

# CREATING CLASSROOM COMMUNITIES



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## WHAT STRUCTURES FOUND IN HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL CLASSROOMS ARE OFTEN IGNORED BY MOST TEACHERS?

Perhaps you might think a time saving planning tool, an innovative teaching strategy that helps struggling learners, or effective techniques that address inappropriate behavior in the classroom. One of the most underused and most often ignored elements commonly found in successfully run classrooms is the creation and sustention of true classroom communities.

## WHAT ARE TRUE CLASSROOM COMMUNITIES?

Classroom communities consist of warm, caring, and positive climates in which each member plays a substantive role. Students feel supported, valued, and committed to each other. They understand that they have important positions in helping the community move forward. Though individual victories are recognized, collective achievement is relished. Community members (students) feel a sense of emotional security and intellectual safety when expressing both thoughts and ideas.

The role of teachers in these communities is best described as that of compassionate facilitator. Compassionate facilitators don't teach while under the

influence of control. That is, they don't feel a need to micromanage every element of learning which takes place. They empower students to develop meaning from content, establish effective learning units where students learn from each other (i.e. peer-learning strategies), and provide several choices for students to demonstrate what they learned according to their particular interests and the ways they learn best. Compassionate facilitators see their role as one of the students in that they continuously look for the optimal techniques, strategies and methods that help students learn best.

Along with academic achievement, compassionate facilitators in true

classroom communities place an almost equal emphasis on the social well-being and personal growth of students. They are emotion sensors. That is, compassionate facilitators are in-tune with the pulse of community members at all times. If an issue affecting a number of students needs to be addressed, they hold emergency community meetings to address and bring quick resolution to the issue.

Learners greatly appreciate the fact that they each have a voice in the day-to-day operations. They regularly give the teacher both formal and informal feedback about their classroom experiences such as the pace of learning,

what they liked/disliked about instruction, difficult to understand content, or the extent to which the presentation of the content was relevant or made sense.

I recently worked with a fifth grade teacher who began to regularly elicit student response through a student survey I designed. This survey provided students an opportunity to give feedback about the teacher's instructional practice and their overall classroom experience. After explicitly incorporating a few of the suggestions gleaned from the survey, she was overwhelmed to see how the perspectives of her students changed and the dramatic improvement in the way they responded to her.

## WHY ESTABLISH A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY?

Typically, when you find classrooms in which disorder and disruption are par for the course, you have students who are fending for themselves on isolated islands of instruction. They feel like the unhappy and unwelcome stranger who often wants to bring others into their miserable existence. At best, they feel out of place, at worst, that they don't belong. They have no sense of being vested in the community.

Succinctly, reasons for establishing communities are as follows:

- A sense of family or kinship is a cultural attribute of African Americans.
- Students in middle school classrooms experience a greater sense of anonymity.
- Disengaged students tend to frequently display poorer behavior and often drop out.
- Non-white students often experience classroom disengagement.
- Students are more motivated to learn in classrooms where they believe the teacher cares.
- African American students learn best in communalistic or interpersonal ways.
- Both student and teacher have a vested interest in the growth and development of the community.

You may ask, "How do you transform

the classroom from a place with participants who are barely visible to productively vested members of the community?"

## TRANSFORMING INTO A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY?

One of the principal emphases in establishing the community is initially made by teachers making connections. Strong connections are characterized by teachers who work not only to build but also to sustain strong student-teacher relationships. For them, those relationships are priorities that they continuously work to maintain and improve. In my own experience and in partnering with teachers, one of the most powerful techniques in relationship-building begins with teachers giving students something first. The things given are not necessarily material items; they could be granting of privileges, giving time, or acts of compassion. Other strategies for developing classroom communities are as follows:

- Collaboratively develop classroom expectations (rules) with students along with a timely discussion of the rationale for those expectations.
- Celebrate their personal important dates (i.e. birthdays).
- Frequently chart, monitor, and celebrate student growth and progress.
- Monitor the I/we ratio: Use more "we" and "our" and fewer "I" and "me" when conversing.
- Provide time for learners to anonymously/safely give feedback regarding important classroom elements.
- Relentlessly make content relevant by situating it in the lives of the students.
- Incorporate the students' lives in the context of the overall classroom.
- Facilitate instructional opportunities that call for social interaction.
- Include various grouping patterns including small groups (i.e. peer-tutoring, cooperative grouping).
- Encourage student voice in creating the community pathway.
- Afford students choice in the selection of ways to show what they have learned.

## ...the climate

The climate is only as healthy as the community in which it exists. Building true classroom communities creates the desperately needed supportive structure in all classrooms, particularly those with students of color. Building true classroom communities minimizes the challenges of student disengagement and disorder. These communities provide an educational extension of home as they connect teachers and learners. They give rise to student voice enhanced by student choice. Community members are transformed from the unknown to the undaunted.

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