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David: A Protégé of Classroom Community Building in a Fifth Grade Classroom

Ruth McKoy Lowery

Establishing an effective classroom community requires much work, dedication, and commitment from all involved parties. This article describes one teacher's experiences of creating a classroom community in her fifth grade classroom. Some of the underpinnings of building a classroom community are addressed and the article offers suggestions on how other teachers may develop community based classrooms.

Establishing an effective classroom community requires much work, dedication, and commitment from all involved parties. As a new fifth grade classroom teacher, I learned early that in order to have a smooth running classroom environment, I had to solicit the help of my students. In this article, I describe the experiences of one student, David (pseudonym), whose initial behaviors clearly indicated that we had to establish an effective classroom community. I first discuss some of the underpinnings of building a classroom community in my fifth grade classroom and then share David's story. I conclude by offering suggestions on how other teachers may accommodate students like David in their classrooms.

Building a Fifth Grade Classroom Community

Building and maintaining an effective classroom community requires that we have "clear positives" (Charney, 1991). Charney describes these "clear positives" as a "set of ideals or principles, phrased in positive language, that allow us to imagine and describe what it is we wish and hope to achieve" (p. 181). Before teachers can establish this type of community, however, they must be aware of each student in their classroom (Bryant, 1999). Charney furthers this notion by asserting that when teachers are aware of their individual students, they can make accurate appraisals or informed decisions about them.

Kanze (1995) determines that in building a community, teachers must learn to build trust so that children will accept what happens within the

classroom. Teachers should acknowledge the "specialness" of each child's work without making other students feel left out. Sapon-Shevin (1995) also asserts that a safe classroom community is "one in which students are comfortable showing themselves, being themselves, and being honest about who and what they are" (p. 104). Teachers have to develop a rapport with their students in order to have these entities working effectively in their classrooms.

Christensen (1994) finds that building community begins when students get inside the lives of others. The community is created as they struggle together to achieve a common goal. A well-established classroom community provides the opportunity for students to get to know each other well. The community environment allows them to reach out, connect, and helps as they learn to interact positively with others (Sapon-Shevin, 1995). Students learn as they explore their own lives and come to terms with the other students in their classroom (Christensen, 1994).

Bryant (1999) posits that the social interaction of a community allows for greater learning to take place. As children learn to take responsibility for their thoughts and actions, they also learn how to function in relationships with others in their classrooms. They internalize the classroom rules since they helped to establish them, and they are more apt to accept the consequences for breaking those rules (Rademacher, Callahan, & Pederson-Seelye, 1998). Students also learn that the teacher is not the only decision maker in the classroom. They understand that their opinions are valued and they learn to value their classmates' opinions. When

disrupting behaviors occur, students are better able to understand and concur with how the teacher and others involved handle the situations.

The first three years of a teacher's career can be very unsettling. Martin, Chiodo, and Chang (2001) determine that these years are probably the most stressful and that the problems and concerns these teachers face each day are numerous and may seem endless. Beginning teachers are scrutinized at every angle. They are worried about how to handle different situations, as they know that every decision they make may ultimately influence their permanent status in that school. Effective classroom management is one area in which many beginning teachers have the most difficulties.

In establishing a fifth grade classroom during my second year of teaching elementary school, my first thoughts were to have classroom procedures that all my students would observe and internalize. I wanted them to understand that the rules were not being arbitrarily handed down to them but that if we decided on a set of rules, we would all be responsible for upholding them. After a tough year as a fourth grade dropout prevention teacher, I was determined that the year would be a productive one in which my classroom management skills would prove effective. Through trial and error, I discovered during the previous year that when my students had a say in how things were done in the classroom they took more ownership. I wanted to maintain this sense of ownership and realized that, in order to do this, I undoubtedly would need the help of my fifth grade students. Thus, at the beginning of the school year, we set out to establish our classroom rules. We had a set of schoolwide rules to observe, but I wanted us to have a set of classroom rules for which we could take full ownership.

Classroom Rules Within the Community

Edwards (1993) argues that students should be involved in establishing classroom rules so that they can take more ownership for their classroom environment. Wood and Duncan (2001) determine that when students and teachers participate in developing classroom rules, there is a productive

opportunity to work collaboratively. Children are more likely to obey classroom rules they have helped to create, even if they do not like some of those rules (Gootman, 1997). Gootman further posits that teachers need to listen to their students and their ideas in a respectful manner even though this does not necessarily mean they agree with the students.

The rules established in a classroom should be acceptable to both the teacher and the students (Rademacher et al., 1998). As students realize that the teacher is giving them a voice to become active members of the classroom community, they take on more leadership roles and are determined to see that the established classroom rules are correctly carried out by all involved. They will quickly remind their classmates and the teacher of a rule infraction. As they exercise correct classroom behavior, they learn to be good citizens (Gootman, 1997). After establishing our classroom rules, we determined that the rules were not "set in stone." We would revisit and modify them, as we deemed necessary. We were off to a great year.

David: Dwelling in a Classroom Community

When David entered my fifth grade classroom, he immediately stood out from his classmates. Although this was his first day in a new school and grade, he had already made friends with the other students. As we settled into the first month of the school year, however, David became restless. He rarely completed classroom assignments, scored very low on class assignments and tests, and would frequently stand in the middle of a quiet session and render a song or any theatrical idea that came to mind. Sometimes David's classmates would welcome his theatrics but at other times they would be annoyed that he was interrupting the class. I realized that he was very talented but that he needed some help in managing his classroom time effectively.

When I checked David's school records, I found that he had been recommended for the alternative education program "at-risk" because his previous

teacher felt he was a “class clown” who was incapable of keeping up with his classmates in a regular education classroom. He seemed to revert to one comedic act after another, anything to prevent him from completing his schoolwork. David was not placed in the at-risk program because he moved to a new school and his records were not immediately available.

In the spirit of community atmosphere, David and I, with the help of his classmates, revisited our classroom rules. After much discussion, the students determined that he needed a “stricter” set of rules; thus we drew up a plan that we felt he could honor in class. The rules included designated class work and “play” time. David agreed to relocate his desk to a position that would not easily distract the rest of the class; he sat at an adjacent angle to my desk. Some of the rules were unconventional, but we wanted to set achievable goals so David could be successful. The first half of the day would be spent completing his class assignments; then he could have the rest of the day to sharpen his theatrical skills. If he felt that he could not remain focused until the afternoon, he could ask his classmates’ permission to sing, rap, or perform any other rendition he felt compelled to do.

The students determined that they would remind David when he went off track. If he broke the rules, he would have to choose one of the predetermined punishments (for example, no playing with his friends at recess or losing thirty minutes from Friday afternoon fun time). Everyone agreed to these conditions and the class settled into its routine for the rest of the year. Initially, some of the students were not happy with the “special treatment” David was receiving. However, they were happy to continue with the plan when they realized that his impromptu outbursts had been minimized after the contract was put in place. Everyone in the community benefited from the new rules.

Throughout the year, I saw David’s behavior, schoolwork, and test scores improve tremendously. It was not easy. Gradually, he learned to work in cooperative groups with other classmates and would readily volunteer in read-aloud sessions. Along the way, we would develop new strategies and fine-tune

others to keep him on task. Several times, instead of disrupting his classmates as they sat doing seat work, he would come to me explaining that he did not want to disturb them so would I please listen to a new rhythm he had just made up. Rendition complete, he would then return to his seatwork. He also began to complete assignments in the afternoons and wanted to be more a part of the classroom community. On two occasions, our class entered competitions with other fifth grade classes. David choreographed dance steps and created a theme song for his classmates. Our class won because of David’s creativity. It was evident to everyone that he literally “stole the show.” His classmates became even more protective of him after these events.

I was sad to see David leave for middle school. Although the year involved a lot of bargaining, he had improved in most areas of school, some more than others. His scholastic aptitude test scores were high enough to garner him a spot in the middle school Performing Arts magnet program. His self-confidence was greatly improved and he had learned how to appropriate time for his schoolwork. Moreover, his classmates loved him. This was evident in the way they often spoke about him. One student commented to me, “He just grows on you, you know?” On the last day of school, our class put on an impromptu talent show. David dominated the entire event. I felt that his classmates planned this event as a friendly way to say goodbye to him. We were confident that he would do well in the middle school performing arts magnet program where he would be able to fine-tune his performing abilities.

David: Beyond the Fifth-Grade Community

I often wondered how David was progressing in middle school. I worried if he was effectively managing his schoolwork and performing abilities or if he was allowing his teachers to again think of him simply as the “class clown.” I wondered how he was fitting into a new classroom environment. Imagine my surprise and joy when two years later I received the following letter from him:

Dear Mrs. L.,

Someone has asked me to write about my most special teacher, and when I thought about it I could only think of you. You were the special lady who was the first to reach out to me. There may never be anyone in the school system that will make me feel loved and cared about, but I have found you to be one of the few. I write these words to express to you the many ways I love you.

I have been told that I am not an easy child to handle; it has always been easier to give up on me. The year that I met you was like any other; I would never have imagined the hold you would put on my heart. When I ran into trouble, w[h]ether in school or otherwise, you helped me make it through. I remember many times wanting to give up, but you were there to tell me that I was somebody and it would always be worth moving on.

I carry you with me everywhere I go. I have become very talented in performing arts by doing what you told me to; following my dreams, reaching for my star. I have won the talent show at Hampton two years in a row and have been bumped a grade to join Cameron High School for 96-97. With my every success I thank you for showing me that the world was such a big and beautiful place, filled with opportunities. I will never forget you.

Sending you all my love,
David

Conclusion

As a teacher educator now, I often share David's story and letter with my preservice teachers. My main goal for doing this is that I hope David's story will inspire them to reach out to the students they will ultimately teach. I encourage them to allow their students to have some input in how their classroom is managed. Establishing a community network in the classroom means that the teacher will not make autonomous decisions in how his or her classroom is run. Giving students a voice ascertains that classroom rules will be observed and that students will better understand their significance. Classroom rules based on the principles of cooperation and responsibility address diverse students' needs and teach students to become productive and positive citizens (Rademacher et al., 1998).

Strachota (1996) asserts that when children learn in a situation where power is shared, they learn to take charge of their lives. They are better able to take responsibility for their actions or behaviors. Children also need regular opportunities to talk about their feelings and to learn to listen to each other (Charney, 1997). A caring classroom community provides for students' social, physical, emotional and cognitive needs (Bryant, 1999). Teachers need to be aware of their students' needs so that they can make better-informed decisions on how to accommodate those needs. A strong classroom community solidifies this belief.

Building a strong community takes dedication and time. Nothing can be achieved in one day. The teacher has to be consistent and persistent. Working through different issues with their students can help to alleviate some of the behavior problems many teachers face in their classroom. Promoting a sense of community among children at an early age helps them to learn how to get along with others. As students understand that they are part of the decision making process in their classrooms, they develop a greater sense of ownership and responsibility. David became an active part of a caring community. As his classmates helped him to succeed, they also learned

I cried as I read and reread David's letter. Nothing in my teaching career had touched me as much. The year I had David in my classroom, I was basically trying to implement strategies for survival. I knew my classroom would be greatly scrutinized but I also wanted to ensure the success of each student in my class. I was determined not to fail. For me, establishing a classroom environment in which my students had some input in how our room would run on a day-to-day basis seemed like the most appropriate method to adopt. With the collective help of his classmates, we were able to help David succeed.

that caring for each other provided a positive learning environment for all.

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