

Building Community through Shared Spaces and Intention

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Abstract

Present-day educational approaches in higher education and K-12 privilege only cognitive gains from students, who are sometimes only seen as test scores, while neglecting the development of the whole human being. This article documents three unique Building Community events at a public university in the northeast, which were designed to embrace the full development of human potential. These events were created to offer novel approaches to education, highlighting and operationalizing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) through mindfulness, literacy, and social justice. The documentation is two-fold: 1) to provide descriptions of each of the three events and the connections between and among Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and mindfulness, literacy and diversity, and 2) to provide an analysis of feedback data and a descriptive framework that makes clear the processes and theories underpinning the events, all of which may provide a beginning roadmap for others to replicate this important work. Qualitative findings suggest that the integration of SEL into classroom theory and practice may be one route to improving and humanizing education.

Keywords:

Social Emotional Learning (SEL), democratic professionalism, mindfulness, literacy, social justice

Introduction

This article tells the story of a unique case study in university outreach. The Building Community initiative brought together a diverse group of individuals from the local regional area, all of whom were interested in learning about new ways to improve education through caring, understanding, and respectful citizenship towards their own and others' learning. At the center of this initiative is Social Emotional Learning (SEL), as referenced in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). According to CASEL, there are five social and emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (as cited in Dorman, 2015). Likewise, success in education must involve an education of the "whole" person, which attends to students' and teachers' emotional and cognitive learning needs (Waxler & Hall, 2011). These Building Community events provided ongoing opportunities for educational stakeholders to discuss their own ideas, listen to others' perspectives, and to collaborate on how the seven competencies of SEL can assist in improving the present state of education. SEL, as the overarching focus of these events, served as a guiding constellation of concepts on which organizers were able to craft three unique Building Community learning experiences for all stakeholders.

Building Community through Mindfulness: Where Literacy and Diversity Intersect

In this first Building Community event and all subsequent events, SEL was at the center. Experts shared presentations on theories of mindfulness, literacy, and diversity allowing participants to expand their awareness of educational processes. The first session was led by a neuroscientist who explained how mindfulness, as a brain-based process, can positively affect learning. The second session, led by an English professor and author who focuses on the power of literacy for learning and self-development. The third session was led by an English Language Learner (ELL) guidance counselor who shared her own experiences as a non-native English speaker, as well as her experiences supporting ELL students and families. Information from participant feedback sheets collected at the end of this event provided guidance for the design of the second Building Community Event.

Building Community through Mindfulness: Knowing the Self and Connecting to Others

Growing from the momentum of the first event, participants called for examples of SEL theory into practice. The evening began with three keynote speakers who gave short talks on mindfulness, literacy, and community-building, providing a necessary foundation for the breakout sessions. After these opening talks, participants were given a choice of attending bridging SEL theory-to-practice sessions on the following topics: (a) Exploring teachers' inner landscapes through metaphors and poems, (b) Literacy and social justice, (c) Creating community partnerships, and (d) Mindfulness and literacy. The goal here was to move beyond theory and have participants experience SEL in practice. Feedback forms from this second event were more detailed and there was some evidence that participants demonstrated self-reflection on SEL in theory and practice.

Building Community through Mindfulness: Bringing Theory to Practice

For this third Building Community event, the sessions were held at a local community school. Experts shared best practices and examples for how they utilize SEL in a variety of settings. Moving away from the breakout sessions, all participants were provided examples for SEL theory into practice through the following sub-topics: (a) Mindfulness, Learning and the Brain, (b) The Power of Deep Reading and Mindfulness in the Classroom, (c) Mindfulness and Literacy: Lessons from the Field, and (d) Social Justice in Education. The kind of feedback collected for this event was in the form of reflective writings on the value of SEL and how it might influence teaching practices.

Review of the Research

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Research evidences the benefits of systemic integration of SEL learning inside classrooms assisting students in the acquisition of skills that allow for better understanding and awareness of the self and others. Further, SEL learning focuses on helping individuals learn how their emotions influence their thoughts, choices and response actions towards others (Brackett & Rivers, 2014, Salovey & Mayer, 1990). “There is growing recognition at the local, state, and federal levels in the United States (US) and around the world that schools must meet the social

and emotional developmental needs of students for effective teaching and learning to take place and for students to reach their full potential.” (<http://casel.org/research/sel-in-your-state/>)

For SEL, the main focus is on developing skills that promote social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as the process of acquiring the skills to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations effectively. A growing body of research and literature supports the premise that effective SEL programming is a key to children’s success in school and life (Durlak et al., 2010; Greenberg et al., 2003).

SEL, as a broad construct, has deep connections to mindfulness because it must be embodied, and it grows from self-knowledge and management of one’s own emotions to awareness of others’ perspectives and emotions. Mindfulness is inextricably connected to SEL; research on mindfulness interventions in K-12 settings is broadening the field and showing how attention to SEL is a conduit for improved teaching and learning. For example, a range of studies on mindfulness evidence that both teachers and students build skills needed, such as emotional regulation, perspective-taking and emotional recognition (Greenberg & Harris 2012; Shapiro et al., 2014).

In the research study by Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015, the development of curriculum content and activities were guided by the research and theory in the area of mindfulness and its relation to well-being and positive psychology (e.g., Clonan et al., 2004; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005a, b). Schonert-Reichl et al.’s ME program (Mindfulness Education), “mindfulness” refers to bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis with a non-judgmental stance. The four key components of the ME program include:

1. Quieting the mind—listening to a resonating instrument (chime) and focusing on the breath
2. Mindful attention—mindful of sensation, thoughts, and feelings
3. Managing negative emotions and negative thinking
4. Acknowledgment of self and others. (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015)

Literacy and SEL

Deep reading provides a mirror for reflecting upon the self, and allows for the development of empathy toward others to understand both the characters in text and the human dimension in our modern society. Deep reading of literature acts as the foundational stepping stone to develop and expand students’ comprehension of text and also acquire the life skills that allows them to apply this same skill set to interact and understand others. This type of emotional intelligence is critical for students to learn if they are to have a quality, positive and productive life (Goleman 2013). Deep reading and deep listening, as building blocks of education, are important for all levels. Literacy skills are rooted in the individual’s ability to sustain focused attention, suspend judgment, and maintain present-moment awareness.

Mindfulness and SEL

In connection with SEL, mindfulness practices can help students to regulate their emotions, increase their attentional capacities, and create positive habits of mind (Davidson, Dunne, Eccles, Engle, Greenberg, Jennings, & Vago, 2012; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012; Waxler & Hall, 2011). Mindfulness is just one way to bring the learners into the depth of the present moment and into a meaningful space created where all other distractions are put aside. Kabat-Zinn's (2006) work, for example, has shown that mindfulness, which focuses attention on the mind, body, and context of the here and now, can reduce stress in people's everyday lives. Mindfulness skill acquisition can provide the entry point for cultivating the practices and embedding students' SEL through the practice of deep reading and deep listening that facilitates the engagement of individuals in rich, collaborative discussions that lead to greater understanding of the topic material.

Diversity, Social Justice, and SEL

Best practices in social justice in education involves the deep-seated belief that when all academic knowledge and skills are culturally and socially situated and made personally meaningful to students, engagement and interest increases (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noguera, 2000). As Watson (2016) points out, "since learning is relational, educators must remember that we are not teaching *content*; we are teaching *people*. Therefore, the identity and diversity of our students (linguistic, cultural, economic, social, ethnic, etc.) has everything to do with who we are and our ability to engage them affectively and effectively" (p. 3). Teachers can be more success in teaching students from diverse backgrounds if they are culturally responsive and create learning opportunities that help students learn through their own cultural filters (Gay, 2002).

Method

Participant Recruitment

The participants, numbering over 100 individuals, represented individuals from a medium-sized urban-serving university in the northeast that included pre-service, graduate students and faculty. The majority of these individuals were from the teacher education department of the university with about 50 percent of these individuals representing pre-service graduate level students. In addition to this group, individuals from the local community also participated in all three events, which helped to provide an inclusive learning space for sharing of the different perspectives from this diverse group of educational stakeholders. Invitation by way of descriptive event brochures were made available using various media as the approach to solicit interest in attending each of the Building Community events.

Research Design

The adopted method for the collection, synthesis and reporting of the data using a qualitative research design to capture the rich, descriptive inner thoughts around the understanding and potential use of the SEL concepts for their own as well as their students' learning benefit. By using a qualitative study design, the authors were able to apply a deductive form of logic when synthesizing the three individual data collections (Cresswell, 1994).

Measures/Procedures

One of the obstacles encountered when trying to gather data from participants was the idea that data collected from each of the participants from the first Building Community Event may not be available for the second or third Building Community events if the person did not attend all three events. For this reason, the authors' intention for this research project was to structure it so that it would be iterative. Using the information from each of the events the data collection tools were structured using the information gathered from the previous Building Community event. This necessitated the use of three connected, but different data collection tools: (a) Satisfaction Survey, (b) constructed participant responses focusing on learner needs, and (c) journal writing using structured prompts. These individual tools were administered to event participants at the conclusion of the final workshop in each of the event series. Participants were asked to provide event facilitators with autonomous, open and honest feedback on the teaching and learning that had just taken place.

Participant comments were captured in written form and then coded at the conclusion of the events. This collection of data was synthesized and combined with the observation notes taken by panel experts, which led to the emergence of several critical themes as a result of the community-building events hosted at the university. This multi-source data was then synthesized using the online qualitative/quantitative analysis tool, DEDOOSE®. By using this systematic analysis process, authors were able to craft a method for answering this study's research questions from the rich body of information gathered from multiple sources that included separate participant feedback forms, facilitator field notes and structured journal entries from members of the Building Community event three.

Results

As a result of these varied data collection tools, the reporting of the results from this series of Building Community Events will be presented in three parts.

Data Analysis from Building Community Event One

Findings from the first event's data collection and analyses indicated an overwhelming positive participant response in the desire for continued learning and implementation of the concepts of SEL. This analysis prompted event facilitators to continue with the use of Mindfulness techniques as a conduit for learning and growing a trustful, engaged community, as it provided a diverse group of participants with a common experience. Mindfulness, as one of most basic ways of knowing, provided a route to self-knowledge and an individual's construction of identity. These ideas about creating a community align with Palmer's (1998) concept that one must have knowledge of the self before constructing understanding and expressing any compassion for others.

Another aspect of common interest synthesized from the event one data collection was the request for classroom examples of SEL implementation. Lastly, analysis of the participant feedback tools found that while this initial Building Community experience offered them the opportunity to connect with and engage in compelling dialogue with individuals from different

areas of education, feedback also indicated that group members felt a greater sense of self-awareness, focus and agency to meet the learning needs of the students they served.

As a result of the feedback received by respondents from this first Building Community event, facilitators structured the second event in this series (Fall 2015) so that participants would be offered a choice of workshops focusing on the particular interests garnered from the first event's data collection.

Data Analysis from Building Community Event Two

The second in this series of Building Community events, was developed to build upon participant's knowledge of the neuroscience research around SEL and how embedding the use of mindfulness can assist in student's attainment of their learning goals by promoting students' literacy skills, ensuring an environment that fosters and sustains social justice, and meeting the needs of individual learners.

The emerging patterns of respondent feedback for this second event were concentrated on how the event learning could transfer into instructional practices to assist in the learning of marginalized students. For example, many participants spoke of their increased understanding of students' diverse language needs. Teachers need to "distinguish between times when their students are confused about content and times when they are simply having difficulty communicating their understanding," one participant wrote that teachers "need to differentiate lessons in order to accommodate a variety of learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and language abilities." While another participant wrote of a similar problem from the SEL perspective, "Students who have been made to feel stupid for the way they communicate their ideas will not contribute to classroom discussions. On the other hand, students who feel validated and understood become active members in the classroom community." Yet another participant stated "Community flourishes when diversity is celebrated."

One participant, who disclosed he was studying to be a teacher commented that he would "ask his students to name their personal metaphors for learning so he can learn what works best for them." He noted that in the middle and high school classrooms he has had experience in, "so many students learn differently, and if I can show that I care about them as a community, they may just learn better than they would otherwise."

Data Analysis from Building Community Event Three

Structured journal prompts were provided to all participants at the end of the third and final in this series of Building Community events. As a result of many participants reporting that they acquired additional skills that provided them greater internal insight and self-understanding, this finding helped to validate the measure of the effectiveness of the series' content, delivery and participant learning. One participant noted, "I learned how to center myself and focus on the moment in which I was experiencing." Other participant responses centered on the collective experience and value of the learning as a result of mastering through practice the deep listening exercises. One respondent commented, "I now acknowledge the difference between listening just to wait for your turn to speak and actually listening to the person speaking to you." Naming a

personal metaphor for authentic reflective experiences that improve teaching and learning was another common thread found among event participants' journal entries. One person poetically expressed that this learning experience had "led to insights" and described his learning as a wave. "At first, I recoil like I am building up my knowledge, then after a while I crash into the sands of confusion and wash over the lines in the sand and end up more knowledgeable than I was before."

One of the most compelling and transparent disclosures found in the third data collection was from a particularly reflective educator who wrote that he realizes that he "learns like a hammer – breaking apart the knowledge and understanding each piece," but that he teaches "like a pile of Legos® – I give all the pieces and expect students to put it all together." This tension in discrepancy of theory and practice led him to reflect and bring about a new awareness as evidenced through this statement, "I could never learn from myself" thus providing him with critical insight with important implications for his ongoing growth and development as a teacher.

This type of participant's acknowledgement and shared self-insight in identifying one's own preferred learning style and experiences in relation to their actual classroom instruction allowed authors to visibly understand his thoughts and thinking around the events' learning. By making himself vulnerable and publicly challenging his own thinking to the members of this learning group, he allowed for others to validate his authentic entry into the instructional reflective practice and observe the development of the changes that will advance his teaching and his students' learning.

Other findings in the themes from the analysis of participant journal entries for this last session in this series of Community Building events included a common feeling among the community for increased motivation and sense of agency. One teacher commented on the use of mindfulness to improve students' social emotional and academic skills, "I can help kids understand how to listen to their classmates better and understand what they are reading." Another individual spoke more broadly on the "take away" value of this community learning experience and stated, "I can help to be a mentor and show [children] how powerful education and communication are..." Yet another participant noted that the building community event "really encouraged me to a greater awareness of the benefits of literacy and mindfulness for all students. Because of this, I have decided to emphasize and incorporate these ideas in my teaching."

As a result of these community building events, educators demonstrated by their disclosures during participation and feedback a self-motivated willingness to learn and adopt mindfulness practices for improving students' social emotional and academic learning inside their classrooms. Analyses of the data gathered from these events' satisfaction surveys and journal entries indicated that nearly all educators who were in attendance expressed a desire for another Building Community event that would provide them with additional learning opportunities in the use of mindfulness practices as a classroom tool for assisting students in their self-regulation and learning.

The above example of participants' entering into undisciplined, voluntary, community facilitated examination of the "self" in a group environment diverges from Dewey's idea that human reflective processes that lead to learning are highly structured and are activated when an

individual begins to think about and gather additional information needed to solve a problem (Bugg & Dewey, 1934; Dewey, 1938; Rogers, 2002). This contrast in ideas leads authors to construct an alternate theory on the circumstance of when and how individuals come to reflect upon their inner thoughts that lead to the planning of their external actions.

Discussion

The Building Communities initiative was created through the gathering of committed, diverse educational stakeholder groups from K-16 and from the local community. Through participants’ conversations and connections across multiple subject matter disciplines, bridges were created through a shared goal of improving education. These events operationalize the model of Democratic Professionalism (Dzur, 2010), which is a broad-based reform movement that aims to heighten civic engagement and promote active participants in a democratic society. In other words, when educators use their skills as professionals to bring people together around a shared goal for improving and humanizing education, they are acting as bridge-agents connecting the school to the community and the community to the school. SEL was at the center of this initiative and manifested through mindfulness, literacy, and diversity. As part of the event debriefing process, an illustrated evolutionary process was created to assist others in the establishment of a foundation for building a community of committed, diverse educational stakeholders (see Figure 1). The work of the Building Community initiative is ongoing, and these phases represented may be iterative and not necessarily meant to be linear or prescriptive. Groups coming together must create spaces that are designed to fit their particular goals, along with their school and community contexts for learning.



Figure 1: Phases in Community Building

Literacy, mindfulness, social justice, and democracy are also inextricably linked. In order to make informed choices and be active members in a democratic society, literacy skills are required. Literacy must always be understood in context, with attention given to the larger social and political dimensions of that particular context. In a Freirean (1987) sense, all literacy begins with the person’s lived reality and their current understanding of the world through their own words (Freire and Macedo, 1987). This ideal parallels Palmer’s (1998) concept that a person who does not understand the self is unable to understand, reach, and teach others.

Conclusion

In the foreword to *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, Parker Palmer notes that for many of today's leaders, "expert knowledge—and the power that comes with it—has not been joined to a professional ethic, a sense of communal responsibility, or even simple compassion" (Barbezat and Bush, 2014, p. vii). Palmer (1998) argues, "The growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it" (p. 144). This shared practice of open, trustful dialogue that is preceded with the practice of mindfulness, an attention to literacy and diversity, opens people's eyes to see their "truth" or mindful thoughts that guide their personal decisions and actions so they are able to see the "truth" in others and in the circumstances in which they live. In order to humanize education, shared spaces for dialogue and embodied learning are needed. Approaches that celebrate SEL in teaching and learning, approaches which value the development of full human potential, are also needed.

The data collected from this case study suggests that Building Community events, ones designed to create safe and respectful spaces for sharing ideas about teaching and learning, holds potential for improving education and for bridging theory into practice. In addition, individual and group reflection may lead to growth in internal motivation for stakeholders. The discussions themselves, where all voices are heard and valued, can be a springboard for ongoing collaborative efforts needed to build a strong community, a place where new resources can be created and deeper connections can be made.

These Building Community events provide hope; they are encouraging signs that transforming education is not only desirable but also possible on both an individual and group level where people from diverse backgrounds and interests can find common ground. People joining with each other, coupled with a consensus of intention to improve education, can produce real change—or at least a start on positive change. When people come together, such as in these embodied learning experiences provided by the Building Community event series, real progress can be made. In the case of this Building Communities initiative, the overarching focus was on SEL as it is operationalized through mindfulness, literacy, and social justice. The best kind of community involves a true symbiotic relationship between schools and the community, where the schools' needs and the communities' needs are reciprocated. The interactions and conversations act as a springboard for ongoing collaborative efforts needed to build a strong community, a place where new resources and connections can be made.

Creating community takes time; individuals need time to get to know one another and feel affiliated, to create trust, and to discover shared goals. Just as fear can be contagious, courage to transform education and build community can also become contagious. Along with time, the creation of community calls for perseverance, action, and an ongoing commitment from the parties involved. Freire, in his work empowers this idea and calls for people to apply their individual and collective thought processes to transform education by defining the term *conscientization* as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions—developing a critical awareness—so that individuals can take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, 19). Events that work to build community, when designed effectively, hold promise for improving and humanizing education. They involve shared spaces,

shared understandings, and shared intentions – all of which are needed for unlocking the inherent learning potential in all people.

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