Hearts and Minds

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Classroom relationships and learning interact.

The din of chatter filled the air as the students piled into the lunchroom. I was visiting a teacher friend, Erin, at his school on the southwest side of Chicago. We were eating lunch when Carlos, one of his 7th graders, walked up with a small box in his hands. Carlos asked Erin, "Hey, Mr. Roche, you wanna play chess?" Erin did not miss a beat. "Sure," he said. Carlos sat down and opened the weathered box, explaining that he had recently bought the old chess set for $2.

All year, Erin, who primarily teaches reading and math, had been teaching his middle school students how to play chess. His students planned chess moves for homework, shared strategies, studied combination theory and probability, played chess in class, and—in collaboration with the school artist-in-residence—designed and created beautiful personalized chessboards. Although Erin clearly was using chess to help his students develop disciplined thinking, he was also fostering caring and trusting relationships with his students. So there I was, watching Erin and Carlos play chess amidst the chaos of a school lunchroom.

Classrooms like Erin's exude both engaged learning and caring teacher-student relationships. The underlying principles of a democratic classroom—choice, discourse, social responsibility, community, critical inquiry, authentic learning, and teaching a relevant and creative curriculum—help promote caring relationships between teachers and students. In turn, these relationships play an integral role in encouraging meaningful learning.

Some teachers assume that they must develop a good relationship with their students before they can teach, but that approach ignores how classroom relationships and learning mutually interact. Teacher-student relationships permeate the classroom, with relationships both helping and hindering learning and affecting everything from curriculum to choice of teaching methods. For most teachers, their relationships are their teaching.

As one teacher said,

You have to make that social and emotional connection with kids in order to get inside their heads. . . . The fact that you care makes them see you differently. (cited in Brown, 2002, p. 67)

In democratic classrooms, teachers win their students' hearts while they are getting inside their students' heads. How they teach and what they teach play integral roles in developing their relationships with students.

Likewise, classroom management is not separate from teaching and not something that a teacher must achieve before teaching can begin. In a democratic classroom, classroom management and student discipline work together, not in a traditional paradigm of control and punishment, but as central to the curriculum and classroom experience.
Student-centered teachers educate the whole child, helping to mold students’ moral identities and fostering democratic behaviors and values. In this sense, discipline does not mean “to punish,” but rather “to educate” (Brazelton, 1992).

Strong teacher-student relationships not only reduce discipline problems, but they also connect behavior and decision making—both in and out of the classroom—to the curriculum (Wolk, 2002). As one teacher put it, “The best discipline is a good curriculum” (Dawson, 2002). The best discipline and curriculum are, in turn, built on caring and trusting relationships. These elements—teacher-student relationships, classroom management, and how and what we teach—are as interwoven and interdependent as a double-helix strand of DNA. Together they create caring classrooms with a shared intellectual purpose.

Classroom Community

Community is central to a democratic classroom. John Dewey (1927/1954) wrote that democracy should be “the idea of community life itself” (p. 148). In the best sense of the word, community is not just a place to live but an active way to live together. In the classroom, the curriculum and a shared sense of purposeful learning help create community. As classroom relationships build community, the community becomes a vital force in learning. Here are four ways in which teachers can promote community while fostering relationships and meaningful learning.

Discussion and debate. Engaging in discourse is a foundation of both living in a democracy and learning in a classroom. By regularly allowing and challenging students to discuss important and controversial issues, teachers tell students that their opinions matter and that the teachers trust students to take issues seriously. Endless sources of good discussion can be tapped: children’s literature; newspapers; electronic media; problems across the planet, within the classroom, and in the lives of students. Teachers cultivate good classroom relationships by offering the freedom to discuss meaningful content.

Class murals and collages. Having students create murals or collages together for their classroom is a great way to make community come alive. When students see their artwork on the walls, they sense ownership and responsibility for their classroom space. Students can choose their own themes, creating murals or collages about classroom values or portraying peaceful conflict resolution, the appreciation of differences, and empathy (Wolk, 2002). Teachers can also challenge students to create symbolic or metaphorical artwork, thereby raising the intellectual value of the activity. Discussing themes and symbols further enhances classroom community.

Drama and role playing. Dramatic skits and plays, like class murals, bring a class together to work toward a common purpose. They also prompt students to get out of their seats and move and talk. Freeing students from the chains of a desk and compulsory silence helps develop classroom relationships. Students can dramatize virtually any part of a curriculum, even math and science. Dramatizing connections between the content being taught and the world today makes curriculum relevant and meaningful. For example, in a unit on the Civil Rights movement, students can write plays about the concept of racism today, dramatizing their own opinions and experiences with prejudice, exclusion, cliques, and the abuse of power.

Playing games. One of the best ways to develop good relationships and create community is to have fun. For example, one game that I played with my elementary and middle school students was “block building” (Wolk, 1998). In block building, two students sit in desks, back to back, with identical sets of small, multicolored blocks. One student is the “communicator” and the other is the “builder.” The communicator builds a structure while explaining the process, step by step, to the builder. (The builder can ask questions for clarification.) The goal is for the two students to build identical structures. In this game, which teaches communication skills, my classes built good relationships largely through the many laughs we had doing it.

Getting to Know Students

When teachers make a regular and focused effort to get to know their students as individuals, they show students that their teacher sees them not as “5th graders” or “students” or—even worse—standardized test scores, but as individuals who have interesting and important lives outside of school. Showing students that you value their interests, cultures, and life experiences helps foster healthy relationships. There are many ways in which teachers can get to know their students.

Writing autobiographies. Bob Peterson (1994) spends the first six weeks of the school year with his 5th graders on a unit about their families and backgrounds that includes writing autobiographies. This activity communicates that the classroom is far more than being about a textbook or a test and that it is, in fact, about the students. Publishing these autobiographies in a class magazine shows students that you value their work. Students will care about their learning and classroom relationships much more when they see that someone appreciates their work.

Creating picture books. Writing and illustrating picture books (which even middle school students can create) can be a different form of autobiography. They can be about students' neighborhoods, cultures, families, opinions, life experiences, or hobbies. The books can include oral history, giving students the opportunity to learn stories and histories about their own family. To prepare, invite students to find picture books that thematically connect to their
lives, read them aloud to their class, and discuss. Once their own picture books are complete, students can visit classrooms of younger grades and read their books aloud, an activity that continues to cultivate community.

One-on-one talk. By taking the time to talk with individual students about topics that have nothing to do with school, teachers encourage relationships based on mutual caring and common bonds. Opportunities for informal talk abound during the school day. Eat lunch with a student, play checkers with someone during class free time, chat with a student as you walk to gym or art, sit under a tree and talk during recess. Again, don't make these conversations about school. Talk about hobbies, weekend plans, movies, family, favorite junk food, and so on. Such conversations tear down the walls between teacher and student and become friendly chats between two human beings (Wolk, 2002).

Photography. JoBeth Allen and a group of classroom teachers (2002) wrote of how they used photography to make their students' lives a central part of a constructivist and culturally relevant curriculum, an approach advocated by Ladson-Billings (1994). The teachers lent their students cameras to take pictures of things that were important to them in their homes and neighborhoods (Allen et al., p. 313). After their pictures were developed, the students wrote about them. This project facilitated closer teacher-student relationships:

Photography allowed us to extend the classroom community to include children's home communities, to build reciprocal relationships with families. Within these extended communities, children, family members, and we as teachers were able to explore our linked identities in relationships with each other. (Allen et al., 2002, p. 314)

To build classroom community, teachers can also simply take pictures of their students and hang the photos around the room or allow students to take their own pictures (using instant cameras) and display them.

An Inquiry-Based Curriculum

Many teachers—especially new teachers—think that the way to create good relationships with their students is to make their classrooms fun. But I agree with Ayers (1995), who says that although having fun in school is important, focusing on having fun is the wrong emphasis for our classroom communities. Classrooms and curriculums must be interesting, intellectual, critical, creative, purposeful, communal, and highly relevant. This focus is very different from just having fun. Getting students genuinely interested in what they are doing in school develops good classroom relationships and learning.

A constructivist and generative curriculum. Many traditional classrooms are based on one-way teaching, from textbook to student or from teacher to student. In contrast, democratic classrooms see teaching and learning as a transaction: teacher to student, student to teacher, student to teacher. Democratic classrooms are constructivist and generative. They nurture the creation of knowledge as opposed to the mere memorization of knowledge. Democratic classrooms honor the knowledge and experiences that students bring to school and advocate learning as a social act; they de-emphasize the memorization of endless facts that will soon be forgotten.

Chuck Cole, a middle school science teacher, has his students read Hiroshima (Hersey, 1956) while they study atoms and atomic theory. The book relates the Japanese perspective on the dropping of the atomic bomb during World War II. Afterward, Chuck asks his students such questions as “How do you feel about the fact that the United States dropped the bomb on Japan? Proud? Happy? Patriotic? Ashamed? Sorry? Glad?” and “You have probably seen some gruesome violence on TV and in movies. How did the violent events in this story compare?” By challenging his students to answer these kinds of questions, Chuck helps them share thoughts and form opinions. Nurturing students’ creation of their knowledge makes learning more interesting and shows students that an adult values their perspectives.

Connecting curriculum to students’ lives. Almost any topic studied in school can be connected to students’ lives. For math class, students can collect and graph data on what TV shows they watch, how they spend their money and their free time, how much garbage they produce, and so on. Reading and writing workshops give students the freedom to read and write texts that are personally meaningful (Atwell, 1998). When studying culture and community, students can study their own families and communities by interviewing people, taking surveys, and sharing stories. As Peterson wrote,

A teacher cannot build a community of learners unless the voices and lives of the students are an integral part of the curriculum. (1994, p. 30)

Connecting curriculum to the world today. One of a teacher’s most important responsibilities is to show students the relevance of what they are learning. If, for example, students are studying the human body, they can investigate obesity, fast food, media, drug use, or medical care. When studying the U.S. Constitution, students can debate such issues as gun control, the death penalty, racial profiling, and civil rights. To teach my 7th graders fractions, percentages, and graphing, I had them develop opinion surveys on controversial social issues, conduct the surveys, and then create graphs (Wolk, 1998). Doing so put math in context, making the students’ inquiry and learning process more meaningful. And after they did their math work, we discussed our survey topics, which further fostered our community and relationships.
A culturally relevant curriculum. While visiting a 5th grade classroom last year, I noticed a bookcase full of children's novels. Thirty-five of the 37 titles were stories about white, middle-class children. Two books had African American heroes. All of the students in this classroom were Latinos, mostly children of the working poor. The literature in this classroom was removed from the cultural lives of its students. An important element in fostering healthy relationships―especially in classrooms with students from diverse cultures and economic classes―is creating culturally relevant classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

To make teaching culturally relevant, we must first learn about students' lives and cultures and then situate the curriculum in their lives. To develop such a curriculum, we need to use resources that reflect students' cultures and that respect different learning styles. And we must value and use the knowledge that students bring into the classroom, believing that all students can learn and excel academically. In Holler if You Hear Me, Michie shows the power of culturally relevant teaching when he relates how a group of 8th grade girls, all Latina, reacted with intense interest to reading Cisneros's (1989) book, The House on Mango Street:

Their basal readers and the books [on their school's] library shelves were populated with few characters who looked or spoke or lived as they did. . . . Mango Street was unlike anything they had ever read and the girls absolutely loved it. . . . The vignettes in House on Mango Street never failed to conjure up memories from the girls' own lives, and we spent as much time sharing those as we did reading the book. (Michie, 1999, pp. 56–59)

Teachers as Real People

The late humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers (1969) wrote,

It is quite customary for teachers rather consciously to put on the mask, the role, the façade, of being a teacher, and to wear this façade all day, removing it only when they have left school at night. (p. 107)

Teachers need to allow students to see them as complete people with emotions, opinions, and lives outside of school. A good way for a teacher to get students to treat him or her like a human being is to act like one. We all have successes and failures, dreams, and hopes, and we need to share these with others to cultivate relationships, empathy, and understanding.

Of course, life also has its lighter moments. Humor is one of the best ways for teachers and students to connect. Sometimes, if a student blurs out a funny joke in class, the teacher's best response is to laugh.

References


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