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# Implementing a New Social-Emotional Philosophy: The Struggle in One Head Start Classroom

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[Introduction to "Notes from the Field"](#)[\(click to view / hide\)](#)

## Abstract

The implementation of a social-emotional philosophy in any early childhood program plays out differently in every classroom. This study focused on the teaching team and children in a single Head Start classroom as they interacted with each other, with families, and with administrators, particularly in relation to the use of Conscious Discipline®, a newly adopted program-wide "social-emotional philosophy." Data sources for the study were classroom observation, informal conversations, interviews, and document analysis. This particular teaching team struggled with several factors—the demands of fitting Conscious Discipline to every child and to various classroom situations, questions or doubts from some parents, the apparent lack of response and incomplete communication from program administrators, discrepancies between the administrators' and teachers' views of the implementation and efficacy of Conscious Discipline, and the conflicting demands of addressing both academic and social-emotional outcomes.

## Introduction

This qualitative study was a follow-up to an earlier research project on emotion-word use by preschool children from low-income families. This study focused on the teaching team and children in a single Head Start classroom as they interacted with each other, with families, and with administrators, particularly in relation to the use of Conscious Discipline®, a newly adopted program-wide "social-emotional philosophy." Conscious Discipline is based on the premise that early childhood teachers model appropriate emotional expressiveness in their classrooms simply by virtue of the day-to-day interactions they experience with each other, with other adults in the program, and with children in their care.

## Methods

### Setting

The Head Start classroom was part of a program located in a mid-sized city in the midwestern United States. The children attended on a half-day basis. Observations in this case were made only in the morning class.

Head Start is a federally funded program serving low-income children birth to age 5. It is part of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Head Start is administered by the Office of Head Start. Though given some flexibility in program design to allow for local community needs, the Head Start Act (2007) and Program Performance Standards (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996) set firm guidelines for local programs to follow. The performance standards and other guidelines frame the organizational structure of the program, the provision of services to children and families, and the ongoing professional development of the teachers and caregivers (see the [Appendix](#)). The standards delineate a detailed operation of programming to provide the highest quality of service delivery (from immunizations to nutrition programs to classroom teaching) for children and families.

One purpose of Head Start regulations is to set guidelines for improving children's social competence, defined as the ability of each child to effectively deal with his or her environment and to demonstrate responsible behavior in school (Head Start Act, 2007). The principles behind the standards are based on the integration of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains of development with adequate health care, nutrition, and mental health; they reflect the belief that development occurs in the context of families, neighborhoods, and communities. These regulations are part of the context in which the educators teach the children academically oriented lessons, such as counting and letter recognition, as well as skills that cannot be overtly "taught" but that seem to be learned by experience and opportunity.

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### Participants

The teaching team that participated in this study consisted of Kari, Jo, and Sarah. Kari and Jo began working together in mid-August, only 3 months before data collection began for this study. Kari had worked in Head Start classrooms for over 6 years and taught in child care and other preschool settings for several years before that. She was completing her bachelor's degree at a local university. Kari was older than her co-teacher Jo, married, with a daughter. At the time of my first observation, she had applied for a managerial position in the Head Start program and was awaiting an interview. Jo had recently completed her bachelor's degree in

early childhood education and seemed to still be finding her way in the Head Start structure and in the classroom. Jo spoke enthusiastically about working with Kari and the children. Both teachers appeared relaxed and well organized. They seemed to exhibit a synchrony rare so early in a partnership. Their student teacher Sarah, in her final year in early childhood education at the local university, had no experience working in Head Start. Kari and Jo expressed excitement about having Sarah in the classroom; both looked forward to working individually with children while Sarah took on more of the group projects.

Head Start is a multilayered bureaucratic program (see the [Appendix](#)); teachers like Kari and Jo answer to their teaching partners, the site director, multiple administrative managers (e.g., child development services manager) and advocates, a grantee-level program director, and the Advisory Council (made up of parents and community stakeholders). During data collection for this study, I also spoke with the site director (Ms. Waters) and the program's child development services manager (Terry Randall).

The teachers expressed the belief that, most importantly, they answered to the children in their care. "They are the reason we are here," Kari emphatically stated. The families of the children in the classroom all met the Head Start income guidelines; all 16 of them were from families with low income. The children, many of whom arrived at the program on school buses, were present for 2 hours and 30 minutes each day. They were served breakfast shortly after arrival and a small snack approximately 30 minutes before dismissal. Meals and snacks were served family style, at four tables, each monitored by a teacher or a volunteer (e.g., a parent). Two children served as helpers to the adult setting the table. Children sat in assigned chairs, and the helpers made sure that each child had utensils and food.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources for the study were observation, informal conversations, interviews, and document analysis. I observed Jo and Kari's classroom over a period of 10 weeks and spent approximately 30 hours watching and listening to the interactions as they occurred in this classroom setting. The children became accustomed to seeing me, and the teachers and I became close, with them asking for advice and help on several occasions. I was a familiar face to the secretary; we exchanged quips about the forecasted weather and the actual weather.

## October Observations

### Group Time Interactions

Kari and Jo are attempting to steer children over to the carpet area for group time. A volunteer sets up breakfast in one corner of the room, and student teacher Sarah waits to begin her meticulously planned activity. After a few minutes of pretending to fly (like a bird) to the carpet, the children sit on small shapes (e.g., the yellow triangle, the red square) on the carpet.

One of the group time activities for this morning is assigning classroom jobs (e.g., line leader, snack/meal helper, clean-up, calendar leader) for the week. The children appear to look forward to getting new jobs, and they do some negotiating: "He can't do calendar again, Miss Kari; he did it last week!" "I really want to do snacks again this week; it was fun!" Sarah asks each child what job he or she would like to do for the week and makes each assignment by placing the child's name tag in a slot next to the job on a cloth bulletin board. Kari sits in the back with Jamar and several other boys who seem to be jockeying for the position next to her. Patiently and softly, she speaks to each boy. The boys quiet down and pay more attention to Sarah and choosing their jobs for the week.

Jamar chooses to do the calendar for the week. He makes his way to the front of the group and stands tall next to Sarah. In a loud voice, he asks the children what day of the week it is. Kari stands up in the back of the group and, smiling, works her way over to me. She whispers that she was hoping Jamar would get that job, because he had wanted to lead calendar time for quite a while. Sarah keeps one hand lightly on Jamar's back, encouraging him to ask the children about the weather. As he finishes, she pats his back and encourages him with a quiet, "Good job, Jamar." Sarah sends the two snack-helpers to help Kari set out French toast sticks, syrup, fruit, and milk for breakfast. It is around 8:30 a.m.; the children anxiously look at the tables. Sarah and Jo, each holding a brightly colored name tag, begin a transition activity:

*Jo:* I have a name [tag] that begins with the letter "d." Whose name begins with "d?"

*Deandre* [standing up and shouting]: Mine does!

*Jo:* Why, you are right, Deandre. It does. You can go to breakfast now.

Some squirming impatiently and others sitting quietly, the children wait to hear the first letters of their names. When they recognize their beginning letter and claim their "name," they are allowed to go and sit at a table. Waiting on the carpet gives way to boisterous activity at the tables.

### Interaction with Concerned Parents

The door of the classroom opens a crack; a face peers in, and someone opens the door cautiously. A man enters holding a little boy's hand. Kari gets up from her place at a table and hurries over. "Good morning, Juan, did you miss the bus this morning?" She smiles a greeting to the man and to a woman, now slowly entering the classroom. The couple bends low and says something to Juan. He immediately stuffs his coat into his cubby and hurries to a chair at a table. They emphatically speak to each other in Spanish, without addressing Kari, who stands before them. They gesture toward Juan, Kari, and the classroom, all the while speaking softly to each other. Finally, the man gestures for Kari to follow him outside the classroom. She signals to Jo and Sarah, who immediately take over pouring the milk into the glasses at Kari's table and settling the children for breakfast.

## Calming Activity during Breakfast

Two children squabble over a piece of French toast, catching Jo's attention. She immediately sits between them and asks if they have "used their words?" Both talking at once, they try to explain the problem to her. Jo shakes her head and says, "Let's stop, take a breath, and ... what?" The two boys look at her and say as one, "Relax!" Jo establishes eye contact with each boy and suggests that next time they not grab the others' food but "use their words" to let the other know how they were feeling. She asks if they want to practice a relaxing activity. (Conscious Discipline offers teachers relaxation activities and ideas to implement in the classroom, particularly when children begin to exhibit tension and stress.) At that, the boys lift up both arms, holding them wide out to their side. At the same time, they hold their breath and, forming an "O" with their arms, they hold themselves still for a few seconds. They both begin to slowly exhale, lowering their arms at the same time. By the time they finish this movement, the boys are laughing and have seemingly forgotten their fight.

## Another Conflict

A few minutes later, Kari returns—visibly upset—and speaks softly with Jo. At that moment, Juan screeches, shouting that Abreonde had hit him. Kari asks Jo to have the children clean up their places and get their coats on to go outside. Jo makes sure that Juan gets his coat from his cubby and lines up with the rest of the children against the wall. Meanwhile, Kari takes Abreonde to the "quiet corner," a large colorful cushion on the floor in the back of the classroom. "Abreonde, did you know that when you hit Juan, you are hitting my friend? I don't like it when you hurt my friend," says Kari. She sits on the cushion with him, talking softly. Abreonde shakes his head sadly and looks away. Kari leaves him there for a few minutes, asking him to think about using his words next time rather than hitting Juan.

## Conversation with Kari

When it is time for outdoor play, the children run out the door to the playground, quickly commandeering tricycles, swings, and climbing equipment. I walk out with Kari and Jo. Sarah has gone out ahead of us and is pushing a girl on a swing. It is a wet and cloudy fall day. Kari seems lost in thought. "Obviously, Juan's parents aren't happy," she finally says, and she recounts her discussion with the parents. She describes Juan's parents as active in the Head Start program, involved in their son's activities in and outside the classroom, and currently unhappy with the teachers' disciplinary actions. Juan's father is bilingual, fluent in English, while his mother speaks very little English and is dependent upon her husband's translation. This has made communication challenging for Kari, who has sought to describe the classroom activities and her discipline procedures in several incidents involving Juan. One such incident occurred the previous Friday. Juan's parents now want to know why another student hit their son and was not punished for fighting. Kari says that she and Jo have struggled to describe Conscious Discipline, the new program-wide approach to social-emotional learning, and the ways to implement suggested classroom activities and interventions to Juan's parents.

## Conscious Discipline: Documents and Interviews

Data related to Conscious Discipline were collected from the Conscious Discipline Web site (<http://consciousdiscipline.com>) and training materials, as well as from interviews with the teaching staff and the program's child development services manager. A comprehensive classroom management program and self-described "philosophy" for teaching social-emotional skills, Conscious Discipline has been used in many preschool classrooms across the nation.

## Conscious Discipline Materials

The Web site for Conscious Discipline states that its use helps to reduce aggressive acts, decrease children's impulsivity and hyperactivity, and decrease behavior and discipline issues, thus creating safer classrooms. It is meant to be used in conjunction with other social-emotional curricula. Its premise is built on supporting and empowering teachers to be proactive instead of reactive during times of conflict. The Web site asserts that the social and emotional environment of the classroom and building will be enhanced through improved adult relationships, adult-child relationships, and parent-child relationships through supportive communication and the setting of limits. Some research is cited to support these claims. Conscious Discipline promises great improvement for the preschool age group but appears to lack a strong research base to support such claims.

## Interview with an Administrator

I spoke with Terry Randall, the program's child development services manager, early in the school year about Conscious Discipline. According to Terry, Conscious Discipline is based on child development information and developmentally appropriate practices and is designed to make changes in the lives of adults first, who, in turn, change the lives of the children in their care. "It is really about building relationships and then focusing on the needs of the children in each classroom," Terry says. She enthusiastically endorses its use. She asserts that the teachers are looking forward to using it with the children, hoping to see changes in the classroom atmosphere, and wanting to change their own attitudes and behaviors with the children. The teaching staff receive two days' training at the beginning of each year from a certified Conscious Discipline trainer; follow-up training is scheduled within the year. The training included explanation of the purpose and objectives of the curriculum and implementation techniques for the classroom. Terry says she believes that the teachers have responded enthusiastically, stating "it just makes a lot of sense" and is "easy to present to staff and is easy to implement in the classroom."

Terry firmly believes that Conscious Discipline builds upon the curriculum currently in use in the classrooms, which focuses on how children feel about people, events, and situations. A family advocate (a position situated between the management team and the direct service staff) regularly comes to the classroom to conduct a large group time, using materials such as flashcards with pictures of children exhibiting a feeling (e.g., girl frowning or grimacing) to prompt the class to label and talk about emotions. The curriculum

also involves scenarios for discussion and role-playing. A class might also brainstorm ways to handle classroom situations, resolve conflicts, and manage anger in healthy ways. When I ask how the teachers are implementing Conscious Discipline in their classrooms, Terry responds that they certainly *seem* enthusiastic and love the premise of it. The Head Start director and site director also express high levels of enthusiasm for Conscious Discipline when they speak with me about it.

## Teacher Comments

The teaching team speaks enthusiastically about the potential changes that Conscious Discipline might make in the program and the classroom; however, they are hesitant about its limits and have already seen issues in its implementation. Neither Kari nor Jo is surprised by the administration's excitement at the thought of empowering relationships between teachers, administrators, children, and parents: "I like Conscious Discipline, but there are times when it just doesn't seem to cover what we need," Kari emphasizes, giving me the training manual to peruse.

## Training Materials

Reading the background of Conscious Discipline puts into context some of the classroom activities that I have witnessed (e.g., encouraging children to use words, breathing exercises, posters on the walls) and clarifies the scope, intent, and purpose of the philosophy.

According to the training materials, discipline is to be motivated from an attitude of love rather than fear, focusing on respect and connection between individuals and changing the adults' focus from manipulation and control to fostering children's self-control so they can more easily resolve conflict. Conscious Discipline is intended to support building self-esteem, seeing the best in others, empathizing with others, and encouraging others. Children are given choices and encouraged in a positive manner to choose appropriately (for the given context). Teachers are encouraged to help children learn to relax and soothe themselves in a variety of ways—the "quiet corner," calming and breathing activities, and breathing and relaxing—before reacting to others (e.g., by lashing out or hitting).

## Classroom Observations: Implementing Conscious Discipline

### Classroom Atmosphere

During my observations, the teachers often used suggestions from Conscious Discipline, including huddling and speaking with the children, calming them in a quiet corner, asking them if they had used their words rather than their fists, and helping them to process conflict with their peers (e.g., "Did you know you are hurting my friend when you hit him?"). The classroom featured posters and pictures directly related to Conscious Discipline, and related written questions dotted the classroom landscape (e.g., "Did you remember to use your words?").

### Handling Spilled Milk

Very little conversation is taking place at the tables. The boys at one table begin squabbling over a granola bar and, in the rush to grab the last one, spill a glass of milk. The entire table goes silent. Another boy at the same table spills his glass of milk. Jo sits still for a few seconds, smiles slightly, and says, in an offhand manner, "Well, boys, you had better get some paper towels to clean up your mess." The boys jump up, run to the sink area, get several paper towels, and clean up their respective spills. The other two boys at the table begin to talk again and reach over to help. One boy reaches across the table, lifts the pitcher of milk, and pours a little milk into each of the now-empty glasses. Within a few minutes, the noise in the classroom resumes its normal pitch.

After snack, Jo is bending down, "huddling" with Jamar. He has had a fairly good morning but is whining about the day and trying to take off his sweatshirt. It hangs over his head like a sack, causing him to bump into the cubbies. He seems frustrated. Jo gives him a stress ball, saying, "Squeeze this as tight as you can, and it might help you feel a little better." He does but still seems agitated. Jo asks him if he needs to go to the quiet corner to calm down. He squeezes the stress ball harder as they walk to the oversized, brightly colored cushion in the back of the room between a computer and the book center. There, Jo helps Jamar with his sweatshirt, talking to him in low tones. This is Jamar's third time in the quiet corner today. He is one of several boys who, during the course of the morning, spent a few minutes there huddling with either Kari or Jo. A minute and a hug later, Jamar hands Jo the stress ball and retrieves his coat and backpack from his cubby.

### Conversation with the Teachers

A few days after Kari's conversation with Juan's parents, the three of us again discuss the parents' unhappiness with the classroom discipline and teachers' style of interaction. Kari reports that Juan's parents wanted to know why Kari did not simply punish the boy who had originally hit Juan, and why he seemed to receive more attention than their son (who had been the victim). They wanted to better understand the Head Start staff's philosophy related to fighting and, more importantly, a boy defending himself. Kari grows pensive as she relates their concerns about boys in their culture—growing up to be a man, learning to defend himself and others. Kari is not certain that she has adequately explained Conscious Discipline and its basic premise to them or that the approach is culturally relevant, particularly as it is implemented during the course of the school year:

It is hard to just *do* the philosophy. It isn't something you just decide to *do*. We are trying to put parts of it into practice in our classroom. It is hard to explain it to parents who want to know what is going on when their son is hurt in the classroom.

Both Kari and Jo wonder if they should use a more traditional means of behavior management (e.g., earning stars for good behavior) in addition to the Conscious Discipline approach but contend that they are “not really supposed to.” Kari explains that program administrators do not want to mix approaches and strategies, encouraging teachers to fully implement Conscious Discipline. When I ask about the response of other parents, Kari replies that the philosophy has been explained to the parents and “not many have questioned how we practice it in the classroom.”

## November Observations and Conversations: Academic and Social-Emotional Outcomes

### Conversations with the Teachers

The overcast skies of November threaten to infiltrate the atmosphere of the classroom. I observe Jo reading *The Way I Feel*, a book about children and emotions, to children resting on the carpet. She reads without enthusiasm, using little affect, and elaborating very little for the children. Later, I sit in a planning meeting with Kari and Jo and listen as they talk about struggling to finish their developmental assessments, plan lessons with Sarah, implement expected curricular activities about numbers and letters, as well as find the time to nurture, help, comfort, and get to know each child in the class. They express frustration about fostering social-emotional learning in the context of performance standards and regulations, federal expectations of academic outcomes, and local program expectations for meeting standards and improving child outcomes. I ask about the importance of social-emotional issues in the scheme of federal mandates and expected outcomes. Jo exclaims, “Oh my gosh, learning social-emotional stuff is so important. In fact, it is the most important thing we do during the day. At least I think!” Kari agrees:

Definitely. I know we are supposed to teach literacy, counting, the alphabet, their names, on and on, but how can they learn in kindergarten if they can't get along with others, if they hit other kids, run around the room, or throw things? I think most of what we do during the day is based on helping them get along with other kids and adults. That is what is important to me. What good is it that they can count to whatever if they can't make friends or play together?

Jo agrees, “That is so true.” She adds:

I wish I had had courses that taught me how to deal with real kids like [the ones in our class], who have real issues! They don't teach you that. I had one course that taught me behavior management. But around here, I can't even begin to develop or start a behavior management program. The issues are too real and too big.

She concludes, “Do you know what these kids are dealing with? Sometimes I look at them, and I think about what is going on at home and I want to cry.” Jo explains that several of the children go from child care to Head Start and back to child care until late at night. She tells me about Tira, who is trying to cope with her parents' divorce and having a difficult time getting along with some of the children in the classroom. A small, pale child, Tira does not involve herself in many of the classroom activities without urging from Kari, Jo, or Sarah. When she does interact with others, many times the activity ends in tears or angry words. Tira, the teachers say, seems exhausted much of the time and complains about not getting enough sleep.

When I ask if it is possible to actually teach social-emotional skills in the context of local and federal requirements, Kari and Jo emphatically answer yes! “We are always teaching social-emotional skills—in everything we do and say.” The balancing act between academic outcomes and social-emotional skills is getting progressively more difficult, they say. Social-emotional curricula and philosophies do not seem to discuss children's real-life issues. Jo gives an example:

Look at Eleana. There are so many things going on at home. She comes here at 1:00 from day care, then leaves here at 4:00 and goes back to day care. What kind of life is that? When does she see her Mom? Society is getting terrible for these kids.

I ask if Conscious Discipline helps them deal with these types of issues. Kari responds, “No, a curriculum is still just a book that gives you suggestions, but they aren't here in our room watching a kid like Dustin run all over the classroom.” Jo says, “We just do the best we can. If only people could come in and watch what we deal with.” The problem, they assert, is that often they are simply helping children deal with what is going on in their lives, leaving little time to do more than touch on literacy skills or counting. Kari notes, “We don't have time to teach counting or ABCs most of the time. We are listening to kids, watching kids, comforting kids, and letting them know that we care—that we are there for them.” Jo agrees, “Yep, some of these kids don't have one consistent person. They go from day care to here to day care. I used to work in day care. I would see a little kid dropped off at 5:55 a.m. and picked up at 5:55 p.m. *I was who they were with all day.*”

## A Change in the Classroom: Observations and Conversations

### The New Boy

I enter the classroom one late November morning, and immediately sense a change in the atmosphere. I see Sarah setting the tables and Jo leading the children in the transition song “Icky-sticky Bubble Gum.” But none of the children on the carpet are really paying attention to the song or Jo. Most are arching their backs and straining their necks to turn and watch the drama being played out in the housekeeping center.

Kari is there with a boy who is clutching a small baby doll. She is obviously trying to get him to join the class on the carpet. He is crying. She leads him (with the doll) almost forcibly back to the carpet area and sits down heavily on a small chair with him on her

lap, on the outside of the circle. Jo and the rest of the children look at them while continuing the song. Sarah pauses in her task to tell me that the boy is new and his name is Donnell.

When the other children are seated for snack, Kari brings Donnell over to a chair. She has also brought a second chair and sets it down next to him. Donnell very carefully arranges the baby-doll he has been clutching on the chair, swaddling the doll with a blanket. As children begin to eat their food, Donnell carefully “feeds” a bite of chicken strip to the doll. He then takes a bite of chicken himself. This ritual continues for a few minutes; three other boys at the table watch silently. The entire room is quiet, with most of the children stealing glances at the little boy feeding the swaddled doll.

Suddenly, Donnell jumps up, grabs the doll, and, without a word or a glance at anyone, runs to the housekeeping center. Unwrapping the doll, he places it on the floor of the small area rug and stands over it. Placing his legs about a yard apart, he bends at the waist and proceeds to pummel the doll with both hands linked into a two-handed fist. Then, as quickly as he had begun, Donnell quietly rewraps the doll in the blanket and walks back to the table and begins to eat.

Suddenly, Juan speaks to Donnell, “No one likes you—or your doll.” Donnell seems to ignore Juan’s outburst; even the teachers seem to ignore it. Juan raises his voice and repeats the statement—this time to the room at large. Kari comes over to Juan and eases him from his chair. She speaks softly:

You know, Juan, I know how hard it is for you to see Donnell running around the classroom. Especially when you want to run around and you can’t. You have to sit and eat. I know he is acting differently, but everyone is different in their own special way. We are working with him on this, okay?

Though he does not seem satisfied, Juan goes back to his snack and finishes eating. Snack time ends in near silence.

Sarah walks to the carpet and turns on the CD player. A lively song plays, and the children finish their snack, move to the carpet, and begin to dance. Jo cleans the tables. Kari chases Donnell who, getting up from the table, has grabbed the doll and begun leaping over the toys in the block area. He clammers over the shelving unit into the housekeeping center and grabs a second doll. Kari edges around the shelving unit and follows Donnell closely. He then goes to the carpet and sits next to Sarah.

Another boy reaches over and takes one of the dolls from Donnell. Screaming, Donnell grabs the boy’s hair and tries to hit him. Sarah calmly reaches over and holds Donnell tightly. She takes the doll from the other boy and gives it back to Donnell. While Donnell wraps both dolls together in his blanket, Sarah gathers the other little boy and hugs him close to her. He gradually calms down enough to get up and to dance along to the music.

## Conversations with the Teachers

Kari, Jo, and I sit on chairs in the classroom after the children depart. Kari explains to me that Donnell enrolled in Head Start the previous week from out of state; she does not know if he has been in an early childhood program previously. We fall silent. Kari breaks the silence with a statement about Donnell’s behavior with the dolls: “I think he must be autistic.” Jo disagrees, “I don’t know about that.” I ask if they have spoken with his parents or Ms. Waters, the site director. They stress that they have spoken with Ms. Waters and have asked for a referral for an observation from the program’s mental health consultant. They briefly talked to Donnell’s mother by phone. She seemed supportive and said they could call her whenever they had a concern.

Sarah comes into the room after taking the children to the bus to get her coat and bag and to say good-bye for the day. She sighs heavily, “Another day—over.” Kari and Jo barely respond. After Sarah leaves, I ask them how they feel. Jo wonders aloud if she can “handle it” much longer. Kari expresses surprise at her own difficulty dealing with Donnell. Both teachers seem emotionally and physically exhausted. They express frustration about what they see as the site director’s lack of interest in Donnell’s behavior, but they are hopeful that they will have another opportunity to speak with Donnell’s mother during parent-teacher conferences at the end of the week.

Two weeks later, I return to the classroom to observe Kari and Jo. As I walk into the classroom, Jo comes up to me, motions me to the door, and begins to cry. I ask what is wrong, and she replies that she is upset, angry, and frustrated with the seeming lack of response from the program administration and Donnell’s mother to his extreme behavior in the classroom. He has been absent that day; the room seems almost eerily quiet. The family advocate manager is in the room talking with the children about emotions, particularly anger. Sarah is preparing tables for an art project for center time. Kari has the day off. Jo says that she feels “at loose ends” and needs to talk.

Jo and I stand at the classroom door while children on the carpet role-play how to handle angry feelings. She tells me that several things have happened that have changed her attitude and the classroom dynamics, especially those of the teaching team. First, she said, Kari has received the promotion she wanted; the site director, Ms. Waters, is interviewing possible replacements. Kari will begin her new management position once a new teacher is hired. While Jo is thrilled for Kari’s opportunity, she seems fearful about her departure.

Jo also discloses that she has been reprimanded by the site director for an email she wrote to a friend at another Head Start site about Donnell’s behavior and the lack of administrative response. Ms. Waters found out about the email and confronted Jo about it. Jo expresses frustration that the whole thing had been “taken out of context.” She seems embarrassed by the situation and the reprimand; she comments that she needs to “simply vent.”

Finally, she says, Donnell’s behavior was much worse the two previous days, culminating in him hitting several children and throwing snacks and milk. When the teachers asked Ms. Waters if they could contact his mother about it, she said no. Jo says that she “can’t take it much longer,” that no one understands, and that she does not understand the lack of response. Ms. Waters has been in the classroom to observe Donnell once—and that, Jo says, was a calm day for him. She goes on to describe an incident that happened on Monday:

I was sitting at Donnell’s table during breakfast. He was eating and suddenly picked up his glass of milk and threw it at me! He threw the whole thing at me! I jumped out of the way and most of it missed me, but that isn’t the point.

We can't have him throwing glasses of milk at kids. What if it had been another child and not me? And then, when I wanted to run home at lunch and change, I was not allowed to. And, you know what happened as a result of him throwing the glass of milk at me? We (the teachers) were told at a staff meeting yesterday to bring extra clothes to change into in the event of "accidents." That was it!

## Researcher's Response

I realized that I had become a part of this case study in a way I had not foreseen. I had listened to Kari and Jo for several weeks, had watched them teach and nurture the children in their care, and had witnessed the arrival of Donnell, who had seemingly brought the winds of change to the entire classroom. Though at this point I was concerned about Donnell's behavior, I also noted the effect that his arrival had on the teaching team. During the time that he had been in the classroom, it seemed that the team had ceased being a "well-oiled machine" and had become divided by the need to follow Donnell around the classroom, teach him the classroom rules, and try to manage the classroom as the other children expressed their frustration with his behavior and the fact that he seemed to "get away with" things in the classroom. The teachers now had seemingly bifurcated duties. Kari acted as a one-on-one aide to Donnell, while Jo maintained the overall atmosphere of the classroom and the children. Sarah (the student teacher) seemed simply to be trying to finish her time in the classroom. I was also concerned about the seeming lack of administrative response, which was quite the opposite of what I had experienced in over 10 years of working with Head Start programs.

Wolcott's "insurmountable tension" seemed to be an appropriate description for my experience (1999, p. 44). Yet, Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2003) struck a familiar chord in their discussion of the long-held view of self as something "to be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized, and controlled" (p. 169). The perspective that one can allow oneself as a researcher (albeit a participant researcher) to be vulnerable, not "[hiding] behind the cloak of alleged neutrality," enabled me to become a part of the classroom community and let the picture develop naturally (p. 169). At this point in my study, I was also reminded of Powdermaker's exhortation to "move back and forth between involvement and detachment" (cited in Wolcott, 1999, p. 48). That proved to be increasingly difficult.

## Conversations with Administrators

Determined to remain somewhat objective, yet acknowledging that site administration seemed to be ignoring urgent problems, I decide to talk with the site director, Ms. Waters, about Conscious Discipline, hoping that the conversation will turn to Donnell's behavior and teacher frustration. She is not able to see me for an extended discussion, but we talk briefly in the hall about the adopted program-wide philosophy. She reminds me that it is not a curriculum, but an approach—a "group of strategies designed to help the teachers in their relationships with each other and the children." The conversation ends there; another teacher needs her in a classroom.

Frustrated, I arrange to talk again with Terry, the child development services manager, about the progress of my case study, with the hope of finding out if she knows of the struggles in Kari's classroom. Terry is enthusiastic about my observations and asks my thoughts about Conscious Discipline and its implementation in the classroom. I am able to tell her some of what the teachers have shared with me, such as their enthusiasm for the relationship-based premise of the approach, the training that they received during the summer, and the potential for change that the approach inspired. I also tell her the teachers' concerns about implementation with children who exhibit extreme behavioral challenges. She tells me that the previous week Ms. Waters discussed with her the need for assistance with several of the children. Terry and Ms. Waters have put in a request for social and emotional behavior consultants from the local university to come to the program, observe several children, and make recommendations and suggestions to assist the teachers. They hope to schedule the consultation for the next week. The specialists will spend several classroom sessions observing the children and will then work with teachers as needed. I ask Terry if I may share this plan with the teachers when I see them the next day.

Given permission, I tell Kari and Jo of my conversation with Terry and the expectation of assistance in dealing with, not only Donnell, but also several other children with behavior issues. The teachers express gratitude at the requested help and frustration at the lack of communication about the situation.

## Preliminary Discussion

Although the immediate problem of administrative lack of response appeared to be resolved, several troubling concerns remained during my subsequent conversations with Kari and Jo. One concern that was disconcerting to the teachers was the disconnect they experienced with Donnell's mother. Although they had met with her at the parent-teacher conference, the conversation about his behavior had seemed to them to be unresolved and incomplete. They had hoped that subsequent telephone conversations might bring about some resolution, or at least some ideas for dealing with his behavior. The teachers had enjoyed open relationships with parents of the children in their care and were disturbed about having been told by the site director several times not to contact Donnell's mother about his behavior.

Another issue of concern was the incomplete communication from the site director, Ms. Waters, whose apparent lack of interest had contradicted the teachers' previous experience with her. (Kari had worked with Ms. Waters for several years and reported having a positive and open relationship with her. Jo, though a new hire, had also enjoyed positive interactions with the director.) In fact, Ms. Waters had already approached university behavior specialists about assisting the teaching staff, but she *had not communicated that to the teachers*. As a result, the teachers believed that their supervising staff was unresponsive to their struggles, when, in fact, measures had been taken immediately following their request for help. There seemed to be a breakdown in communication between the administration and teaching staff, yet without frequent and open conversation between managers and direct service staff, the teachers' sense of isolation and frustration might continue to grow. This situation seemed especially upsetting to the the teaching team, because they and the children were beginning a transition period that would affect all of them. With Kari's departure and the arrival of a new teacher, Jo and the children would have a period of adjustment that would bring a change in dynamics and a shift in priorities and position.

A third issue was the teachers' understanding of the best use of social-emotional strategies within the classroom. From their Conscious Discipline training, they understood that it was better to consistently use the recommended strategies and techniques than to bring in methods from other approaches. However, Kari and Jo expressed concern about the continued implementation of only Conscious Discipline in the face of parental concerns (such as from Juan's parents) and some children's challenging behaviors.

Terry Randall, the coordinator, admitted that Conscious Discipline "only went so far" in providing a foundation to build on, stressing that the teachers needed to implement it in the way that worked for their classroom and their children. When I asked Kari and Jo about their plans for further implementation, they emphasized that they wanted to use Conscious Discipline as a foundation but supplement it with some "good, old-fashioned behavior management techniques" that they believed might meet some children's needs—regardless of concerns about using strategies and methods from other social-emotional philosophies or approaches.

Finally, a fourth area of concern was the desire of the teachers to balance their time emotionally nurturing the young children in their care and helping them meet the expectations of increasing academic demands at an early age. Yet, Kari and Jo both expressed frustration in having to meet the various expectations placed on them, wondering if they are doing any of them well.

### Concluding Reflections

The identified issues grew out of my observations in the classroom and out of conversations that developed and took on a life of their own as Kari, Jo, and I teased out the challenges of dealing with the social-emotional needs and concerns of preschool children in Head Start. Our conversations brought to light issues common to early childhood classrooms and teachers everywhere, from implementing *No Child Left Behind* (2002) to maintaining healthy relationships with children, parents, and other staff.

A program's implementation of a social-emotional philosophy plays out differently in every classroom. Conscious Discipline is unique in that it targets the adults first, encouraging them to sustain healthy and open relationships and interactions with each other; in that environment, children learn and mature emotionally and socially. This case study found that, despite the fact that the Head Start program worked diligently at maintaining open lines of communication (e.g., managers meeting weekly with teaching staff), and welcomed teacher input on the implementation of Conscious Discipline, this particular teaching team struggled with several factors—the demands of fitting the approach to every child and to various classroom situations, questions or doubts from some parents, the apparent lack of response and incomplete communication from program administrators, discrepancies between the administrators' and teachers' views of the implementation and efficacy of Conscious Discipline, and the conflicting demands of addressing both academic and social-emotional outcomes. At risk, it seemed, were the very interactions and relationships between the administrators, teachers, parents, and children that Conscious Discipline supports and encourages.

This case study can be a starting point for highlighting some issues around addressing social-emotional skills and development. A comprehensive discussion of these issues requires additional studies of teacher-child relationships, of the workings of a teaching team and what it means to utilize co-teaching as an instructional strategy, and of the impact of introducing philosophies, curricula, or strategies into early childhood classrooms.

Several additional concerns bear mention—the breakdown of synchrony between the teachers early in the study as compared to later in the study; the immediate conclusion that a child (Donnell in this case) must have some sort of "problem" or disability (as evidenced by the statement, "He must be autistic"); the question of what happens when a child joins an ongoing classroom community and does *not* acclimate to that classroom; and the ways that contextual factors, such as the structure of Head Start, may influence or affect classroom social-emotional issues.

The issues identified during this 10-week study were not resolved by the conclusion of the research. In fact, they are part of overarching challenges faced by teachers daily. Kari and Jo, and teachers all over America, contend with meeting the expectations of their administrators, which sometimes conflict with the teachers' ideas and needs. Teachers struggle to nurture and prepare children socially and emotionally for kindergarten, while helping them meet child outcomes in numeracy and literacy. Teachers are left trying to meet the needs of all the children while having to spend much time with a few who have persistent challenging behaviors.

Each issue discussed in this paper arises on a daily basis, consuming teachers' time and energy as they attempt to support and build strong relationships with each other and children in their care. Building a strong social-emotional foundation within an early childhood setting is not an easy task—a fact that was apparent during this case study of implementing a social-emotional approach in one Head Start classroom.

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### Appendix Office of Head Start Organizational Chart

