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Abstract

In 1997, fifteen council meetings were observed and recorded at the Albany Free School and subsequently analyzed. Unbeknownst to the school, the council meetings were found to be very similar to what Lawrence Kohlberg had in mind when he developed his Just Community Model. This article discusses how this council meeting forum compares to Kohlberg's model. The most significant finding concerns how teachers interact with the students throughout the meetings can have a large impact on the students' understandings as to how to participate in such forums. Thus, it is recommended that teachers be present at the meetings but not officiate. It is also suggested that teachers take an emotionally neutral position so as not to influence the solutions outcome.

Daring to Give our Children a Voice

What happens when children are given a voice in their schools? Does this help children become empowered to speak up and by extension increase their moral development? Lawrence Kohlberg was interested in this and wanted to explore the best avenues for creating an environment where students could grow morally and learn how to become participatory citizens in a democratic society (1970). In essence, Kohlberg envisioned the ideal school as a little republic. Powers explains what Kohlberg meant by this; it is a school that "governed democratically, with full student participation and with 'justice … a living matter' (1988, p.195)." Kohlberg's later work studied how a democratically governed school might work through the creation and implementation of his Just Community Model. To understand how this model worked, he conducted research at a correctional facility (Kohlberg, Kauffman, Kelsey, Scharf, & Hickey, 1974), the Cambridge Cluster School (Wasserman, 1976) and the Scarsdale School (Kohlberg, 1985). Kohlberg found that democratic participation in school problem solving served to increase students' moral development.

In 1997, I started to research progressive schooling where I was driven by similar questions to Kohlberg's. I wanted to see what kinds of democratic school systems gave students the opportunity to express themselves pertaining to all aspects of their own schooling. In the process of this study, I found the Albany Free School (from this point to be referred to as AFS) where I ultimately collected data for my research. I discovered at AFS that the school community had instituted a unique approach to conflict management called the council meeting. The council meeting is based upon a model developed by A.S. Neill (1960) at his school named Summerhill. The rationale behind the council meetings is that through submitting conflicts and grievances to public discussion and resolution, the students will become community minded and cultivate a desire to participate actively in the democratic process. What is interesting is that, unknown to AFS, the meeting that was created closely resembles the Just Community Model (this shall be referred to as JCM from this point) recommended by Kohlberg, although the founders had not read Kohlberg's research.

It is important to note that there is a fundamental difference between Neill and Kohlberg's democratic approaches to education. Neill's stated that children are to be given "freedom - not license" (Neill, 1960, p.289). Neill held that children were to run the weekly democratically led meetings without any instruction or interference by the faculty. Kohlberg on the other hand believed that instruction was essential for forming children's development. Kohlberg felt that both teachers as well as their students needed training in how "to do" moral development in the classrooms or as a democratic school process (Carr, 1996, 2002).

In 1998-99, I collected data pertaining to AFS council meetings where I recorded fifteen council meetings for the purpose of comparing this forum to Kohlberg's JCM. In this article, I will share the results of this study by outlining Kohlberg's JCM and discussing how council meetings work. A comparison between the forums opens up a valuable discussion about what techniques used in implementing community meetings does or does not make these meetings successful as an avenue for facilitating moral development. To start, it is helpful to have an overview of how the JCM was developed and how it works.

<u>The Just Community Model</u>

Lawrence Kohlberg's (1970) initial work was concerned with how children acquire moral principles. His work began with his dissertation in 1958 where he developed a taxonomy that described how a child progresses through developmental stages in which he or she becomes capable of comprehending and using moral principles (Reed, 1997). At the apex of development, the child evolves from being "obedience and punishment" oriented (Kohlberg, 1970, p. 71) into an adult who is "conscience or principle" oriented (p. 72). In his essay, "Education for Justice," Kohlberg (1970) explains that the kind of moral consideration and reasoning a child is capable of changes as he or she matures. Children of different stages will draw different lessons from the same experience and children cannot be expected to engage in moral reasoning of a given kind before they are cognitively ready. From these beginnings, Kohlberg's work progressed from a focus on individual moral growth to a community approach to moral development. Thus, Kohlberg began to look at how moral growth was facilitated in schools.

Through studies conducted with Moshe Blatt (1975), Kohlberg discovered that guided classroom discussions based on moral dilemmas did facilitate and stimulate moral growth in children. The concern, however, was that the students were not finding that the lessons learned applied to their own every day life scenarios. Another concern emerged pertaining to the teachers' roles. Kohlberg noted that there was a propensity for indoctrination. The moral discussions could lead into a conversation focused on what is perceived as right and wrong behaviors. It is the consideration of all possible solutions and angles that is important in the moral developmental process. However, if the teachers did not guide the discussion appropriately, their own positions were revealed and the students' own judgments were lost (Kohlberg, 1985).

Kohlberg reflected upon these weaknesses later when he strove to advocate for the use of his proposed just community method in educational institutions. He thought that these problems he discovered in his previous studies might be resolved by creating participatory democratic schools in which children both engage in solving real-life dilemmas and learn to take responsibility for school governance and disciplinary procedures. He stated that this just community program provided students with the opportunity to deliberate on every day issues pertaining to what is right or wrong. It also gives the students a chance to find "holes" in their own reasoning processes and, by extension, improve their use of these processes, thereby stimulating moral growth. On a larger scale, Kohlberg believed two things are accomplished through a democratic approach to education. One, the student and faculty investment in the democratic process created an opportunity for the students and faculty to be involved in the educational decision making process. Secondly, the students were able to consider carefully all facets of moral issues that arise in everyday life. Such discussions were shown to enhance the moral development of students. This environment Kohlberg believes is the just community.

Kohlberg (1974) first designed and tested his formulation of a just community in a correctional institute in New Haven, Connecticut. Through this trial, Kohlberg, assisted by fellow researchers, designed a "just community" prototype that was later adopted by two high schools. Kohlberg believed that implementing this just community system in the prison would stimulate the moral growth of the inmates.

Kohlberg established what became the heart of the just community system: the community meeting. A system of community meetings that were coordinated and interfaced with one another served as the central part of this governing system. There is a main community meeting, a discipline committee, advisory groups, small group meetings, in-class moral discussions and a staff-student consultant meeting. There is a coordinated effort among each of the groups for the purpose of the students and teachers democratically participating in the institution (Kohlberg & Reimer, 1989).

The success of the community meeting was dependent upon the group's adherence to rules, which were agreed upon by the group. These rules were that the meetings must be democratic (meaning that all participants have equal rights to state their opinions, call a meeting, and vote), mandatory attendance, adherence to disciplinary measures decided by the group and to contractual agreements made by the group, strict confidentiality, and meets a minimum of once a week and no topic is forbidden (anything is safe to speak about without judgment). Another rule that is unique for the prison system is that inmates could call a meeting at any time. The only restriction set upon this rule was that a meeting could not be called between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m. Otherwise, anyone could call a meeting at any time to discuss any pertinent matter.

Schools serving "difficult" populations of students found this "just community" concept and implementation process very appealing. Elsa Wasserman (1976), who was one of the Cambridge school's counselors wrote an article for *Social Education* in which she described a program in her school where "Kohlberg's concept of a Just Community School" (p. 203) was implemented. The school was started in the fall of 1974 in response to requests by parents and teachers to start an alternative school housed in their own school. The desire was to target students who were considered severely disadvantaged. Permission was granted and Kohlberg was hired as a consultant.

In his essay entitled, "Just Community Approach to Moral Education," Kohlberg (1985) discussed the Cambridge Cluster School along with the Scarsdale Alternative School. The Scarsdale Alternative School implemented Kohlberg's just community concept through the adoption of a "school within a school" structure like the Cambridge Cluster School. Two more just community programs were implemented in New York City (Oser, Althof & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2008).

Both the Cambridge Cluster School and the Scarsdale School experienced problems with teacher influence. In the Scarsdale case, the teachers became advocates for positions which tended to sway the vote of students in meetings. Kohlberg found this dissatisfying and later wrote an article with Lickona (1987) that describes in detail the ideal teacher conduct in democratic classroom meetings. These teacher behaviors were identified to help teachers learn how to assist students in becoming more active in community meetings and less influenced by the teacher's own position.

According to Kohlberg, if teachers adhere to these appropriate behaviors, then the indoctrination that Kohlberg found in earlier studies would be avoided. However, that is not the focus of this article here. The focus of this article is to compare the Albany Free School Council meeting with the Just Community model studied by Lawrence Kohlberg. However, before moving on to comparing the two forums, I will describe what the council meeting looks like.

<u>The Albany Free School's Council Meeting</u>

In 1965, Mary Leue founded the Albany Free School (AFS) (Mercogliano, 1998). AFS is a small experimental private elementary school (Pre-K-8) whose goal is to move away from the top-down hierarchical approach found in many traditional schools. The school worked toward developing an environment in which the students' natural propensities toward learning are fostered and where children grow "organically" (here organically refers to children learning according to their natural rates and abilities). One of the key elements in the process is AFS's approach to discipline and school management (Mercogliano, 1998). The need to incorporate these elements into a democratically run school translated into the creation of a forum that serves as the primary management and disciplinary tool for the school. This forum is known as the council meeting. It was adapted by Mary Leue from A.S. Neill's (1960) General School Meeting at his school, Summerhill, with the intention of giving the staff and students an arena in which they publicly and collectively deal with social conflicts and school policies.

When Leue created the council meeting system, she departed from Neill's idea of a weekly meeting and moved to a meeting that focused upon the experience in the moment. Thus, council meetings are held at any time during the school day. This meeting

is intended to give the students the opportunity to deal with their problems and issues as they happen and not save the problem to be dealt with at a later time. The thinking behind this approach comes from Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), since Leue was a great follower of Reich's work. Reich believed that for a child to be healthy the child must be able to express his/her emotions when felt. This is what Reich called free energy flow. Holding these emotions inside even if addressed at a later date only serves to block what the child is feeling and contribute to creating an armor, which stultifies energy flow (Boadella, 1974).

The structure of the council meeting includes all the school personnel and can be called at any time throughout the day. Since AFS is set up to accommodate student individual learning, there are no formal classes such as is seen in a traditional school. Having the school structured in this manner makes it easy to allow for council meetings to be conducted whenever a school community member feels the need. To initiate the process, a community member only needs to walk around the school and call "Council Meeting." From this call, all members stop what they are doing and congregate in a large school room to begin the meeting. It is mandatory for the first through eighth grade students and their teachers to participate whereas it is voluntary for the cook, visitors or volunteers to attend. It is rare that the kindergarten or pre-school classes attend.

The rationale behind the council meetings is that through submitting conflicts and grievances to public discussion and resolution, the students will become community minded and cultivate a desire to participate actively in a democratic process. Furthermore, it is believed that the students will come to value and appreciate the need for cooperative and peaceful approaches to conflict resolution rather than resorting to fighting; both of which are forms of moral learning.

The focus of this research was to analyze how these council meetings mirrored and diverged from Kohlberg's Just Community Model. To do this, I spent six months collecting data from which to do this analysis. I will describe my methodological approach next.

Methodology

For this study, I focused upon one aspect of daily life at the Albany Free School – the council meeting. I attended the school three days a week for six months and used

ethnographic tools for collecting data; I obtained data through the use of observations, audio recordings and interviews.

The school is pre-school through eighth grade. However, the participants in the council meetings only included the first through eighth grade students and their teachers. Thus, it was this group I audio recorded. There were thirty-one students, four full-time faculty and two part-time faculty at the time of this study.

For this research, I started by obtaining permission from the school's co-directors. I also obtained permission from all the students' parents according to the human subjects' protocol from the State University of New York at Albany's Internal Review Board. Only one parent declined consent. In this case, I did not record the student's comments or note his/her participation. I also kept adherence to the human subject's protocol and changed all the names of the students in this study. I took all precautions to ensure that the identities of the students were protected. However, I am using the name of the school since it is considered public domain.

I recorded and transcribed fifteen council meetings. As these meetings were recorded, I took notes pertaining to participants' physical placement (where they sat and so on) as well as participant nonverbal behaviors. It is from these transcriptions and the interviews with the teachers that I compared the council meetings with Kohlberg's JCM.

Results

From Kohlberg's research at the Scarsdale School, the Cluster School, and the correctional facility, a number of elements were identified as being necessary for a successful community meeting. In this study, success is defined as affording the participants the opportunity for moral growth through discussion.

Table I below was developed to compare the JCM with the council meeting (to be referred at as AFSCM from this point). The table highlights the timing of the meeting, the actors' participation, the number of groups that meet and the type of dilemma discussed. To illustrate the differences in each forum, I have underlined the places in which the AFSCM deviates from the JCM.

Table I: Comparison of the Just Community Model (JCM) and the Albany Free School Council Meeting (AFSCM)		
	JCM	**AFSCM**
1	Democratic discussions take place during the meeting. A turn taking protocol is upheld and one person is given one vote.	Democratic discussions take place during the meeting. A turn taking protocol is upheld and one person is given one vote.
2	Students discuss personal issues pertaining to their educational experience (i.e., theft, bullying, cheating and so on). Curricular and administrative issues are not discussed in the groups but dealt with by the faculty.	Students and teachers discuss personal issues pertaining to their educational experience (i.e., theft, bullying, cheating and so on). Curricular and administrative issues may be discussed in this forum, but this was rarely evidenced.
3	School-wide meetings are scheduled weekly. Various committees meet on a weekly basis.	Meetings are spontaneous; meetings are called whenever a problem occurs. There are no set times for these meetings.
4	Meetings are run by students who are elected.	Meetings are run by students or teachers who are elected.
5	There are several meeting groups for dealing with school issues (agenda committee, advisory groups, school-wide community meeting and discipline committee). The discipline committee is responsible for following through with the solution.	There is one school-wide group for dealing with any and all issues. All school members participate in following through with the solution.

As can be seen in Table One, there are several differences between JCM and AFSCM. However, I want to note here that only one difference is significant; this is the immediacy of the council meetings (see number three above). I will discuss this more in detail below. The other differences observed during council meetings rarely occurred.

The table is organized to show the most similar aspects between the two forums to the least similar aspects (i.e., democratic meeting process). This is followed by an illustration of the meeting differences arranged according to a meeting's sequence. Thus, the first is the type of issue that arises, the second is when the meeting is scheduled, the third is who is determined to run the meeting and last is how the solutions were implemented.

The first comparison in the table is the area in which JCM and AFSCM are very similar. This is the manner in which the meetings are run. Kohlberg feels an important aspect of the JCM is that students participate and learn about the democratic process; Kohlberg defines this democratic process as one in which every person has one vote. AFS teachers report in interviews that this is an important function of their council meetings as well. The protocols in both the JCM and AFSCM are as follows: individuals are called upon to speak by the chairperson; decisions are made through one person having one vote; both students and teachers are allowed to vote; and, the majority decides the outcome. Kohlberg feels that this democratic process gives the students the chance to learn responsibility and problem solving techniques. Thus, the AFSCM and JCM both give this opportunity to the students.

The second point of comparison is where the differences between JCM and AFCSM begin. The second point focuses upon the issues that are discussed. Both JCM and AFSCM lead students in discussions of moral topics, from stealing to bullying. Obviously, this is essential to achieve moral learning, and these are the most common topics in AFSC meetings.

However, in the AFSCM the students have the option of discussing curricular and administrative issues as well. According to the teacher interviews, students can make use of the AFSCM to discuss any curricular or administrative practice or policy with which the student has problems. There was only one instance among the 15 council meetings that I observed in which the students discussed what I regard as an administrative issue; this instance involved how lunch was distributed. Since such topics are a rare occurrence, it is not necessary to delve into the specifics of this particular meeting. It is of value to note that allowing the students to discuss curricular or administrative practice and policy does not necessarily have to distract from moral learning. It can facilitate this if questions of morality emerge, such as in this council meeting a discussion of "fairness" of food distribution did occur. Kohlberg states that learning to become a citizen in a democratic society is also of value. Thus, discussing such topics can contribute to this type of democratic education.

The third comparison is the difference between JCM and AFSCM pertaining to when the meetings are scheduled. This is the greatest difference between the two forums

because it greatly impacts how the issues are discussed. AFSC meetings are not on a fixed schedule. All the council meetings recorded happened at different times throughout the day, on any day. Council meetings take place in the moment when a conflict or issue arises, whereas the school-wide meetings in the JCM are scheduled on a weekly basis at a regular time. The amount of time that the students have in which to think about the issue is greater in the JCM than in the AFSCM. For the JCM, this means that when issues arise, these must be consciously noted and remembered by student(s) for discussion at a later time. Then the issue is raised in the sub-committee meetings, and later when the weekly school-wide meetings occur.

The fourth comparison between JCM and AFSCM is how the meeting is run. The AFSCM has a process by which the chairperson for each meeting is elected when the meeting begins. Teachers and students reported in their interviews that either a teacher or a student can be elected as the chairperson. However, out of the 15 council meetings recorded, only once was a chairperson a teacher. This process is different from the JCM. In the JCM, the students prepare for the weekly school-wide meeting in their committees. The students who run the school-wide meeting are chosen before the school-wide meeting. Students can run the meeting either in a pair or individually and an agenda is created before the meeting ensues. Teachers do not run a meeting in the JCM.

The final comparison between JCM and AFSCM is the way in which meeting solutions are implemented. In both of these forums, students and teachers discuss the issues and propose solutions. In both cases, these solutions are decided upon as a group and the outcomes are determined by a vote. In the AFSCM, each person in the school is considered responsible for following through with the solution which is referred to as a motion. The distinction with the JCM is that a sub-committee is responsible for monitoring the implementation of a solution rather than involving the whole school, as the AFSCM does.

In the following section, the importance of these similarities and differences in these two models will be discussed. Particularly the focus will be upon what is the significance of this comparison for the field.

Discussion

I found that AFSCM both fit and diverge from Kohlberg's JCM. It was found that both processes are run in a democratic fashion. There are specific protocols that are adhered to and each member has a chance to speak to the issue. Problems brought forth are encouraged to be discussed and solutions are proposed that the members may vote upon. The meetings give the participants the opportunity to talk about significant personal issues and devise workable solutions. This system works well for AFS. The ability to discuss one's problems and to explore solutions conjointly contributes immensely to the moral growth of the students. Such meetings, according to Kohlberg, allow the students to have a safe environment in which to learn how to deal with personal issues and interpersonal conflicts. Thus, AFS is successful providing a forum in which the students have the opportunity to grow morally.

There are some areas in which AFSCM diverges from the JCM. Two areas are of little significance, but worth mentioning briefly. Who runs the council meetings is one point. In the AFSCM, teachers and students both have the potential to run the meetings, whereas in the JCM only students run the meetings. However, I only observed one teacher run an AFSCM. From my interviews and observations, I found that the teachers are aware of the importance in student personal and moral growth through student-run meetings. In these interviews, the teachers expressed their understanding that there is a potential for moral developmental stagnation if the teachers conduct the meetings rather than the students.

Another area of little significance is how solutions are implemented. Kohlberg recommends that teachers help students learn how to follow-through on solutions. In the JCM, a committee oversees how solutions are carried out. The AFS believes that the whole community should work together to see that solutions are implemented. Each person is encouraged to take responsibility in following through on the solutions and to make sure implementation occurs.

As noted above, the most significant difference between the JCM and AFSCM pertains to when the meetings occur. For AFSCM, spontaneity worked well when dealing with immediate emotions and for purging conflicts quickly. It gave the people involved the opportunity to deal with the issue right on the spot. This helps children to get rid of

the negative energies that Wilhelm Reich felt were harmful to the individual. However, there are some drawbacks to this method. When teachers are involved emotionally in the conflict, there is little time for the teacher to step back and consider the situation before discussing it. This is problematic if the teacher is to assist the students in discussing problems thoroughly and in contributing to the student's moral development. This can also lead to indoctrination by the teacher, which is something that Kohlberg wants all teachers to avoid.

One of the main drawbacks I found was that, at times, the teacher became too invested in discussing his or her point of view and forgot to focus upon helping the students to understand and discuss their issues. This focus upon the teacher's emotions may cause the teacher to derail the discussion from the moral issue to consider his or her own problems, not the students' developmental needs. This aspect does not fit with Kohlberg's JCM concept where the idea is for teachers to have a more hands-off approach to the discussion. The model requires that the teachers facilitate a discussion that focuses mainly on the students' issues and feelings and not on the teachers' positions, which Kohlberg will stress is secondary. With spontaneous meetings, there is not time to consider the issues and outcomes carefully, thus making it harder for the teachers to be less emotionally charged when the meeting occurs.

AFSCM is an important forum to research and analyze. When Leue started the school, council meetings were developed and evolved into what the teachers themselves report as the "heart of the school." The students also reported consistently that they thought that council meetings are an important part of the school. Only once did students vote out the usage of council meetings. When this occurred, within a few months the students voted to have this forum implemented again because of the desire to have an avenue for self regulation. Thus, AFS teachers and students find council meetings to be highly significant to their educational processes.

The question is can these forums can work in public education. With the current educational system, changes to the school day should be made in order to adopt some conflict management forum in classrooms. It is essential that children are taught in elementary schools how to deal with their own every day problems. It is a necessary pre-

emptive measure in our increasingly violent school system. Young students should be taught to give voice to their own every day concerns so they will develop into adults who can productively deal with conflictual issues. However, it is unrealistic to expect that teachers will readily integrate class meetings into their every day practices; unless further studies are done to show how these forums can work and what teacher behaviors are best for drawing out students' personal expressions pertaining to conflictual matters. Research also needs to show how effective these mechanisms are. However, with guidance and time, it is possible for teachers to adopt opportunities for students to engage in moral developmental activities. This is how we can begin to teach young children how to engage in a democratic society; thus, working towards creating peaceful schools and sound moral development.

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