

What Happens When I Incorporate Activities That Promote Kindness and Empathy
into My Fifth Grade Classroom?

EDU 602

Scarlett O'Neill

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Question in Context

I have been teaching fifth grade for the last ten years in a public elementary school in a suburban town with a population of 29, 460. This charming school has an enrollment of 557 students ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade. The population of this school is predominately white upper class families and has a reputation for being academically rigorous and competitive. The parents are very actively involved, and we are never short on volunteers for any school activities.

I feel blessed to have become part of this school's community. The parents, students, and faculty are a tight-knit group, and I have met and worked with many amazing people. Over the years I have been welcomed into the homes of numerous families, and I know that if I ever needed anything, personal or professional, I have a number of families that I could turn to without hesitation. I have also been lucky to have worked with an incredible staff of teachers who have been my second family. Do not get me wrong, my school certainly is not "Pleasantville," and I have had my share of nasty parents and cranky colleagues, but the positive has definitely outweighed the negative over these last ten years.

My current class is made up of twenty students, eleven girls and nine boys, who all fall into the average to above-average range academically. They all come from two-parent homes and are all involved in various extra-curricular activities. It is a wonderful class with a great deal of personality.

Throughout my teaching career, it has always been important to me that my students feel special and comfortable in my classroom. I have also tried to instill in my students the

importance of treating others kindly. It is unsettling to see students get left out, talked about, or picked on, and it is even more unsettling that it almost gets treated like a rite of passage that kids have to go through. It is even so common place that unkind behavior in school has been the plot of countless movies and television shows. I am sure that if we all asked our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents they could all give an example of a time in their schooling where they have witnessed or been a part of unkind behavior. It is disheartening to think that ten, twenty, thirty years from now students could be treating each other in the exact same ways. Several questions come to mind revolving around this topic: Why do students act this way? Is there anything that can be done to change these behaviors? What role should schools play in helping students learn stronger values?

Over the years I have tried to tackle incidences where students have treated each other unkindly with class discussions and punishments. I find that students can easily tell you what unkind behaviors are, why they are unkind, and how they should behave instead. Unfortunately, what they say and what they do can be two different things.

I have also created class activities that allow students to celebrate and compliment each other. One such activity is *Special Person of the Week (SPOW)*. Each week a different student is the *SPOW*, and he/she gets to decorate a small bulletin board with pictures, awards, artwork, etc. The rest of the class makes a book of compliments about that person over the course of the week. I find that this is a nice way for each student to have the spotlight, and also gives students the opportunity to take the time to recognize what is special about this person.

Around the holidays, we do something in my class called *Word Gifts*. We each pick a name of someone in the class out of a cup and make a *Word Gift* for this person. We write

complimentary statements using sentence starters, glue them on a big piece of construction paper that is in the shape of a gift, and decorate it. Similarly, around St. Patrick's Day, we do *Secret Shamrocks*. This activity also involves picking a name out of a cup, but this time you make a shamrock for the person with three reasons why you are lucky to know this person. I use these to teach my kids that kind words are gifts, and it is important to celebrate each other's strengths. These activities are fun and helpful, but I feel that I could do more.

In the 510 class we spent a great deal of time getting to know ourselves as teachers. Through our class assignments, activities, discussions, and most importantly my journal, I had the opportunity to reflect on what I value most as a teacher. I know, without a doubt, that my students are most important to me in my teaching. In 510, I also learned to think like a teacher researcher and have picked up the habit of constantly asking questions and reflecting on what is happening in my classroom. Most of the questions that I ask myself have to do with my students and their behaviors. I was reminded, through my journal, that one topic that I am quite interested in centers around how students treat each other.

I have two boys in my class, Chris and John, who describe themselves as "enemies." From the beginning of the year I could tell that there was a riff between the two and have tried to keep them apart. That helped for the most part in class, but I began hearing that there were some incidences going on at lunch and outside of school that I was not happy about.

Chris is the second oldest of four children in his family. His parents, though very nice, have what comes across as a "boys will be boys" attitude. I really like Chris. He is fun, has a great sense of humor, is very outgoing, and though he can be a bit of a troublemaker at times, I really feel that he has a good heart. Chris is a very social boy who has many friends. He is

described by his peers as a “popular” kid. He is quite athletic and plays various team sports throughout the year. On the weekends he spends a great deal of time with other kids his age.

John is the older of two boys in his family, and his brother is about seven years younger. His parents are more strict and set firm rules in the family. John is a somewhat quiet boy who has a small group of friends. His closest friends are not in my class. John is very sweet, hardworking, and helpful. Social skills do not come as easy to him as they do to Chris, and neither do sports. John spends more time with adults, and he often spends time after school and on the weekends at his mother’s office. He is a kid who often times gets picked on by other kids in the grade, including Chris.

About a month and a half ago John’s mother called me concerned that he had been coming home from school crying and saying that Chris was being mean to him at school and calling him inappropriate names. She went on to explain that it was unlike him to get this upset. She also told me that over the weekend both boys were in town and Chris was yelling obscenities at John and his friends from across the street. When I spoke to Chris, he was very open in explaining that the reason he acted this way was to look “cool” in front of his friends.

It was around this time that more questions started to swirl through my head: What makes some kids popular and some not? Why do some kids have better social skills than others? Do kids realize the impact their words and actions have on others? If they did, would they still act this way? Why does kindness seem to come more naturally to some more than others? Can you instill the value of kindness on another? What effect would that have on mankind?

During the first weekend of our 601 class, I decided that I wanted my research question to somehow relate to this topic. I wanted my students to truly realize the importance of being

kind to others, and I wanted them to want to be kind. I wanted to make this impression on them before they left fifth grade so they could carry it on with them to middle school and onward through their lives. With this in mind, I came up with my original research question: *What happens when I implement a kindness program into my fifth grade classroom?* My plan is to research and come up with various activities that I could use in my class that center on kindness. I will have the students reflect on the activities and on kindness in general.

Over the past few weeks I have been reading articles related to my topic and mulling my question over in my head. In my research I came across several articles about empathy that I thought tied in nicely with what I want to accomplish in my class. I realized that I wanted to include empathy somewhere in my question. I also discovered that I did not really like the way that my original question was worded. I specifically was not comfortable with the words, “kindness program.” To me this sounded like I wanted to find a packaged program on the market to buy and use in my class. I played around with it a bit and came up with a question that I am happier with: *What happens when I incorporate activities that promote kindness and empathy into my fifth grade classroom?*

I am excited to embark on this journey with my question. I look forward to using research to find ways to help my students be kinder people and maybe even use what they learn to spread their kindness onto others.

Literature Review

When I was deciding on a good research question I knew that I wanted the focus to be related to the topic of kindness and empathy in the classroom. I have had experiences in teaching fifth grade when students have left out, picked on, or ganged up on their peers, and I wanted to come up with an approach to try and teach my students kindness in such a way that it would make a true and lasting difference. That is how I came up with the question: *What happens when I incorporate activities that promote kindness and empathy into my fifth grade classroom?*

In order to best meet the needs of my students, I wanted to research what “experts” had to say about kindness and empathy and understand their views on how and why these values are important in school. I also wanted to learn the most effective ways to integrate kindness and empathy into my classroom.

In his book, *The Joy of Kindness*, Furey (1993) explains that, “kindness, at its most basic level, means acting charitably without requiring or expecting to be rewarded for one’s deed,” (p. 5). Children learn kindness when people are kind to them. According to Furey, (1993) “Children try to live kindness not because it is explained to them but, rather, because they have seen it and felt its warmth,” (p. 18). Since children spend so much of their time in the school setting, it is essential that the teacher make a concerted effort to make sure that each student is exposed to that kindness and warmth. Students need to be in a classroom where they feel comfortable, cared for, and valued. In his book, *Teaching Empathy*, Levine (2005) explains that:

In order for our students to feel cared for and motivated, we need to intentionally create connecting environments. A connecting environment is nonjudgmental and emotionally safe: a place where the unique story held within each child’s heart is given a voice

through listening and responsiveness, where each child and his or her story is accepted and honored. (p.7)

When these particular needs are not being met, there is more of a chance that a student will then exhibit negative behaviors in school. Setting a positive and safe learning environment is key in helping students learn to treat others well. (Levine, 2005)

These ideas made me stop and examine my own classroom environment. It is important to me that my students feel comfortable in class, and I want them to feel that they can take risks and be themselves. I also want them to feel cared for and valued, so I try to make connections with each student as often as I can by taking an interest in their lives outside of school, spending time with them individually or in small groups, and finding out what is important to them. I would like to do more of this, as well as celebrate their individual strengths and accomplishments more often.

Along these same lines, in the article, *Developing the Caring Classroom*, Durmondy (2003) agrees that teachers and students should work together to build a strong classroom community, and she also believes that teaching students to perform random acts of kindness can help them develop stronger values. She states:

It is critical that our classrooms provide safe, warm, and supportive learning environments. As we meet our students' academic needs, we must also concern ourselves with who our students are going to become. If we ultimately want caring adults, we must nurture that tendency in our children. It is essential that we build classrooms that foster positive relationships among all students and give students activities and responsibilities that foster personal accountability, kindness, and respect for others. We need to give students opportunities to care. (Making Caring a Custom section, para. 1)

I like the idea of encouraging the students to perform random acts of kindness, and think that is something that could work well in my classroom. It would be great to have the students

keep track of their random acts, or even have the whole class keep track. I would like to think that having students do this for a long period of time might make it become part of their nature to do kind things for others. I wondered what benefits it would have to get the whole school involved and even the families. Then I read an article, *It Takes a Child* (Allen, 2006), which told of a school that did just that.

In Brigantine, NJ, there was a school that won the *Kindest School in New Jersey* award, and their principal was voted, *Kindest Principal in New Jersey*. How wonderful would that be? I was thrilled to hear that there was even such an award. The school got there through its *Kindness is Contagious* character education program in which the whole school community emphasizes the importance of treating each other with kindness and respect. They start off the year with a kindness month and families get involved with keeping track of kind acts done at home. The parents have even gotten involved by doing their own kind acts, which has led the whole community to get involved. This ripple effect has caused the whole town to earn the *Kindest City in New Jersey* award, and the best part is that it all started in the school, (Raymond, 2006).

Besides creating a caring environment and having students participate in kindness activities, it is also essential that teachers praise students for the specific kind behaviors they see their students doing. It is also important to be specific while praising the student so he/she knows exactly what was good about the action. This positive reinforcement will encourage students to continue to treat others with kindness. Bailey (2006, ¶ 5) explains:

Noticing children's kindness, and praising it, not only encourages more of that kind behavior, it has other benefits as well. It expands a child's consciousness, fosters the rooting of a positive value system, and primes the brain for future success in school, society, and life.

Bailey (2006) also discusses how too often we focus on pointing out a kid's negative behavior rather than the positive. By spending more time focusing on good behaviors we will encourage more good behaviors. In the classroom, I know that it is very easy to notice a student doing something negative and then calling them out on it. I need to spend more time finding the positive acts that students are doing and draw attention to those. It will be interesting to see the impact that would have on individual students and class dynamics.

Another value that I wanted to emphasize with my students was empathy. Empathy, a relative of kindness, is thought of as the social emotion because it involves an emotional connection to other people (Caselman, 2007). Caselman explains that, "Empathy is actually the ability to read and understand another person's thoughts and feelings, and to let that person know in a positive way that you understand," (p. 9).

In her book, *A Short Course in Kindness*, Forrest (2003) states that, "Empathy is the starting point for every act of kindness," (p.48). Students need to learn how to open themselves to other people's feelings and viewpoints by trying to imagine themselves in that person's place. According to Caselman (2007), "People who are able to feel another's feelings and cognitively put themselves 'in the others shoes' are more likely to behave in ways that are compassionate and helpful," (p. 67). When students have empathy for someone else, they usually will want to do something kind for that person. "Once a person can imagine and understand why someone thinks and feels a certain way, that person can act on these cognitive and emotional imaginings by moving into an empathetic state," (Levine, 2005, p. 56).

In my research I learned that children as young as one and two begin to show signs of empathy through concern for others. When children reach the age of six or seven, they have the cognitive ability to put themselves in another person's place in order to understand his/her feelings, (Caselman, 2007). I was curious as to why, if children naturally develop and show signs of empathy at that young of an age, it can be so difficult for older children, and even adults, to be empathetic. It was interesting to learn from Levine (2005) that:

During the course of a child's life, this natural empathetic state becomes overridden as the child learns other social survival strategies such as who to be friends with in order to gain acceptance, what clothes to wear, what to say, or simply how to avoid those kids who are hassled by others even if he or she feels compassion or concern for them. Therefore, teaching empathy is often a process of reverberation in which the learner is returned to a memory of the feeling he or she once felt so naturally. (p. 20)

As a fifth grade teacher, I have definitely seen my students make decisions based upon how their peers are going to react. Peer pressure is a huge obstacle to overcome, in many cases, when it comes to trying to teach your students to be kind to everyone, even those they do not choose to be friends with. My student, Chris, was very honest in admitting that the reason he was mean to John was because it made the other kids laugh and, in Chris's eyes, look up to him. Sometimes it takes courage for people to be kind and empathetic, and I think that students need to learn that too. It is easy to walk away from someone in need if you think that your friends are going to treat you differently for helping that person. According to Forrest (2003), "We must let go of what other people think in order to lead them by example," (p. 72).

It is my hope that the students in my class will understand what kindness and empathy look and feel like, and that they would eventually choose to be kinder and more empathetic to others because they wanted to, not just because it is expected of them. In order for that to

happen successfully, I would have to find ways to make the lessons and activities meaningful to the students. According to Levine (2005), “A social skills lesson has three strategies that create captivating lessons in which learning takes place: make it real, keep it simple, and make it memorable.” (p.55) Lessons that followed those three criteria would be meaningful to the students and then make a lasting impression.

In an article I read entitled, *Mining the Values in the Curriculum*, Ryan (1993) explains that educators can teach values through formal and hidden curriculum. Formal curriculum would be considered educational curriculum and would involve connecting the values to existing curriculum such as literature or history. Hidden curriculum is the personal and social instruction in the classroom. This would include the tone that is set in class, expectations, what values the school deems to be important, and the school climate. I can think of several books, such as *Walk Two Moons* and *Maniac Magee*, which we read in class, which could be used to explore kindness and empathy.

An interesting activity that I found to emphasize kindness and empathy was role playing. When children take on the role of someone else and act out their behaviors and feelings they increase their affective and cognitive empathy, (Cotton, 1996). Levine (2005) shares that:

Role playing provides the opportunity for students to safely act out new skills in typically challenging social situations. I have found that role playing acts as an emotional hook that helps students explore challenging social situations in which a tough decision must be made (such as going against what others are saying and doing). (p.73)

Role playing different social situations provides students with practice in making positive decisions, treating each other well, and ignoring peer pressure.

In the article, *Character Makes a Comeback*, Lundstrom (1999) describes how schools can promote character building through peer mediation, bully-proofing, and teaching values as a core. Castleberry, a teacher interviewed in the article, said that, “Bully-proofing hits the nail on the head because it encourages children to say nice things, to be helpful, and to include others. When children know that they have a safe, caring environment, they’ll come to school ready to learn,” (Bully-proofing as Antidote section, para. 7). In my school we have a small bully-proofing program where eighth graders come in a couple times a year and act as *Bully Buddies* to the elementary students. They teach the younger students ways to handle bullying situations as a victim and a bystander. The students get excited about it, and they wish we had it more often.

Other activities that would be helpful in the classroom would be having students work in different cooperative groups allowing them the opportunity to work with a variety of different students, journal writing to express their feelings, class discussions/meetings on the topic at hand, and teachers sharing their own personal stories, (Cotton, 1996; Furey, 1993; and Levine, 2005). I feel that all of these activities would be easy to implement into my class and worthwhile for the students.

In addition to providing activities and discussions, it is essential that teachers model kind and empathetic behaviors. When children see desired behaviors modeled they are more likely to act kindly and empathetically than if they were just told to do so, (Cotton, 1996). It is crucial that teachers be aware of what they say and how they act in front of their very impressionable students.

The literature I have read reinforced the idea of how taking the time from the regular academic curriculum to foster the life-long skills of becoming a kind person is essential to

teaching the child as a whole. According to Levine (2005), “If you spend time each day teaching a pro-social skill strategy, you will begin to create a sense of ritual and ceremony regarding the significance of the skill building you are facilitating,” (p. 70). If more and more schools took the time to implement such programs, what wonderful things could happen to our society.

Methodology

Once I had the research to support my question, *What happens when I incorporate activities that promote kindness and empathy into my fifth grade classroom?* I was able to begin implementing the ideas in my class and collecting data. My data collection took place from the end of March until the end of June and consisted of student responses and reflections to activities we did in class, teacher survey responses, my field notes, and my journal writing.

Before getting started with any activities in the classroom, I sent a letter home to my fifth graders’ parents to make them aware of my project and what we would be doing in class over the next few months. I also asked for their permission to use their children’s work and refer to their children’s responses in my project. Every one of my twenty families sent back the form giving permission, and I had several positive comments written on the bottom about how they were thrilled that I would be taking the time to explore such important topics as kindness and empathy with the class. This made me even more excited to introduce the activities to my students.

Over the course of the three months, I presented a variety of different activities to my class that centered on kindness and empathy. I tried to choose activities that would capture the attention of my fifth graders and make a lasting impression. The introductory activity that I did was the *Toothpaste Activity* where I had the students work in pairs and gave each group a small

tube of toothpaste. Their first task was to squeeze as much of their toothpaste as they could onto a paper plate. Next, I gave each group a toothpick and told them that their challenge was to get all of the toothpaste into the tube. Afterwards we discussed how the toothpaste was a metaphor for unkind words and actions, and how once you say or do something unkind, it is hard to take it back. I chose this activity to start with because I felt that it had an important message, would get the students thinking, and would grab their attention. The students definitely connected with the activity and talked about it for the remainder of the school year.

In many of the articles and books that I read for my research, authors discussed the idea of having students take part in activities that focused on random acts of kindness. I thought that this idea would be good to use in my class to get students in the habit of performing kind acts in their everyday lives. For four weeks I had the students keep weekly logs of the acts of kindness they did, and at the end of each week, I had them reflect on their kind acts with a set of questions. The reflections enabled the students to analyze their kind deeds and the effect they had on themselves and others, see the importance of what they were doing, and set goals for the following week.

Similar to the *Random Acts of Kindness*, I also had the students keep track of kind acts that they saw other students in the class perform in school. They would fill out a slip describing the act and put it into the *Caught Being Kind* box. At the end of the week I would read all of the slips in the box aloud. This activity celebrated the kind acts that the students did for one another. It also motivated students to be more kind to one another and become more aware of their behaviors and the behaviors of others.

In addition to these activities, I also used the novel *Walk Two Moons*, by Sharon Creech, to teach empathy to my students. I used their written responses and our class discussions as part of my data. My data also included student responses to other questions and journal topics, field notes on students working in collaborative groups, notes on when we had eighth grade *Bully Buddies* come work with my students, my journal entries on their work, my modeling of behaviors, and the connections that I worked to make with students. I felt that all of these were worthwhile pieces of data that would enable me to see what students were thinking. I kept a section in my journal where I wrote down my areas that I was being subjective as well as my feelings about what we were doing and the students' responses.

As part of my research, I also distributed a survey to the teachers in my building. The purpose of this survey was for me to learn how my colleagues work to foster kinder, more empathetic learning environments, what literature they use, and how they view the role of educators when it comes to values.

Once I collected all of my data I needed to make sense of it all. What worked best for me was to write in my journal, in narrative form, what I learned from the data. This writing allowed me to put the results of my data into my own words and made it more meaningful for myself. I also highlighted areas in student written responses places that showed they were really connecting with the lessons, understanding the objective of the lesson, and relating it to their own lives. In addition, to organize my thoughts and make sense of my data, I also made lists in my journal under topics such as: what students thought to be kind acts, ideas from teachers in my building, questions that came to my mind while going through my data, and what I would like to try for next time.

Next, I color coded areas in my data under the following categories: areas where students made connections between themselves and the kindness and empathy lessons, data that was surprising, students' quotes that I thought were noteworthy, places where students exhibited an awareness for their own actions and the effects of their actions, and ideas to use in the future, either from students, colleagues, or myself.

The data that I collected provided me with new insight into my students, my teaching practices, and curriculum.

Data Analysis and Findings

Once my data was organized and analyzed, I realized that I now had many new insights to my research question, *What happens when I incorporate activities that promote kindness and empathy into my fifth grade classroom?*

My students were very excited, from the start, about the topics of kindness and empathy and the activities that we did in class. When I gave a questionnaire to my students, I was very surprised to see that they all said that, overall, they felt that students in our school, and in our class, were kind to one another. Several students, when asked to explain their thoughts, went on to say that they thought everyone was kind to each other because they have all known each other for awhile. It was interesting to see them make that particular connection between kindness and knowing someone well or for a long period of time. I assumed that there would be at least some students who said that they felt that there were kids in the class or school who did unkind things. Even Chris, who has been picked on a number of times by John, said that everyone was kind. I was curious as to why everyone had such a positive view as to how students in the class and

school treated each other. I know that I have seen students be unkind to each other and have heard students complain about some of their peers. Though I was surprised, I was happy to see that the students all had such a positive outlook on each other. Later, however, they did open up more about their own unkind behaviors and those that have been done to them.

After learning how my students felt about kindness in school, I thought that it would be helpful to hear my colleagues' views on kindness and empathy in the classroom and see what they were doing in their own classrooms to promote these values. I passed out a survey to the twenty-four classroom teachers in my building and got a response from eight of them ranging from grades 2-5. They were all in agreement that, for the most part, all of their students were kind to each other, with a few minor exceptions. They mentioned behaviors like teasing, tattling, poor manners, and excluding others as unkind behaviors that they have seen. These teachers' thoughts and observations were similar to my own. I learned that all of the teachers who responded have some form of positive reinforcement system set up in their classes to reward students for kind behaviors whether it was marble jars, tickets, or charts. Many of these teachers believed that it was the school's responsibility to reinforce what was being taught at home in regard to kindness and empathy, and that teachers should model kind and empathetic behaviors. One teacher was quite adamant that character education is becoming too much the responsibility of the school, and parents should take on more responsibilities in the home. Several teachers were in favor of having a school-wide program that promotes kindness.

This survey was helpful for me to get a sense of what goes on in other classrooms and on different grade levels. I was happy to see that all of these teachers thought that kindness and empathy were important values that should be instilled in the students. It is always great when your colleagues validate your own beliefs and teaching practices. It was wonderful to see that

different grade level teachers were reinforcing kindness and empathy in their classrooms. If students are exposed to that each year then they will have more opportunities to learn what kind and empathetic behaviors look and feel like, and hopefully they will be more likely to take part in those behaviors.

In my own classroom we did several activities to promote kindness and empathy. The students definitely responded the best to those activities that grabbed their attention, such as the *Toothpaste Activity* and having the *Bully Buddies* come into the classroom. The purpose of the Toothpaste activity was to show that any time you say or do something unkind to someone it is hard to take that back. Even if you apologize and they forgive you, they will always remember the unkind thing you did or said. The same rule applies in a positive way. All of the kind things that you say or do for someone stick with them too. After doing this activity with my fifth graders, I wrote the following reaction in my journal on April 14, 2008:

The kids were really excited about this activity and had a lot of fun doing it. The metaphor part actually had much more of an impact on the kids than I thought it would. They really took it seriously that the things they say and do to people actually do stay with them. I gave them the example that I am thirty-three years old and I still remember things that people said to me when I was younger.

Their written responses showed me that it really hit home to students that what they say has that much of an effect on others. They wrote about what they learned from this activity and how it related to them personally. They each had their own story about a time when they have done something to someone that they now regret and how they are going to think twice before doing or saying something unkind in the future. I could really sense the remorse in many of their reflections. Several of them wrote about taking a few seconds to think before you speak, so that

you can control the mean things that come out. One student, Alex, summed up the lesson well when he shared:

Now I will be much nicer to those who I have hurt in the past. I will be much nicer and compliment my siblings instead of tormenting them. I hope I won't hurt anyone anymore ever again. I also liked the activity very much. It was so fun. I like these group activities. Now I will think before I speak.

When the eighth grade *Bully Buddies* came with their guidance counselor, their goal was to teach the fifth graders about bullying and what to do if they find themselves in a situation where they are being bullied or they see someone else who is being bullied. My students loved working with the eighth graders, but what made the biggest impression on them was a story the counselor, Mrs. Clark, told about cyber bullying. She explained how an eighth grader at the local middle school went under another student's email account and, while pretending to be this other student, wrote a threatening email to a teacher. The police were able to track the kid down and he was expelled from school. He was also sentenced to fifteen weekends in juvenile hall and 300 hours of community service picking up cigarette butts off the street. In addition, he was fined \$1500. Hearing this story and other examples of how one can get into legal trouble for bullying caused my students' mouths to drop. It was my hope that seeing how serious the consequences can be for bullying would be enough to keep students on the right path.

Those two activities were examples of lessons that caught the attention of my students. According to Levine (2005), the best social skills lessons are the ones that students find interesting and will remember. The students could relate to these lessons and could connect their own personal stories to them. Lessons like these will stay in the students' memories and hopefully will help them in their decision making down the road. Seeing my students' reactions

first hand has made me even more aware of the importance of creating more lessons in the future that will cause similar results.

Several of the activities that we did in class showed me that the students were becoming more aware of their actions and the effect they had on other people. One such activity was our *Random Act of Kindness* logs and the students' responses to them, and another was our *Caught Being Kind* box. The point of these activities was to get the students in the habit of doing kind and helpful tasks on a regular basis.

It was interesting to hear several of my students express that doing kind things for others comes naturally to most people because it is the right thing to do. I was happy to find that the majority of the class enjoyed doing kind acts for others, and each week, the number of kind acts each student performed increased. Most of the kind acts that took place at home revolved around helping parents around the house with certain chores and helping their siblings or spending extra time with them. My favorite part was when they explained how the kind acts made them feel and the reactions of their family members. Michael shared:

I felt really great when I did kind acts for others. It made me feel happy and proud that I did something kind for others for no reason or reward. I had a warm feeling inside after I did those things.

A student named Kelly explained,

When I did an act of kindness it made me feel like a superhero. It made me feel like a superhero because when you do something kind you get a certain feeling like you are on top of the world.

When asked how others reacted to the students' kind acts, they all had very positive responses of how people were appreciative and happy that they had something kind done for them. Some also noted that they got reactions of surprise that they were doing something kind for no reason. In some instances, they even inspired others to do kind acts as well. One boy in my class stated, "They reacted really grateful to me. They were surprised I just randomly did something nice for them. Sometimes they helped me out or others." Another student shared that, "When I did kind acts, others were very thankful that I helped them. It also made my sister make her own log."

The positive results they were receiving and the way they felt inside caused my students to set goals for themselves, including doing more kind acts the following week that they had performed the previous week. Alex's goal after week one was, "I want to do more than this week. I want to do more bigger and kinder things also." I was very pleased to see that the students were seeing the cause and effect relationship between doing kind acts for others and feeling good about oneself.

I also saw signs of students becoming more empathetic in their reflections of their kind acts. Many students explained that the reason that they did certain acts was because they could see that their family members were tired or stressed and could use some help. Some of them also tried to cheer people up or calm a crying sibling. These students were able to recognize how another person felt and realized that they could use some help. It was terrific to see the students taking their kindness to this deeper level.

Through the *Random Acts of kindness* I observed the students become more aware of their behaviors and actions. They also became more aware of the behaviors and actions of their

peers with our *Caught Being Kind* box. In addition to writing the kind acts that they spotted classmates performing, they would also write positive comments on the slips such as, “Keep up the good work, Sally!” I noticed that the students really went out of their way to help their classmates with simple tasks such as picking up a spilled box of colored pencils to much larger acts such as including another student in a game. Overall, the climate in my classroom became much more positive for the rest of the school year.

Another place where I observed my students becoming more aware of empathetic behaviors was when we were reading our class novel, *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech. One of the major themes in this book is, “Don’t judge a man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins.” (Creech, 1994) In the novel, characters were quick to pass judgments on one another without taking the time to get to know each other. In our class discussions and their written responses I could see how they were recognizing when other characters were being empathetic to one another. The students were also able to put themselves in the positions of several characters to understand why they were feeling certain ways or making the decisions they did.

In one activity I created that tied in with this novel, students were asked to respond to the following question: Whose moccasins do you need to make more of an effort to walk in? Why do you feel this way? I was very impressed with the depth that the students reached when they answered this question. Most of the students wrote about someone who they were upset with or do not particularly like and questioned whether they had judged this person too quickly. For example, Michael shared:

I need to get in Eli’s moccasins because sometimes he makes me mad. He makes me just roll my eyes back sometimes when he says things. Maybe there is a reason he is that way

and I need to find out to understand him. I judge him by characteristics not personality and that is a really bad thing to do.

Reading Michael's response let me see that he realized the importance of taking the time to understand Eli on a different level and was working to find a way to tolerate the behaviors of Eli that annoyed him. Another student, Brian, also discussed the importance of putting yourself in another person's position to realize that you should not treat that person badly. He explained:

I think I need to walk in Henry's shoes more. I feel this way because many people call him a nerd behind his back and I think they call him this because of the way he looks or because he doesn't have any interest in what other people have an interest in. I have also called him a nerd too, but I regret it now because I also have the same interests as him so why should I be treated good and him bad? So that's why I think I should be in Henry's shoes more.

I thought that this was a terrific breakthrough for Brian because he is a student who is considered "cool" by his peers, and he does have a tendency to pick on or exclude other kids because they are different. I was thrilled that he was thinking about his actions and realizing that he and Henry really were not all that different after all. Hopefully if he continues to think in this way, he will behave in a kinder way to his peers and maybe his friends will follow suit.

In their responses, my students showed that they were able to think about someone else's feelings, motives, actions and decisions and have a better understanding of that person and be more understanding towards that person. That is what empathy is all about.

In my journal I wrote about a breakthrough that occurred between Chris and John in the last month of school. We were working on a social studies activity, and I let the students pick their own partners. Three students, John, Chris, and Julie came to me and said they did not have partners, so I made them a group of three. This was a little risky since I have always tried to

keep John and Chris apart because of their history. I could tell that Chris was not happy, and he even asked if he could join another group. Eventually he gave in, and the three of them got down to work. At first Chris and Julie were working together and John was sitting with them but working alone. I thought about intervening, but I was so thrilled that John and Chris were sitting together and not arguing that I decided to let it go for a little while longer.

After about five more minutes I observed Chris make the first move and ask if he could put his book on John's desk while he looked in his own desk for White-Out. This broke the ice. When he took his book back Chris started asking John his opinion on one of the social studies questions. Soon the group of three began working together as a team. There were no harsh words and no evil looks that passed between Chris and John for the time that they worked together. What a relief! After the activity that day I went to Chris and praised him for his positive behavior. I explained that I knew he was unhappy at first with the group he was put in, and I thanked him for doing the right thing. He was beaming.

Chris and John never became friends during the remainder of the school year, and I did not expect that they would. However, after that social studies assignment, they did not bicker in class and they spoke to one another in civil tones. Chris seemed to be less interested in picking on John, and he left him alone. They seemed to have a tiny bit more respect for each other, and I was happy with that. I do not need for these two to be friends. I do want them to be respectful of each other and kinder to one another. I am hopeful that this "truce" will carry over through middle school.

Implications

Throughout the journey in search of answers to the question, *What happens when I incorporate activities that promote kindness and empathy into my fifth grade classroom?* I have learned a great deal about myself and my teaching practices, and truly feel that I have grown as a person. I have also come up with ideas on how to improve my lessons on kindness and empathy and am excited to include new activities in the future.

My research made it clear to me that I am a key factor in helping my students be kinder and more empathetic to one another. It is my responsibility to make sure that I always welcome my students into a classroom environment that is warm and inviting. It has always been important to me that my students feel comfortable in my class and that they know they can take risks and come to me for anything. Now I can see, in the bigger picture, that creating this caring environment also fosters students' positive behaviors.

This experience made me more aware of my own actions and reactions to the students. I paid more attention to my body language in class, my level of patience with the students, and I became more conscientious of how I handled situations where discipline was needed. I was more aware of my role as a model to the students, and I tried to set a more positive tone in the classroom by spending more time praising students, pointing out their strengths, and making a point to notice the kind things they were doing for one another. I realized that being a model of kindness and empathy and making stronger connections with my students was just as important, if not more, than the activities we did in class.

I watched my students become more aware of their behaviors and the feelings of others. I found that providing them with the opportunity to reflect on their feelings in writing and

discussions helped to build this awareness. They got to know themselves on a deeper level, and I got to know them better as well. I will definitely incorporate more reflection time in my lessons in the future.

I was very pleased with the way that the activities went in the classroom and how willing and eager the students were to partake in them. There are some changes that I would like to make for the future. Time was my enemy when it came to implementing these activities into my classroom this past year. I started in late March, and before I knew it, school was over. I did not get a chance to do all of the lessons that I would have liked. Next year, I am going to start in September so that we have plenty of time to get everything accomplished, and we can do so at a deeper level. Starting in September will also make kindness and empathy regular components of our classroom.

Another obstacle I faced was incorporating these character education lessons into my already packed school curriculum. To me, the social curriculum is just as important, but I also had deadlines to finish social studies units and math lessons. In the future I would like to find a way to infuse the kindness and empathy lessons with the pre-existing academic curriculum. It worked well with *Walk two Moons*, so it should not be too difficult to incorporate into other areas as well.

I would also like to try adding a wider variety of activities to promote kindness and empathy in the classroom. I would like to provide more role playing activities that would be very beneficial to the students in getting in touch with the feelings of others. I think it is important for me to share more of my own personal stories with the students to enhance my

lessons. This will allow me to connect with my students on a deeper level and help validate some of their own feelings and know that they are not alone in their experiences.

Emerging Questions

Next year, while I continue to incorporate activities that promote kindness and empathy in class, I would like to explore other questions that arose during my research and work with my students. The most effective way for students to learn the values of kindness and empathy is for them to be reinforced both in school and at home. I got such positive feedback from this year's parents about what we were doing in the classroom. This caused me to wonder how I can create a stronger partnership between what I am doing in class and what parents are doing at home. How can I get the parents involved at home, and do they want to be involved? It would certainly have a strong impact on the students if their parents were reinforcing what we were doing in class.

Another question I have involves the Random Act of Kindness logs we did this year in class. The students did a wonderful job of doing kind deeds for others, keeping track of them, and then reflecting. This was all done over the course of one month. Next year I would like to start my activities in September. This leaves me curious as to what is an appropriate amount of time to have the students keep the logs. I want them to be doing their kind acts on a regular basis, but will it be too tedious for them to keep a weekly log for the whole year? I am afraid that if I have them keep a monthly log they may forget and save it all until the last week of the month. I could create a kindness month where they can keep track weekly over the course of the

month, but what about the rest of the school year? I will have to analyze this carefully to come up with the optimal amount of time.

One of the obstacles that I faced was the issue of time and being able to fit in these lessons with the academic curriculum that I was also responsible for accomplishing. This leads me to my next question: in what ways can I tie kindness and empathy into the existing curriculum? Language Arts seems like an easy place to start as books are always a great way to connect to character education. Are there other subject areas that would make sense to intertwine kindness and empathy? I would like to spend quality time looking at my current lessons and areas of study to go along with this. I also teach social studies to two other classes twice a week and am curious if it would work to try to carry over some of the ideas of kindness and empathy that I have been using with my own class to these classes? It is a thought that is worth trying.

An important question I have been wrestling with is, how can I get students to apply what they have been learning about kindness and empathy in class to “real life” situations? Students can easily explain what it means to be kind and empathetic, but when they are in the moment, and their friends are pressuring them, and they are faced with a choice to be kind or not, they do not always make the right decision. When all of your friends are leaving out Tom or making fun of Nancy’s clothes, it can be hard to go against the crowd and do the right thing. How can I instill in my students that actions such as excluding others, teasing, and gossiping are not acceptable ways to try to fit in with their peers? Peer pressure is a tough challenge to overcome. According to Forrest (2003) “We must let go of what other people think in order to lead them by example.” (p. 72) What can I do to help my students “let go” of what judgments their peers may make about them?

Something that really stood out to me in while I was analyzing my data was when one of my students wrote in a reflection, “You can’t always be kind, it is impossible.” I think about her statement every day and wonder how much truth there is to that statement. I know that I am not always kind every day in every situation. I can work harder to be more kind, but I am sure there will be times when I make the wrong choice. I am sure that even the “Mother Therasas” of this world have had their off days. I guess it doesn’t truly matter if someone is kind in every single situation so long as they make an effort to do better the next time. It is an interesting thought to ponder though.

When I began this project, I was not quite sure how my students would react and what affects my lessons and activities would have on them. I am so pleased with the enthusiasm they showed for these activities and the positive results that occurred. I enjoyed watching them become more aware of themselves and others and think on a deeper level about their actions and the feelings of others.

In doing the activities, having discussions, and giving my students time to reflect, I feel that I made a positive impression on my students. I am not naïve and know that my students are never going to say something mean to another person or are never going to exclude someone ever again, but I can feel good knowing that I got them thinking and made them more aware of their behaviors and the feelings of others. It is my hope that they will continue their kind acts for others and take the time to stop and put themselves in another person’s “moccasins” before making judgments. I am excited to improve this plan and explore new emerging questions as I continue on my journey.

It has been wonderful learning that kindness and empathy are not only valued by me, but by my students, their parents, and my colleagues as well. I will continue to foster these values in my classroom and look forward to exploring new ideas in the future.

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Subjectivity Addendum: What Happens When I Incorporate Activities That Promote Kindness and Empathy into My Fifth Grade Classroom?

EDU 602

Scarlett O'Neill

8/12/2008

I chose the topic of kindness and empathy for my project because those are values that are important to me. I have always been bothered by seeing students teased, or excluded, and wanted to do something that would make students be kind to one another. I do not expect all kids to be good friends with one another, but I do expect them to respect one another.

I was very surprised that my students and members of the staff seemed to have a much more positive view on the way students in the school treat each other. My students all felt that, overall, the majority of kids in our school and in our class are kind to one another. I truly expected most of the class to say that there were more unkind behaviors going on. I know they have all been a part of either treating others unkindly or being treated unkindly themselves.

Though my colleagues' views were closer to my own, I was still surprised at the level of positivity in their survey responses. A majority said that their students were kind with a few exceptions here and there. A couple of teachers wrote that overall, all of their students were kind all the time. Is that possible? I have been in the faculty room countless times when teachers have complained about disrespectful students or incidents of students picking on each other. I began to think that maybe my expectations for the way students should treat each other were too high. However, I did not feel comfortable lowering my expectations.

Then I took a step back and thought about how I would have responded to that survey if I randomly received it in my mailbox. I too would have most likely said that, overall, my students were kind to each other. When I think about it in a broader sense, yes, they are all kind to each other as a whole. Because I was the one who created the survey with specific thoughts in mind, I was expecting other teachers to be thinking in that same way. They were thinking in a more

general sense without all of my preconceived notions. Instead of asking such a broad question, I may have gotten different results if I had asked more specific questions such as: what kind and unkind acts they see in their classroom and how often they have to deal with unkind behaviors.

My views of what constitutes kind and unkind behaviors are subjective. I believe that unkind behaviors in school would include excluding someone from an activity, teasing, gossiping, rolling their eyes at someone, hurting someone physically or mentally. Someone else could have a different view of these behaviors. Some teachers may tolerate more unkind behaviors in their class than I do. What was important to me in this project were the behaviors that I wanted to see in my own classroom.

When I started planning lessons and activities for my class, my dream was that my students would quickly see the error of their ways and want to be kind to each other all of the time. I expected to get phone calls and emails from parents about huge transformations that they were seeing in their kids at home because of what I was doing in class. Most of all, I hoped that there would be a major breakthrough in the volatile relationship between Chris and John; maybe they would even become friends. I quickly discovered that those expectations were quite high and became willing to accept that I could be just as happy making a dent in the social walls that these students put up.

Because my expectations for a positive outcome were so high, and I really wanted to make a difference in the way students treated each other, I found myself choosing activities that would be easy for the students to have successful results. For example, I knew that all of the students would be able to complete kind acts for the *Random Acts of Kindness* log and that completing these acts would make them feel good. I also knew that most of the students would

do kind acts for the classroom and end up in the *Caught Being Kind* box. The kids who were rarely in it, I looked for their kind acts and put them in myself. I also did not set very strict parameters for what students could put on their logs or in the box. I allowed for even the smallest of acts, like picking up someone's pencil, to be included because I did not want them to get discouraged by having to do monumental acts like standing up for someone who was being bullied. I feel that a more objective person would have chosen an assortment of activities, set expectations, and sat back and watched what happened.

I also do not think that an objective observer would have provided encouragement along the way. I praised the kids for their good deeds and we celebrated their accomplishments. This encouraged them to do more kind acts. I think the praise and setting up for success, at least in the beginning, is important in keeping the students motivated.

I also decided to do activities that I thought would be fun for the students. I started with the *Toothpaste Activity* because I knew it would grab the attention of the students and get them interested in kindness and empathy. I also made sure to show my enthusiasm for these activities so that the students would be more excited about them.

Throughout the three months that we did these kindness and empathy lessons, I did have certain expectations for different students. I had been working with these students for seven months and knew them quite well. I knew, or thought I knew, which students were going to stand out in the activities and which students were going to have a harder time with opening up and also becoming kinder students. I have to admit that I was wrong. There were students in my class who surprised me and had very few kind acts on their logs, rarely if ever were in the *Caught Being Kind* box, or took a longer time than others to start to show more empathetic

thinking. On the other hand, there were students who I did not think would do much who really impressed me with their thoughts and actions. I was embarrassed that I was quick to judge these students instead of seeing their potential. A more objective person would have viewed all of the students on equal starting ground.

My subjectivity also showed up when I was analyzing my data. As I sorted through my collection of student responses, field notes, staff responses, and journal entries, I was looking for certain items such as areas where students were showing awareness, student quotes that were interesting to me, new ideas that I would like to use in my class, places where students were connecting what they learned to their own lives, and data that was surprising to me. Those were the topics that were important to me in what I was hoping to get out of this project. By looking for just those topics, I am not sure if I missed anything else that might have been important. If someone else were to look at my data, he/she may pick out what is important to him/her, and that may be different than my findings. I was looking for what would be most helpful to me as a teacher, not anyone else.

My project showed me that I strongly value the way students treat one another. I am most concerned with the feelings of the students who are not being treated kindly and what drives kids to be unkind to others. It hurts me to see kids being left out or picked on. It also makes me angry that students are often mean to impress their friends or because it makes them feel more powerful. I feel that it is my responsibility as a teacher to ensure that the students are exposed to social skills lessons. I personally do not think that all students are getting enough of it at home, so I feel that it is up to me to make sure that they are getting it in school. I know that not every teacher and every parent agrees that these values should be taught in school, but it is what I feel is right for my class. I know that I will not be able to completely change all of my

students' behaviors, but if I can at least get them thinking about others and the decisions they are making than that will make some difference.

Overall I am happy with the way that this experience has gone. My students grew, to different degrees, as kinder, more empathetic people. I learned so much from them through this process, and I learned so much about myself. I feel that becoming more aware of the environment I create in my classroom and how I want my students to feel has enabled me to become a better, more caring teacher. What I learned through my subjective data will help me continue to create activities that promote kindness and empathy in the classroom.

Implementation: What Happens When I Incorporate Activities That Promote
Kindness and Empathy into My Fifth Grade Classroom?

EDU 602

Scarlett O'Neill

8/12/2008

When I sat down with my principal in March to fill him in on what I would be doing with my class for my research project, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that our school-wide theme for the following year would be focused on kindness. He explained that he was going to put together a small committee of teachers from my building to come up with ideas and projects for the school. I immediately expressed my interest in being a part of this group. This would be a perfect way for me to share my research and findings from my project.

During my research I found a variety of different useful books and articles about this topic that would be worth sharing with my colleagues. I also came across various class activities on all different grade levels, including the ones I did with my own class. The group and I could put together a bibliography and packet of activities and materials that teachers could use in their classrooms if they wanted. At a faculty meeting I could also discuss with the whole staff what I did for my project and the valuable information I learned. They could then take my information and tailor it to their own students and classroom needs. It would be great if we could devote a few faculty meetings a year to come together as a staff and share what we were doing in our classrooms in relation to kindness, what we were learning, and new ideas we had. I do not think that we do this enough as a staff, and it is such a valuable use of time.

I would be sure to impress upon my colleagues that promoting kindness in the classroom goes way beyond doing an activity here and there. Teachers have to understand the importance of creating a caring classroom environment and understand their role as a model of kindness. If a student feels accepted and comfortable in class and feels respected and cared for by the teacher, he/she will be more willing to behave well in class. I would also explain how my students had a positive response to written reflections and that it helped them to better understand themselves

and the feelings of others. The staff may want to try some form of this in their own classrooms. In addition to kindness, my project was also centered on empathy as well. To me, kindness and empathy really go hand in hand, so I would also share ideas that would help our school's students become more empathetic.

The activities that I did were focused on just my class, but some of them can be altered to fit the whole school. For example, we could do a school-wide *Random Acts of Kindness* program in which every student and staff member could take part. We could also encourage parents to get involved as well. My former principal used to have teachers submit the names of students who they saw performing kind acts for others, and he would announce their names over the loud speaker during morning announcements. Those students would also receive a certificate from the principal. The students enjoyed hearing the kind acts that took place and it motivated them to be kinder themselves. We could also do some sort of school wide assembly programs that promoted kind behaviors.

Getting the entire school involved is a wonderful way to try and reach each child and teach them the importance of kind behaviors and treating others well. It would definitely enhance and reinforce what I would be doing with my own class. I am sure that my colleagues would have many new ideas to share that I could with my students as well.

In my district we have a program where teachers lead workshops that other teachers can take for professional development credits. These workshops run after school and over the course of a few weeks. There are a variety of workshops offered such as technology courses, classroom management, and differentiated instruction, and they are always looking for teachers to lead the courses. It may be interesting for me to take my research and findings to develop a professional

development class on kindness and empathy that my colleagues from other buildings could take. I would teach them what I have learned from my research and class experiences and do activities with them that they could modify and do with their own students. This would be a fun way for interested teachers to become more aware of ways to promote kindness and empathy in their classrooms.

Besides sharing my project with others, I am also going to use what I have learned to better my own teaching and improve upon the activities and lessons I have been doing. It is important to me to have kindness and empathy as part of my class curriculum. I plan on continuing to work to create a caring environment for the students and set a positive tone in the classroom. As a role model of kindness, I will keep aware of my own actions and responses in the class, especially in times where my patience may be wearing thin. I would like to spend more time celebrating the positive behaviors of students rather than disciplining negative behaviors. I also plan on sharing more of my own personal experiences with students in regards to kind and unkind behaviors as a way to connect with them on a deeper level and help validate their own feelings and experiences.

I enjoyed the activities that I did with my students this year, and I look forward to adding more to my curriculum. I also plan on starting in the beginning of the year as opposed to the last few months of school. This will help to set the tone in my classroom and make these activities part of our class routine. I would like to do more role-playing with my students by providing them with different situations to act out, and even having them come up with their own scenarios. This would enable them to empathize more with others as well as give them the experience in handling difficult situations where they are faced with a choice of acting kindly or unkindly.