

Schools and Classrooms as Caring Communities

When students feel they are valued members of the school family, the school becomes more effective at fostering all aspects of their development—intellectual, social, and moral.

How can schools encourage social responsibility in their students? They can teach the behaviors that constitute being "socially responsible," but social responsibility is more than a set of learned skills or acquired habits—it is anchored in the development of deeply personal commitments to such core social values as justice, tolerance, and concern for others. We cannot expect our children to develop commitments of this kind in a vacuum. They must be able to see and experience these values in action in their daily lives, including their lives in school. This is why schools must strive to become "caring communities," imbued with these values, in which all children become contributing, valued members.

Creating such communities has not, unfortunately, been a priority in American education, but a few schools are succeeding at developing them. We would like to describe a program presently in place in seven elementary schools in two California districts.¹ This program, the Child Development Project (CDP), fosters the creation of a caring community within each school and each classroom.

Toward More Optimistic Assumptions

Although students spend their academic careers in groups, schools often ignore the potential benefits of this group life. Teachers and administrators, when they organize students to work individually or competitively, actually undermine a sense of

community. An emphasis on competition guarantees that school life will become a series of contests, with some students winners and some losers. And the current enthusiasm for "time-on-task" often condemns students to spend inordinate amounts of time

working alone on narrowly defined cognitive exercises.

In our view, the assumptions about student learning and motivation that underlie these approaches are misguided. We view students as partly self-interested, of course, but also as

Photograph by Jim Ketslever of students at Longwood School, Hayward, California



well intentioned and concerned about their fellows, curious and interested, and capable of using and responding to reason.

The Child Development Project is based on these optimistic assumptions. We designed it to promote children's *prosocial development*: their kindness and considerateness, concern for others, interpersonal awareness and understanding, and their ability and inclination to balance consideration of their own needs with consideration for the needs of others. What we have tried to do is to structure conditions in schools and classrooms that bring out the best in teachers, administrators, and students alike.

The CDP classroom contains three major elements that work together to foster prosocial development: cooperative learning, "developmental discipline," and a literature-based ap-

proach to reading instruction. The CDP version of cooperative learning emphasizes:

- extensive interaction among group members;
- collaboration toward group goals;
- division of labor among group members;
- mutual helping;
- use of reason and explanation;
- explicit consideration and discussion of values relevant to the group activity.

This approach stresses two major types of experience that we consider essential for promoting children's prosocial development: collaboration and adult guidance. It is through their collaboration with equal-status peers that children learn the importance of attending to others, supporting them, and working out compromises. Then, because peer interaction is not *always*

equal-status, collaborative, and benevolent, the teachers act as values advocates, pointing out the importance and relevance of helpfulness, fairness, concern and respect for others, and responsibility. They show students the meaning of doing one's best, one's part, one's fair share, and how these values can be effectively applied in their group work. In "setting up" cooperative activities and in "processing" them with the students afterwards, teachers routinely lead discussions about the relevant values and their applications, after first focusing on the academic task at hand.

"Developmental discipline" is a classroom management approach that encourages children to take an active role in classroom governance, including participating in the development of classroom rules. They meet periodically to discuss issues of general concern, enjoy as much autonomy as is appropriate for their age level, and work collaboratively with the teacher to develop solutions to discipline problems. The teachers treat the children with respect—as capable people who can respond to reason. They help students to think about and understand the importance of common values, rather than imposing values by virtue of their authority or power. Further, these teachers avoid extrinsic incentives (rewards as well as punishments) so that children will develop their own reasons for positive actions other than "what's in it for me." Teachers work to help children develop and tap their own intrinsic motivation by emphasizing the inherent interest in and importance of the academic activities.

We want each student to feel that the school is a large family and that he or she is an important and valued member. It is the feeling of belonging and contributing that motivates children to abide by and uphold the norms and values that the school community has decided are important.

We try to ensure that students' emerging sense of community is not achieved through a process of isolating and distancing their communities from others. To discourage such isolation, we change the membership



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within class groups, so that by the end of the year each student will have worked in groups with most, if not all, the other students in the class. And in the school at large, students often work outside their own particular classrooms, particularly in the "buddies" program. For this program, classes of older students are paired with classes of younger students for activities such as reading to each other, planting a vegetable garden, or holding a bake sale to raise money for an earthquake relief fund.

As with other literature-based reading programs, ours is designed to help students become more skilled in reading and more inclined to read. Ours is also designed to develop children's understanding of prosocial values and how those values play out in daily life. In much the way that cuisiniers provide examples of mathematical processes, good literature shows how values "work." For example, the touching story *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes (about a poor girl who claims to have 100 dresses at home) helps children to see how damaging and hurtful teasing can be. Similarly, other stories and books show concretely and vividly how such values as fairness and kindness make the world a better place. Still others reveal the inner lives of people from other cultures, ages, and circumstances as they deal with universal issues and concerns—they help children to empathize with people who are both like them and not like them and to see the commonalities that underlie diversity.

Encouraging Results

To find out how well the program was actually implemented in the project classrooms and what effects it had on participating students—to see whether what *should* work in theory actually works in practice—we conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the project. Our evaluation has followed a cohort of children who participated in the project from kindergarten through 6th grade.²

Our findings show that the project was well implemented in most partic-

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ipating classrooms and that it produced a broad range of positive effects on students. It helped them to improve in social competence, interpersonal behavior in the classroom, interpersonal understanding, endorsement of democratic values, and higher-level reading comprehension. They also reported themselves to be significantly less lonely in class and less socially anxious. Overall, we believe the program is fostering a healthy balance between children's tendencies to attend to their own needs and to attend to the needs and rights of others.

In this article, we want to focus on our attempt to assess students' perceptions of their classrooms as caring communities and the impact of such perceptions. We included a measure of this perception in questionnaires that we administered to project students when they were in the 4th, 5th, and 6th grades. This instrument included items representing two major components in our conception of the sense of community: (1) students' perceptions that they and their classmates care about and are supportive of one

another and (2) their feeling that they have an important role in classroom decision making and direction.

The first of these components was represented by 7 items, including: *Students in my class work together to solve problems*, *My class is like a family*, and *The children in this class really care about each other*. The second component was measured by 10 items, including: *In my class the teacher and students plan together what we will do*, *In my class the teacher and students decide together what the rules will be*, and *The teacher in my class asks the students to help decide what the class should do*. Students in the three project schools scored significantly higher on this combined measure than those in three comparison schools each year of the three years we administered the questionnaires. Thus, as we had hoped, the program was successful in creating caring communities in the classrooms, at least as seen by the students in those classrooms.

We also found, in general, that the greater the sense of community among the students in a program class, the more favorable their outcomes on measures of prosocial values, helping, conflict resolution skill, responses to transgressions, motivation to help others learn, and intrinsic motivation.

These findings indicate that the program produces its best effects on students when it succeeds in creating caring communities in classrooms. We believe that students who feel themselves to be part of such communities are strongly motivated to abide by the norms of the communities, as they see them. When these norms include the maintenance of prosocial values and the development of and reliance on intrinsic motivation, these are the characteristics that children in such classrooms will display.

Creating Caring Communities

Because of fundamental changes in American family and community life, today's children often lack close, stable relationships with caring adults. Schools cannot ignore this reality—it cuts across all class and ethnic catego-

ries, and it shows no sign of abating—nor can they avoid the problems it causes. Schools have little choice but

to compensate by becoming caring communities, by becoming more like supportive families.

Our experience in the Child Development Project shows that, with effort and dedication, schools *can* become

A Circle of Friends in a 1st Grade Classroom

Susan K. Sherwood

Ann, Age 6. Severe multiple disabilities. Birth trauma. Head injured. Moderate to severe mental disabilities. Hemiplegia to right side of body but ambulatory. No right field vision. Small amount of left peripheral and central vision. Color-blind. Verbal.

Pacing back and forth in the entryway, I pondered the details in my mind. As I anticipated Ann's arrival on the area agency education bus, I vacillated between calm conviction and near panic. Three days before, the special education teacher had greeted me with a request for a full-time integration placement. In light of my conviction to meet the needs of all students, my answer was instantaneous. Now I wasn't quite so sure.

As a teacher of young children for 18 years, I know that every class has a wide range of abilities and problems. This particular group of 21 students was no different. Their intelligence range, as measured by the Cognitive Abilities Test was 137-68 (excluding Ann's evaluation). Shane was reading at the 8th grade level; Sara had been diagnosed as learning disabled, James as hyperactive; Mike was adept at mathematics problem solving; Erica was a 6-year-old in puberty; and so on. Indeed, Ann was not so different. *All* needed to belong to our classroom community and to accept their own strengths and limitations before they could freely accept others. To develop confidence, instill love of learning, and enhance self-concept, the teacher builds on each child's uniqueness—creating a motivating and challenging atmosphere where all children are free to work cooperatively, learn from mistakes, take risks, and rejoice in accomplishments. Such a classroom community is a support system for each of its members.

Special educators coined the term "a circle of friends" to describe the framework of peers, friends, and adults in the natural environment that surrounds a child with severe multiple disabilities and offers mainstream support (Perske 1988, Stainbeck and Stainbeck 1987). Only the term itself, however, is new to the classroom teacher who has worked to build these relationships in his or her classroom all along.

Just as circles of friends draw the lives of children together, networking within the classroom links special educators and regular educators together in common goals. Our objectives for Ann were to help her (1) develop normal relationships and friendships with her peers; (2) build functional skills through normal 1st grade routines; and (3) continue work at her level toward functional academic life skills.

In social interactions, nonhandicapped children are good role models. By observing what they see, the handicapped imitate appropriate social behaviors and engage in fewer inappropriate ones (Donder and Nietupski 1981, Stainbeck et al. 1983). I was amazed at the ability of my students to provide structure for Ann's activities in the absence of an adult aide. For example, when Mike noticed that Ann needed assistance, he would gather the necessary materials, quietly approach her,

and firmly direct her task. On one occasion, when she flatly refused to participate, he unemotionally prodded her, "You have to because you're a 1st grader, and these are the things 1st graders do." Then, without a pause, with the same sense of purpose as an adult, he directed her to trace the letters.

Of course, to promote Ann's independence, we had to adapt basic 1st grade materials to enable her to follow directions and participate routinely. For example, to allow her easy access to her supplies, we affixed a wooden block to the top of her desk to hold pencils, crayons, and her name stamp in an upright position.

On some academic tasks, such as rote counting by one's and five's to one hundred, Ann was capable of full participation. At other times, we struggled creatively to supply her with parallel activities so that she could still feel part of the group.

We also initiated the "facilitator of learning" role for each supporting adult on our classroom team. This means that their primary purpose was to assist Ann's integration; however, each team member was to support *any* child when not directly involved with Ann. In this way, the other children did not perceive Ann as having a special helper.

As I reflect on this past year, I know that Ann's life has been touched in many ways by her peers and teachers because she was afforded a free and public education in a regular classroom. Yet the integration process isn't easy. At times, it can become all-consuming. With no right answers, however, we cannot allow ourselves to be constrained by past practice. Don't be afraid to try. We can capitalize on mistakes and transform them into learning experiences and opportunities to creatively solve problems. My vision for education is students, parents, educators, and administrators working cooperatively to make learning positive and empowering for each student within a *regular* classroom.

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such communities. What's more, when they do, they become measurably more effective at promoting all aspects of children's development—intellectual, social, and moral.

All too often, meeting children's needs for belonging and contributing is the missing variable in the school improvement equation. Systematic attention to their human needs holds high promise for both children and society, as children and adults thrive in caring communities and develop their personal commitments to each other, to the world around them, and to abiding human values. □

¹ In the San Ramon Valley Unified School District, the project schools are Neil Armstrong, Bollinger Canyon, Country Club, Walt Disney, and Rancho Romero; in the Hayward Unified School District, the project schools are Longwood and Ruus.

² The research described here was conducted in six schools, three that implemented the program and three "comparison" schools in the same district. We have focused on a cohort of children who began kindergarten in the fall of 1982 and finished 6th grade in the spring of 1989. During each of these years we have conducted classroom observations to assess program implementation and student behavior and have assessed characteristics of the children with interviews, questionnaires, and small-group activities. From 300 to 350 students have taken part in our research assessments each year. For further information about our findings, see Watson et al 1989, Solomon et al. 1990, and Battistich et al. in press.

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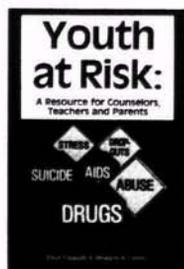
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