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Honors Program Senior Capstone: “Kindness in the Classroom”

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Kindness in the Classroom

Background

Social and Emotional Learning

As children grow older and develop, they learn new social skills and experience different emotions. This development is inevitable and impacts every human being throughout their lives. Teachers and educators play a vital role in this development, known as social and emotional learning (SEL). This type of learning, is described as, “acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2013a, 2013b, as cited in Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013, p. 10). Development in SEL skills is constantly occurring for young students, and is seen largely at the elementary school level. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is at the forefront of promoting SEL and has pinpointed the following core competencies that guide SEL instruction and learning. *Self-awareness*, defined as the ability to identify one's own emotions, thoughts, and values, and how they influence behavior. *Self-management*, which is the skill of successfully regulating one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations, including stress management, impulse control, and motivation. *Social awareness*, when one takes the perspective and empathizes with an other, including individuals from diverse cultures and backgrounds. *Relationship skills*, defined as the ability to create and sustain healthy, rewarding, and communicative relationships with diverse individuals and groups. And lastly, *responsible decision-making*, which includes making constructive

choices regarding personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms (CASEL, 2017).

Educators are the leaders at helping children develop their SEL core competencies everyday in school. Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) suggest that schools need to include SEL embedded into curriculum and instruction. They recommend two sets of educational strategies for teachers to aid in this type of the development. First, explicit, systematic teaching, modeling, and facilitating the competencies so that they will become habits for students and a part of their everyday behavior and norms. Second, educators should establish a safe, caring, and engaging learning environment for their students that includes peer and family initiatives with schoolwide community-building activities (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). Research shows that high quality and properly implemented SEL education can yield positive academic, social, and emotional benefits for students. For example, in 2011, Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger concluded that, “compared to controls, SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement” (p. 405).

Random Acts of Kindness Curriculum

Kindness is defined as, “a natural quality of the heart, expressed through an act of goodwill and reflecting care for self and others” (Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, 2015, p. 2). Kindness in the Classroom, is an academic initiative created by the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation to improve school culture and support both social and emotional learning in addition to academic learning. Their pedagogical model consists of curriculum, activities, lessons, and resources that teachers can implement in their classroom to help bring a change or

development in awareness, attitude, and behavior in their students over time. It consists of explicit instruction of SEL concepts and strategies, and moves towards more complex interactions by the end of each lesson. They have developed 12 Kindness Concepts that support the growth of a student's social-emotional competency that include: assertiveness, caring, compassion, fairness, gratitude, integrity, helpfulness, perseverance, respect, responsibility, self-care, and self-discipline (Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, 2015). The model has free lesson plans and activities for educators specific to each of these concepts for Kindergarten to 12th grade.

To answer the question "Is kindness teachable?", we turn to Dr. Robert Roeser, Professor of Human Development and Psychology at Portland State University. Dr. Roeser believes that there are many skills people develop over time to process and regulate emotions. Roeser states that being able to acknowledge our emotions is the same skill that builds kindness (Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, 2015). This skill can be practiced and taught day in and day out in a classroom setting so that students can learn how to be kind simply by entering school. Teaching kindness can improve a child's happiness, health, self-esteem, concentration, grades, sense of belonging, acceptance of their peers, and appreciation of their circumstance. It also helps to reduce their stress, depression, and likelihood to bully peers (Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, 2015), all of which no teacher would like to see their students suffer from.

The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation (RAK) Foundation (2015) has compiled over four years of data, results, and feedback from teachers and students, which have shown an increased level of trust, a decrease in disciplinary action, improvement in classroom climate with pro-social behavior, improved self-awareness skills, and an increase in kind actions and empathy

as an outcome of the program. They are currently conducting larger trials with diverse populations to provide more insight into what schools can expect when they apply the RAK “Kindness in the Classroom” model into their classrooms (Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, 2015). Results are expected to align with existing findings. A pilot study has been conducted by the RAK Foundation with a sample of students in K-8 and found that, “teachers rated students’ social emotional skills significantly higher, with the typical student’s total SEL skill score increasing from the 44th percentile to the 66th percentile” (Woodbridge, Rouspil, Thornton, Sheckman, Goldweber, 2014, p. 4). The study notes that the most progress in social skills was in early elementary students in kindergarten through third grade.

The Present Study

The present study integrates the RAK Foundation lesson plans and CASEL’s SEL core competencies to investigate the impact direct and explicit teaching has on a student’s level of empathy in a third grade classroom.

Participants

This study consists of a sample of 33 third-grade students (8 and 9 years old) at one suburban elementary school located in the northeastern United States. The elementary school includes the following demographics: White (63.8%), Hispanic (14.8%), Asian (11.5%), and African American (6.4%). Additionally, 24.6% of the school’s population is listed as “economically disadvantaged” by the Massachusetts Department of Education and 51.2% of the students at the school are male, while 48.8 % are female. Individuals were included in the study based on comprehensive selection, as all of the students in two identified classrooms received an

invitation to participate. The invitation was extended to a total of 48 students to take part. A total of 42 students participated with signed parental consent and child assent. Due to student absences, the control group had 16 students participate in the pre- and post-test, and the treatment group had 17 students participate in the pre-test, treatment, and post-test. This created the total number of 33 students who participated in the entire study.

Measures

The survey used for the pre- and post-test were identical. It was adapted from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) used in Litvak-Miller and McDougall's 1997 study titled *The Structure of Empathy During Middle Childhood and Its Relationship to Prosocial Behavior*. The survey contained 11 items that were rated on a 5 point-Likert type scale ranging from "never like me" (1) to "always like me" (5). To adapt the IRI at a third-grade reading level for this particular study, some items were reworded for the students without affecting the content. A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A.

Procedure

Students in two identified classrooms received an invitation to participate. The classrooms were chosen by comprehensive selection as the primary researcher was the student teacher in the treatment classroom and it would allow for accessibility for the lessons to be taught. The control classroom was chosen by the researcher due to scheduling and grade level convenience and similarity to the treatment classroom. The project information sheet and parent consent form was sent home with each student and they were asked to be returned as soon as possible. The forms were translated into the native language for students whose primary language spoken at home was something other than English. If a student or their parent or

guardian chose not to participate in the study, the student was given the choice to go to another classroom in the school and work on independent reading or classwork while the study was taking place. There were no penalties for non-participation.

A third party researcher randomly assigned each participant a unique numerical ID to anonymize the data for the primary researcher. The third party researcher visited the school to collect data on the researcher's behalf to eliminate any bias that the researcher might create while the students complete the pre- and post-test surveys. Before the pre-test, the third party researcher read aloud the child assent forms to the students as they followed along and instructed them to sign the form if they chose to participate. The third party researcher then proceeded to read aloud each question of the survey to students and answered any clarifying questions. Students had privacy partitions set up on their desks to ensure they were able to record answers in confidence. There was a teaching aide in the classroom at the time to assist in the process. The same procedure was conducted in the control classroom afterwards for both pre- and post-tests. The third party researcher conducted both surveys around the same time in the morning. The post-test was given eighteen days after the pre-test and after the treatment was complete.

The treatment classroom received instruction of four (4) lessons based on the Kindness in the Classroom curriculum. The lessons were taught equally spread out within the span of ten days. The main researcher taught the lessons to the treatment group and followed the lesson plans closely. Each lesson had a different type of instruction (see Appendix B for the procedures of each lesson). All four lessons were taken from the Kindness in the Classroom Grade 3 Unit

titled “Communicating with Empathy”. The objective of the unit is to build and create students’ ability to put empathy into action and offer kind things to say.

Analysis

Upon collection of the data, the researcher matched the pre- and post- test survey of each participant. There were five English Language Learners (ELLs) in the sample. Due to their limited knowledge of the English language, which may have affected their comprehension of the survey, their data were excluded from the analysis of this study. If a student was absent for either day of data collection, they were also not included in the analysis.

Three out of the eleven questions (questions 1, 5, and 6) were reverse coded as they were framed and worded differently than the rest of the assessment. The data was coded by the researcher using the scale on the survey. A “5” was considered to be an empathetic score and a “1” was considered to be a nonempathetic score. A mean “empathy score” was calculated for each participant based on all of the questions for the pre- and post-test data. The researcher then calculated the difference in empathy scores for each participant in both the control and treatment groups. A t-test was used to calculate whether there was a significant difference in empathy scores within the same participants in the pre- and post- conditions for each group. An additional t-test was used to see if there was a significant difference between the average difference in empathy scores between the treatment and control groups.

Results

A paired t-test was conducted to compare the pre- and post-test empathy scores for the treatment group. There was no significant difference in the empathy score for the pre-test ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.82$) and the post-test ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.68$; $t(16) = 0$, $p = 1.0$, two-tailed). The null hypothesis was accepted, that there is no difference in empathy scores between the pre- and post-test for the treatment group. The difference in scores is not significant enough to conclude that there is a change in the empathy scores after the treatment was given.

A paired t-test was also conducted to compare the pre- and post-test empathy scores for the control group. There was no significant difference in the score for the pre-test ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.50$) and the post-test ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.40$; $t(15) = 2.0765$, $p = .0554$, two-tailed). The null hypothesis was again accepted, that there was no difference in empathy scores between the pre- and post-test. The difference in scores between the tests for the control group is not significant enough to conclude that there is a difference.

Lastly, an independent samples t-test was performed to assess the change in empathy scores from the pre- to the post-test, and for the treatment and control groups. There was no significant difference in the change in scores for the treatment group ($M = 0.01$, $SD = 0.69$) and the control group ($M = -0.19$, $SD = 0.36$; $t(31) = -1.05$, $p = .302$, two-tailed). The null hypothesis is accepted that there is no difference in change in scores between the two groups. On average, participants who underwent the Kindness in the Classroom intervention did not perform better on the empathy assessment compared to students who did not receive the intervention treatment.

Discussion

This study took place in a third-grade classroom. After removing the ELL students and the students who were not present for either of the data collection days, there was a sample of 16 students in the control group and 17 students in the treatment group. Statistical analyses reveal barely any change in the empathy scores for the students in the treatment group. These students took part in four lessons centered around the topics of kindness and empathy. However, there were no significant results in the data from their participation. There was also no notable difference in the scores between the control and treatment groups from the post-test survey. The lack of significant results of this study, however, does not undermine the importance and the impact of teaching SEL as seen in the literature and research. There were several limitations to this preliminary study, which may have impacted the results.

Limitations

After analyzing the data and reconsidering the procedure of the present study, various limitations can be concluded. First, the curriculum and lessons themselves were fairly short and brief. There were only four lessons taught and they were isolated from the rest of learning going on throughout the student's day. If more lessons had been taught for longer periods of time there may have been significant results. Additionally, if the content discussed in the lessons was more relevant, students may have been more interested in the learning taking place. For example, if the material pertained to a story they were reading in English/Language Arts, or was related to something going on in their lives, where the students were able to make a connection to the learning, it may have been more impactful. Another instance of the content being unrelatable

was in lesson three of the curriculum where there were role play situations for the students to act out. Some of the situations the students had not had experience with and had trouble connecting to the material. For instance, dealing with a student who is violent towards others, which they have never encountered.

Secondly, some students in the treatment classroom were absent on the days of the lessons. Attendance was not taken note of by the researcher, but it could have made an impact on student learning. The schedule of the project and the classroom did not have flexibility to teach the lessons only when all students were present, so some students missed out when they were absent from school on a day of the treatment.

The most influential limitation was the pre- and post-test survey itself. Even though the questions were modified for a third grade reading level and were reworded to ensure comprehension, there was still confusion among the participants during survey completion. The survey was chosen, as it was noted, from previous studies as a measure of empathy. However, the questions were too abstract for the third graders to understand, which could have contributed to the results not being significant. Even though some of the questions were revised by the researchers, the wording still confused some of the participants. For example, there were two questions that were vague for the students, which read: “Things I see make me feel sad” and “Things I see make me feel happy”. Additionally, the negative words in some of the questions confused students in regards to which answer they should choose, such as, “I don’t feel sorry for other people when they are having problems or feeling bad”.

Another limitation that was difficult to control was the SEL that the students in the control group were receiving during the time period in between data collection. It is possible

that the participants who did not receive the intervention of the kindness lessons were learning about empathy in their own classroom or from other teachers, faculty members, coaches, or parents and family members. This is something that could have impacted the results of the study.

Future Directions

Limitations and nonsignificant results are common for pilot and preliminary research studies like this one. However, there are various notes for future directions should this study be continued or redesigned. For example, a larger sample size would be preferred to give a better representation of the population. This also limits the chances of having outliers in the sample impact the data in a meaningful way.

During the treatment of the kindness lessons, there were several instances of students completing written work about empathy. Including other assessment measures in a future version of this study, instead of just a pre- and post-test survey, would create a more comprehensive outlook on progress. For example, qualitative measures could be included such as the writing and drawing the students completed or observations made by the researcher or teacher. In this study, the researcher found that the assignments throughout the curriculum showed evidence of empathetic thinking and expressive language that increased in quality throughout the unit, which shows that even though there was no statistical significance of the intervention from the data, the lessons were educational and impactful.

Lastly, the survey that was used should be modified significantly, as it was confusing and too abstract for the students to understand. A more clearly worded survey could be successful in

finding more realistic results, or including questions that are based on real-life situations using empathy. Creating or using a survey as a pre- and post-test that is more closely aligned with the curriculum being taught for intervention might show a clearer result to discover if it was impactful or not.

Conclusion

Statistically significant results were not found for this study. However, that does not rule out the importance of teaching and learning social and emotional skills. Previous studies have shown noteworthy results when implementing curriculum such as this one into the classroom over longer periods of time with larger sample sizes. If the pool of participants for this study was larger, with a more comprehensive pre- and post-test survey, and all of the additional limitations had been taken into account there may have been significant results.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Please read each question and circle a number response.

QUESTION	NEVER LIKE ME	NOT OFTEN LIKE ME	SOMETIMES LIKE ME	OFTEN LIKE ME	ALWAYS LIKE ME
1.) I don't feel sorry for other people when they are having problems or feeling bad.	1	2	3	4	5
2.) It seems like I feel the feelings of the people in the stories I read or hear.	1	2	3	4	5
3.) When I see another kid being picked on or teased, I feel like I want to help them.	1	2	3	4	5
4.) I try to understand my friends better by imagining what things are like for them.	1	2	3	4	5
5.) When I see someone get hurt, I stay calm.	1	2	3	4	5

Page 1 of the pre and post test survey

Please read each question and circle a number response.

QUESTION	NEVER LIKE ME	NOT OFTEN LIKE ME	SOMETIMES LIKE ME	OFTEN LIKE ME	ALWAYS LIKE ME
6.) When my friends or people in my family have problems, it does not bother me a lot.	1	2	3	4	5
7.) Things I see make me feel sad.	1	2	3	4	5
8.) Things I see make me feel happy.	1	2	3	4	5
9.) It is easy for me to feel sorry for other people.	1	2	3	4	5
10.) When I'm mad at someone, I try to imagine how they feel for a while.	1	2	3	4	5
11.) Before telling someone that I don't like something about them, I try to imagine how I would feel if someone told me that.	1	2	3	4	5

Page 2 of the pre and post test survey

Appendix B

Overview of “Communicating with Empathy” Unit and Lesson Descriptions



Grade 3 • Ages 8-9

Communicating with Empathy

Having empathy for others helps students stay in touch with what their peers are feeling. This unit builds students' abilities to put empathy into action and offer kind things to say.

Kindness means being friendly, generous or considerate to ourselves and others through our words, thoughts and actions.



These lesson plans were created by The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation. For more information, please visit randomactsofkindness.org

If you have questions or comments, please email us at teacherhelp@randomactsofkindness.org

Unit Objective

Students will be able to describe positive ways to communicate that show care, consideration, concern and empathy for others, give examples of pro-social behaviors such as helping others, being respectful of others, cooperation, consideration, self-control, and not teasing others, describe some of the ways that young children can be helpful, with intention, to others and analyze how a community in an African country is similar to and different from their own community, and develop the language to respond kindly to people from a variety of cultures. (This objective is for the Discovering Africa Activity only.)

Introducing This Unit To Your Students

For the next few weeks, we are going to talk about how to show care and concern to others through our words and actions. What does it mean to you to show care and concern? What are some ways you show that you care?

Allow time for students to respond and discuss, either as a class or in small groups. You can also use this time to introduce the Kindness Concept (compassion). You can create community definitions for compassion or share the one listed below. Consider using the [Kindness Concept Poster](#) for compassion as a way to reinforce learning.

Kindness Concepts

Consider writing key terms on the board before class to introduce vocabulary and increase understanding.

COMPASSION Being aware when others are sick, sad, or hurt and wanting to help.

CARING Feeling and showing concern for others.

Unit Lessons

There are four lessons in this unit plus an optional lesson if you have time.

LESSON TITLE	LESSON GOALS	LESSON MATERIALS
Lesson 1: Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters	Students will describe positive ways to communicate that show care, consideration, concern and empathy for others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> John Steptoe, Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters, New York: Amistad Publishers, 1987 or YouTube video of book being read RAK journals
Lesson 2: Expressing Empathy	Students will identify the difference between positive/compassionate responses and negative/unkind responses to people who are in challenging situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15 to 20 age-appropriate newspaper or magazine pictures or internet images of people who are poor, injured, sad, disappointed, frustrated, angry, etc. (Make sure to show care as you select images; it is important to avoid reinforcing racial and ethnic stereotypes about poverty and feelings.) Write responses on the back of some of the images before class, using suggestions noted under activity description and then allow students to develop their own responses.
Lesson 3: Caring Role-Plays	Students will practice kind and caring ways to respond in different role-play scenarios.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Caring Role-Plays, two copies, one cut apart before class
Lesson 4: Empathy Across the Genres	Students will write a story or descriptive poem that focuses on caring and empathy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RAK journals Paper and pencil
Optional Lesson: Discovering Africa	Students will complete a research sheet about a country in Africa.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discovering Africa research worksheet B Books or research materials about Africa. Some possible websites include: http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/ (Enter country in search feature.) http://www.factmonster.com/countries.html (Enter country in search feature.)



YOUR NOTES

Unit Notes

The activities in this lesson focus on a central theme and connect to different academic curriculum areas.

The lessons are intended to be easy to teach and fun to use while helping to develop social and emotional skills.

Lesson activities use a variety of modalities to address different learning styles and build on each other.

Each lesson includes choice of evaluation or reflection questions, which can be written, discussed or used as journal entries. Consider writing these on the board before the lesson begins.

The activities also incorporate key Kindness Concepts, which can be introduced before teaching the lesson or as the concepts are discussed in the lesson. Consider displaying the [Kindness Concept Posters](#) during the unit. See the [RAK Educator Guide](#) and [Building Trust in the Classroom](#) for information about using Kindness Concepts to create a healthy classroom environment and help students develop pro-social behaviors.

Each activity includes tips for how to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of diverse learners.

The Kindness Tool Kit is another way to meet the needs of diverse learners. See the [RAK Educator Guide](#) for how to create and use this tool kit.

RAK also has developed [Focusing Strategies](#) and [Problem-Solving Strategies](#) to help students better regulate their emotions, think through challenging situations, and build healthy relationships, friendships and community. See the [RAK Educator Guide](#) for more information about incorporating those strategies into the unit.

Establishing kindness as the norm in your classroom positively influences classroom culture. By setting kindness as the expected behavior and having everyone agree to that norm, your students gain responsibility for maintaining an environment that is kind to everyone.

Regularly revisiting the topics or questions raised during discussions will expand student understanding of the concepts. Scripted explanations are provided, but feel free to use language that feels natural for you.

The Common Core, 21st Century, SEL and Colorado P-12 Academic Standards met in this unit are listed at the start of each lesson. A [Learning Standards Key](#) is provided on the website for your reference.

