ETC 693 Master Project

Reflective Professional Development: Creating a Caring Classroom Community

Rebecca A. Havenstein

Submitted to the

Graduate School of Education

City University of Seattle

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master in Teaching

I give permission to City University to store and use this MIT Project for teaching purposes.

Submitted by _Rebecca A. Havenstein_   _March, 14, 2020_
          Rebecca A. Havenstein   Date

Approved by
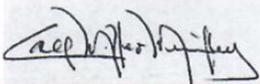
_____   _____
      Corll Miller Morrissey, M.Ed.   March 6, 2020

Approved by

_____   _____
      Vicki Butler, Ed.D.

March 12, 2020

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my great appreciation to my husband and daughters for their enduring support, encouragement and patience through this project. Thank you also to my mentor teacher who showed me what a caring classroom looks like. Her ongoing love for her profession and her students is clearly visible in everything she says and does in her classroom. Her willingness to share these insights with me has profoundly changed me.

I would like to express my gratitude to the amazing faculty of City University. Especially my research advisor, Corll Morrissey and my field supervisor, Susan Gray. Corll Morrissey's ability to ask the right questions and provide guided insight sent me on this path of a reflective professional development action research project. Susan Gray's positive coaching throughout my tenure has helped shape me into the future educator I want to be.

I would like to thank my previous mentor teacher who encouraged me to observe and seek out educators that would inspire and assist me. It is this encouragement that enabled me to land in another caring classroom community that I wanted to learn to emulate. Finally, a thank you to my students with whom I had the opportunity and grace to learn how I could facilitate a caring classroom community. It is with you that I found my teacher voice.

Abstract

This professional development (PD) focused on learning, implementing, and reflecting upon language/communication changes to determine if they aided in the creation of a caring classroom community. The primary participant in this study was me with assistance provided by mentor teachers and students. The intervention focused on three communication/language changes incorporated into interactions with students. Personal journals were kept tracking goal language/communication, steps the researcher took, reflections on encounters and feedback received from others. Findings showed language/communication changes aided in the creation of a caring classroom community.

Introduction

My goal as an educator is to create a caring classroom where students feel safe to be vulnerable to express their whole selves. With this goal in mind I set out to understand what attributes make a caring classroom community. Observations of multiple classrooms and research demonstrated that there are many aspects to creating a caring classroom community. Two key areas of interest to me were social and emotional learning and relationship-building.

I had the opportunity to perform my student teaching in a classroom where the teacher focused heavily on creating this caring classroom community where students felt safe. Upon further observation I noted that she embraced social and emotional learning and built strong relationships with her students and between students in the classroom. One of the key tools she used to accomplish this was specific and intentional language and a warm positive communication style. This is where I chose to focus my professional development.

Dilemma (or Problem Statement)

Through observations of multiple classrooms, I noted a difference in classroom communities. Some classrooms demonstrated a sense of community and caring for one another. Academic struggles and successes were shared. Student work was proudly displayed. Students were actively supporting one another through encouragement and by helping each other with problems they faced. Other classrooms demonstrated a sense of chaos and sadness. Student work was not displayed. Students spent time tattling on each other. Negative words were used to describe one another. Students were not encouraged to assist one another.

I found the teachers in each of these rooms demonstrated different communication styles and used different language to interact with their students. Teachers in the caring classroom expressed genuine interest in their students. Their tone was positive and inviting. They

intentionally acknowledged all students. They greeted their students at the door. These teachers

worked to communicate positive behavior traits they wanted students to emulate and were

respectful in redirecting students as necessary. They encouraged students to share. The language

these teachers used was positive and encouraging.

Teachers in the other classrooms seemed disinterested or bothered by their students.

Their tone was negative and condescending. These teachers did not greet their students at the

door. They didn't appear to focus on positive traits instead highlighting adverse behaviors by

using sharp tones to redirect students in loud and very visible ways. The language these teachers

used was negative and disheartening. I chose to focus my reflective professional development on

learning how to adapt my communication style and language to lead the classroom in ways that

create a caring community where students feel safe to be vulnerable to express their whole self.

Rationale

Classrooms can be safe places where students feel valued and where teamwork and

learning are encouraged. Or they can be places of discord where students do not feel safe and

learning takes a back seat to behavioral issues and conflict among students. The Child

Development Project defined a caring classroom community as one where students feel valued

and connected to others (Lewis, Schaps, and Watson, 1996). The Collaborate for Academic,

Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identified relationship-building as one of their key

competencies for social and emotional learning (Dusenbury and Weissberg, 2017). This research

highlights the importance of personal relationships to build connections with others in the

classroom as a way of creating a caring community.

Caring classroom communities can have a positive impact on students' long-term success

in school. The Child Development Project identified a direct correlation between caring

classroom communities and an increase in students' learning (Lewis, Schaps, and Watson, 1996).

Specific positive learning outcomes identified include higher academic performance, less

absenteeism, less behavioral issues, and an increase in student's positive outlook on school

(Lewis, Schaps, and Watson, 1996). Additional researchers note, creating a caring classroom

community can benefit student who have had previous negative learning experiences to see

school in a positive light (Vasan, 2007). By having a caring community, students feel safe to

share concerns and problems (Krall and Jalongo, 1999). This community sharing also works to

build positive social skills that enhance student citizenship.

       This reflective professional development project is designed to inform my professional

practice by providing me communication and langue tools to aide in creating a caring classroom

community. It is also an opportunity to enhance my reflective nature as an educator.

Literature Review

Introduction

       The following review of literature discusses the importance of the reflective practice on

professional development. The review also details information on the importance and benefits of

creating a caring classroom community. Social and emotional learning and the Responsive

Classroom methodology is further detailed because they provide guidance on how to create a

caring classroom community. Finally, the review highlights how communication styles and

language play a critical role in the development of a caring classroom community.

Reflective Practice

       Harnett (2012) noted that international research is showing that "teacher knowledge,

thinking, and skill are among the most important factors affecting student achievement" (p. 1).

Harnett (2012) further noted that effective teachers are reflective and analytical of their own

performance. The reflective process involves recording events and then looking closely at these events and evaluating them for effectiveness (Wlodarsky, 2018). During this evaluation, it is important to seek feedback and input from others. This additional perspective can provide clarity to the event and outcomes experienced. Research of relevant literature is also important to assist in determining any additional changes to be made (Attard, 2017). It is important to note that changes that are identified could be in the form of behaviors or attitudes not just actions (Wlodarsky, 2018). These changes are then implemented, and the cycle starts again (Wlodarsky, 2018). This ongoing cycle of events ensures focus remains on personal professional development (Attard, 2017).

Caring Classroom Communities

Researchers for the Child Development Project began linking the importance of caring classroom communities to children's success in school in the 1990's (Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996). The positive outcomes associated with these environments include higher educational outcomes, increased academic performance, students liking school, and fewer discipline problems (Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996). Schaps and Solomon (2002) researched seven elementary schools in two California districts implementing the Child Development Project. According to Schaps and Solomon (2002), these caring classroom communities share key aspects, the largest of which is students feel they are valued members of the community.

Ellerbrock, et al, (2015) identified specific steps teachers take to create this caring classroom community. Some of these steps include creating a safe environment; ensuring communication is both open and honest; valuing mutual respect; and encouraging academic excellence from everyone (Ellerbrock, et al, 2015). According to Ellerbrock, et al, (2015) these steps assist teachers in building strong relationships with and between students. Additional

researchers also support relationship-building as being a key component to creating a caring classroom (Ellerbrock, et al, 2015; Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996; Schaps and Solomon, 2002; Vasan, 2007). Lewis, Schaps, and Watson (1996) found that teachers in schools focused on relationship-building skills and exercises, such as interviewing classmates on interests, see a decline in bullying. Schaps and Solomon (2002) noted in their research on schools implementing the Child Development Project, which has a focus on relationship-building, that students who participated in the program from kindergarten through sixth grade reported feeling a high sense of community and improved prosocial behaviors.

Ellerbrock, et al, (2015) also noted the importance of open and honest communication in the creation of a caring classroom. They specifically highlight the value in teachers demonstrating vulnerability in communication (Ellerbrock, et al, 2015). This is done by teachers openly sharing aspects of their lives with students. For example, a teacher shares their own learning experiences or mistakes made in the classroom. Krall and Jalongo (1999) also noted the importance of communication on the creation of a caring classroom. Specific strategies they recommend include being non-judgmental and respectful of each student, being specific and direct with expectations, and ensuring that body language and tone of voice are also taken into consideration (Krall and Jalongo, 1999).

Social and Emotional Learning

Students' success in school is dependent on their ability to be socially, emotionally, and academically competent (Dusenbury and Weissberg, 2017). As such, schools are realizing that students need instruction in more than just academics. CASEL identified five key components that comprise social and emotional learning. These components are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Dusenbury

and Weissberg, 2017). Social emotional learning also highlights the importance of building

strong relationships between teachers and students as critical to meaningful instruction (Smith,

Fisher, and Frey, 2015). Smith, Fisher, and Frey (2015) detail steps to building these

relationships for teachers. They include learning students' names, ensuring transparency in the

attitude presented at school each day, and really getting to know students' interests (Smith,

Fisher, and Frey, 2015).

   CASEL studied multiple evidence-based social emotional learning programs to determine

their ability to be replicated and successful. Responsive Classroom is one of the programs that

was determined to be both (Dusenbury and Weissberg, 2017). Responsive Classroom was

established twenty years ago as an education philosophy (Delisio, 2011). The Responsive

Classroom approach was designed to create a methodology that would assist teachers in meeting

students' social and emotional needs. This enabled teachers to have well run caring classrooms

conducive to successful academic learning (Baroody, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen, and Curby,

2014). Key teaching practices identified in the Responsive Classroom philosophy highlight the

importance of building connections and respect for one another through positive and open

communication (Delisio, 2011).

   Baroody, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen and Curby (2014) specifically evaluated the

Responsive Classroom approach and student-teacher relationships. Their study focused on

twenty-four schools from the Mid-Atlantic district and occurred over three years. Teachers were

studied as students moved from second grade through to fifth grade. To evaluate student-teacher

relationships teachers completed a questionnaire. From this questionnaire, researchers

determined that teachers that trained and used Responsive Classroom techniques did report more

positive student-teacher relationships (Baroody, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen, and Curby, 2014).

They also noted these practices create a caring environment where students feel their individual needs are being met (Baroody, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen, and Curby, 2014).

Stearns (2016) looked critically at the Responsive Classroom approach by comparing empirical studies and evaluating their assumptions. Research Stearns (2016) evaluated supported the positive effects of the Responsive Classroom approach. However, as he evaluated the assumptions for these reports, Stearns noted that one of the prominent authors received funding from a foundation that also supported the Northeast Foundation for Children which created the Responsive Classroom program (Stearns, 2016). Stearns (2016) also concluded in his opinion the program over-simplifies emotional needs and wants to have all students minimize conflict and project ongoing happiness. Stearns concludes his research by calling for more qualitative data to assist in further evaluating the Responsive Classroom approach.

Language

Language is powerful. Lev Vygotsky noted that "language actually shapes thoughts, feelings, and experiences" (Denton, 2015, p 3). Language does this by impacting our sense of self, helping us to understand how we think, and by impacting our relationships (Denton, 2015). Our sense of self is impacted by the language we hear and the language we use. Positive words encourage safety and growth and provide increased self-confidence (Denton, 2015). Negative words do the opposite. Language can be used to build positive trusting relationships or ones built on fear (Denton, 2015).

Responsive Classroom focuses on the importance of communication styles and language. Their educational literature supports evidence and tools to change the way teachers communicate. Denton (2015) noted that communication styles and language choice are teaching tools. These tools are used to create a caring classroom community and improve academic

learning. Specific language and communication guidelines provided by their literature include being direct and genuine, showing confidence in students abilities, keep it short, and learning when to be silent (Denton, 2015).

Responsive Classroom found that positive teacher language encourages habits that increase academic knowledge, build relationships so students also learn from each other, model positive communication styles, and enable students to effectively communicate social and emotional needs (Denton, 2015). They also note teacher language that encourages cooperation and respect for others assists in building community (Denton, 2015). This community then helps students feel safe in the classroom.

Changing communication styles and language can be a formidable task. Specifically, it means "taking the time to consciously change often-unconscious speech patterns" (Crabtree, 2016, p. 12). Focusing on one area at a time is an effective course of action to begin this change. The benefits of taking this action are positive. Crabtree (2016,) an educator who wrote about her professional development focusing on language, noted a reduction in stress as these changes positively impacted her classroom management. She also saw the classroom community change to support students feeling safe and taking risks with their academic learning (Crabtree, 2016).

Conclusion

A reflective practice adds an important layer to professional development by making the learning specific to a teacher's individual growth. This process also continues to enhance a teacher's ability to think critically and analytically regarding their teaching because it requires time for reflection.

Caring classroom communities create safe learning environments for students and increases their academic success. Research shows a key component to the creation of these

communities is relationship-building which includes social emotional learning. An evidence based social and emotional learning methodology is the Responsive Classroom approach. This methodology focuses on specific steps teachers can incorporate to meet students social and emotional needs. One of the key steps involves building relationships within the classroom between teachers and students. The Responsive Classroom methodology includes educational materials that highlight the importance of focusing on language and communication style. The materials regarding this topic highlight that language is vital to building classroom relationships and to the creation of a caring classroom community.

Question

Will improving my communication style and language create a caring classroom community in which students feel safe to be vulnerable and show their whole self?

Purpose

To grow professionally in my communication style and language usage to effectively create a caring classroom community in which students feel safe to be vulnerable and show their whole self.

Methodology

Context

This research was conducted at a Title One school located in the Edmonds School District. According to 2019-2020 school-year statistics from Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), there are approximately 529 students. The student population includes seventeen percent English Language Learners and forty percent of students come from low income families. The student population is comprised of forty-one percent white

students, twenty-four percent Hispanic/Latino, thirteen percent more than two races, ten percent Asian and seven percent African American.

This research was conducted in a first-grade classroom in this Title One school. The classroom comprises nineteen students of whom many are highly impacted students. The classroom contains students who receive Special Education services, English Language Learner services, Behavior Intervention Plan support, Title 1 reading support, McKinney Vento services, and trauma impacted students.

Participants

The key focus for this professional development study is on my own practice and to study the change in my professional effectiveness. Other assistance will be provided by my mentor teacher, my internship mentor teacher, my field supervisor, my graduate research advisor, and my students.

Intervention

Creating a caring classroom environment where students feel safe to be vulnerable to express their whole self is a high priority for me as an educator. Through classroom observations, research, and self-reflection I have determined the component I want to improve upon is my language and communication style.

The intervention involved observing, interviewing, and taking notes on the communication style and specific language used by my mentor teacher to create a caring classroom community. I then reflected upon this data to determine what areas I wanted to improve in. This data was collected through interviews and classroom observations and recorded in a journal (Appendix A). At the completion of this phase, an analysis was performed comparing communication styles and language I was comfortable using and ones I noted my

mentor teacher employing. From this analysis, a detailed action plan (Appendix B) was created to highlight changes that would be made over the remaining three phases of the intervention.

Phase two focused on improving my communication style and language as it related to social and emotional learning. Research indicated social and emotional language helps students to feel safe and to build relationships with both the teacher and other students. Specific language choices were identified for inclusion into my daily language. Some examples included: "I see you." "I hear you." "Practice is important." "I know you can do this.". Daily journaling (Appendix C) was used to capture what I did, and active reflection was included in the journal. Feedback on my usage of this language from my mentor teacher and other supporting educators also informed this study. This feedback was captured on my daily journaling and implemented as received.

Phase three focused on improving my communication style and language as it related to being direct and genuine. Research demonstrated that being direct and genuine was an important communication tool. By being direct and genuine students learn to trust that what we say is what we mean (Denton, 2015). Specific language choices were identified for inclusion in my daily communication with students. This included ensuring I was intentional with my statements. Some examples included: "I mean what I say, I say what I mean." "I am so excited to be sharing one of my favorite stories with you today!". This phase also included changes to my communication style. I specifically focused on ensuring that I consistently used an even tone and stopped letting my voice go up an octave at the end of statements, thereby turning them into questions. Daily journaling (Appendix D) was again used to capture what I did and my reflection on its impact. Feedback from my mentor teacher and other educators was sought and incorporated into this cycle.

Phase four focused on using silence as a teaching tool. Research indicated silence to be as powerful as language in the creation of a classroom community (Denton, 2015). Silence provides students think time and demonstrates the value in thinking before speaking (Denton, 2015). Also incorporated within this development was talking more slowly and quietly and learning when it was appropriate and effective to do so. Daily journaling (Appendix E) and oral and written feedback from my mentor teacher were again the data source for this development.

Data Gathering Instruments/Assessments

To ensure appropriate triangulation of data, input was included from myself and two other educators who witnessed my efforts at changing my language and communication style. Data was gathered over an eight-week period. Four distinct journal entries tracked the four action research cycles.

Phase 1: This phase focused on interviews with my mentor teacher about communication styles and language used to create the caring classroom community I observed in her classroom. My mentor teacher uses the Responsive Classroom methodology in the management of the classroom. She also employs intentional language that I had not observed in other classrooms. This intentional positive language lets students know they are valued, have a voice in the classroom, and are safe. This language assists in building the positive relationships that form the foundation to a caring classroom community. This is evidenced by students' sharing of negative life events, their willingness to be vulnerable and show emotions in the classroom and their honest affection displayed in high fives and wanting to sit near the teacher. After reflecting on my skills and what I had learned about creating a caring classroom, I determined language and communication style would be the focus for the other three cycles of action research.

Phase 2: This phase focused on specific social emotional language I wanted to add to my daily language. All statements identified are focused on social emotional learning and how to model and assist students in using this language. Target language included: "Practice is important." "I know you can do this and if we need to practice all day, we will!". It also included helping students with feelings statements and deffusing tense situations, such as hurt feelings and hitting. The journal entries (Appendix C) include examples of what I did and my reflection on how that worked for myself and the student.

Written feedback received from my mentor teacher included her capturing phrases she heard me saying throughout my student interactions. Specific examples she noted include: "I believe in you." "I know you are tired, but you can do this, everyone can do this." "You are all amazing listeners." "We will keep practicing." (A. Weaver, personal communication, November 2019). I received oral feedback on this phase from a learning support teacher. Specific comments were: "You sound just like your mentor teacher." "The students see you as their teacher and seek out your guidance." "You consistently interact positively with these high need students." (R. Toves, personal communication, November 2019). During this time, I was also observed by the principal of the school. Specific feedback given included: "She was quickly able to establish relationships with all the students in the room and students felt comfortable coming to her with their struggles and problems." "She recognizes positive behaviors regularly." "Students like and respect her and work hard to meet her expectations." (D. Sanders, personal communication, January 2020).

During this observation an area of ongoing improvement was identified by the principal concerning helping students to feel a sense of urgency in learning (D. Sanders, personal communication, November 2019). Specifically, Ms. Sanders noted that my empathy for students

sometimes seemed to override my sense of urgency in getting them settled for learning. This was valuable feedback that was incorporated into the third phase of action research which was focused on being more direct.

During this cycle I noted positive changes in my ability to quickly find and use positive social emotional language to assist students. I became more comfortable handling difficult situations and remaining calm. I saw differences in my students as well. They were modeling and learning the language I was using, and it was helping them solve their own problems. This language was giving them a vehicle to communicate their feelings in constructive ways. I saw them use this skill as they began speaking up for themselves to me and with other students. I also noted the focus on social emotional language helped me remember my students were little and frequently had little social emotional support in their home lives. This increased my patience level. The feedback I received from others confirmed my reflections that I was becoming more comfortable using social emotional language and that students were sensing this change. The feedback also provided additional guidance to include in future cycles.

Phase 3: This phase focused on being direct and genuine in my communication. Specifically, I was focused on using more statements, less questions, and being specific and intentional with my word choice to assist in building trust with students. This phase was partially to address feedback I received during phase one that when I spoke my tone frequently went up at the end of a sentence. This change in tone made it sound like I was asking a question, instead of making a statement.

The same process for recording action taken, reflections, and feedback received from other teachers was followed for this phase. I noted in my reflections this was more difficult for me because I was working on changing my natural voice inflection. I learned during this phase

that making statements had a large impact on students' understanding. My mentor teacher also noted that she could hear the intentionality in what I was saying and that I effectively transitioned from asking questions with my tone of voice to making statements (A. Weaver, personal communication, November 2019). A. Weaver also noted "During this phase I saw a change in your ability to balance when to negotiate and when its time to take charge. There was a sense of urgency." (A. Weaver, personal communication, November 2019). A previous mentor teacher observed my teaching and noted an improvement in my ability to balance meeting a student's individual needs quickly and then reengaging that student in the learning by being direct, genuine, and employing social and emotional language (A. Holder, personal communication, November 2019). He also noted that students bought into my sense of urgency (A. Holder, personal communication, November 2019).

My reflections note this was a difficult part of my communication style to change. I noted student improvement in following the more direct communication style though. This positive action helped me to see that students want to be guided. That increased my confidence in my ability to guide them. Feedback I received from my mentor teachers supported the changes I was seeing in myself. Both teachers noted seeing improvement in my ability to impart a sense of urgency to students for learning.

Phase 4: This phase focused on learning to use silence as a teacher tool. Specifically, I was focused on learning when to give silent wait time for students. This phase also included intentionally using a quieter voice to capture their attention when students were being loud. The same process for recording action taken, reflections, and feedback received from other teachers was followed.

Specific feedback received from my mentor teacher included identifying that I did finally start to consistently provide wait time (A. Weaver, personal communication, December 2019). My previous mentor teacher noted I had improved greatly in my ability to provide silent wait time from the previous year (A. Holder, personal communication, December 2019).

My reflections noted this was another challenging change to incorporate. I had to use visual cues to remind myself to wait with silence. During this cycle I began to realize that silence can be just as powerful as language. I noted students rising to my higher listening standard. They began to more quickly stop their talking to listen to directions and learning. I noted they also stopped to think before speaking. I saw them listening to friends more often without talking over them.

I was also successful in quieting the volume of my voice to grab student attention. I noted this helped to calm the room and refocus students on learning. During this cycle, I began to use visual cues to get the attention of students. For example, one day during math lessons students were continuing to talk over me. I stopped and stood there with my small white board on my head. This visual tool and silence caught the class's attention quickly and they all immediately quit talking to find out what I was doing. These observations taught me that silence and visuals can be more effective than talking louder to guide students in learning. Feedback received from my mentors helped me to see the growth in this cycle and realize that I was successfully growing in my professional development.

Results

This personal development was focused on understanding if improving my communication style and language would help me to create a caring classroom community. My vision of a caring classroom is one in which students feel safe to be vulnerable so they can

express their whole selves. This is demonstrated through excitement at seeing the teacher, pride in their own work, a willingness to share ideas and feelings, and a desire to help other students in their classroom. Through the eight-week process I identified three specific areas I wanted to improve in my communication style and language and observe the changes I saw in myself and my contribution to creating a caring classroom. In all phases I identified improvement in myself in incorporating communication tools that did assist in creating a caring classroom.

Phase 1: The result of this phase was an action plan identifying the specific language and communication style changes that were going to be the focus of the remaining three cycles (Appendix A).

Phase 2: Three key results were identified from my integration of social emotional language into my interactions with students: 1) I built relationships with my students; 2) My language became a model for students to learn social emotional language and begin using it themselves; and 3) My confidence in my ability to handle difficult situations increased.

Using intentional social emotional language such as "I see you. I hear you." tells students exactly what I am thinking and lets them know in the most literal way possible that they matter. This focus on social emotional language helped me to strengthen my relationship bonds with my students specifically in those difficult moments when they were having a hard time expressing their feelings. Through this cycle, I saw students trust in me increase. They began coming to me on a regular basis to share when something was wrong, or when they needed help communicating with a friend. This cycle supported research that shows social emotional language helps students to feel safe and supported (Denton, 2015).

My language became a model for the students. I began to hear students in the classroom use the same language they heard from me. Slowly students began trying to solve their own

problems by using feelings statements with other classmates before they asked me for my help. Students also began encouraging others and helping them with classroom routines. These positive observations were evidence that my focus on social emotional language was not only making a difference to me but also to my students. The language we were now all using was helping to make a caring community.

During this cycle I found language that made me more comfortable dealing with difficult situations. From this, my confidence in my abilities to handle anything that came up increased because I knew I now had the skills to handle them. This social emotional language gave me the tools I needed to gain confidence in leading students in respectful and caring ways that showed them how much I care for them and their learning.

Phase 3: The result from this phase was I became successful in guiding students. Being direct and genuine built trust with the students that I did mean what I said. From this they began to follow directions and guidance more quickly. For example, prior to this cycle transition times during rotations took approximately eight minutes. After this cycle, students needed only two minutes or less to move between groups. This made me realize that students want to be guided in the learning process and by providing them direct and genuine communication they understand what the expectations are, and they rise to those expectations. Being direct and genuine set the tone that I was the leader in a caring and positive way. It established that I cared about them and their learning. This assisted in building their trust, which helped in creating the caring classroom I was attempting to create.

Phase 4: Two results were noted from this cycle. I found silence is an important and empowering teacher tool. I also noted silence and quiet voices help to calm a room which contributes to creating a caring community.

Using silence is an important teacher tool. I used this teacher tool multiple ways. I used silence in the classroom to model thinking before I spoke. To model this silence, I told the first graders in these situations that I needed a minute of silence to think about what they asked me. I reinforced they also could take a minute before responding. I used silence when waiting for students to show respectful listening during learning time. By following the direct guidance of "It is time for learning so please show respectful listening" with silence the classroom quickly learned I was waiting for everyone to join us for learning. Finally, I used silence when listening to first graders share whatever they needed to share. By using it in these varying situations I validated research that show silence is an important tool (Denton, 2015). I found silence reinforced all of us, teacher and students, could be thoughtful, respectful, and caring members of our community.

Another result of silence and being quieter is that it naturally calms the room. First grade rooms can be loud boisterous classrooms that feel chaotic because of the energy the students project. Using silence and quieter tones naturally calmed the room and brought the focus back to learning. This calmer environment naturally lent itself to academics and positive communication between everyone.

Discussion

Conclusions

This personal development drastically changed me. Prior to this personal development I struggled with how to be a caring leader of a classroom. I lacked leadership and classroom management skills because I was concerned about being too authoritarian. From this personal development I found my teacher voice and language and now have the confidence to lead my classroom in a caring manner.

From the research for this personal development I gained a stronger understanding of some of the components of caring classroom communities. I learned how important social emotional language is to the creation of a caring classroom community. I learned how the creation of positive relationships overlaps with both caring classroom communities and social emotional learning. I found a social emotional learning methodology, Responsive Classroom, to provide me with direct educational guidance on how to integrate more social emotional learning into the classroom. I learned how important language and communication style is on the creation of positive relationships. It is those positive relationships that lets students know they are safe to be vulnerable to be their whole self. And that is my goal for a caring classroom community.

From my changes in language and communication style I built strong relationships with the students in my classroom. I became a model of how to use social emotional language to communicate needs and problem-solve for my students. I also developed confidence in my abilities to handle difficult situations. I started being direct in my communications with students instead of phrasing my comments as questions. This direct genuine communication taught me that I could lead students in caring ways. I found students positively reacted to this guidance and began to follow my sense of urgency to learn. I found silence and quieter tones of voice to be effective teaching tools and ways to calm an energetic first grade classroom. All of these components led to positive changes in the classroom community.

At the conclusion of my personal development my mentor teacher noted "You found your teacher voice. With your word choice and your tone, you now convey to the students – I believe this so come along with me." (A. Weaver, personal communication, December 2019). I now believe in myself and my ability to guide students in positive ways. I know these tools are critical for me to create a caring classroom community.

Recommendations

Reflection is a powerful tool for self-discovery and improvement. It is a practice that I use often and will continue to do professionally. This willingness to try, reflect, and try again is an important characteristic as a teacher. For this development I used a word document that listed the specific goals I was working on for the week. Going forward I would research other tools or techniques to capturing goals, action taken, and results. Finding a more efficient and streamlined approach could make the process more effective.

Language is a large category. For this professional development I focused on three key areas that I wanted to improve upon. As I have grown more comfortable with these language changes and have seen the positive impact it has on students, I would like to continue to focus on enhancing the language I use with students. For the next study, I would like to focus my language changes on asking open-ended questions as a way of enhancing academic and social learning. The goal of this focus would be to enhance students' academic learning by sharing their ideas with each other through subject related "talks". This is a popular approach in math lessons to have a portion of the lesson focused on math talks where students share their own strategies for solving problems. I believe researching more open-ended questioning language that could guide students' discovery and conversation would be beneficial for their learning.

Finally, a caring classroom community is comprised of many components. Language and communication styles are just one component. I would like to explore more regarding the Responsive Classrooms approach to integrating social emotional learning into the classroom. This would include following their First Six Weeks of School ideas, morning meeting, and closing circles (Responsive Classroom, 2015).

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Appendix A

Journal – Baseline Data Collection

Language Used / Communication Style	Situational Example	Notes
Examples . . .	Examples . . .	Examples . . .
"Your job is to be a learner"	On the learning rug	This feels authentic and I could definitely use this.
"I notice . . . .that my front row is showing me respect by facing me, they have a still body, they have listening ears ready, and they have their mouths closed."	On the learning rug as a positive way to reinforce the behavior and norms that all students should be following.	I really liked the positive nature of this feedback, it caused a ripple effect and the rest of the rainbow rug quickly followed suit.

Appendix B

Action Research Cycle Action Plan

Goal	Examples	Reflection
Phase 2 Language – Social and Emotional Learning		
Phase 3 Language – Be Direct and Genuine		
Phase 4 Communication Style – Know when to be silent		

Appendix C

Action Research Cycle #2

Goal	What I did	Reflection
Language – Social Emotional Learning • "You are seen" • "I see you" • "You are heard" • "I hear you" • When not called on teach "Oh well, maybe next time." Or "Congratulations" • "I do not care about you less if you are at the back or the front of the line" • "Practice is important. I know you can do this. We can take as long as we need to practice" • Feelings statements – teaching students to identify their feelings and to tell friends how their actions made them feel. Then teaching the other friend words to use to make things better. • "In room 3 we are (a team, friends who take care of each other, tidy, etc.) • "I know that is not who you are." • "I am not mad"	Examples . . . Student was saying "I am too tired to do my writing" he was really stuck. I responded with "I know you can do this and I believe in you enough for both of us so we will try!" After he did it – "See you can do it!"	Examples . . . This student can really get stuck and be unwilling to move on. This was a real eye opener that hearing him, validating his words, and then encouraging him helped him move on and accomplish the task. After it was over I also asked how he felt knowing he could really do it – he felt proud 😊

Appendix D

Action Research Cycle #3

Goal	What I did	Reflection
Language – Be Direct and Genuine ("I mean what I say, I say what I mean") • Give directions clearly and directly • Use statements not questions • Use an even warm tone • Be specific ("Today's lesson is one of my favorites because I love learning about different habitats!") • Be intentional	Examples . . . Changed voice to not go up at the end of my sentence. This makes the sentence sound like a statement instead of a question.	Examples. . . This is hard to remember to do but really works. Remember kids are looking for guidance.

Appendix E

Action Research Cycle #4

Goal	What I did	Reflection
Communication Style – know when to be silent • Provide wait time • Slow down when speaking • Quiet my volume	Examples . . . I waited . . .	Examples . . . This was painful. I overrode my inner desire to talk after asking students to give me 5 (a listening norm in the classroom to turn to the teacher and stop talking). And I just waited and waited and THEY DID IT! This is an important reminder that students will frequently rise to the standards expected of them when given the chance.