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Fostering a Respectful and Engaging Classroom Environment

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Abstract: The classroom environment is an integral part of the learning process. A respectful classroom environment is defined as a space where all students feel safe, comfortable, and valued both academically and emotionally (Miller & Pedro, 2006). There are many parts to fostering a respectful environment: student-teacher relationships, peer status, and classroom management. Multiple findings suggest that positive student-teacher relationships and peer status greatly contribute to a feeling of belonging in the classroom, which is a large part of fostering a respectful environment. In addition, inclusive and student centered classroom management styles create and encourage a respectful learning environment as well. Finally, fostering an environment where all students feel valued leads to higher academic achievement and sense of belonging. The purpose of this study was to investigate the different ways in which teachers can build strong relationships with their students, foster positive peer relationships, and create classroom policies that ultimately contribute to a respectful classroom environment. Over the course of one semester of student-teaching, I compiled field observations, lesson plans, and student feedback in order to determine ways that positively fostered a respectful classroom environment in upper grade high school English classrooms.

Keywords: classroom community, teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, respect in the classroom

Research Question: How can teachers foster a respectful classroom environment?

Introduction

In the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, students have struggled with returning to school. Not only have students struggled with academics, but more so, they have struggled with behavior and social relationships on school grounds. Not only has it been difficult for students to readjust to in-person versus online learning, current events in the country polarize the educational field. Book challenges and banning has become more common, and the recent frenzy over what constitutes teaching critical race theory in K-12 education is becoming more widespread. To those outside of education, and especially those who are not in a K-12 school day to day, these issues are top priority. While administrators, teachers, and even students worry about how to respond to book challenges and critical race theory allegations, the main concern of school administration and faculty is the students. Concern about student academic progress, student social and emotional maturation, and school atmosphere remain the priority. A strong school community that is able to meet its students' needs has a much easier time dealing with curricular changes.

Students' sense of belonging and school atmosphere are a huge concern when it comes to striving for students' academic achievement and general well-being. Brofenbrenner's theory of *ecological systems* supports the prioritization of the classroom environment. This theory suggests that a child's best opportunity at academic success is an environment that respects, supports, and celebrates their identity. Alignment between a child's home environment, social environment, and school environment creates a sense of safety, belonging, and familiarity which, in turn, allows the student to better contextualize curriculum and prepare to learn. Brofenbrenner's suggestion of alignment between all of a child's environments is also supported by Jean Piaget and his theory on *schema*. *Schema* is the way in which children acquire a foundation of knowledge in order to aid them in learning new concepts. When a child's home, social, and school environment's align, they are better able to rely on their schema, or foundation of knowledge, in school. The ability to rely on schema helps students learn new and more challenging concepts. Thus, both Brofenbrenner's theory on ecological systems and Piaget's theory on schema support the establishment of a respectful classroom environment that supports students' needs and identities as a pathway to student success.

Throughout this paper, I discuss the importance of the classroom environment and all the pieces that make up that environment. In order to begin this discussion with proper context, I start with an analysis and review of existing literature that discusses different factors that contribute to a classroom environment. The four categories of review are the classroom environment, teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, and classroom management. After reviewing the literature, I discuss and analyze my own classroom data that I gathered throughout my student-teaching experience during the Fall of 2021. The data analysis is also grouped into four sections which include how teacher-student relationships build trust, how fostering peer relationships build comfort in the classroom, how honesty and choice contribute to a genuine environment, and a final presentation of evidence that a respectful classroom environment was created. The conclusion of this paper offers a synthesis of my main findings, how they answer the research question, limitations of my study, and implications for teachers, teacher education programs, and further research in the education field.

Literature Review

The Significance of the Classroom Environment

The overarching focus of this study is the classroom environment. A classroom environment upholds the values that a teacher fosters within their room (Miller & Pedro, 2006). Miller and Pedro (2006) specifically explore the qualities of a respectful classroom environment, which they believe is a space in which students feel comfortable, safe, and valued. Miller and Pedro (2006) found that there were multiple factors that contributed to fostering a respectful environment, including: classroom management, teacher-student relationships, and peer relationships. There have been multiple studies analyzing different aspects of a positive and respectful classroom environment as well as ways to foster such an environment. Many studies conducted on the subject record student feedback through surveys and/ or interviews. One such study by Keyes (2019) looked at student perceptions of belonging in the school and classroom. This study consisted of a compilation of 31 interviews of high school students attending a Chicago Public School and detailed a list of factors that students contributed to their sense of belonging (Keyes, 2019). A study by Pendergast, Allen, McGregor, and Ronksley-Pavia (2018) compiled interviews of school administrators, teachers, and middle level school students in order to see how a sense of belonging at school affected youth as well as how to create that sense of belonging. Öncü and Bichelmeyer's study (2021) surveyed high school and college students taking an associate certification course as well as the teachers who taught those courses. They asked questions about multiple factors that influence a students' sense of belonging, such as engagement, instructional practices, and teacher characteristics (Öncü & Bichelmeyer, 2021). Alston (2012) looked at how instructional practices might affect students' sense of belonging, and found that there was a relationship between instructional practices, a sense of belonging, and academic achievement. Lastly, Skerrett (2012) conducted a study in which she observed a teacher's reading class in order to understand how classroom practices contributed to students' sense of belonging and academic achievement.

Many of these studies point to the importance of teacher feedback (Alston, 2012; Keyes, 2019; Skerrett, 2012; Öncü & Bichelmeyer, 2021). Students appreciate when teachers take the time to give them meaningful feedback, and teachers recognize that taking the time to provide genuine feedback is a way to demonstrate that they care about their students' individual academic, and sometimes personal growth. As well as teacher feedback, the ability for students to provide feedback to their teachers has proven valuable to the classroom environment (Keyes, 2019; Skerrett, 2012). Students become empowered in giving feedback to their teachers, and it gives students a way to take an active role in their learning and classroom. Student feedback also provides teachers with firsthand knowledge on how to reach their students and provide them with the best personal and educational opportunities. Another way teachers can contribute to a respectful classroom environment is by using student centered practices (Alston, 2012; Keyes, 2019; Miller & Pedro, 2006; Pendergast et al., 2018; Skerrett, 2012; Öncü & Bichelmeyer, 2021). These practices include hands-on activities, lessons involving student identity, and collaborative assignments (Alston, 2012; Keyes, 2019; Öncü & Bichelmeyer, 2021). Again, teachers can demonstrate their strong relationships with students through tailoring academics to their identities, needs, and interests. Students feel valued and seen in a classroom that reflects who they are.

Another trend in creating a respectful classroom environment is a focus on mutual respect (Keyes, 2019; Miller & Pedro, 2006; Pendergast et al., 2018; Skerrett, 2012). Mutual respect is created when teachers follow the same standards they set for their students (Keyes, 2019; Miller & Pedro, 2006). This respect signals to students that teachers not only have high expectations for their students, but that they see those expectations as attainable and worth holding themselves

accountable to. Mutual respect often comes with an emphasis on relationships. Fostering positive teacher-student relationships, as well as positive peer relationships, is a large part of classroom culture. Positive and strong relationships create a sense of safety in the classroom that allows for more meaningful learning. Many studies point to the positive benefits of creating strong relationships within the classroom (Keyes, 2019; Pendergast et al., 2018; Miller & Pedro, 2006). Positive relationships lead to better student engagement, better student achievement, and a better sense of belonging (Keyes, 2019; Miller & Pedro, 2006; Pendergast et al., 2018; Öncü & Bichelmeyer, 2021). Though many classrooms focus on student-teacher relationships, peer relationships are a large factor in student comfort, and a teacher does have a big role in fostering positive peer relationships through academic and community building activities.

Some more specific factors that help create a respectful classroom environment are celebrating identity, creating safe spaces, and ingenuity. Celebrating students' identities demonstrates that they are valued by the classroom and that they bring something valuable to the classroom community. Sharing and reflecting student identities in the classroom creates a strong sense of belonging (Keyes, 2019; Alston, 2012; Skerrett, 2012; Miller & Pedro, 2006). It also contributes to the creation of a safe space for all students because students see themselves as valued and represented in the classroom. In many studies, students and teachers have commented on what they call a "safe space" (Pendergast et al., 2018; Miller & Pedro, 2006). Safe spaces are places where students can be their authentic selves, ask difficult questions, make mistakes, and grow together. Having a classroom that students feel safe in is very important to a strong classroom environment. If students do not feel safe to be themselves and make mistakes, not only is learning difficult, but creating a culture of ingenuity is difficult. In Miller and Pedro's study (2006), they found that students who believed their teachers to be genuine people, felt more comfortable in the classroom. This sense of comfort led to a stronger and more respectful classroom environment. If a student can trust a teacher to be genuine and real with them, students will be more comfortable being genuine and real with their teachers and peers. In nearly all instances mentioned, teachers act as the role model that sets the classroom standard of respect. In the end, teachers hold the most power and ability to foster a respectful classroom environment.

Influence of Teacher-Student Relationships on Classroom Environment

An integral part of creating a respectful classroom environment is fostering strong teacher-student relationships. Many studies have shown connections between these strong relationships and a sense of belonging in the classroom (Cheung, 2019; Hernández, Eisenberg, Berger, Spinrad, Van Schyndel, Silva, Southworth, and Thompson, 2017; Martin & Collie, 2019; Scales, Pekel, Sethi, Chamberlain, & Van Boekel, 2020; Spilt, Hughes, Wu, and Kwok, 2012). Martin and Collie (2019) sought to prove this relationship through a study of student academic achievement and the number of positive versus negative teacher relationships students had. The longitudinal study followed over 2,000 students in 18 different high schools and determined engagement in learning, aspiration for achievement, enjoyment of school, and dynamic of relationship through surveys. Martin and Collie sorted and ratioed the data based on those categories. They found that when there were more positive teacher-student relationships in a student's day, their academic achievement and engagement increased. In addition, for students who had more negative than positive relationships with their teachers, for every additional positive relationship a teacher made with that student, their engagement in school and academics increased incrementally (Martin & Collie, 2019). These findings imply that even one teacher can

stand to make a difference in whether a student feels that they belong in school and in the classroom.

Hernández et al. (2017) saw similar trends in their study. Their study focused on student-teacher conflict and whether it had an association with student efficacy in the classroom. Meaningful relationships between students and teachers in the classroom showed a connection with academic achievements. Conflicts between teachers and students had an adverse effect, resulting in lower academic achievement for students involved in negative interactions with their teachers (Hernández et al., 2017). The main focus of their study was to examine students' ability and want to refocus and engage in the classroom based on the relationship they had with their teacher. They predicted that a more harmonious student-teacher relationship would lead to more trust between the student and the teacher. However, the results also pointed to a preliminary finding that positive teacher-student relationships and "interactions" reflected an increase in positive academic experience as well (Hernández et al., 2017). Again, this study points to how a strong and positive student-teacher relationship might increase student motivation as well as foster a respectful and engaged classroom environment.

Cheung (2019) conducted another study on teacher-student relationships. This study hypothesized that a positive student-teacher relationship was crucial for smooth school adjustment. The study surveyed over 300 students three times over the course of 18 months. The students answered questions about their parents' involvement in their education, the quality of their relationships to their teachers, and how they felt they were adjusting to school (focusing on themes of school belonging, engagement, and perception of competence). Though the purpose of Cheung's study (2019) was on the connection between parents, teachers, and students, there were findings that supported the benefits of good teacher-student relationships. One such finding was that positive relationships between teachers and students were associated with school adjustment as demonstrated through school engagement, valuing of education, and student perceptions of their own competence in the classroom. These studies demonstrate and summarize the common finding that students with positive relationships with their teachers are more likely to engage in school and, as a result, have a better chance at academic success.

There is also a lot of research that points to positive teacher-student relationships being an avenue for belonging and adjustment in the classroom, which aids in fostering a respectful classroom environment (Scales et al., 2020; Spilt et al., 2012). Spilt et al. (2012) related the findings of their study by incorporating different student demographics. Their study followed over 600 ethnically-diverse, at-risk students as they progressed through elementary school. They observed students and then created trajectories based on the qualitative data. Overall, positive growth in teacher-student relationships led to higher gains in academic achievement, and conflicts between students and teachers led to less academic achievement. However, the effects of student-teacher relationships did not affect all students proportionately. Black students, students living in poverty, and children with low IQ or behavioral problems were more likely to have weaker relationships with their teachers and were more likely to have lower academic growth (Spilt et al., 2012). This study also found that while girls, overall, had stronger relationships with teachers than boys did, girls who were in conflict with their teachers suffered more academically than boys who were in conflict with their teachers (Spilt et al., 2012). Scales et al. (2020) conducted a study in which they delved deeper into the student perceptions of positive relationships with their teachers. They looked at the development of these relationships over the course of a school year, and their overall findings revealed that when students reported that they had a good relationship with their teachers, their motivation, their GPA, and their

school involvement was better (Scales et al., 2020). This study illustrated that a positive student-teacher relationship leads to a better sense of belonging in addition to better academic achievement; moreover, it shows that teachers should pay special attention to stereotypes or biases when forming relationships with their students. Both boys and girls benefit from a positive environment and a strong relationship with their teacher.

In addition, while very few students reported major changes in their relationship with their teachers, for the few who did report positive growth, their academics and school involvement improved as well (Scales et al., 2020). Scales et al. (2020) interviewed their participants, the students involved in the study, over the course of three semesters gauge their perceptions of how teachers can create meaningful relationships with their students and how those relationships benefit their students. Students offered two great ways in which teachers can foster a positive relationship: (1) students commented that it was much easier to trust their teachers who responded to their needs and (2) students mentioned that they respected when teachers apologized to their students or admitted they made a mistake (Scales et al., 2020). When teachers hold themselves to the same standard as their students and are able to admit their own shortcomings, students are able to trust and respect their teacher. Students who were interviewed for this study believed that they viewed the teacher, as well as themselves, as responsible for creating a positive relationship. Respect and trust have to go both ways if there is to be positive growth (Scales et al., 2020). This study provided valuable insight to how students reacted to teacher practices and attempts to form meaningful relationships. All of these studies point to the benefits of strong, meaningful teacher-student relationships and the positive correlation those benefits have with a sense of community and belonging within the classroom.

How Peer Relationships Affect Classroom Belonging

Another important relationship dynamic within the classroom is *peer relationships*—relationships and dynamics amongst students and their peers. The dominant group, or the group that sets the norm for behavior, is often referred to as the peer group. Multiple studies have been conducted in order to explore these relationships and their effects on different students. One such mixed method study by Kiefer, Alleyn, and Ellerbrock (2015) looked to explore peer relationships as they related to student motivation, classroom engagement, and school belonging. The study's participants were all teachers and students from the same urban middle school; participants were observed and surveyed. One major finding was that “all participating educators and a majority of students perceived peer academic support and emotional support as central to supporting student needs for relatedness and promoting classroom engagement and school belonging” (Kiefer et al., 2015, p. 12). Students are often concerned with how they are perceived by peers because it is their peers who decide what students are popular; this concern can affect their relationship with their teacher and their peers as students act out to seem cool or try to remain invisible to the peer group. It is hard for students to navigate these relationships in ways that are genuine and meaningful to them. Kiefer et al. (2015) discovered that teachers seem to be in a unique and influential role when it comes to fostering genuine, supportive, peer relationships, though they admit that there needs to be further study in order to understand just how a teacher can take advantage of their role in the classroom.

Another study on peer relationships by Engels, Colpin, Van Leeuwen, Bijttebier, Van Den Noortgate, Claes, Goossens, and Verschueren (2016) followed a large group of students in various grades between 7th grade and 11th grade, observing their classroom interactions. The major finding of this study was that teachers have influence on student engagement in the

classroom as do peers, but their influence is not interconnected (Engels et al., 2016). They found that peers were equally as important as teachers (Engels et al., 2016). However, this study does not look at how teachers and peers interact and engage with each other, so it is entirely possible that classroom practices geared towards creating amiable peer relationships were not observed. While this poses a possible limitation of this study that is similar to Kiefer et al. (2015), this study does go further into how the peer group influences each other. For example, well-liked students experienced pressure to be like other students in order to continue to be well-liked (Engels et al., 2016). This factor contributed to the creation of classroom norms amongst the students as students strived to mimic each other to fit in. In addition, students who were “popular” were less likely to be behaviorally engaged and often showed less motivation and concentration in the classroom (Engels et al., 2016). This issue leaves a major area to explore: how a teacher might institute classroom procedures, policies, and environments that combat this lack of motivation without students feeling as though their social status is affected.

Berchiatti, Badenes-Ribera, Ferrer, Longobardi, and Gastaldi (2020) surveyed students with and without stutters using a sociometric, or social status, questionnaire as well as teacher evaluations in order to determine how students were received by their peers. The main finding of this study showed that children who stuttered were more likely to be unpopular and rejected by the peer group (Berchiatti et al., 2020). Students who were noticeably different from their peers, in this case those who stuttered, were given a lower social status in the peer group. Students who are different in a non-noticeable way, are advantaged in being able to hide those differences from their peers. When it came to the teacher’s role in peer relationships, Berchiatti et al. (2020) found that, when it came to grades and motivation in the classroom, students that were seen as average status in the peer group had higher grades than those who were rejected. This implication could be due to the high rate of students with a stutter in the rejected grouping. This study neither explored the teacher’s role in peer relationships, nor did it discuss what peers or teachers might do to foster more positive relationships. Berchiatti et al. (2020) did demonstrate that the perception of students who are different from the norm of the peer group has a relationship to whether those students feel they belong in a classroom environment.

Troop-Gordon and Kopp’s study (2011) looked at how a teacher might positively or negatively influence how the peer group operates. This study looked at how relationships in the classroom evolved over the course of a year with a focus on the victimization of students by their peers. Their main finding provided evidence that a close teacher-student relationship did little to nothing to protect a student from being victimized by their peers (Troop-Gordon & Kopp, 2011). Students were not deterred from bullying or harassing their peers even if the student exhibited a strong relationship with the teacher. The students who were harassed or victimized were, again, students that did not fit in. Another finding of the study was that a student’s dependency on a teacher raised the risk for the student to be involved in peer harassment, rather than having conflicts with authority, the teacher in this case (Troop-Gordon & Kopp, 2011). Again, this study did not go deep enough as to explain how or what specific actions led to victimization or the creation of positive or negative relationships within the classroom. However, it did show the significance of the peer group within a classroom setting.

Ruzek, Hafen, Allen, Gregory, Mikami, and Pianta (2016) research how a teacher might foster positive peer relationships. Their study followed students, ages 11-17, from the beginning of a school year to mid year. The study had students self-reporting their experience in the classroom. At the same time, Ruzek et al. (2016) observed teachers and their practices. The major finding of the study was that teachers who interacted with students in a positive, and

respectful manner are able to better foster peer relationships through modeling respect and support for peer relationships. Teachers who had the most success in behaviorally-engaging their students fostered “emotionally supportive” classroom environments, and in doing so, were able to “lead students to perceive that their peers are supportive, positive, and respectful” (Ruzek et al., 2016, p. 101). Teachers are able to create such an environment through engaging in genuine conversation, encouraging peer support, and demonstrating care for the individual student. This study illustrates that a teacher’s classroom practices can influence peer relationships, and the practices are conducted with an understanding that positive peer relationships can lead to academic success and a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Classroom Management Practices that Foster Community

The last factor to explore when it comes to a respectful classroom environment is a teacher’s classroom management. *Classroom management* involves a teacher’s policies, procedures, and guidelines for learning and behavior within the classroom. Krei and Shoulders (2015) conducted a study that observed 256 teachers in rural high school settings in order to determine whether certain characteristics of these teachers, like years of experience and classroom management practices, lead to more student engagement. The major finding in this study found that teachers of 5-14 years of experience had more confidence in their classroom management practices. However, more experienced teachers had similar levels of student engagement in their classroom as the teachers who had 0-4 years of experience (Krei & Shoulders, 2015). The study also found that teachers with a Master’s Degree had more confidence and assurance in their classroom management skills than teachers with a Bachelor’s Degree; however, this factor also did not lead to more or less student engagement (Krei & Shoulders, 2015). The findings of this study demonstrate how a teacher might become more confident and consistent in their classroom practices. The major limitation of this study is that these findings do not explore specific classroom practices or student outcomes. It did have implications for a connection between a consistent classroom management approach and student achievement, which suggests further observational study.

Back, Polk, Keys, and McMahon’s study (2016) surveyed 208 teachers across 38 high schools in order to evaluate how classroom management practices, among other school wide practices, related to student achievement. The setting was an urban school environment and student achievement was measured by ACT scores (Back et al., 2016). Back et al. (2016) found that classroom management did have an influence on student achievement. This study demonstrated the limitations of Krei and Shoulders’ study (2015); Back et al. (2016) analyzed student ACT scores as a product of classroom management practices and found that classroom management was an important factor in student achievement, school belonging, and in combating difficult climates common in urban school settings. While specific classroom management techniques were not listed, Back et al. (2016) saw that effective practices varied, but the best practices were catered to student strengths and needs, sensitive to culture, and centered around student choice and autonomy. Again, the limitation of this study is that specific classroom management strategies were not listed, but the study implies the difficulty in doing so as the student demographic varies from classroom to classroom. Thus, the same exact practices cannot be expected to work in every classroom.

Booker’s qualitative study (2021) focused on the connection between classroom management and classroom environment through interviewing and observing nine classroom teachers. This study found that these teachers had great classroom environments which Booker

(2021) attributed to their classroom management styles. Teachers used collaborative practices in order to get their students fully involved in the classroom. These practices included co-constructing classroom rules and creating social contracts. Students would first create these resources individually, then collaborate in small groups before finalizing them as a whole class. These rules and contracts were also mutual, meaning both teachers and students were expected to adhere to them (Booker, 2021). In following the same classroom practices that students do, teachers are able to model good behavior and empathy as well as demonstrate how student voice is valuable. These practices increase a sense of classroom belonging and creates a more positive and respectful classroom environment. Consistency in structure, in addition to showing concern and care for the student inside and outside the classroom, is also a major factor in fostering a positive environment (Booker, 2021). Students are receptive and can understand when a teacher genuinely cares about them over their grade, and commonly engaging in non-academic conversation or going to extracurricular activities demonstrates genuine care for the wellbeing of the whole student. Feeling cared for allows students to trust teachers and truly buy-in to the respectful classroom environment.

Sandwick, Wonsun, Hahn, and Ayoub's study (2019) focused on five New York City schools and their specific classroom and school-wide community-centered practices. These schools used strategies in line with restorative justice practices in order to respond to student needs. Such practices included "one-on-one student check-ins or restorative conversations; mediation; mentoring; varied community-building strategies; multiple forms of talking circles (e.g., community building, harm, support, reentry, etc.); and ongoing counseling" (Sandwick et al., 2019, p. 11). Though schools emphasized different practices, all practices contributed to a more harmonious school and classroom atmosphere. Teachers had the opportunity to structure restorative justice practices into their daily routine and use these practices as needed. Oftentimes, restorative practices were tailored to specific situations and/or students (Sandwick et al., 2019). This study's findings are comparable to Booker's (2021) study. Both point to catering classroom practices and procedures to the specific student demographics and needs. In focusing on the individual students, teachers are able to better understand and accommodate students as well as show that the individuals are valued. When students are and feel valued, fostering a respectful classroom environment becomes natural.

Lewis and Tierney (2013) looked closely at how emotion and emotive interactions in a classroom related to classroom belonging. This study followed one 11th/ 12th grade film class and how they navigated difficult discussions. At the beginning of the year, the teacher, Ms. Haas, set the expectations for students by saying, "If your teachers let you do nothing and get a passing grade, you are being disrespected," and "I expect something of you because I know you can do it" (Lewis & Tierney, 2013, p. 297). In explicitly telling her students that she believed in them, she demonstrated that she cares about them and their academic progress. She also encouraged them to believe in themselves. This support sets the foundation for meaningful classroom relationships. This teacher also allowed students to move about the classroom freely, demonstrating her trust in their judgment and needs (Lewis & Tierney, 2013). Students were also able to leave the classroom to interview various students and staff for projects, and they were able to chat as they worked, again, demonstrating the mutual trust and respect in the classroom (Lewis & Tierney, 2013). This study, as compared to other studies, also gathered detailed student responses to the teacher's practices. Overall, students appreciated the teacher's "toughness" and attributed it to her challenging them to be their best; one student, Vanessa, expressed that "she 'loved' Ms. Haas and the class" (Lewis & Tierney, 2013, p. 300). She also

expressed that Ms. Haas created an environment where students felt safe, free, and validated in sharing their thoughts, ideas, and opinions. Again, one of the most important factors in fostering a respectful classroom environment is utilizing classroom management practices that empower and value students.

Methodology

The original focus of this study was to determine the benefits and effectiveness that certain classroom activities had on student engagement, specifically in the high school setting. Throughout the course of the 2021 fall semester, I implemented various brain break strategies, hands on activities, movement, group activities, share circles, and more in order to encourage student behavioral engagement in the classroom. However, in reviewing the data of this study, I noticed that the data collected had interesting implications for how these strategies affected the classroom culture and student-teacher relationships. Thus, the conceptual framework shifted from engagement to creating a respectful environment. In analyzing the data, I focused on answering the question: *How can a teacher foster a respectful classroom environment?*

The concept of a *respectful environment*, as outlined by Miller and Pedro (2006), acts as the framework for analyzing and discussing the classroom data of this study. In order to foster a respectful classroom environment, or a classroom where every student feels safe, heard, and cared for, teachers must learn to understand students' identities and backgrounds (Miller & Pedro, 2006). This allows teachers to not only connect with students but also create academic lessons and schedules that accommodate students' home lives and identities. Doing so creates a sense of belonging in the classroom and helps students become more receptive to feedback on disrespectful behavior (Miller & Pedro, 2006). A respectful classroom environment acknowledges and celebrates its students through differentiated lessons, diversified content, and the allowance of students to talk to one another and the teacher in non-academic situations (Miller & Pedro, 2006).

The participants in this study consisted of 18 students from four different sections of English classes. Six students were seniors from two sections of a Senior English Workshop class, while 11 students were juniors from two different sections of a Co-Taught Junior Literature and Composition class in which myself, my cooperating teacher, and a special education co-teacher were in the classroom daily. The junior classes were part of a co-taught track designed to give additional support to students with individualized education plans (IEPs). An area of additional support is having a content teacher and a special education teacher in the classroom everyday. One student that participated in the study, a senior, was in one section of the Senior Workshop class as well as one section of the Junior Literature and Composition class. All students attended the same school, located in an urban area within central Illinois. 34% of students were proficient in ELA according to 2021 SAT scores (ISBE 2021). The class sizes vary throughout the school and within the four sections surveyed; class sizes were anywhere between 11 and 18. All students that participated in the study had an individualized learning plan (IEP), though some were learning based while others were behavior based. 47.3% of students at the school with an IEP are chronically truant, and 46% of students with an IEP are chronically absent (ISBE 2021).

Classroom layouts became an important factor in this study as it looked to analyze different classroom practices and activities that foster a respectful classroom environment and community. In the Senior English Workshop Classroom, the desks faced the center so the students were looking at each other rather than the teacher. I often sat amongst the students

when discussions were taking place or when reading aloud. Once or twice throughout the semester, the class was held in the Co-Taught Junior Literature and Composition classroom in order to better encourage group cooperation and communication. That classroom held two large clusters of wooden tables where the majority of students sat. It also had seven individual desks for students who preferred their own space. All the seats were placed so that students faced each other rather than the front of the classroom. The layouts of the classrooms allowed for the following types of activities to be implemented: varying academic and non-academic discussions, check-ins, modeling using student interests, incorporating movement, utilizing student choice, project based learning, group work, etc.

During the research study, three major data sources were analyzed in order to draw conclusions about the research question: *field notes/ reflections*, *anecdotal records*, and *lesson plans*. Sixteen *lesson plans*, or detailed instructions for how I taught a lesson, were created prior to teaching, and each plan incorporated and encouraged community building within the classroom. After each lesson was implemented, I took the time to write up *anecdotal records*, or quick notes, about each student and *reflections*, or quick summaries, about each lesson or activity. These records, totaling to about eight notes per student and nine summaries, detail how students responded to lessons verbally and physically as well as showcase evidence of comfort with peers, the teacher, and the classroom environment as a whole. I also took time to write up eighteen detailed *field notes*, or thorough retellings of a lesson or class session, that contained specific context around student responses to the lesson plans and activities that were written up in the anecdotal records and reflections.

I analyzed the *field notes*, *anecdotal records*, and *lesson plans* by theme. In order to identify these themes, I noted repetitions, significant changes, and student feedback in the form of behavioral and verbal cues. The four themes, or trends, that were found in the data were peer interactions, teacher-student interactions, classroom management practices, and student engagement. I first printed my field notes, anecdotal records, reflections, and lesson plans so that I could thoroughly reread them. In this process, I was able to discern what classroom practices and relationship building strategies that I employed were most effective in creating a respectful classroom environment. I then used all of this data in order to help me interpret the exit survey I gave students at the conclusion of my semester of student teaching. I will discuss the themes found in my data collection in the following section of this paper.

Research and Data Analysis

Building Teacher-Student Relationships

I kept observational field notes as well as anecdotal records during my student teaching semester. This observational journal spans from the end of September to the end of November. The field notes were written 36 hours of a major lesson, and the anecdotal records were taken sporadically throughout the semester because they detail unplanned instances of community building. I also have some of my lesson plans cited as they have planned activities and discussions for community building. The first major trend that was found in the data is that the better my individual relationships with my students were, the more comfortable and safe they felt to be themselves and participate in lessons.

At the beginning of my field notes, there are not many student responses. When I taught or checked in with students to see how they were doing, I seldom got responses and I rarely noted a conversation. Even at the beginning of data collection, which was about a month into the school year, students still saw me as a stranger in the classroom. They were not sure what I was like,

and they did not feel comfortable showing me their own personalities. More to the point, they did not feel safe confiding in me, even if it was to let me know how they were feeling on any given day. As detailed in the following paragraphs, my effort in making non-academic connections with students created a classroom environment in which students felt safe and comfortable sharing their experiences growing up and taking steps to becoming an adult, instances which can be emotionally heavy.

In my first field note, taken from my fifth period co-taught Junior Literature and Composition class, I noticed that allowing students to transition into the class not only helped with engagement, but also helped students be more willing to participate in the lesson. For example, one student, Demetrius, always came into the classroom with a lot of energy. This particular day, my first lesson for this class, he was set on doing back flips in the classroom. He was really excited about it, so instead of immediately shutting him down because I was nervous about him getting hurt, I engaged in conversation with him about it. I told him that I believed he could do a backflip; however, I encouraged him not to do it in the classroom because he is pretty tall, and I did not want him to get hurt by hitting the projector or trying to land the flip in sandals. While I had little success in getting Demetrius to quiet down or sit respectfully in class prior, he responded well to my concern for his well being. I suspect that he has not heard many teachers worry about him as a person rather than him as a distraction to the class.

In taking the former approach, I noticed that Demetrius started to trust me more, and he slowly became more comfortable asking me for help and engaging in conversations with me. In fact, Demetrius was one student who my cooperating teacher, our co-teacher, and I often got questions about because other teachers had difficulties with him. However, our collective focus on building a strong relationship as well as caring for the student as an individual, not just a learner, created an environment in which Demetrius felt safe to be himself and learn. As the semester went on, he engaged more and more with content and lessons. In our choice book unit, he read his book, entranced by the story, and he was quick to share his theories and talk about the theme with his classmates. At the end of the semester, on my last day, he gave me a hug and thanked me for teaching him that semester.

Another student in which building an individual relationship became important to their comfort in the classroom was a student in my 2nd hour Senior English Workshop class. Simon was always the first student in the classroom for 2nd hour. He came in quietly, and he did not talk to anyone except his friend, Edric, who sat next to him. Simon demonstrated that he was a good student; he did his work and was not on his phone during class. However, his quietness seemed more like uneasiness; he seemed wholly uncomfortable in the classroom. Leading up to my time as a full-time student teacher, I asked the class how they were doing and tried to engage in conversation at the beginning of the class period. I often roamed the classroom during work time to ask students if they had any questions or needed help. The first major assignment in this class was a structured research project in which students looked into what they wanted to do after high school. Simon got all of his work in on time, so I often walked by his desk to help him with revisions as other students were still working on first drafts. He turned in a great essay, and he always said, "Thank you," after I helped him. There was no other conversation besides that, though.

Then, one day in early October, as the class was starting their next unit, our co-teacher came into our room during first period to tell me and my cooperating teacher that Simon was talking to our co-teacher during math. Simon told our co-teacher that he was scared of me; this made us all laugh. I explained that maybe I have been hovering over students too much in an

effort to force relationships. I brought up to Simon that I heard he was scared of me, and this moment seemed to break the ice. The whole class laughed about it; many of the students thought that “scary” was not the right word to describe me. As I found my place in the school community, I could tell that the sense of nervousness surrounding the students had lifted. From here, Simon was much more talkative and comfortable talking about himself, asking questions, and expressing frustrations. Around mid-October, the class was working on tracking elements of a narrative in groups. Simon’s group consisted of himself and his friend Edric. Edric had become increasingly scarce in class. He had started a new job and was taking care of family things which made it difficult for him to come to class. However, this meant that Simon was doing all the work for his group, and he complained that it was unfair for Edric to get the grade that Simon had worked so hard for. The three of us were able to have a conversation and come to an agreement; Edric would have to add to group work or create his own assignment, depending on whether he was in class or worked on it at home. It was only by creating strong individual relationships with both Simon and Edric that I was able to help them both peacefully resolve this issue. It also allowed them to trust me in getting them to a reasonable and fair solution.

Another small, yet extremely important, part of building trust and respect between teachers and students is utilizing passing periods and the first few minutes of class to get to know your students as well as show them that they are important. After a few lessons, I realized the importance of this practice and started embedding check-ins and chat time into my lesson plans. For example, I stood outside the classroom almost every day to welcome students to the classroom, and I made sure to include this in daily plans. I always said, “Good morning,” or asked them how they were doing as they walked in. I also made sure to say hello if I saw one of my students passing in the hallway so that they knew I saw them and noticed them. These little 3-5 minute conversations during passing periods or at the start of class gave me little snippets of students’ lives. I found out that Mitch was on the varsity football team, and that Brad played the clarinet in the band. I was excited to see both of them perform at a Friday night football game, and the next Monday, when I was able to talk to them about the experience and congratulate them both, Mitch and Brad seemed more relaxed in class. Again, they participated more in class discussions; Mitch volunteered to read aloud, and when Brad ran into issues with group work, I was able to talk to him and encourage him to participate in his group’s discussions. Similarly, early in the semester, a student in 5th hour, Lilo, proved herself to be full of energy and easily distracted. During my first lesson, she was uncharacteristically mellow. I checked in with her the next day to see if she was alright. It turned out she was just tired, but she said she was really glad that I checked in on her. In showing all three students that I did not only care about them as students but as thinking and feeling people, I was able to better teach them and guide them in the classroom.

My findings are consistent with Scales et al. (2020) and Hernández et al. (2017). Both studies found that a teacher’s relationship with a student has a prominent impact on the student’s sense of belonging at school and the student’s academic achievement. I found that, similar to Hernández et al. (2017), my students were much more likely to participate in class and engage with the curriculum if I made an effort to meet their needs and form a strong bond with them. Furthermore, I found, similar to Scales et al. (2020), that being genuine made students feel a lot more comfortable in the classroom. Students could tell that I was nervous and distant at the beginning of the semester, and it was not until I made the choice to just be myself that students were able to see that it was okay for them to be themselves, too.

Honesty and Choice as Classroom Management Tools

As a student teacher, classroom management was difficult to navigate. In reviewing my data, I found that one classroom practice that can be implemented in any situation is honesty. The students were slow to warm up to me, but the more genuine and honest I was, the more relaxed students became. This trend is reflected in my field notes and anecdotal records.

At the beginning of the semester, I was nervous, and I did not directly talk to students very much. I said, “Good morning” every day, and I often asked how students were doing; however, not many students responded. I now realize that it is because, at the beginning of the semester, the students had no reason to believe that I actually cared about how they were feeling as human beings. As the semester progressed, I had more and more opportunities to prove that I cared about students’ well-being and academic success. I stayed persistent, and I always gave my students the choice to take my feedback or accept my help. For example, one of my junior students, Oaken, did not engage with me much at the beginning of the semester. He would nod when I said, “Good afternoon,” and he would rarely make eye contact with me. Every day, he went to the bathroom in the middle of class, and he was often on his phone. Throughout August and September, whenever I asked Oaken if he needed help, he would shake his head or say, “No, I’m good.” I respected his choice to refuse my help, especially because his grades were not suffering, but I did continue to check in on him. There was a day in which Apollo got sent home, and as other students were asking questions, Oaken stood up for his friend in a very calm, respectful manner. He told the class that he supported Apollo’s actions, but he also made it clear that it was unnecessary to talk about Apollo’s absence. I thanked Oaken for redirecting the class in a mature way, and I believe this is where he became more comfortable with me. As we moved onto our next unit, a writing unit in which students wrote a compare and contrast essay, Oaken asked for my help. He had me read over many of his paragraphs, and he paid attention to any suggestions I gave him. Once Oaken knew I respected him, he was able to trust that I had his best interests in mind. By allowing Oaken the choice to trust me, he became more comfortable with me and the classroom environment. As November came around, Oaken even took leadership in his choice novel group. The students were in small book groups, and each week they had to write a summary. Oaken made sure that his group was on task and that the group stuck together while reading independently.

One class that really responded to honesty and choice was our fifth period Junior Literature and Composition class. I found that speaking honestly about how I was feeling amongst the chaos of a classroom full of moving and talking teenagers made the students a bit more willing to listen and calm down. More than once from October through November, I raised my hand in the middle of a loud classroom, and said, “Alright, who needs to take a deep breath? Because I feel like I do.” Lilo and a few other students turned to me and either nodded or responded, “Yeah, okay.” I then led a quick deep breath saying, “Okay, deep breath. Here we go. Breath in... and out... Awesome.” After the breath, I continued on with lesson instructions, and a lot more students were ready to listen. I also found that the best way to get them to act in any semblance of order was to be honest with them or give them a choice. For example, I often just stood at the front of the class saying, “Oh, geez, I will never be able to talk loud enough to break through all of your voices. Settle, settle, settle...” as I also waved my hands in the air. I am an awkward and very jittery person, and being my honest self is all I know. They responded well to this kind of attention getter because (1) they were confused about why I was waving my hands or moving weirdly and (2) those in the front that could hear everything thought it was

funny that I did not get angry or start to yell. It was refreshing for the class to just be a little confused as to what I was trying to accomplish with my words and actions. This also created strong bonds because the class did not have to guess at the kind of person I really am; they could see who I was for themselves, and who I am happens to be someone that cares about the class. The students were a lot more willing to listen to me and trust the learning process once they felt like they knew who I was.

A more specific example of honesty and choice occurred within the choice novel unit. Our group that was doing the book *This Is Where It Ends*, was a tough mix of students. By November, Brad had ceased doing work in our class without heavy hovering, and instead, he would bury himself in his phone. He did alright the first two weeks of the choice novel unit. He did not always read with his group, but he kept on pace. He also contributed quotes to the group summary. However, by week three, Brad and Lilo were constantly making comments to each other centering around Brad's lack of group camaraderie. That week, I often had to deescalate the situation by saying, "Woah, hey now, hey now. Cool it," and giving them both a pointed look. That worked until Thursday. Neither Brad nor Lilo were backing down, and their comments were getting louder and louder. This time, I asked Lilo and the rest of the group to go and work on their summary in the other classroom. Mr. Toad went with them to help them with their work. I stayed and talked to Brad. I told him that unless he could work nicely with the rest of his group and contribute a fair share of the work, he would have to write the entire summary on his own. I told him that I would help him write his summary if he decided he could not work nicely with the rest of his group, but he decided that he would rather only have to write one or two sentences than eight every week. I respected his decision, and I also gave him the option of writing his sentences on a separate sheet of paper and handing it to the rest of the group to copy onto the group's paper. This way, if he was feeling like he could not interact positively with his group, he could at least still contribute to the group's work. From then on, the group had a much calmer time with reading and writing together.

The biggest issue I had with our senior classes was doing work. They did well in class. They would listen, participate, and engage with the material, but when it came to a worksheet or doing any form of writing, it did not get done. It was not just a few students either; students who consistently did their work were in the minority. I tried a lot of different strategies to try and get them interested in doing their work. Their research essay was an essay that we wrote in parts and in class. Not only that but the students also got to research what they were interested in post college. My cooperating teacher and I gave them the options of college, trade school, or the military, but we also gave them the opportunity to research a path unique to their interests and skills. While students greatly enjoyed talking about their plans, they frequently refused to write or type any information. This stayed consistent from August through October. However, having the students work in groups held them more accountable to doing their work, though their enthusiasm for writing did not improve. In November, when the senior classes got to the end of their narrative reading unit, I gave the class a choice assignment for their unit project. Each student was allowed to choose whether they worked alone or with a partner; they got to choose which narrative, either the book we read or the movie we watched, they would base their project on; and they got to choose what their project would look like. The choices for the type of project were a playlist and explanation on why the songs connected to the movie/ book, a two page journal entry from the point of view of a side character, an alternate ending, or a poem based on either the book or movie with a creative image to go with the poem. When we gave students time to work on their projects in class, they did so happily. The students would get out their

Chromebooks immediately, and they would exchange ideas as they typed out their projects. Nearly all the students turned in their projects on the due date, which had not happened so far in the semester, and every student presented their project for extra credit. By showing students that I trusted them to choose the best way to display their knowledge, including working with a partner or not, they took on the project with excitement and autonomy. The time in which the seniors were working on this project was by far the easiest and most productive classroom atmosphere we had all year.

Once again, I found that my observations were similar to the findings of Back et al. (2016). Their study found that classroom practices that were responsive to the make-up of each individual class were most effective in managing a classroom and creating a comfortable environment for students. I found that, for my students, honesty and choice were the most effective classroom practices that I could employ. These practices fostered trust and promoted meaningful learning. Booker et al. (2021) was another study that had findings aligned with my own. Their study found that collaborating with students on classroom guidelines or assignments created a strong classroom community. In my semester student teaching, the assignments in which I allowed students to choose how to demonstrate their understanding of a topic were the assignments that students were excited about. In addition, the moments in which I worked with students to calm down the classroom were the most effective, and these moments helped foster strong bonds between all members of the classroom.

Guided Group Work and Non-Academic Discussions Create Peer Bonds

Another trend in the collection of fieldnotes, anecdotal records, and lesson plans was that fostering peer relationships created a more respectful classroom environment. Peers play a huge role in student development and comfort within the classroom, and it is imperative that teachers take a positive role in fostering respectful relationships amongst students. I found, in my time full-time student teaching, that guiding students on how to work in pairs and groups with other students they do not know well better prepared students to work in groups independent from teacher intervention.

One way in which I was able to model how to interact with peers was how I worked with my cooperating teacher and our co-teacher. In the senior classes, it was much more obvious that I and my cooperating teacher were comfortable with each other and our expected roles in the classroom. It was something we had time to discuss and lay out extensively, and we demonstrated this relationship to students throughout the very first week of class. I introduced myself and allowed students to ask me questions on the first day of class. My cooperating teacher often pulled me into conversations with students so that I could get to know students, but this also showed students that my cooperating teacher wanted me to succeed. My cooperating teacher also had me facilitate the diagnostic tests during the first week of school. I did not always explain the writing prompts or review for the prompts thoroughly and clearly, but my cooperating showed her support for me to the class and often re-explained the prompts in a way that did not overshadow my attempts.

In the same way, I guided the Senior Workshop students in their first sustained group work activity. The senior classes were made up of students who had been in the same English classes the previous year. They were already well acquainted, but this particular semester was the first time students were in person since the COVID-19 pandemic. So, while most students knew each other well, there were some issues with newer students, and with all students, there were issues with how to participate in a group. The class was split up into five different groups;

the groups were decided partially by the class and partially by me. I decided how many students would be in each group, and from there, I asked which students wanted to work on which element. Some groups had students that were already friends, but in every group, there was a learning curve in how to cooperate with a peer to achieve success. Every week, each group was responsible for writing a three to four sentence summary on how their element of a narrative (plot, setting, characters, theme, or conflict) had developed in the reading we covered that week. The book we were reading throughout this group project was *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam.

Third period had four groups that got along well. Right from the start, these four groups divided up work, and each person within the group worked quietly on their portion of the tracking sheet. As time went on, these four groups became much more collaborative, talking through each section of the worksheet and completing it together. One group, made up of three people who were not friends previously, had trouble evenly distributing the workload. The first week, they seemed to do well talking to one another, but the second week it was obvious that one student was doing all the work. The student who was working sat by himself, and the other two students did not move to join him even after I asked them to. Instead, they stayed separated from the rest of the class, and they were on their phones the entire class period. I had a conversation with these two students the next day. I told them that they got a zero for the group work from the previous day, and that unless they contributed to the work or did their own worksheet, they would continue to get zero points. I also told the two students that it was not right for them to allow the third student to do all the work. They were all part of a team, and they should be helping each other out. I gave them the options to either all work alone, split up the work into equal parts and complete it individually, or collaborate on the worksheet. The group was able to come to the decision that they would rather all work collaboratively on the assignment. Going forward, the two students that were not engaged in the group work were more willing to participate within their group and in front of the whole class.

The senior classes also did really well with non-academic discussions. They preferred to have these as a break in the class period, so as the semester progressed, I started writing them into my lesson plans. One example of this was a discussion about the class's favorite breakfast foods. During the third week of their *Punching the Air* unit, I noticed that many of the groups were missing small details within their tracking sheets. Since it was an issue across all the groups, I decided that the class would do a quick peer review activity so that each group could better understand why the missing details were important to include. However, when the day came to do the peer review lesson, groups did not have their third week tracking sheet completed. So, I gave the class the first ten minutes of the period to complete the sheet with their groups. Then, I planned to have the breakfast food discussion as a way to get the students ready to transition into the peer review activity. The students were very interested in the discussion topic. I found that many students hated cereal, which was a shock to me because I love cereal. Not many really liked eggs, mostly because students did not have enough time to make them and eat them before school. Pancakes and waffles were the classes' overall favorites, though a fair amount were saying that they liked coffee for breakfast. After about ten minutes of discussion, the students were relaxed and ready for the next activity. They were also more engaged in making sure their peers' work was correct.

The junior classes were trickier when it came to peer relationships because my students were much more inconsistent with each other. For example, Matt and Lilo would be paired up for a partner activity one day, and that day, they would work really well together. However, the

next day, they would be interrupting class saying that they could not stand each other. This trend was similar with all of our junior students. I found that the juniors' uneasiness and inconsistency with each other was due to their larger class sizes, and the fact that not all of them had been in class together before. My senior students had nearly all been a part of the same junior co-taught class the year before. However, these juniors were not all together as sophomores, and if they were, it was on Zoom. This meant that the class had to do a lot of community building before we were able to get through a class period somewhat smoothly. At the beginning of the semester, we asked students what they would like to be called in class and why. Each student presented their "Name Story" to the class as a way to start getting to know one another.

We also did a lot of quick partner activities. For example, we started our unit on *The Crucible* with a partner research project. It only took one class period to research and one class period to present, but the mini project allowed students who may not have known each other prior to work together towards a common goal. We also did all sorts of entry activities that had students working together or sharing ideas with each other. One example of a fun entry activity that students enjoyed was our "Connection Activity". In this activity, students were randomly paired up and given two words. Their goal was to connect those two words in a sentence. This activity acted as scaffolding for creating a connection between their attention getter and thesis for their major paper. Students were able to just be their silly selves during this activity, and we had multiple partners creating more than once sentences to connect their words. Many of the students were laughing and asking each of the three teachers to come over and listen to their sentences. We also did a number of non-academic activities throughout the semester. One was a counting game in which students had to count as high as they could without two students shouting the same number. This had nothing to do with academics, but the students enjoyed it all the same. Only about half the class was involved in the game at first, but pretty soon the entire class was invested in getting above 20. Another non-academic activity was a discussion about which Halloween monster would win in a fight: Frankenstein, a werewolf, or Dracula. The junior classes had strong opinions on this question. Fifth period had several small debates going on during the allotted time to discuss the question, and the results were pretty evenly distributed. Fifth period was bringing in all sorts of secondary questions like "Is the fight taking place during the day?" and "Is the fight taking place during a full moon?" They were comparing each monster's powers, trying to decide who logistically had the upper hand. Sixth period was just as engaging, but their discussion took a different turn. A two students insisted that they would win against all three monsters, and some of the class supported that belief. In the end, one student got the class to unanimously agree that Goku, a character from an anime, would be the ultimate winner. In both fifth and sixth period, the classes had a good laugh and a good break from academics while discussing the question.

A major activity that showed a lot of growth in the students' relationships was a peer reviewing activity. The students peer reviewed their compare and contrast essays at the end of October. At first, students were averse to having their peers read through and correct their papers, but I made sure to create a checklist that kept students from being harsh. The goal of the peer review was to make sure that students understood all the parts that needed to be in the paper by reading someone else's paper, so the checklist simply had students marking: "Did the introduction start with an attention getter, Yes or No?" After reviewing the checklist, students were much more comfortable with the activity. Students even started chatting with their peers about their papers, and the activity turned out to be more collaborative than intended; which was

much more helpful to each individual student. All of the group work and non-academic discussions led to students trusting their peers to be kind and helpful.

Overall, the more students worked with each other in various groups and on various assignments, the more comfortable they were in class. Students who felt like they knew and trusted their peers were more likely to participate in a lesson. My observations and teaching practices reflect the findings of Ruzek et al. (2016) whose main finding was that teachers who implement community building foster strong and supportive peer relationships. My observations are also supported by the findings of Kiefer et al. (2015) and Engels et al. (2016); both studies found that the more students a teacher is able to engage, the more likely that those students will be able to engage their peers.

Evidence of Classroom Support System and Final Student Survey

At the end of my student-teaching semester, both the junior and senior classes participated in activities that exemplified all the progress the classes had made in creating a respectful classroom environment. My field notes, anecdotal records, lesson plans, and final student survey all pointed to the creation of a safe learning environment. Using guided group work and non-academic discussions to create strong peer bonds, fostering trusting teacher-student relationships, and employing choice and honesty as classroom management tools prepared all classes to take part in deep discussions concerning their own experiences coming-of-age.

In the junior classes, November through the end of the semester was centered around their choice book projects. For this project, students chose different books to read in groups. As they read, they were to analyze how that main character came of age. In order for students to understand what constitutes a coming-of-age moment, I created a lesson plan in which the students came up with a definition of coming of age through talking about their own experiences. I wrote this lesson so that students would have a lot of autonomy in how the discussion would go. Students came up with guidelines for discussion, which included being good listeners and being supportive of their classmates. After we created guidelines, I shared my own coming-of-age experiences. I wanted students to be able to choose what kinds of experiences they shared, so my examples modeled different experiences. The first I shared was about how my parents' divorce forced me to grow up in order to understand their adult issue. The other coming-of-age experience I shared was when my younger brother started high school; I had to take responsibility for him getting to school and getting home. Sharing my own experiences first broke the air of nervousness that students still had surrounding the discussion. To help them further ease into the conversation, I had the students start by writing two to three examples of their own coming-of-age experiences on a white board. Once the students were done with that, I had them get into small groups and share their examples. Once everyone had shared one of their experiences in small groups, each small group came up with similarities they found in their stories. Then, the whole class came together to create our own definition of coming-of-age in order to analyze the main character's coming-of-age experience in each of their books. The students showed the utmost support as students shared their stories. One student, Mitch, shared about being called mature for his age; he said that it made him feel like he could not be a kid. Another student, Ray, shared about his experience coming to the United States from Honduras, and Apollo shared his experience losing his mom. In every instance, the class came together to support each other, listen to each other, and learn how each person's experience made them grow up. In understanding their own experiences and the experiences of their classmates, they were

better able to relate to the characters in their books. The classroom also became a space where every student knew they were allowed to feel safe and learn.

My senior students learned about telling personal stories through the book *Punching the Air* and the movie *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It was their job to keep track of the elements of a story used in these texts (plot, setting, characters, etc...) in order to understand how an author creates a narrative. The students then used these two texts as examples to write their own narratives. Once again, the classroom environment became an integral part of the learning process. All of the activities and discussions, academic and non-academic, that students had participated in throughout the semester helped them build trust with me as a teacher and each other as peers. Because of this trust, the class was able to brainstorm and share their ideas for their narratives with each other and get supportive, respectful, and constructive feedback from their peers. In order to help get the students' thoughts together, my cooperating teacher and I created a brainstorming worksheet. It was a simple list with different categories. Each student was to come up with two to three examples of a funny experience, a difficult experience, and an experience that made them proud. After each student had filled out their sheet, they talked about two experiences from their list that they believed they could write about well. As each student talked through their experiences and ideas for writing their narrative, their peers offered suggestions or questions that the student could use to expand their narrative and give readers more details. Students also helped each other decide which narrative would be better to write. For example, Penny, a student in my second period class, shared two experiences: one was about getting shot with a beebee gun by her friend and the other was a story about her niece. The students listened and engaged with each of her experiences, and when she was finished sharing, they discussed with her about her two options. In the end, the class helped Penny decide to write about her experience with her friend because she had more details in that story, and the story was very funny. The class showed their support for their classmates by listening and helping each other decide which stories would be best to write based on each student's excitement to write about an experience.

While these lessons were not necessary in order to teach students about coming-of-age or how to write a narrative, these lessons did show students how they have value. In the end of the year surveys given to all classes, students overwhelmingly enjoyed lessons where they were able to explore academic topics in their own lives. For example, 73% of the juniors chose the coming-of-age discussion as their favorite activity during the semester. Furthermore, 73% of the junior students said that they would also choose a counting game as their favorite activity. The students' feedback demonstrates that allowing students to be themselves, and be kids, creates a classroom environment where students feel safe and valued. These results also align with the findings of Alston (2012) and Keyes (2019). Both of their research found that student centered practices lead to a safe and respectful learning environment. In creating scaffolding using my students' own experiences and understanding when students just needed to play a game, I created a classroom environment that centered around students' needs and identities.

The seniors were also given a survey. In their results, I found that non-academic discussions and the ability to choose played the biggest role in creating a respectful classroom environment. For example, 92% of the seniors responded that they enjoyed the meme check-ins that we had throughout the semester. These check-ins consisted of pictures of popular memes, or viral photos, that students had to choose from to express how they were feeling that day. These check-ins put smiles on the students' faces and invited them to be honest about how they were feeling while also making them laugh. In addition, the seniors overwhelmingly favored

assignments that involved personal choice. The students chose the choice project at the end of their narrative unit as their favorite assignment of the semester because they were able to choose how to complete the assignment and whether they worked independently or with a partner. In the senior classes, they felt the most valued when they were trusted to make choices that they saw benefited them best. Pendergast et al. (2018) and Skerrett (2012) both found that mutual respect helped foster a supportive classroom environment. By allowing my students autonomy and giving my students a space where they were allowed to be happy, sad, tired, overwhelmed, or any other emotion, I fostered an environment where students felt comfortable and safe to learn.

Conclusion and Implications

There were four major findings of this study. The first major finding was that student participation increased as trust was built with the teacher. Student academic success as emotional well-being improved as the student's relationship with the teacher improved. Prior research indicates that group work, choice, and non-academic activities help foster strong classroom relationships (Back et al., 2016; Booker, 2021; Krei & Shoulders, 2015; Lewis & Tierney, 2013; Sandwick et al., 2019). Specific ways in which a teacher can help foster a strong, respectful relationship with individual students include: supporting the student at non-academic or extracurricular activities, engaging in conversation about a student's emotional well-being, providing opportunities to participate in non-academic discussions or activities, and adapting assignments and curriculum to students' identities. The second major finding of this study was that structured group work allowed students to build strong peer bonds. Strong peer relationships provide an additional layer of safety and comfort in the classroom. Teachers can help foster peer bonds through non-academic discussion and activities, but more importantly, a teacher can foster strong peer bonds through group work. Having students work in various groups and partnerships throughout the semester gives students the structure and space to get comfortable with each other. The more a teacher can get different students to engage with each other, the more cohesive their classroom environment will be.

The third major finding of this study indicates that, as a teacher, admitting mistakes modeled and encouraged respectful behavior. When students see that even an authority figure can be honest, genuine, and mistaken, it creates an environment where anyone and everyone can be their authentic self. There are many opportunities teachers have to be honest and genuine. For example, when a student finds a mistake in a presentation, the teacher can thank the student for catching their mistake. Another opportunity to uplift students may be if a student asks a question that the teacher does not know the answer to. Instead of ignoring the question or making up an answer, the teacher can thank the student for asking a good question and work with the student on finding the correct answer. The last major finding of this study was that strong classroom relationships and classroom management practices that encourage honesty and authenticity are major contributors to a respectful classroom environment and strong classroom support system. Prior research supports this finding; strong classroom relationships lead to a respectful and supportive classroom environment (Cheung, 2019; Berchiatti et al., 2020). Fostering a strong classroom environment requires honesty, authenticity, prioritization of students' needs and identities, and attention to meaningful peer bonds.

There were five major limitations of this study. The first limitation was the small sample size. I focused on four classes throughout the Fall 2021 semester, and these classes added up to fifty-three students total. In addition, I received only eighteen sets of parental and student

consent forms. While I was able to generalize the whole class environment, I was only able to rely on these eighteen students when it came to analyzing specific examples of the classroom environment. Furthermore, all participants were juniors and seniors in a high school English classroom; thus, all students were between the ages of sixteen and eighteen years old. Another limitation was the academic make-up of the participants. Since I was teaching solely within the co-taught curriculum track, all participants had an individualized education plan (IEP). While this does not greatly affect the implications of the findings, it should be noted that more than just myself and my cooperating teacher were in the Junior Co-Taught classroom daily. The pace of the curriculum also allowed for more individualized instruction and whole class community building. The last limitation of this study was that it was implemented by a student-teacher, so there were few explicit classroom policies and procedures implemented.

Keeping these limitations in mind, there are some valuable implications for teachers, teacher education programs, and future research in the education field. Implications for teachers include the importance of explicit policies and procedures, the need for honesty and genuineness, and the importance of discovering ways to foster individual relationships with your students, relationships between your students, and a classroom community. Explicit policies and procedures give students direction and allow for more time to focus on the classroom community. These policies and procedures can include honesty and genuineness, two important factors in classroom management. Honesty and genuineness are great tools for fostering individual relationships with students as well as modeling how students can support and respect their peers. Lastly, finding ways to incorporate community building into lessons as well as in the form of non-academic discussions and activities can help foster classroom relationships and a strong classroom environment. Many of the implications for teachers also apply to teacher education programs. Teacher education programs need to reinforce the power of honesty and genuineness in the classroom. Furthermore, teacher education programs need to be able to prepare their students for the trial and error of classroom management. When it comes to classroom management, there is no one set of guidelines and rules that will fit every classroom, and it is often that teachers do not get a handle on their classroom management style until they are already working full-time in the field. Some areas for future research include how teacher education programs can better simulate classroom management practices, specific classroom policies and procedures that help foster peer relationships and classroom community, and student feedback on classroom environments.

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