

The Impact of the Social Classroom Contract on Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

This study explores how social classroom contracts impact students with learning disabilities. The way that students behave and interact has a direct bearing on how they are taught and learned. The research uses a quantitative method to identify the elements influencing the formation of classroom social contracts, explore how they relate to the student code of conduct, and emphasize the beneficial effects of classroom social contracts for students with learning disabilities. The research shows that giving students a choice and a voice in establishing a social contract in the classroom empowers them to take charge of their education and recognize their potential to make a difference. The student code of conduct, a set of rules and expectations for behaviour in the school setting, is also strongly tied to the classroom social contract. Additionally, classroom social contracts give students a stronger feeling of independence and accountability, promoting a socially conscious and active learning environment. This study emphasizes the transformative potential of social classroom contracts for students with learning disabilities with the possibility of increasing their attendance, engagement, and achievement.

Keywords: *Achievement, Attendance, Code of Conduct, Student Engagement, Voice, and Choice.*

Introduction

Because today's youth are getting ready to compete with students worldwide, education in the twenty-first century has evolved into a global endeavour. The calibre of education that the current educational system provides will significantly impact the future economy. Therefore, each nation's achievement and graduation rates must be comparable to those of other developing nations worldwide.

According to UNESCO [1], the lower and upper secondary education global adjusted net attendance rates were 65% and 52%, respectively 2021. In 2020, 90% of the world's population had finished primary school, but only 66% had finished secondary school. For students attending public high schools in the

United States, the adjusted cohort completion rate for the 2018–19 school year was 86%. Maryland specifically had an 86.9% graduation rate, but the percentage of students with disabilities who graduated was lower at 65.8%. However, despite these graduation rates, academic achievement among U.S. students still lags that of many other nations.

According to data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [2], the United States is in the middle of the rankings globally regarding reading, science, and math. In reading, math, and science, the United States placed 11th, 29th, and 16th out of 79 nations studied for the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

In addition, the United States was ranked 8th in science and 15th in math for the fourth grade in the 2019 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Out of 46 nations tested in eighth-grade math and science, the United States ranked eleven.

The U.S. Department of Education's 2022 report card [3] reveals a substantial achievement gap between learners who have disabilities and their peers. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2022 reading assessment report revealed that 70% of fourth graders with specific learning disabilities (SLD) performed below the basic reading level, with only 11% reaching proficiency or above. In comparison, 38% of students without disabilities scored below basic, while 37% were proficient or above. Similar patterns were observed in math assessment, with 53% of students with a learning disability (SLD) performing below basic and only 3% reaching proficiency, compared to 20% below basic and 8% proficient for students without disabilities.

This achievement gap persists throughout eighth grade, with 72% of students with disabilities performing below basic math compared to 33% of those without disabilities.

To increase graduation rates and narrow the achievement gap, schools need to adopt more strategic approaches to engaging students with learning disabilities. Rice and Kipp (2019) [4] suggest that promoting and sustaining the engagement of students with disabilities may require additional strategies and support compared to those implemented for students without disabilities. Research has shown that students who enjoy school and actively engage in classroom activities are likelier to persist in their studies and graduate successfully [5, 6]. Cook-Sather [7] argues that soliciting student voices can foster engagement, develop democratic-minded students, and challenge existing power structures in traditional education.

Furthermore, involving students in their learning encourages collaborative learning, active participation, learner autonomy, and student achievement [8, 9]. Using classroom contracts is one effective approach to soliciting students' voices and promoting engagement. Teachers and students take responsibility for their actions by deciding on the classroom rules together. Classroom agreements ensure that rules are clear, include consequences rather than punishments, permit flexibility based on the class's needs, protect students' dignity, and improve communication [10].

Creating a social contract within the classroom is an effective way to demonstrate to students that everyone belongs. The Classroom Social Contract, as promoted by Capturing Kids' Hearts by The Flippen Group [11], aids students in feeling heard, seen, and valued as members of the learning community. According to Brené Brown [12], we rely on authentic connections to thrive as social beings. Students in our classrooms yearn for connection with their teachers and peers. Feelings of loneliness, elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and a heightened affective filter can all result from a lack of genuine connection.

Learning, problem-solving, and creativity are all hindered when the affective filter rises and cortisol releases [13]. To establish a secure environment where students feel like they belong, the Social Contract is the first step. This safe environment is crucial because it allows students to take risks and make mistakes, which frees up their minds to learn academic material and develop their language skills [12]. It is important for kids to feel like they belong and have a safe place to relax. A sense of belonging can alter the course of their lives. There is little room for effective learning if a student's mind is preoccupied with self-protection, worrying about fitting in, fearing ridicule, or harbouring anger toward peers.

While many researchers have investigated the challenges faced by students with disabilities, few studies have explored the

necessary factors for building a social contract and their connection to a student code of ethics. Likewise, none of the studies have examined the significance of classroom contracts specifically for students with learning disabilities. As schools are evaluated based on student performance and graduation rates, addressing this sociological issue becomes crucial for all educational institutions. School leaders should explore diverse approaches to engage students and foster accountability. Student behaviour and interaction directly impact the teaching and learning process. For students with learning disabilities, learning in a chaotic environment becomes exceedingly challenging.

Therefore, this study aims to assess the impact of social classroom contracts on students with disabilities to improve their success in the classroom. This study focuses on the following research questions: a) What are the essential factors in building social contracts in the classroom? b) How is the student code of conduct related to classroom social contracts for students with learning disabilities? c) Why is it imperative to create classroom social contracts? The study is limited to exploring the effects of social classroom contracts on diploma-seeking students with learning disabilities, who must meet graduation requirements but require specialized instruction and accommodations. However, it lacks a comparison group of non-disabled students or classrooms without social contracts. Future research should include a broader range of students with disabilities and suitable comparison groups to better evaluate the efficacy of social contracts. Social classroom contracts can support student codes of conduct, improve attendance, increase engagement, and enhance achievement. However, educators must consider the unique needs of students with learning disabilities and continuously evaluate and refine social classroom contracts for optimal effectiveness.

The significance of understanding the impact of social classroom contracts for students with learning disabilities lies in the fact that these contracts promote engagement, foster a sense of belonging, strengthen classroom community, enhance communication, and foster student accountability. By implementing effective social contracts, schools can create an inclusive and supportive environment that empowers students with disabilities to thrive academically and personally. Classroom social contracts can increase school attendance, achievement, and engagement.

Materials and Methods

Design of the Study

The study's design was quantitative, and the researchers used Google Forms to administer a questionnaire survey that allowed for simple data retrieval and direct analysis. By using Google Forms, responses were recorded accurately.

Sample

The study involved 28 Reginald High School teachers working with students with learning disabilities during the 2022–2023 academic year. The selection of teachers who actively interact with students with disabilities was done via purposeful sampling. All participating teachers had completed Capturing Kids' Hearts training, fostering social contracts with students.

Data Gathering Procedure

Teachers of students with disabilities received a survey and consent form from a researcher via Google Forms. Participants were chosen to participate after being informed of the study's goals. The participants answered the survey, and data was gathered through Google Forms.

Data Analysis

The collected items were presented in tables and percentages, translated into a chart,

allowing the researchers to identify the factors needed in building a classroom social contract, determine the relationship between the classroom social contract and the student code of conduct, and assess the impact of classroom social contracts on students with disabilities.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were given an orientation explaining the purpose of the study, the methods used to collect the data, and how the data would be used. The Participants must check a box at the start of the survey to indicate their consent.

Those who declined were directed to the questionnaire’s final section, while those who agreed answered the questions. There were no dangerous or life-threatening procedures used in the study that might have harmed the participants. By omitting personal identifiers from the survey, the researchers protected the participants’ privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, the data were kept private, and

after data collection, only the researchers had access to the study and results.

Results

Essential Factors in Building Classroom Social Contracts (CSC)

The figure 1 highlights the essential factors required in building classroom social contracts for students with learning disabilities. It demonstrates that the top priority, at 100%, is considering student choices and voices in creating these contracts. Following closely at 78.6% is the clear definition of classroom social contracts. Ranking third, with 71.4%, are behaviours such as addressing appropriate language, student efforts, listening, and no put-downs, which are given significant consideration during the initial contract-building process.

The two least considered elements are the required number of items (10–25) in a social classroom contract, with only 35.7% of responses, and providing processing time, which garnered 50% of responses.

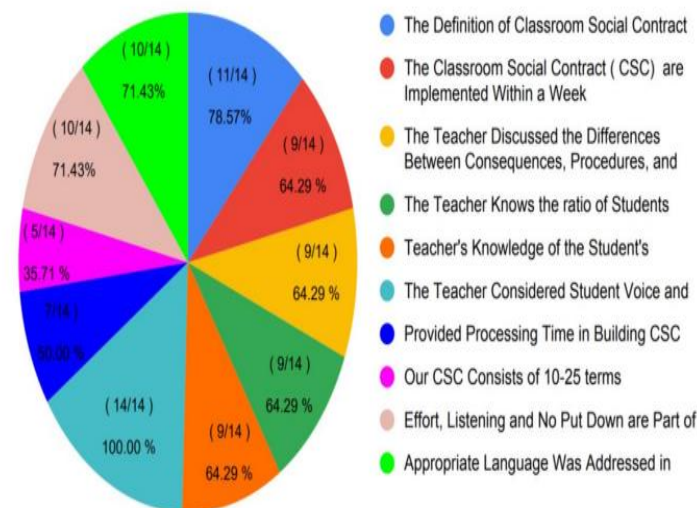


Figure 1. Essential Factors in Building Classroom Social Contracts (CSC)

Relationship of the Student Code of Conduct to the Classroom Social Contract (CSC)

All the respondents agreed that the student code of conduct and the classroom social

contract are related. They also added that their consequences for misbehaviour are aligned with the CSC. The link between the student code of behaviour and the classroom social contract is broken down in the above figure. Classroom disruption and disrespectful behaviour are the

most related behaviours addressed in the classroom contract, with 92.9%. Next is bullying, which includes cyberbullying, with 71.4%. Class cutting, attacks on students, and defiance of authority rank third with 57.1 %.

Behaviour from the student’s code of conduct with a minor link to the classroom social contracts is hallway misbehaviour at 35.7%, followed by harassment at 42.9%, and academic dishonesty, which is within 50 %.

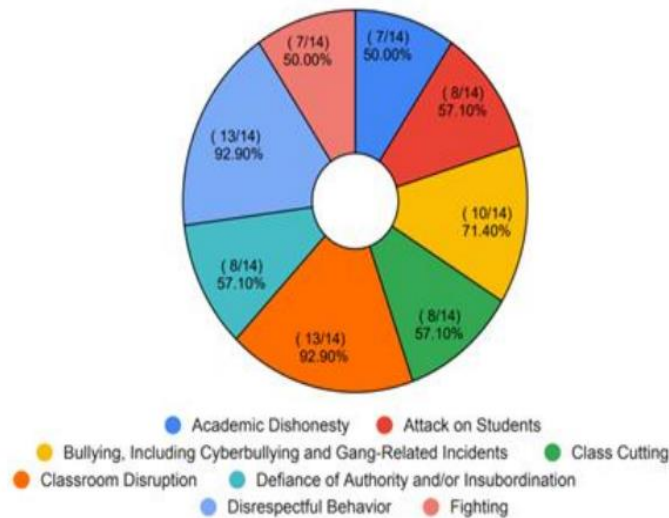


Figure 2. Relationship of the Student Code of Conduct to the Classroom Social Contract (CSC)

Benefits of the Classroom Social Contract (CSC)

Based on the above figure, holding the student accountable has the highest impact (92.86%). Foster community in the classroom and strengthen school engagement; provide structure; and let students know the expectations and the consequences if they do not follow. This ranks second with 85.70%.

Lastly, helping students feel heard, seen, and valued is on the third rank, with 78.57%.

Regarding the impacts on the lowest rank, help them understand their disability more because they set expectations based on what they have ranked first with (57.14%). Giving them choices or the freedom to choose classroom expectations, promoting self-directedness, and establishing basic, inalienable rules rank second to last at 64.29%.

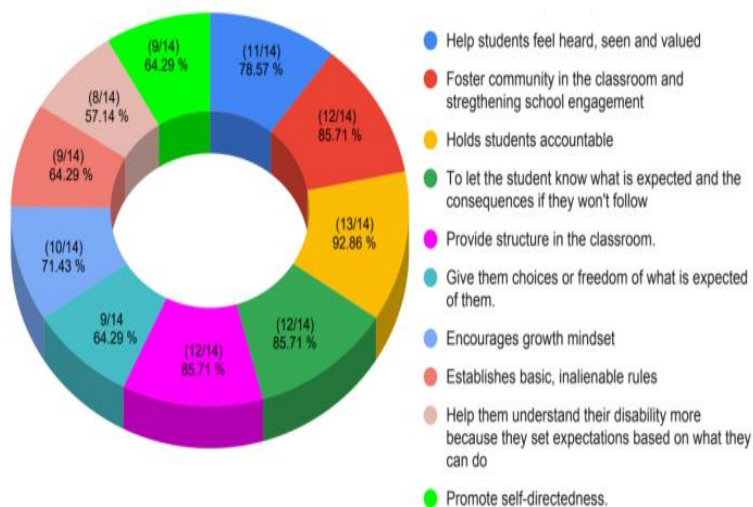


Figure 3. Benefits of the Classroom Social Contract (CSC)

Discussion

The research findings identified the essential factors for building classroom social contracts for students with learning disabilities. These factors include incorporating student choices and voices, providing explicit definitions of the social contract, addressing inappropriate language, emphasizing student efforts, promoting active listening, and prohibiting put-downs [11, 14-17].

Takila, a teacher from Haines Elementary School, emphasized that students feel empowered when they have a voice and choice in creating social classroom contracts. This empowerment enables them to work collaboratively, monitor their interactions, and build rapport with their classmates and teachers. In addition, when students are actively involved, agree to, and sign the contract, they become responsible for committing to its principles [14]. Smith [15] highlights the importance of explaining the social contract to students. Giving students ownership of the contract by explaining that it is an agreement on how they can make the classroom a great place to learn and have fun can foster a meaningful and student-led classroom contract. Students are more likely to adhere to the rules when they understand the purpose behind them. According to Flippen [11], an effective social contract in the classroom should include three key elements: effort, listening, and no put-downs. Students should demonstrate effort in abiding by the agreement, learn to actively listen to others, and refrain from using inappropriate language or humiliating their classmates. Krupansky [17] adds that consent is vital for a social contract to be effective. In the classroom, students should willingly consent to and abide by the social contract to maintain order and create a conducive learning environment.

The findings also reveal that classroom disruption and disrespectful behaviour, bullying, which includes cyberbullying and class cutting, attacks on students, and defiance

of authority, are the behaviour in the student code of conduct related to creating and implementing the social classroom contract. It implies that the social contract supports the implementation of the code of conduct. Classroom A social contract ensures students understand the school's expectations and consequences [18]. This suggests that integrating the student code of conduct with the classroom social contract emphasizes the classroom social contract's function as a useful instrument for translating general behavioural norms into concrete, actionable terms. Students can better comprehend the real-world applications of these expectations in their everyday interactions when the social contract and the code of conduct align [19]. This thorough approach promotes a favourable learning environment for all students by preventing misconceptions and promoting clarity about the possible implications of their conduct. Furthermore, this approach encourages students to take ownership of their actions and promotes a sense of responsibility. It also allows for open communication and collaboration between students and teachers, creating a positive and respectful classroom culture.

As a final finding, the study shows that social contracts in the classroom benefit students with disabilities. They provide structure, hold these students accountable for their actions, promote a sense of community in the classroom, increase school engagement, and inform the students at the school's expectations and consequences. This is especially important because students with disabilities may benefit from clear behavioral guidelines that create a welcoming and inclusive learning environment [20]. Everyone has a voice and a stake in preserving a positive classroom environment when students are involved in the social contract's creation [21]. In addition, Gordon [22] emphasizes the significance of student accountability in the classroom, emphasizing the critical role that social contracts play in

educating students about expectations and holding them accountable for their actions. Social contract implementation not only fosters a culture of accountability but also improves classroom management, reduces misbehavior, and increases the possibility of productive instructional time [23; 22]. As a result, by actively influencing social contracts and behavioral norms, students help create an environment that fosters personal and academic growth.

Conclusion

The present study explores the impact of classroom social contracts on students with disabilities, specifically focusing on enhancing their success within the school setting. This investigation focused on the following questions: a) What are the essential factors in building social contracts in the classroom? b) How is the student code of conduct related to classroom social contracts for students with disabilities? c) Why is it imperative to create classroom social contracts?

The study reveals the essential factors in building classroom social contracts: considering student voice and choice, clearly defining classroom social contracts, and addressing behaviours such as appropriate language, student efforts, listening, and no put-downs. The study also reveals that all teachers agreed that a direct relationship exists between the student code of conduct and the classroom social contract. Classroom disruption and disrespectful behaviour are the most related, followed by bullying. Class cutting, attacks on students, and defiance of authority are among the top-ranked codes of conduct related to classroom social contracts.

Lastly, the study highlighted that the classroom social contract benefits the school environment. The top benefits are holding the student accountable, fostering community in the classroom, strengthening school engagement, providing structure, letting the student know the expectations and the consequences if they do

not follow, and helping students feel heard, seen, and valued.

Developing a classroom social contract must be based on the voices and decisions of the students. Instead of the teacher listing and enforcing posted rules throughout the classroom, it is the 21st-century method of enforcing proper behaviour. A social contract for the classroom is an agreement on how to act and treat other students in the community. It is the fundamentals and rules of social behaviour. The list that students produce is brief, accessible, and written. The student's code of conduct is defined and moulded by the school. Policies outline sanctions for behaviours that are considered unacceptable in the discipline. Implementing the code of conduct is strengthened by social contracts in the classroom. A social contract in the classroom for students with disabilities must be clear and simple to be effective. They ought to be involved in the creation of social classroom contracts. Social contracts in the classroom have many positive effects. They give students more power by fostering a sense of ownership and accountability for their actions. Additionally, these agreements promote a supportive community in the school environment, where respect for one another governs interactions. As a result, student engagement increases, enhancing learning opportunities and academic achievements.

The inclusion of student perspectives as respondents in future studies is recommended. In-depth knowledge of the intricacies surrounding the implications of social classroom contracts can be gained through interviews, which can be used with questionnaire surveys. It is likely to enhance and increase the effectiveness of social contracts in school environments by involving students as active participants in the research process. The significance of the study's findings is outlined in this section, which also underscores the rationale for the study and its practical benefits and extensions.

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Conflict of Interest

There are no declared conflicts of interest in this work by the authors.

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