

Community in the Classroom: An Approach to Curriculum and Instruction as a Means for the Development of Student Personal Engagement in a High School Classroom

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Curriculum for Community

[C]oncepts and values will be meaningful to children only to the extent that they can relate them in some way to their own experience (Splitter & Sharp, 1995, p.164).

In this age of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the school curriculum risks becoming scripted, distant, and impersonal. More and more, it is controlled by professionals outside of the classroom who are unfamiliar with the particular needs and learning style of students and what they are interested in and curious to inquire about. As Freire points out, the curriculum, which includes the classroom environment, should aim to “create possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge rather than [engage] simply in a game of transferring knowledge” (1998, p.49). Unfortunately, it is the students’ individual scores on one specific high-stakes assessment that has become the focus of attention in our country; and, as a result, it has limited the extent to which students are able to interact with each other and inquire into matters of interest.

NCLB has created a climate where teachers feel increasingly pressured to ensure their students pass the test, with the result that they allocate less time for purposeful and authentic learning experiences (Kohn, 2004). Thus, rote memorization is favored over inquiry, and there is no room to personalize the curriculum in order to fully engage, motivate, and invite students to become active participants in their own learning. This approach to teaching and learning, as Freire says, “turns [students] into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher, and the more completely she fills the receptacles, the better teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (1998, p. 71).

I reject this approach to teaching and learning and argue that the goal of education should be to create thoughtful, critical, curious, confident, personally aware, independent students. “Something must be done to enable children to

acquire meanings for themselves. They will not acquire such meanings merely by learning the contents of adult knowledge. They must be taught to think and, in particular, to think for themselves” (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan, 1980, p. 13). The curriculum that I carry into my classroom and present to my students reflects my understanding of them as individuals and what I have come to learn about their interests and abilities. I want to challenge them to go beyond their present understanding and try to “think outside the box.” I want them to engage their own sense of wonder and natural curiosity and to create meaning for themselves.

School is a place where students should feel safe to engage intellectually, socially, and emotionally in the act of learning. It is the school’s responsibility to provide knowledgeable teachers and promote a classroom climate where all students are heard and where they can learn from one another. It is a teacher’s responsibility to implement a curriculum that challenges students and empowers them to become problems solvers who can take what they learn in the classroom into the world outside. Teachers must aim to create a classroom environment that recognizes and values students’ genuine thoughts, questions, and ideas. They should aim to provide them with opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings and to learn to work with others in a constructive way. As Kohn (2004) writes, “all of us yearn for a sense of relatedness or belonging, a feeling of being connected to others” (p. 119). Students must also be able to connect, in some way, to the material as well as to one another. Lack of engagement is what causes students to tune out and turn off.

Teaching specific topics or skills without making clear their context in the broader fundamental structure of a field of knowledge is uneconomical...such teaching

makes it exceedingly difficult for the student to generalize from what he has learned to what he will encounter later. (Bruner, 2003, p. 31)

Students need to have opportunities to apply what they are learning and understand the reasons behind the content in order to internalize the material and fully *learn* it. The content needs to become a part of them, moving from external content to internal knowledge. As Jerome Bruner (2003) contends, “the best way to create interest in a subject is to render it worth knowing, which means to make the knowledge gained useable in one’s thinking beyond the situation in which the learning has occurred” (p.31). Therefore, what a student experiences in the classroom should be applicable to life outside of the classroom. Experiences should be provided for students to practice the skills needed for independent thinking, instead of inviting them to respond to questions on pre-determined topics. Only with the implementation of such educational experiences can we hope to create interested, independent, intellectually engaged members of society.

Though there are a variety of tools that can be used to encourage, promote, and foster engagement, more powerful factors, such as a lack of self-confidence, poor self-concept, fear, and apathy, often stand in the way. Participation in class activities can be threatening to some students, although more worrisome is the fear that their contribution may be judged as trivial or incorrect by their peers. Conditions have to be properly established and maintained for many students to get involved:

When students need close affiliation, they experience a large depersonalized school; when they need to develop autonomy, they experience few opportunities for choice and punitive approaches to discipline; when they need expansive cognitive challenges and opportunities to demonstrate their competence, they experience work focused largely on the memorization of facts. (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 122)

My main concern, therefore, is getting students to recognize their ability to learn and, more importantly, to communicate with and learn with others. I believe the “key” to achieving success in advancing and improving their self-concept and confidence is to work to build relationships within an intellectually safe classroom community.

Community as Foundation

Education is, or should be, a cooperative enterprise. An atmosphere of mutual respect and positive regard increases the likelihood of cooperation and student success in school (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 43).

From the first day of school I work to create a classroom environment where students are engaged, both on their own and in dialogue with each other. My classroom becomes almost entirely student-directed, allowing students to explore their own needs, wants, questions, thoughts, and ideas. Furthermore, I strive to create a classroom that allows students to develop good thinking skills that they can use when they are at school and that they can take with them when they are engaged in the world outside of the school. As Haynes (2002) comments, “Dewey argued that schools should be participatory communities, a meaningful part of society where young people could develop as citizens” (p.46). I view my ultimate goal as one of creating independent, confident, responsible learners who can fully participate in community life. Of course, I am aware that this is a process that takes time and relies heavily on the collaboration of the group.

There are three stages of community development, which I identify as the beginning, emerging and mature stages (Jackson, 2001). It is essential to begin laying a foundation for a community to emerge and develop from the first day of school; the initial experience must reflect the need for and importance of forming a classroom community. For example, I begin by facilitating an inquiry into the meaning of “community” by viewing a film about relationships within penguin communities and asking students to compare and contrast aspects of the bird’s community to that of a classroom. During this early stage students are often hesitant and may even reject the idea of community due to their unfamiliarity with it, or they may simply be unwilling or unable to listen due to all the views and concerns that have been presented (Splitter & Sharp, 1995). That is why I present the topic within a structured format they are familiar with (i.e., viewing a film, taking notes, constructing a written response) as opposed to leading a more advanced, open discussion on the idea. The teacher must remain true to the process and gradually invite students to direct their own learning. At the same time, the skills of critical thinking, formulating questions, and taking part in discussions must be modeled and practiced in a structured way before the students can be asked to implement these skills within a guided inquiry. “To develop the class-

room community and the needed skills, the teacher needs to deliberately set aside time for both” (Jackson, 2001, p. 460). Student-generated questions “provide a doorway for children to enter into the realms of an inquiry which is...in their own hands. To bypass this part of the procedure is to risk undermining the egalitarian and democratic nature of the entire enterprise” (Splitter & Sharp, 1995, p. 140). Since these skills are new to students, such questions may not initially lead to a very elaborate or productive inquiry; however, it is not the outcome but rather the process that is important at this stage in community development.

In the school year 2009–2010, I conducted a self-study in my classroom to examine the impact of using a community-centered approach to curriculum on student identity, I wanted to gain an understanding of the students’ levels of cognitive, social, and emotional engagement during the collective learning process over the course of an entire school year. The project allowed me to examine all three phases of community development, which included, interestingly, a community “break down” that occurred during the emerging stage and threatened to prevent all learning, engagement and any further community development. Fortunately, the breakdown was temporary, and I was able to use it as a lesson on community. By relying on the initial sense of community we had established prior to this incident, I was able to use it as the stimulus for reflection and self-correction. I reminded students that their voices and feelings were valued. “Caring classrooms... enhance opportunities for student engagement by developing supportive relationships, increasing opportunities for participation in school life, and allowing for the pursuit of academic success” (Zins, et al., 2004, p. 62).

Communities of Inquiry

There are...thinking communities and unthinking communities, communities that are reflective and self-corrective and communities that are not. What education requires, obviously, are communities of inquiry (Lipman, 2003, p. 94).

In developing a sense of community in the classroom, it is necessary also to establish clear parameters for the conduct of inquiry and classroom dialogue. The creation of a community of inquiry “makes it possible for children to see themselves as active thinkers rather than passive learners, as discoverers rather than receptacles, and as valuable and valued human beings rather than resources or commodities” (Splitter & Sharp, 1995, p. 21). There is a distinct and observ-

able difference between the student engaged simply in listening to directions and completing assignments, and a student who is internalizing the knowledge, connecting and relating it to other knowledge, and expanding individual thought into collaborative inquiry. John Dewey (1930) spoke to the importance of being a member of a classroom community:

[B]eing a unique member of a meaningful group is important for both the individual and the group...the more democratic a group is, the more the group experience builds on the unique perspectives and interests of its members, and this the more the group experience becomes a source of educational development for all involved. (cited in Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 50)

It is in a student’s best interest to engage in the learning process in order to improve the level of inquiry for the group. However, students seldom have this perspective when entering the classroom; therefore, it is the task of the teacher to create an inviting environment that encourages students to participate in group inquiries in a safe way.

Matthew Lipman (2003) identifies fifteen key features of communities of inquiry. As a seasoned elementary school teacher, something Lipman was not, I consider the first three to be the most essential to emphasize at the initial stages of community development:

- A. INCLUSIVENESS.** Within a community no one is excluded from internal activities without adequate justification.
- B. PARTICIPATION.** Communities of inquiry encourage but do not require participants to participate verbally as equals.
- C. SHARED COGNITION.** In a private reflection, an individual will engage in a series of mental acts aimed at penetrating and analyzing the matter at hand. In shared cognition, the same acts (wondering, questioning, inferring, defining, assuming, supposing, imagining and distinguishing) are engaged in, but by different members of the community. (p. 95)

The additional characteristics that Lipman identifies and explains emerge and become more effective as the community grows over time, but are not readily applicable or possible at the beginning. These characteristics include seeking meaning; creating a sense of solidarity; promoting individual thinking; and being impartial, challenging, reasonable, reflective, and curious through discussion.

Within a community of inquiry, students participate in intellectual and social activities respectfully. In Richardson's (2003) social constructivist perspective, meaning is individually constructed as a result of "opportunities to determine, challenge, change or add to existing beliefs and understandings through engagement in tasks that are structured for this purpose" (p. 1624). A community of inquiry provides a space for students to actively participate in learning both by building shared meanings and through the processes of internalization. Such participation provides students with opportunities to gain confidence in expressing their own views. "Through taking part in thoughtful, reflective discussions, children gain confidence in their ability to think on their own" (Lipman, et al., 1980, p. 131). As students come to understand and appreciate that there are few, if any, "wrong" answers and possibly more than one right answer, the community provides them with a safe forum in which they can exchange and develop ideas and learn to respect the ideas of others. "The purpose of a community of inquiry is to...bring participants into deeper and more significant relationships, to shake them free of their complacency, their false convictions and to make them available for more comprehensive understanding" (Sharp, 1993, p. 340).

When students feel they are valued members of the community and that their opinions and contributions are important, there are fewer distractions from the work of the classroom and fewer behavior problems (Allender, 2001). It is therefore essential that the teacher develop lessons that invite students to learn within a safe, inviting environment. "Learners must be active participants in the creation of a caring classroom community" (Zins et al., 2004). These beliefs are at the core of my teaching philosophy. Thus, as a teacher-researcher, I am interested in the way that students' emotional connection and responsibility affects the level of cognitive and social engagement within that community.

Intellectual Safety

Students choose to learn, just as they choose not to learn in the face of ridicule, embarrassment, or coercion (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 45).

Matthew Lipman (1993), the founder of Philosophy for Children (P4C), believes that "children hunger for meaning, and get turned off by education when it ceases to be meaningful to them" (p. 384). Jackson (2001) advises that in order to promote and develop a classroom environment where

students are trusted, willing, and able to engage in responsible dialogue and inquiry and to create meaning, "a particular relationship must develop among members to the classroom community that is quite different from standard classroom practice" (p. 459). He recommends that these relationships should be those that place more emphasis on listening, thoughtfulness, silence, and care and respect for the thoughts of others:

Essentially, the classroom needs to become an intellectually safe community; a place where students do not have to worry about being put down, belittled, teased, or ridiculed by their peers or teacher when they offer their personal insight, experiences or questions, so long as these comments are respectful to all members of the community. Within this place, the group accepts virtually any question or comment, so long as it is respectful of the other members of the [community]...Intellectual safety is the bedrock upon which inquiry grows. (p. 460)

Jackson describes an intellectually safe place as one that is free of put-downs, where no comments are made with the intent to "belittle, undermine, negate, devalue, or ridicule" other community members (p. 460). In order to create an environment where students feel secure enough to participate in inquiry, all members first need to trust one another with their personal thoughts and questions. Intellectual safety creates a classroom community where students do not fear the response to their contributions, where they know they will not be put down by the teacher or teased by the other students. Greely (2000) speaks to the importance of respect in developing and maintaining a safe classroom community:

When students feel safe, when they feel respect from both their peers and their teachers, and when they trust the people around them, they become free to learn. They are able to engage in the practices that lead to authentic intellectual growth. They become more willing to say what they think, more willing to share their work and invite feedback, more willing to experiment and try new things, more willing to try again when they don't get it right the first time, and more willing to invest in their own learning. And, because of this, they become better readers, writers, and thinkers. (p. xiv)

In order to foster an environment where students are able to carry on responsible dialogue and inquiry within the community, it is necessary for students to feel safe enough to take risks. Without the element of intellectual safety in place within a community, students will not take

educational risks and will not recognize the importance and benefits of doing so.

I begin to build an intellectually safe classroom at the very beginning of the year through modeling, extending low-risk invitations to share, and acknowledge all contributions as valuable. During the first few days of school we do not engage in a formal inquiry. However I do endeavor to facilitate inquiries with each of the students as well as introduce the idea of community. The initial class meetings focus on the unique identities of each student. I believe that this is crucial due to the fact that my class size is often forty or more students. Each individual needs to feel welcomed and recognized within my classroom. In order to generate authentic, even if brief, discussions with each student I have them complete an informational sheet asking questions about their background and interests. I use the information on these sheets to take attendance for the first few days and to help me make personal connections to each of them.. For example, I note that “You are the one who takes Judo,” or “You can speak four languages.” This provides a way for me to connect with each student while sharing aspects of their identity with the rest of the classroom community, and do it in a safe way.

It is not just the building of a yarn ball and the circular seating arrangement that makes Philosophy for Children work. It is the establishment of an atmosphere that recognizes that learning is risky, and that what we are asking our students to do is often a more difficult thing than it was for us. It is the acknowledgement of the “basic human need for positive regard from both others and from oneself” (Purkey and Schmidt, 1987). In order for this type of learning to occur, classrooms must become a place where students feel intellectually safe and therefore choose to participate cognitively, socially, and emotionally in educational activities.

Philosophy for Children

Likewise, philosophy—when embedded in the context of the community of inquiry—cultivates habits based on reflection and self-correction, rather than inculcation and rote learning (Lipman, et. al., 1980, p. 179).

I have observed numerous instances where students were asked to *learn*, rather memorize, information only to spit it back on a multiple-choice test and never return to it again. The information never related to their own lives and their comments were seldom welcomed, especially questions

that might lead the class “off topic,” which seemed to be the equivalent of the discussion going beyond what the teacher might know or want to discuss. The curriculum was organized with content as a first priority and student interests second. Students were expected to repeat this information on a test to show that they had ‘mastered’ this material. “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (Freire, 2005, p. 72). Freire’s statement suggests a different approach—that children’s questions and thoughts on the material should be included in the way in which they are assessed. Tests should not simply be about their ability to repeat what the teacher or textbook has informed them.

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is at the core of my approach to teaching. P4C is a curriculum approach created by Matthew Lipman, a professor of philosophy at Columbia University, as an attempt to “improve children’s reasoning abilities by having them think about thinking as they discuss concepts of importance to them” (Lipman, 1989, p. 146). P4C has grown into a worldwide movement that has expanded beyond Lipman’s original approach, emerging as a researched-based pedagogy that has been built on the assumption that learning is socially constructed. The P4C curriculum aims to give priority to student interests and independent judgments over the memorization and presentation of content. P4C has become an important part of my teaching philosophy and allows student to engage thoughtfully and regularly within an intellectually safe classroom community. It is an approach that promotes a sense of classroom community while developing skill in critical thinking. The concept of community advanced by P4C changes and challenges the model of traditional teacher/student roles and relationships—one that moves the teacher from information-giver to co-inquirer. P4C is “based around the notion that [the students] must construct meanings for themselves, rather than simply accept those which are handed down to them” (Splitter & Sharp, 1995, p.99). In addition, P4C strategies help teachers construct a safe classroom environment where all ideas are welcomed and valued equally.

One of the goals of using P4C is to allow students to view the classroom as one in which they feel safe and respected, as well as excited to enter and eager to learn:

Philosophy for Children is an attempt to reconstruct (not water down) the discipline of philosophy, to make it accessible and attractive to children who will then be able to appropriate it and thereby acquire the tools, skills, and dispositions they need in order to think for themselves. (Splitter & Sharp, 1995, p. 99)

P4C leads to the creation of a student-centered environment, which ultimately leads to the improvement of self-confidence. Students raise their own questions, discuss possible answers with one another, listen to one another's responses, consider alternative points of view, and form their own ideas based on the evidence presented by themselves and their peers. P4C aims to create independent, self-directed thinkers who are challenged to discover more about the topic under discussion. "Philosophy for Children's egalitarian nature, commitment to varying viewpoints and insistence on the inherent value of all participants helps foster empathy and pro-social behavior as an essential basis for values education" (IAPC, 2003).

Role of Teacher as Facilitator

I think of teaching as if I were directing a play – an improvised play in which there are no lines for the players to read...There is, however, a specific structure that allows for and encourages all of the players, the teacher, and the students towards goals... the teacher's predominant role is that of director. (Allender, 2001, p. 5).

Teachers must be proactive in making the necessary adjustments to the classroom environment that allows for authentic engagement to take place. "From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization... efforts must be imbued with a profound trust...they must be partners of the students in their relations with them" (Freire, 1998, p. 75). In addition to being a partner in inquiry, the teacher-facilitator has to continue to provide the structure that offers opportunities for student participation and engagement with content; "...invitations must be sent and received; they cannot merely be wished for. People do not reach their potential because others simply wish them well" (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 50).

In terms of instruction, the teacher-as-facilitator must encourage students to discover meanings on their own. "The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower

isolation, but only in communication" (Freire, 2005, p. 77). The use of a "gently Socratic inquiry" method (Jackson, 2001) allows for the teacher to develop relationships with students that go beyond the information-giver-to-information-receiver affiliation. As Dewey says, "In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher—and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of giving or receiving instruction, the better" (1916, p. 160).

Carl Rogers (1980) presents the concept of empathic understanding to explain the way in which a teacher connects with students in this type of environment:

When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then again the likelihood of significant learning is increased.... [Students feel deeply appreciative] when they are simply understood—not evaluated, not judged, simply understood from their own point of view, not the teacher's. (as cited in Smith, 1997)

The development of empathetic understanding takes time. The teacher should not abandon the approach if they do not have immediate success in establishing a deep connection with students. Yet, staying true to my role and purpose by becoming a trusted co-inquirer has proved to be a challenge and the most challenging part has been in creating a sense of community with the students. However, continued reflection and adaptation has given me a renewed sense of purpose and aided in my success.

The teacher who adopts and implements a P4C approach plays a role that is different from that of the traditional educator:

The P4C facilitator sees her/himself as a co-inquirer with the children, as interested as they are in exploring philosophical concepts, improving judgment and discovering meaning. However, when it comes to the procedures of inquiry, the facilitator both guides the children and models for them—by asking open-ended questions, posing alternative views, seeking clarification, questioning reasons, and by demonstrating self-correcting behavior. It is through this kind of modeling that the children eventually internalize the procedures of inquiry. (IAPC, 2003)

Dewey argues that education should be considered as a form of social activity. "When education is based upon

experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes radically. The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities” (Dewey, 1998, p. 66). Taking on such a non-traditional instructional role is challenging; it demands a lot from the teacher, especially if she or he is a novice. It is hard work to stay true to the process and to her or his own beliefs about education especially if other teachers are unsympathetic. This is why it is more empowering to be part of a recognized program like P4C.

Conclusion

Students’ curiosity, their eagerness to engage in inquiry, and their natural sense of wonder needs “a place to grow, breathe and make sense. [T]he authentic ‘Aha!’ experience requires risk on the part of the learner, and a climate of trust and safety is essential for all of these things to happen” (Bluestein, 2001, p. 210). Trust is a fundamental component of learning process—students are “most likely to thrive in an atmosphere of trust... This involves maintaining a warm, caring relationship with students, one in which teachers can be ‘real’ with themselves and others” (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 50). Teachers in a constructivist classroom act as a guide in discovering areas where the student lacks understanding or is simply mistaken and in need of assistance from the teacher. The utilization of a P4C approach is what allows me to create the type of intellectually safe community environment that I know is crucial to my students’ cognitive, social and emotional development, and is therefore an essential aspect of their educational experience and growth.

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