Establishing Classroom Community at the Intermediate Level

Melissa Culver
Regis University

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ESTABLISHING CLASSROOM COMMUNITY AT THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

by

Melissa Culver

A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

REGIS UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Establishing Classroom Community at the Intermediate Level

The contents of this research project contain information, directed towards teachers and other educators, regarding the establishment of classroom community at the intermediate level. Within this project contain research regarding such establishment and the benefits of this type of learning environment, a presentation covering all major points of this topic, and the results of classrooms that have established this kind of community.

Implications and conclusions of this project are also included; in that, the research gathered and the presentation given were a success. Based on the research given in the presentation, educators agreed that this was a positive thing to input into their classrooms. Overall, establishing classroom community enhances a child’s education and their well-being in the classroom environment.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Frequently, the sense of community in an elementary classroom is something that is somewhat overlooked in education today. It is the subject of much discussion and research as educators realize the importance and impact of such community (Watkins, 2005). While there is much research that suggests the positive effects of building classroom community, few authors acknowledge just how much of an impact this sense of community has on the student. Setting a positive tone every day that a student comes into the classroom allows him or her a sense of ritual and belonging. Use of these procedures can give a student a sense of ownership and respect for a classroom. Collaboration and the relationship between the teacher and the student are imperative to a positive learning environment for everyone. Moreover, it was suggested by Schaps and Lewis (1997) that a strong sense of classroom community contributes to positive student outcomes. Also, teachers, who are more successful at the establishment of such a classroom, enable students to be successful in the classroom.

Statement of the Problem

There are numerous studies (Stone, 2001; Schaps & Lewis, 1997; Gillies & Boyle, 2005; and Kriete, 2003) in which researchers have found that the more classroom community that is built into everyday activities, there is a direct correlation to student achievement, not only academic achievement, but social as well. This correlation of
achievement is related to classrooms as learning communities, students are welcomed to
the classroom, and an environment is established in which they feel safe. Teachers need
to provide this safe haven for students to achieve maximum growth and awareness.
Authors like Kriete (2003) agree that the daily rituals of “doing stuff together” (p. 70),
such as learning and using names, sharing stories, building a common repertoire of songs
and experiences, is perhaps the greatest contribution of these gatherings.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project will be to present educators with information that shows the effectiveness of building classroom community. This author will inform intermediate level educators through an in-service, to establish better classroom community. The information, as shown in a Power Point presentation, will provide them with effective ways to establish community and methods to develop such a positive environment for their students.

Chapter Summary

It is this researcher’s position that the establishment of a classroom community must be an essential goal for all teachers. Also, educators must take the time to understand the importance of such ritual, not only for the students, but for their own benefit as well. In Chapter 2, Review of Literature, this researcher presents the background material to support the position that fostering classroom community is a crucial aspect of every student’s day. In addition, this researcher will demonstrate the necessity for classroom community through greeting, sharing, meeting, and group
activity for further development. In Chapter 3, Methods, the procedures for the development of this project are detailed.
The purpose of this project will be to develop an inservice Power Point presentation for teachers to use as a tool to establish classroom community. This approach to education is something that is known but not always implemented in classrooms across the country (Watkins, 2005). Teachers may have a morning routine set in place, but this routine may not influence all of the students. Procedures like greetings, sharing with each other, and working collaboratively can enable teachers to address all children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development daily. Bickart and Dodge (1999) indicated that a positive classroom community enables teachers to: (a) address children’s basic needs, (b) promote their resiliency to hardship conditions, (c) teach the values of respect and responsibility, and (d) foster their social and academic competence.

What Is Classroom Community?

Classroom community can mean different things to different people, but it will contain many of the same elements (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). It is a sense of belonging, being valued by, and showing respect to not only the teacher, but one’s peers as well. There are various ways that community is expressed in a certain classroom, some include: (a) morning meetings, (b) greetings, (c) shared ideas, and (d) group learning. When community is established in the classroom, teachers can create a common and
predictable cultural experience for their students, one that helps children feel connected to others and find something in themselves.

The members of these communities change each year as new students arrive, but with each new class comes the excitement of creating a classroom of which they are proud and want to belong. With each new class, teachers must tailor rituals to the likes and dislikes of students. This creates belonging and encourages students to become part of something that means a great deal to them; they invest in each other and in themselves.

In the words of Bredekamp and Rosegrant (1992, as quoted in Bickart & Dodge, 1999):

A community is a place where individuals share common values, goals, and activities. It is a place where each member takes on roles to provide sufficient services so that the community’s goals are reached. In communities, everyone does not do the same thing at the same time, but groups work together to achieve common goals. A community is a place where social bonds are established and individuals can flourish (p. 81). (p. 45)

_Morning Meetings_

Morning meetings are vital in the establishment of classroom community because they provide routine and a sense of belonging (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). Children’s learning about what school will be like begins the moment they step foot in the building (Kriete, 2003). Typically, students and teachers launch their school days with a half hour daily ritual that builds community and expresses important beliefs about the value of relationships in the classroom (Kriete). Over time, these practices can bond a classroom of students into a community. Bickart and Dodge stated that, “No matter how you decide to conduct your first meeting of the day, keep in mind that the goal is to come together as a group and set a tone of togetherness and purposeful work” (p. 59).
These meetings can include listening and responding to one another’s stories or just enjoying each other’s company in the morning (Kriete, 2003). This practice enhances academic and social skills, if done every day, so that children are comfortable with and around each other. Embedded in all of these skills is the opportunity to practice the skills of being a member of a caring community and to enhance one another’s day together.

Varying these greetings will keep students interested; some are straightforward, and others are more simple (Kriete, 2003). They might start with a simple “hello” to their neighbor or a “good morning,” a smile, a handshake, anything that is appropriate that will encourage students to talk to each other and share their morning. Some are more complex, from name games to saying their nickname or choosing another name to be called for that morning. Each child receives the warmth of the greeting no matter what it is, they learn each other’s names and information about them that, normally, they might not have known. These greetings, simple or complex, provide practice in the verbal and non-verbal communication skills central to relationship building.

The use of morning meetings can engage students in the daily work and offer opportunities for every class member to have fun and feel a sense of importance and belonging. Kriete (2003) stated that, “The daily ritual of doing stuff together—learning and using names, sharing stories, building a common repertoire of songs and experiences—is perhaps the greatest contribution of these morning gatherings” (p. 70). To succeed, teachers must convey to students that they are genuinely interested in the students’ views (Partin, 2005).
Some students will not take risks in the classroom because they do not trust that their classmates will accept their response (Kriete, 2003). In order to earn this, trust should be established and with the use of morning meetings, sharing, and group work, students are more likely to release inhibitions and take risks when they learn. Thus, morning meetings are what schools should be, communities that are filled with learning, in classrooms where children feel safe and respected (Kriete).

Sharing

The classroom can be intimidating for some students, especially for a child who is new to the classroom or school (Kriete, 2003). Sharing is a practice that can help to alleviate any feelings or detachment. Students, who share little pieces of information about themselves with the class, can provide their classmates with a platform to express ideas and gives them a sense of self-importance (Kriete). During sharing, they can practice communication and presentation skills and find common ground in each other’s conversations.

Sharing enables peers to launch conversations at other points in the day and strengthens their repertoire of appropriate responses to different kinds of information (Kriete, 2003). Seeing events from someone else’s perspective opens up a child’s eyes and mind to someone else’s perspective and way of life. Thus, they can obtain a sense of togetherness and be able to bond with the ideas of their classmates.

Group Activity

With the use of a whole class group activity, a sense of belonging and class cohesion can result from the actions that are taken (Kriete, 2003). From mathematics
exercises, vocabulary building, to songs, games, and chants, these activities are fun and often fast paced. When these activities are done together, class cohesion and community is built which allows every student to feel like he or she is part of something bigger. This allows them to feel that they help the classroom operate.

*News and Announcements*

During the final moments of the morning meeting, news and announcements are made in regard to the students’ day (Kriete, 2003). These announcements can be made on the blackboard or on chart paper. Students will learn about events in the day to come, and develop language skills as they read and discuss the messages that their teacher has provided them. These charts can be used to welcome students and orient them to what will happen in the classroom. Even the salutation at the top of the chart reinforces the sense of group and identity. These announcements should be followed by related activities or brief conversations about things that might be happening in someone’s life, outside of school, or activities and announcements that happen within the walls of the school.

*The First Days*

The first days of school are important for any child but, also, they are filled with many other emotions (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). Most children are scared or nervous that they are going to get the teacher from the Black Lagoon, or that none of their friends will be in their class. The way a teacher begins each day sets the tone for the learning that will occur. Information: (a) about what and whom they value, (b) about their expectations for each other, and (c) how they will be treated. Also, they are informed
about the way learning will occur in that community. Through these fears, classroom community can be used to address these fears and ease a child into the classroom and make him or her feel important and welcomed.

**Initial Activities**

The first days of school are very important for a child’s well being; assumptions are made the first day that will stay with them for the entire year (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). Before the school year even starts, it is good to begin communication with students and their parents. A simple postcard to introduce oneself and welcome them to the classroom opens the lines of communication and makes everyone more comfortable with the situation (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). Also, encouragement to visit the classroom during the several days before school starts, allows students to become familiar with the place where they will spend much of their time.

The involvement of students in nonthreatening activities the first couple of days will help them transition into the classroom and make them feel more comfortable about the environment (Kriete, 2003). Learning names is one of the most important activities that can be done. It gives them a sense of identity and the idea that they belong to something. There are many ways that teachers and students can learn each other’s names but Bickart and Dodge, 1999) provided several suggestions.

1. Sing songs and play games during meetings that use children’s names, such as “My Name Is” and “Cookie Jar.”
2. Have children create and decorate labels for their cubbies, journals, and message boxes.
3. Have discussions on ways we are all the same and ways we are different. Charts generated from these discussions can be displayed in the classroom near the photographs.
4. Assign each child a partner and have them interview one another. After grouping their answers, the children make graphs on topics such as favorite foods, colors, pets, TV shows.

5. Hang up the alphabet in the classroom and display the children’s names next to the corresponding letter. (p. 54)

These are just some of the ways that can be used to help children feel more comfortable in the classroom and how community can be built through activities like these. Also, it is common to see Student of the Week posters, in which students place personal information and pictures on a poster and share it with their classmates. This allows them to share part of themselves with others and helps to establish relationships and build community among each other.

These activities, linked with others like it, can help ease a child’s transition into a new classroom. The development of these things can also encourage a community among peers, while learning is encouraged among each other (Kriete, 2003). It makes a difference whether adults and peers greet them when they walk in the building, whether the classroom feels chaotic and unpredictable, or ordered and comforting. Every day of students’ experience informs them about their classroom and their place in it. They need to feel valuable to that community and know that each student is a part of the whole.

Teaching Respect and Responsibility

In order to establish a classroom community, all members must respect and look out for each other (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). If this does not occur, then a community cannot be built around its members. “Respect is best taught in an environment where children are treated respectfully. Similarly, in order to learn responsibility, children need experience making decisions and having responsibility” (Kohn, 1998, as cited in Bickart
When respect is demonstrated from teacher to student, the students will better understand the meaning of respect and why it is so important. Lickona (1992, as cited in Bickart & Dodge) expressed this best when he stated:

Children learn morality by living it. They need to be in a community—to interact, form relationships, work out problems, grow as a group, and learn directly, from their first hand experience, lessons about fair play, cooperation, forgiveness, and respect for the worth and dignity of every individual (p. 90). (p. 49)

Learning through doing enables students and helps them realize that all of them contribute in some way and that everyone’s opinion and contribution counts. Rather than a focus on teaching and the correct answers, the focus should be on making the right decisions and being a moral person. These values should guide all instruction, interactions and content covered in curriculum (Bickart & Dodge).

Also, the teaching of respect helps children to understand and accept differences in each other (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). When they respect each other, they accept each other; therefore, there is a better environment in which to learn and interact. Opportunities in the classroom give them the first hand experience they need to understand each other and realize how different people can work and live together. Also, Bickart & Dodge stated, “The classroom community is a place to confront bias, teach respect, and demonstrate how differences can be resolved without resorting to verbal or physical abuse. They reap the rewards of learning and living together well” (p. 49).

When children understand the effects of when they respect one another they will then understand and feel how their classroom acts as a community. Not only does this benefit them, but the people around them are benefited as well. Seeing this process occur will make them more accountable in their actions and give them a sense of contribution.
A large role in the effectiveness of a classroom is that students are given responsibility. When they feel responsible for something, not only will they do a better job, but they will feel more satisfied in the end. Schools are more likely to be successful when students experience a sense of ownership over their duties (Partin, 2005). Both are achieved when students have some degree of choice and control in their classroom experience. Involving all students in decisions, valuing students’ contributions and respecting individual differences allows this (Partin). To allow for responsibility, students should be given roles, or jobs, to help make their classroom work more harmoniously. They should know their role in the classroom and be able to carry it out without difficulty (Wong & Wong, 1998). This process provides students with an added sense of accomplishment and acceptance, because they know that they help the classroom to operate more smoothly.

Children’s Basic Needs

In a classroom community, children need to feel safe, and they need to feel a sense of belonging and experience success. Watkins (2005) believes that much depends on the values which develop, and the best is achieved through a caring, prosocial, learning oriented approach to the relations between all parties. In order to do this, teachers must cooperate and make sure that everyone acquires self-esteem and the confidence to raise their voice in class. When a student experiences success during the school day, he or she can acquire success and gain self-confidence while they positively relate to others (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). Teachers must view mistakes as a part of the learning process and, therefore, better understand a child’s thinking. When a safe and
positive community has been established, children are more likely to take risks and less likely to be afraid to volunteer ideas even when they are unsure.

Promoting a Sense of Competence

The way a teacher responds can have a noticeable effect on the way a student thinks. Some of these responses, provided by Bickart and Dodge (1999), show how the teacher respects the child’s thinking and that they fully expect them to be cooperative and caring with one another. Their expectations can be expressed through these types of statements.

1. Acknowledge what children do: “Thank you for helping Sloan clean out the guinea pig cage. After the long weekend, it was too big a job for one person.”
2. State rules positively to give a clear message of what behavior is expected: “Be a friend” rather than “No fighting.”
3. Validate children’s best intentions so they view themselves as people who have positive social skills: “You’re the kind of person who likes to help others,” or “It’s just like you to be generous.” (p. 70)

These statements promote positive thinking throughout the classroom and show that the teacher cares about what each child thinks and learns. Schaps et al. (1997, as cited in Watkins, 2005) reported that students in schools with a strong sense of community are more likely to act in a respectful and ethical way; also, they develop social and emotional competencies. Every child is treated with the same respect and, with that, competence is achieved.

Handling Conflict

Conflict arises in every classroom across the nation, but it is the way it is handled that varies (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). Teachers must provide students with the skills to handle conflict on their own. These skills can be taught in a classroom community. To
establish a greater sense of community, conflict should be addressed immediately, and in a respectful manner. Whether it is in a class meeting or individually, the presence of respect and accountability results in a positive learning environment. Children come to school with a mixture of feelings already and, often they react emotionally to events that happen throughout the day. Overall, school standards influence the climate of the school environment and diminish any fear. A positive, prosocial climate alleviates any amount of negativity in the classroom and eliminates the focus on negative behavior (Garrity & Jens, 1997). When students are helped to put their feelings into constructive words, conflicts can be solved.

Through class meetings, children have the opportunity to discuss issues of concern. Also, working collaboratively with the teacher, peers can develop solutions to their problems (Watkins, 2005). Watkins reported that, “When teachers avoid extrinsic incentives, children develop their own reasons for positive actions, rather than a ‘what’s in it for me’ attitude. This outcome develops more pro-social behavior, moral values, conflict resolution skills, and motivation to help others learn” (p. 53).

Another positive strategy used by teachers is the use of role playing in the classroom. Gronlund (1959, as cited in Zachariah & Moreno, 2006) noted that role play can be used to help students in school settings to improve social understandings and social skills with their classmates. Also, the use of role playing can be a vehicle used for learning how to handle situations in which conflict may arise. Role playing creates healthy and safe social relationships in the classroom community (Zachariah & Moreno).
Bickart and Dodge (2005) reported that, in a classroom where children experience a sense of belonging, and where they know their ideas are respected, they learn how to handle disagreements before they escalate. Children will be more likely to approach conflicts in a healthy manner if it is modeled that way in the classroom.

Collaborative Learning

Johnson and Johnson (2003) and Slavin (1995, both cited in Watkins, 2005) have documented the benefits of collaborative learning over the years. These benefits include: (a) academic gains, (b) feelings of enhanced competence and self-esteem, (c) the development of positive social relationships, and (d) increased motivation to learn (Gillies & Boyle, 2005). The use of collaborative learning not only creates a better learning environment but fosters community between peers and their teachers. Several authors (Shachar & Fischer, 2004; Gillies & Ashman, 2000; Johnson et al., 1997; all cited in Gillies & Boyle) established: (a) the importance of student interaction, (b) the ability to seek help from others, and (c) the provision of help as well. Also, with this type of learning, students can develop elaborative and detailed understanding which facilitates their thinking (Webb, 1992, as cited in Gillies & Boyle).

Benefits of Collaborative Learning

Through the use of collaborative learning, children acquire both academic and social skills as they: (a) take turns, (b) share, (c) give help to others, and (d) accept help from peers (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). In addition, Gillies and Boyle (2005) reported that, when teachers implement cooperative learning, students engage in more facilitative learning interactions. It is these interactions that have the potential to influence
understanding and learning. This facilitated learning creates camaraderie among students and teachers.

Students’ interaction in these groups fosters a sense of teamwork and with this teamwork comes a sense of community (Gillies & Boyle, 2005). In classrooms where collaborative learning is integrated there is a better sense of community because of the interaction and relationships that are developed (Gillies, 2006). When students have open discussions in collaborative groups about topics, they are able to clarify ideas and perspectives in a context that is free of scrutiny and criticisms, from the teacher and the class as a whole (Howe, 1990, as cited in Gillies). When students are presented with the opportunity to work together, they are able to construct new understandings about things. They are able to help and support each other’s learning and the process that goes with that.

Membership in classroom communities enables students to understand their peers better than their teachers might (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). They see them in a different way, and while there might be one teacher for 26 students, students in a classroom have each other to count on for help and understanding. These students can provide reasoning for each other in a way that the teacher might not be able to do, simply because they are more aware of each other’s needs (Webb & Farivar, 1994, as cited in Gillies). Not only do these interactions in group work help the recipient but the helper as well. Gillies cited King (1999) and stated that:

Recipients benefit because they have learnt new ways of thinking about issues that they previously may not have considered, while helpers benefit because when they have to justify or explain their ideas to others, they are forced to reorganize
Their understandings and, in doing so, often obtain a clearer perspective on the problem than before, which has a positive effect on their learning performance. (p. 272)

These interactions have an increased positive effect on students’ performance in school, because they are challenged by their peers and because they are genuinely invested in one another (Gillies).

Chinn, O’Donnell, and Jinks (2000, as cited in Gillies, 2006) found that, “when children were required to discuss reasons for their conclusions in small groups, they used higher quality discourse and obtained higher scores on post discussion learning activity than their peers who did not engage in argumentative discourse” (p. 273). Dialogue between two students can impact their learning immensely. Students, who did not have this sort of interaction between classmates, showed less coherence in subject matter and coordination of subjects than those who participated in a collaborative learning environment (Gillies). Not only is there discussion between peers, but each participant is stimulated to think at a higher level. Also, this interaction can result in a greater bond between classmates and, therefore, enhance the community of the classroom.

In this kind of environment, children have daily opportunities to contribute and learn from others (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). Children with limited social skills can contribute their ideas with success and can learn from others in the group. In the classroom, students help one another learn through the design of their own questions, discussion, and trial of new ideas, and explanation of their findings to each other.
In the clarification of this learning, students' gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter and improve communication skills with one another (Gillies & Boyle, 2005). All of this is achieved while they gain a deeper perception of one another. Children’s relationships with each other, especially those of different ethnicities, socioeconomic, and ability groups, are improved through collaborative learning (Slavin, 1991, as cited in Bickart & Dodge). Kuh (1997, as cited in Summers et al., 2005) reported that collaboration among students had a positive effect on educational gains. Also reported was a direct correlation between school related involvement and student improvement. In addition, there is more prosocial behavior in these groups which leads to fewer behavioural problems and children’s acceptance of differences (Bickart & Dodge). Slavin (1995, as cited in Summers et al., 2005) found that, in working together, students should acquire new strategies and knowledge, both about the subject and about thinking in general.

When children are engaged in collaborative learning, not only do they learn from one another but they build relationships with each other. When they turn to their peers for help or to share ideas, when they work together to solve problems, or when several children make a discovery and want to explore it further, they engage in collaborative and community efforts (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). Also, collaborative learning prepares students in organization and preparation skills (Beckman, 1990). Skills like these, they will use for the rest of their lives.

Collaborative efforts in the classroom engage children in each other’s deepest thoughts and ideas which enable them to learn from one another and build relationships.
The use of collaborative learning allows students to get out of their comfort zone and trust their classmates; therefore, a greater sense of community and a positive learning environment is fostered.

Role of the Teacher

The role of a teacher in the establishment of classroom community is crucial (Bickart & Dodge, 1999). Students are impressionable and rely on the teacher to bring out the joy in learning. The process of creating classroom community where every student develops growing respect, interest, and trust depends on the actions of the teacher (Stone, 2001). Teacher/student interaction is an important relationship in building this community of learners. McCabe (2001) reported that, “If a teacher perceives a child to be motivated, they feed and nurture that behavior. If they perceive the child to be withdrawn, they to withdraw, causing the child to withdraw even further” (p. 10). This statement is terrifying and can be solved in the everyday classroom. A teacher’s role is to motivate, communicate, and model to every student, no matter what the differences. When teachers accomplish this, they set the bar for themselves and their community of students.

Teachers can do several things to promote a positive classroom community. One of these is modeling; every minute that teachers are with their students, they are a role model for effective behavior (YouthLearn, 2001). Students are always watching, and when they see their teacher work effectively with others, involve them in decisions, and share ideas with them, they are more inclined to mimic their behavior. Children see themselves mirrored in their teachers’ eyes, and if they are seen as worthy and respected
they, in turn, will express more interest towards each other, feel safe, and like the feeling of belonging together (Stone, 2001).

Also, the presence of a positive learning environment is important in the establishment of classroom community. Discussion is a part of this learning. Through discussion, students’ knowledge is advanced because of different understandings. Watkins (2005) reported that, “Students believed learning was a matter of understanding and not just simply getting the facts” (p. 58). Being comfortable in discussion with each other is an important part of a child’s learning and can build their confidence, not only in themselves but in each other as well. Also, the students are engaged in conversation, enhancing their communication skills and respect for the differences of others.

Implications for the Classroom

In classrooms where a sense of community is built, students are active agents and more engaged (Watkins, 2005). A greater sense of motivation comes with increased relatedness to communities. In a classroom community, students who are treated equally and act as equals promote learning and collaboration. In classrooms where a sense of community is built, an increased sense of classroom belonging develops among students, and this leads to a greater relatedness, participation, and motivation. Watkins cited Johnson et al. (1995) and suggested that, “By encouraging supportive relationships among students through cooperative learning activities, student satisfaction with the group increases” (p. 52). A sense of classroom community puts the responsibility on the learner, which is crucial in order for them to be actively engaged and achieve at higher
levels (Watkins). An active role is taken by the student who feels a connection to the class and its members.

When communities are developed in the classroom, roles are assumed by the students. Roles become available both for the classroom and the participant as students view themselves in different roles and begin to contribute in efficient ways (Elbers & Streefland, 2000, as cited in Watkins, 2005). The differences in students’ personalities that were once there are not, and a wider range of students become valued for their contributions. Christal et al. (1997, as cited in Watkins, 2005) related that, instead of being outcasts, the nerdy kids are treated with reverence, for their role in the classroom. These roles afforded many students, who do not normally have success in school, some success. Every child knows they have something different to contribute, and with the establishment of these roles, they are able to be themselves and express those ideas. In classroom communities, there is a not an emphasis on these differences, and the inclusion of every student is promoted (Watkins).

Watkins (2005) cited Elbers (2003) and stated that, “students put competition and claims of authorship into perspective. Against these, they emphasized that they work as a community and that it is the idea that matters, not who came up with it in the first place” (p. 53). Engagement in this kind of community and commitment by its members enhances the sense of community over time. By continually doing things to better the environment in which students learn, teachers can foster a community of higher level learners. Students can become passionately engaged in everyday activities, develop arguments, and generate questions they might not have asked before. Trust builds over
time among classmates, peer judgment is discarded, and members are more likely to contribute in a positive way (Watkins).

Chapter Summary

As demonstrated in this review of literature, there are many reasons to establish community in the classroom. Watkins (2005) found that the development of learning communities should be a key feature of 21st Century schools. The connectedness of outcomes (e.g., social, moral, behavioral, intellectual and performance) is a particularly important feature here, and one which may address the challenge which has been set by key players. Also, Schaps and Lewis (1997) reported that:

Children with a high sense of community feel personally known and respected. They believe they have a significant say in class planning, decision making, and problem solving. And they believe that their fellow students care about them and care about learning. Students who have it [classroom community] do better than students who don’t. And teachers who are more successful at creating it are better at helping their students to grow—ethically and socially as well as academically (p. 1).

It is this researcher’s opinion that there is a great need to foster classroom community in schools around the nation. Also, students should be given the chance to feel like an equal, to know that their opinion matters, and that they belong. The establishment of classroom community not only gives them this, but enhances their educational experience. In Chapter 3, this researcher describes the method, target audience, goals, and procedures for the development of this project.
Chapter 3

METHOD

The purpose of this project was to present educators with information that shows the effectiveness of establishing classroom community. By fostering community in the classroom, students are more willing to express and accept ideas while there is a positive effect on their academic outcomes (Schaps & Lewis, 1997). Additionally, students are more connected to the class and their peers and feel like they have a personal affect on what goes on in within the classroom walls. Several outcomes became apparent in regard to the positive effects that classroom community has on all facets of a child’s life. It was through this teaching experience that this researcher saw the need to expose this information to teachers, to give them further resources to benefit their classrooms.

Target Audience

This project was designed for application with students in Grades 4-5, but should be easily adaptable for use in primary. Teachers who need a guide to establish classroom community, teachers who seek to improve their students’ academic and social achievement, and teachers who are interested in strengthening their students’ commitment to the classroom, will be interested in this project.

Goals and Procedures

The goal of this project was to provide teachers with the appropriate information to facilitate a better environment for learning. The Power Point presentation provided an
extensive review of literature that demonstrates the need for more community
development in the classroom. Subsequent ideas and handouts were organized to include
the first days of school, collaborative learning, dealing with conflict, the role of the
teacher, and implications for the classroom. Each element was briefly detailed and an
example of each provided. Additionally, current trends and best practices were
presented.

Peer Assessment

Assessment of the Power Point was obtained from four colleagues through
informal feedback, recommendations, and suggestions for further research. Each
colleague was given a copy of the document and asked to review it for relevancy,
usefulness, and significance. Each reviewer provided comments, editing marks, and
suggestions on the presentation. Results of this feedback will be presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter Summary

The establishment of community in a classroom is the subject of much research.
Through this project, this researcher used knowledge gained from an extensive review of
literature and personal teaching experience to provide other teachers with the timely and
meaningful tools needed to address this issue. In Chapter 4, she provided user friendly
information and applications for teachers who are unfamiliar with best practices for
creating classroom community, and for those who desire to create an environment that
benefits the student in every way. Discussion and colleague reviews are presented in
Chapter 5.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this project was to design a presentation, to be given at an inservice, on the benefits of establishing classroom community. Presented in this chapter is a Power Point presentation. It includes what classroom community looks like, methods of achieving such community, and the teacher’s role in establishing community. Establishing classroom community is a positive thing, not only for students, but teachers and parents as well. The idea of creating a positive environment for all students is embraced and with the information given in the presentation, can be achieved. The goal of this inservice was to inform intermediate teachers that establishing classroom community is, in most cases, an effective and positive way for students to learn and experience. This author is hopeful that educators, who are exposed to this inservice will consider the research and the information presented prior to implementing a sense of community in their own classroom.

Supplementary forms and/or handouts are provided in the Appendix.
Establishing Classroom Community

Melissa Culver
Hello Everyone,

Welcome to the session on Establishing Classroom Community. I’m your presenter, Melissa Culver. Today we will be discussing classroom community; what it is, why it is important, and how it can make a huge difference in students education. I will also give tips and advice as to what classroom community looks like and how teachers are an important part of the process.

The typical classroom can seem chaotic at times. In a classroom that has established community things may be different. While there is still controlled chatter, the students are reacting positively to lessons and interacting with each other. They respect each other and are intrigued by their classmates. Everyone feels like they belong and contribute to the classroom environment.

During this presentation we will look at some of the ways a teacher can make their classroom look like this. It can be achieved and will be if the methods given today are implemented.
As you can see, I have started to list the ways in which morning meetings can help you, as a teacher, establish classroom community. While I am sure most of you can add to the list of procedures done in the morning, these ideas serve the purpose of creating the best environment you can for your students.

Starting your morning off with a greeting welcomes the children to the classroom and allows them to feel comfortable in the environment you have created. They greet each other as well, enhancing communication, social skills, and building relationships among each other.

After the students have greeted one another, a series of group activities can build their cohesion with each other and give each and every one of them a sense of belonging. These activities can include things like sharing stories or ideas for the classroom or answering open-ended questions. Giving students control over the activity gives them a sense of ownership and belonging.
Throughout the morning sharing might occur. No matter how often you do this it will always have a positive outcome. It creates a sense of respect for classmates and students will have the opportunity to create appropriate responses for one another’s ideas and stories. This also helps with communication skills and the development of a child’s thought process.

News and announcements are always a large part of the morning, as you are trying to prepare your students for the upcoming day’s activities. This establishes a routine for the class and gives them a sense of togetherness and identity. They can establish themselves through this activity, while making them feel like they are a unique community of learners.

The routine of doing these things will unconsciously bring the students together as a community and allow them to trust each other.
The first days of school are important for any student. As a teacher, you set the tone for the rest of the year. A certain sense of control has to be taken and expectations must be expressed. Students know the teacher’s expectations for their behavior and what they are going to be held accountable for. This should always be done in a positive way, so as not to be seen as a command but a compromise.

Students will gather how they will be valued in the first days of school. Reactions from the teacher and fellow students gives them the opportunity to assess the classroom and their feelings toward it. At this school I have seen many positive approaches to welcoming students and have seen it done in many different ways. If a child does not feel valued they are already thinking negatively about their school environment and classroom. They also make assumptions about what and whom they will value in the classroom. Once again, the more positive and progressive the process the more they will be willing to give to fellow students and their education.
The First Days

- Open Communication
  - Parents
  - Students
  - Other teachers

As I am sure most of you have been presented with, the first days of school bring lots of questions and explaining. Teachers give out a ridiculous amount of information in the first days and most of that information goes right over the students’ heads, as they are excited for school. With this information comes a great deal of communication on the teacher’s part; not only with students but with their parents and other teachers as well. This open line of communication helps develop a greater sense of community because everyone is on the same page and understands the expectations of the classroom. While communicating with students is always important, it is also nice to develop a relationship with their parents. Parents play an integral part in a child’s education, so the more they know and the more open you are to them, the easier the process and more positive the situation. Being consistent with your communication also helps develop a better learning environment.
The initial activities of a school year are important because they establish what kind of classroom you want and expect. These activities help welcome students to your classroom, giving them a sense of belonging from the beginning.

When students do activities like personalizing their desks to fit their personality or interviewing each other they are practicing skills, social and academic, that will help enhance their learning experience and make them better students. Doing these things helps them to establish relationships with classmates they might not know that much about. They discover things about each other that they have in common or things that they could possibly get into discussions about later. These skills they are practicing at the beginning of the year set them up for success. They are able to trust one another and have already established a sense of respect for one another. They might see each other in a different light. Someone they perceived as a “nerd” could share many of the same qualities that they do. It breaks down the wall that is between them initially and makes the classroom a comfortable environment to be in.
As a teacher, assessing children’s basic needs right away is very important for their success in your classroom. You can boost children’s self confidence by developing lessons that are tailored towards students’ success. They also thrive on acknowledgement in the classroom. All students’ thrive for attention, and the more positive your interaction with them, the more they are going to be inclined to be successful. All of these things enable a student to be as successful as they can be in the classroom environment you have created.

Having a respectful classroom is imperative in establishing classroom community. If students have respect for you and those in the class they are more willing to put themselves out there and have the confidence to push themselves because they know they are an equal. They also need to have an established sense of responsibility and accountability for their education.
Along with giving students a sense of responsibility and seeing that their needs are met, you also need to give them the ability to handle conflicts that arise, and be able to handle these yourself.

Problem solving skills are something that every student should be equipped with. They should know what to do when a problem arises and how to handle that problem. Problem solving strategies can be included in class meetings and discussions. Allowing the students to come up with their own strategies makes them more comfortable with actually implementing these strategies. Children often react emotionally to situations but if they have options then they will soon enough make the right decisions. In a classroom where children experience a sense of belonging, where they know they are respected, they will learn to handle disagreements before they escalate out of control, using whatever method they are most comfortable with.
Throughout students’ learning process, they will benefit most from some sort of collaborative learning. It not only creates a better learning environment but enables students to learn things at a higher level. They think at a higher level because they are engaging each other in discussions that they are intrigued by. This collaborative learning can take place through group discussions, small group learning and discussion, or through the interaction of working with a partner.

This interaction not only helps the student academically but once again, builds relationships among students. They are able to help each other out with a problem or discussion. Because they are providing reasoning for their answers they are thinking at a higher level because they have to prove their answers to their peers.
Collaborative Learning

- Positive Social Relationships
  - Improved communication skills
  - Children’s acceptance
  - Trust classmates
- Increased Motivation
  - Challenged by peers
  - Greater participation

Collaborative learning creates positive social relationships with students, therefore enhancing the classroom community. Students not only improve their communication skills but learn to trust each other. If they know that their classmates trust and respect them, they may be more inclined to participate in the discussion and say how they really feel. Students also feel acceptance from others if they are engaged in discussion, they learn from each other and dare actively participating in their learning.

Students will also have an increased sense of motivation to achieve. If they see that everyone around them is participating and engaged in the conversation then they will want to become a part of that community as well. They are going to become challenged by each other in discussion and the way they choose their answers. Overall, you will see greater participation and higher level answers from students.
As a teacher you have many roles but some may be more important for the success of your students than others. Teacher/student interaction is very important to the success of your students. If they feel like they belong and that you have accepted them, then they will be more inclined to communicate with you when they are struggling with something. Your ability to communicate with your students will also help establish a sense of community.

One of the most important things a teacher can do is to model for students how they want something done. This is a very important role for a teacher and can be effective if done correctly. Modeling can help establish community, the teacher can role model for effective behavior, respect, and how to create a positive learning environment. By doing these things you set the standard for your students, they will act like you have modeled for them.
Another significant role for teachers is to create a positive learning environment for all students. In doing this you are enabling them to be successful in the setting they are in. You set the example for your students and your classroom will reflect the things that you, as a teacher, do every day.

One way to create such an environment is to involve students in the decisions that go on in the classroom. Giving them a sense of responsibility and value in the classroom will give them the confidence they need to be the best student they can. Also, allowing them to be comfortable in all aspects of the classroom is vital. If they feel comfortable, especially in discussions, they will be more inclined to participate and, in turn, value their contributions to the classroom. Treating all students fairly and with respect can create a positive and inviting community of learners.
Implications for the Classroom

- Greater Participation
  - Greater sense of motivation
  - Higher level learning
  - Cooperative learning activities

- Supportive Relationships
  - Trust among classmates
  - Respect among class
  - Connection to classmates

Overall, I think the implications this can make for your classroom are great. Even if you can not do all of the things mentioned today, try one or two new things and watch how your students blossom with a new confidence and independence. They will have a greater sense of motivation to participate and when they do participate with their classmates they will be doing so at a higher level of thinking. Also, through cooperative learning activities they will learn to trust and respect one another, establishing a type of community in your classroom.

It is amazing to me when, as a teacher, you see your students coming together to accomplish something. It is that trust and respect that is established from day one that allows them to connect with their peers and become successful together. When they learn together they learn more, not only about the subject matter, but about each other and that makes a world of difference in their education.
Also, establishing community gives your students a sense of belonging in the classroom. Everyone wants to feel like they contribute and when you have a sense of community in your classroom that goal is met. They feel like they are a part of something and this gives them meaning, when at times I feel children can get lost in the hustle and bustle of the day. They contribute in positive ways, interacting with each other.

Establishing classroom community has to have commitment by all members to be successful. Whether it is the students, teacher, or the rest of the staff at the school. Everyone needs to participate in creating this environment and can do that by setting a positive tone every day, collaborating with students to generate success, and by allowing students to develop on their own and with their peers. By creating these positive relationships you can see a direct correlation to student success.
"Children with a high sense of community feel personally know and respected. Students who have it [classroom community] do better than students who don't".

-Schaps & Lewis
Questions?
Summary

- Development of Learning
- Connectedness of Classroom
- Sense of Belonging

So, in summary, we have covered how to establish a classroom community, the methods in doing this, and the results that can come from such a positive setting.

Students development and their learning process is created in this environment, it is encouraged by the teacher and through the roles students are given.

In a classroom that has community, the connectedness of the classroom is seen as soon as an outsider walks in the door. The actions of the teacher are directly correlated to the attitudes and actions of the students and all students have respect and responsibilities in this environment. They also gain confidence through belonging, trust, and respect.
Chapter Summary

Throughout this presentation many things have been covered in regards to establishing classroom community. How to develop this community was expressed, the methods in doing this, and the results that can come from such a positive learning environment.

Students development and their learning process is created in this environment, it is encouraged by the teacher and through the roles that are given to the students. Students have a higher sense of confidence and motivation when it comes to school work and there are happier in their environment. This kind of community gives the child a comfortable place to learn and allows them to open up and discover new possibilities.

In a classroom that has community, the connectedness of the classroom is seen as soon as an outsider walks in the door. It is expressed through the way the classroom looks, the way the children are acting, the learning that is going on. The actions of the teacher are directly correlated to the attitudes and actions of their students. All students have respect and responsibilities in these kinds of classrooms. They gain confidence through this belonging, trust, and respect.

While there were limitations to the research done, long term effects, how children and teachers react to this type of classroom, the correlation with classroom community and academic excellence is something that cannot be ignored. Throughout this process this researcher has gained knowledge that will
last her entire career. The research found and methods used can be used in any classroom and carried over to primary classrooms as well, ensuring student success in any classroom that has established community.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this project was to develop a presentation designed to encourage teachers and other interested educators to become aware of the benefits of establishing classroom community, what it looks like and how it is developed in the intermediate classroom. Methods, information, and materials were provided to use to improve that community, and the introduction of teaching methods designed to improve this kind of community in the classroom.

During this researcher’s times as a student teacher and substitute at Laura Ingalls Wilder Elementary School, she observed that, often, teachers and students did not focus on fostering community in the classroom. Instead the focus on solely the academic achievement of the student and what grade they had in the class. While this is important, building classroom community touches on this issue as well. Students who felt like they were a part of a community tended to do better academically; they reported higher grades and a larger sense of belonging (Watkins, 2005). In addition, parents seemed more informed and more comfortable with their child’s teacher and classroom environment.

Given these factors, this researcher was greatly encouraged by the outcome of the presentation and the positive feedback that was given. The level of enthusiasm from a majority of the teachers and staff following the inservice was encouraging. Also, this researcher would like teachers to implement many of the ideas and teaching styles into
their curriculum and classroom environment. The presentation and project provided them with a wealth of knowledge, material, and information which would positively contribute to their profession.

Limitations of the Project

Participation in the presentation was limited to elementary staff. While they found it useful; this researcher should have opened up the inservice to all grade levels. The presentation would have been more effective had it been given before school rather than after school. Perhaps having more than one presentation would help with scheduling difficulties. A 1 hour given on 2 separate occasions might have been a better format for this presentation and help with those who saw scheduling difficulties. This would allow for more discussion, demonstration, active participation, and practice of the strategies given.

Also, if the presentation was given at the beginning of the year rather than towards the end, more carry over could be seen in classrooms. Several teachers reported interest but because of time constraints would not be able to implement some of the ideas.

In addition, this researcher found that while not all of the information could work for everyone, bits and pieces could be used by all. Some of the information given was specific to grade level and while some of the intermediate teachers thought they could use many of the methods, most of the primary teachers believed they would have to change the method in order for it to be effective.

More time at the end of the presentation should have been given for evaluation process. Because it was after school, the evaluations were rushed because of time
restraints and scheduling. If teachers and staff had been given more time to plan for this presentation the attendance would have been higher. Because of a rush to get in the inservice before the end of the school year, short notice was given to staff about the presentation. Therefore, attendance was about half of the teachers from the building rather than all.

At some point this inservice could be given to other schools as well, perhaps schools that are more diverse than Wilder. If there was increased interest in this topic it might be positive to bring it up at a district meeting. This way administrators from other schools who show interest can implement it there as well.

Recommendations for Future Development of the Presentation

The study of the development of classroom community seemed limited and more research in this area is needed so that teachers may continually improve the environment created in the classroom. Studies on the long term effects of establishing community would shed light on the topic and provide interesting information on students’ achievement. Ideas for further research might include: (a) a follow up study done to determine the actual progress that is made by a student in a classroom that has established a sense of community, (b) a comparison study of a classroom environment that is unstable and lacks any establishment of community, (c) a study on the attitudes and feelings of students in an established community classroom, (d) a comparison study of a classroom that lacks this community, (e) a study concerning parents and teachers views on their students’ feelings and attitudes toward their teacher and classroom environment.
Project Summary

The inservice and presentation were successful, in that, many of the teachers at Wilder Elementary School, according to their discussion and responses, were satisfied and encouraged by the information given. Several teachers responded that they would use information and methods gained in the presentation. Furthermore, they indicated they realized they did some things to establish community already but through the presentation learned exactly how to implement this kind of environment. Given the information, many walked away excited to start the next day off with some of the information given, and expressed that they would continue to implement these activities into their day. The strengths of this project lie in the research done and the methods used. Also, the quality of information presented, the quality of organization in the presentation, and the knowledge of the subject matter by the presenter strengthened the presentation. Many teachers and interested parties expressed their delight in the information given and the way it was presented. After discussion, many expressed interest in further information on this topic and how they themselves could implement this in the classroom. Because of this a handout was given with tips for teachers and resources that can be used on this topic. For this reason, the presentation proved to be of considerable value and useful for the majority of people that attended and wanted to enhance the development of their students.

The major limitations of this presentation are related to time constraints and evaluating the long term effects in the classroom of the participants. While initial
responses were positive, the long term effects of the methods given in the presentation
have yet to be touched on at this school.
REFERENCES


