Rule-creating in a constructivist classroom community

Abstract:

Constructivist classrooms promote children’s social, cognitive and moral development better than teacher-centered activities. Because children in constructivist classrooms participate in decision making, this fosters independence, a sense of community, respect for rules, active involvement and enhances inductive thinking and making meaningful connections. A constructivist activity whose objective was to formulate classroom rules in a third grade classroom is analyzed.

Rule-creating in a constructivist classroom community

Challenging children to think about the rules that should govern the social life of the classroom is a basic way to stimulate their construction of moral knowledge. (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987, p. 158)

Constructivist classrooms may do a better job promoting children’s social, cognitive and moral development than do more teacher-centered programs (DeVries, Reese-Learned & Morgan, 1991; Kamii & Joseph, 1989). Constructivist classrooms, which focus on reasoning rather than recitation, give children greater opportunities to choose and experiment. Constructivist teachers develop reciprocal relationships with children, express understanding of children’s feelings and desires, communicate ideals of fairness, emphasize logical consequences rather than punishment, and encourage children to develop their own solutions to interpersonal problems through peer negotiations (DeVries et al., 1991). DeVries et al. (1991) report that children in constructivist classrooms view themselves as creators of classroom rules. The children give broad reasons for the rules, including consideration of natural or logical consequences, respect for others’ feelings, preservation of friendships and general respect for rules.
Children in constructivist classrooms actively engage in knowledge construction, including constructing knowledge of rules and their importance in a classroom community. Constructivist teachers who foster autonomy, or self-governance, involve children in rule-creating discussions. The children share their perspectives about rules in general as they negotiate their own classroom rules. Such discussions promote advances in children’s moral reasoning: “Prosocial behavior (rule making, group problem solving, co-operative work or play) leads to advances in social-moral reasoning, which in turn provides better reasons for engaging in social behavior” (Kohlberg & Lickona, 1987, p. 164).

When children create rules, as they do when they invent their own games, they feel they are playing an important role in the democratic process (Castle & Wilson, 1992). They are more likely to want to create rules that peers will view as helpful and fair to all. Rule discussions provide opportunities for children to debate the fairness of rules within the meaningful context of the classroom community. Teachers can guide these discussions without imposing adult authority. Giving children choices for establishing their own classroom rules promotes their autonomy and ability to make decisions: “When children are allowed to make decisions, they often make the same rules that adults would make; however, they respect the rules that they themselves make much more than the same rules imposed by adults” (Kamii & Joseph, 1989, p. 51–52).

**What Children Gain from Creating Their Own Rules**

Engaging children in classroom discussions on creating rules leads to:

- **Active Involvement.** Children are actively thinking and expressing their ideas to others. They compare their ideas to others’ ideas.
- **Reflection.** Children reflect on their own experiences with rules and rule infractions. They share examples that have personal meaning.
- **Meaningful Connections.** As children relate one rule to another, combine rules, delete rules, and think of better overarching rules, they are connecting how one behavior relates to another.
- **Respect for Rules.** Children are more likely to respect the rules because they understand why rules are important to them personally.
- **Sense of Community.** When children discuss rules, they see the need for helping one another and working together. They develop a sense of unity as a class with mutual interests and goals.
- **Problem Solving Through Negotiation.** Debating and sharing ideas allow children to find areas of mutual agreement.
- **Cooperation.** Children who discuss the relevance of rules and question each other’s thinking are more likely to engage in cooperation as they understand the need to take the other’s point of view.
- **Inductive Thinking.** Moving from specific rules to general principles facilitates inductive thinking and searching for broader issues.
- **Ownership.** Children have a sense of rule ownership and are more likely to view the classroom as belonging to them. As they experience ownership, their sense of responsibility to themselves and to others grows.

**Classroom Anecdote of Rule Creation**

A sense of classroom community—that we are all in this together and will help one another—can be achieved early in the school year by engaging children in thinking about, discussing and agreeing on a set of classroom rules. The following narrative of an actual classroom brainstorming session illustrates the level of meaningful involvement that can be achieved when children are given a chance to establish their own classroom rules. The teacher’s purpose is to give each child control of his/her behavior.

The one-hour session occurred on the second day of school in a 3rd-grade classroom of a metropolitan elementary school composed of children from a variety of socioeconomic, ethnic and racial backgrounds. Karen Rogers, the teacher, covered the school-wide rules on the first day. She began the discussion on the second day by reviewing the school rules and asking children to come up with some rules that would be good for their specific classroom and for times when they would work in teams with the younger children in 1st and 2nd grades.
Active Involvement and Reflection

The 3rd-graders immediately became actively engaged in the discussion. Rogers wrote the rules on the board as children offered them. She did not rush through the discussion, but rather continued as long as the children remained interested. They discussed specific examples of rules and related them to situations that the children and teacher could remember. As each rule was written, the children would recall an incident in which that rule was broken and resulted in an injury to a child or to someone's property. The teacher also contributed examples of playground or classroom incidents that reinforced the value of the rule under discussion. By recalling and relating previous experiences, children see the purpose for a certain rule and can give reasons why it is a good rule. In this way, the rule discussion occurred within a personally meaningful context.

Meaningful Connections

The group also discussed the idea that some rule infractions were accidental or nonintentional, but nevertheless resulted in hurting someone or in property destruction. The children discussed the difference between intentional and accidental rule infractions. Children commented that accidental rule infractions can teach one to be more careful in the future and thus more considerate of others. Another idea that emerged was the importance of restitution and repair of damage as a way of correcting the behavior in question. Children agreed that restitution would help make things right with the offended child. Such reasoning reflects an advance from a lower stage concern with material damage to a higher level concern with consideration of intention and restitution (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Piaget 1965).

Respect for Rules

The discussion was lengthy and allowed time for children to remember incidents, reflect on reasons why certain rules were necessary, and make meaningful connections between rules and behaviors. Extended time spent thinking and discussing will actually save time in the long run. Children who have had time to reflect on and debate about rules are more likely to remember the rules and understand their importance, thus preventing problems from occurring in the first place. Also, time spent early in the school year on rule discussions helps create an atmosphere of classroom community in which children feel free to express their ideas and debate important issues without fearing their ideas will be rejected or ridiculed. Children learn that helping others and being helped by others result in a more pleasant and interesting learning experience. The rule discussion in Rogers’ class resulted in 27 child-created rules.

Sense of Community

Before the last two rules were written, one child said there were too many rules. But two children were eager to add the last two rules. The teacher allowed the brainstorming session to last long enough so that everyone had a chance to participate. Finally, the class voted on whether the list was sufficient. Through voting, children learn what it means to participate in a democratic process (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987). They are also more likely to view themselves as contributors to the classroom community. The large number of rules may indicate that the children were attempting to cover every specific situation that came to mind. The majority of the rules were stated in negative terms—possibly due to children’s previous experiences with adult restrictions and also because it is easier for children to state rules negatively than positively (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987).

Problem Solving Through Negotiation

The second, less lengthy, part of the rule discussion involved reflecting on the list of rules and deciding which ones might be combined. The children began to think how one rule related to another; for example, how “Don’t Take Others’ Stuff out of Room” was related to “Don’t Mess with Others’ Stuff” and how “Don’t Take Animals out of Cages” was related to “Don’t Misuse Animals.” Whenever a child had an idea of how one rule was related to another, the class discussed it and decided either to erase a rule or come up with a better rule that would cover both situations. Children openly showed excitement when they made a relevant connection.
Cooperation

During the discussion, Rogers asked the children to reconsider the rule “Do What Teacher Asks” because everyone is a teacher in her classroom. The class agreed this rule was unnecessary. Rogers’ goal was to foster autonomy and the idea that each person is responsible for his/her behavior. If everyone learns, teaches and cooperates, everyone benefits.

“Democratizing the early childhood classroom does not mean less leadership or authority on the part of the teacher, but a different kind” (Kohlberg & Lickona, 1987, p. 161). When teachers reduce their adult authority and engage in reciprocity, children are allowed to become more independent learners and assume responsibility for their own actions. Children in this environment will learn they are important and respected. They become capable decision-makers who know how to help one another and understand the importance of cooperation.

Inductive Thinking

As the children discussed the relationship of one rule to another, the idea of a general principle or overarching rule began to emerge. Children began to discuss how a more general rule could take the place of several specific ones. When thinking about how the rule “Don’t Go Crazy When Firebell Rings” was related to “Be Kind,” one child excitedly exclaimed, “The rule ‘Be a Good Role Model’ could take the place of all the rules!” The class agreed and decided to use this overarching rule to replace several others. Rogers related a personal example of a 3rd-grade child who taught her, through his example, to be a better listener. She emphasized that children could be good role models not only for each other, but also for adults.

The idea of an overarching rule or guiding principle represents an advance in reasoning from specific to classifying similar specific cases into one category—reasoning from the specific case to the general (Piaget, 1966). Younger children, for example 1st-graders, do not typically engage in this level of inductive thinking about rules. They will end their rule discussion content with a long list of rules to cover every situation they have discussed. Older children, as these 3rd-graders did, will search for a few good overarching rules that are not so situation-specific.

As the discussion continued, more rules were erased until only a few remained. Two children said too many rules had been erased. After three more rules were erased, one child asked Rogers to please stop erasing. Rogers emphasized the importance of narrowing the list to a few good rules. This child’s concern shows that some children feel a need for many rules that specify behaviors for every situation. When children are always told exactly what to do, however, they are less likely to think for themselves. In this example, the children were encouraged to think of how specific behaviors are connected by a unifying category or rule. Classrooms that foster autonomy help children to make better choices and to feel in control and responsible for their own behavior. They are not dependent upon a teacher to tell them what they should do.

At one point in the discussion, Rogers asked that the rule “Ask Teacher for Author-Signed Books” be erased because it was a rule that had importance only for her. She explained her feelings about books and gave reasons why the books in her classroom were so important: she paid for them herself, many were signed by the authors, she loves books and she has read each of them. Although the class erased this rule, the children nevertheless ask her for the author-signed books. Because Rogers openly shared her feelings and honestly expressed what the books meant to her, the children follow the unwritten rule out of respect for their teacher. Children are more likely to show respect to teachers who treat them respectfully.

Four rules remained at the end of the discussion. The class then debated their order of importance and finally agreed upon the following:

1. Be Kind
2. Be a Good Role Model
3. No Tipping in Chairs
4. Don’t Open the Door (backdoor to playground)

Rules 1 and 2 were the overarching rules that replaced all but rules 3 and 4. The class decided they really needed
rules 3 and 4 and neither fit under the first two rules. The children also discussed their role in reminding the younger children who would be coming to their class during Team Time about the class rules.

Ownership

When the classroom discussion on rules ended, all agreed that they had established a very workable set of classroom rules. Teacher and children made a commitment to be good role models. The children’s ideas had been accepted and respected.

During the course of the year, very few instances of rule infractions occurred. When they did, one child would remind the offending child of the rule and point out how it was being broken. Rogers and the class role-played unkind behaviors and alternative behaviors that foster good will. When asked about classroom rules, the children indicated that rules were not a concern. They felt an ownership of the rules.

Conclusion

Creating classroom rules together can be a very meaningful learning experience for children and teachers and can help establish a positive sense of classroom community. Teachers who commit time and effort to the process have found it benefits children's relationships and increases understanding of what it means to participate as a constructive member of a classroom community.

References


Figure 1

- No Tipping Chairs
- Don’t Misuse Animals (classroom pets)
- Treat Books Nicely
- Ask Teacher for Author-Signed Books
- Don’t Mark in Books
- Be Quiet When Someone Is Talking
- Don’t Draw on Chalkboard
- Don’t Open the Door (backdoor to playground)
- Leave Stuff Alone During Team Time
Don’t Go Crazy When Firebell Rings
Be Kind
Keep Classroom Clean
Don’t Throw Things Across Room
Don’t Shout
Don’t Take Animals out of Cages
Do What Teacher Asks
Raise Your Hand To Talk
Don’t Mess with Others' Stuff
Don’t Chew Gum
Don’t Talk When People are Working and Listening
Don’t Hog Stuff
Don’t Take Others' Stuff out of Room
Always Apologize for Accidents
Help Other People
Don’t Fight
Don’t Take Community Stuff off Teacher's Desk
Don’t Mess with Calendar Stuff

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