

# BUILDING COMMUNITY IN THE CLASSROOM

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As teachers, we have a very difficult job. We are to take a group of diverse students and teach them in ways that meet all of their needs on every level: academic, emotional, and social. Yet, students come to us with many different strengths and abilities. They also come to us with pain and hurt in their lives. Our challenge is to create a classroom culture that builds on their strengths and heals their hurts so that learning can occur.

By definition, a community is a group of people who work with one another building a sense of trust, care, and support. This means that in our classrooms, part of our job is to provide opportunities and structures by which students can help and support one another. It also means that we provide explicit instruction and support so that students learn *how* to do this. As I've worked to build community in my classroom, I've realized that it is connected with everything I do. However I have found a way to structure how I think about building community.

## Helping students building 'community'.

- Fostering community awareness by creating structures that emphasize collaborative activity and joint problem-solving.
- Modeling the language of cooperation (eg. 'friends help friends. We all work together'.)
- Extending community-building efforts to all areas of classroom activity, finding places where students can assist each other.
- Reinforcing the notion that all ideas in the community are respected and valued.
- Providing visible cues throughout the classroom that encourage collaboration and cooperation (eg. Posters highlighting a 'Cooperative Work Ethic'; seating arrangements).
- Strategic planning for the arrival of new students to the classroom (eg. Assigning a friend to each new student to provide support, guidance, and leadership).
- Modeling collaboration, making teachers' collaborative planning activities visible to students.
- Play group games that foster community building and read literature that teaches these topics.

## Provide Voice

**Making choices.** Children both need help from adults to provide structure in their lives and freedom to make choices. Students need to take responsibility for choices as part of their growing and learning. I establish many ways to give students reasonable choices on a daily basis. Often I present options to the entire group and allow students to select through a democratic show of hands. Some other examples include:

***What to learn.*** At the beginning of the year and at the beginning of each unit, I find out what students would like to learn and incorporate their ideas into my plans.

***What order:*** Students sometimes choose order of work activities. Should they learn the new lesson or go over homework first? Do reading workshop or writing workshop first?

***Choice Time.*** I structure time every day for students to participate in any of several specified choice activities. This is not “free time,” as the activities are all structured around a topic, such as literacy, science, or social studies.

***What to read/write.*** Students are given choices about what books to read or what stories to write. Even when I select the genre to read or write, the student selects the content.

***Day to day goals.*** Kids choose weekly goals to set for themselves in terms of either academics or behaviors. They are required to think reflectively to choose goals that they think need improvement. Again, this is their choice not me demanding.

***Where to sit.*** For most activities, where to sit is not really the key issue. I let students choose where to sit, as long as it does not impede their work process.

It is also very important for children to feel like the class is theirs and not just the teachers. This adds to a feeling of responsibility and helps children learn to take care of their things. As I get started at the beginning of the year, I remember that first impressions, for adults as well as kids, can be lasting ones. I seek from the beginning to set the tone and build a culture of mutual support in our class. Some ways I encourage this feeling early on are to decide as a group how the room will be set up (this year I am holding a room decorating party), what the bulletin boards should be for, and what the classroom rules should be. With little direction,

students often come up with the same ideas I would have chosen. Sometimes they surprise me and come up with better ones.

### **Be Friends**

It is very important for children to get to know each other and see each other as individual people. They can learn to respect and appreciate differences and enjoy things that are the same. This adds a great deal to the feeling that we are a family of people here to learn together. Some things to do to encourage this are:

- Instead of taking general recess time, set aside some time during the day to play a game together.
- On Mondays share their weekends and other things that make them happy or worry them.
- At the beginning of each day, hour, right after recess, or wherever it seems to work best have children talk with a friends about anything they want to. This gives them a chance to share feelings with people.
- Do fun work together, like art projects
- Arrange activites with their families outside of the normal school day.
- Play educational games together.

Many teachers, including myself, take the first two weeks of school to really concentrate on getting to know each other and building community. This foundation serves well to prevent future problems and provide a respectful way of dealing with those problems that do occur.

### **Promote Respect**

**Daily routines.** In my experience, we either make or break community in the smallest of daily routines. We either treat simple issues in ways that build respect and teach responsibility or in ways that are controlling. In elementary schools, going to the bathroom is an excellent example. I see one class lined up at the bathroom. The teacher is admonishing the children in line to stay quiet, which only a few of them were doing, and is trying to rush the children through the bathroom. The noise of laughter and scuffling around is easily heard through the door. In about 20 minutes, the teacher manages to get all of the children out of the bathroom and back to the class to work. Sound familiar?

In my class, the children wave one of two bathroom passes to ask permission to leave without interrupting and I nod yes. I check the clock to make sure they are not gone too long. Most of the children go to the bathroom without outsiders

really knowing that they were gone. Many children even try to wait longer so they won't miss fun things in class. This solution teaches children to be responsible for their own actions, while not wasting learning time.

These and other issues can have a significant impact on the community feeling in the classroom. If we are teaching students how to function as responsible adults, not controlled children or inhabitants of institutions, we must develop strategies by which students are given daily responsibility and supportive structures for them to do so. In each basic daily routine I think about ways to make it fun and teach responsibility at the same time. Here are typical routines and some strategies that build community and responsibility.

***Getting class attention.*** Clap hands in a rhythm students imitate, ring a bell or other musical instrument, hold up a silent hand and count down while children join in, or quietly ask each group to put their eyes on the teacher. Involve the kids themselves in figuring out attention getting strategies.

***Transitions between areas or activities.*** Begin singing a song all know, ask kids to fill in blanks in funny story, start reading a poem, begin a riddle.

***Bathroom.*** Have a signal to ask permission silently, use a bathroom pass, provide consequences for misuse.

***Lining Up.*** Have children lead with teacher following, stopping at key areas.

***Lunch Count.*** Use a magnetic board with one column for hot and cold lunches. Have students move their magnetic ticket to hot/cold lunch and another student charged with the job of pulling tickets and sending information to the office.

***Dismissal.*** Set a routine for leaving room. Assign jobs needed for straightening up.

***Attendance.*** Students take attendance on a sheet, passing it around, or student checks off names on a printed list.

**Tone of Voice:** “When you are done writing please match eyes with me and I know we can go on.” This is an example of a respectful strategy by which to interact with students in the class moving from topic to topic. Kids need to feel accepted in class and it is very important not to embarrass students or put them on the spot. Anytime students don't want to talk, they just say ‘pass’”. Then they will be more likely to respond at a later time. If they pass all the time, I talk with them individually. I try to always talk in a respectful manner, so that I am modeling what

I want them to do. If I yell at them, doesn't it make sense that they will be rude back?

**Difficult Students:** We probably send the biggest messages about respect to all of our students when they see us handle the most difficult students. In my fourth grade class two years ago, I was having difficulty with a girl who was arguing insistently. While I tried to stay calm, I finally began yelling. Another student mumbled, "Great! Now she will be mad at all of us. There goes this day." When other students see that I treat all students with respect, they are more comfortable taking risks and sharing things about themselves. However, when they feel intimidated because they are worried about what I might do, then the strength of the community bond is broken. I strive to be calm and respectful and rely on the classroom structures put into place to help things run smoothly.

**Another Strategy:** When you know you cannot keep calm with a student anymore, give yourself a break. Arrange for them to visit another classroom, run errands for the office, or sit in a cooling off spot in the room. Do whatever works for you and that child to give each other some space. Then when everyone is calmer, come back and talk to the child.

### **Work Together and Problem Solve**

**Class Belongs to Everyone.** Students need to understand that the classroom belongs to everyone, not just the teacher. This does not happen by accident but takes careful thought and consideration. In addition to the basics of arranging and decorating the room, students need opportunities to help create the rules that will govern their lives in the classroom. Creating classroom rules together, where everyone's ideas are listed, then grouped into three or four rules that are easy to remember, is essential to establishing a feeling of ownership. This requires that teachers be willing to give up the feeling of total control and replace it with a feeling of pride in teaching kids how to control themselves. Once these rules are agreed upon, they are posted and referenced often. I might say, "Johnny that breaks the agreement you made to abide by rule #4". This puts the responsibility for actions on the student, and reminds other students of our agreements together.

**Class meetings.** Classroom meetings can be valuable tools for democratically handling issues that arise. In my class, we have meetings almost every day, whether it is about teasing, staying on task in writing workshop, or turning in homework. Meetings vary in lengths, sometimes taking only ten minutes and sometimes longer, depending upon the issue.

The topics of classroom meetings are chosen both by students and myself. I make available a box in which the students or teacher can anonymously place issues. This allows even those who are not comfortable sharing aloud to have their needs addressed.

Classroom meetings are run by the children, a shift which is very difficult for some teachers. In the classroom meeting, students take turns in the different roles of notetaker and moderator. I establish basic rules that allow students to speak one at a time. We pass around a designated object (a stuffed penguin in my room) to the person who has the floor to speak. Students are not required to speak and may pass if they so choose. Most importantly, the class makes a decision that results in action. My students very quickly lose interest if they do not feel that their decisions are taken seriously.

***Cooperative learning.*** Working together raises the level of capability from what children can do on their own. Create structures that enable children to work together in any subject, whether through reading buddies, editing partners, or clock partners in math. Create projects that require students to work together, but have jobs at different levels of expertise. This enables every student to have a job that others depend upon but at their own level. In these structures, they learn that they can depend on others for help and they learn that different people bring different strengths to a partnership

***Clock Partners.*** A strategy that works from kindergarten through high school is to use clock partners to pair students for activities. A large clock has a line in the middle of the face, and lines at each hour. Students ask each other to sign on each hour line. They cannot have the same student twice. My rule is that if someone asks, the student cannot say no. In an activity, I ask students to get their clocks and get with their 5:00 partner to do work together. This simple strategy removes aggravations often associated with pairing students. No more hurt feelings, complaints about not getting their way, or trying to separate the same students who always work together.

***Sharing work.*** Sharing completed work gives students a sense of appreciation for others and a sense of pride in their own accomplishments. It builds self-esteem and community all at the same time. When a genre of writing has been completed, I have had a book sharing time or shared stories with other classes, either older or younger. This year I am going to try having a celebration at the end of a unit, where children prepare activities, set up projects, skits, and written work to show what they have learned. We will invite other classes or parents to participate.

**Circle of friends.** Sometimes I need intentional strategies to support students. Circle of friends is a powerful strategy by which I do this. In a circle of friends, one student is seeking help and support from others. While the idea of circles was born as a way to help students with disabilities, it is a powerful tool for anyone.

In situations where I see students having a real tough time, I ask them if they would like to have a circle of support. Students decide who to invite to be part of their circle. Sometimes they have specific people. A student has also, with my help, opened the invitation to all students within a class. Students need the assistance of an adult who acts as a facilitator for the group. I meet with my children at lunch time once a week, but it could be handled in other manners. This year, I am going to train a child in my existing group to facilitate the meeting, so that they can also conduct circles during the school day.

Once the group is selected and a meeting time and place established, the group meets. I start with the MAPS process to focus the work of the circle group. We explore the dreams and fears of the student and develop an action plan, including support and assistance from the circle group, to help the person cope with challenges and move ahead to desired outcomes.

Kids have a natural desire to help, and I channel that to more specifically meet my children's needs. Given proper modeling and support, children can meet very high expectations.

### **Student Leadership**

In my classroom, I want students to become leaders and extend themselves outside of their comfort zone to help others reach their full potential. As I find ways for students to exercise leadership roles I increase their understanding of the subject of study, build responsibility, and raise their self-esteem.

**Jobs:** In my class, every kid has a job, one for which they are responsible without constant reminders..This helps students see the interdependence people have on each other.

**Other Roles.** Students can take other leadership roles. As I give students choices, leadership roles often evolve naturally out of their work. I have learned to rely on some students as peer mediators, as members of circles of support, as particularly good at giving comfort, or at leading classroom discussions. Students help me design fun lessons and give me ideas for students having difficulty. The more we can involve our students in real decisions, the more they learn and the more help we all have.

**Experts.** Students need experience teaching others what they know. As teachers, we know that this is not a simple task. To teach someone else, children must have a much deeper understanding of their subject matter. There are many adults who in their own professions cannot articulate what they are doing and why. Having children explain their thought process to others will teach a much needed skill, and will create a feeling that everyone is an expert. For example, a student was writing a story but was not using needed quotation marks. I helped her look for examples in books. When she shared what she had done, I asked her if she would be willing to help others. She said that she would. Later another student asked me for help with quotation marks. I sent that student to my expert. For the rest of the year, they were the teachers for quotation marks.

I also facilitate this process by creating a “yellow pages”. Students identify 2-3 skills in which they excel and write an advertisement for themselves. These are compiled into a class yellow pages. Students often consult this book when they needed help on topics. This gives every child the opportunity to be the teacher, including students who most often were seen as needing help from others

**Students Lead Lessons.** My students love to play teacher. When they have seen a teaching strategy several times, I will let them take turns coming to the board and being the teacher. I sit in a desk just like a student and raise my hand with questions. Not only does this give the students an excellent learning opportunity that is fun, it is an excellent way to get a window into their thinking about the subject.

**Raise Self Esteem.** I cultivate leadership by asking students to help others after their work is finished or teaching a few students a new skill that the whole class needs to learn and then send others to them for help. This is an excellent way for those children who normally finish last to have some experience being the leader. I provide guidelines for how helping looks different from doing the work for the other person. Once this is accomplished, the room is transformed into a place where there are many people to ask for help, not one teacher who cannot be everywhere at once.

The range of what children can teach each other is amazing. Experts can be on any subject from spelling, adding or dividing, proving theorems, placing capital letters or quotation marks, making a cursive ‘m’, to being knowledgeable about the science topic being studied. The key is to teach the kids share their knowledge with others and accept knowledge from others as well.

## Individualize and Discuss It

**Ability differences up front.** It is important to help students understand that we all have different abilities and that this difference does not make us better or worse people. It is important for every student to get what they need to learn, but this does not mean that they all need or get the same thing. I start talking about this with my students by teaching them about multiple intelligences. This helps students who know they function lower in some areas to look at their strengths in other areas. I talk about how I teach in my class to help them understand that different students will be working at different levels. By watching my interactions with classmates who are having difficulty, students learn not to ostracize others for their abilities. It becomes ok to be different, and students learn to look for one another's abilities in different areas. They learn how to work in groups with people who have very different abilities, and this skill will serve them well later in life.

At first the idea of building community in our class and in our school may seem just a bit like a fairy tale. After all, many of us experienced schools where feelings were not considered important, we sat in rigid rows and listened to boring lectures about topics we were told were good for us. Successfully build a collaborative community of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, 8<sup>th</sup> graders, or high school seniors may seem a bit far fetched. Yet, teachers all over the world are building a literature of practices that far extend the beginnings I have sketched and it is growing by leaps and bounds. With the world growing more violent every day, there is a real need for feeling part of a community and knowing how to create it. So it becomes part of our journey as teachers that's both full of excitement and many frustrations, but we'll find not only is it our key to successful teaching, it contributes a richness to our lives that would be impossible without our students help.

## Multiple Intelligences

From Peterson and Hittie (In Press.) Teaching in the Inclusive School  
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| Multiple Intelligence<br>Description   | Think... Love...<br>Needs...  | Teaching Menu<br>(a few ideas)   |
|--|---|--|
| <b>1. Linguistic:</b> the capacity to use language to express ourselves and to understand other people. Examples: poet, writer, orator, lawyer, teacher.   | In words . . . reading, writing, telling stories, playing word games . . .<br>Books, tapes, writing tools, paper, diaries, dialogue.  | Use storytelling to explain . . .<br>Conduct a debate on . . .<br>Write a poem, legend, short play or news article about . . .<br>Conduct an interview about . . .                                     |
| <b>2. Logical-mathematical:</b> ability to use numbers effectively and to reason well logically. Examples: mathematician, accountant, computer programmer, scientist.  | By reasoning . . . experimenting, questioning, figuring out logical puzzles . . . things to explore and think about, science materials, manipulatives.                          | Translate a . . . into a math formula.<br>Design & conduct an experiment on . . .<br>Make up syllogisms to explain . . .<br>Describe patterns of symmetry in . . .                                     |
| <b>3. Spatial:</b> competence to represent the spatial world internally in your mind and to use materials to impact the environment. Examples: hunter, scout, artist, architect, inventor.   | In images and pictures. . . designing, drawing, visualizing, doodling . . . art, video, movies, imagination games, mazes, illustrated books, trips to art museums.              | Chart, map, or graph . . .<br>Create a slide show, video, or photo album of . . .<br>Create a piece of art that illustrates . . .<br>Draw, paint, sketch or sculpt . . .                               |
| <b>4. Bodily-kinesthetic:</b> expertise in using one's whole body to express ideas and feelings and capability to use one's body to make or change things. Examples: actor, athlete, sculptor, mechanic, surgeon.                      | Through bodily sensations. . . dancing, running, jumping, building, touching. . . role play, drama, movement, constructing, sports, hands-on learning.                          | Create a sequence of movements to explain. . .<br>Build or construct a . . .<br>Plan and attend a field trip to. . .<br>Bring hands-on materials to demonstrate. . .                                   |
| <b>5. Musical:</b> proficiency to think in music, hear patterns, recognize them, remember them, manipulate them. Examples: singer, song-writer, music critic.  | Via rhythms and melodies . . . singing, whistling, humming, tapping feet. . . sing-along time, music playing, musical instruments, music.                                       | Give presentation on . . . with musical accompaniment.<br>Sing a rap or song that explains<br>Explain how the music of a song is similar to . . .<br>Make an instrument and use it to demonstrate. . . |
| <b>6. Interpersonal:</b> ability to understand thoughts, feelings, motivations of other people and to interact well with them. Examples: politician, salesperson   | By talking with other people. . . leading, organizing, talking, mediating, partying. . . friends, group games, social events, mentors   | Conduct a meeting to address. . .<br>Participate in a service project to<br>Teach someone about . . .<br>Practice giving and receiving feedback on . . .   |
| <b>7. Intra-personal:</b> understanding oneself – feelings, reactions to others – and acting on that understanding. Aware of inner moods, capable of self-discipline, and deeply reflective. Example: philosophers, poets, counselors. | By reflecting deeply inside themselves. . . setting goals, meditating, dreaming, being quiet. . . secret places, time alone, self-paced projects, choices.                      | Describe qualities you have that will help you . . .<br>Develop a plan to . . .<br>Describe a personal value about . . .<br>Write a journal entry on . . .<br>Assess your own work in . . .            |
| <b>8. Naturalist:</b> highly sensitive and responsive to living beings (plants, animals), the natural world, and the environment. Examples: “street smart” students, hunters, farmers, botanist.                                       | By interacting with nature and the environment . . . camping, moving around the community, organizing the environment . . . time in nature or the community, organizing events. | Create observation notebooks of<br>Describe changes in the local community. . .<br>Care for pets, wildlife, gardens, or parks in . . .<br>Draw or photograph natural objects or the community.         |