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What Effects Will Collaborative Art Have on Social Cohesion?

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An Action Research Report
By: Nadine Clarke-Manning
Abstract

The purpose of this project is to determine the effects of group art on social closeness in the early childhood Montessori classroom. The study had nineteen participants ranging in age from three years to six years old and their parents. The data was collected by means of parent pre and post-project questionnaires, student feedback forms, observations and tallies, and reflective teacher journals. The intervention spanned over a six-week period in an established Montessori school in a rural area of Ontario, Canada where social connection and bonding had not been reached. In small groups, students completed a cohesive group art project each week. As the weeks progressed, the number of children feeling comfortable with their new teacher increased and the number of children who worked collaboratively increased. While these changes indicate subjects were becoming more comfortable in their classroom, it is difficult to determine whether social cohesion is attributed solely to the group art or some other factors. Further study over a more extended period of time is needed to determine the extent of the effectiveness of the intervention.

Keywords: cohesion, prosocial behavior, antisocial behavior, bonding, collaborative, art, social, attachment, joyful learning, early childhood
Tears, tattling, and whining are synonymous with early childhood. Why are young children prone to these behaviors? Cliques form leaving children ostracized because of behaviors leading to division and a lack of social cohesion. Is there, however, something that can be done to counter and prevent these associations in social interactions in early childhood classrooms? How then, do we go from in-fighting to inviting? How do we create a cohesive social group with lasting effects of kindness, compassion, and empathy? Friendship lessons can undo harmful actions imposed on others and bring about peace in early childhood classrooms, however those lessons alone are not always enough to create a lasting change.

The beginning of each new school year introduces factors that influence the classroom’s social structure. Staffing changes, the influx of new students, and the departure of existing students shape the group’s community. These factors can make it difficult for a child to feel comfortable and experience bonding with peers, teachers and the school. The intent of the early childhood Montessori classroom (Casa dei Bambini) is to create a home-like setting where the child is independent. Montessori (1962/1972) states, “The children must be free to express themselves and thus reveal those needs and attitudes which would otherwise remain hidden or repressed in an environment that did not permit them to act spontaneously” (p. 46). The prepared classroom environment plays a vital role in promoting stability, academic success and comfort for children. However, positive social interactions are equally important to the child’s success. To have the freedom learn and to self-express, the child needs a strong sense of belonging and security. It is the responsibility of the teacher to monitor and guide children into developing appropriate bonds to others and the school surroundings. Montessori explains, “A child’s liberty should have at its limit the interests of the group to which he belongs” (1962/1972, p. 49) Montessori put emphasis on the importance of respecting and valuing the social needs of the group, adding, “We should
therefore prevent a child from doing anything which may offend or hurt others, which is impolite or unbecoming” (1962/1972, p. 49-50).

Nestled in a rural area with rolling hills, farmland, quaint shops and old Victorian houses on one side of the town and modern houses on the other, stands a beautiful Montessori school with a long history in the community. School rooms begin in infancy all the way through the elementary level. This bustling school is active and full of energy. The Montessori values and principles are held in high regard and classrooms are beautifully outfitted with child-sized furniture and Montessori apparatus. Out of the four established early childhood classes, one classroom, situated near the front of the school is the focus of this study. A tumultuous couple of years resulted in unsettled children who lack the stability usually associated with an early childhood classroom in a Montessori school. Four teachers have accepted the position to guide the children within the past two years, with the longest tenure being one year. Two separate assistant teachers have also rotated within that same timeframe, creating a revolving door of staff. The children exhibit behavioural deviations, but more noticeably there is a lack of social cohesiveness. Walking into the room, you find children being physical with one another lacking the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully. Children are not engaging in purposeful work, and there is a negligible amount of concentration on lessons. Rather than witnessing joyful learning we observe children who burst into tears, wanting to return home; children who are needing constant direction and redirection. Days are long and exhausting to the guides and students alike who appear to struggle to make it through to the end of the day. The carefully crafted apparatus unique to Montessori classrooms, which isolate and teach specific skills, are mishandled and misused. Children have no real love, care or concern for the environment nor its occupants. There is little to no display of empathy for others, and some children seek the approval and acceptance of their teachers for validation.
The instability of the classroom environment resulted in fearful children who are not thriving. Attachment theory explains that a child’s bond with their primary caregivers determines their ability to function in social settings. This secure attachment with parents influences and shapes the child’s opinion. Parents, dissatisfied, untrusting and suspicious of the commitment of the teachers currently serving the classroom lead to children who rarely greet teachers, and if they do, greetings are timid, lacking eye contact and happiness. The teachers are visibly stressed and disgruntled, also deficient in collaboration and cooperation. The parents’ distaste for the events influences their children. Teachers serve as the child’s role model outside of the home and display unhappiness. The mood and energy emitted from the teachers naturally affect the children. Research suggests that these factors lead to a challenging classroom body. They interfere with the normal success and functions of the three to six-year-old class. The negativity contributes to the most visible and prominent problem; the lack of social cohesion in the early childhood Montessori classroom. The children lack social and emotional competence. They struggle with regulating emotions and independence and problem-solving skills are absent.

This action research project addresses the problem of the lack of social cohesion through community building activities. An analysis of the effects of collaborative art on the group will be undertaken. Through observation, and other data collection methods such as a teacher’s journal, tally sheets, student feedback form and parent questionnaires, reports will indicate what affects the implementation has on the group’s social cohesiveness. What effects will collaborative art projects have on social cohesion in the 3-6 Montessori classroom? Will there be an increase in concentration and a solidifying of connections? Art is said to promote social and emotional competence and increase prosocial behaviors. Can a class riddled with instability and
inconsistency become settled, adjusted and peaceful where joyful learning occurs using art as a tool? The proposed intervention will seek to evaluate and answer those questions.

**Review of Literature**

Social cohesion is central to the Montessori classroom. As children adjust and adapt to one another, they form a robust social unit through a series of developmental phases. Maria Montessori (1949/2000) stated, “It is interesting to see how little by little, these become aware of forming a community which behaves as such. They come to feel part of a group to which their activities contributes” (p. 212). This community requires nurturing and a favorable atmosphere to bloom. Studies show that multi-age groupings and multi-year classrooms are conducive to healthy social connections. Moreover, social and emotional competence dramatically affects a child’s ability to integrate into the classroom environment. Social competence is influenced by attachment to parents, teachers and by bonding to school. These factors contribute to the creation of a cohesive social unit. Teachers are the child’s first role model in the classroom. Their behaviors will prescribe the behaviors of the students. This literature review will explore the interweaving of all these factors to better understand how to achieve social cohesion.

**Attachment**

As children grow and are nurtured, they form attachments to their parents or caregivers. Bergin and Bergin (2009) describe an attachment that forms a bond that encourages children’s exploration of the world around them within the safety of the secure environment created. The level of security depends on how the adults respond to their needs and signals for attention (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Consequently, Bergin and Bergin (2009) and Hyson and Taylor (2011) agree that children who are not securely attached to parents are even more likely to be less willing to explore a new environment such as a new school. They believe that this lack of safety
can lead to an inability to integrate into the classroom, deviant behavior, a lack of focused and joyful learning and lower overall academic success.

School life and home life are very different. As children first enter a school environment, the security of home does not automatically transfer. Attachment theory confirms that infant and child attachment behavior, as it correlates to parent and child interactions, later affects all social development (Tarabulsy & Symons, 2016). Furthermore, as Tarabulsy and Symons (2016) assert, attachment theory implies that children form social connections based on the interactions and bonding with their caregivers. The child-parent interactions shape children’s motivated behavior (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004). Thus, the behaviors they exhibit in the classroom are greatly influenced by the experience of interactions they have with parents.

Parent-child attachment is linked to a child’s willingness and ability to explore and be independent and their social and emotional competence (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). While parents and adults or attachment figures are the first teachers of social competence, according to Bergin and Bergin (2009), at school, the teacher’s role is paramount in continuing that education. Children adopt the behaviors and values of their teachers (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Lillvist, Sandberg, Björck-Åkesson and Granlund (2009) point out that social problems inevitably arise when children enter school for the first time and begin sharing space with others. It is essential that the teacher establish relationships with the children to foster secure attachment. The teacher-child attachment is congruent to the parent’s in preschool and predicts long-term success and well-being in school (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). According to Hyson and Taylor (2011), a teacher who attaches securely to students will result in students who display empathy with more prosocial behavior, regardless of a secure or insecure attachment at home.
Social Competence

Social competence is often described as problem-solving skills relating to peers including conflict resolution, the effectiveness of reaching one’s goals, the understanding of self and others as well as the ability to make meaningful relationships and connections with others. Social competence is closely linked to the Theory of Mind (ToM). Pavarini, Hollanda Souza and Hawk (2013) state, the “Theory of Mind refers to the development of children’s understanding of the mind and how it relates to human actions and interactions (p. 844). ToM leads to a child’s better understanding of self and those around them. Pavarini et al., assert, “To have a theory of mind means to understand the different ways in which thoughts, emotions, and beliefs affect human actions. This, in turn, allows for the regulation of one’s own mental states, as well as those of others” (2013, p. 845). The emotional competence of a child is a predictor of how a child will perform as they progress through school regarding academic success (Klorer & Robb, 2012; Hyson & Taylor, 2011). Children who are socially competent are independent, with excellent problem-solving skills and are sensitive to the needs of others displaying empathy (Lillvist et al., 2009). A teacher’s definition of social competence, however, varies based on their preferred social skills. In their study conducted on the definition of socially competent children, Lillvist et al. (2009) found that 46.9% of all school personnel defined them based on intrapersonal skills (self-esteem, empathy, autonomy, participation/engagement, and problem-solving). For 53% of the staff, interpersonal skills (interpersonal relationships, popularity, interaction, communication and peer leadership) defined social competence. A child’s temperament also affects their emotional competence. Temperament gives rise to traits such as fear or confidence (Kizbes & Fatma, 2017). Social skills training, therefore, is important in preschool to thwart the development of negative behaviors and habits (Kizbes & Fatma, 2017).
The Teacher’s Role

The teachers in a classroom establish the atmosphere by providing appropriate community building activities, and lessons in reciprocal kindness and by modeling acceptable behavior (Hyson & Taylor, 2011). A socially competent teacher is self-aware and works to motivate students to be enthusiastic learners (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Social development theory suggests that children who have opportunities for involvement and interaction with others are less likely to display antisocial behavior (Catalano et al., 2004). It is the responsibility of early childhood educators to invest in prosocial lessons as these behaviors carry over into their later years at school (Hyson & Taylor, 2011).

Empathy is one component leading emotional competency. Its development leads to greater social competence. Positive social behavior increases as teachers provide opportunities for children to connect to each other. Hyson & Taylor (2011), point to providing multiple opportunities for collaboration, offering reminders of group belonging as well as encouraging support and friendship. These opportunities foster empathy. Empathy encourages a willingness to help, cooperation with others, the ability to appreciate and sympathize leading to healthy social relationships (Masterson & Kersey, 2012). Teachers can facilitate the development of empathy by providing meaningful opportunities for children to nurture empathy (Masterson & Kersey, 2012).

Art to Promote Social and Emotional Competence

Art is one of the tools available to promote social and emotional competence. Positive social behaviors emerge as a result art enrichment programs (Klorer & Robb, 2012). Head Start Centers in Illinois implemented an arts integration program for children with social and emotional problems. The children referred to the program had difficulties with boundaries,
separations, and transitions, aggressive behavior, were socially withdrawn and lacking focus. The implementation of the program produced a decrease in aggressive behavior, increased concentration, and interaction with peers and an increase in self-esteem (Klorer & Robb, 2012). Coholic (2010) developed art activities with positive results. The 12-week program provided opportunities not possible on a one-on-one basis. The initial weeks focused on building trust and social cohesion, paying attention to the group’s abilities, comfort with the methods involved, social skills, teaching mindfulness and the importance of self-awareness. These concepts were revisited throughout the implementation of the program. Through the program, children experienced peer support and affirmation, gained social skills and developed self-awareness. These benefits highlighted that group art activities were no better or worse but were an alternative method as both individual and group activities provided opportunities for self-awareness and self-discovery. As cited in Coholic (2010), Whitaker (1975) states that group work is beneficial because it teaches interpersonal skills, limits isolation and strengthens the group socially. Participatory and collaborative art, however, solidifies connections (Lee, 2013). If art can affect social and emotional learning and competence, one must question the impact of such activities on the social cohesion of the group. Torkelson, Lynch and Chosa 1996, Camic 2008, Newsome, Henderson and Veach 2005, as cited in Coholic (2010), state that group art helps foster self-awareness and self-esteem, coping and social skills and promotes social cohesion. Group art, when shared with others, also builds a sense of pride in the artists. Sharing the art with other members of the community or school also has positive effects. As children take ownership of the creations, they are empowered as their art is valued and appreciated (Gibson & McAllister 2005).
Arts integration programs also promote social and emotional competency (Biscoe & Wilson 2015). They help children gain skills in emotional regulation. Emotional competency is encouraged as participation in such programs gives children an opportunity to make eye contact, offer positive feedback and compliments to peers and increase empathy (Klorer & Robb, 2012). Russell and Huztel (2007) infer that service-learning art is helpful in enhancing Social and emotional learning and invokes reciprocity and serving others. Cress and Holm (2016) substantiate the need for children having opportunities to express themselves creatively in a group setting. The adult’s role is to assist with the introduction of new ideas involved in art projects. While the adult interacts with the children during creative projects, the deeper-level interactions occur between the children.

While shared art is beneficial, it, however, is not superior; instead, it is a different method. Some children show trepidation and uneasiness approaching group art activities and need assurance of an emotionally secure, safe, non-threatening, fun setting to benefit from them (Russel & Hutzel, 2007; Coholic, 2010). The use of arts-based methods for children in need, for example, helps children with self-expression and how to deal with their feelings and in turn, how to react to the feelings of their peers (Coholic 2010). Heid (2007) and Cress and Holm (2016) encourage the use of child-directed free-form, open-ended art projects to promote peer relationships and social interactions. They uphold that children who express themselves freely in this manner have an opportunity to share their creations, inspiring further discussion with peers. Maria Montessori (1962/1972) cautions about free drawing stating, “The so-called “free drawing” has no place in my system…which require an explanation on the part of the child” (p. 280). Montessori (1962/1967) believed in training the hand with structured art practices stating, “We do not teach the child to draw by having him draw but by giving him the opportunity to
prepare his means of expression” (p. 281). Solberg (2016) explored the use of land art as an opportunity for children to interact with nature and culture and to express themselves. Land art uses nature’s objects and the landscape to design and create artwork. Children working together and collaborating on this art inspired the emergence of other interactions and games.

**Multiyear and Multiage Classrooms**

Research highlights that multiyear teaching and placement also plays a role in alleviating social problems (Hitz, Somers & Jenlink, 2007). Maria Montessori introduced such a concept with the creation of her philosophy because of the ability to individualize instruction. The flexible groupings and the continuum of care build stronger relationships and competition understated (Proehl, Douglas, Elias, Johnson & Westsmith, 2013). The multiage and multiyear setting creates stability, reliability and eventually a secure and cohesive group. Hitz et al. (2007) refer to this multiyear grouping as the looping classroom. The looping classroom allows the sharing of accomplishments and failures, resolving of problems, and the building of trust (Hitz et al., 2007). Multiage classrooms are inviting environments for social development as they provide students with an individualized education. Proehl et al. (2013) reference a study conducted in a K-8 catholic school that transitioned from single grade to multi-grade classrooms in response to its declining enrollments. The results showed high parent satisfaction with the school namely because of the religious content but often mentioned a family-like feel as a motivator for their satisfaction. Parents remarked students became more helpful to siblings and community members, had better peer relationships, built empathy and were exposed to more rigorous content at a younger age through the individualized attention. Parents attributed all the benefits to the multi-age classrooms. Teachers were equally satisfied because they knew their students better. They noted that students were comfortable because of clear expectations and transitioned
easily to other classrooms because of the consistent practices from one classroom to another. Teachers reported fewer disciplinary problems and attributed it to the family-like atmosphere. Teachers did, however, mention the need for further professional development to broaden their teaching style as they continue in the multi-grade classroom to continue to offer differentiated instruction.

**Peer Acceptance**

There are challenges to the looping or multi-age classroom when children enter a class after the social group is already established. It becomes the teacher’s responsibility to help integrate those new children into the group by teaching acceptance (Hitz et al., 2007). Peer acceptance in preschool is linked to social success whereas peer rejection is linked to deviant behavior (Brighi, Mazzanti, Guarini & Sansavini 2015). This selectiveness in peer groups leads to the creation of cliques. Children choose to assimilate with one another based on similarity. Children with aggressive tendencies will pair together, for example. Brighi et al.’s (2015) study examined social-emotional functioning and linguistic skills and how they relate to likeability and peer selection. The study concluded that social-emotional function and linguistic skills and likeability through reciprocal choices are positively linked. Brighi et al. (2015) state, “this suggests that this kind of mutual preference among peers can be considered an index of friendship for preschoolers” (p. 77).

Naturally, selective peer affiliation can lead to exclusion as well as a rise in deviant off-task behaviors. Transition times also influence behaviors. Guardino and Fullerton (2014) identified a rise in off-task behaviors in inclusive classrooms during transition times. These times are most susceptible to deviant behavior because it is the area where the teacher’s schedule is most
vulnerable and unpredictable. Limiting transitions and optimizing learning times is said to keep children engaged in work (Guardino & Fullerton, 2014).

**Joyful Learning**

The lack of joyful learning can also explain deviant behaviors. External pressures and extrinsic motivations for completing tasks hinder joyfulness. Joyful learning demonstrates children who are working collaboratively, engaging in purposeful, independently chosen activities and making meaningful connections (Ward & Dahlmeier, 2011). It is possible to recapture joyfulness through child-directed and inspired lessons and projects (Ward & Dahlmeier, 2011).

In conclusion, one can say that collaboration gives rise to the development of social skills. Additionally, empathy is common to all the processes that lead to social competence and social cohesiveness. Mastery of social skills encourages positive social interactions. Positive interaction builds social competence. Social competence leads to empathy and empathy leads to the creation of a cohesive social unit. One of the most effective strategies identified in facilitating the development on of social and emotional competence is an arts integration program. Implementation of an arts program within a multi-age and multi-year group is of an even greater advantage encouraging growth that extends from one year to the next.

**Data Analysis**

The setting for this study is in a classroom comprised of 3-6-year-old preschoolers in a Montessori school. At the beginning of the study the class had seven 3-year-old children (5 girls, 2 boys), eight 4-year-old children (5 boys, 3 girls), three 5-year-old boys and one 6-year-old boy. The classroom has one Montessori teacher, newly added within the month to the group, one student intern, active in the school for 3 years and in this class for 2 years, and one assistant teacher serving just under six months at the school.
After two weeks of teacher observations, collecting baseline data, active and passive consent forms were given to parents giving them the option to opt in as participants themselves as well as their children. Parents were given one week to return all consent forms. All the parents consented to have their children participate in the study. Of the 19 families, fourteen parents also consented as participants in the study. The study began after 4 weeks of baseline data collection through teacher observations and teacher journals. A pre-intervention survey for parents was given prior to implementation. The parent questionnaire, delivered electronically, made up of five questions returned 9 responses. As illustrated in figure 1, from the 9 responses, 6 said their child was happy to go to school daily, while 2 were neutral and 1 expressed their child was unhappy about school. When asked whether their child speaks often about school, the majority neither agreed nor disagreed with the question. In terms of children speaking positively about school while at home, 6 parents said that their child does and the 3 said they do not. Nearly all the parents agreed that their children spoke of having friends at school. Responses regarding whether their child liked school shows that 7 of the parents conferred that their child likes school whereas 2 said they did not. Students appeared social and friendly with one another in the class. The pre-intervention questionnaire suggests that most of the children are happy at school and speak of having friendships.
Initial reflections recorded in a teacher’s journal, reveal the researcher’s biases and perceptions. The classroom appeared disorganized with several physical barriers and blind spots limiting supervision. The classroom layout did not allow for an ease of movement. It felt uninviting and choppy. The administration allowed for a day of redesigning the classroom environment. Restructuring of the environment was intended to be done in a team but it became a solitary assignment due to the absence of the other staff. This absence prevented the beginning of the bonding process for the adults. The reorganizing of the classroom was taxing on the mind and the body making the initiation of the new teacher into the group difficult and overshadowed with feelings of resentment and frustration. While one half of the room’s supporting team appeared pleased and welcoming of the changes, the other seemed apprehensive and guarded.

The observations collected in the 4-week period show children’s behaviours and tendencies. Observational data prior to implementation in figure 2 shows that although most students enter the classroom happily, the children were most comfortable approaching the usual
staff and very few made eye contact or greeted the new teacher without prompting. Those who did great needed prompting while others did not greet at all.

**Figure 2.** Initial data based on observations of participants prior to study.

The students are routinely exposed to other adults throughout the day due to specialty classes, lunch coverage staff and supply staff. There are numerous interruptions in a day including toileting routines where children, accompanied by an adult leave the room. The constant flow in and out of the room, creates multiple interruptions in group activities, concentration and noise level. The first week, provided smaller numbers because other schools, where siblings attend, were not yet in session, others were still on vacation and some were ill.

There are visible behavioural issues such as hitting and kicking, but other children show a reluctance and trepidation to connect. Children collaborate but seem to do so more to cling together and occupy the same space. Very few worked independently and most huddled together in the
same vicinity of the class. They were not necessarily concentrating on any given task or lesson, but rather observing each other and assessing the room. Children require frequent redirection because they wander around. Only 15.2% of students capably chose work independently. Some of the children were on the verge of tears, saying they felt ill and requesting to go home to be with a parent. One child, spent the entire 4-week period hiding behind shelves, to avoid detection and direction to work. Some children ate less than usual at school, as reported by parents and teachers, and others would constantly ask when it was dismissal time. As a result, the data shows only a small number of children working and an even smaller number of 2.1% collaborating in studies.

The first week of implementation of the intervention connected the participants on a new level with their teacher. The non-academic activity tweaked the interest of those who were initially apprehensive. The opportunity to work in groups provided the security to work with their new teacher without discomfort.

![Observations During Intervention](image)
The observations throughout the course of the study show that, while 26.7% of the participants entered the room happily, without crying, 20% needed direction before engaging in any activity, and 10% independently engage without direction. Only 6.7% of the children chose to work with friends and 13.3% helped others. Children were still reluctant to initiate conversation with their new teacher. A small percentage of 3.3% approached the teacher for help and asked others for help (see figure 3).

In the second week, there was an increase in the number of children who were happy to come into the class. Observations made during the intervention show an increase each week in the number of children comfortably approaching the new teacher in the room.

There is a notable and steady incline in participants asking peers for help with tasks, collaborating, and a willingness to help others in need of assistance. The crying disappeared all together by the second week of the intervention. The greatest and most significant change visible in figure 4, from
week 1 to week 4 as is visible in the observations taken during the intervention, is the increase in the comfort participants had with the teacher, greeting without prompting and the amount collaborating and helping each other. In week 1, 2 children collaborated, and 1 child went freely to their teacher. In week 4, 8 children collaborated and 9 spoke to their teacher with ease. Children still needed direction, but it was mainly since many were observing and watching peers participate in group art activities. The weekly interim observations, taken while each small group participated in the art project show the trends of the students. In the first week, very few children work alone (figure 5). Most participants, work in collaboration with friends. Many of the children need direction to initiate to work, however a large portion of the class was concentrating on their tasks despite the few that observed others participating in their group art sessions.

![Interim Observations During Art Projects Week 1](image)

**Figure 5.** Small group observations during the first week.

The second week continues to show high levels of children collaborating and concentrating, and as children grew accustomed to the practice of doing the art projects, the desire and need to watch others waned. Figure 6 depicts the various behaviours observed.
Figure 6. Small group observations during the second week.

The third week is marked with many children in concentration while others performed art, and participants more consistently and confidently, worked alone. As each group had their opportunity to do art, the numbers of those students needing directing, and watching art, diminished (see Figure 7).
Figure 7. Small group observations during the third week of the study.

Variables affecting data collection were, student absences and participants transitioning in and out of the classroom for specialty classes. Despite lower numbers, data shows that children, by week four eventually ceased watching peers participating in art and began collaborating more often as well as working independently more often. Figure 8 shows that while children consistently needed direction, as many were intrigued by the process, most were in deep concentration on their lessons.
Students were given a feedback questionnaire so that they could share their feelings about each activity. The results in figure 9 showed most children felt happy before the art and remained happy during and after the project. Most said they would enjoy working with friends following the activity. A few of the participants expressed feelings of sadness and most of those responses were related to feelings of regret that the activity ended or that the activity reminded them of missing a parent.
Many children found the questionnaire entertaining and some chose different feelings based on the way the emoji appeared and not necessarily based on their feelings. The pie chart in figure 10 shows that throughout the study, in total 69.6% of the participants shared feelings of happiness, 21.7% were neutral (neither happy nor sad) and 8.7% were sad or unhappy.
The parents once again submitted response to a post-study questionnaire. The survey received 13 responses, an increase of 4 participants compared to the pre-study questionnaire. The majority indicated their children are happy to come to school, speak about it often, and that their children declared having good friendships at school, as seen in figure 11.
Results from the parent questionnaire show a slight decrease from 25% to 24.3% who like school. The positive talk at home regarding school also decreased minimally. The parents, however reported a slight increase concerning their child’s happiness to go to school from 21.4% pre-study to 24.3% post study. There was an increase in how many children talk about having friends in school from 28.6% to 29.7% (figures 12 and 13).
Figure 12. Summary of pre-study parent responses.

Figure 13. Summary of post-study parent responses.
While the data from parent questionnaire offers no real trend of improvement or worsening of the child’s feelings about school, the researcher’s observations, signal and indicate an increase in prosocial behaviour.

**Figure 14. Social Behaviour Occurrences.**

The first week of the implementation was marked by many conflicts between classmates as seen in figure 14. Oftentimes, children were physically harmful to others and other times, the conflict was verbal. Teachers intervened continuously to regulate the behaviour. Teachers utilized methods of withdrawing and separating children from each other or the group, teacher-led conflict-resolution scripting, or consequence-based reactions.

Over the 4-week period, children began independently solving their conflicts unassisted by a teacher. There were less physical conflicts and less need for teacher intervention.
Students affection and care towards their new teacher also increased over the course of 4 weeks. Participants increasingly used affectionate words and offered frequent hugs to teachers. The Prosocial behaviours chart (figure 15) shows a sharp and steady decline in teacher-resolved conflicts as well as a steady incline of children showing affection to their teacher.

**Figure 15.** Line graph of prosocial behaviours over 4-week period.

The results of this action research show that the process of bonding can be hastened. Prosocial behaviour can indeed flourish if the social cohesion is encouraged as the foundation of all interaction. Participants showed an increase in comfort with teachers, others and with self. The comfort with teachers exhibited in their ability and willingness to speak to the new teacher also showed a readiness to respond to their teacher’s guidance.
The increase of affectionate language and action suggests a growing security and positive attachment to the teacher. The steady bonding led to participants developing social competence because they were securely attached in their classroom environment to their teachers and peers. The comfort with peers blossomed and as a result, the conflict resolution skills in the group increased. Children developed empathy for one another due to an increase in a sense of belonging. The shared group art encouraged working towards a common goal and developing a product in unison. This shared goal united the group’s motives and strengthened the bonds of friendship.

Children’s emotional competence increased as conflicts were resolved without teacher interaction. Less crying and peaceful resolution bolstered the students’ confidence and assurance in the security of their social unit. The comfort with self grew as the comfort with others grew. As children felt secure in their group, and the sense of belonging matured, their confidence and self-esteem augmented. This concept is accurately portrayed in the increase of children collaborating with one another and helping one another.

These results will impact how we approach activities selected for our classrooms. Much consideration is given to the development of the individual child however, positive group interactions require more deliberate focus. Providing collaborative experiences where each contributes equally, helps to build social belonging. Shared art projects provide self-expression while promoting a sense of community bonding. These results remind us that while empowering and enabling independence is important commitment and interdependence help build securely attached children and promotes social and emotional competence. Interdependence only occurs when children as securely attached and confident in their group and empathy is exhibited. The empathy and care for each other promotes prosocial interactions.
The results of the parent questionnaire suggest that children do not with certainty share the same feelings about school with parents that they display at school. The results also suggest that parents do not perceive all their child’s feelings from at-home interactions. These findings will shape how parents are made aware of their child’s success and happiness at school. More parent observations and photos shared with families may provide a more accurate depiction of their child’s adjustment to their school environment.

New approaches can be taken to plan for the student’s development. More emphasis placed on the social competence of the student will undoubtedly affect the success of the classroom. If lessons plans are geared to include collaboration, social cohesion builds as does empathy and in turn promotes prosocial behaviour. Devoted attention to building a willingness to help others to develop empathy is a new area to focus on in early childhood settings. The current focus is on the academic success and independence of the child; however these findings suggest encouraging shared projects will increase emotional competence, social belonging and care for others.

One could explore the effects this research on already socially cohesive classroom environments. Further research could help determine if collaborative art could contribute to more closeness and bonding in environments where social cohesiveness is already achieved.

Additionally, there is potential future exploration of the effects this same plan with other teachers facilitating the process to see if the closeness with the new teacher would still ripen. In the event of the absence of usual teachers, one could investigate whether supply staff facilitating collaborative art would increase comfort with that supply teacher.

This research also merits investigation to uncover whether art is the only collaborative activity that proves to be successful or if other collaborative activities would have similar or
better results. It would be advantageous to explore sport, or academic projects as collaborative activities to see what effects are shown.

Another area to delve into is the area of the small groups children completed their tasks with each week. If children were in fixed preassigned groups, would cliques and exclusion then ensue? Without the opportunity to work with new people, would social cohesion materialize? There is value in further research to determine the outcome of these factors on the current study.
References


## Appendices

### Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Tally Sheet at Start of Day</strong></th>
<th>Date: ________ Time: ________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of children who enter classroom happily.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of children entering classroom crying.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of children who choose work independently.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of children needing direction.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of children who work collaboratively.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of children who work alone.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

OBSERVATIONAL DATA OF BEHAVIORS INDICATING SOCIAL COHESION AND CHILDREN FEELING COMFORTABLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students greet teachers with eye contact without prompting</th>
<th>Students approaching teacher easily with questions</th>
<th>Students asking peers for help</th>
<th>Students collaborating with others</th>
<th>Students helping others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tally</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix C

### Parent Questionnaire

**ID:**

*This information is needed to compare beginning and ending data and to maintain your anonymity. Please use the first three letters of your mother’s maiden name plus the date of the month of your birth. I.e. HAY23.*

- [ ] Check here if you would like to continue but prefer not to have your responses included in the study.

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*Completion of these questions is voluntary and anonymous. Completing this feedback form is completely voluntary and you may quit at any time. The tool will not collect your email or log in information, and the researcher will not know who completed this form.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At home, my child is happy about coming to school...</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Smiley" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Neutral" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Sad" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child talks about school often...</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Smiley" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Neutral" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Sad" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When my child talks about school it is usually positive...</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Smiley" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Neutral" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Sad" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child talks about having friends at school...</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Smiley" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Neutral" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Sad" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child likes school...</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Smiley" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Neutral" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Sad" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix D

**Interim Tally Sheet During Art Project**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of children working independently</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children working collaboratively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children needing direction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children concentrating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children observing group art</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Tally Sheet at the Completion of all Group Art

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of children working independently.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of children working collaboratively.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of children concentrating.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of children needing direction.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix F

#### Student Feedback Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Happy</th>
<th>OK</th>
<th>Unhappy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child’s Name:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child’s Age:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before art I felt...</strong></td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>During art I felt...</strong></td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working with friends made me feel...</strong></td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>After art, if I work with friends I will feel...</strong></td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>At the end of the art project I feel...</strong></td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>Unhappy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<th>Disagree</th>
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