Developing a 'classroom as community' approach to supporting young children's wellbeing

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INTRODUCING THE IDEA OF THE 'classroom as community', a class of six- to eight-year-old children engaged with a project, The Wellbeing Classroom (McInnes, Diamond & Whitington, 2014), which intended to support and advance their social and emotional development. This paper examines how the notion of 'classroom as community' informed the thinking and actions of the adults involved, and identifies six key elements of the approach employed. The teacher employed five strategies over a year: professional learning and reflection; building trust with children and modelling emotional self-regulation; teaching social skills across the day; accessing regular outreach worker support; and involving parents. Led by an upskilled teacher, the 'classroom as community' approach was found to have successfully supported children's social and emotional development, particularly those with difficulties. The project's reach included parents, thus extending its effects. This article reports on the significance of the concept of classroom as community to the project's success.

Introduction

After family, schools provide the environments where children over five years of age spend most time. Children's ability to cope with the social, emotional and behavioural demands of schooling is shaped by their family experiences and their early years of school. For children with difficulties, school-based individualised responses have been shown to be ineffective, risking stigmatising and further isolating children (van Lier, Vuijk & Crijnen, 2005). Group approaches have been found to be more effective (Stefan & Miclea, 2014). The notion of classroom as community has recently been researched as a motivator for learning (Ciani, Middleton, Summers & Sheldon, 2010), and to develop a sense of agency via group belonging (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). This study explores the concept's usefulness in improving children's social and emotional learning.

The neuroscience of learning shows that school children who experience chronic stress or trauma have difficulties learning and integrating new information (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010). Chronic childhood stress and complex trauma impact the development and function of the brain, affecting children's emotional, cognitive, social, physical development and behaviour (NSCDC, 2014). Social-emotional effects of chronic stress and trauma include risky behaviours and relationship difficulties (Ko et al., 2008), problems with emotional self-regulation, and poor self-concept with feelings of shame and guilt, aggression and mistrust in interpersonal

relationships (Streeck-Fisher & van der Kolk, 2000), and depression (Luecken & Lemery, 2004). Consequently, traumatised children often have difficulty making friends. They tend to avoid novel experiences and social contact (Streeck-Fisher & van der Kolk 2000, p. 912), jeopardising their socialisation.

Teachers need to understand the difficulties faced by chronically stressed children, and know how to create supportive learning environments. Providing support for the idea of community in this process, researchers Schreiber and Valle (2013) and Ciani et al. (2010) found that enabling autonomy and building trust within groups assists children to be more available for learning. Furthermore, there is evidence that a community-based approach supports children's learning motivation via a peer-shared culture that fosters children's sense of autonomy (Lash, 2008; Scully & Howell, 2008).

Potential stressors, which all children must negotiate, include relationships with school staff (Henricsson & Rydell, 2004), relationships with peers (Rubin, Bukowski & Parker, 2006) and the ability to successfully engage with the school curriculum (Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman, 1997). Children who experience difficulty adapting to the classroom environment may face academic failure (Henricsson & Rydell, 2004), peer rejection (Coie, Dodge & Kupersmidt, 1990) and negative teacher judgement (Henricsson & Rydell, 2004). Teachers' most common response to behavioural issues is individual punishment (Lewis & Sugai, 1999), yet punishment has been

shown to stigmatise and alienate children, and damage the teacher–child relationship (Berk, 2013). Children who are frequently being punished are more likely to have poor academic progress (Noguera, 2003).

Teachers need an approach that supports young children's social and emotional development and shapes their behaviour so they become valued and respected class members. One possibility is to consider the classroom as a potentially supportive community for children, including those with social and emotional challenges. This research aimed to investigate how the notion of class as community informed the thinking and actions of the adults involved in The Wellbeing Classroom project (McInnes et al., 2015). It also identified the key elements of the classroom as community approach employed during the project's implementation.

The Wellbeing Classroom project principally employed sociocultural theory, which posits that meaning is actively created in everyday interactions in the learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978). The idea of the socially-formed mind, central to Vygotsky's theory, contends that the human mind is developed from the pattern of social interactions in which individuals engage with significant others. The notion of the socially-formed mind implies a clear role for community in children's intellectual development. Furthermore, it is theorised that in learning contexts, with expert scaffolding the role of the teacher reduces and learner competency grows.

The theoretical approach was also informed by neuro-scientific research, providing strong evidence of the effect of high stress and trauma on brain development (NSCDC, 2014), and sociological research. In sociological research, the term 'community' refers to a sense of membership, shared emotional connection, needs fulfilment and influence within a group (Nowell & Boyd, 2014, p. 230). Such groups can be based on locality, cultural practice, identity or cohorts which meet members' needs for belonging, influence and connection.

Within classrooms, a sense of community can function as a pedagogical resource that provides its own feedback loop to members, enabling a sense of achievement, efficacy and identity. Those who experience difficulties within the group are not excluded, but rather invited into a process of communication to enable the community to accommodate and adapt to meet members' needs. The term 'community' in the Wellbeing Classroom project was thus positioned as a context for children's learning, relating, healing and development. Seen as a community, the classroom offers an immersive everyday context in which children are provided with ongoing social and emotional skills teaching, guiding cues and understanding and the chance to repair mistakes. The classroom offers multiple, repeated opportunities for children to learn and relearn socially-adaptive thinking and behaviours, observed by Perry (2009) as impossible in an individual clinical setting. Furthermore, there are trusted adults who teach the needed skills and provide models.

Classroom communities have the power to create trusting non-hierarchical, power-shared, non-judgemental relationships where everyone is valued (McInnes et al., 2015). This approach means that teachers must relinquish some of their power, and actively teach children about their own feelings and others' feelings so they know these need to be acknowledged. In such classrooms, social and emotional skill teaching is crucial. Children learn social rules and practise pro-social interactions in low-risk environments (McCaskill, 2007). The interactional quality of the classroom builds a community in which children learn how to support each other emotionally, to give each other time, space and support when upset. This approach means that children are likely to feel safe, valued and welcome at school. Their stress levels may lower and they become more available to learn and get on with others (McInnes et al., 2015).

The teacher, in this context, is also likely to need support. In their study, McInnes et al. (2015) found that during the project's initial implementation, the teacher was regularly mentored to help enact major change, gradually moving towards operating independently.

The project teacher used two resources that aimed to improve children's social and emotional skills. Play is the Way is 'a cooperative physical games program' in which 'children are required to work together towards positive collective outcomes' (Street, Hoppe, Kingsbury & Ma, 2004, p. 97). The structured games and language aim to promote peer support, trust, respect and understanding by engaging children's emotions. They require mastery and control of emotions so children can participate, be aware of others' needs and interests, and co-operate to achieve success (McCaskill, 2007).

Similarly, the Kimochis program aims to help children to identify and express their feelings positively, and to recognise the contexts that prompt those feelings (Kimochis, n.d.; Pritchard Dodge & Grimm, 2014). The plush toy characters introduce children to a vocabulary of feeling, providing interactive storybooks to relate each character's feelings to the events of the storyline. They promote children's empathy, enabling them to recognise their own or others' feelings through the characters; and efficacy, by presenting the different choices and outcomes available to characters.

A 'classroom as community' approach includes parents, providing a non-threatening pathway between home and school. Parents of children exposed to chronic stress and trauma are themselves often similarly pressured. A community approach extends to families by arranging evening events, and welcoming incidental interactions with the teacher. Children take home the ideas and words they have learnt about how to respond and solve conflict. Perry (2009) pointed to the key role of parents in providing supportive contexts for trauma-affected children. If the parent is knowledgeable and effective, then the support is more likely to work.

The following research questions were posed. How did the notion of 'class as community' inform the thinking and

actions of the teacher and outreach worker involved in The Wellbeing Classroom project (McInnes et al., 2015)? What were the key elements of the 'classroom as community' approach employed?

Methodology

Methodological approach

The research used a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992) by which the emerging meanings from the process of systematic data analysis develop and inform theory. The research employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in which participants' comments are read and coded by theme. Thematic analysis allows researchers to interpret and summarise participants' 'experiences, meanings and … reality' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81), providing new insights. Sociometry measures group cohesion (Moreno, 1989), and is used by teachers to track the development of children as a group to identify the patterns of mutual friendship and isolation. Ideally, over a year, the numbers of mutual choices should increase and isolated children decrease.

Participants

Nineteen children from a Year 2/3 classroom (six to eight years) of 28 children from a low income, outer metropolitan Australian suburban primary school, participated with parental consent. Eight children were identified as exhibiting behavioural difficulties that affected their learning. Informal evidence indicated that these children either had or were currently living in contexts which were traumatic for them. Their teacher Josh (pseudonym), and Tim (pseudonym), an outreach worker, also gave consent to participate.

Project strategies

Five strategies were implemented during the 2012 school year.

1. The teacher engaged in professional learning and adopted a 'classroom as community' mindset, drawing ideas from many resources including Making Space for Learning (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010).

2. The teacher built trust relationships with children and between the children, which in part involved him initiating with children and modelling emotional self-regulation.

3. The teacher taught an explicit social-skills program using two resources: Kimochis (n.d.) and Play is the Way (McCaskill, 2007), employing their underlying principles and language in everyday interactions at school.

4. The teacher accessed an expert outreach worker who regularly supported him in implementing the social-skills programs.

5. The teacher built relationships with parents by holding after-school barbeques, which focused (in a fun way) on learning about the two social-skills programs.

Project data

The data used to assess the project in terms of its community approach was collected from:

- five reflective interviews with the classroom teacher, focusing on the project's implementation
- a reflective interview with the outreach worker at the project's end
- class sociometric data collected by the teacher in Terms 2, 3 and 4.

Procedure

Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the University of South Australia and the Department for Education and Child Development (ethics number: 0000028159). The children's parents, the school principal, the teacher and the outreach worker consented to participation. The project was implemented across a four-term school year. The outreach worker played a key role in sourcing materials—Play is the Way and Kimochis—and provided training and support to the classroom teacher in their use.

Data about Josh's professional knowledge and reflections about implementation of classroom strategies were collected through four interviews conducted at the end of each term. Josh was interviewed a year later, to reflect on the project's impact on the children and his professional practices. Regarding the sociometric measure during each term, Josh asked the children, 'Write the names of three people in the class who are important to you'. Tim was interviewed once at the end of Term 4.

Analysis

In a recursive process, the teacher and outreach worker interview data was organised into themes, which were defined, named then checked against the research question and aims. Three sociograms were constructed about children across the year, by number of choices including mutual choices from class peers. The analysis identified how the notion of 'classroom as community' informed the adults' thinking and actions. It also identified the elements that shaped the social and emotional climate and peer cohesion of the class.

Findings and discussion

Analysis of both the interview and sociometric data revealed that community was central to the social and emotional learning strategies employed by the two adults. Josh and Tim were found to employ a community-building approach using six key elements of the 'classroom as community' approach.

1. The adoption of a community-based mindset regarding classrooms and schools.

> *To try and build up their sense of community, I think, is pretty important and I reckon I can do that with the seven- and eight-year-olds!* (Teacher interview 1).

Classrooms have the potential to be communities, however, it cannot be assumed that they are 'communities', as defined by Nowell and Boyd (2014). A sense of group membership, shared emotional connection, needs fulfilment and influence is needed. Recognition that the classroom context has the potential to be a community, which can powerfully and positively influence learning, is now less prominent than in previous decades—perhaps due to the emphasis on individual performance and assessment to meet federal testing benchmarks. Nevertheless, Josh viewed his class as a community. This approach provided a powerful tool that enabled children to safely develop socially and emotionally. In contrast, teachers using an individual approach see their classroom as a series of individual interactions between them and each student.

Josh's understanding of the class, as a supportive and potentially healing community, was evident in the following statement about his approach to one child who was living with a history of trauma. Josh understood that if one child has that issue, it is likely that others do too, and that a community approach would help.

> I won't say, 'This is for (Child X). We need to help him.' But I'll say, 'People in this room are feeling this way, and how can we help them?' And indirectly it's helping a few others as well who might be sort of on that borderline (Teacher interview 2).

Josh extended this community approach beyond his classroom.

> … even if the students aren't in my class, I'll make sure I say hello to them and make sure they know me, and [that] they can feel comfortable talking to me (Teacher interview 1).

Also evident was Josh's sense of the growing healing power of the class community, as the children developed their social and emotional skills and capacity to support each other.

> …as a team and as a group, they are getting better at caring for each other and looking out for each other (Teacher interview 2).

Feelings of belonging were found to be central to the development of the classroom community. The approach provided an inclusive classroom in which Josh and Tim reported that children felt they belonged, even when they had behaved in an antisocial way. Children were given time to calm down through doing other activities rather than being punished. In describing his approach to a child with significant trauma, Josh said he was:

> …trying to foster that, I guess, team philosophy within the class as well. To be accepting of (Child X) and understand that he'll make mistakes along the way, but don't hold it against him; he's trying (Teacher interview 1).

On the same topic, Tim observed, in describing his approach to another child living with trauma:

> … when (Child Y) needed that time, that circuit breaker, it would be about, 'Well (Child Y), would you like to go and do [another activity]?' That was highly effective in getting (Child Y) to regulate himself… it doesn't take him away from that classroom environment, he's still part of that class (Outreach worker interview).

2. Developing individual trusting relationships amongst the children, the teacher and the outreach worker

Josh made his relationship with the children his highest priority.

> I just guess it comes down to trying to know the student individually. That came from counselling training as well—that to help someone through their problems, you need to understand them.

> I do try and take in more of what they say, like in those little incidental conversations ... To try and learn as much as I can about them, I often sit with the kids, like when they're eating their lunch and talk to a few of them (Teacher interview 1).

The Australian Childhood Foundation (2010) observed the importance of teachers making time to spend with individual children. Such often teacher-initiated interactions build relationships (Latisha, 2014; Nolan, Taket & Stagnitti, 2014). This approach was found in the present study, as the outreach worker commented regarding Child X:

> I initiated the idea of the teacher spending some of his Non-Instructional Time (NIT) [preparation] time with (Child X) one-on-one, doing some models up in the tech room. And the profound effect that had on building a relationship between the teacher and (Child X) (Outreach worker interview).

Morgan, Pendergast, Brown and Heck (2015) observed that teachers need to move their identity from a 'deliverer of curriculum and attaining measurable outcomes to being and becoming a person in an authentic relationship' (p. 1048) with their students. Nolan et al. (2014) added that teachers who wish to develop trusting relationships with their students will become emotional management role models, if, like Josh, they share their emotional experiences.

> I'll acknowledge to the class now that I'm not in a state where I can make strong choices. I was saying this has happened … and it's just all piling up on me now. I just need five minutes and then I can recharge and start again … In the past I would have just lost it, and time out … But yeah, I can sort of pre-warn them (Teacher interview 2).

Relationship repair on an individual basis is also important. When relationships were damaged in some way, Josh reported that he consciously repaired the relationship.

I've … been more conscious of making sure that relationships are repaired and that we don't just leave things on the backburner (Teacher interview 1).

3. Explicitly and systematically teaching an ongoing social and emotional skill learning program

Children's knowledge of social skills, and their capacity to act using them, is important to their success at school. Yet, not all teachers understand fully the need to explicitly teach them. Josh observed:

When I first started [teaching], I just expected that kids would know [social skills]. It was like the students will follow because I expect it. But now I've learnt … you do have to teach it and model it (Teacher interview 1).

Wilson McCaskill (2007) pointed out the value of teaching social skills in a whole-class low risk context. In this study, in response to the children's observed needs, Josh planned lessons designed to develop those skills, stating:

Allocating a couple of lessons a week to simply this … in the past, I may have just waited for those teachable moments, for it to come up. But by actually allocating time to it, it basically forces you to talk about it at least once or twice a week and get things out in the open (Teacher interview 3).

This explicit teaching is consistent with a recommendation from the Australian Childhood Foundation (2010) regarding working with children who have experienced trauma. '… integrate emotional literacy activities into the curriculum to support children to recognise, name and manage feelings and learn to respond to others' expression of feelings' (p. 75). Explicit teaching of social skills was found to have a positive effect on at-risk children in particular.

(Child Z) could quickly see that his actions were affecting the group and that was affecting the way people talk to him, the way people respond to him (Teacher interview 1).

The social-skills teaching was also found to distribute responsibility for class behaviour from solely the teacher to the group. Josh observed:

A few people started chatting and there were two or three telling them to be quiet, because we've talked about [the fact that] it takes great strength to be sensible. If your friends are chatting, the easy thing would be for you to talk to them as well, but it's not the right thing to do (Teacher interview 2).

Teacher modelling was also important in developing a classroom community. This finding is consistent with Nolan et al. (2014) who emphasised the role of modelling in learning social and emotional skills, and not just relying on incidental teaching. The teacher taught skills and also modelled responding in situations that were emotionally challenging for him.

Josh observed that the children with more advanced social and emotional skills were models for their peers:

…it's helped them become better models to the other people in the classroom (Teacher interview 3).

Latisha (2014) gave a strong role to circle time and cooperative activities, finding that over the year, such sessions improved children's empathy and understanding. This is consistent with the teacher's prioritising of explicit social and emotional skills teaching. Josh observed:

Early in the year, there were a lot of comments like, 'Such and such made me do that'. I'm not getting those excuses anymore. They're taking responsibility for their own choices and behaviours (Teacher interview 5).

The strength of the community approach is that, potentially, it exponentially increases the number of positive, affirming interactions in which a child can participate in one day, accelerating change.

4. Providing expertise and support for the teacher from the broader community

Tim regularly worked in Josh's classroom, enabling Josh to achieve more than would have otherwise been possible.

Josh recognised Tim's key support role in shifting his teaching towards relational pedagogy and classroom community building.

He has played a huge supporting role, particularly talking with [children with trauma histories]. He's been able to supplement a lot of the content we've talked in the classroom and deliver it to them one-on-one or … intensify it for the kids. He also came in and did the introduction for the Kimochis, to give me a chance to look at it and see it as well. So, he's been [a] huge [help], organising the [parent] nights (Interview 3).

Tim concurred with Josh regarding the catalytic effect of his role on the classroom change process to a relational, community-based approach.

The guidance role to teacher was pivotal. That made the difference in what he did in the classroom. If I wasn't doing the stuff with the individual students, there still would have been the change in those students, but it was useful … it made a greater change (Outreach worker interview).

The role of in-service professional learning in improving the quality of teaching is increasingly being recognised (Feinstein, 2015). Increasingly, teachers are being offered professional learning support in class to improve practice (Timperley, 2008).

Professional learning can extend teachers' knowledge of children's social and emotional development, and ways to support it. 'Outsiders' can provide valuable skills and knowledge to support teachers who are re-thinking their pedagogy to improve practice and outcomes for children (Feinstein, 2015; Latisha, 2014; NSCDC, 2014). Peeters and Sharmahd (2014) argued for the use of such people as mentors, advocates, facilitators and role models. Peeters and Sharmahd (2014) stated that 'guiding facilitators' can provide teachers with the opportunity to reflect on their

practices and stimulate them into 'discovering what is possible' (p. 415). These researchers also found that such facilitators were of particular value in communities where many children were at risk, as in this study's community.

5. Fostering working relationships with parents so they are included as a part of the classroom community, bringing schools and parents into synchrony

Parents engaged with considerable interest in the project, with almost all families attending the after-school events.

I was really pessimistic about it [parent nights]. Then to get, you know, 90 per cent of parents, families coming in; it was a huge achievement (Teacher interview 2).

Josh described the opening that this high attendance provided in building a broader community knowledge of and interest in the class social and emotional development program, and the importance of that level of participation to project success.

I definitely think [Kimochis night] was vital … I had quite a number of parents say, 'We've heard sons/daughters talk about Kimochis, but we didn't really know what it is'. It was a way for us to share exactly what it was, how it worked, what it meant.

In education, if you don't have the support of the parents, it's very difficult to make it sink in and flow on. So, I definitely see parents are very important for the success of this project (Teacher interview 4).

Josh and Tim also gave examples of the reach of the social-emotional learning programs into the children's homes. Josh said:

It was nice to hear, 'Oh yeah, my son came home [and] told my other son about this, and how we work through problems'. It was really positive (Teacher interview 2).

Tim said:

We had those parents [who] wanted to know more. We even … had parents that wanted to buy the Kimochis to use at home. So we're getting an impact.

I was … hearing parents use the Play is the Way language with their children … The kids had taken all of that language home, they'd … taught their parents. [There was] one child who said to her mum, 'This is what we're doing at school, mum, this is the way I want you to tell me off from now on' (Outreach worker interview).

Tim also provided insight into the value of his support for Josh, as together they extended the classroom community to include families. In this way, a broader learning community was built. Tim commented about this change in Josh's confidence regarding parental involvement.

It's reignited his faith in parents wanting to be involved with their child's learning. He was starting to see that if

we provide a learning environment [where] the kids enjoy, where the kids flourish, then they'll share it with their parents. And the kids acted as peer educators for their parents, bringing the parents along; and all of a sudden, we're doing parenting work (Outreach worker interview).

The idea of partnerships between schools and their communities has made recent gains in Australian education systems, specifically in schools with considerable numbers of children at risk. Building class communities, which extend beyond the school gates, holds particular importance for communities with low incomes. Shonkoff et al. (2012) pointed to the social capital that developed in poorer communities when schools, families and other organisations work together to improve children's start in life.

In their research into the implementation of a social and emotional skills program, Stefan and Miclea (2014) found that for skill transfer to the home and generalisation of skills learned in the classroom, parents need to be involved in the learning program. From a clinical perspective, Perry (2009) argued that for children living with trauma, healing occurs most powerfully when parents are part of the process.

The project included a play-based approach to involving parents. Support for this approach comes from the literature concerned with the value of play-based social skill learning (Milteer & Ginsberg, 2012).

6. Involving the whole school in an extended social and emotional learning program to enable a whole site culture to develop

The class provided the most intense focus for the social and emotional skills program; however, other teachers in the school implemented some teaching in this area, particularly the Play is the Way program. Josh noted the positive effect of this across the school.

It's just like any program that comes into the school. If it's a whole school and everybody is doing it, everybody is on board; the language becomes more ingrained around the school (Teacher interview 5).

The value of a whole-school approach to social and emotional skills learning is strongly supported in the literature (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010; Feinstein, 2015; Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014).

In writing about school-wide programs to support the social and emotional development of Tiwi Islander children, Dobia and O'Rourke (2011) added that parents prefer universal rather than targeted programs that are appropriate to the school and community context.

Peeters and Sharmahd (2014) argued the need for school-wide responsibility regarding the teaching of social skills, saying that the building of such programs cannot solely be left to individual teachers. The responsibility for working with families, particularly those whose children are at risk, lies in the creation of a broader system that has

governance, financing and expertise to effect real change. Feinstein's (2015) review of the literature regarding children's social and emotional learning concluded that whole-school and community approaches were those that most successfully implemented these learning programs for children. Feinstein (2015) also argued that the strongest evidence has been found for the employment of a universal approach, that is, a structured process for program implementation that includes clear goals and steps to reach them.

In this project, a systematic, school-wide approach was employed. Those running the programs at both the classroom and school levels were trained and had reference manuals. Tim argued that schools are a key central community location and, therefore, ideal places for community development to occur.

> I think school is the centrepiece of most communities and it's the one place where everybody in the community links in, in some way. So, I think that's the other powerful thing I've seen in the picture this year. If we recognise this and use school as that pivot, we can engage parents, kids, adults, we can engage the whole community in what's happening (Outreach worker interview).

Sociometric data

The findings of the sociometric data analysis supported the interview analysis regarding the 'classroom as community' approach. Over the school year, a tighter and more socially cohesive classroom community developed. The number of children's mutual choices (important friendships) increased threefold from 8 to 25. In Term 2, 18 participants were chosen 35 times by other classmates. This number rose to 42 times in Term 3 for 19 participants; then rose again to 50 times for 19 participants by Term 4. Furthermore, the numbers of children who had one or more mutual choices rose from 6 in Term 2, to 11 in Term 3, and 14 in Term 4.

Conclusion

This paper discussed how the concept of 'classroom as community' informed the thinking and actions of the adults involved in The Wellbeing Classroom project. It also identified the key elements of the community-based approach employed. The six elements identified coalesce around the idea of community, which begins with establishing trusting relationships between a class teacher, children and their peers. Attention to the wellbeing of each member of the classroom community was found, in time, to develop trust amongst children and adults. Children's learning of social and emotional skills, using a common set of resources, enabled them to become familiar with the concepts and language of the resources and to be immersed daily in their use. Regular enactment transformed concepts from abstract ideas into lived

interpersonal interactions. As skill development occurred, the children gradually acquired the skills to build a sense of community together.

To be authentic in his interactions, Josh relinquished the position of 'power over' for 'power to' and became an authoritative community member who used his position to facilitate improved relationships amongst all. The expertise of the outreach worker provided the teacher with important validation and support to make this shift in power relations and practice.

Welcoming parents into the classroom community and to the resources provided a home–school connection, maximising the effect of the strategies employed in the classroom to create a community. The strategies were also enacted beyond the school gate. In a 'classroom as community' approach, parents can see their child's positive responses and developing skills, enabling them to be more socially successful at school. In this way, parents may become community-based champions for the school and their children, and come to feel that they too can contribute positively.

A limitation of this research was that it was conducted in one classroom. A whole-of-school participation in the social and emotional learning program is recommended, as it would enable the community culture to be carried into the later years. Incoming children would enter a world where they are able to learn about relationships more easily, and teachers would be able to share how their class has engaged with different aspects of the program and together grow their expertise.

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