

PROMOTING CARING AND PEACEFUL PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS THROUGH THE USE OF CHILDREN'S CULTURALLY RICH BOOKS



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“I couldn’t go outside because a guy was dead in the hallway” said Kevin, a 5-year-old. “I don’t want to go out and play because bad guys have guns and shoot little kids,” shouted a 4-year-old. “I want my daddy, I want my daddy! Why did he kill my daddy?” cried a 3-year-old. Concerned Kimmy (a pseudonym) told his teacher, “We got robbed and my mom is crying!”

CONVERSATIONS LIKE THESE are often pervasive in schools and communities today. Violence enters children’s lives early, and the media feeds children large doses of violent news, violent toys, and violent video games. The seeming explosion of violence in schools and communities where children and teachers have been killed and injured has prompted the nation to pay closer attention to how homes, schools, and communities must work together to reduce violence in our nation, especially in our schools.

Recent violent events in schools and communities indicate we need to redouble our efforts to prevent and address violence and trauma in children in the larger community (Douvlos, 2019; Erdman et al., 2020; Everytown for Gun Safety, 2021; Turk, 2018; White, 2019). Citizens, lawmakers, and government officials across the country have clearly communicated the urgent need to reduce violence against and by children. Our families and communities must work together to prevent violence and trauma in children’s lives (Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Hill & Adesanya, 2019; Hymel & Darwich, 2018). Given the growing exposure to violent behavior in everyday life, it is exceedingly difficult for young children to learn to cope with this violent society because oftentimes they are limited in their abilities to deal with traumatic environmental forces. Violence flares when people do not understand the consequences of their behavior toward others or when people cannot deal with conflict in any other way (Erdman et al., 2020; Everytown for Gun Safety, 2021).

The purpose of this article is to suggest one strategy that early childhood professionals might use to create caring and peaceful classrooms that are conducive to learning. Caring and peaceful classrooms can be defined as those that value the feelings of others and that express concern and empathy, where everyone is safe. To create such classrooms, we will describe how educators can use children’s culturally rich books in conjunction with addressing three domains of development: attachment, regulation, and competency (ARC; Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019). We will also explore the experiences of two teachers and administrators at two laboratory schools. The discussion briefly explains the ARC framework, which has been found to be effective for supporting children experiencing stressful events (Norman et al., 2021). Also, this article will suggest how teachers can promote children’s coping skills using culturally rich books in the three domains. Culturally rich books are literature that exposes children to “a multitude of ideas and concepts” (Hill & Adesanya, 2019, p. 89). Such

books expose children to positive images and concepts about “race, racial identity, and linguistic similarities and differences” (Follari, 2015). Children’s literature works as the link between what children see and what they think about the world around them (Brown et al., 2020; Galinsky, 2020; Harper, 2016; Ho & Funk, 2018; Tominey et al., 2017). Reading and discussing carefully selected culturally rich books can support children’s coping skills because such books highlight how people from not only diverse cultural backgrounds but also different perspectives can live and work together peacefully in their communities (Clark & Harper, 2020; Galinsky, 2020; Hill & Adesanya, 2019; Wright, 2020). A list of books that might help children and teachers is provided after the conclusion.

The ARC Framework

The attachment, regulation, and competency framework was created by Blaustein and Kinniburgh in 2010. It is flexible intervention for young children and adolescents in traumatic environments. Researchers have found it to be effective in helping children coping with stressful events (Norman et al., 2021; Taylor, 2019). Teachers can use the ARC framework in developing lesson plans and in interacting with children. Enhancing children’s attachment, regulation, and competency is more important to today’s children because of the epidemic of violence in the world.

To establish trusting relationships with children and to promote children’s attachment to school environments, teachers need to exhibit caring and peaceful attitudes. Attachment is defined as an emotional tie between a parent/caregiver and a child that endures over time (Morrison, 2015). Teachers’ caring and peaceful attitudes can promote children’s attachment to school environments (Booker, 2021; Galinsky, 2020; Morrison, 2015; Norman et al., 2021).

The second domain of the ARC framework is regulation. Self-regulation refers to the ability to control one’s emotions and behaviors, to delay gratification, and to create positive social relations with others (Morrison, 2015). Regulating one’s emotions can be difficult when experiencing traumatic events (Norman et al., 2021). Children need to learn to express their emotions appropriately, and teachers need to support children’s self-regulation skills (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Houseman, 2022; Hubber, 2022). Highly skilled and sensitive teachers who form strong relationships with students help children to develop emotional regulation skills (Erdman et al., 2020) by modeling appropriate behavior, encouraging children to

express their feelings in positive ways, and offering children opportunities to practice self-regulation skills through developmentally appropriate activities in safe environments.

Building on children’s social, cognitive, and emotional strengths is a base of the ARC framework, and competence is the third domain (Norman et al., 2021). Competency is related to one’s abilities in social, cognitive, and emotional strengths (Norman et al., 2021). Focusing on children’s strengths can support the development of competence. Identifying children’s existing strengths, valuing them, celebrating them, and building lesson plans based on such strengths can support their sense of competence (Erdman et al., 2020; Norman et al., 2021). In a world that has become uncertain and frightening for all of us, it is challenging to find reasons to celebrate, but teachers can find reasons to celebrate children’s strengths every day in classrooms. Such celebrations can develop children’s competence (Galinsky, 2020; Turner & Izumi-Taylor, in press).

To implement the ARC framework, it is important for teachers to inform families and offer information about how to apply the framework at home (Galinsky, 2020; Norman et al., 2021). Children’s aggressive and bullying behaviors tend to relate to familial factors, and children from unstable, uncaring, or punitive families are more likely to have difficult social behaviors in preschools (Morrison, 2015). Teachers need to help children define their places in their families, and family members and teachers can work together to build warm and supportive partnerships. Such partnerships between families and school staff are critical in implementing the framework. Providing families with handouts and offering workshops on cooperative problem-solving and other issues can also be helpful in working with families (Norman et al., 2021).

Attachment

When using the ARC framework, teachers need to develop children’s positive attachments to their school environments, where children feel safe. We all want to keep children safe from all the hardship and trauma related to community violence, but we know it is not possible. However, teachers need to make sure that children know that most people are good and are making sure that they are safe. One way to promote children’s attachments and connections to school environments is to keep stable routines and provide structure so that children can predict everyday schedules (Booker, 2021; Brown et al., 2020; Erdman et al., 2020; Morrison, 2015; Norman et al., 2021; Statman-Weil, 2015; Wolpow et al., 2009). Rituals

and routines are important to children because they make life predictable during change. Yet, teachers know that safety is not just a physical matter; it is related to a psychological and emotional state of being. Being attuned to children's needs and being available for them can assure safety and enhance children's attachments (Booker, 2021; Galinsky, 2020; Ho & Funk, 2018). When teachers provide safety, they can enhance a foundation for developing children's self-esteem, generosity, and coping skills (Booker, 2021; Galinsky, 2020; Hill & Adesanya, 2019; Hutchison, 2019; Turner & Izumi-Taylor, in press; Wolpov et al., 2009).

Teachers need to create culturally rich classrooms that convey to children that their classrooms are safe and that children can develop a sense of attachment to their teachers and others (Hill & Adesanya, 2019). Culturally rich classrooms embrace the diversity of children and communities by teaching acceptance, not just tolerance, and offering children activities that promote fairness, equity, and inclusiveness (Follari, 2015). Such classrooms form strong relationships with children and their communities. Highly skilled and sensitive teachers can support warm and caring relationships between children and their families, respect families' cultures, and incorporate children's cultures into the curriculum (Adair & Sachdeva, 2021; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019). Celebrating children's cultures promotes their attachment to their school environments.

Considering recent violence, tragedies, and uncertainties, safety is precarious. Even so, the aftermath of a crisis, trauma, and hurtful experience can be a foundation for our healing. Teachers can read *Homemade Love* by hooks (2002). Unconditional love is conveyed in this beautifully illustrated book. "Girlpie," as affectionately nicknamed by her mother, makes a mistake and becomes upset. However, her worries vanish in the comfort of her parents' love and affection. Girlpie learns a wonderful lesson that she is loved just as she is because nobody is perfect. At the first laboratory school, 4-year-olds discussed their nicknames: "I love my nickname, Honey! My grandpa gave it to me when I was born." "I don't have a nickname, but you can call me Sweetie. That is what my dad calls me. Wait! Um...that is my nickname, isn't it?" "Do you have a nickname, Teacher?" The teacher asked, "Do you have a nickname?" "What do you do when you make a mistake?" "What does it mean that nobody is perfect?" Teachers might want to ask other questions such as, "How do you think he or she was feeling?" or "When you feel upset, what do you do?" These

open-ended questions can promote children's management of emotions effectively (Tominey et al., 2017). At this school, the teacher sends a weekly newsletter to families to inform them of the books the children have read and what activities they have been engaged in; thus, one of her priorities is connecting with the families of her students. In her newsletters, she writes children's quotes and their reactions to the books they read together. She also uses students' drawings as illustrations in the newsletters. Additionally, she created a booklet consisting of each week's newsletter that children can review at their leisure. Reading culturally rich books with children and informing their families about the books can promote children's feelings of safety in their classrooms as well as their connections to their school activities and routines (Follari, 2015).

To further build home and school partnerships at this school, the administrator and teachers supported a knowledge-rich curriculum that involved children's families. In this regard, the annual Earth Day became a school-wide and university-attended springtime event. On this day, parents planned and implemented the activities, including games and art involving "Recycling, Repurposing, and Reusing," as well as planting trees, flowers, and plants. There was a "Lunch on the Ground," in which parents were asked to bring enough for their families and at least one other person. Music was provided by the parents and others. When a community spirit is created, children come to understand who they are, how they are valued, and how to develop a sense of belonging and attachment (Brown et al., 2020; Morrison, 2015; Schonfeld et al., 2020). This activity was helpful to children and families as they face everyday violence in their communities. When children witness or experience violent events, their sense of trust and safety can be diminished (Erdman et al., 2020). Participating in an event like the annual Earth Day can provide children with different activities and the opportunity to be a part of something positive. The ARC framework can increase emotional support for children, families, and teachers (Norman et al., 2021), and it can offer a variety of early childhood classroom environments and interactions.

Regulation

While children and adults are still coping with the pandemic, terrorism, and everyday violent events, whether experienced personally or witnessed in news reports (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2021), teachers need to recognize some children's challenging behavior as trauma-related and not as misbehav-

ior (Adair & Sachdeva, 2021; Erdman et al., 2020; Galinsky, 2020; Hutchison, 2019; Wymer et al., 2020). Children share with teachers an intimate exchange of their truth, as shown in the opening vignette. Kimmy shared his pain for a moment, and it is in those moments where we as teachers do our most sacred work. Teachers play many roles in their students' lives, but taking care of children's self-regulation skills and feelings of self-worth are their highest priorities (Galinsky, 2020).

When interacting with children, teachers need to respect each child and to be sensitive to his or her needs (Booker, 2021; Erdman et al., 2020; Galinsky, 2020; Hutchison, 2019). As teachers show respect for all children, children will feel their self-worthiness and will begin to develop self-regulation skills, and they will be more likely to trust their teachers (Morrison, 2015; Norman et al., 2021; Statman-Weil, 2015). Respecting children means that we accept them as they are, not for what they can do in the future. As adults, we need to be responsible for our own futures and provide authentic and better lives for today's children. Teachers can demonstrate respect and acceptance to their charges by interacting with them respectfully and by selecting developmentally appropriate activities (Booker, 2021; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hutchison, 2019; Norman et al., 2021). In making a conscious effort to promote children's regulation skills, teachers need to create positive and reciprocal relationships with children and their families (Erdman et al., 2020; Norman et al., 2021; Wolpov et al., 2009).

By reading and discussing culturally rich books with children, teachers can further promote children's regulation skills (Hill & Adesanya, 2019). Teachers can read a book entitled *Julius, the Baby of the World* (Henkes, 1995). This is a story about a small mouse, Lilly, and her struggle to accept her new baby brother. At the second laboratory school, the teacher briefly introduced the book to the kindergartners by saying, "Now we are going to read about a baby named Julius. Julius is a baby mouse and has a big sister named Lilly. I know some of you welcomed new brothers and sisters within the last year or two. I bet you remember what it was like when the new baby came home for the first time." There were immediate responses from the children. The teacher added, "You will see how Lilly felt when Julius came home." This was not a book heard by a quiet audience, and the children interacted throughout the story. It was very real to those who had experienced a comparable situation. At this school, the children enjoyed this book, and children commented, "I wish we don't have a baby at my house because he gets all the attention" and "It is so hard to

have a baby girl because she bothers me a lot." One thoughtful girl shouted, "I just join in with my baby brother and enjoy it." Teachers can ask questions such as, "What would you do to help Lilly so she does not feel bad about her brother?" or "What else can we do when we feel upset?" Such questions can enhance children's problem-solving skills. Children's regulation skills do not develop overnight, and their everyday school activities need to support such skills. Reading books dealing with children's emotions can turn negative feelings positive. Learning to identify and understand their feelings through reading culturally rich books can promote children's regulation skills (Erdman et al., 2020; Norman et al., 2021).

In keeping with the issue of respecting others, at this laboratory school, teachers and administrators consider the importance of respecting children's needs as well as teaching children to respect the needs of others. In their efforts to develop reciprocal respect among everyone in classrooms, the teachers of 4-year-olds informed them that when teachers are talking to others, they will wear red scarves on their necks. They informed the children that the red scarves mean they need to respect and not interrupt the teachers, and that when the teachers are finished, they will talk to them. Although it took much practice, this idea was welcomed by everyone and fewer interruptions were observed. Reminding children of the meaning of the red scarves provided an opportunity for them to reflect while receiving the teachers' support and respect. Because of these teachers' remarkable nurturing, affectional, and sensitive guidance, this teaching practice was recognized and respected by the children. Teachers assured the children that they do care about their needs, but the children need to respect the needs of teachers as well. Children can learn to delay their gratification through the use of the red scarves, and such a practice can help develop children's regulation skills, which are related to the salient components of the ARC framework (Norman et al., 2021).

Competency

When teachers support children's strengths, children can develop their sense of competence (Galinsky, 2010; Norman et al., 2021). Children develop their competency when they actively participate in making decisions and in directing their learning (Masterson, 2021; Morrison, 2015). Teachers can take time to support students' success by teaching them how to resist distractions and to think before acting (Galinsky, 2010). Teachers can minimize adult control and promote initiative in their

students by offering them many opportunities to make rules in classrooms. A balance must exist that allows children to regulate their own behavior while receiving guidance from teachers (Galinsky, 2020). Self-regulation, rather than compliance, should be the objective. Encouraging children to do things on their own and to seek help only as needed promotes competence (Galinsky, 2020; Ho & Funk, 2018).

To promote children's competence, children and teachers can read *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* (Henkes, 1996). Lilly is a student whose favorite teacher is Mr. Slinger. When Lilly brings her purse to show her friends, she becomes too disruptive, so Mr. Slinger takes her new purse, making Lilly upset. He then sends a note to Lilly, saying, "Today was a difficult day. Tomorrow will be better." Lilly worked through her anger at her teacher because of his respectful attitude toward her. When a teacher read this book to a group of 4-year-olds at another laboratory school, the children liked Mr. Slinger's note. This was an especially important lesson for children indeed. One girl said, "I like her teacher. He is nice," and another one cried, "I think I will have a better day tomorrow too!" Teachers can ask questions to promote children's understanding of everybody's feelings, such as, "How is Lilly feeling?" "How do you know what she is feeling?" "What do you think of Mr. Slinger's note?" "What did Lilly do when she was angry?" or "What would you do when you get upset with your teachers or friends?" This book relates to Lilly's development of social, cognitive, and emotional competency with help from her kind, supportive teacher. The book describes her teacher's recognition of Lilly's feelings and his optimism about Lilly's reflective understanding of her own behavior.

In their efforts to promote children's competency and peaceful school environments, the director, teachers, and a parent group at this laboratory school collaborated on a meaningful response to current violent and traumatic events. They decided to rebuild their community and to create an annual Peace Day. Previously there had been an annual Multicultural Lunch celebrating the diversity of the school. Out of that intention grew the Peace Day that included parents, other family members, university students and faculty, and community leaders. The day began with the release of 24 white peace doves and a collective shout of "Peace on Earth!" as the doves circled the laboratory four times. Then, special guests presented their creative gifts of songs, storytelling, and magic. Next the teachers prepared peaceful, age-appropriate classroom experiences with parents in attendance. For example, the children in a class of

2-year-olds, along with their teachers, read the book *Go Away, Big Green Monster!* (Emberley, 1992). The children and parents discussed why the story was scary to them and determined ways to cognitively restructure those fears to reduce them. At the end of this Peace Day was a "Peace-nic" with multicultural dishes for all to share; recipes from this event were collected in

RECOMMENDED CHILDREN'S BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND TEACHERS

- Ada, A. (2004). *I love Saturdays and domingos*. Aladdin.
- Brantley-Newton, V. (2018). *Grandma's purse*. Alfred Knopf.
- Cindy, G. (2013). *I'm like you, you're like me*. Free Spirit Publishing.
- Cook, J. (2012). *Wilma Jean the worry machine*. National Center for Youth Issues.
- Cooper, I. (2020). *The Golden Rule*. Abrams.
- Dooley, N. (1995). *Everybody bakes bread*. Carolrhoda.
- Harris, R. (2012). *Who's in my family? All about our families*. Candlewick Press.
- Henkes, K. (1991). *Chrysanthemum*. Greenwillow.
- Henkes, K. (1995). *Julius, the baby of the world*. Mulberry Books.
- Henkes, K. (1996). *Lilly's purple plastic purse*. Scholastic.
- Hoban, R. (1969). *Best friends for Frances*. Harper & Row Publishers.
- Leedy, L. (1995). *Who's who in my family?* Holiday House.
- Lin, G. (1999). *The ugly vegetables*. Charlesbridge Publishing.
- Lopez, S. (2018). *Just right family: An adoption story*. Albert Whitman & Company.
- Marley, C. (2011). *One love*. Chronicle Books.
- Olien, J. (2018). *Right now*. HarperCollins.
- Payne, L. (1997). *We can get along: A child's book of choices*. Free Spirit Publishing.
- Penn, A. (2001). *The kissing hand*. Scholastic.
- Peter, R. (2018). *I am human*. Harry N. Abrams.
- Waber, B. (1973). *Ira sleeps over*. Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Wells, R. (1998). *Yoko*. Scholastic.
- Woodson, J. (2001). *The other side*. G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Young, K. (2018). *Hey Warrior*. Little Steps Publishing.

a cookbook. The Peace Day was successful because it involved everyone in the community. The ARC framework involving families relates to helping adults regulate their own feelings and emotions in order for them to help their children (Norman et al., 2021). Involving families is always important to children's development and learning.

Conclusions

Teachers who wish to capitalize on the value of promoting caring and peaceful classrooms need to give special consideration to the three domains of the ARC framework to help children face this traumatic world. Teachers can implement the three domains of the framework using culturally rich books and home-school partnership activities. When teachers read and discuss culturally rich books and how different people have good relationships with others, children can understand the importance of diversity. Children develop attachment to teachers and schools through supportive, safe, and predictable routines. Also, by reading culturally rich books, teachers can assure children that they are valued and respected. Children's regulation skills can be nurtured when teachers guide them through consistent and calm interactions. Reading books with a variety of feelings and empowering messages can instill children's abilities to control their emotions. Books focused on feelings related to acts of caring and kindness are helpful. Children's development of competence can be supported by teachers' positive interactions and their focus on children's needs. Also, children's competency can be enhanced when teachers read culturally rich books with themes involving people's feelings when things are fair or unfair.

The schoolteachers' experiences described here are a few examples of how teachers attempted to use children's culturally rich books and home-school partnership activities to teach or reinforce the characteristics of caring and peaceful classroom environments. Using the ARC framework and the reading of children's culturally rich books (something most teachers already do), teachers can create a positive classroom environment that is conducive for learning. •

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