

# The Social Contract: Building Community and Fostering Prosocial Behavior in Kindergarten

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### Introduction

Students are often punished for displaying low social competence (Logue, 2007). Expulsion rates for pre-kindergarten programs are higher than expulsion rates for any other age (Gilliam, 2005). Certain students are being left behind at the earliest age they can engage with the school system. A report by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (2014) showed that black children are disproportionately represented for preschoolers who have received out of school suspensions. Students' self-concept, motivation and sense of belonging are harmed when they are repeatedly punished for not having the prerequisite social skills for conforming with school expectations (Kupchik, 2016). Social-emotional learning and sense community can mitigate expulsion rates.

### Research Question

How does intentionally scaffolding community-building through the use of a Social Contract affect kindergarten students' sense of community and prosocial behavior?

### Literature Review

Prosocial behavior is defined as altruistic behavior that creates positive consequences for another person or for a group (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989). Positive socialization is guided by involvement in a community, affective relationships in a community and the values upheld by a community (Hirichi, 1969). As socialization units, classrooms are especially impactful for children's prosocial development. If students feel a sense of belonging in their classroom environment and those environments promote prosocial behaviors, the students themselves would be likely to develop those behaviors (Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming & Hawkins, 2004). There are many curriculums and strategies that integrate social emotional learning and the teaching of prosocial behaviors in a classroom setting. One such program is Capturing Kids' Hearts (CKH). While there have been studies that show the effectiveness of CKH with adolescents, this study seeks to gain a deeper understanding on how the same practices can impact the prosocial behavior for kindergarteners, who are at a lower level of cognitive and moral development.

### Action Research Method

#### Participants

- 17 kindergarten students
- Five females, 12 males
- Ages five to six
- 90% of student body qualifies for free or reduced lunch
- Nine participants were English Language Learners



#### Data Collection

- Audio-recorded individual interviews on students' general experience in kindergarten and their perception on the classroom community
- Audio-recorded focus-group interviews with two to three students
- Observational data on students immediate prosocial behavior during four 30-minute lesson observations
- This study is a qualitative, observational, action research design

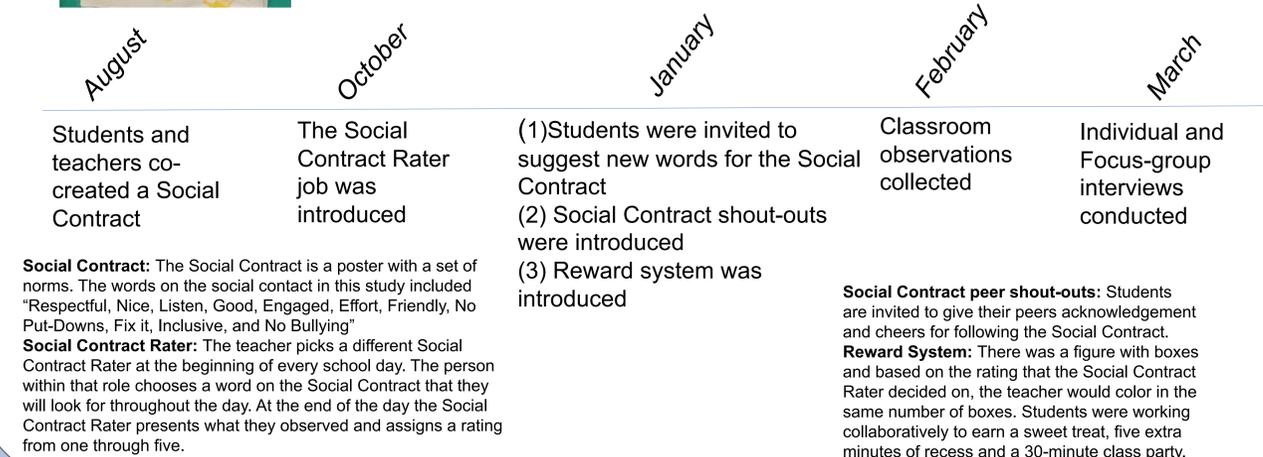
#### Data Analysis

- Interviews were transcribed and coded for themes using an open coding approach
- Observational data was examined using an open-coding approach



#### Intervention

Based on Capturing Kids Hearts Implementation Strategies



### Discussion

The community-building approach consisting of a classroom Social Contract, student Social Contract Raters, and opportunity for peer shout-outs, fostered in the students a strong sense of community, social responsibility and positivity regarding school..

The community-building strategy displayed many values of humanistic education. It created a democratic classroom that facilitated community cohesion and social and emotional growth. By experiencing responsibility, improving self-awareness and communicating with peers in supportive ways, students were able to develop a positive regard for self and other.

Through the strategies implemented in the classroom, students had all the components to experience positive socialization. They had perceived opportunities for participation in the group, actual participation in the group, skills for participation and interaction, and perceived rewards from participation and interaction (Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming & Hawkins 2004). As a class, students demonstrated a desire to act prosaically and developed a strong group identity.

Additionally, the intervention may help students move faster along in moral development. At a age five and six people generally engage in moral reasoning from a perspective that determines good versus bad based on punishment, reward and obedience to authority (Kohlberg, 1968). However, some kindergarteners demonstrated a respect for the social contract because of its effects on group cohesion. Students internalized norms on the social contract and understood the social value of those norms.

### Results

Themes	Quotes
Positive Emotions	"I really like the whole thing in kindergarten, there's nothing I have not liked. I feel happy on my way to school because I love coming to school to learn because I have never learned so many things before. My friends are amazingly great, I even love playing with them outside."
Responsibility	"If I was teacher I would pick a social contract rater." "I like being Social Contract Rater because I get to stand up like a kid and tell the class what they did"
Awareness	"I use my eyes and ears to tell what people are doing. I just write a note in my head when I notice." "You were focusing and you were not rushing,"
Peer Support	"I take a lot of notes in my head. I took the note about George where he was being so good." "Our classroom community is about helping people who are sad or upset. I help people with Gigi so they can keep up with levels so they don't have to stay inside."
Group Identity	"I give a shout-out to everyone! The whole class is being respectful." "This school is the best! I think we are the best group of kindergarten."
Punishment/Reward	"You have to listen to the social contract because that's following the rules." "It matters because we could get special stuff or we could get in trouble."
Moral Reasoning	"You have to follow the rules because it's important because people will start fighting." "I'll follow the social contract because I want no one to be mean to me back."
Relationship Cohesion	
Moral Reasoning	

### Implications

- Teachers can harness the Social Contract to benefit students' moral development by ensuring that the values on the contract are aligned with the students' next stage of moral development.
- For kindergarten students, providing rewards and punishments is an effective method for motivating prosocial behavior and making values more concrete.
- Offering students responsibility is a powerful method for fostering student buy-in to class norms. Teachers should find ways to give students meaningful responsibility in the classroom in order to strengthen students' sense of belonging, self-esteem and motivation.
- Given the findings in this study, kindergarten teachers could implement this exact intervention in their classrooms in order to facilitate community cohesion and prosocial behavior in a way that aligns with humanistic education.