Building a Classroom Community
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Abstract: This paper will discuss community in the classroom and how teachers can intentionally build their classroom’s to provide an emotionally stable, physically engaging, and growing academic community. The paper will discuss the importance of a secure emotional environment showing how this allows students to feel confident which in turn promotes academic growth. Another topic the paper will go over is how children who are working towards a common goal tend make stronger connections, which again, allows for academic growth. The skills these children are learning in their elementary classrooms are setting them up for success in their future academic endeavors.

Community is a term used to describe many things; it can describe a group of a people in the same area or people with the same background. This paper will discuss community in a more specific way; we will talk about how to build a community in your classroom as well as why it is important for children to experience a sense of community in classrooms. Communities are not just formed overnight and it is the job of teachers to orchestrate the building process necessary to complete these classrooms. There are three facets of a classroom; emotional, physical, and academic, “Without an excellent, intentionally designed, emotional environment (one which builds authentic community in the classroom), … standards are of little value” (Shaw, 2013).

The process of building communities requires a carefully thought out plan, teachers should use “get to know you” activities to encourage students to share. It is important that such activities encourage children to be comfortable with each other; this will lead them to feeling safe and confident in the classroom, which stimulates the emotional environment of the class. In Anne Shaw’s blog post “Back to School: A Surefire Strategy for Building Classroom Community” she describes such an activity used on the first day of school called “Take What You Need”. The teacher takes a few squares from a roll of toilet paper and passes it on to the next person, each child will take a few squares (as many as they need) and pass the roll on. When the passing is over each person will count the squares of toilet paper they have, each square represents one thing a student will share with the class, the teacher will go first, by doing this they will demonstrate the types of facts and information that should be shared with the class. This activity is repeated throughout the year; students share their triumphs, tragedies, and small tid-bits from their days. Carefully thought out activities like this one encourages students to share outside of academics, allowing them to take risks, grow, and develop as learners.

Another essential part of building community in your classroom is creating a physically engaging class, a class where children are able to work together to create an environment conducive to learning. As a teacher it is important to create a positive atmosphere, one way to do this is starting the day with greeting each student as they walk into the classroom. By doing so you are setting a positive tone for the rest of the day. Placing the desks in small groups or clusters instead of separate rows or a U-shape has been proven to be best for teamwork, although it is important to move desks around every once in a while to encourage interactions amongst all students. A great way to strengthen the room’s sense of teamwork is using self-sticking posters or flip chart paper to display students’ work whether it is group discussions, ideas, or drawings. Showing off each teams’ work creates a strong sense of ownership amongst students and their clusters or groups.

It is important that students feel comfortable with each other as well as the teacher. There are many ways to achieve a level of comfort, one of which is to “demonstrate your loving acceptance of all backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints” doing so will create an environment that shows students they are welcome (Church, 2014). By celebrating individual backgrounds and experiences you are creating a tight knit
community that is sewn together by diversity as well as unity. According to “Building a Community in the Classroom” written by Ellen Church studies show children who feel a sense of identity within a group are the most well-adjusted and successful in school. The different backgrounds, experiences, and abilities each child brings to the class will only enhance your experience as a teacher and theirs as a student. You, the teacher, are an essential tool in creating this sense of identity and community, your classroom is the epicenter of the skills they will learn throughout the year, “people skills of interaction, communication, collaboration, and problem solving” are the building blocks to a students’ education (Church, 2014). Intentionally playing games and doing activities that require students to work together as teams, which highlight their individual skills and experiences, will only strengthen the foundation on which your community is built.

After you have laid out your foundation for your classroom community, it is important to build on it. Children who are “working towards a common goal, engaged in a fascinating topic, or trying to figure out a solution... feel more connected to school and each other” (Wilson, 2013). Knowledge should not just be about learning, it should include experiences; by presenting children with opportunities to work together you are helping them make connections that strengthen your community. In Margaret Wilson’s article “Building Community Through Academics” she shares with us a unit she studies with her second grade students; she explains to children what the Caldecott book award is and then follows up with a list of criteria that each winning book followed. After reading a few Caldecott award winning books students would then turn their attention to that years’ potential winners. As a group they share their thoughts and opinions on which book will win that year; after the results are posted students bond in their reactions whether it is excitement or frustration. By including activities like this into your units, students are not only thinking academically but they are “purposefully and jointly engaged in interesting academic endeavors” (Wilson, 2013).

Connections made through learning are just as important as those initial connections made during the first day of school. By encouraging students to share with one another on a personal level you are building their confidence to share on an academic level. By sharing ideas, opinions, and answers children are being engaged learners. Engaged learning allows students to discover concepts and apply their individual skills and experiences as they come up with their own ideas and reactions, promoting essential life skills such as problem solving. By building a classroom community in which students feel comfortable, safe, and confident teachers are setting their students up for academic success as well as giving them essential life skills.

References
Church, Ellen B. "Building community in the classroom." Scholastic.com.