begins With You**

Ms. E highlighted the idea that the innermost circle of community begins with oneself. She then continued to share that everybody has their own strengths they bring to the community. According to Ms. G, empowering students to feel confident and brave enough to openly share helps create a community where diversity is celebrated. By reading Jacqueline Woodson’s book, *The Day You Begin*, and Peter H. Reynolds’ book, *Be You!*, students learned to discover the beauty of their powers. Sitting in a community circle all of the kindergarteners and classroom educators shared their powers of what makes them unique. Ms. E shared with all of her students “I have special fingers that my mom gave me.” Harper, a kindergartener, shared “I am special because I can talk to all animals. I really actually can!” Continuing amongst the kindergarteners in the community circle, Alexander stated, “My life is special because when I was a baby I was so special to my mom and dad.” Wilson, another kindergartener, when asked what makes him special expressed “I can go to school… Also I can see. Also my life is way importanter.” Wilson understands the value his abilities hold and shares his strengths with the classroom community with lots of care in his heart. All of the powers shared aloud were special. As each student relayed the powers they bring to the classroom community and outside of school their voices were filled with confidence and joy.

After reading *Be You!*, students were encouraged to create a picture communicating their role in making the community a better place for all. Luke drew a picture of himself with three
other students and wrote, “I can make them [feel] love!”

Another kindergartener, Olivia, wrote, “I can help someone fix toys.” Olivia always looks to care for others in the classroom and ensures everyone feels included. With the new English language learners, Eric and Arianna, Olivia ensures they feel a part of the community by translating or making sure Eric’s wiggly body does not distract him too much. Luke and Olivia constantly use their powers for the betterment of others in their community.
Making Connections by Welcoming Others Until Everyone Feels Joy

In the classroom and at school, the community is constantly widening. More and more people are joining together. Harper, a kindergartener, declares “It’s wonderful!” Community is a place where all are heard, valued, and respected. The findings demonstrate that cultivating community beyond the self is done through acts of kindness that welcome diversity with an open heart. The kindergarteners were read a variety of stories: Brad Montague’s The Circles All Around Us, Marcus Pfister’s The Rainbow Fish, and Pat Zietlow Miller’s Be Kind, all of which became learning opportunities for students to become more accepting and inclusive of others.
At one point after school, while sitting at the table in the middle of the kindergarten classroom, Ms. E and I began referencing Vincent’s idea of community as a circle. This sparked an idea in Ms. E that the circles of community do not solely include ourselves. These circles ripple into the classroom, school, city, and world around us. What was becoming evident from this conversation with her is that I needed to further expand upon Vincent’s idea. Therefore, I was encouraged to find *The Circles All Around Us*, a story on ways we can create bigger and bigger circles of community and connections as we grow. Claire shared aloud with the class that as the community gets bigger and bigger, a conscious effort must be made to ensure “everyone feels joy.” Wonderful things happen when the circles of community around us widen.

The students were given a booklet containing five circles. For each, the innermost circle began with themselves. The other four circles varied outside of the initial ripple created on the community anchor chart poster, which included: oneself, classroom, school, city, and world. In the five circles of community, Luke included his brothers, his parents, our school, and his grandparents. Another kindergartener Vincent added his family, our classroom in room 2, Redwood School, and the world. Ella incorporated her family as well her house, Redwood, and friends. Harper too included her family in the circles of community along with the kindergarten class, our fourth grade big buddy class, and the world. Lastly, Jade’s circles of community included family (e.g., abuela, auntie, mama, dada, and her brother), room 2, her neighborhood street, and the world. All of the circles of community were diverse and personal to the kindergarteners. The kindergarteners were very thoughtful in determining the loved ones to bring into their circles of community. As the story mentions, “In the circles all around us everywhere that we all go, there’s a difference we can make and a love we can all show.”
Many of the kindergarteners included friends into their circles of community. By reading *The Rainbow Fish*, a story about the impact that sharing can have on friendship, the kindergarteners were prompted to share their thoughts and feelings around the making of a good friend. Seven of the kindergarteners agreed upon the idea that sharing is a huge component of being a good friend. Vincent, Harper, Ella, and another kindergartener Oliver put in writing that a good friend shares their toys with others in the community. Claire wrote, “A good friend shares love.” Marcus Pfister’s story prompted other themes to emerge around empathy and inclusivity. Hudson wrote, “A good friend helps somebody up!” Junie, Alexander, and James all shared this sentiment in their writing by expressing that good friends help those in their community and encourage kindness. In addition to these themes, kindergarteners Olivia, Jade, and Madison wrote, “A good friend will play with me.”

Madison finds great joy in playing with the other kindergarteners. She is strong willed, kind-hearted, and has the silliest personality. Her way of welcoming others into the community is by saying “meow meow,” instead of “hello.” Madison keeps everyone on their toes in the best of ways. She is the epitome of a spitfire. Her love for those in the community and eagerness to join in is what draws the other kindergarteners to be in her presence.

There is more to Madison’s story, a kindergartener with centronuclear myopathy that has led to weakening in her bones making it difficult for her to stand on her own or take part in various physical activities. For the classroom community, finding out the ways Madison’s body moves and functions was a learning experience. At the beginning of the school year, Madison was very hesitant to join the community on the playground. Claire and Grace, with an open heart, were quick to welcome her into their play and help Madison to find her confidence. Although Madison is not always able to participate with the same ability in the activities the
children play, she always strives to attempt. Joining the others in activity, instead of just watching, has allowed for Madison to experience accomplishment and enjoyment. Ensuring centronuclear myopathy does not define nor predict Madison’s success promotes greater inclusivity throughout the community.

Shared experiences, shared successes, and shared struggles are all a part of making a supportive and successful community. “A community in a classroom,” as Ms. E explains, “is every child having a voice, every child feeling they have a right to say, be heard, to feel safe, to be loved, to be taken care of.” The story *Be Kind* further spoke to Ms. E’s sentiment about the ways the simplest acts can change the world for the better. Therefore, all of the kindergarteners were given stones to express their kindness and love to the circle of community beyond the classroom. Many of the kindergarten students created rainbows and hearts on their rocks to relay kindness and bring joy to others that will potentially stumble upon them outside. Ella’s stone with a pink heart in the center and colored with yellow, purple and lots of red wrote the message “I like you.” On two of the other stones created by Wilson and Grace, shiny colors shared the message “I love you.” Claire’s stone expressed a similar message, which read “Love is spread.” The students scattered their stones all around the school for others to find and be filled with a tremendous amount of joy as well as love. Creating these stones was a simple act that, in hopes, will esoterically cultivate a more tightly-knit community.

*Caring for the World*

Throughout the study, many of the kindergarteners shared the importance of valuing the world around us and all of its inhabitants. While creating the community anchor chart, students were asked how the outer circle of community, the world, looks. Students shared that bees, birds, flowers, and trees all encompass this circle.
While creating the community poster, Hudson shared the value trees have in the world. Hudson, a kindergartener at Redwood Elementary, is thoughtful and very mindful while sharing his thoughts or feelings with others. Hudson has the giddiest personality and is always excited to share his knowledge with the classroom community. His curiosity for learning is contagious and often sparks fascinating conversations with the whole group. An example of this is when Hudson expressed aloud, “trees are the most important part of life.” He elaborated on this statement by sharing that trees give out oxygen, which gives us air to breathe. Without trees the circle of community would be nonexistent therefore, they must always be shown a great deal of love. Hudson’s mindset prompted students to begin viewing community from a broader perspective.

Throughout many of the prompts on ways to care for those in the community, students would commonly incorporate animals into their drawings and writing. Claire expressed the value birds bring to the world. Claire wrote, “I am kind because I am helping a bird. I will take it to the vet when it’s weak.” For another prompt, Claire wrote, “I can make others feel welcome by helping a hurt scratched up bird.” Alexander, another kindergartener, added to this idea by writing “I am kind to birds,” and on another occasion writing, “I can make others feel welcome by giving birds a bath and feeding them.” In many conversations, Alexander would highlight ways everyone can show kindness to blue macaw birds specifically. Their view of community extends wide, as evidenced by the great deal of empathy they both hold for nature’s inhabitants.

These ideas prompted further discussion on the valuable relationship between flowers and bees. Claire shared the idea that we all must be friends to flowers, to which Wilson added that we all must care for bees. Together the flowers and bees work to create a better community for all. As emphasized by many of the kindergartners, this circle of community is the most significant and requires the greatest amount of care.
Conclusion

Findings from this research study reveal the value of positive reinforcement, embracement of diversity, and collaboratively working together to ensure all students feel heard, known, and respected. The findings further bring light to the circles of community around us which prompts a rippling effect of empathy and inclusivity beyond the classroom all the way into mother nature. The data shows that the foundation of empathy is students’ perspectives. Throughout and after the project, the kindergarteners showed significantly more understanding of the thoughts and feelings held by others in their community, not just their own. Additionally, this study showed that literature is effective at fostering a sense of belonging when students see themselves reflected in the stories as well as exposes students to stories that show experiences other than their own thus, broadening their worldview.

Throughout this study, I learned the value of learning while in dialogue with the students. Vincent’s idea of community as a circle seemed quite simple at the moment however, upon further thought I found it to be a real revelation. I began to shift the literature to revolve around this idea. In Paulo Friere’s critical pedagogy, the students are not limited to the teacher’s banking deposit. Thus, I realized that I too am a part of the circle alongside the students. I must honor the role as teacher while remembering I am equal in the classroom community. From the dialogue with the kindergarteners, specifically Vincent, I have realized in many ways I learn best from the students.

The first research question was how does implementing inclusivity and empathy into the classroom help to drive successful school change and benefit all classroom members, with disabilities and without? The results from this study indicate that laying the foundation in the classroom fosters a ripple effect of care throughout the rest of the school. By implementing
inclusivity into the classroom, students attain greater empathy for all and value everyone, regardless of any disabilities. The second research question was what ways can educators capitalize on diversity for the betterment of the classroom community? The data suggests that differences contribute to a greater whole. Honing in on our hills and valleys promotes greater inclusivity because everyone is aware of the purpose they bring to the community. For the betterment of the community, students become more accepting of their peers when diversity is valued.

These strategies are then linked to the third research question, how can educators create a supportive environment where all students are capable of learning and succeeding? Through literature, the mindsets of the students are broadened and open conversations lead to greater love and support of those in the community. As the hearts of those in the community grow, students are able to join together and successfully learn alongside each other. This research study offered the student participants the opportunity to begin taking leadership with cultivating an empathetic and inclusive community. Incorporating literature and tactile experiences into the study changed the students’ engagement through this reflective experience. As such, this study was effective at increasing students’ empathy and urge to actively include loved ones in the circles of community that surround each of them personally.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings from this study document the importance of inclusive practices towards cultivating an empathetic community, beyond just the classroom. Joining together in hills and valleys fosters a supportive classroom community that honors the feelings, ideas, and creations of all students. Additionally, findings show the impact of literature on broadening student perspective by laying the foundation for making choices out of love, which results in the hearts of those within the community to grow bigger. Finally, findings expand the concept of community into a multitude of circles that start with the self and ripple outward with care to the flowers and bees in the world.

In the following discussion, I outline the importance and impact of cultivating an inclusive classroom community and culture for all students, and how the present findings align with prior research in the field. Additionally, I share the new themes that emerged in the research, and how they add to the breadth of knowledge on empathy-driven inclusive practices for students, particularly, specific areas that should be addressed for cultivating kindness through play, and the necessity of hills matching to valleys for supportive pairings. Finally, I convey the limitations of this study and explore possible avenues for future research.

In many ways, the findings from this study closely connect with the frameworks in the literature review. The current research further underlined the importance of inclusive learning in the school setting, and that it has positive implications for encouraging students to join together in visible and invisible ways (Causton-Theoharis, 2009). This aligns with the present study, as findings suggest that inclusive classrooms create a more authentically connected community for all students, regardless of ability.
The existing literature also discusses that through empathy, the classroom community learns to understand each other, which helps to build positive and trusting relationships (de Klerk & de Klerk, 2018). Further, it is discussed that the focus of empathy is to experience the feelings and thoughts from other people’s point of view (Hashim et al., 2019). Both align with the findings of this study, which point to the importance of understanding the needs and feelings of others, not just one’s self. For instance, the ways in which the kindergarteners willingly sought to help Madison, a kindergartener with centronuclear myopathy, sit and stand throughout the day cultivated a greater sense of empathy amongst all of the students.

In addition, Kent and Simpson (2020) state that purposefully choosing adolescent literature is one way to create a foundation of trust upon which students can express their care and concern for one another, their education, and the broader world. Throughout the study, literature led to more thoughtful discussions on ways to welcome and be friendly towards others.

**Implications for the Literature**

The findings from this study differ from prior research, in part by how it addressed creating an inclusive learning environment that honors diverse student experiences during a specific point in time, “post” pandemic. Additionally, this study explored kindergarten students’ perspective towards inclusivity, which was a gap in the existing literature. From this study, kindness showed up as highly relevant to the making of a tightly knit community. Specifically, the kindergarteners shared that kindness is most successfully cultivated through thoughtful words and opportunities for play along with calm music to comfort others.

Another way this study differs from prior research is through the concept of hills and valleys. Pairing support to match hills, one’s strengths, with valleys, one’s weaknesses, promotes a positive community where all are able to be successful learners in an inclusive space. Ensuring
conversations are had for the cohesiveness of joining together helps foster a more supportive classroom community. Furthermore, through this study, the kindergarten students related empathy beyond interpersonal relationships to the community of the world. The student participants expressed their care and concern for the birds and the bees to the flowers and the trees, differing from literature which focused on the circle of classroom community.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

The findings of this research suggest a variety of useful implications for practice and policy towards cultivating an inclusive classroom community within the school setting. In order for all students to feel heard, known, and respected, the implications of promoting greater inclusivity and empathy are valuable. The findings have implications for the practice of teachers within the classrooms, schools, and educational policies.

**Classrooms**

Implications for classrooms include the value of having open conversations to promote a more inclusive community. Morning meeting check-ins and end of day gratitude sharing create opportunities for building classroom community authentically, especially when conducted in a reciprocal learning manner. For instance, in the classroom community, I will recognize my part in this circle by honoring my role as a teacher while still learning from the students. This study has shown that learning from students is more powerful and effective to my skills as a teacher. I need to actively ensure that my voice does not overpower the thoughts and feelings expressed by students. Therefore, I need to be attentively listening to the students’ voices because they are just as much a part of the classroom community. Moreover, opportunities and space for students to play need to be created for the betterment of the community. Purposefully designing fun activities for students that struggle to get along or having students take part in tactile activities
(e.g., *A Wrinkled Heart* lesson) gives them the opportunity to widen their perspectives, fostering greater inclusivity and empathy.

**Schools**

At a school level, teachers should be supported in attending professional development surrounding the implementation of inclusive practices and the promotion of student voice. If teachers lack the educational background and knowledge to facilitate social emotional learning in their classrooms, it would be unfair to expect them to integrate such practices. Additionally, schools should cultivate a shared sense of purpose around play. As communicated by kindergarteners in this study, through play, a more tightly knit and welcoming community is made. Lastly, implications for schools include the value of integrating diverse literacy practices. Filling the library bookcases with literature that reflects student diversity is of the utmost importance. However, there is more to celebrating diversity than simply stacking the books on the shelves. These stories need to be read to the students to spark open conversations around honoring the differences of others. Integrating diverse literature into schools will foster a more inclusive environment for all.

**Policy**

Students would benefit greatly if all teachers’ pre-service training had a deeper focus on pedagogical approaches to cultivating an empathy focused classroom community. In order for this to be effective, it may be beneficial for policies to be established that require teachers to attend training on inclusive practices and cultivating empathy, so that all teachers have the necessary background knowledge and training. Additionally, providing training for pre-service teachers in facilitating dialogic classroom focus discussions would draw out student voices for the betterment of the community. No matter the students’ age or English proficiency, all students
should be given the opportunity to engage in vitally important, collaborative conversations.

Moreover, while informal check-ins are necessary and important, the findings show that more formal training around patience and play is essential for the classroom community as a whole. Since play has been shown to be essential for promoting greater patience amongst students, it would also be useful to create more standards built around play in the classroom and school community, so that the direction of learning is emphasized more fully in the curriculum.

Moreover, establishing learning outcomes across grade levels around inclusive play and building patience would contribute positively to the classroom and schoolwide circles of community.

**Limitations of the Study and Future Research**

By expanding the research, more helpful implications would likely be discovered for the benefits of all students, regardless of ability or disability, within the community. The following areas discuss the limitations of the study, as well as explore ideas for future research.

**Limitations of the Study**

In reviewing the findings of this study, a variety of limitations were unveiled that should be considered. A major limitation of the study was the limited sample. Only twenty-four youth participants were involved in the study, all of whom are from the same class and elementary school. Within this sample, only one classroom consisting of eighteen kindergarteners, seven of whom were classified as English language learners at the time research was conducted, was invited to participate. Additionally, this study included only six adult participants (five educators and one counseling psychologist), all of whom identify as female and of caucasian origin. Greater diversity amongst the sample of participants would have influenced the results of the study.
Another critical limitation of this study was the amount of time available to conduct the research. The entirety of the research study was conducted within less than a month. This limited the amount of qualitative data gathered by the researcher from the participants. Furthermore, in relation to length limitations, the researcher had only known this group of kindergarteners for a year. Longer relations with the student participants would have influenced the data collected and thus, the results.

**Future Research**

In the future, a mixed methods approach would be useful for exploring the understandings of changes needed and remarkably helpful in evaluating the processes for establishing a more tightly knit community beyond the classroom. Additional research could be conducted with this group of kindergarteners throughout the remainder of their elementary schooling. Specifically, focusing on literature revolving around inclusive practices and empathetic skills for the upcoming five years would be very interesting to analyze longitudinally. Observing the students learning and understanding as they grow would foster broader perspectives.

Another direction for future research includes focusing on a larger, more diverse population of participants. Since the participants are all from one geographic region, it would be interesting to study a larger population of educators and students from places across and outside the state of California. As more participants join in the study, the findings would be further advanced by studying across upper grade levels. The research could be extended to determine whether the findings are different when working with older students, and with students longitudinally. Furthermore, gathering data from the parental guardians of the students on their thoughts and feelings on community strengths and challenges would further enhance the quality
of this study going forward. Lastly, future research could include more students with disabilities, both learning and physical, in the study to get their perspective on cultivating an inclusive community where they feel heard, valued, and respected.

Conclusion

Community is an essential part of what it means to be human. We are nothing without the circles of community joining us all together. Everyone deserves to feel embraced and part of a community. Thus, educators must continue to highlight the beauty diversity brings to creating a more inclusive community, while simultaneously embracing individuality through literature and supportive pairings. Being open to welcoming others into the circles of community leads to greater inclusivity and empathy towards all. Over the course of this research, several findings have emerged that will impact my approach to teaching in the community. I must honor the role as teacher, while recognizing that I too am a part of the circle. But even more importantly, I have recognized that I have transformed and grown to avoid my voice overshadowing the thoughts and feelings shared by the students. I am grateful to students who participated in the research and how they became my teachers. I now see in many ways, I learn an incredible amount from my students about how to teach, about diverse perspectives, and about the value loving choices bring to the hearts of those within the rippling circles of communities.
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Appendix A: Example Lesson
The researcher conducted a multitude of literacy lessons related to diversity, community, and empathy. One lesson, for example, included the researcher reading Alexandra Penfold’s story, *All Are Welcome*. The reading took place in the kindergarten classroom for approximately ten minutes. There was a whole group focus conversation on the carpet where students were encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings aloud on inclusivity, the beauty of diversity, and the story as a whole. The kindergarteners were then given a prompt to reflect on a time they made sure others were included, which read “I can make someone feel welcome by. . .” (See Appendix B).
Appendix B: Drawing/Writing Prompts
1. I can make someone feel welcome by…

2. When others feel down, I can help by…

3. I care for others by…

4. I am a friend to others when I…

5. A good friend…

6. I am kind when I…

7. I can include others by…
Appendix C: Questions for Students
1. Thinking about the book we read in class today, when is a time that you have included someone? How did that make you feel?

2. When is a time that others have included you? How did that make you feel?

3. What would happen if nobody was welcome?

4. What does community mean to you? How does it look/feel? Who are the people in your community? How do your community members relate to the characters in the story we read today?

5. In what ways are you unique? What do you add to the community? What are your powers? Why are differences important for the community?

6. Thinking about the book we read as a class today, how is our classroom a community? How do you work to make the community a better place?

7. How does it feel to be in your own circle of community, by yourself? Who can you bring into your circle? What wonderful things happen when we have wide circles?

8. When you think about our community here in Room 2, how do you think we can help include people in our school or class?

9. Thinking about the book we read today in class, why is it important to be kind towards someone? What does kindness look/feel like?
Appendix D: Individual Interview Questions for Staff
1. What does community mean to you?
2. What makes a supportive and inclusive community?
3. How do you work to build a more tightly knit community?
4. How do you celebrate inclusiveness and diversity in your classroom?
5. What ways do you work toward ensuring all classroom members feel included?
6. What is one thing Redwood Elementary could try this year to improve school culture?
7. What does empathy mean to you?
8. Can you share an example that you’ve seen of a student being empathetic?
9. What is the biggest challenge you face with fostering inclusivity for students with physical and learning disabilities in your own practice?
10. How can students take leadership with all of this?
11. What is one story you read to your students to foster a more inclusive environment?