



The Importance of Building a School Community

As adolescents enter middle school, they bring developmental questions about their safety and their ability to belong, such as, “Will I be bullied?”, “Will my teachers care about me?”, and “Will I have friends?” All humans share basic desires, including the need to feel safe and to be emotionally and physically accepted. Students are particularly sensitive to these needs. When a school meets its students’ psychological and emotional needs, students become increasingly committed to the school’s norms, values, and goals (Schaps, 2003). Adolescents, in particular, devote more time to being concerned with whether they are safe and accepted than with any aspect of learning (Doubet & Hackett, 2015).

Students in schools with a strong, positive, and caring community are more likely to be academically motivated (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000), to act more ethically and altruistically (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997), to develop social and emotional competencies (Solomon et al., 2000), and to avoid negative problem behaviors (Resnick et al., 1997). Adolescents are more positively engaged in school when they experience autonomy, competence, and a sense of belonging. Researchers have also reported that positive behaviors and feelings

of relatedness, once established, will persist over time (Battistich, 2001).

Positive school communities are environments that promote a sense of belonging and connectedness with their members (Petrillo et al., 2016). They foster democratic values, civic participation, and collaborative discourse through students and teachers working together (Farmer et al., 2016, p. 209).

Schools must be intentional and evidenced-based (Westheimer & Kahn, 1993) in their efforts to promote a positive school community. Stating a school mission or shared vision is in itself not enough to create a community; the evidence of this vision needs to be tangible throughout the school and in every classroom. Staff must work together to develop common routines and procedures that actively encourage respectful and supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents.

Barriers Exist

The development of a positive and caring school community comes with many challenges. Schools may experience frequent teacher or student turnover, a high rate of student absenteeism, and chronic discipline problems. Teachers may not have the pedagogical background to implement





prosocial behaviors in the classroom (Westheimer & Kahn, 1993).

Lack of buy-in by stakeholders can also be a barrier to transforming an unsupportive school culture into a more positive school community. Without backing from students, parents, and teachers, a vision of a positive and caring school community is a “mandate without meaning” (Haberman, 2017). Creating a vision shared by all stakeholders of what a positive and caring community looks like and how it will be evidenced in the school is paramount.

Staff must dedicate time to collectively identify, support, manage, evaluate, and reflect on those policies and routines that promote the mission and values of the school, as well as how these procedures are manifested day-to-day. Teachers may also need support in developing these policies and routines. Book studies, research, professional development, professional learning communities (PLCs), and ongoing grade level staff/team may be required to overcome common barriers, in addition to a plan for measuring forward progress.

Elements of a Positive and Caring Community

A fundamental component of community is the need for students to feel safe—physically, emotionally, socially, and

intellectually (Thapa et al., 2013). Schools that lack these safety structures are more likely to have greater discipline issues, higher absenteeism, more reports of verbal or physical violence, reduced academic achievement, and diminished student engagement. As many as 160,000 students per day stay home from school in avoidance of being bullied, and one in seven students nationwide experience chronic absenteeism (Elias, 2019; Thapa et al., 2013).

What are those elements that build community? Students need to know that their experiences are valued, and they need to feel welcome in the classroom. The setup and structure of the classroom set the tone for a positive and caring community. Schools need structures and avenues of support that are perceived as fair and equitable for all. Students are more likely to perceive rules as fair if they view the adults enforcing the rules as caring and supportive. Classroom decorations should reflect student diversity, and the setup of the classroom should support discussions and encourage student ownership. For teachers who have different experiences than their students, it is important to create asset-based views of youth that specifically avoid and challenge stereotypes. Ultimately, students should have opportunities to define their own identities (Scharf, 2018).





A body of research suggests that effective school and classroom teachers spend time during the first weeks and months of school establishing expectations, routines, and rituals (Tate, 2012). Building common classroom routines in elementary school is relatively easy but may pose challenges as middle school students move to different classes with a variety of teachers. It is important that middle school teachers decide collectively, as teams or at grade level, on developmentally-appropriate and positive student routines, expectations and procedures, and how to implement and practice them across subject matter.

Schools with a strong sense of community not only stress academic achievement but also actively develop student skills that promote character and citizenship, such as fairness, concern for others, and personal responsibility (Schaps, 2003). Learning is seen in much broader terms in these positive school communities where the emphasis is not only academics, but also on social, emotional, civic, and service education (Thapa et al., 2013). Classrooms with a strong sense of community stress student-centered learning, valuing all students' voices and all students' right to participate (Farmer, Leonard, Spearman, Qian, & Rosenblith, 2016). In these classrooms, students experience a shared sense of belonging and a sense of agency (Farmer et al., 2016).

Establishing a classroom community supports academic success (Schaps, 2005).

Schools must provide regular opportunities for students to experience service to others and cooperation (Schaps, 2003). Buddy or student mentoring programs, school-wide or class community-service projects, peer mediation opportunities, student advisory councils or representatives, and classroom group experiences are all examples of how schools can develop student skills of cooperation and service to others.

The Classroom Reflects the School Culture

The building of relationships between students and their teachers cannot be understated. Doubet and Hackett (2015) indicate that building relationships with adolescents is a prerequisite for learning in the classroom. Taking the time to know students' names and their proper pronunciation (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012), their interests, and how their day unfolds, yields benefits in increasing student motivation and class cohesion. An equitable classroom promotes a willingness and commitment that allows students to define their own identities and to be known without judgment.

Doubet and Hackett (2015) cite one teacher who asked students to respond to a personal question every time he gave students an





assignment. Asking students to answer the question, “How is your day going?” after putting their names on their paper prompted responses that ultimately led to students suggesting other questions to ask of them and contributed to an atmosphere of trust. Research also stresses the importance of the teacher’s initial daily interaction with each student. The use of handshakes, greetings, positive reminders, and encouragement at the beginning of class led to a twenty percent increase in academically engaged time when compared to classrooms that did not use similar strategies (Cook et al., 2018). Similarly, another study found the use of a class handshake increased the sense of belonging in a classroom (Boyd, Jarmark, & Edmiston, 2018). In yet another example, language arts teachers used individual student surveys and interest inventories to drive reading selections and relevant lesson themes that were important to their students’ interests and issues.

In a caring classroom, healthy teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships are actively promoted and developed by the teacher. Adolescents are quick to recognize the hypocrisy of a school culture that promotes the values of a positive and caring community but a classroom environment that is indifferent to those values. Students must be able to feel safe to take emotional and intellectual risks through

a class environment that emphasizes there are no mistakes, just more questions to be addressed. This emphasis on the “growth mindset”—the ability to realize that we all learn from our mistakes as much or more than our successes—is key to setting a safe emotional tone in the classroom (Blackwell, 2018). Teachers who develop a classroom community believe in their students and hold them accountable in warm, yet demanding ways, thereby also teaching students to speak up against injustices and negative profiles that may define them (Williams, 2018).

Teachers need strategies that emphasize positive prosocial behavior and create classrooms that honor students’ needs for safety, equity, and autonomy, while also celebrating student diversity. One such prosocial behavior strategy is the “Two-by-Ten” strategy (Smith & Lambert, 2008). Focusing on their most difficult student, for two minutes each day, ten days in a row, teachers have a personal conversation with that student about anything the student is [appropriately] interested in. Researchers found that the targeted student’s behavior improved by 85% but, most notably, other students’ behaviors in the class also improved.

While explicitly teaching positive behaviors and skills, teachers also must deliver





engaging and explicit instructional content (MacSuga-Gage et al., 2012). When students are actively engaged in learning, improvement is made in classroom cohesion, achievement, and climate. Allowing students avenues of responsibility for their learning can improve student engagement. Within the classroom environment, students need to be able to make choices and have opportunities to be active participants in their learning.

Summary

Developing a positive and caring school and classroom community is intentional and continuous. “It is the result of thoughtful reflection and the purposeful planning and actions of teachers and staff. A robust classroom culture is built progressively and collaboratively over time, through the teaching of responsibilities, routines, and procedures and in meeting children’s essential needs as learners and as people” (Smith, 2019, p. 10). All stakeholders must actively participate in shaping the vision of a positive school community and how it is evidenced in the school and in the classroom.

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