

Building Community in the Classroom

By Christine Venturis | Categories: Social-Emotional Learning, Classroom Community

As I shop for school supplies with my son, I encounter other parents and children wandering from aisle to aisle, choosing pens, pencils, paper, and that perfect backpack — *the one that will hold everything and also display the carrier's personality.*

In both the children and adults, I recognize the combination of anticipation of anxiety, of excitement and uncertainty, as they get ready to let go of the easy, lazy summer days and to enter the familiar — or perhaps unfamiliar — routine of school. A new year in a new community.

This makes me wonder what community means to these children, and to educators as well. What comes to mind as they think about their hopes for what the classroom might hold?



In this guide, we will discuss the importance of building community in the classroom and how to create a communal class environment.

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What Does Classroom Community Look Like?

Close your eyes and imagine the ideal community. What do you see? What do you hear? How do you feel?

I imagine ...

... a place where I am accepted.

... a safe place.

... a place where similarities and differences are honored.

... a place where I can be me.

... a place where I will be challenged.

... a place where I will grow, fall down, and be helped back up.

...a place where we laugh, cry, agree, and disagree.

...a place where I WANT to be. This is my community — the kind of community we all want for ourselves and our children!

We want our children (all children) to experience a collaborative classroom community: the type of community where students are supported, challenged, accepted, and held accountable; where teachers are present, have a supportive stance, are vulnerable, take chances, make mistakes and continue to learn; a community filled with trust, empathy, and acceptance where it is safe enough for teachers and students to grow both academically and socially.

The Importance of Building Community in the Classroom

The classroom is a unique environment that allows students to explore and build not only academic but socioemotional skills. In a positive classroom environment, students have the opportunity to build peer relationships and feel a sense of empowerment and value that allows them to thrive academically.

Let's talk about some of the reasons why bringing community into the classroom is important below.

It's Essential for Academic Learning

Classroom community creates a positive learning environment for students that allows them to thrive academically.

When students feel safe and comfortable in their classroom environment, **they are more likely to take academic risks that are necessary for developing skills like competency and resiliency.**

Research shows that classroom community can help improve student motivation for developing and improving competence while avoiding the pressures and stress of a performance-oriented environment. (Ciani et al. 2009) Simply put, **when students feel better about themselves and their environment, they perform better.**

It Can Decrease Behavior Issues in the Classroom

An important part of building community in the classroom is setting expectations for conduct and behavior. Classroom rules, expectations, procedures, and consequences should be clear.

When students have clear boundaries and set expectations, they have the opportunity to learn how to interact respectfully with their teacher and peers and **expand upon socioemotional skills and development** (Kumpulainen and Minna 2007).

It Gives Students a Sense of Belonging

Aside from academic and behavioral needs, students also have a need for a sense of belonging and importance. When teachers take the time to get to know students on a personal basis and be culturally responsive, these needs are being nurtured.

Bringing community into the classroom further reinforces the belief that students have something valuable to offer and that they

are critical members of their community.

How to Build Classroom Community

How do you build a strong community in the classroom? During those first weeks with the new students — all of whom are armed with all of their new “tools”— teachers are setting up procedures:

What do you do if you need to go to the bathroom or your pencil breaks?

Where do you get paper?

What if you don't know how to spell a word or are unclear about what to do when you return to your seat and begin to work independently?

These procedures are developed and revisited across the year, as needed.

At the same time, so are those just-as-important procedures for learning how to become a member of a caring community:

How do I work with a partner?

What do you do if you did not get a chance to share?

How do we continue a conversation and agree or disagree respectfully?

These procedures ensure that all students are acquiring the skills necessary to do the harder work of digging beyond surface understanding about a text or an issue.

They allow students to give the real feedback that writers need to make their story more interesting and clear. Children are learning how to work with someone who might not be their first choice as a partner and how to handle the challenges of working with a best friend. These skills are life skills — *the skills we hope for in all citizens.*

In a time of high-stakes testing, standards-driven instruction, and outcome-based evaluations, it is sometimes difficult to resist the urge to “get to the meat” of the content. It is hard to believe that the rigor is not in a text or an assessment. It is hard to stay the course and take time daily to focus on creating a caring, respectful community where divergent ideas are encouraged—the only thing that, in the end, will support students in acquiring the skills necessary to engage in rigorous thinking around content and issues that are not easily accessible.

These “soft” skills are the most important; indeed, they are critical for developing into the kind of citizens needed to ensure a future where there is a sense of community for all.

As we enter this new school year, I am looking forward to being invited to participate in the joys and challenges of creating these environments with new and old friends. I look forward to coming alongside teachers as they gather the tools needed to create these types of collaborative classrooms. I look forward to learning from teachers and students about what community really means.

Create Your Own Caring Community

If you are interested in creating a caring community in your classroom, check out Caring School Community, a social and emotional learning (SEL) and discipline curriculum that builds classroom and schoolwide community while developing students' social skills and competencies. [Try out a grade-level sample here.](#)

References

- Ciani, Keith D., et al. "Buffering against Performance Classroom Goal Structures: The Importance of Autonomy Support and Classroom Community." *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, Academic Press, 22 Nov. 2009, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0361476X09000423>.
- Kovalainen, Minna, and Kristiina Kumpulainen. "The Social Construction of Participation in an Elementary Classroom Community." *International Journal of Educational Research*, Pergamon, 19 Nov. 2007, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0883035507000869>.