

“Blood, Barf, or Beyoncé”—Building Community and Establishing Procedures in the First Six Weeks of School

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Abstract

Previous research has established long-term benefits for children’s successful transition to kindergarten. Yet a majority of the research focuses on teacher and school practices that occur before the first day of school, and less is known about instructional practices teachers use to build community and establish procedures at the beginning of the school year. The current study involves in-depth observations of one highly effective kindergarten teacher during the first six weeks of school. Results indicate the teacher intentionally spent time building relationships with individual students from the moment they arrived. She modeled respect and kindness throughout the day and gradually introduced procedures in an interactive and engaging manner. The study has important implications for practitioners and for future research.

Key Words: classroom community, classroom management, procedures, beginning of the year, teacher–student relationships

Introduction

The first few days of school are critical for children’s positive adjustment to kindergarten. When children begin kindergarten, they enter a whole new world with unfamiliar social, behavioral, and academic expectations (Pianta & Cox, 1999). Previous research has established that children who make a

smooth transition to kindergarten experience long-term cognitive and literacy benefits and are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college (Barnett, 2011; Chetty et al., 2011; Claessens et al., 2009; Quirk et al., 2017). Numerous studies have looked at the transition to kindergarten more broadly. Typically, these focus on how schools engage with parents, caregivers, and children about kindergarten before school begins (Early et al., 2001; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Though the practitioner literature provides numerous suggestions as to how teachers might support children in the classroom during the first weeks of school, there is a limited amount of empirical research studies that investigate in-depth *how* students are welcomed into the classroom community and introduced to procedures in the first weeks of kindergarten. The present study aimed to address this gap in the research through focused observation of one kindergarten teacher during the first six weeks of school.

Theoretical Framework

The present study was informed by the work of Nel Noddings and the ethic of care in education. Based on her belief that children are much more likely to respect adults with whom they have established a relationship characterized by trust and care (Noddings, 2005), we wanted to know more about how teachers set the stage for this in the early days of kindergarten. Through our observations, we were able to focus on both the carer (the teacher) and the cared for (the students) and how the impact of their actions might influence one another as they began getting to know each other. This study is also informed by Noddings' work on moral education (2003) and the impact of teachers who model care and provide intentional opportunities for students to practice the act of care.

Noddings argues the purpose of schooling should go beyond academics and focus on explicitly teaching students to care for themselves and others, as well as plants and animals (Noddings, 2013). She views students as "apprentices of care" as they navigate classroom life. In her view teachers have a moral imperative to discuss relational themes as they arise and problem solve social dilemmas with children collaboratively. This study intended to further explore how caring relationships develop in the context of today's classrooms.

Review of Research

Previous research has established children are afforded multiple benefits when they experience closeness in relationships with teachers. Closeness is generally defined by positive interactions, open communication, and warm feelings between teachers and children (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). Students in relationships higher in closeness were more engaged in their work,

participated in class more actively, exhibited better work habits, demonstrated more prosocial behavior, and tended to like school more (Baker, 2006; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hipson & Séguin, 2016; Klem & Connell, 2004; Ladd et al., 1999). Children who received higher amounts of instructional support from teachers also performed better on language and literacy assessments (Cash et al., 2019).

Conversely, conflict in the teacher–child relationship is often correlated with poor outcomes for children. Children who experience conflict in the teacher–child relationship may exhibit externalizing behaviors, have less self-control, become less engaged in school, and experience difficulty connecting with classmates (Collins et al., 2017; Ferreira et al., 2022; Heatly & Votruba-Drzal, 2017). Some children also perform worse on academic measures and this holds true across their years in elementary school (Li et al., 2022).

At this point, no one disputes the value of teacher–child relationships for young children’s learning and development. However, fewer research studies focus more explicitly on *how* teachers build those relationships at the beginning of the school year. Meltzoff (2001) described how one effective teacher built classroom community in a kindergarten setting. Meltzoff spent 2–3 days per week observing the class from the beginning of the year on. She identified and organized her findings around 10 foundational strands for building community: shared leadership, responsiveness, communication, shared ethics, cooperation as a social process, shared history, shared environment, commitment, wholeness, and interdependence (Meltzoff, 2001). In this classroom, children helped determine classroom rules and consequences and all worked together to care for their classroom space. The teacher spent a great deal of time explicitly teaching social skills and helped children learn to cooperate and negotiate with one another when using classroom materials. Each of the children had a voice but also learned to adjust their language and behavior in response to classmates.

Additional studies have uncovered key teacher behaviors for effectively managing the classroom and keeping students engaged. These include use of eye contact, attention signals, direct commands, and specific praise (Bohn et al., 2004; Briere et al., 2015; Emmer et al., 1980; Hutchings et al., 2007; Joseph et al., 2016; Yassine et al., 2020). Effective classroom managers use pre-corrective statements, explicitly teach expectations and use proximity to redirect off task behavior (Reinke et al., 2018). Teachers who knew students’ names from the moment they entered the classroom and consistently listened to students’ thoughts and needs and responded compassionately were also rated as more effective at classroom management; they also provided students with choice and gave them a role in creating the classroom rules (Bohn et al., 2004). Whereas,

recent research has found teachers who exert more control over students and express more negative affect and emotions are less effective in their teaching (Poulou et al., 2022).

Transitions in effectively managed classrooms were smooth and short, and teachers addressed inappropriate behavior immediately and then quickly moved on (Emmer et al., 1980). Children's literature was used to help students understand routines and procedures, and the class rehearsed routines until they were mastered; effective teachers also intentionally modeled being kind to others and recognized when students were kind to classmates (Bohn et al., 2004). In fact, Leinhardt and colleagues (1987) found effective teachers spent a significant amount of time explaining and modeling procedures and setting expectations on the first day of school. In that study, teachers planned carefully and introduced additional procedures gradually across the first week (Leinhardt et al., 1987).

In contrast to a majority of the studies reviewed which focus primarily on management and procedures in first grade and above, the current study fills a gap in the research by making use of in-depth observations in one kindergarten classroom during the first six weeks of school, which is typically a very challenging time of the year. This study took place in a high needs school where a majority of children came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Previous research suggests children in these settings find the transition to school extremely challenging (Lloyd & Hertzman, 2009; McWayne et al., 2012), and teachers report students from low-income backgrounds sometimes have difficulty following directions and working independently (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). Primary research questions for the present study included:

1. How does a highly effective kindergarten teacher build individual relationships with students and build classroom community during the first weeks of school?
2. How does a highly effective kindergarten teacher facilitate positive peer–peer relationships during the first weeks of school?
3. How does a highly effective kindergarten teacher establish procedures and routines during the first weeks of school?

Method

The present study made use of a qualitative case study design. This was justified given the exploratory nature of the research questions and our desire to describe contextual conditions in detail (Yin, 2003). Data was collected through participant observation and informal, unstructured teacher interviews. The principal investigator spent 20–25 hours per week in one kindergarten

classroom for the first six weeks of school (Aug. 19–Sept. 30). After the first six weeks, the principal investigator spent the remainder of the school year observing an additional 1–2 hours per week. While there, the principal investigator took detailed field notes, capturing a majority of the dialogue that took place between the lead teacher and children throughout the day. This resulted in over 100 pages of notes. Informal interviews with the lead teacher took place across time and were less than 30 minutes each week. These often occurred informally during transitions or planning periods. Notes on what the teacher said were kept in the same notebook mentioned above.

Participants

School

The study was conducted in a Title I-funded, public elementary school in an urban setting in the southeastern United States. The school serves approximately 300 students enrolled in prekindergarten through fifth grade. The average class size was 18, and there were approximately 2–3 classrooms per grade level in kindergarten and above. Roughly 60% of teachers at the school had advanced degrees. Approximately 85% of students lived in poverty based on free or reduced lunch status; 93% were African American, 4% White, and 2% Asian. The school is authorized as an International Baccalaureate (IB) Program and recognized as a Capturing Kids Hearts (CKH; see <https://www.capturingkidshearts.org/>) showcase school for its focus on relationship building practices. CKH is a schoolwide model for character education that involves extensive teacher training and personalized support.

Teachers

The lead teacher, Ms. M, identified as a White female and had been teaching at the school for three years, though she had been teaching elementary school for a total of 13 years. Ms. M was assisted by Ms. K who was an African American female who was pursuing a degree in education and had been working at the school for several years at the time of the study. Ms. M holds a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, Master's in Literacy, and is licensed in Early Childhood Education through the state. She regularly serves as a leader and mentor within her school and for the larger school district. She also regularly supervises student teachers as part of a preservice teacher education program at a local university. Ms. M was selected for this study by the principal investigator based on previous observations in her classroom using the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) standards for effective teaching as a lens (see <https://www.niet.org/>). In these observations, Ms. M's teaching was rated as highly effective, particularly in the domains of

Instruction and Environment. She used a variety of instructional strategies, set clear and rigorous expectations, and kept students engaged throughout the day. She also regularly recognized positive behavior, anticipated students' learning difficulties, and paced instruction appropriately.

Students

The kindergarten class was composed of 19 students on the first day of school. All student names that appear in the results section are pseudonyms; 16 of the students had attended the school's prekindergarten program. Two of the others attended preschool elsewhere, and one was entering school for the very first time that year. Parents identified 42% of the students as female and 58% as male; 89% were African American, and 11% were White. Approximately 74% were from low-income backgrounds based on free and reduced lunch status.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using the constant-comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which involved multiple readings of the data. This method is supported by grounded theory. Grounded theory is an inductive approach to data analysis which allows a researcher to derive themes directly from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, open coding was employed to determine key practices used by the teacher. For example, "says good morning right away" and "gives compliment." Next, axial coding was used to establish connections between the first set of codes produced. For example, "warm start to the day" was an axial code used to bring together the two codes in the previous example. Subsequent readings of the data involved coding materials into each category, often referred to as selective coding. This resulted in the identification of six major themes addressing the first research question, three addressing the second research question, and ten addressing the third. Each category is represented by a separate subheading in the results section.

Trustworthiness was established through regular member checks with the teacher (Birt et al., 2016). Throughout the data collection period, the principal investigator would share observations with the teacher and ask for clarification or confirmation. After coding the data, the teacher was able to confirm results by reflecting on her own perspective and experience and how it was aligned with the researcher's coding scheme and interpretation to triangulate the data.

To promote trustworthiness, the principal investigator made use of prolonged engagement (Henry, 2015) and observed for multiple hours a day on multiple days each week over the first six weeks of school. Beyond that, she continued to observe for several hours one or two times per week for the remainder of the school year. While there she focused on keeping field notes

objective and tended to record only what could be heard or seen. She refrained from using labels in the notes such as “good” or “happy” and instead recorded behaviors like “teacher smiles” and “maintains eye contact” to document positive affect.

Positionality

Data was collected and analyzed by the first author. Both authors are White, cisgender females with multiple years of experience teaching in settings similar to the classroom of focus in this study. Neither are from the city where the research took place, but both have been working in the state for more than 10 years. The principal investigator and first author is a college professor at a four-year, public institution and has been engaged in researching teacher–child relationship quality for the majority of her career. She has completed multiple courses on research methods, observation, and interviewing techniques. Multiple check-ins with the teacher of record helped prevent bias in interpretation of the data.

Results

How Do Effective Teachers Build Individual Relationships With Students During the First Weeks of School?

When investigating relationship building in the classroom, six themes arose from analysis of the observation and interview data. Each is discussed in more detail below, but they include: the teacher engaged in warm, individual interactions with children; modeled kindness and care; and used a variety of relationship-focused routines across the day. She also valued students’ identities, regularly communicated with families, and made consistent use of positive affect and language when interacting with students.

Warm Individual Interactions

Individual interactions between Ms. M and her students were responsive and warm. On the first day of school (and every day thereafter) she made sure she greeted students as they arrived, often saying things like, “I am so glad to see you Jamari. How was your soccer game last night?” She frequently hugged them upon arrival and tried to spend a few minutes with every student. This time was typically characterized by lots of smiling and laughter, which seemed to increase over the weeks as students became more comfortable in their new environment.

Ms. M also made sure students’ basic needs were met first. For example, one of the first questions she asked once they arrived to school was whether they’d had breakfast. If not, she immediately sent them to the school cafeteria to eat.

During morning meeting, if students made requests for a particular song or activity to be repeated, she would happily comply. She also frequently made time to answer student-generated questions during read-alouds and discussions. This was true even when discussing more difficult topics like “code red” drills (for school shootings). These examples illustrate Ms. M’s attempts to build what Noddings (2005) referred to as an “ethic of care.” Students were learning they could trust Ms. M to care for them from the first day of school.

While she had high expectations for all students in regards to their attention and participation, she seemed especially attuned to the needs of two students with autism. She regularly adapted her instruction and eagerly provided them with accommodations. One student wore noise canceling headphones, and the other was allowed to sit where he chose at all times. A third student was repeating kindergarten with Ms. M as his teacher. Despite his academic and behavioral challenges, she tried to promote him as a leader among his peers and often asked him to help or take on additional responsibilities. For example, on the first day of school when she introduced how to sit on the carpet, she asked him to demonstrate it for the class. She said, “Oh, Blake knows how to sit and listen. Can you please show your new friends how we do that in this room?”

Ms. M made multiple attempts to help children feel seen as individuals. Each day the morning meeting included a morning message highlighting a different student and something they could do. For example, one day it said, “I see Kamryn and he likes to ____.” Then Kamryn (or the target child) would decide what went in the second blank (e.g., “jump up and down”). The children were often asked to demonstrate. Other times Ms. M allowed students to bring in special books from home, and she read them aloud to the class.

Modeling

Ms. M served as a strong model for emotion regulation and regularly took advantage of opportunities to demonstrate this for students. When one child became disruptive and unsafe during morning circle, Ms. M remained calm and said, “I will talk to you when I am ready, but right now I am upset” and modeled taking deep breaths to calm herself. In another instance, she told a child, “You are allowed to be mad but not scream.” When students talked out or over her during whole group instruction, she would often respond by saying, “I am feeling frustrated because people are talking over me.” This modeling embodied Noddings’ push for there to be rich dialogue between those who are learning to care for one another (Noddings, 2013).

In general, Ms. M created a climate where mistakes were viewed as opportunities to learn, underlining her belief in the concept of growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). In fact, one of the main consequences for misbehavior involved “time

to practice at recess” where students would meet with her to briefly discuss the issue and practice whatever they had done wrong. For example, one day when Jaden had trouble focusing during whole group instruction, she engaged him in role play during recess which gave Jaden a few minutes to practice sitting appropriately and paying attention to the speaker.

Relationship-Focused Routines

Ms. M made use of a variety of relationship-focused routines across the school day. The morning meeting was structured in a way that began the day positively and provided opportunities to share and connect with one another. Ms. M typically waited to begin the meeting until all students had arrived at school. First the class would sing the “Welcome to School” song by Stephen Fite, and everyone would greet a classmate. Students were then usually asked to rate on a four-point scale how they were feeling, and Ms. M offered words of encouragement. She would quickly scan the room to see how everyone rated themselves and then say things like, “Oh wow, Karlyle is having the best day ever” or “Keevin’s at a two...you can handle this, buddy” while making eye contact with each of them.

Diverse Materials

Ms. M used a variety of materials to make sure students’ identities were represented in the classroom. Students could see themselves reflected in classroom texts and materials. Ms. M had a large classroom library with lots of multicultural literature. In one of the informal interviews, she mentioned it was important to her that her students could see children who looked like them in books. She also displayed multiple photos around the room of the children in the class versus displaying premade, commercially produced posters. Ms. M made multiple attempts to make sure students’ families and identities were valued. Characters in the texts read aloud, pictures on the walls, and music videos often included African Americans and other people of color.

Parent Communication

Ms. M regularly checked in with students’ families and made a positive call home to each individual family before the end of the first week of school. She sent home daily reports on student behavior. Often these focused on sharing kind or helpful acts displayed by students. For example, she wrote in one child’s folder, “I was proud of Samaria today when she hugged a friend after she’d fallen on the playground.” In my informal interview with her, Ms. M described wanting to share positive information with families whenever she could, but she also wasn’t afraid to call or text home when children exhibited a pattern of misbehavior. Sometimes she would even get children to talk to their parents

via phone in the middle of the school day. Once she invited a parent in to see how her child was behaving during whole group lessons. This was followed by a meeting with the teacher, parent, and child. The principal investigator was not present for the meeting, but Ms. M mentioned the three had worked together to discuss strategies for improving the student's attention skills and engagement in class and set a time to check in a few weeks later. Ms. M also regularly invited parents to volunteer in the classroom. For example, on weekly "Welcome Wednesdays," a different parent volunteer would sign up to help monitor the group and read with individual children during reading workshop.

Affect and Language

Overall, Ms. M's affect was positive. She was often seen smiling and laughing. She frequently held hands with students and gave lots of hugs and high fives. She made eye contact with each of them when greeting them and actively listened to their ideas when called on. She maintained high energy and a positive attitude throughout the day, even when things were not going as planned or students misbehaved.

As she worked to get to know students in the first weeks, she often shared about her own family and pets. She frequently gave small compliments to students on items of interest like a fun pair of socks or character on a lunch box. She also made sure students knew they were missed if they came late to school or missed a day. In general, her language in the first few days of school was largely focused on safety and kindness, and she often redirected student behavior in connection to those. For example, "hands are for helping...and hugging" and "walking keeps us safe." This was similar to the teacher in Meltzoff's (2001) study whose class motto was described as "Everyone gets to feel safe and comfortable and do their important work."

How Do Effective Teachers Facilitate Positive Peer–Peer Relationships in the First Six Weeks of School?

Three themes address how the teacher of focus facilitated positive peer relationships. Each is discussed in more detail below; they include how the teacher was intentional and explicit in teaching social skills. She also led multiple team-building activities to help students get to know one another and regularly referred to the class as a family.

Intentionality in Teaching Social Skills

To model effective peer–peer relationships in the first six weeks of school, Ms. M spent time modeling prosocial behaviors. During morning meetings, she had students make eye contact, greet one another back, and she emphasized listening when classmates were speaking. Previous research has identified

the importance of scaffolding these interactions for students. For example, the kindergarten teacher described in Meltzoff's study (2001) had a speaking and a listening chair to define each person's role as children tried to problem solve a situation.

More than once Ms. M said to students, "we only use kind words in this classroom" and recognized students who showed kindness to others. For example, Samaria asked a friend if she was okay after she had fallen, and Ms. M publicly acknowledged her for it. When Devon had trouble finding a space to sit during morning meeting, she told his classmate, "look—you can tell Devon 'there's room right here.'" These examples illustrate Noddings' thoughts (2013) on school as an essential context for learning *how* to care for one another.

Ms. M modeled respect by stating things like "when someone is speaking, we'll be quiet...that's respectful" and emphasized "not laughing when others make mistakes." She even explicitly modeled how to respond when someone asked to be partners. This connects back to Noddings' work (2003, 2013) on the need for teachers to demonstrate how to care for others. Personal space was addressed by reading a simple book about "being a space saver versus a personal space invader." She also read the children's book, *Decibella and Her 6-Inch Voice* by Julia Cook to discuss speaking at an appropriate volume. Following the read-alouds, she consistently used language from the books to redirect and/or reinforce children's use of the behaviors introduced. It was clear Ms. M understood her role in building students' personal competencies or "the something other" parents hope to see develop in young children as they progress through school (Redding, 2014).

Team Building

During morning meeting and throughout the day, Ms. M facilitated several group games and partner activities. She used a strategy called "Stand up, Hand up, Pair up" to help children find a partner and encouraged students to thank one another once the partner activity came to an end. When students were sharing, she taught them to use a hand signal when they agreed with the speaker or could connect to their story. For example, when Benny told a story about her love for playing with her dog, Ms. M modeled using the "me too" hand signal to indicate she also had a dog at home that she enjoyed playing with.

Class as a Family

Ms. M often spoke about the class as a family and highlighted their interdependence. When a child was slow to respond or needed redirection, she often said things like "we are waiting on you, don't let your class down." When students used a four-point rating scale to indicate their moods, she told classmates to "check on friends who rated themselves a two or one...you might need to

build them up today.” After introducing and practicing a new routine, she generally rated the class as a whole on how well they followed procedures and expressed their need to work together to improve the next day. Also, students who completed work early were often asked to “help a friend.”

When one student was causing a distraction in the middle of morning meeting, Ms. M told her “you are not being fair to your classmates.” Meltzoff (2001) described this as responsiveness, or the idea that “we” should come before “me” in a classroom community. In the most extreme cases, Ms. M sent students away from the group for a few minutes and told them they “weren’t welcome” in the circle if they were being unsafe (rolling on floor, kicking others, etc.). Admittedly, this practice sounds harsh and is generally discouraged, but Ms. M always welcomed the student back after a few minutes. During an interview she admitted this strategy was typically used as a last resort. This example highlights the complexity of teachers’ decision making when it comes to meeting the needs of the larger group versus those of an individual student and how sometimes those two things are in conflict.

How Do Effective Teachers Establish Procedures During the First Six Weeks of School to Enable Children’s Positive Experiences With and Success in the Classroom?

Ten themes address how the teacher of focus established procedures during the first six weeks of school. Each is discussed in more detail below; they include: Ms. M provided scaffolding and modeling when introducing routines and gently redirected students as needed. She provided student choice, kept them engaged, and developed procedures with student input. She demonstrated strong planning skills and intentionality in her teaching and regularly explained the purpose behind activities.

Scaffolding

Ms. M began establishing procedures and provided scaffolding from the first day of school. She intentionally kept routines simple and then built in additional steps on subsequent days. For example, after they were greeted on the first day, students were simply asked to hang up their backpacks, walk to an assigned seat, and begin working on a simple coloring page. The next day an additional step in the morning routine involved having students sign in by writing their names on a large piece of chart paper. As students became more comfortable with these initial steps, the morning activities became more complex. Rather than coloring, students were eventually allowed to choose a morning bin of manipulatives (unifix cubes, chain links, pattern blocks, etc.) to work with quietly at their table. In the first weeks of school, students were assigned seats at small

tables. In later weeks, they were provided with more flexible seating options, like sitting on the floor or using bean bags or wobbly stools.

Gentle Redirection

In general, when students were off task, Ms. M redirected behavior positively and quickly moved on. She would often simply call a student's name to get their attention or use proximity. One student with autism was regularly asked to sit near her because he had a strong need to touch her to stay focused. She frequently held his hand or allowed him to fidget with her clothing which seemed to soothe and interest him. Ms. M focused on telling students what to do, instead of telling them what not to do, for example, using commands like "please walk" rather than "don't run" or "we are listening" versus "no talking."

When students had trouble saying goodbye to their families at arrival, Ms. M and her assistant worked hard to redirect the student's attention. One young girl, Denaya, cried every morning for the first two weeks. Ms. M and her assistant addressed this by having Denaya help out with small classroom tasks like cleaning tables, laying out materials, or collecting items from students' backpacks. Often by the time Denaya completed the task, she had stopped crying and was ready to begin the day.

Student Choice

Ms. M worked hard to give students choice across the school day. When Damien was struggling to clean up his materials, Ms. M asked him if he wanted to pick up the red blocks first or the green. She was also respectful to students even when they caused distractions or said hurtful things. Often she addressed students individually and quietly. When addressing the group, she rarely raised her voice and instead said things like "I am not going to talk over you; I am waiting for you to have a calm body and a quiet voice." When individual students became overly disruptive to the group, Ms. M stayed calm and asked them to "take a break" at their seat, or the teaching assistant would take the student on a walk around the school.

Ms. M eventually allowed them to choose their own seats after describing how much she appreciated that right as an adult in staff meetings. She described students' behavior as a choice, too, and explained it was their choice to follow rules or not. She empowered students as leaders when allowing them to model for the class: "I like the way you did that, Samaria. Can you show the class?" When students had trouble sharing or working together, she told them to "be problem solvers" and work it out. She asked questions to facilitate these problem solving sessions rather than jumping in with solutions. For example, when two students were having trouble sharing manipulatives in their morning tub, she sent them to the carpet and told them to figure out how they could

better work together. Sometimes when the two children could not solve it on their own, she sent classmates over to help or presented the problem to the whole class for suggestions. Only when students had trouble generating solutions did she offer her own.

Modeling and Guided Practice

Ms. M spent an extraordinary amount of time modeling procedures in the first weeks of school. She began by demonstrating what students should do and then had a student to try and asked his/her classmates “what they noticed” about their behaviors. For example, on the first day of school, Ms. M took the students on a “little field trip to the bathroom.” She demonstrated how they should ask permission to go (using a hand signal), walked quietly over to the restroom, closed the door, flushed the toilet, and washed her hands. She even demonstrated how to wait appropriately if another child was already in the bathroom. After the first demonstration, she allowed students to ask questions and then did it again but asked students to tell *her* what should be done next at each step. Finally, a student was asked to demonstrate, and classmates pointed out what their classmate did correctly.

Sometimes procedures were introduced with short, teacher-created books. For example, before learning about fire drill or lockdown procedures, the students heard about them from short stories. Once the procedure was introduced, Ms. M took simple photos of students completing each step and displayed these on “Standard Operating Procedures” (SOP) charts. When students had trouble following procedures, they were often referred back to the chart. Sometimes Ms. M would playfully complete the procedure inappropriately and have students identify what she had done wrong. This was engaging for students because they thought it was funny.

Similarly, when introducing a new set of materials, Ms. M worked with children to create a “yes/no” chart describing what should and shouldn’t be done with the materials. On the second day of school, they made a chart like this for crayons. The next few times the class used crayons, she reviewed the chart. Sometimes she even read the “no” side in a deep, funny voice. The charts were driven by student ideas and were developed organically. For example, on the third day, when a student intentionally broke a crayon, she added “breaking” on the “no” side of the chart.

When Ms. M began working with small groups, she taught procedures that built students’ independence and allowed her to stay focused on small group instruction. Students were playfully taught they should only interrupt her in the event someone was bleeding or vomiting or if an important visitor “like the famous singer, Beyoncé” came in the room. In later weeks, when students tried to

interrupt the group, she would point to the chart and redirect them by asking, “Is it blood, barf, of Beyoncé?” Most would quickly return to what they were supposed to do given their issue did not fall into one of those three categories.

Throughout the first weeks, as she introduced new routines and procedures, Ms. M emphasized progress over perfection and worked with students to set goals for improving performance, which is connected to principles of growth mindset or the idea that with effort and dedication one can improve (Dweck, 2006). Beginning in the second week of school, Ms. M worked with the class to determine a class goal. The first was “I will control my body even when I am upset.” Then, the class brainstormed solutions, which included “ask the person to stop” and “ignore.” Finally, the class worked together to suggest consequences. They came up with things like “sitting out” and “calling home.” Students were reminded of the goal across the day and referred back to the poster when receiving a consequence.

Authenticity

Ms. M provided her students with authentic reasons for behaving appropriately. Examples included “put your name on your paper so we know whose backpack it should go home in” and “sit on your bottom so the people behind you can see.” Every now and then she explained how she also had to follow rules as an adult and empathized with students who were having difficulty. For example, she told them how she was known for being late to family events and described how it often upset her brother and father because they would have to wait for her.

Encouragement

Given the emphasis on progress and growth over perfection (Dweck, 2006), Ms. M was quick to notice and acknowledge students behaving appropriately or those trying to turn behavior around. Even children who were sent away from morning circle for disruptive behavior were often quickly praised for turning things around and were then welcomed back to the group once their behavior improved.

Ms. M also picked her battles in the early weeks and chose to ignore minor infractions or disruptions to keep the activity moving along smoothly. For example, if a child in the back was rolling on the carpet but otherwise listening, she did not address it. Similarly, when a child shouted out an answer instead of raising their hand, often she focused on their enthusiasm instead of admonishing them for speaking out of turn. She often referred to a student’s first offense as “just a mistake” and reiterated “we all make mistakes.”

Engagement

Students seemed engaged by Ms. M's style and delivery. She presented content and instructions using a genuinely enthusiastic tone of voice. Her interactions with students were playful, and her responses to their comments and questions were often very animated. She worked hard to get and keep their attention making use of a variety of attention signals. For example, when she said "hands on top" the students would reply with "means we stop" while putting their hands on their heads. Even when she taught them this signal, she made it feel like a game. Occasionally she would speak to students in a whisper to change things up and make them "really have to listen." She also frequently incorporated movement activities and dance (or "shake") breaks.

Active Listening and Observation

Ms. M made use of teacher observation and strong listening skills to determine students' needs. She seemed to understand children's innate desire to communicate and be seen. She taught them to use finger waves in the hallway when they saw siblings, friends, or other familiar adults. During morning meeting she gave students time to talk with a partner since they wouldn't all get a turn to share with the group each day. To reinforce children behaving appropriately, she took photos of them. These were sometimes hung in the room and/or sent home for families to see. She often said things like "I am calling on Curtis because he raised his hand" to encourage others to follow suit. Other times students were given a special star necklace to wear when they were doing something she wanted others to emulate, for example staying focused during independent reading. Every now and then she used food to reinforce appropriate behavior. For example, candy or goldfish crackers were given to individual students who stayed on task during writing workshop or walked quietly in the hallway. In a follow-up interview, Ms. M acknowledged use of food was not always ideal or practical but thought it did occasionally motivate students. While she praised individual efforts and behaviors, she also worked hard to encourage and reward the group's success. Sometimes she would challenge the group to "work together to come to the carpet faster tomorrow."

She was particularly in tune with student needs on the first day of school, anticipating many of the students' questions and addressing them early on. Several asked about lunch and recess during their first 30 minutes in the classroom, so Ms. M's initial morning meeting included a brief description of the plan for the day so students were reassured she had made time for their favorite activities.

Clear Expectations Developed Democratically

Procedures were not just established by the adults in the room; Ms. M allowed students to provide input and developed procedures democratically. In

the beginning weeks of school, Ms. M worked with the class to develop a social contract versus presenting students with a set of rules she had come up with on her own. This began with multiple discussions on how the children wanted to be treated and resulted in four main ideas. It was also informed by parent suggestions Ms. M had collected during open house, which took place just a few days before school began. A majority of parents attended as it was their first opportunity to meet the teacher. They were asked to respond to two questions: (1) What do you want your child to learn in kindergarten? and (2) What character traits do you want your child to exhibit while at school? Parents responded on a notecard, and Ms. M read a few aloud to children each day to generate ideas. She reported her students “really appreciated hearing what their parents had to say.” The resulting social contract included a promise to be “learners,” to be “respectful and responsible” and to have “fun.” Once they decided on these, the whole class celebrated by eating “social contract salad” where a different fruit represented each of the four promises. Children signed the contract to demonstrate their commitment to obey it, and it was regularly referred to in transitions and in connection to student behavior. For example, “I see Talia following the social contract and being a learner by raising her hand.” Similarly, when students misbehaved, they were often asked to reflect on their behavior and consider whether it violated the promises made. For example, when Emy pushed a classmate while lining up, she was reminded she had “promised to be respectful in the classroom” and was asked “is it respectful to push?”

Planning and Intentionality

While it was clear Ms. M was very intentional and often stopped to review written lesson plans in transitions, she also followed the lead of her students. She regularly reflected on practice out loud (“well that didn’t go as planned”) and with her teaching assistant, and actively monitored and adjusted the plan throughout the day/week. Ms. M also frequently jotted her reflections directly on a printed copy of the weekly lesson plans. She also made an intentional effort to keep her language focused on learning, which included simple things such as referring to the students’ seats as “learning spaces.” Their writing journals and materials were also kept in individual plastic bins that were referred to as students’ “offices.” One day when students were learning phonics, she took out bubbles and blew them over their head describing them as “thinking bubbles” to help the children come up with answers. She instructed the students to “let them fall into your brains” and not to get up and chase them.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain in-depth insight into how one effective teacher developed classroom community and established procedures during the first six weeks of kindergarten. Results indicate the teacher facilitated warm, nurturing interactions with individual students across the day and used a variety of relationship-focused routines. Research has established through daily interactions with children, teachers create psychologically supportive environments that communicate they know and value their students (Longobardi et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2012; Wang, et al., 2020; Williford et al., 2013).

While child outcomes were not measured in the present study, the results support previous research on the value of individual teacher–child and peer relationships for children’s learning and success in school. Closeness in teacher–child relationships is associated with a variety of child outcomes and is thought to mitigate children’s risk for adverse experiences later in school (Hughes, 2011; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1992; Pianta et al., 1995). In fact, a meta-analysis of over 60 studies found a positive classroom climate is consistently associated with children’s social competence and academic performance (Wang et al., 2020).

Furthermore, research has documented that children’s connectedness to classmates is associated with their satisfaction in school (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). In general, multiple studies have found children who have stronger relational ties in the classroom tend to perform better academically, demonstrate less disruptive behaviors and are more engaged in their learning (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Burchinal et al., 2002; Hosan & Hoglund, 2017; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Yassine et al., 2020).

In regards to supporting peer relationships, the teacher of focus in the present study regularly referred to the class as a school family and intentionally planned opportunities for students to get to know one another. Research on culturally responsive classrooms emphasizes the need for teachers to build caring communities where students can take risks, laugh, and trust one another (Brown, 2004). In these classrooms teachers explicitly discuss the value of relationships and help students make connections between their interests and backgrounds (Bondy et al., 2007).

The current study confirms previous research on the importance of teaching procedures gradually over the first few days (Bohn et al., 2004; Reinke et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2012). Emmer et al.’s study (1980) found effective teachers introduced only the most salient procedures (bathroom, getting a drink of water, etc.) on the first day of school so as not to overwhelm students. Our findings also highlight the importance of involving students in decision

making and shared leadership (Wells & Reeder, 2022). The teacher of focus in Meltzoff's study (2001) explicitly told students they would all be teachers that year, and the teacher identified herself as a learner alongside her students. Shadiow (2009) describes how engaging in this work can build shared trust because it provides an opportunity for the teacher and students to coconstruct the first days of school.

One limitation of the study is that it describes only one teacher. However, given its singular focus, the principal investigator was able to describe the teacher's actions in rich detail. Although the generalizability of the current results must be established through future research, the present study contributes to the body of evidence on the importance of the first days of school in setting the tone for a positive and productive school year. Future research should investigate this topic with a larger population of teachers to see how prevalent some of the identified practices are in other classrooms. Furthermore, future studies might also investigate how use of the identified practices relates to child outcomes later in the school year.

It is our great hope that the detail provided in this study could inform practitioners seeking to improve their practice as they prepare for the next incoming class of students. It was clear from interviews with Ms. M she put a lot of time and thought into her planning. To be most effective, teachers need significant time to plan for the first weeks of school intentionally and thoughtfully. Teachers identified planning time as one of the most important factors in meeting students' individual needs (Daniel & Lemons, 2018) and research has found it critical for addressing disruptive student behavior (Reinke et al., 2014). Lack of adequate planning time is one of the top reasons teachers leave the profession (Podolsky et al., 2016).

Teachers should be given the autonomy to focus on relationship building before jumping headfirst into content. Teachers should also give themselves plenty of time to introduce classroom procedures and provide lots of opportunities for students to practice routines early in the year. Furthermore, teachers might reflect on small steps they could take to develop a more democratic classroom, for example, having students help determine the classroom rules or decide how many people might fit in each play center to keep everyone safe.

Meeting a class of incoming kindergartners requires a lot of planning, since students enter kindergarten with a variety of experiences with formal schooling. Given that some of the students have never set foot in a formal classroom, kindergarten teachers must work especially hard to establish new procedures while also developing a safe and warm classroom environment so students feel comfortable and ready to learn.

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