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Creating Classroom Community to Welcome Children Experiencing Trauma

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Cover Page Footnote

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Creating Classroom Community to Welcome Children Experiencing Trauma

Katherina A. Payne, Jennifer Keys Adair, and Shubhi Sachdeva

School as a civic space encourages teachers and students to consider the fundamental question, “How do we live together?” While secondary classrooms may deliberate public policy issues that inform this question (e.g., Hess & McAvoy, 2015), early childhood classrooms afford spaces for young children to negotiate this question through their embodied, everyday experiences. This question is at the heart of social studies education, yet social studies has been increasingly marginalized or pushed out of elementary and early childhood curricula (e.g., Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014; Heafner & Fitchett, 2012). As social studies is pushed out, concurrently schools have readily adopted curricula for “social-emotional learning” (SEL).

In early childhood settings, educators often try to support the development of community (a goal of engaging the question of how we live together) through a lens of prosocial development or social-emotional learning. These frames tend to position children as individuals who lack the ability to engage in White middle-class notions of peaceful social interactions and acts of kindness and to encourage schools to take on the responsibility of teaching those predetermined skills (Schonert-Reichl & O’Brien, 2012). The focus on individuality often removes the child from the collective space of the classroom community, as well as takes away their authentic ways of being a community member. Emphasizing remediation of individual behaviors differentiates many social-emotional learning curricula from a vision of civic education that negotiates the question of how we live together.

Over a year, we spent 469 hours in three classrooms in a Head Start center in South Texas. We observed and documented how young children act with care and concern alongside and for their community members, that is, their classmates (see Payne, 2018; Payne, Adair, Colegrove, Lee, Falkner, McManus & Sachdeva, 2019). In other words, we saw how young children embodied civic skills and dispositions in their everyday actions. Additionally, we saw how their teachers’ actions either allowed or constrained these opportunities. Rather than focusing on what individual children lacked in “social skills,” we observed how teachers and children negotiated difficult circumstances to better include all children in the classroom community. How children acted civically, that is, acted with and on behalf of their communities, and how their teachers supported this work fostered social and emotional learning that enmeshed the individual within the collective.

We offer one experience and story of Luis¹, his peers, and his teachers as evidence of how attending to civicism reframes social emotional learning as a more collective endeavor. We consider how Luis’s teachers and classmates approached his social learning, inclusive of his experience with trauma, from the point of view of civicism, incorporating social-emotional learning into community building work in authentically caring ways (Valenzuela, 1999).

Recognizing Trauma in the Everyday Settings of Early Childhood Education

During the course of our *Civic Action and Young Children* study, we spent many hours observing and filming in a Head Start preschool in San Antonio, Texas (see Payne, 2018; Payne, et al., 2019; Adair, Phillips, Richie & Sachdeva, 2017). Early on, we noticed that children struggled with varied difficult circumstances, including poverty, homelessness, discrimination, and threat of deportation. Yet teachers did not label children as homeless, illegal immigrants, or poor. Children seemed to help one another more than we saw in other

1 All names are pseudonyms.

preschool classrooms. We started filming to capture all of the ways that children acted as a community and soon realized that instead of dismissing children's behaviors, needs, or desires as problematic, children and teachers together tried to meet everyone's unique needs without judgment.

In particular, we noted how two teachers, Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa, who worked in a general education classroom, and their group of 17 3- and 4-year-old children, supported one 4-year-old Latino boy, Luis. In class, Luis enjoyed building ramps with blocks, helping set up lunch, and riding tricycles during recess time. During the year we spent with Luis and his classmates, we also learned that his family was experiencing housing insecurity. Consider the following scene from a morning in their classroom:

Ms. Louisa, the assistant teacher, is standing at the door greeting children as they arrive for the day. Luis walks up the hallway, wrapped in a plush bright blue blanket. Ms. Louisa calls out, "Good morning, Luis! Put your blanket in your locker." She continues, "Wow, Luis, I like the way you walked in this morning, put your blanket in your locker. You can get it during nap time, okay?" Luis slowly unwraps himself and shoves the blanket in his locker, and then gives Ms. Louisa a high-five as he walks into the classroom.

The class begins their morning routines and circles up on the rug for their morning meeting. Luis crouches over and puts his head on the floor. The children around him leave him alone as he falls asleep.

Luis sleeps through the morning, curled over with his head on the rug. When center time begins, children head over to the rug where Luis is sleeping to play with the blocks. Victor and Giovanni start building a tall structure near Luis's feet. Luis, still sleeping, has spread his body out on the rug. Enrique is building a structure around Luis and soon realizes he cannot keep building the way he did the other day and pleads, "Luis, move!" The other children continue building around Luis. Soon the blocks are close, but not quite touching Luis's head, arms, legs and feet. Ms. Luz, the head teacher, comes over to check on Luis. Enrique tells her, "Luis is blocking the way."

Ms. Luz kneels down next to Luis, fixes the collar of his shirt, and gently shakes his shoulder. She says, "Luis, you're missing work time, Luis. Are you going to wake up? Luis?" She sings his name out, "Lu-is. Are you ready to wake up now?" She announces to the group playing all around Luis, "He doesn't want to wake up."

The students continue building. When Nicholas goes to knock down his blocks, he is careful to knock them away from Luis. The students gradually move their structures to the other half of the rug, away from Luis.

The class prepares for their second small group activity. Ms. Luz calls out, "Luis, we're going into our second group, Luis." David is gently shaking Luis. Ms. Luz tries one more time, "We are going to feed our chameleon flies, Luis." Luis continues to sleep.

As the students line up for recess, Ms. Luz stays behind with Luis to wake him up. She calls the school leader, Dr. Benevides, to come help so that she can join Ms. Louisa and the students heading outside. Dr. Benevides picks up Luis and carries him to her office where he wakes up and then rejoins the class outside during recess (Video, April 28, 2016).

This scene highlights how Luis's classmates and teachers engaged in everyday civics to create space for him to be part of the classroom community. The children continued to access the block area for play, while allowing Luis to continue sleeping. They also negotiated how his presence shifted their play—Enrique openly struggled with how to build in the way he wanted and attempted to get Luis to move and Nicholas ensured

the blocks tumbled away from Luis.

We also noted how the teachers' actions modeled particular ways of acting as a community. When Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa watched and reflected on our recording of this scene, they pointed out that they didn't force Luis to wake up. They described Luis's situation in plain terms, not with labels, to the children and to us, the researchers. The teachers pointed out that Luis did not get enough sleep at home and that they wanted to help him be successful with his peers and in his academic learning, so they let him sleep. They described his life at home as "a living situation that was a little different," or they would simply say that Luis and his family were living in a motel. They did not ever say on camera or in passing that he was homeless, yet they were acutely aware every day of his need for security, calm, and extra understanding.

In such difficult circumstances, it may be tempting to blame the home situation for what is happening at school and then look down or think ill of the child's family. There is extensive evidence that making assumptions about families does not help teachers treat children with kindness, nor do negative labels help teachers set an example for children to treat one another with kindness, empathy, and helpfulness (Adair, 2015; Adair, 2014; Brown, 2016; De Lissovoy, 2012; Dyson, 2015; Gold & Richards, 2012; Martínez, 2018; Souto- Manning & Martell, 2016).

Teachers need to be able to adapt to unique needs while keeping a positive outlook on a child and their family. Labeling often accompanies deficit thinking, which then makes a teacher act differently towards a child. Wright (2012; 2014) explains that strengths-based, non-labeling approaches to young children experiencing trauma or extreme stress helps teachers meet their needs in ways that are better for children. He explains,

Teachers must apply a strength-based perspective—seeing children as fighting to live, rather than on the risky road to failure. Teachers must be vigilant about responding not only to children's behavior, but to their needs as well. Sometimes traumatized children are too anxious to sit quietly during circle time, too afraid of who might walk in the room to take their eyes off the classroom door, or too deprived to share a doll or toy. Rather than criticizing children for these behaviors, it is important for teachers to recognize the underlying causes and help the child to feel more calm, safe, and content. (2012, p.28).

Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa noticed and responded to the unique needs of Luis and the other children in the class without labeling them or attaching negative assumptions to them or their families.

Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa believed that each child had something unique to offer to the classroom community and Luis was no different. They viewed him not as a problem that had to be removed, but as a useful member of the community. They saw him act out and hit other children when he was tired, but they remembered that he was also the boy who taught other children how to build tall structures with blocks. They knew that he was good at reading and many times helped other children figure out words on the word wall. They appreciated that Luis liked to help set up tables for lunch.

Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa understood that each child in their care needed support in unique ways and they recognized how each child offered possibilities for others to engage with and learn to be a responsive community. Luis helped others to see that equity does not mean equality. His classroom community, both children and adults, learned through him and each other that people need different resources to succeed and these resources are not the same for everyone. By seeing their teachers treat Luis and his family with

respect, the children understood that needing support and help was not a sign of inadequacy or weakness but a human need. They also learned that everyone can lend support. In Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa's classroom, teachers and children often supported one another by saying, "we are all trying our best."

In this scene and in the teacher's reflection, the attention was on how to engage Luis as a community member, rather than on how to "fix" Luis's behavior. The teachers recognized that all children needed support and contributed to the community in varied ways, at different times. Positioning Luis as a member of the community shifted the attention away from individual behaviors, and toward the collective possibilities shared among all community members. The children's and teachers' actions highlight the civic skills and dispositions of problem-solving, care, and inclusion. The teachers' engagement with the family and larger community highlighted their deep understanding of the circumstances Luis encountered outside of school. Incorporating this knowledge into the work of "how we live and learn together" in the classroom models a type of civicism focused on collectivity and asset-based approaches to children, families, and communities.

Welcoming Luis as Integral to the Classroom Community

The teachers modeled kindness, patience, and inclusion in how they worked with Luis and allowed him to get what he needed from school. Sometimes that was sleep. When Luis was sleeping in the middle of block-making, the children just worked around him. The children recognized Luis's need to sleep because they had seen the teachers not get upset or frustrated about it. Ms. Luz commented,

If we were there day after day forcing him to get up, then maybe [they] would have gotten really upset and gotten up and went [sic] to get a teacher because they'd know we'd force him to get up. So I think they saw us not making a big deal either (Interview, May 8, 2017).

Other times, Luis needed patience or the opportunity to fix a problem. Children learned to be patient with Luis through their experiences living and working as a community. They knew he was having a hard time, but that was all they knew. They also knew that he could be helpful, adept at block play, and skillful at academic work such as reading.

The teachers offered many opportunities for children to problem-solve in empathetic ways with Luis. They helped children figure out how to be patient with Luis and still share their concerns. In other words, the children learned social and emotional skills and dispositions through their everyday interactions as a *classroom community*. By focusing on interactions rooted in everyday experiences, children and teachers constructed ideas of civicism through embodied practices (Payne, 2018; Payne, et al., 2019; see also, Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chávez, & Angelillo, 2003; Urrieta, 2013).

One day Luis was having an exceptionally hard time and was even biting and sticking his tongue out at his classmate David. When it was time for small group lessons, the class split in half to go with one of the two teachers. Luis sat down at one of the tables between Diamond and Giovanni. Giovanni objected loudly, "No!" Ms. Louisa asked him what was wrong. Protective of Diamond, Giovanni explained that Luis was probably going to be mean to her. Ms. Louisa told him and the other children at the table that she believed Luis was going to change his behavior. Giovanni passed out papers for the activity and started with David, who had been bitten by Luis. Luis turned toward David, sitting a few children away from him. He apologized to David. David then came over and hugged Luis, who hugged him back (Field Note, March 3, 2016).

Giving Luis patience, comfort, and opportunities to work through the problems he caused was part of an overall approach to creating a classroom community that emphasized children as community members

whose participation and welcoming attitudes were critical for helping everyone in the class feel safe. This sense of safety and care was part of everyday life. Wright (2012) notes that these types of feelings in a classroom space are critical for children experiencing trauma. He writes,

Especially for children who have experienced trauma, classrooms must be safe, predictable, structured, and caring. Raising one's voice, abrupt transitions, or an unpredictable schedule, for example, may trigger the traumatized child to fight, flee, or freeze. Each of these responses interrupts learning and social-emotional development (p. 28).

The emphasis on patience, care, and being welcoming was directly related to the teachers' unwillingness to label children or to approach them in a negative way, as well as to an overall emphasis on supporting each other as a community.

Of course, children who are experiencing trauma—such as not having a permanent or consistent place to live—need many resources. The school offered a closet of clothes and household supplies, referrals to social workers, on-site counseling, and nursing services as well as assistance with food. These resources complemented the teachers' desires to welcome Luis into the classroom community by meeting his and his family's needs without judgment.

Creating Civic Classrooms

We saw multiple ways in which teachers and children engaged with each other every day that allowed them to work through social and emotional skills and dispositions. Reframing these interactional opportunities through civiness affords a more collective view of social emotional learning. Rather than working with a child experiencing trauma through an individualized and decontextualized curricula, focusing on the community created opportunities for all children to practice authentic care and for Luis to experience inclusion in the community. Here are five recommendations to help create classroom communities that both welcome children experiencing trauma and create authentic opportunities for children to enact civiness.

1. Use unique differences as opportunities for children to problem-solve and understand their community.

Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa noticed what individual children needed and they shared with the class what some of those needs were to facilitate children helping one another. They supported children using their own ideas to solve problems. They often observed children working through problems and only stepped in to give advice or support. They encouraged children to talk to one another throughout the day as a way for them to share stories and get used to each other as unique human beings.

During activities at the block center, when Enrique wanted Luis to move, the teachers did not scold him or correct him, they simply let him problem-solve on his own. Eventually he moved his block building to another area so he could have more room. Rather than intervene on behalf of Enrique, Ms. Luz allowed him to figure out how to solve his problem, while taking into account Luis's need to sleep.

2. Help children learn how to respond to everyone's unique needs.

Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa took many opportunities to highlight each child's unique needs. Ms. Luz explained, "In our class, what's fair for one child might not be the same fair for the other child. They didn't say that's not fair Luis gets to sleep and I don't. They knew it was fair for him to sleep because I guess that they realized they all have different needs. He was more tired and they weren't tired" (Interview, May 8, 2017).

Recognizing and teaching children how to recognize each person's unique needs included everyone in the class. Another student, Diamond, used to have a hard time in class and would sometimes throw materials. After talking with her mother, they learned that Diamond really liked to help out. So Diamond began to take on the role of helping pass out papers and materials, even when the teachers had not asked for a volunteer. Students not only allowed Diamond to do this extra task, but they also began to go to her for help or assistance. Liliana asked for Diamond's help each day to open her milk carton, and Diamond patiently opened and showed Liliana how to do it for herself (which she eventually did).

Children's need for help was matter-of-fact rather than a source of shame. At lunch the teachers often reminded the children that they could open their own milk cartons, as Diamond helped Liliana to do. When Alycia joined the class halfway through the year, the teachers reminded the children to help her: "Who is the person that might need help?" To which the children responded, "Alycia." Rather than being a moment where Alycia was called out for a deficiency, the students viewed this as a reminder to help Alycia if she needed it because she was new to the class.

3. See each day as a new day.

Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa insisted that each day was a fresh start. They greeted each child warmly every morning and welcomed them at the door of the classroom. They did not stay upset from the day before if it had been a bad day. They told us that when teachers are really frustrated with a child for not listening or behaving poorly then they are not happy to see them in the morning. This affects the child and the teacher in negative ways, particularly when children experiencing trauma are hoping for safety, care, and opportunities but expecting harshness, frustration, or even anger. Offering children new starts every day was a key part of the teachers' approaches to welcoming and including children in the classroom. This expectation extended to the children, who were often told, "Today is a new day."

4. Notice needs without labeling children.

Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa saw and described children's behaviors, actions, and situations without attaching a label to them. In our research meetings, one day we realized we had been talking about Luis as "the child who is homeless." While we had thought we were being careful with our language in our study and in our analysis, we realized that we were giving a label to Luis that we had never heard used by Ms. Luz or Ms. Louisa. They said that they had spent a lot of time figuring out what Luis wanted and needed. They had spoken with his mother, sharing that he was sleepy in class. After talking with her, they realized the family was first living with friends and then in a motel. We never heard the teachers say anything negative about the parents or even offer pity for the child's circumstance.

5. Offer parents positive views of their children.

Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa worked hard to get to know the parents of the children in their classroom. Their communication always began with positive observations about the children, usually with stories about how the child had helped their classmates or learned something new. Toward the end of the school year, we showed the scene of Luis sleeping to his mother. She was impressed by Luis's classmates: "They were very careful when my son was asleep on the floor. Building around him, trying not to hit him. They're very smart." She talked about the two teachers' approach to working with her son, noting their patience:

I would always wait for the phone to ring at home, wait for that phone call at home, Luis

did this, Luis did that, and they never, not once, called me. I would tell Ms. Luz, I know how Luis can be. [She would reply], “No he did good, other than him going to sleep he did good.” You know, he bumped his head, or he bumped one of the other children, but he said he was sorry, he apologized (Focus Group, May 8, 2017).

Luis’s mother commended the teachers’ patience and positive outlook on her son. Rather than framing Luis as “a problem,” they helped him, first by meeting his needs and second by supporting him to develop tools to reconcile with his classmates. Offering parents a positive view of their children emphasizes that the action, not the child, is at issue. In addition, the teachers gave children space to own their actions, rectify them, and move on with a fresh start.

Recognizing Strengths and Possibilities in the Classroom Community

Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa used their tools of observation, problem-solving, and home communication to understand root causes of behaviors and seek out strengths-based approaches. The teachers focused on offering Luis the best experience in school they could, helping him to become a valuable member of the classroom community and working with the school to address systemic and resource-oriented needs. Both teachers carefully observed children and sought out additional information from caregivers to move forward with a plan of how to best support them.

The teachers modeled how to include Luis in the classroom community without stigma and gave children opportunities to practice the skill of caring without labeling. The children in Ms. Luz and Ms. Louisa’s classroom learned how to be community members who supported Luis and recognized his needs. Supporting how children could act with and for each other, in other words being civic, afforded opportunities to learn how to live and learn together in everyday, embodied ways. Along with continued attention to connecting Luis’s family with adequate resources, supports, and advocates, we hope that over time, Luis’s life will stabilize so that he can fully engage with the curriculum and prioritize learning when at school. In the absence of such generosity, children tend to stop viewing school as a place that works for them, which moves them farther away from what might be their most direct pathway to a life of more security and stability.

Children today face innumerable obstacles to feel safe outside of our classrooms. As educators, we need to know about those obstacles and recognize their immense impact on young people’s behaviors and feelings. Yet these obstacles do not define children. Teachers can use that knowledge to help themselves and even very young students learn to be a part of a community by noticing and responding to one another’s unique needs without judgment. If we are able to show that level of compassion, kindness, and understanding, then we can trust that young children will also approach each other in meaningful ways.

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