

Positive Affirmations and Their Effect on Children's Moods in an Elementary Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This study set out to find out how **positive affirmations** affect children in an elementary aged classroom. The study consisted of thirteen students in a mixed age Montessori classroom. The study lasted ten days and for six of those days the students simply rated their mood. For the next six days students said **positive affirmations** in the morning and rated themselves like they did the previous six days. This study used the **Mood Meter** as the scale for students' moods. The Mood Meter was created by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. This study used **Evaluation Research Method IV** in order to see that by implementing positive affirmations into a classroom would children's moods increase. The study did not find a correlation between students saying **positive affirmations** and students' moods. Although this study did not find a correlation between positive affirmations and students' moods, the method that was used can be replicated on a larger population and longer study in order to see the true effects.

Introduction

In today's society it is very important that students know their worth. Teachers are constantly trying to find new ways to increase students' self esteem and encourage them to get out of their comfort zone. There are the traditional tactics of bribing students with candy or having students walk laps around the field at recess but there is a recent push in using positive psychology in the classroom. One of the ways teachers are implementing positive psychology is through positive affirmations, "Affirmations are short; positive "I am" statements that call you into an intentional way of being" (Yourtherapysource, 2019). These statements are declarations for children to say, with the hope that they will embody these statements. The Association for Psychological science did an experiment to see why Positive affirmations were so effective in reducing anxiety and stress. They looked at the error-related negativity response to see what effects positive affirmations had when performing a task, "This suggests that self-affirmation enhanced the ERN response for those participants, which in turned predicted their performance on the task. The researchers speculate that participants who were self-affirmed were more receptive to errors which allowed them to better correct for their mistakes." (Self-Affirmation Enhances Performance, 2012). The error-related negativity response, "is a pronounced wave of electrical activity in the brain that occurs within 100 ms of making an error on a task" (Self-Affirmation Enhances Performance, 2012). This study found that people performed better at a task when they had said positive affirmations. This could translate into a classroom since teachers want students to be successful in their academic endeavors. Another study was done that looked at positive psychology and its effects on Chinese medical students. This study measured whether or not positive psychology had an affect on the students by using a hope, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness scale. After the study was completed they found that students' scores went up on all of the scales. The researchers also found that many of the students experienced less symptoms of anxiety and depression after the implementation of positive psychology (Zhang, X.-Q., Zhang, B.-S., & Wang, M.-D. , 2020). Although there are studies that find that positive psychology can positively affect students, there is no study that looks at the effect of positive affirmations on students in a classroom. With the knowledge that positive affirmations can improve the lives of adults

and children alike, the researcher of this study asks the question: To what extent does positive self talk affect a child's mood in an Elementary Aged Classroom?

Literature Review

Low Self Esteem and Behavior Problems

There is an established connection between having low self esteem and behavioral problems. In a study done on schools in New Zealand and the United States, when children had a lower self esteem, they were more likely to be aggressive (Caspi, Donellan, Moffit, Trzesniewski, Robins, 2005). Low self esteem is defined as a lack of confidence and feeling badly about oneself. This was shown time and time again across different age groups and nationalities. Along with the fact that students that have behavior problems at a young age are more likely to have worse behavior problems as they get older. There is evidence that if a child grows up in a Child or Youth Center they are more likely to have low self esteem and a negative self identity. These researchers did a study that tried to implement positive psychology intervention into a youth center (Teodorczuk, Guse, Plessis, Graham, 2019). This study did not find a significant change in the children's behaviors but it is one of few studies that look at the effects of implementing positive psychology techniques into an adolescent's life. This study did establish that children that have rough home environments are more likely to have more behavioral issues that in the right setting could be combated with positive affirmations.

Positive Affirmations in Children

It has always been a struggle for parents and teachers alike to control a child's behavior. There have been countless ideas that have been proposed to help teachers manage a classroom or parents to manage their child's bad behavior. One of the newest ideas is positive affirmations. A positive affirmation is defined as a positive statement that is said to yourself to challenge negative thoughts (Wilkins, 2020). Positive affirmations are believed to boost a child's confidence, subsequently helping with their behavior. Roxanne Wilkins is a mother that saw her children were struggling with anxiety and depression. By having her children repeat these positive statements, their self esteem was boosted. When we feel worthless we will act like we are, but when we are confident in ourselves we will behave better (2015). Liz Hall had the same experience with her child. After realizing that a lot of her child's self talk was negative, she decided to change the narrative. She began implementing positive affirmations into her child's daily routine, hoping to turn the negative self talk to positive. When children feel like they can not, they will not and when they feel like they can, they will (2021). In order to take full advantage of positive affirmations, there are eight steps that a person has to follow: make affirmations positive, keep them in the present, start by making small shifts, follow through with the affirmation, say something that you believe, place them in visible places, repeat affirmations often, and check in with yourself (Flokis, 2013). All of these steps need to be taken in order to implement positive affirmations into one's life. This act of reprogramming our brain is called attention destiny. This means that the more effort someone puts into a thought, the more it gets drilled into our brain (2013). It is not just enough to have one child implement this into their life, it needs to be in the culture of a classroom or household in order for it to really work.

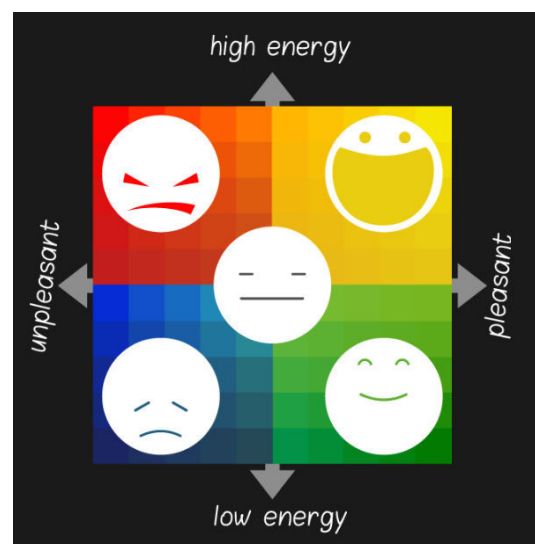
A culture of praise

Not only does it help for an individual to say positive statements about themselves, but it is also beneficial if the individual is in an environment surrounded by positivity. The article, *Building up a Culture of Praise*, determines that when people work in a positive environment, they are more likely to be productive (Grimmer, 2020). This need for a positive environment carries over into the classroom. Positive education is a methodological approach to implement

a policy of viewing the students as a full human being in order to promote an education that allows the student to reach their full potential (Schiavon, Teixeira, Gurgel, Magalhaes, Reppold, 2020). A study was conducted to see how feedback affects a person's outcome valence. Outcome valence is defined as the value an individual places on the rewards of an outcome. This study found that if a person received positive or negative constructive criticism, they were more likely to maintain their self esteem. If a person receives a negative outcome such as a low test score, with no feedback, their self esteem plummets and they have a negative outcome valence (Chen, Huang, Liu, Scott, Sommers, 2018). If a person is in a positive environment, they are more likely to have a higher self esteem and work harder, which should always be the goal in a classroom.

Implementing this culture into a classroom

In Operation Houndstooth Intervention Theory the goal was to develop the six co-cognitive factors in students, these six factors are optimism, courage, romance with a topic/discipline, sensitivity to human concerns, physical/mental energy, and vision/sense of destiny (Crocker, Dominik, Mischkowski, 2008). This intervention implemented six approaches into the classroom, these six approaches included: The Rally-Round-the-Flag-Approach, The Gold Star Approach, The Teaching and Preaching Approach, The Vicarious Experience Approach, Direct Involvement I, and Direct Involvement II. The Rally-Round-the-Flag-Approach includes putting inspirational posters up around the classroom in order to promote values that are important to the school community and should be relayed to the students. The Gold star approach is giving children incentives such as award ceremonies and 'student of the week' in order to promote good behavior. The Teaching-and-Preaching Approach is enforcing the values of the school into the children by recitation and drills. The Vicarious Experience approach puts students in a situation where they have to tap into their emotions and see how they react. The Direct Involvement approach encourages students to take part in behaviors that help the community such as community service. Direct Involvement II is when students are encouraged to be an active leader in social change. As a result of this implementation, students improved in all six of the co-cognitive



factors (Crocker et al., 2008). This experiment was based on positive psychology. Positive Psychology is defined as a science of human strengths that help us understand and learn to foster socially constructive virtues in young people (Crocker, 2008). What is missing from this experiment is implementing positive affirmations into the classroom, which is another form of positive psychology that students would greatly benefit from.

Methods

After conducting the literature review, a research protocol was developed based on prior research and articles. Since this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and the amount of visitors allowed into schools was limited, it was important to have a way for the teacher to easily track the results of the study while also allowing for ease in data collection. Each teacher had a google slideshow shared with them that contained a picture of a mood meter (see figure entitled “Mood Meter”) on each slide. On the first day, the teacher assigned a number to each child and put each child’s results on the slide that correlated with their number. Each day the children would come over to the computer and point to which quadrant best matched their feelings. The teacher would then move a dot to the quadrant that the child pointed to.

Mood Meter

This study used a class at a local Montessori school that consisted of thirteen students as the sample. The sample size was determined by the amount of parental consent forms that were received.. Among the participants, seven were girls and six were boys. Seven were in second grade and six were in third grade. The process for choosing this class began by emailing the principal at the local Montessori school looking for a class that consists of 1st-3rd graders that would be willing to participate in a study to see if positive self-talk has an effect on a child’s mood. Once a teacher agreed to participate, I was put into contact with her and began explaining the study.

The procedure used the Evaluation Research Method IV. For 10 days, these students rated how they felt on a Mood Meter. The Mood Meter is an evidence based tool that allows people to easily express their feelings. The Mood Meter was designed by the director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and was created so people could build emotional intelligence (Boost Emotional Intelligence, 2021). There are four quadrants: the top left being unpleasant and high energy, the bottom left being unpleasant and low energy, the top right quadrant being pleasant and high energy, and the bottom right quadrant being pleasant and low energy. Each quadrant is assigned a color: top right is red, bottom right is blue, bottom left is green, and top left is yellow. Each quadrant also has a face on it that expresses the mood the person feels. The center in this study was used as moderate, meaning the student was not feeling any particular emotion. The Mood Meter was chosen as the tool for data collection due to its use in prior research and accessibility for young children.

For six days, the students went about their daily business and then would rate themselves once a day. The time varied based on their daily schedule, which was helpful for the research as well by creating a time variable. To rate themselves, they would move the dot on the slide to the quadrant that they felt best represented their mood for the day. Then, for the next four days, the teacher had the students say positive affirmations at 8:15 am and later that day had the children rate themselves again. The positive affirmations that the children said each day were “I am Brave, I am Strong, I am Friendly, I am Smart, I am Focused”. The affirmations that the children said were chosen based on Patricia Flokis’s eight steps to make positive affirmations effective. I kept the affirmations positive, kept them in the present, and made the list of affirmations short so that it would not disrupt the school day too much. I also made the affirmations attainable adjectives so the students could easily believe them.. By having the students rate themselves each day on the Mood Meter, they were forced to check in with themselves. Since I could not physically go into the classroom, I could not place posters of the affirmations in visible places. I still think that by completing seven of Patricia Floki’s eight steps, the positive affirmations were as effective as they could be for the students.

The independent variable in this experiment were the affirmations and the dependent variable was the children’s moods as rated on the Mood Meter. It is shown that when children have positive self talk, they have a higher self esteem and therefore a better mood. This procedure was set up to test that statement. My hypothesis was that the students would more commonly rate themselves in the yellow quadrant after saying the positive affirmations, indicating that they had higher energy and felt pleasant. This would be in contrast to students rating themselves in the green,

red, or blue quadrants which would indicate they either have low energy, feel unpleasant, or both. I also hypothesized that students would choose the center and green the most when not saying positive affirmation. By having the students rate themselves, it took out any bias that the teacher might have towards the students' behavior. The mood meter only has four words so that the students did not get overwhelmed and choose a word that did not match what they were currently feeling.

Results

To evaluate the impact of positive self-talk on elementary aged students, I compared their moods on the six days that they did not say positive affirmations in the morning to the four days that they did say positive affirmations.

No Positive Affirmations

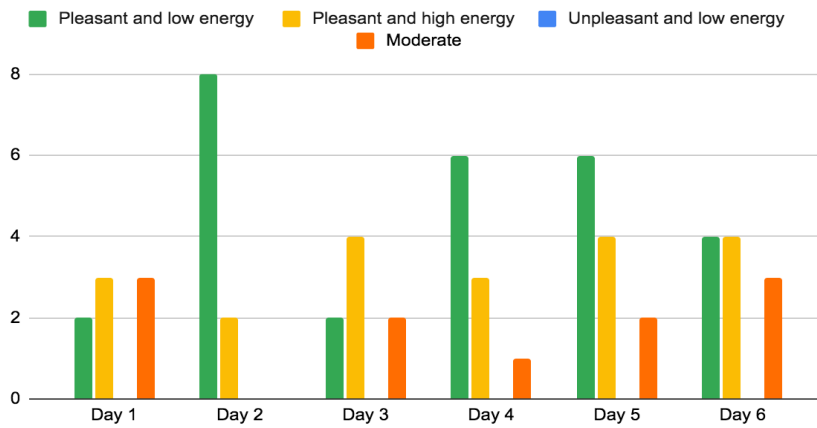


Figure 1A shows which emotions were answered each day that the children did not say positive affirmations. Low energy and pleasant as well as high energy and pleasant were the most common each day other than Day 1 and Day 3. Day 2 had the highest amount of students rating themselves as high energy and pleasant with 8 out of 13 students. Day 1 has a relatively high number of students rating moderate at 3 with low energy and pleasant also having 3 this day.

Positive Affirmations

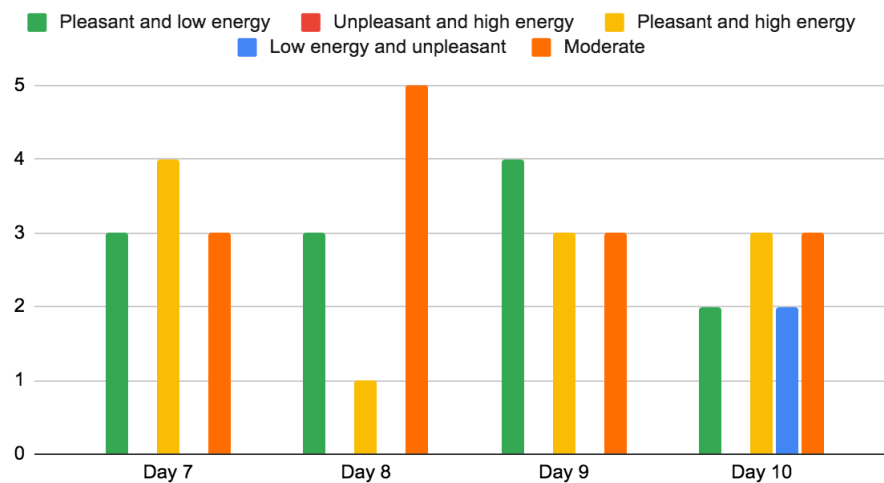


Figure 1B shows which colors students chose when they did say positive affirmations in the morning. On day 8 the most common emotion chosen was moderate, meaning that the majority of the students did not feel any strong emotions. Day 10 was the only day that students chose low energy and unpleasantness as an emotion that they were feeling.

Positive Affirmations vs No Positive Affirmations

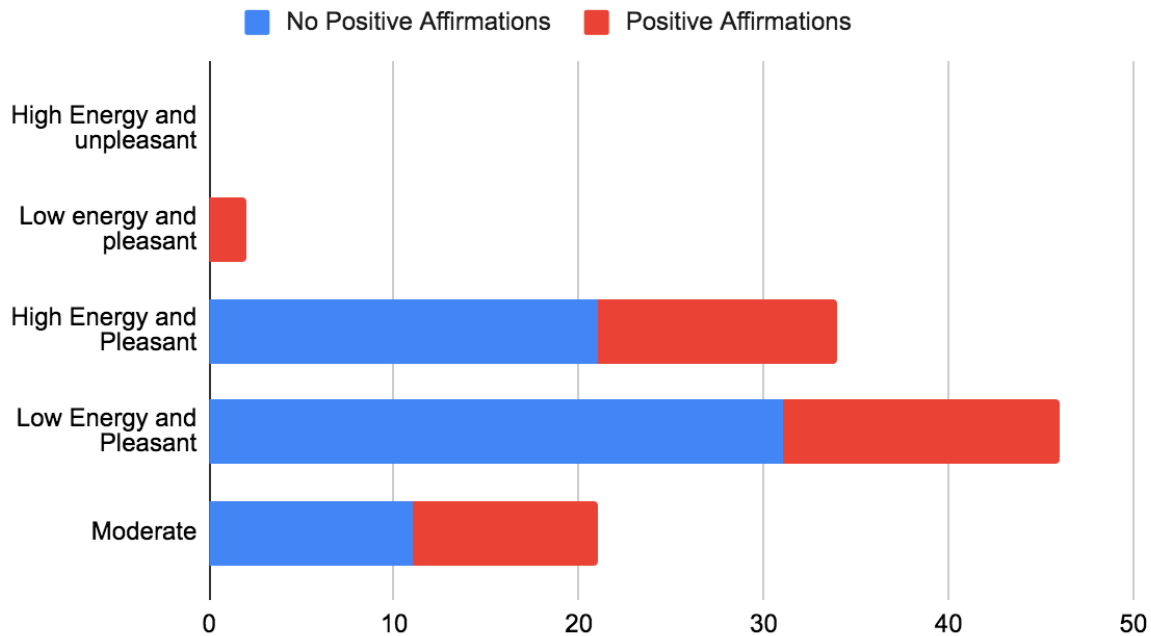


Figure 1C compared what colors were chosen when the students did not say positive affirmations to when students did say positive affirmations

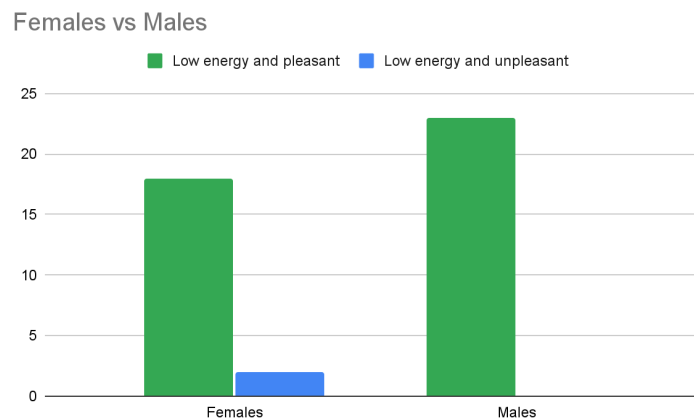


Figure 1D shows the emotion answered when students said positive affirmations compared to the emotion students said when they did not say positive affirmations. Low Energy and Pleasant was answered more when positive affirmations were not said than when positive affirmations were said. This figure shows how many male students answered blue and green throughout the study versus female students. Only females answered low energy and pleasant throughout the study. It is important to note the difference in sample size between groups with 7 being males and 6 being females.

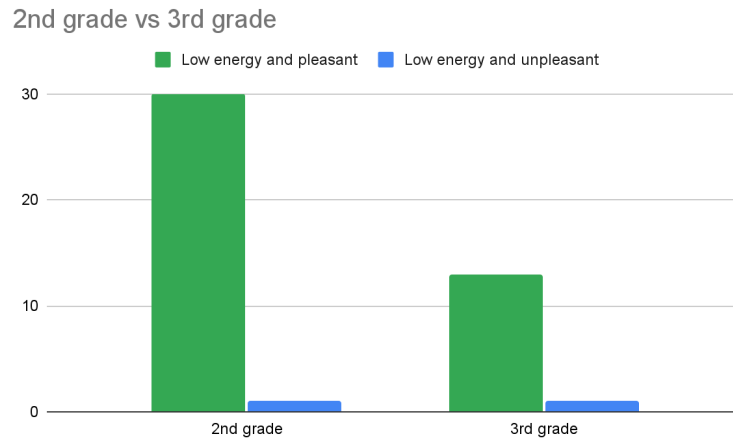


Figure 1E. This chart shows how many 3rd grade students chose blue and green versus 2nd grade students. Only female students chose blue throughout the study. It is important to note the difference in sample size between groups with 7 being in 2nd grade and 6 being in 3rd grade.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to see if children saying positive affirmations in the morning would affect their mood throughout the day. A Chi square test found that the p-value was .205. Since the p-value is more than .05, my experiment did not find that saying positive affirmations is correlated to a child's mood. The values used in the Chi square test were the number of students that answered blue, green, center, and yellow throughout the study. I did not include any answers that were on the border since that would create many outliers. I also did not include red in the Chi square test because no one answered red throughout the study and including the zero would cause an error in the Chi square test. During the first six days of the study, students chose varying answers for what color represented how they were feeling on the mood chart (Figure 1A). By choosing green, students indicated that they felt low energy and pleasant. By choosing yellow, students indicate that they feel pleasant and high energy. My hypothesis was that students would rate themselves in the yellow quadrant, indicating that they are high energy and pleasant. I hypothesized that saying encouraging statements such as "I am focused" and "I am smart" would make them believe those statements and consequently increase their mood. I found that no matter if they said positive affirmations or not, the most common answer was yellow or green. On day two of the study, eight students selected that green best represented what they felt that day. This indicates that the students felt pleasant but had low energy. This is the most amount of students that chose green throughout the entire study. Although I hypothesized that students would mostly choose yellow, green is also a positive answer. On days three to seven, four students chose yellow on the mood meter for how they felt. No one ever chose red and only two students chose blue. When the two students chose blue the class had said positive affirmations that day, showing that positive affirmations do not always increase a child's mood. More students chose yellow or green when they did not say positive affirmations than when they did say positive affirmations. About the same amount of students chose the center when they said positive affirmations and when they did not say positive affirmations. By choosing the center students indicate that they do not feel any strong emotions.

Figure 1C compared what colors were chosen when the students did not say positive affirmations to when students did say positive affirmations. Yellow was chosen twenty one times when no positive affirmations were said thirteen times when positive affirmations were said. This means that around three students chose yellow each day when no positive affirmations were said and about the same amount of students chose yellow when positive affirma-

tions were said, showing that my hypothesis was not correct. Green was chosen thirty one times when positive affirmations were not said and 15 times when positive affirmations were said. This is very surprising since green would mean students are low energy and pleasant and by saying positive affirmations students should be overall happier.

Figure 1D shows how many male students answered green or blue compared to the amount of female students that answered blue or green. There were seven males and six females in this study and more males answered green than females. Green was chosen twenty three times by males which means that about four males chose green each day. This is in comparison to green being chosen 19 times by females which means that only about three females chose green each day. It seemed that in the study a male was more likely to choose yellow or green than any other color. This is a positive since it means that for the most part the males of the classroom are pleasant. The only students that answered blue, indicating that they were unpleasant and low energy, were females. Only two students answered blue throughout the entire study and it was on the same day so something could have happened in the classroom that made the students feel this way. This does not invalidate the positive effect of positive affirmations because it is normal for students to feel sad for one day over the course of ten days. Figure 1E compares third grade students to second grade students and how many chose blue and green as the color that best represents their mood. There were seven second grade students and six third grade students. Only one second grade student and one third grade student answered blue. Overall, this study did not find a correlation between students saying positive affirmations and their mood. The data shows that for the most part the students were happy throughout the study since none of them ever answered red and very few of them answered blue. In the future, I would have this study run longer and consist of a larger sample size. By observing students' moods for a longer period of time, the normal dips and rises of a child's mood could be observed and there would be less of a chance that they were just having a bad or good week. I also did not find any significant difference between how males and females rated themselves. Since it is a mixed grade classroom the students are probably more similar than second and third graders in separate classrooms which would account for the similar answers.

The study done by researchers Teodorczuk, Guse, Plessis, and Graham on children in youth centers in South Africa also did not find any results. This study implemented positive psychology into adolescents' daily lives and looked at how they responded to it (Teodorczuk, Guse, Plessis, Graham, 2019). The study did not find any significant correlation, just as my study did not. This does not invalidate either study but simply shows that more research is needed in order to see if positive psychology can work in either scenario.

Conclusion

This study looked at how positive affirmations affect students' moods in a mixed grade classroom at a local Montessori school. Although this study found no correlation between the children saying positive affirmations and increase in their moods, that does not mean there is not a correlation between the two variables. In future studies, I could have the study go on for a longer period of time as well as have set times for the children to rate their moods. With more time in this study, it would account for days where students are just feeling off and would potentially see more consistent results in regards to each student's mood.

In an intervention performed by various psychologists, they saw that children in an early childhood classroom responded well to kindness, forgiveness, and love. The article says, "Character strengths such as love, kindness and forgiveness promote emotional health, positive relationships and enhanced well-being for children and adults." (Haslip, M. J., Allen-Handy, A., & Donaldson, L., 2019). The implementation of kindness, forgiveness, and love helped early childhood students with social emotional learning. This research shows that children learn better in a classroom that is filled with those three specific characteristics, it would seem that students would respond well to positive affirmations. By having children rate their moods throughout an entire year, half of the year without affirmations and half of the year with affirmations, a future researcher would be able to see truly how students respond to positive affirmations in order to build on the findings from Haslip, Allen-Handy, and Donaldson. It could also be concluded that the

classroom environment is already filled with kindness, forgiveness, and love. Since it was a Montessori classroom the students have more flexibility with what they choose to do with their day, making them overall happier students.

Even though my study did not find any correlation between positive affirmations and a student's mood, I find that this study was beneficial for not only future researchers, but also myself. Researchers that use this method on a larger population and for a longer period of time could potentially find a new way teachers can manage their classroom. The teacher of the class that participated in my study did say that the students enjoyed saying positive affirmations so there does not seem to be any negative effects to implementing positive affirmations into the classroom. I want to be a teacher once I graduate college and this study allowed me to see how children feel throughout the week which can help me be a better teacher.

Limitations

My study did have limitations. One of the limitations is that some students were absent some days and so I do not have data for all ten days for them. The teacher asked them to rate their moods at different times each day which could change how a student was feeling. The study was made to be flexible and done whenever it best fit into the teacher's schedule but in doing so it did add more confounding variables. The students were also asked to rate their mood hours after they had said the positive affirmations which leaves room for something drastic to happen that could change a student's mood. I also could not control what was happening in a student's life, which could affect their mood positively or negatively. The students also might have not rated their mood honestly. The study also consisted of a small population which limited the amount of data there was to look at. When I ran the Chi Square Test I did not include any results that were on the border of a color and I did not include the red section since no one answered red throughout the experiment. I did not include the answers that were on a border because most of the time they only had two answers and including the red would not allow for me to complete the Chi Square test.

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