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CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY IN THE CLASSROOM

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of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in the Art of Teaching Program
Sarah Lawrence College

Abstract

Connection and community can motivate children and adults to come to the classroom. These relationships can enhance learning in a number of ways. Not only do they bring joy, but they help children feel safe and a sense of belonging helping create an environment that is conducive to learning. A strong teacher-student relationship encourages and fosters learning. This connection is weakened when teachers use punishments, rewards and labels such as troublemaker that isolate students from the community. Community and connection can be fostered through true listening, reflective literature, story acting, open-ended play, and sharing with the community during circle time. Community and connection are fostered when the whole child is accepted including the child's culture, background and interests. When a supportive classroom is in place and strong teacher-student connections are made, a child's learning benefits. The social nature of learning is evident when children benefit from Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. Both peers and teachers can expand, enrich and stretch a child's thinking in a classroom of strong connections and community. Connection and Community create a classroom where children feel safe and where they feel they belong.

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I chose this thesis topic because I realized it was my desire to connect with others that drew me to the classroom. Becoming a student again after a long time has made me reflect. I was so excited to learn about the art of teaching, but it was the connections and community that motivated and supported me. The encouragement and guidance of my teachers, especially Patricia, sustained me as I re-entered school in a new way, on line. I reflected on how much that connection meant to me and how much I had to trust my teachers.

This past fall, I was so happy when I finally was able to get to meet my cohort in person. Katie, Molly, Corrine, Evangeline, Malik and Kate, I loved getting to know you, and I truly

cherish each of you. I loved learning with you and learning from you. I am so happy I will be able to graduate with you.

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Outline

Introduction - The importance of connection and community in the classroom

- Why it's important
- How teachers can build connection and community in the classroom
- The benefits of connection and community in the classroom

Maslow's hierarchy

- Classification system which reflects universal needs of society
 - physiological needs: food, shelter sleep
 - psychological needs: safety, belonging, love and esteem
- I would argue that a child is best prepared to motivate to satisfy their cognitive needs and learn in the classroom once they are in an environment where they feel safe, where they feel they belong and cared for, where they feel respected and valued. I believe the best way to achieve this is through a culture where personal connection and community are fostered in the classroom.

The Brain's Response to Fear and Connection

- Citing Hammond: The oldest parts of the brain function to keep us safe.
- When we feel stressed in our environment, it is more difficult to learn.
- Citing Koplow about how fear and anxiety impair learning
- Positive social relationships and supportive communities can shield or mitigate the effects of stress. The brain is a social organ rewarding connection with others with the release of oxytocin.

- Cite Koplow: Trust is the core of positive relationships
- Quote Hammond: “When anyone experiences others in an environment like a classroom that is inattentive or hostile, the body picks up that information through the autonomic nervous system [sending signals to the brain] ...The body starts to produce stress hormones that make learning nearly impossible. Even if the environment isn’t hostile but simply unwelcoming, the brain doesn’t produce enough oxytocin and begins to experience anxiety. This anxiety triggers the sympathetic nervous system, making one think he is in danger because the brain doesn’t experience a sense of community”(Hammond, 2015, p.45).
- It is “imperative to understand how to build positive social relationships that signal to the brain a sense of physical, psychological, and social safety so that learning is possible” (Hammond, 2015, p.45).
- Cite Hammond: All students need to feel affirmed and included as valued members of a learning community

The Importance of Strong Relationships Between Teachers and Children

- Cite Koplow: Research finds that warm teacher-child relationships fosters learning, social, and emotional health throughout school years.
- Quote Souto-Manning and Martell: “the strongest predictor of reading achievement is the quality of student-teacher relationships.” (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016, p.39)

Listening in one way teachers can build strong relationships with children

- Quote Hammond: “The most powerful way to build rapport is by practicing what Reggio Emilia practitioners call a pedagogy of listening. Listening communicates a sense of respect for and an interest in the student’s contributions. Research says that 70% of communication is nonverbal. So listening doesn’t just mean hearing the words but listening to the emotional quality of the conversation.”(Hammond, 2015, p.78)
- Quote Hammond’s four attributes of listening with grace: “1) Give one’s full attention to the speaker and to what is being said. 2) Understand the feeling behind the words and be sensitive to the emotions being expressed 3) Suspend judgement and listen with compassion 4) Honor the speaker’s cultural way of communicating” (Hammond, 2015, p.78).
- Share example of Cassandra in the ECC
- Cite Denton: True listening is critical to child’s sense of belonging
- Quote Denton: “We all need to feel understood to have a sense of belonging and significance. To be motivated to learn, children need to feel like they belong and are important in the classroom community. Listening is crucial in this equation.” (Denton, 2015, p.72).
- Quote Denton: When a teacher truly listens to students, they are “setting a standard and a tone of respect and empathy that are fundamental to a strong community.” (Denton, 2015, p.74)
- Cite Denton
 - Pausing as an effective tool that teachers can use for true listening.
 - Paraphrasing as a tool that fosters true listening.

- Cite Ritchhart, Church and Morrison how documenting key points can enhance listening
- Quote Ritchhart, Church and Morrison: “listening conveys a sense of respect for and an interest in the learner’s contributions. When this is present, students are more willing to share their thinking and put forth their ideas...” (Ritchart et. al., 2011, p.17).
 - Documenting can:
 - demonstrate good listening
 - show students their thoughts and ideas are valid
 - help others reflect on what has been said
 - Foster richer and more productive dialogue

Reflective Literature

- Books that mirror the issues and emotional experiences of children in the classroom
 - Cite Koplow: Reflective literature becomes a dialogue between children, their teachers and the group encouraging reflection.
 - Quote Koplow: “In many instances, there is verbal and visual sharing, so that children can hear, see, and connect to peer generated thoughts and feelings. This part of the process acts to decrease emotional and social isolation within the group, promoting resilience and diminishing risks for mental health issues..”(Koplow, 2015, p.73)
- Example of Cassandra at the ECC using reflective literature.
- Gives children voice for their own thoughts, feelings, and life experience

Story Acting

- Another way to foster community is through Vivian Paley’s story-acting technique.

- Story acting in Milana's preschool classroom
- Quote Koplow: "Vivian Paley's story-acting technique serves multiple purposes for the young learner. It allows children see their dictated stories in written form, and then gives them the power to bring their stories to life by acting them out within their community of peers. Storytelling and eventually story writing become a voice for their own thoughts and feelings, and are intrinsically motivating and compelling. Emotional energy that comes from young children's developmental conflicts and confusing life experiences has a prosocial place to go, as this form of self-expression fits well within the continuing structure of the literacy curriculum. Inviting and appreciating fantasy as well as reality factors in the classroom offers emotional release, social opportunity, and an alternative to acting out when conflicts are too difficult to articulate."(Koplow, 2021, p.117).

Circle Time and Morning Meetings

- Cite Koplow: Morning meeting routine helps children become oriented to schedule; feel part of group.
- Description of Liz's classroom morning meeting with the bird study Tweet of the Day
- Circle time provides a safe place for the children to share their work
 - in Liz's 2nd and 3rd grade classroom
 - in Milana's preschool classroom

Circle Time - Gratitude

- Practicing gratitude during the end of day circle in Liz's 2nd and 3rd grade classroom
 - appreciations and recognitions; helpful acts; acts of kindness; birthdays

- Quote Shawn Achor: “In fact, studies have shown that gratitude sparks an upward spiral of relationship growth where each individual feels motivated to strengthen the bond. It also predicts feelings of integration and cooperation within a larger group, which means that the more gratitude one employee [or person] expresses toward another employee [or person], the more social cohesion they feel among the whole team [group].” (Achor, 2011, p. 195)
- Quote Shawn Achor: “ A long line of empirical research, has shown that acts of altruism—giving to friends and strangers alike—decrease stress and strongly contribute to enhanced mental health.”(Achor, 2011, p. 52)
- Description of and anecdote from Vivian Paley’s book, *The Kindness of Children*
- Quote Paley: “Because see, like everybody is loving that gorilla and I wanted to do something good too.” (Paley, 2000, p.26)

Circle Time - Social Emotional Learning

- Teacher Meeting at Ella Baker regarding social emotional learning
- The need for social emotional learning in Liz’s class
 - Morningside Center curriculum in Liz’s class
 - Role playing to learn social emotional skills in Liz’s class

Open-ended Play - Benefits Social Emotional Learning and Community Building Benefits

- Description of free play in Cassandra’s ECC classroom
 - children collaboratively create scenarios, objects and worlds using their imagination
 - children form bonds by playing together; sharing and negotiating space
 - Children admire each other’s creations - respect for each other’s work

- Place where children can develop social emotional skills with scaffolding.

Accepting the Whole Child into the Community

- How do we know that the connection is authentic and not superficial
 - one way is to make sure that challenging experiences are accepted
 - Cite Koplow: We need to accept both positive and negative affects and experiences
 - Quote Koplow: “A good mirror acknowledges both children’s positive and negative affects, and their positive and negative experiences, without valuing one over the other, while consistently reflecting a positive image of the children themselves.” (Koplow, 2021, p. 59)
- Cite Shalaby: Children who are labeled troublemakers can feel isolated.
 - Quote Shalaby: “These children risked punishment, risked their relationships with the teacher, to carve out a thread of belonging in the social fabric of the classroom... At the same time, the more they misbehaved to earn a place in the community, the more they were excluded from the community” (Shalaby, 2017, p.161).
 - Quote Shalaby: “When a child is excluded, it teaches the other children that belonging to the classroom community is conditional, not absolute” (Shalaby, 2017, p.162).
- Cite Shalaby: Teachers need to have a fierce love for all students
 - being part of the classroom community should not require conformity
 - each child is unique and brings their own skills and strengths to the community
 - importance of being sensitive to the needs and desires of the everyone
 - embracing the whole child, including parts that are difficult to manage
 - to be authentically heard; to be known; to be celebrated

- Quote Shalaby: “Many leading education scholars call for schools to center authentic and meaningful human relationships, empathy, and care between and among both teachers and young people. Marcus’s [a child labeled a troublemaker] demands echoed these most human of things— to be authentically heard, to be known, and to be celebrated....fundamentally care was more motivating than authority, reciprocal relationship more effective than power over, listening more useful than lecturing, healing more beneficial than punishment.” (Shalaby, 2017, p. 145-6)
- Teachers must reflect on their own biases and triggers that may get in the way of the fierce love for each of their students.

Punishment and Rewards - Effects on Connection

- The effect of punishments - Quote Alfie Kohn: “warps the relationship between the punisher and the punished... The caring alliance between adult and child, so vital to the later’s growth has been significantly compromised... To help an impulsive, aggressive, or insensitive student become more responsible, we have to gain some insight into why she is acting that way. That, in turn, is most likely to happen when the student feels close enough to us (and safe enough with us) to explain how things look from her point of view. The more students see us as punishers, the less likely it is *** that can create the sort of environment where things can change.” (Kohn, 2006, p. 27)
- The effect of rewards - Quote Alfie Kohn: “Like punishments, rewards warp the relationship between adult and child. With punishments we come to be seen as enforcers to be avoided; with rewards as goody dispensers on legs. In neither case have we established a caring alliance, a connection based on warmth and respect. Like

punishments, rewards try to make bad behaviors disappear through manipulation. They are ways of doing things to students instead of working with them.” (Kohn, 2006, p. 36)

Bringing a Child’s Background and Interests into the Classroom

- One way for students to bring more of their personalities into the classroom is to share their interests and passions.
 - Cite Kackenzie and Bathurst-Hunt: Students can explore and then present about a topic that they are passionate about.
 - Learning about one another builds community.
- When teachers understand the perspectives that underlie a student’s knowledge, they are more effective in the classroom.
- Quote Epstein and Shiller, “.. children come to school with historical content and concepts which are related to their racial, gender and national identities.”(Epstein & Swiller, 2005, p. 203)
- Cite Gloria Ladson-Billings, about importance of understanding culture background
- Cite Levstik and Barton, about bringing family histories into the class room and curriculum
- My desire to bring children’s backgrounds and interests into the classroom.
- Discuss experience of bringing families into the classroom in Liz’s 2nd and 3rd grade during Spanish-Speaking Countries Month
- Cite Koplow, about story gathering from the child’s adults
- Quote Koplow: “Story Gathering involves teachers meeting with parents or other family members to learn the important stories of each of their children’s lives, allowing teachers

to better understand and support social and emotional growth within the context of the child's actual experiences (sites herself). These conferences allow parents to experience the teacher's capacity to listen in a nonjudgemental way." (Koplow, 2021, p. 84)

The Social Nature of Learning

- Learning is social. In a classroom where each child feels safe , where they feel they belong, where they feel valued, seen, cared for and respected, learning as a social activity can benefit as well.
- Quote Miller: "...children actively participating in culturally organized activities try to make sense of them and the larger society. In this way, cognition develops as a by-product of engaging in these cultural routines. Thus cognition is a dynamic process of trying to understand.." (Miller, 2016, p. 160)
- Quote Vygotsky: "learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90)
- Quote Vygotsky's definition of proximal development as the distance between a child's "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the [higher] level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers(Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)
- The social aspect of language learning in relation to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development.

- Quote Souto-Manning and Martell: “Through talk, children facilitate their own thinking and learning, construct meaning with others, including peers, teachers, family and community members”(Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016, p. 72).
- Quote Genishi and Dyson: “Children learn language, on whatever path at whatever rate, on a social plane. Language learning comes through countless interactions with others across varied sociocultural contexts. Language exists in dialogue with others in a sociolinguistically complex world. Something articulated—said or written—is an invitation for response from others” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 135).
- Cite Gallas in the benefits of science talks in a community of learners who “take on the voice and authority of scientists”(Gallas, 1995, p. 3)
- Quote Gallas: Science talks, “..create a level playing field. Everyone can be scientific, even the least privileged children in the class, and everyone has important questions that provoke energetic discussion”(Gallas, 1995, p. 25)
- Cite Cohen and Lotan’s book about groupwork.
- Cite the article, The Importance of Group Work in Mathematics
- Quote Cohen and Lotan: “productive Groupwork increases and deepens opportunities to learn content and develop language and thus has the potential to build equitable classrooms (Cohen& Lotan, 2014, p.6)
- Cite Freire: Dialogue cannot exist without love, trust, humility, faith in humankind, hope and critical thinking.
- Quote Friere: “Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people...Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue

itself...Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical. As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. It must generate other acts freedom; otherwise, it is not love.” (Freire, 2018, p.89-90)

The Connection Between Social Support, Happiness and Higher Thinking

- Connection and community can increase happiness and help broaden thinking.
- Cite Actor: In studies, the happiest people have more social support.
- Quote Achor: “It turns out that our brains are literally hardwired to perform at their best not when they are negative or even neutral, but when they are positive.”(Achor, 2011, p. 15)
- Quote Achor: “Recent research shows that this “broadening effect” is actually biological; that happiness gives us a real chemical edge on the competition. How? Positive emotions flood our brains with dopamine and serotonin, chemicals that not only make us feel good, but dial up the learning centers of our brains to higher levels. They help us organize new information, keep that information in the brain longer, and retrieve it faster later on. And they enable us to make and sustain more neural connections, which allow us to think more quickly and creatively, become more skilled at complex analysis and problem solving, and see and invent new ways of doing things.”(Achor, 2011, p. 44)

Benefits of Student-Teacher Relationships to Learning

- Cite Ladson-Billings about culturally responsive teaching

- using connections with students to stretch and empower them
- Quote Geneva Gay: “loving children should not become a proxy for teaching them”(Gay, 2010, p. 53)
- Cite Hammond: Teachers can use strong relationships with their students to push them as learners.
- Quote Hammond: “Your role as ally in the learning partnership calls for you to know when to offer emotional comfort and care and when to not allow the student to slip into learned helplessness. Your job is to find a way to bring the student into the zone of proximal development while in a state of relaxed alertness so that he experiences the appropriate cognitive challenge.....”(Hammond, 2015, p. 97)

Conclusion / Calling

- My hopes for a classroom where children feel safe and where they feel they belong.
- Quote Koplow: “Access to supportive relationships at school is critical to all children’s well-being no matter their economic status, race, cultural background, or birthplace. Ensuring that our children have access to a nurturing and meaningful education that supports emotional and social well being in concert with intellectual growth is essential for everyone who wants to promote a safe and mentally healthy democratic society.”(Koplow, 2021, p. 11)

Process Paper - Connection and Community in the Classroom

The importance of connection and community was informed by my own experience at Sarah Lawrence's Art of Teaching program. I started the program in the fall of 2020, six months after New York City shut down because of the Covid 19 pandemic when non essential workers and students stayed home. Many people felt isolated as the CDC recommended social distancing. As I began the program, all of our classes were on line via zoom. It was difficult to make connections on line, but our teachers tried their best. Patricia Virella who taught my cohort two classes for a total of four hours a week, guided our group in making connections with each other. Patricia made time during class for all of us to make a group chat, which helped us share information about ourselves. Patricia created break out rooms during class to help us discuss readings and complete work. It was during these small group encounters that I was able to begin connecting with my classmates.

Patricia understood the value of strong teacher-student relationships in mentoring students and encouraging them. She was relatable in appropriately sharing about her own life and when anxieties were high, she made space for us to talk about unsettling events that were happening that year. So much was new to me in the fall that I felt unsure about taking on the workload. Patricia gave me encouragement verbally and in emails. She really helped motivate me.

Reflecting back on my own experience when I felt overwhelmed by the goals and work on the syllabus, I realized how important trust is in the relationship between teachers and their students. I really had to trust that my teachers would give me the tools to complete my

assignments. I had to trust that my teachers would support their students when needed and would listen and be responsive to student feedback. I was very motivated to learn in my courses, but what really sustained me during my first year was the encouragement from my teachers.

The fall of the second year of the program I was able to meet in person with my fellow students. I was able to be more relaxed and authentic with them in person than I had been on line. As we came together once or twice a week our second year we talked about our coursework, our student teaching experiences, and our lives. We formed stronger connections. It was my relationships with my cohort that sustained and motivated me to graduate with them.

I learned about the social nature of learning during class time. I enjoyed and learned through working with my peers in small groups both during class and on group projects. I learned so much through the knowledge that my classmates brought to class as well. My classmates opened my mind to different ways of thinking and problem solving.

In our coursework we learned about the social nature of learning as well. In my own education before Sarah Lawrence, learning was done individually. In my first year, during the Math and Technology course, I learned how group work can enhance learning. During Emergent Curriculum I learned how science talks and discussions with open ended questions can deepen and enhance learning. My second year during Language and Literacy we learned how children learn language in a social context through interactions with others.

In the spring of our first year, we read *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain, Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* by Zaretta Hammond. This book resonated with me as I understood how when I was in an environment that made me feel anxious it was more difficult to be myself and more difficult

to learn. It was also relevant in that during the pandemic and times of political animosity, there were many stories of how stress negatively affected people emotionally, physically and cognitively. Hammond's book struck me as relevant when we learned about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their negative effects. In working on my thesis I re-examined Hammond's book, and was introduced to *Emotionally Responsive Practice, A Path for Schools That Heal* by Lesley Koplow which addresses the importance of creating a supportive environment at school.

I saw the importance of the social nature of learning in my student teaching experience as well. Starting in January of my first year I was on line with Milana's preschoolers at the Ella Baker School as a student teacher. When we returned to the classroom in April, the difference was clear. The children delighted in being with one another. One boy who was nervous and hesitant about entering the physical classroom after being on line, exclaimed to his parents how much he loved school at the end of his first week. I delighted in being able to connect to the children in a way I was not able to on line as well. I was able to see how warm Milana was with her students and to learn her approach and methods in the classroom in ways I would not have been able to on line.

When I entered the 2nd and 3rd grade classroom as a student teacher in the fall of 2021, most of the children had not been in school for a full year since preschool or kindergarten. The teachers seemed to start the year as they would any other. The teachers noted that many children were acting less mature than expected for their age, needing more help and direction from the teachers. It wasn't until the beginning of November that the need to address the social emotional skills that the children lacked became more urgent to the teachers. By the beginning of

November, within the four different 2nd and 3rd grade classrooms, four children had broken their arms in the school yard during recess. Parents were complaining to the teachers about issues in the recess yard involving exclusion and hurtful words and actions. The children needed support in developing social emotional skills to play together, and the teachers in my classroom responded by using a Morningside Center social emotional curriculum and role playing scenarios to address these needs.

During the fall of 2021 I felt at times unwelcome or ignored by many of the adults in the school. My stress level was high, as I felt a lack of belonging. What made me want to come to school each day was the connection with the students. This connection motivated me to encourage them in their work and to assist them in their learning. I saw how happy the children were to connect to one another. One child had behavior problems at home in school on line the previous year. She was a delight in person. Another child confided in me her joy at making new friends at school. I saw how these relationships stretched children's thinking. The children practiced communicating, working together and negotiating problems. I noticed how a child tried a new activity because her friend did so.

Connection to others and classroom community is an important motivation for children and adults to come to school. I have seen the joy this connection brings children and it is the reason I look forward to coming to the classroom to engage in learning. So many experiences highlighted the importance of community and connection in learning in the classroom: my own experiences as a student, in the course material that we learned and in my own student teaching experiences. I believe that a supportive classroom culture where social emotional learning takes place and connection is valued is the foundation on which everything else that happens at school

takes place. Connection and community enhances learning, thinking and enjoyment. Without the foundation of a supportive classroom culture, everything else that happens in school suffers.

I hope to make each of my student feel seen, known and cherished in their entirety. I hope to have a classroom where students feel respected, valued and connected to one another. I hope these connections and community provide a supportive environment where students can bring their authentic selves forward and take appropriate risks to stretch their learning without fear of failure, knowing they will be supported in negotiating difficulties and in learning from their mistakes. I hope that in such an environment we can learn and grow together.

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Connection and Community in the Classroom

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The importance of Connection and Community in the Classroom

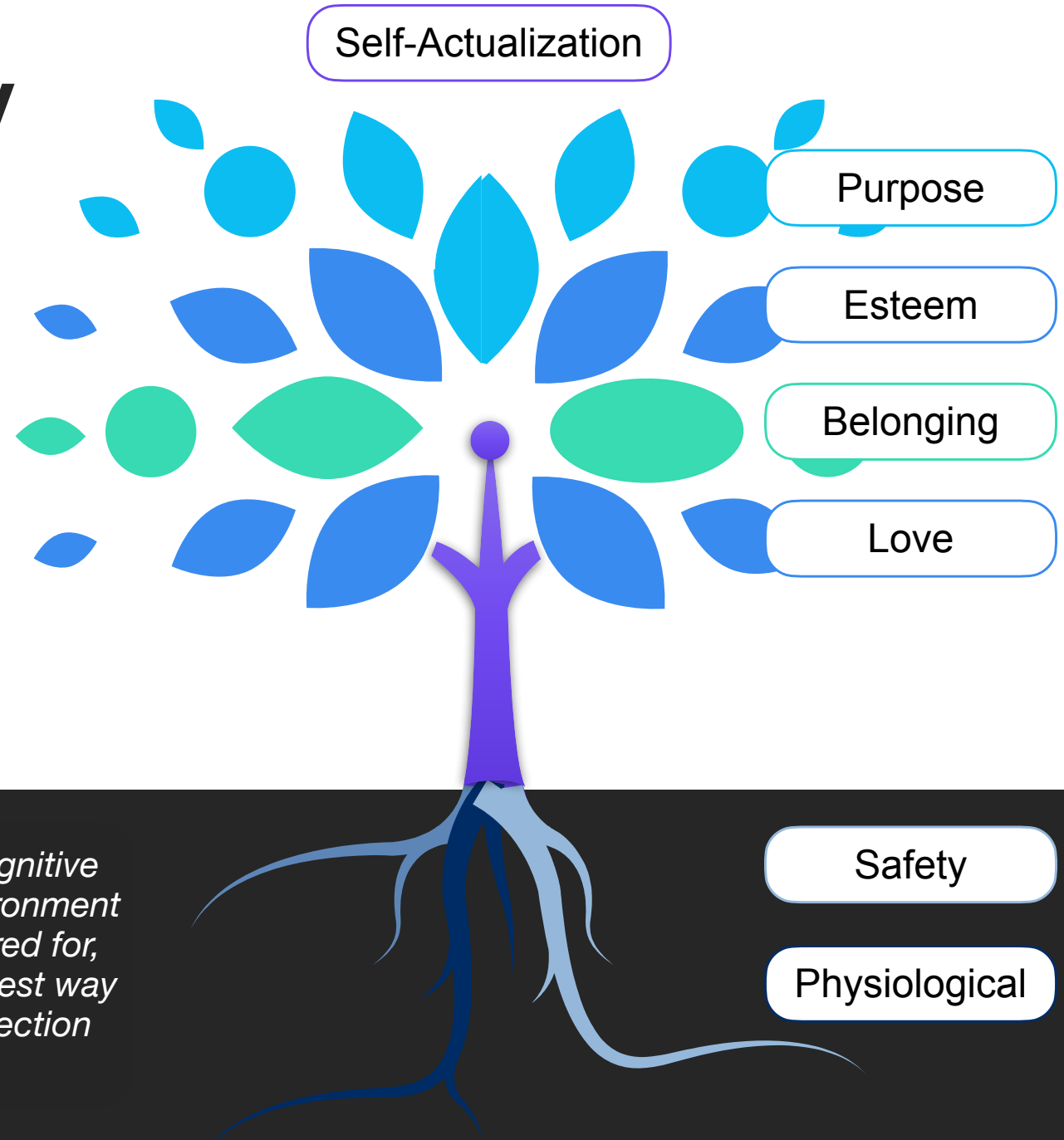
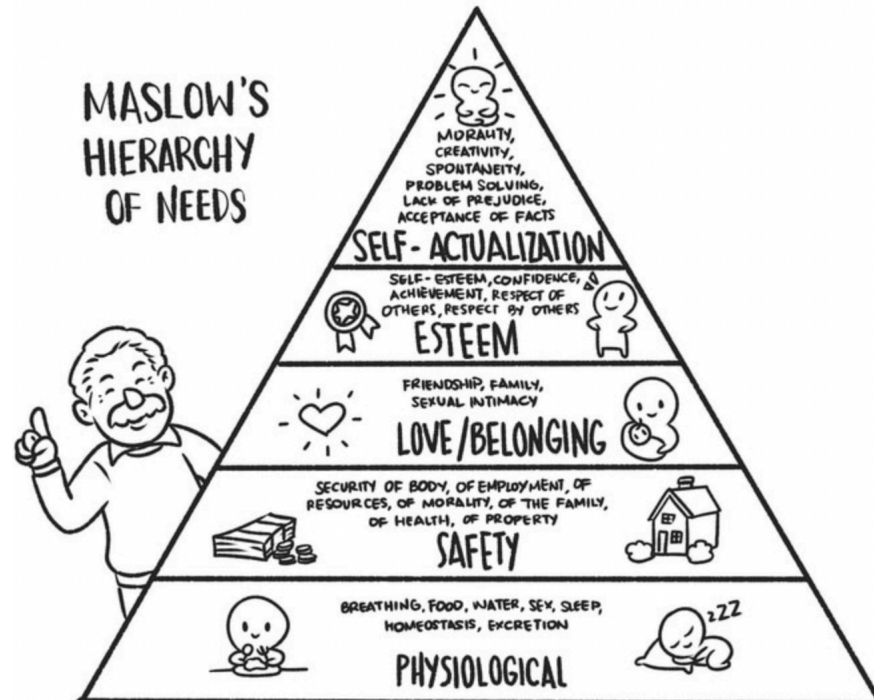


01 Why it's important

02 How to build it

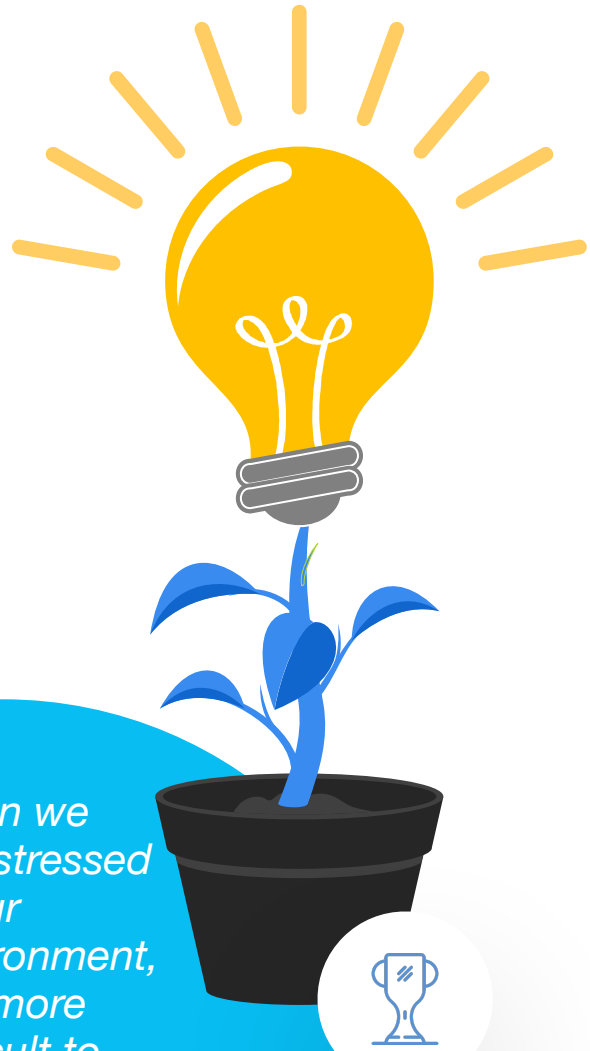
03 The benefits

Maslow's Hierarchy



A child is best prepared and motivated to satisfy their cognitive needs and learn in the classroom once they are in an environment where they feel safe, where they feel they belong and cared for, and where they feel respected and valued. I believe the best way to achieve this is through a culture where personal connection and community are fostered in the classroom.

The brain's response to Fear and to Connection



When we feel stressed in our environment, it is more difficult to learn



The importance of Strong Relationships between teachers and children

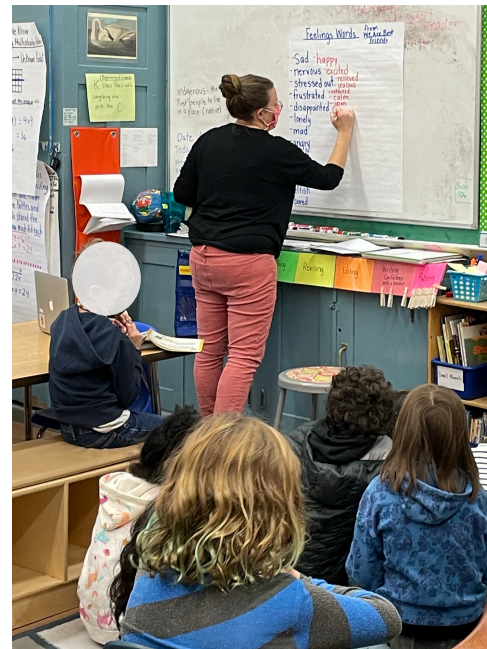
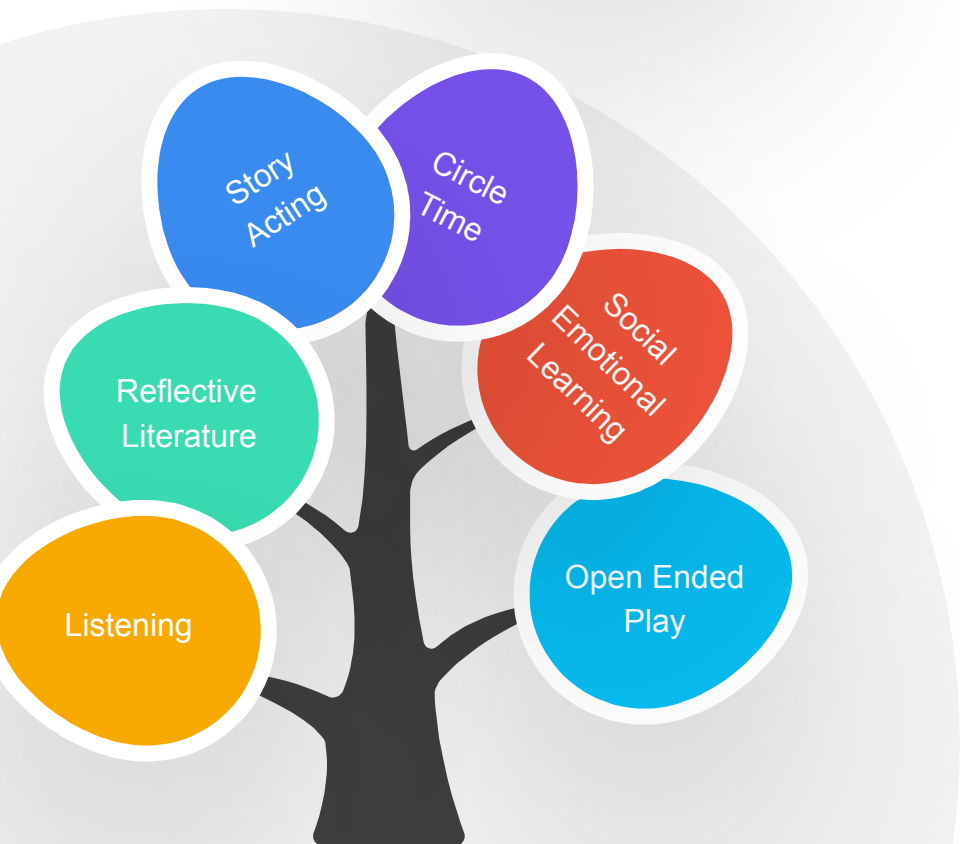


Research finds that warm teacher-child relationships fosters learning, social, and emotional health throughout school years. (Koplow)

The strongest predictor of reading achievement is the quality of student-teacher relationships. (Souto-Manning and Martel)

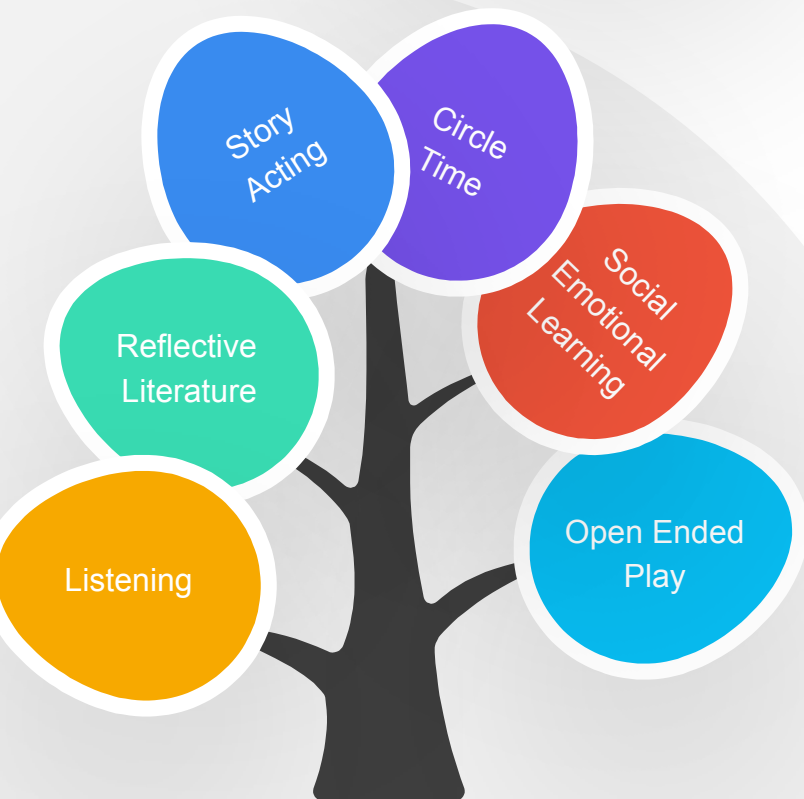


Listening



The most powerful way to build rapport is by practicing what Reggio Emilia practitioners call a pedagogy of listening. (Hammond)

Listening



- Listening communicates a sense of respect for and an interest in the student's contributions
- Research says that 70% of communication is nonverbal
- Listening doesn't just mean hearing the words but listening to the emotional quality of the conversation
- True Listening is critical to child's sense of belonging
- Listening with Grace



The most powerful way to build rapport is by practicing what Reggio Emilia practitioners call a pedagogy of listening. (Hammond)

Reflective Literature

Story Acting

Circle Time

Reflective Literature

Social Emotional Learning

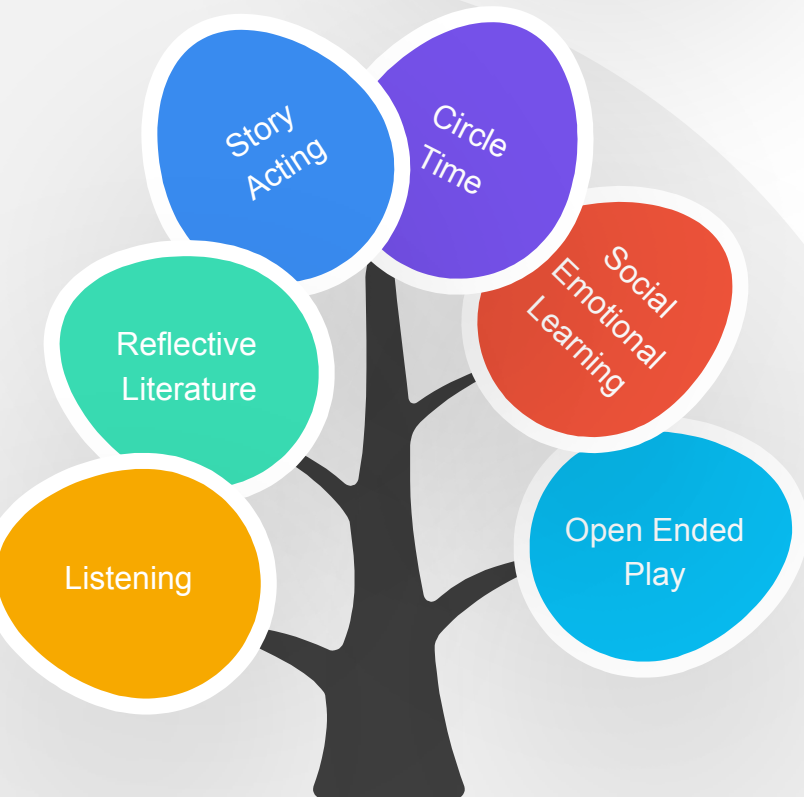
Open Ended Play

Listening



“Reflective literature becomes a dialogue between children, their teachers and the group encouraging reflection.” (Koplow)

Reflective Literature

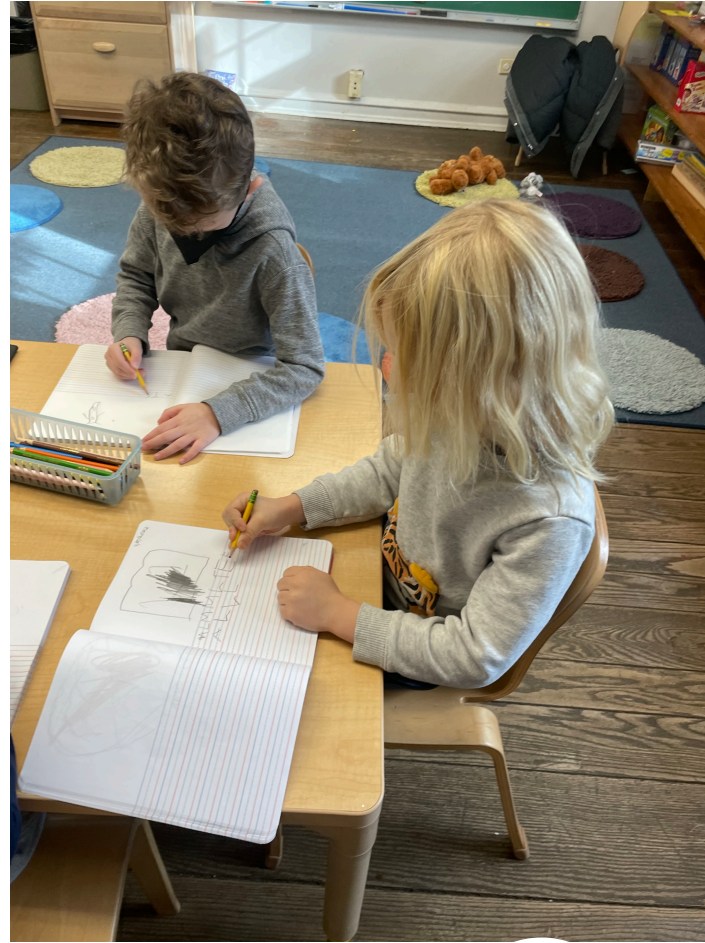
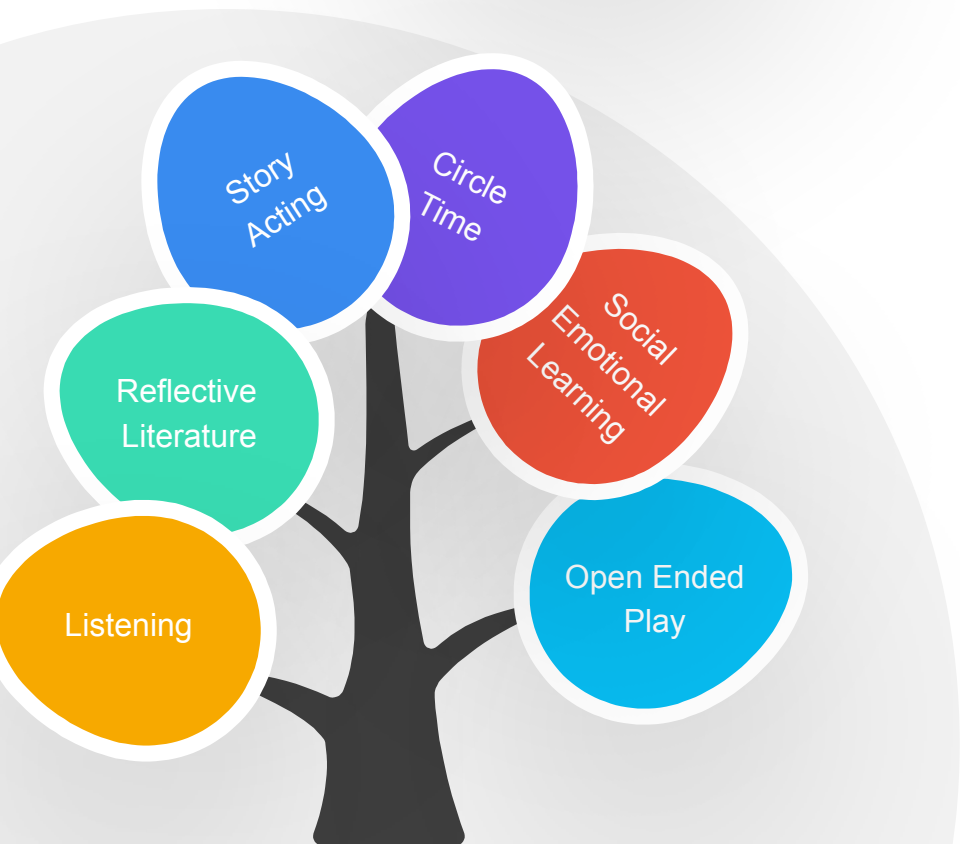


- ◆ Books mirror the issues and emotional experiences of children in the classroom
- ◆ Verbal and visual sharing helps children to hear, see, and connect to peer generated thoughts and feelings
- ◆ Reflective literature gives children voice for their own thoughts, feelings, and life experience
- ◆ Reflective literature decreases emotional and social isolation within the group, promoting resilience



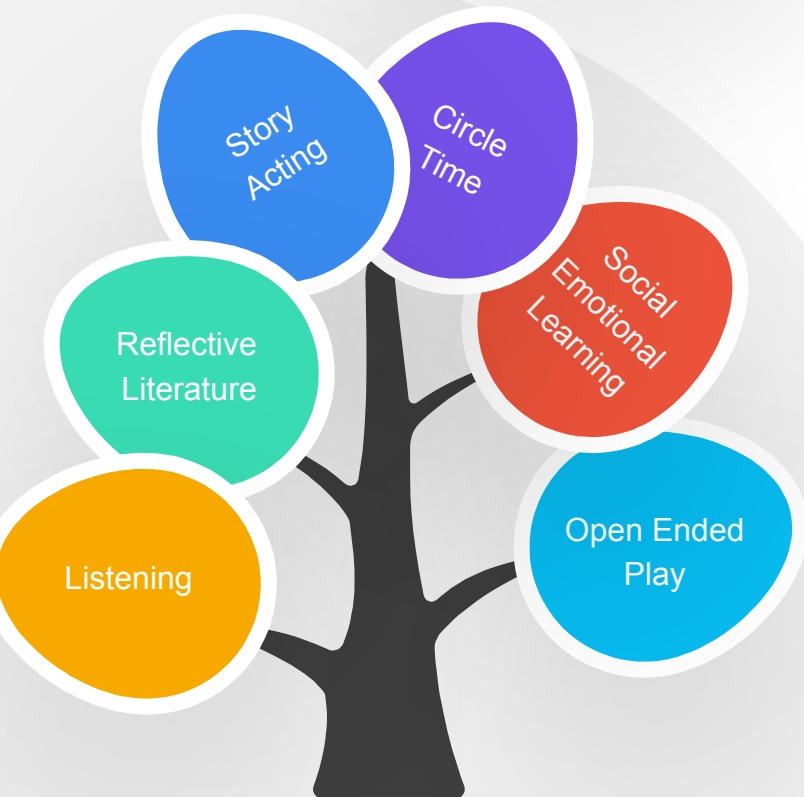
“Reflective literature becomes a dialogue between children, their teachers and the group encouraging reflection.” (Koplow)

Story Acting



“Storytelling and eventually story writing become a voice for their own thoughts and feelings, and are intrinsically motivating and compelling.” (Koplow)

Story Acting

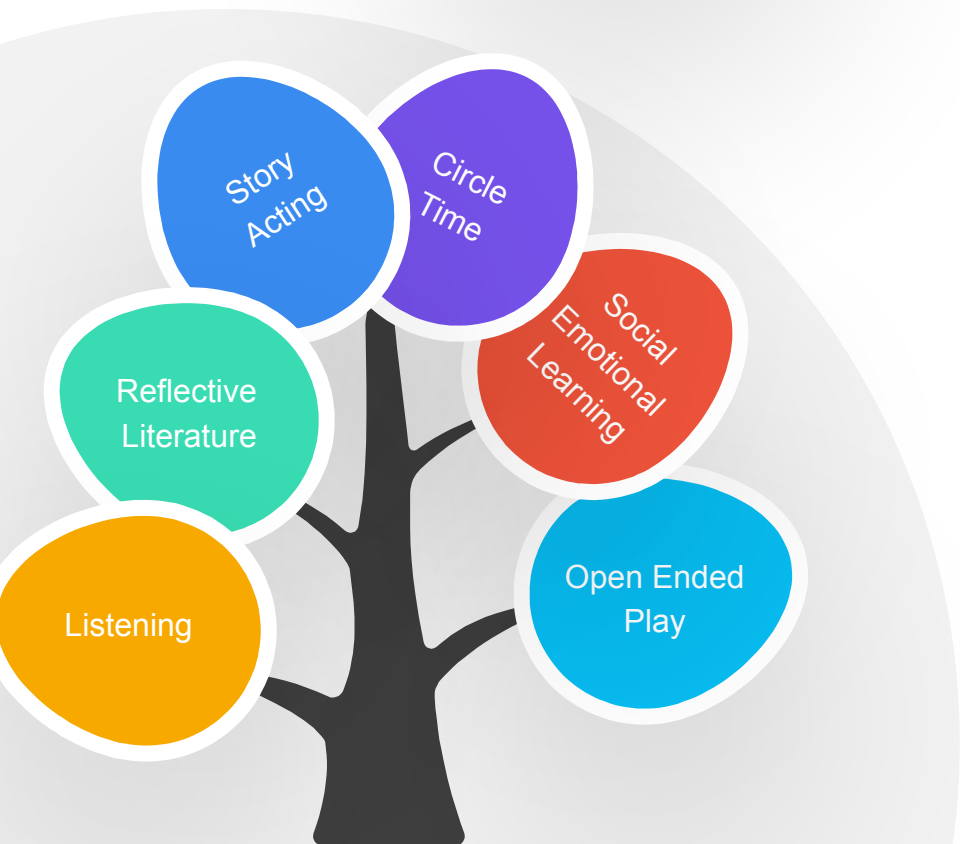


- 💡 Story acting is a great way to foster community
- 💡 Children get to see their dictated stories in action
- 💡 Gives children the power to bring their stories to life by acting them out within their community of peers
- 💡 Fantasy as well as reality factors in the classroom offering emotional release, social opportunity, and an alternative to acting out when conflicts are too difficult to articulate



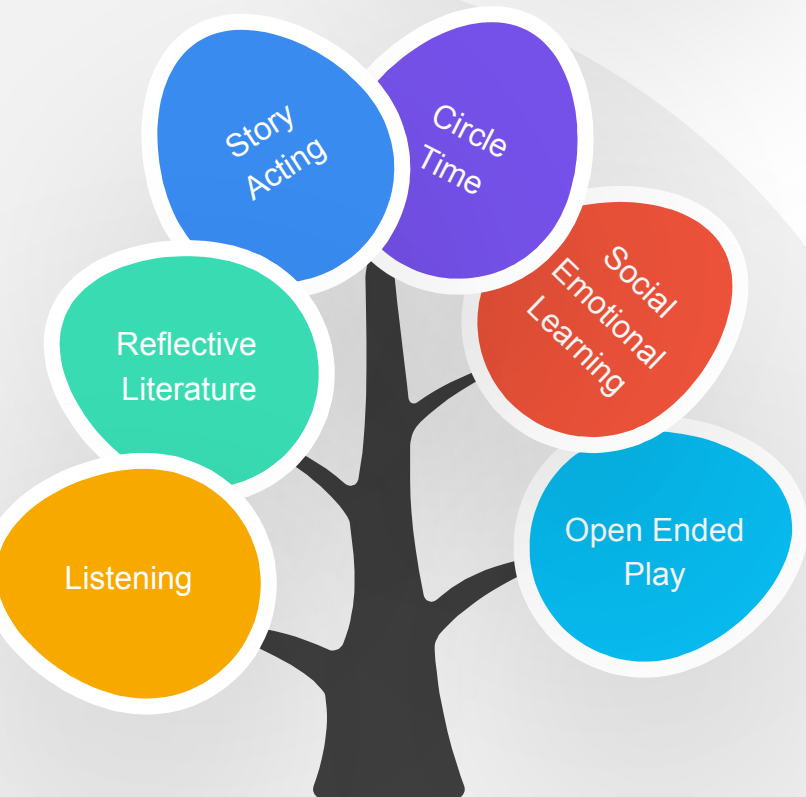
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Circle Time



“studies have shown that gratitude sparks an upward spiral of relationship growth where each individual feels motivated to strengthen the bond.” (Achor)

Circle Time

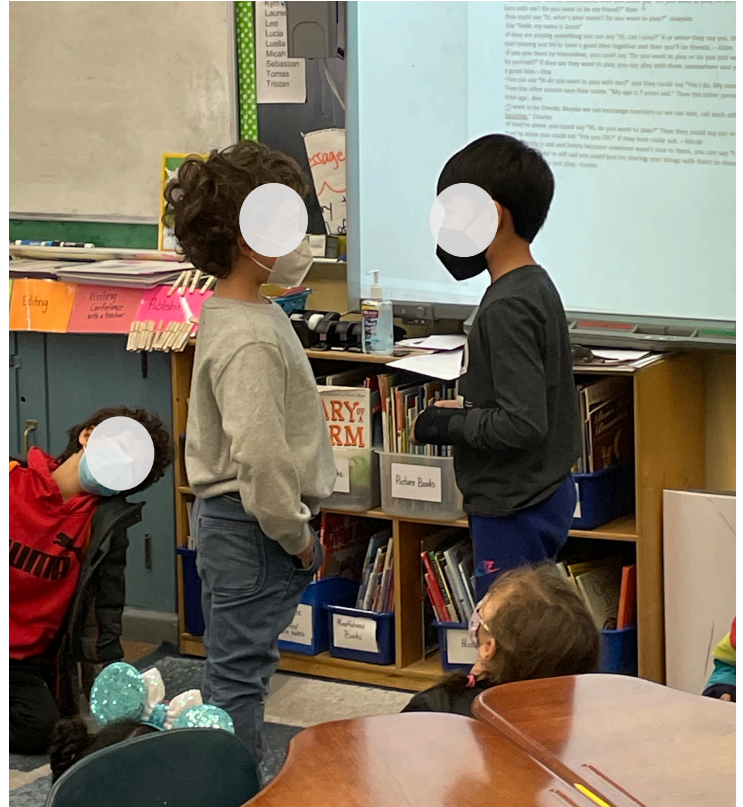
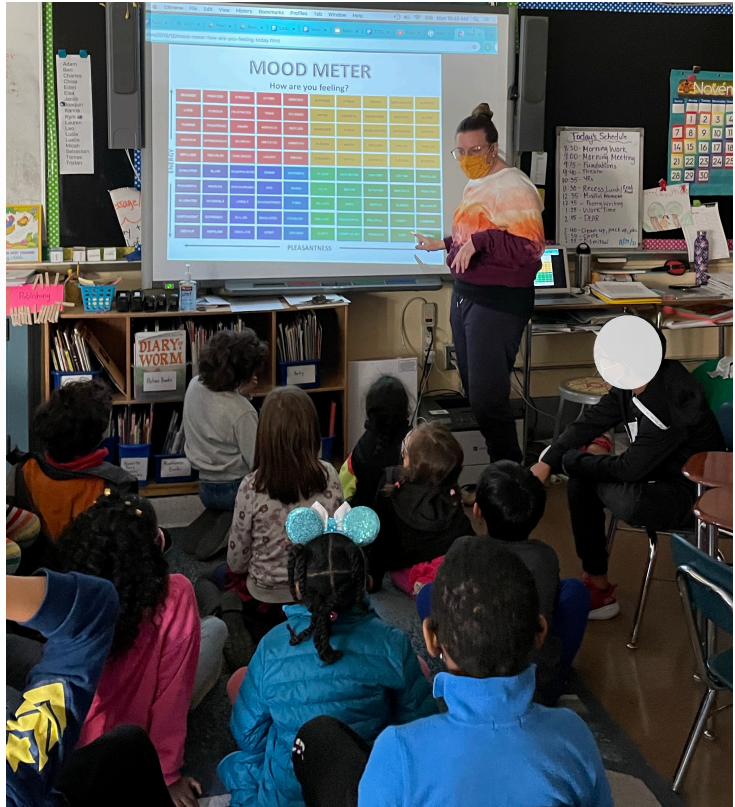
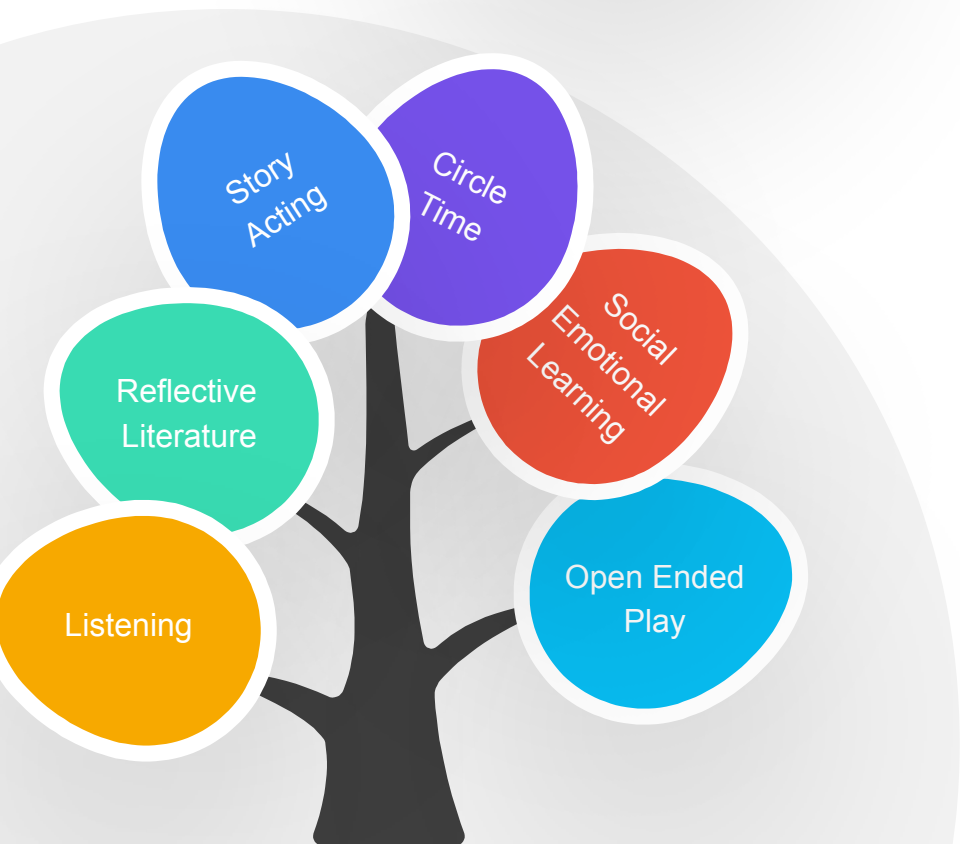


- Circle time provides a safe place for the children to share their work
- Practicing gratitude - appreciations and recognitions; helpful acts; acts of kindness; celebrating birthdays
- Acts of altruism - giving to friends and strangers alike - decreases stress and contributes to mental health



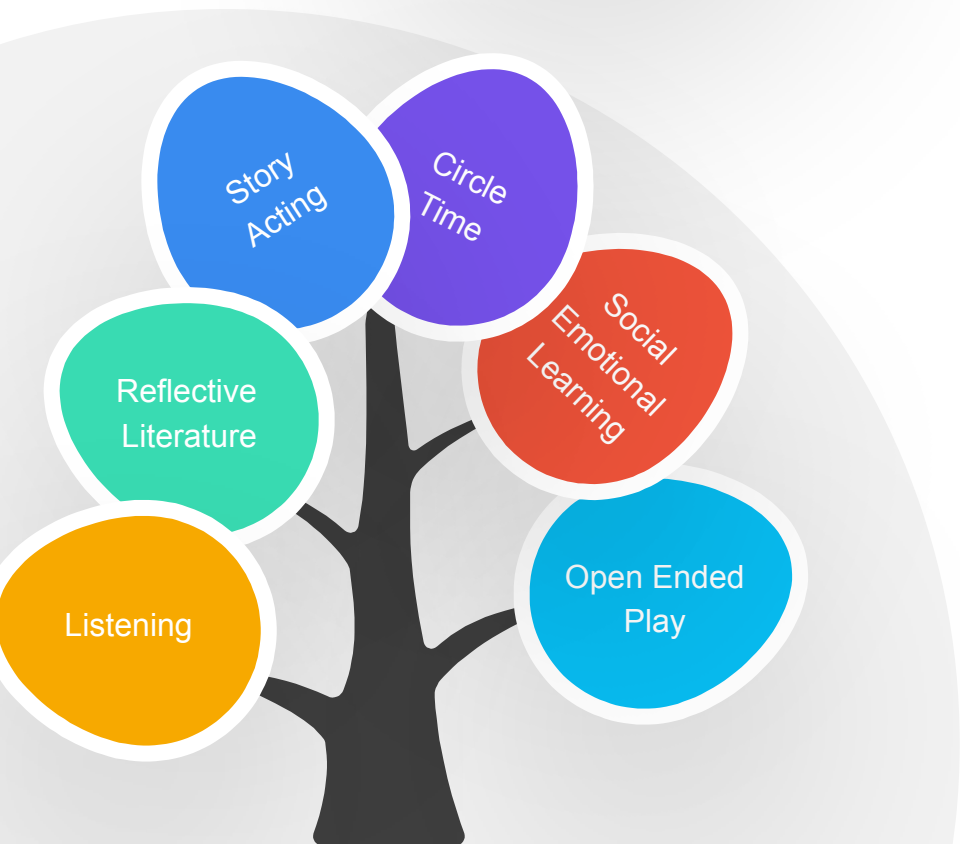
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Social Emotional Learning

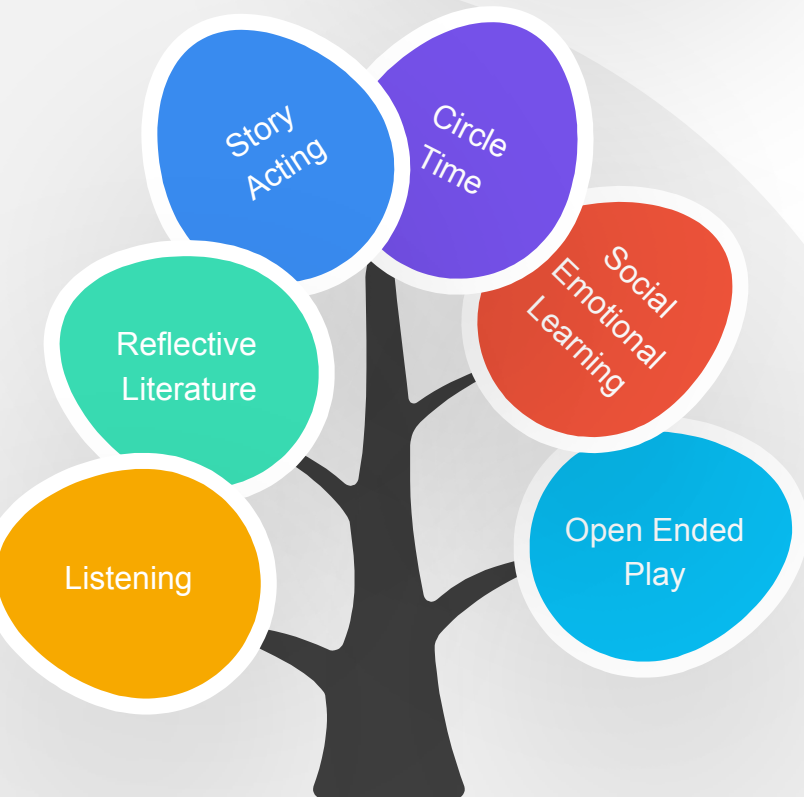


Early childhood educators are critical in supporting social and emotional learning in young children. Morning meetings help children feel a part of the group.

Open Ended Play



Open Ended Play



- Open ended play is a place where children can develop social and emotional skills with scaffolding
- Children collaboratively create scenarios, objects and worlds using their imagination
- Children form bonds by playing together, sharing, and negotiating space
- Children admire each other's creations and show respect for each other's work

Accepting the Whole Child



“When a child is excluded, it teaches the other children that belonging to the classroom community is conditional, not absolute” (Shalaby)



Accepting the Whole Child

01

How do we know that the connection is authentic and not superficial?

02

We need to accept both positive and negative affects and experiences

03

Children who are labeled troublemakers can feel isolated

“When a child is excluded, it teaches the other children that belonging to the classroom community is conditional, not absolute” (Shalaby)



04

Teachers need to have a fierce love for all students

05

Teachers must reflect on their own biases and triggers that may get in the way of the fierce love for each of their students

06

A child who feels accepted and appreciated is more likely to engage and contribute in the classroom

Bringing a Child's Interests into the classroom



Discovering and exploring interests



Sharing student's interests and passions



Learning about one another builds community



When teachers understand the perspectives that underlie a student's knowledge, they are more effective in the classroom.

Bringing a Child's Background into the classroom



Understanding student's culture and background



Learning about one another builds community



Bringing families into the classroom

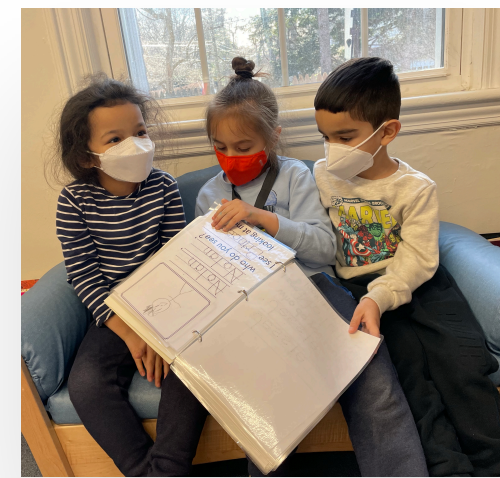


Story gathering



“Children come to school with historical content and concepts which are related to their racial, gender and national identities.” (Epstein and Shiller)

The Social Nature of Learning



“Through talk, children facilitate their own thinking and learning, construct meaning with others, including peers, teachers, family and community members” (Souto-Manning & Martell)



The Social Nature of Learning



“Through talk, children facilitate their own thinking and learning, construct meaning with others, including peers, teachers, family and community members” (Souto-Manning & Martell)



“Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people...Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself...

Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical. As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. It must generate other acts of freedom; otherwise, it is not love.” (Freire)

The connection between Social Support, Happiness and Higher Thinking



“Our brains are literally hardwired to perform at their best not when they are negative or even neutral, but when they are positive.” (Achor)

Benefits of Student-Teacher Relationships to Learning

01

Teachers can use strong relationships with their students to stretch and empower them as learners

03

Teacher's role as ally in the learning partnership calls for them to know when to offer emotional comfort and care and when to not allow the student to slip into learned helplessness



02

Loving children shouldn't be a proxy for teaching them

04

A teachers challenge is to find a way to bring the student into the zone of proximal development while in a state of relaxed alertness so that they experience the appropriate cognitive challenge

Connection and Community create a classroom where children feel safe and where they feel they belong.



“Access to supportive relationships at school is critical to all children’s well-being no matter their economic status, race, cultural background, or birthplace. Ensuring that our children have access to a nurturing and meaningful education that supports emotional and social well being in concert with intellectual growth is essential.” (Koplow)



Connection & Community in the Classroom



Denise Ellen Crystal



Sarah Lawrence College



April 26, 2022



Master of Science in the
Art of Teaching Program



Thank you!!!

INTRODUCTION

Thank you all for being here, Today I am going to talk about the importance of connection and community in the classroom. First - focusing on why it is important to learning.

Second - on how teachers can build connection and community in the classroom

Third, - I will focus on the benefits of connection and community in the classroom.

MASLOW

Abraham Maslow created a classification system which reflected the universal needs of society. Maslow's hierarchy of needs illustrates a pattern through which human motivations generally move. A person must have satisfied a more basic need in order to be motivated to achieve the next need in the hierarchy. The most basic need is physiological, which includes the need for food, shelter and sleep. After the physiological needs are met an individual is more motivated to achieve the other basic needs of safety, belonging and love and self esteem. The fulfillment of a person's physiological needs, safety needs, belonging and love needs and the esteem needs should be met so that one can move on to satisfy the growth needs which include cognitive needs.

I would argue that a child is best prepared to motivate to satisfy their cognitive needs and learn in the classroom once they are in an environment where they feel safe, where they feel they belong and cared for, and where they feel respected and valued. I believe the best way to achieve this is through a culture where personal connection and community are fostered in the classroom.

THE BRAIN'S RESPONSE TO FEAR AND CONNECTION

In the book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain*, Zaretta Hammond(2015) writes about the brain and the nervous system and how they relate to learning.

Hammond's description of the oldest parts of the brain mesh with Maslow's Hierarchy. Our brains developed in layers; the oldest parts of the brain function to keep us alive by pursuing basic needs such as food and shelter, and to keep us safe by alerting us to danger. The newest part of our brain is home to our executive functions which controls planning, abstract thinking, organization, self-regulation and our imagination. When a person feels unsafe and stressed it makes learning nearly impossible.

In the book *Emotionally Responsive Practice*, Lesley Koplou(2021) writes about the connection between persistent fear and anxiety in childhood and impaired learning as well. When stress hormones flood the hippocampus in the brain, higher level cognition is impossible to access.

Positive social relationships and supportive communities can shield or mitigate the effects of stress.

The brain is a social organ, it works best when it has the opportunity to connect and interact with others. It rewards those social connections with the release of oxytocin, which makes us feel relaxed and happy. Even simple gestures like a smile, a nod of the head, a pat on the back or a touch of the arm can stimulate the release of oxytocin. Even eye contact with another person can send a signal to the brain that triggers empathy and rapport.

Koplou(2021) writes that trust is the core of positive relationships. When we are connected to others that we trust will treat us well our brain feels safe and relaxed and is freed up for other activities such as creativity, learning, and higher order thinking.

Hammond writes, "When anyone experiences others in an environment like a classroom that is inattentive or hostile, the body picks up that information through the autonomic nervous system [sending signals to the brain] ...The body starts to produce stress hormones that make

learning nearly impossible. Even if the environment isn't hostile but simply unwelcoming, the brain doesn't produce enough oxytocin and begins to experience anxiety. This anxiety triggers the sympathetic nervous system, making one think he is in danger because the brain doesn't experience a sense of community"(Hammond, 2015, p.45). It is ... "imperative to understand how to build positive social relationships that signal to the brain a sense of physical, psychological, and social safety so that learning is possible"(Hammond, 2015 p.45). All students need to feel affirmed and included as valued members of a learning community (Hammond, 2015, p.47).

TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

Leslie Koplow(2021) describes the importance of strong relationships between teachers and children and how compelling research affirms the power of strong and supportive teacher-child relationships in fostering learning and social and emotional health throughout the school years. Not only can close teacher-child relationships predict multiple positive academic and behavior outcomes but it can lesson depression and buffer vulnerable children from peer victimization.

In the book, *Reading, Writing and Talk*, authors Mariana Souto-Manning and Jessica Martell(2016) note that "the strongest predictor of reading achievement is the quality of student-teacher relationships." (p. 39)

It is my hope to form strong, supportive relationships with each of my students, valuing the knowledge they have and being partners in learning.

LISTENING

I believe that one of the most important ways to build community and connection and to help students feel safe and valued, is a classroom where listening is valued.

Hammond(2015) writes that "The most powerful way to build rapport is by practicing what Reggio Emilia practitioners call a pedagogy of listening. Listening communicates a sense of respect for and an interest in the student's contributions. Research says that 70% of

communication is nonverbal. So listening doesn't just mean hearing the words but listening to the emotional quality of the conversation."(p.78)

Hammond describes the features of listening with grace:

- 1) Give one's full attention to the speaker and to what is being said.
- 2) Understand the feeling behind the words and be sensitive to the emotions being expressed
- 3) Suspend judgement and listen with compassion
- 4) Honor the speaker's cultural way of communicating(Hammond, 2015, p.78)

When I was a student teacher at the Sarah Lawrence Early Childhood Center, I saw how 5-6s teacher, Cassandra Santos gives her full attention to children who share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings with her. During the morning meeting time children in Cassandra's class eagerly share events from their lives and information that is important to them. She models this listening with grace during circle time providing an example to all the children. She gives her full attention to the contributing child and reminds the other children in the classroom to do the same. Cassandra listens and gives children her full attention when they talk to her throughout the day.

True listening in the classroom starts with the teacher. True listening conveys that the teacher values and respects the child. Paula Denton(2015) writes about listening in *The Power of our Words: Teacher Language That Helps Children Learn*. Denton describes true listening as letting the teacher know and understanding the child. She states, "We all need to feel understood to have a sense of belonging and significance. To be motivated to learn, children need to feel like they belong and are important in the classroom community. Listening is crucial in this equation." (Denton, 2015, p.72).

When a teacher truly listens to students, they are "setting a standard and a tone of respect and empathy that are fundamental to a strong community." (Denton, 2015, p.74) The teacher sets the tone for respectful listening and students can learn true listening through their

own interactions with the teacher and by observing the teacher with other students. A teacher's careful listening models for their students how they should listen to one another.

Denton recommends pausing as an effective tool that teachers can use for true listening. It shows respect for the child and their ideas. One way to do this is to teach children not to raise their hands during or immediately after someone speaks. Students can contribute only after they had paused and reflected on what their fellow student said. By pausing teachers give their students time to express their ideas more fully before responding. Pausing sets a slower pace in the classroom encouraging more mindful communication and listening. By pausing the teacher can create an environment that enables students to develop their ideas and contribute more thoughtful discussion in the classroom. By telling their students to think about their response for 2 or 3 minutes before raising their hands, the teacher can give students that need more time to gather their thoughts before speaking the opportunity to actively participate in the discussion.

Paraphrasing is another tool Denton (2015) describes that can foster true listening in the classroom. A listener paraphrases by restating the speaker's message in their own words. It is a way for a teacher to show students that they value what a student has communicated and to make sure that they understand the message. Students can also use paraphrasing to clarify and to help organize their thinking. By paraphrasing and following up with an open ended question, the teacher can show the student that they are truly listening while creating room for their students to propel the discussion in new directions. By paraphrasing what a student is expressing and following up with open ended questions, the teacher can also help students make connections, think about the topic in a new way, or explore related topics potentially making class discussions richer.

In *Making Thinking Visible*, Ritchhart, Church and Morrison (2011) explore how active listening helps learning and teaching and how documenting key points can enhance the process. Liz Malerba, a teacher in the 2nd and 3rd grade classroom at Ella Baker, regularly used documentation during class discussions.

Ritchhart, Church and Morrison(2011) explain that “listening conveys a sense of respect for and an interest in the learner’s contributions. When this is present, students are more willing to share their thinking and put forth their ideas...” (Ritchart et. al., 2011, p.17). Ritchart, Church and Morrison (2011) also recognize that good listening and an understanding of what the student is communicating can generate good questions. By documenting key points in a class discussion a teacher can demonstrate in a different way that they are listening. It can show students that their thoughts and ideas are important and valid. Documentation can help students and teachers reflect on what has been said and learned and can move the learning process forward. When students are able to develop and articulate their ideas and when they can really listen to each other in a respectful environment, it fosters a richer and more productive dialogue making classroom discussions more open and dynamic. Also, I believe that the classroom becomes and more supportive place for everyone.

REFLECTIVE LITERATURE

Teachers can support student’s feeling of belonging in a classroom through their selection of literature. In *Emotionally Responsive Practice*, Koplow(2021) writes about reflective literature in relation to the emotional, developmental and life experiences of the children in the classroom. Koplow uses the example of reading the book, *Wemberly Worried* about a mouse who is anxious about starting kindergarten to reflect children’s separation issues. Reflective literacy becomes a dialogue between children and their teachers, as well as among the children who comprise the group. Teachers can use literature to encourage discussion and reflection among students. Koplow(2021) goes on to write, “In many instances, there is verbal and visual sharing, so that children can hear, see, and connect to peer generated thoughts and feelings. This part of the process acts to decrease emotional and social isolation within the group, promoting resilience and diminishing risks for mental health issues..”(Koplow, 2015, p.73).

ECC teacher, Cassandra Santos shared her thought process with me in selecting books that reflected and related to issues that the children are working through at the time. One day

she chose the book, *We Listen to our Bodies* by Lydia Bowers, in response to what she noticed during the children's play and conversation. Cassandra paused during the book to ask the children if they could relate to something that the main character did and the children responded with nods and raised hands, and examples from their own experience.

Reflective literature can give a voice to children's own thoughts, feelings and life experience.

STORY ACTING

Another way to foster community and connection in the classroom is through Vivian Paley's story-acting technique. Paley describes the story acting technique she used in her classroom. After a child has written or dictated a story, the class is invited to enact the story together.

When I was a student teacher in Milana Kagen's preschool classroom at the Ella Baker School, the children drew a picture and dictated their story to a teacher. During circle time at the end of the day, often a child would share their story. Different children in the class would participate in acting the story out, the stage being the center of carpet used for gathering the class together. The sharing and acting out of stories makes the storyteller visible and helps them feel valued. Inviting others to participate in the story helps build empathy and community within the classroom.

Koplow(2021) writes, "Vivian Paley's story-acting technique serves multiple purposes for the young learner. It allows children see their dictated stories in written form, and then gives them the power to bring their stories to life by acting them out within their community of peers. Storytelling and eventually story writing become a voice for their own thoughts and feelings, and are intrinsically motivating and compelling. Emotional energy that comes from young children's developmental conflicts and confusing life experiences has a prosocial place to go, as this form of self-expression fits well within the continuing structure of the literacy curriculum. Inviting and

appreciating fantasy as well as reality factors in the classroom offers emotional release, social opportunity, and an alternative to acting out when conflicts are too difficult to articulate.” (p. 117)

CIRCLE TIME - MORNING

A common routine in early childhood classrooms is morning meeting held at the same time each day. The morning meeting routine allows children to predict the sequence of events, feel part of the group, and become oriented to the schedule of the day. Morning meeting can hold opportunities for children to share as well. (Koplow, 2021, p. 75-76)

Liz’s classroom

All the classrooms where I was a student teacher had a morning meeting circle time. In Liz Malerba’s 2nd and 3rd grade classroom at the Ella Baker School, the morning meeting was a more structured event which includes the date, the schedule for the day and the word of the week. During the fall when the class working on a bird study, the meeting ended with the Tweet of the Day, in which the teacher presents a picture and information about a particular bird. The children were invited to make observations about the bird’s appearance and bird sounds. Children use descriptive language to describe plumage, the difference between males and females, specific markings such as an eye ring, the length of the tale, and crests on the head, as well as a description of the beak. After the class listens to the sound the bird makes, children can imitate the sound and describe it, sometimes saying the bird call sounds like a song, or relating it to another sound like a horn. The study of birds is a social kind of learning that helps to build community. As children made observations during the *Tweet of the Day*, each student could make a valuable contribution, and each student was heard by all the other students - each student was treated as a valuable member of the community. The curriculum is valuable in building community through shared language and shared experiences. The children are learning about a particular topic together and gaining language and a conversational repertoire together.

CIRCLE TIME - SHARING WORK

In both Liz's 2/3s class and Milana's preschool class, time is made for individual children to share their work as the class is seated in a circle on the rug. The class may examine a creation made out of cardboard or another art work made by a child or a child may read something they have written aloud. Members of the class can comment on the piece or ask the creator a question. This group activity enables the presenter to feel recognized and valued as part of the group. Other children can learn more about the child who presents. Each child's comments or questions are valued as well.

CIRCLE TIME - GRATITUDE

Sometimes at circle time at the end of the day in Liz's classroom, the class would recognize a child for their birthday. Each child in turn would wish the child a happy birthday and may choose to comment on something positive about the child's personality, talents or deeds.

Other times, during the circle at the end of the day, Liz would ask for appreciations or recognitions. A child could raise their hand and tell the class something kind or helpful that another child did for them.

Researcher and author, Shawn Achor wrote that "In fact, studies have shown that gratitude sparks an upward spiral of relationship growth where each individual feels motivated to strengthen the bond. It also predicts feelings of integration and cooperation within a larger group, which means that the more gratitude one ...[person] expresses toward another ... [person], the more social cohesion they feel among the whole [group]." (Achor, 2011 p. 195)

Achor(2011) goes on to write, " A long line of empirical research, has shown that acts of altruism—giving to friends and strangers alike—decrease stress and strongly contribute to enhanced mental health."(p. 52)

In the book *The Kindness of Children*, Vivan Paley(2000) writes about visiting various classrooms of children of various ages. Paley tells children in the classroom a story of when she visited a classroom of young children and the children performed an act of kindness for a

boy named Teddy. In the book, she describes how a good deed is called a mitzvot in her family and how even telling the story of an act of kindness is a mitzvot or good deed in itself. As Paley visits different classrooms of various aged children, her original story spurs more acts of kindness as well as stories of other acts of kindness. When Paley relays the story of Teddy to students in a high school classroom it prompts a girl to tell her own story. She was riding a crowded bus on her commute when the story of a gorilla at the zoo rescuing and protecting a toddler broke on the news and was shared with everyone on the bus. This story prompted the girl on the bus to perform another act of kindness of giving up her seat for another. When Paley asked the girl why she gave up her seat the girl replied, "Because see, like everybody is loving that gorilla and I wanted to do something good too." (Paley, 2000, p. 26)

CIRCLE TIME - SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Liz sometimes used circle time during the day to address social emotional issues as well.

I attended a meeting with Liz and her fellow teachers at the Ella Baker School in the fall of 2021. Before the teachers learned about a social emotional curriculum, the teachers were asked to compare the grade that their students were in to how the children were acting socially and emotionally. Each teacher thought that their students were two years behind socially and emotionally because of the disruptions caused by the Covid pandemic.

The lack of social emotional skills was evident in early November when the 2nd and 3rd grade teachers became aware of issues occurring on the recess yard involving exclusion and hurtful words and actions. These events this past fall really struck home in me how teachers really need to place value on social emotional learning and really need to be aware of the social emotional skills that their children have or need work on. In order to function in a positive community where children feel valued and can trust others, teachers need to make time and effort into scaffolding or sometimes directly teaching these skills.

A few weeks after school started, the 2nd and 3rd grade children in Liz's class formed a circle on the rug for 4Rs or a social/emotional learning. Liz used the curriculum from the Morningside Center. The curriculum started with a book and continued with a discussion about the book.

In addition to the Morningside Center curriculum, Liz gathered children in her class into a circle to discuss and role play situations on the playground like: what to do when a game has started and you want to join? when someone asks to join your game after it has started? and what happens if you accidentally bump into someone or someone bumps into you? I saw Liz and some children role play what to do when one child bumps into another child to illustrate what to do and to give the children the tools for successful interactions.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

I have seen how relationships are built and strengthened and how social emotional learning takes place during free play in Cassandra's 5-6s classroom. The children have ample time for free play both outside in the yard and inside the classroom with a variety of materials. Children collaboratively create scenarios, objects and worlds using their imagination. They form bonds by working together, sharing and negotiating each other's space and respecting each others creations. Children are able to make authentic connections and learn from disagreements. Cassandra provides appropriate scaffolding and guidance for building social emotional skills.

ACCEPTING THE WHOLE CHILD INTO THE COMMUNITY

How do we make sure that we are accepting the whole child and that the connection and community are authentic and not superficial?

One way to welcome the whole child is to make sure that both positive and challenging experiences and characteristics are accepted. Koplw(2021) refers to this as the teacher acting as a mirror. She states, "A good mirror acknowledges both children's positive and negative

affects, and their positive and negative experiences, without valuing one over the other, while consistently reflecting a positive image of the children *themselves*.” (Koplow, 2021, p. 59)

In the book *Troublemakers, Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School*, the author, Carla Shalaby(2017) writes about the isolation that children labeled troublemakers can feel in the classroom. In describing the children labeled troublemakers Shalaby writes, “These children risked punishment, risked their relationships with the teacher, to carve out a thread of belonging in the social fabric of the classroom... At the same time, the more they misbehaved to earn a place in the community, the more they were excluded from the community” (Shalaby, 2017, p.161)

Shalaby(2017) goes on to describe the ripple effect this exclusion has on the classroom community. “When a child is excluded, it teaches the other children that belonging to the classroom community is conditional, not absolute” (p.162).

In “A Letter to Teachers” Shalaby(2017) calls for teachers to have a fierce love for each of their students. Shalaby writes about love in terms of freedom and the responsibilities and dilemmas that come with freedom. I think about love in terms of a community and the responsibilities, sensitivities and compassion that come with being part of a community. To me being part of a community or a team does not require conformity. Each person is unique and brings their own skills and strengths to the community. But being part of a community means being sensitive to the needs and desires of others in the community and the needs of the community as a whole. There is a push and pull between individual needs and desires and group inclusivity and responsibility.

Shalaby(2017) writes about the importance of relationships as well. She explains that “Many leading education scholars call for schools to center authentic and meaningful human relationships, empathy, and care between and among both teachers and young people. Marcus’s [a child labeled a troublemaker] demands echoed these most human of things— to be authentically heard, to be known, and to be celebrated....fundamentally care was more

motivating than authority, reciprocal relationship more effective than power over, listening more useful than lecturing, healing more beneficial than punishment.” (Shalaby, 2017, p. 145-6)

Teachers must reflect on their own biases and triggers that may get in the way of the fierce love for each of their students.

PUNISHMENT AND REWARDS AND CONNECTION

Alfie Kohn(2006) wrote about punishments and rewards in the classroom and the effects on connection. He states that punishment “warps the relationship between the punisher and the punished... The caring alliance between adult and child, so vital to the later’s growth has been significantly compromised... To help an impulsive, aggressive, or insensitive student become more responsible, we have to gain some insight into why she is acting that way. That, in turn, is most likely to happen when the student feels close enough to us (and safe enough with us) to explain how things look from her point of view. The more students see us as punishers, the less likely it is that we can create the sort of environment where things can change.” (Kohn, 2006, p. 27)

Kohn(2006) goes on to write, “Like punishments, rewards warp the relationship between adult and child. With punishments we come to be seen as enforcers to be avoided; with rewards as goody dispensers on legs. In neither case have we established a caring alliance, a connection based on warmth and respect. Like punishments, rewards try to make bad behaviors disappear through manipulation. They are ways of doing things to students instead of working with them.” (Kohn, 2006, p. 36)

BRINGING A CHILD’S INTERESTS INTO THE CLASSROOM

One way for students to bring more of their personalities into the classroom is to share what they are passionate about. In *Inquiry Mindset Nurturing the Dreams, Wonders, & Curiosities of our Youngest Learners*, Trevor Mackenzie and Rebecca Bathurst-Hunt (2018) explore how students can share their passions and interests in the classroom with more

independent projects. By letting students choose a topic that interests them teachers foster the child's interest and empower the student by honoring their voice. (Mackenzie & Bathurst-Hunt, 2018, p. 16).

Students can explore and research their topic, collect learning evidence and then create an authentic piece of work and display their understanding. (Mackenzie & Bathurst-Hunt, 2018). When students share work that reflects their interests, they often bring considerable expertise while sharing their individual voice with the classroom. The student who shares will feel valued and respected.

Learning about one another also builds community. When the class truly listens to their classmate's presentation about their interest, they often learn another perspective while demonstrating their respect for their classmate. Perhaps a younger child can share a book or object they know about. I hope to give students time and space to learn about their interests and passions. By sharing their knowledge with others, students can learn from one another while feeling listened to and valued.

BRINGING A CHILD'S BACKGROUND INTO THE CLASSROOM

Teachers can help make students feel valued through understanding and including their social identities in the classroom. In the article *Perspective Matters: Social Identity and the Teaching and Learning of National History*, Terrie Epstein and Jessica Shiller (2005) explore the impact of social identities on learning. They state, "... children come to school with historical content and concepts which are related to their racial, gender and national identities"(p. 203). When teachers understand the perspectives that underlie a student's knowledge, they are more effective in the classroom. I believe that it is important for a teacher to understand who their students are and to value the knowledge and viewpoints they bring to the classroom. Teachers should be open to a variety of viewpoints in the classroom and prepared to integrate multiple perspectives into their instruction. This can be a source of growth and achievement.

In *Crafting a Culturally Relevant Social Studies Approach*, Gloria Ladson Billings (2016) writes about the importance of teachers knowing their students and adjusting their approach accordingly. Billings describes how two teachers help their students to bring their knowledge and identity into the classroom by encouraging their students to learn about their family history and by asking how their family came to live in their neighborhood.

In *Doing History, Investigating With Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, the authors, Linda Levstik and Keith Barton(2015) describe different projects that helped students to bring their own history and knowledge into the classroom. In one project students create a timeline of their lives using what they already know and gathering information from family members. Students bring their own histories and identities into the classroom, by choosing which events to research and describe. Young students can do this project with a time line, pictures and short descriptions.

Another project that Barton and Levstik(2015) describe involves students learning about their family history through interviews with family members, especially older members like grandparents. Students learn and can share about the unique family histories and important family events.

I want to incorporate projects where students own histories and cultures are incorporated into the curriculum. I hope to create a classroom environment that gives my students a space where they feel their history and culture is valued and where they can share their individual experiences with their classmates. When students share the backgrounds of their families and communities, and their own experiences it also helps students to learn about and understand different perspectives.

I saw how Liz worked to bring children's family history, community and culture into the classroom during Spanish-Speaking Countries Month, also known as National Hispanic Heritage Month. She invited children's parents and relatives to share stories and interests with the children. One parent read a book that took place in Columbia and one child's uncle talked about soccer and the sports importance to him.

Koplow(2021) advocates story gathering. “Story Gathering involves teachers meeting with parents or other family members to learn the important stories of each of their children’s lives, allowing teachers to better understand and support social and emotional growth within the context of the child’s actual experiences. These conferences allow parents to experience the teacher’s capacity to listen in a nonjudgemental way.” (Koplow, 2021, p. 84) I believe story gathering can strengthen the relationship between the school and family as well.

THE SOCIAL NATURE OF LEARNING

Learning is social. In a classroom where each child feels safe, where they feel they belong, where they feel valued, seen, cared for and respected learning as a social activity can benefit as well.

Psychologist, Lev Vygotsky viewed learning in a sociocultural context. ..”children actively participating in culturally organized activities try to make sense of them and the larger society. In this way, cognition develops as a by-product of engaging in these cultural routines. Thus cognition is a dynamic process of trying to understand..” (Miller, 2016, p. 160)

As Vygotsky explained, “We propose that an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90)

Vygotsky defined the zone of proximal development as the distance between a child’s “actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the [higher] level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

In the book, *Children, Language, and Literacy: Diverse Learners in Diverse Times* by Genishi and Dyson(2009) and in the book, *Reading, Writing and Talk: Inclusive Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learners, K-2*, by Mariana Souto-Manning and Jessica Martell(2016), the authors write about the social aspect of language learning and relate language learning to

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development in learning through interacting with others. Souto-Manning and Martell (2016) write "Through talk, children facilitate their own thinking and learning, construct meaning with others, including peers, teachers, family and community members" (p.72). Genishi and Dyson(2009) write, "Children learn language, on whatever path at whatever rate, on a social plane. Language learning comes through countless interactions with others across varied sociocultural contexts. Language exists in dialogue with others in a sociolinguistically complex world. Something articulated—said or written—is an invitation for response from others" (p.135).

In *Talking Their Way Into Science*, Karen Gallas(1995) describes the benefits of science talks, in which a community of learners, or class discuss a scientific topic and "take on the voice and the authority of scientists"(p.3) Gallas states that science talks "...create a level playing field. Everyone can be scientific, even the least privileged children in the class, and everyone has important questions that provoke energetic discussion."(Gallas, 1995, p. 25) In order to have productive discussions there must be a foundation of respect each person in the community has for each other.

I learned about group work in math in the book, *Designing Groupwork: Strategies for the Heterogeneous Classroom*. Before working in small groups the authors, Cohen and Lotan(2014) note the importance of setting norms for positive group interactions.

In the article, *The Importance of Group Work in Mathematics* written for the World Conference on Educational Sciences the authors identified multiple benefits for students that are taught using principles of Groupwork that include students: gain in self-confidence, overcome the fear of making mistakes, improve expressing themselves, learn from each other and learn to respect each others' opinions.

Cohen and Lotan(2014) explain that Groupwork enhances intergroup relationships by increasing trust and friendliness, keeping students involved with their work, and teaching skills to work in groups. They also note that "productive Groupwork increases and deepens opportunities to learn content and develop language and thus has the potential to build

equitable classrooms (Cohen & Lotan, 2014, p.6). The quality and depth of the discussion around solving problems has the potential to be much richer during Groupwork.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2018) writes that dialogue cannot exist without love, trust, humility, faith in humankind, hope and critical thinking. (p. 89-92) Freire (2018) writes, "Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people... Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself... Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical. As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. It must generate other acts freedom; otherwise, it is not love." (Freire, 2018, p.89-90)

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT, HAPPINESS AND HIGHER THINKING

Connection and community has other benefits in the classroom. It is a key way to lower stress and increase happiness. The positive feelings that one can feel from connection to others can broaden thinking and creativity. Achor writes about these benefits.

In two different studies researchers sought out the characteristics of the happiest 10 percent among us. It was not physical fitness, what climate one lives in, age or education that determined happiness. The only characteristic that distinguished the happiest people from everyone else was the strength of their social relationships. In other words, the more social support you have the happier you are.

"It turns out that our brains are literally hardwired to perform at their best not when they are negative or even neutral, but when they are positive" (Achor, 2011, p. 15).

Achor writes, "Recent research shows that this "broadening effect" is actually biological; that happiness gives us a real chemical edge... How? Positive emotions flood our brains with dopamine and serotonin, chemicals that not only make us feel good, but dial up the learning centers of our brains to higher levels. They help us organize new information, keep that

information in the brain longer, and retrieve it faster later on. And they enable us to make and sustain more neural connections, which allow us to think more quickly and creatively, become more skilled at complex analysis and problem solving, and see and invent new ways of doing things.”(Achor, 2011, p. 44)

BENEFITS OF STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS TO LEARNING

But social connection and happiness alone do not determine a successful classroom experience.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) emphasizes, the point of culturally responsive teaching isn't just about getting along with students but to use that connection to stretch and empower them as learners. Author, Geneva Gay(2010) states, “loving children should not become a proxy for teaching them” (p. 53).

Hammond(2015) describes how teachers can use warm, supportive, and strong teacher-student relationships to push for excellence and stretch a student beyond his comfort zone (Hammond, 2015, p. 97&98).

Hammond(2015) writes, “Your role as ally in the learning partnership calls for you to know when to offer emotional comfort and care and when to not allow the student to slip into learned helplessness. Your job is to find a way to bring the student into the zone of proximal development while in a state of relaxed alertness so that he experiences the appropriate cognitive challenge.....”(Hammond, 2015, p. 97).

CONCLUSION/CALLING

I hope to have a classroom where every child feels safe and where they feel they belong as part of a supportive community. My hope is that each child feels accepted in their entirety. My hope is for each child to feel valued for who they are and believed in for what they can achieve. My hope is in such a community where trust, support, and acceptance are valued,

children are able to participate, to take risks without fear of failure, to become active contributors to learning, sharing their ideas and advocating for what they believe in.

Leslie Koplow(2021) writes, "Access to supportive relationships at school is critical to all children's well-being no matter their economic status, race, cultural background, or birthplace. Ensuring that our children have access to a nurturing and meaningful education that supports emotional and social well being in concert with intellectual growth is essential for everyone who wants to promote a safe and mentally healthy democratic society"(Koplow, 2021, p. 11).

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