

How Can Educators Bring About Emotionally Positive Classrooms?

Promising First Steps from the Peaceful Schools Institute

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There are many benefits to creating emotionally positive classrooms and schools. For example, research has shown positive emotional classrooms lead to gains in academic achievement, greater teacher retention, decreased rates of violence, a lower drop-out rate, and fewer students engaging in risky behaviors (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterie, Fleming & Hawkins, 2004; Cohen & Geier, 2010). School climate research has concluded that in positive emotional climates, students feel a sense of safety, belonging and “connectedness,” and are motivated to excel (Cohen & Geier, 2010). Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recognized the importance of emotionally positive schools when he stated that “a positive school climate is the foundation” to academic achievement and “absolutely critical” to the success of our nation’s students and schools (Duncan, 2010 & 2011).

This line of research inspired the primary author to create the Peaceful Schools Institute (PSI) in 2005. The goal of the Institute is to bring about emotionally positive classrooms in elementary and middle schools through teacher-led implementation of social-emotional learning and conflict resolution skills and strategies.

Efficacy was chosen as the focus of the current study because there is a rich body of research that suggests higher teacher efficacy leads to higher rates of experimentation and success with new strategies, more persistence when facing obstacles to practice implementation, and ultimately better student learning outcomes (Bandura 1977; Bandura 1997; Pajares, 1996; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). According to researchers Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, and Hoy (1998) teacher efficacy, in general, is defined as “the teacher’s belief in his or her capability to organize and execute a course of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context.”



In the current study we wanted to learn whether teachers’ efficacy increased as a result of participation in the Institute. Moreover, we wanted to learn about the timing of efficacy development. Would we see increases in efficacy immediately after participation in the summer Institute? Or, would we have to wait until teachers had a chance to practice their new skills when they returned to their classrooms, several weeks later? Previous studies have suggested that we would have to wait, because efficacy levels improve when teachers experience “mastery” by successfully applying their new skills with students in the classroom (Bandura, 1997). However, we assert that the experiential nature of the Institute allows for classroom simulations and would result in increased efficacy immediately following the Institute.

Description of the Peaceful Schools Institute

The PSI is an 18-hour professional development experience for teachers, school counselors, and school administrators working in Pre K-8 settings. The Institute takes place over three consecutive days, and includes 6 instructional hours per day. The length of training allows for adequate time to present content and to facilitate an agenda comprised

of active and experiential learning. The arrangement of three consecutive days allows for the creation of an immersion experience, during which a supportive professional development community is created and shared by educators from different schools.

Institute Goals

The Institute was designed to accomplish the following, a) increase teachers’ social-emotional (SE) and conflict resolution (CR) skills, b) help teachers instruct their students in SE and CR skill development, and c) establish emotionally positive classrooms and schools. As mentioned above, an initial step in this process was to increase teachers’ feelings of efficacy with regard to creating emotionally positive classrooms, through the implementation of key SE and CR practices.

Teachers’ social-emotional (SE) efficacy. For the purposes of the Institute, SE efficacy is a form of teacher efficacy that pertains to confidence in using SE and CR skills within their classrooms, and influencing their students to do the same. We created a questionnaire to measure SE efficacy in areas that were cov-

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ered in the institute. Specifically, the questionnaire asked teachers to respond to the following statements, "I feel confident that I can: control disruptive behaviors in the classroom; work successfully with the most difficult students; change students' moods so that they are ready for learning; get students to stop and think before they act; get students to work out peer conflicts; get students to include other students who are different; prevent students from teasing one another, and prevent bullying school-wide."

Social-Emotional (SE) and conflict resolution (CR) skills education. SE and CR skills education covers overlapping content and skill sets, as well as a broad spectrum of teacher and student practices. Researcher Tricia S. Jones (Jones & Compton, 2003) defines CR education as the teaching of "processes, practices and skills" that bring about nonviolent conflict resolution and "create safe and welcoming communities" (p. 19). Researchers Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg and Walberg (Zins et al, 2004) define SE learning as "the process through which children enhance their ability to integrate thinking, feeling and behaving to achieve important life tasks" (p. 4). Recent studies in neuroscience have demonstrated the ways in which moods, moderated by SE skills, impact student attention, cognition, memory and engagement in the classroom (Kusche & Greenberg, 2006). Examples of CR and SE skills introduced at the Institute are: emotional awareness, expression and self-control; active listening; the S.T.A.R.

(Stop, Think, Act, Reflect) problem-solving method; cool-down strategies; conflict de-escalation; empathy; perspective-taking; and classroom meetings. A comprehensive review of the CR and SE research literature revealed strong evidence to show that well-implemented CR and SE programs lead to students experiencing increased feelings of "connectedness" to school, improved self-control, and improved academic achievement. Additionally, evidence shows that programs can lower suspension rates, decrease disciplinary referrals and aggression, therefore significantly improving school climate (Jones, 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, Walberg, 2004).

The focus during the Institute is on the development of *teachers'* knowledge, attitudes, and skill levels in five specific SE and CR content units as follows: a) Creating Safety and Community Through Social-Emotional Learning, b) Facilitating Classroom Meetings, c) Utilizing Positive Discipline Strategies, d) Teaching and Using Classroom-based Conflict Resolution Strategies, and e) Teaching and Using Bullying Prevention and Intervention Strategies. These units include common elements of many research-based CR and SE programs, and were chosen by the primary author based on their role in promoting a positive classroom climate and fostering a positive attachment to school. The instructor presents a brief theoretical rationale for each content area, but most of the time is allotted to the presentation and practice of core skills.

Pedagogy: Process and Practices of Experiential Learning

The process and practices of experiential learning methods are applied during the Institute. We hypothesized these methods would cause immediate development of teachers' SE efficacy.

Process. The process of experiential learning includes four components: 1) engagement in an experience 2) reflection on the experience to formulate new meaning (the "learning") 3) generalization of the learning to ascertain relevance to various contexts and 4) application of the learning to their next experience (Kolb & Fry, 1975; Kolb, 1984). This process is not a simple linear model, but a spiral one, in which subsequent experiences lead to deeper levels of understanding and learning (Kolb, 1984). During the Institute, the instructor uses experiential learning to guide educators through sequenced SE and CR activities that provide them with a first-hand, "felt" experience of caring, belonging, community, and connectedness- key qualities of an emotionally positive classroom. The instructor also engages educators in experiencing the SE and CR practices and skills they are to use in their classrooms. Through these experiences, educators explore their personal feelings, attitudes, values, and beliefs, deepening their self-awareness of the content and its value. This learning environment fosters respect, trust, collaboration, and creative problem-solving, which are used to build and sustain a transformative professional learning community. In this context, educators reflect on the potential impact of the Institute content on their teaching practices and on the development of their students.

Practices. The Institute includes a variety of experiential and active learning activities, such as: ice breakers and games, feeling check-ins and check-outs, pair-shares and small group discussions, group contracting, self-assessment, modeling, mental mapping, brainstorming, gestures and movement, storytelling, role-playing, collaborative planning, and guided skill practice with feedback.

An especially important experiential practice is activity debriefing. Activity debriefing invites teachers to challenge their perceptions and to develop new insights based on their new experience. During the debriefing of activities, teachers are encouraged to make meaning of the activity vis-à-vis SE learning and CR objectives. Participants are frequently





asked, “What insights have you gained from experiencing this activity as a participant? How will these insights impact the way you use this activity in your own classroom with your own students? In what way would you alter this activity to make it developmentally appropriate for your students? How might you apply this activity in the classroom to meet SE and CR learning objectives?” and “How can this activity be used to create or sustain an emotionally safe classroom?” Finally, teachers are invited to brainstorm solutions to potential challenges that might arise when they implement various activities and practices in their classrooms. In short, teachers learn to imagine how their personal thoughts and feelings, as well as the thoughts and feelings of their students, will impact their work back in the classroom. In the current study we hypothesized that the joint effects of experiential learning and the metacognitive processing that takes place during activity debriefing would bring about immediate development of SE efficacy.

Method

We addressed the following research questions: a) Does the PSI help educators develop increased SE efficacy? and b) Does SE efficacy increase immediately following the Institute? Our hypothesis was that participation in the PSI would help educators develop increased social-emotional efficacy immediately in each of eight targeted areas related to the Institute’s objectives: a) Controlling disruptive behaviors in the classroom, b) Working successfully with the most difficult students, c) Changing student’s moods so that they are

ready for learning, d) Getting students to stop and think before they act, e) Getting students to work out peer conflicts, f) Getting students to include other students who are different, g) Preventing students from teasing one another, and h) Preventing bullying school-wide.

Participants. One hundred fifteen educators from PreK-8 schools within the Archdiocese of Philadelphia School District participated in one of three PSIs during the summer of 2011. The sample consisted of classroom teachers, subject area teachers, support staff, principals, and one counselor. All subjects voluntarily registered for the Institute.

Procedures. Our research design allowed for two sets of comparisons between treatment conditions and control conditions. We had two cohorts of participants. Cohort 1 attended the Institute in June, cohort 2 in July and August. For the purposes of the study, assignment to groups was virtually random. Subjects were invited to participate in this study through completing an online survey prior to their participation in the Institute. Participants in cohort 1 ($n = 40$) took a pretest and a post-test and were considered as treatment group only. Participants in cohorts 2 ($n = 49$) took the pretest twice, separated in time by about two weeks. Then they received the treatment and took the post-test. Because we had three times of measurement for cohort 2, they served as their own control group.

We created a questionnaire to measure teacher social-emotional (SE) efficacy. The format was modeled after the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (Bandura, 2006) and the Teacher Sense

of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001). We established content validity by applying the Delphi technique, eliciting input from a panel of experts in the field of social-emotional learning. Inter-item consistency was strong (Cronbach’s Alpha = .93) and test-retest reliability was acceptable for an instrument of this type ($r = .76$, $p < .0005$). A factor analysis showed that all eight items loaded on a single factor and accounted for 68% of the variation in scores, on average. Thus, we concluded that teacher’s SE efficacy is a uni-dimensional construct with strong factor validity. Readers can contact the primary author for a copy of the questionnaire.

Results

The research design allowed a comparison of cohort 1 (treatment) and cohort 2 (control) between observations 1 and 2. And, for cohort 2 it allowed a comparison between observation 1 and 2 (control) and observation 2 and 3 (treatment).

Cohort 1 O₁ X O₂

Cohort 2 O₁ O₂ X O₃

The first comparison showed significant gains in SE efficacy for cohort 1, treatment condition (gain = .80, $s.e. = .22$) but not for cohort 2, the control condition, (gain = .20, $s.e. = .19$). The second comparison showed no significant change for cohort 2 from time 1 to time 2, during the control condition (gain = .20, $s.e. = .19$), but significant gain from time 2 to time 3, the treatment condition (gain = 1.00, $s.e. = .17$).

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Discussion and Conclusions

Our hypothesis was supported. We found greater gain on SE efficacy for the treatment condition than for the control condition. Because assignment to group was random, we conclude that the gains for the treatment condition were due to participation in the Institute. We assert that the experiential and transformative nature of the Institute, as outlined in the Pedagogy section, provides a powerful learning experience for educators such that positive increases in efficacy can occur even before educators try out their new skills in the classroom. More specifically, we contend that the activity debriefing component of the Institute is key to increasing teachers' confidence. The questions we asked during the activity debriefing sections encourage teachers to process how they think and feel about the activities and to imagine using them in their own classrooms. Furthermore, they give teachers an opportunity to think through and troubleshoot possible barriers to success. We believe this formal process of reflecting on experiences and processing insights goes a long way toward increasing teachers' SE efficacy.

This study underscores the importance of experiential training and SE learning among

the teachers themselves. Teachers who experience the Institute gain particular strategies they can use in the classroom. Yet perhaps more important for creating classrooms and schools with positive emotional climates is the transformative effect on the teachers themselves as they become more emotionally mature, aware, and "tuned in." In future studies, we plan to add questions about teachers' own SE experiences. In addition to the skills and techniques teachers gain in the institute, we believe they also become more self-aware and more deeply in touch with their feelings and become more aware of how their feelings impact their behavior. Moreover, we believe they become better at trusting their feelings to guide their behavior. These hunches will be examined empirically in future studies.

Strengths and limitations of study. The experimental design of the study is a clear strength. By virtue of pretesting, post-testing, treatment conditions, control conditions, and random assignment, the study possesses strong internal validity and thus, allows for causal inference. External validity or generalizability of the study is somewhat limited. All participants in the 2011 Institute were Catholic school educators from suburban schools. Catholic school educators may possess spe-

cific characteristics which makes it difficult to generalize from their experience to the experience of educators who work in public or charter schools. In addition, most educators who participated in the Institute did so voluntarily, and were inherently interested in the Institute content. Positive outcomes from the study could be inflated due to the particularly receptive participants. However, some educators may have participated mainly to earn required professional development hours, or because they were requested to attend by their principal. Those who were requested to attend may represent those members of the population who are less interested and motivated by the Institute content.

Directions for future research. Educators who participated in this study will continue to be followed so that their efficacy levels can be measured after they have had the chance to try out their new SE and CR skills and practices with their students. It is hypothesized that teachers will experience even greater increases in efficacy levels after they have been able to successfully use new skills and practices in their classrooms. However, if teachers try new skills and do not assess their efforts as successful, they may experience a decrease in efficacy. It will be interesting to see if any

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patterns emerge among teachers whose efficacy increases and those whose efficacy remains constant or decreases. Factors that impact outcomes may be related to individual subjects or to their environment. For example, a teacher's state of physical health may impact their feelings of efficacy overall, as might implementation barriers that prevent them from using a particular SE or CR skill in the classroom

Implications for practitioners. There are many educators who, like us, are interested in providing experiential programs to teachers for professional development. We encourage our colleagues to include a reflective component to their program along the lines of our "activity debriefing" component which will help participants to develop a deeper self-knowledge of SE and CR content. Debriefing also encourages educators to imagine themselves using SE and CR skills in the classroom to meet targeted learning objectives, and to anticipate and troubleshoot predictable obstacles. We believe this process will help teachers develop efficacy on an accelerated time table.

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*"If we learn to open our hearts,
anyone, including the people who
drive us crazy, can be our teacher."*

— Pema Chodron