Build Community and Empower Students

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Students of all abilities, ages, and backgrounds benefit from learning in a safe and supportive educational community. Building a positive classroom community requires sustained planning and attention. According to Shaw (1992), effective community building is based on facilitating a student's sense of *inclusion*, *influence*, and *openness*. Following are 20 ways to build community and empower students in any classroom setting.

1. **Believe a positive classroom community and empowered students are essential to the classroom and broader community.** We act based on our beliefs and values. If we believe community is important, then our actions will convey that same message to our students, and they will follow our lead.

Facilitating a sense of inclusion:
Students know and begin to trust themselves and the people around them.

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2. **Map the community.** Define the community as the classroom or school. Have students create detailed maps of their community that include a compass rose, legends, boundaries, traffic routes, and so forth. Students get to know other people and places in the community while reinforcing map-making and data-gathering skills. As they define and determine how certain parts of the classroom or school are used and by whom, they understand their place in the community.

3. **Find common threads.** Pinpointing common threads gives students an opportunity to identify characteristics and activities they share with classmates. Students can complete a series of sentence starters printed inside large circles. For example, *For fun I like to . . .* Students write in the circle several activities that they do for fun, cut out the circles, and decorate them. The teacher then facilitates a matching activity where students find others in their class who have at least one similar interest. The circles are then attached (i.e., stapled, glued) like dominoes (see Figure 1). This gives students and teachers a visual of all of the common threads in the class.

**Figure 1.** The Common Threads Activity in a third-grade classroom.

4. **Conduct community interviews.**
Getting to know the people around us can be challenging for many, particularly when youth want to learn about adults in their community. Identify people of interest in the community. Help students design general interview questions that encourage them to ask personal and professional questions. Once prepared with questions and some interview techniques, students conduct the interviews and record the answers. Sharing the interviews with classmates is one way for students to learn more about and connect with other people.

5. **Provide self-study activities.** These are teacher-designed activities that give students an opportunity to know themselves as learners. These activities go beyond students telling the class their names and what they like to do for fun. Rather, self-study asks students to draw a picture of how they learn or the environment in which they learn best. It can include writing letters to teachers and peers about techniques that facilitate and hinder learning. Self-study can include discussions or learning activities that are difficult or easy. The goal of self-study activities is to guide students to know them-

selves as learners and know the other learners in the classroom.

6. **Match compelling literature with student characteristics.** Classrooms are filled with magazines, newspapers, and read-aloud stories. Matching student characteristics with the characteristics of a character in a story or a subject of a current event can give students another way of identifying who they are within the community. If a character in a story is industrious, the teacher and others in the group can identify peers who are industrious as well. This activity also gives class members an opportunity to see less familiar students in a new way.

7. **Play community bingo.** Create bingo cards much like the traditional game. Instead of numbers and letters, insert phrases such as "owns pet," "volunteers in the community," "has lived in this community for his or her entire life." Depending on class size, have at least 15 squares on the sheet. Give each student a bingo card. Students search the room and obtain signatures of classmates who match the phrases, and these classmates write their
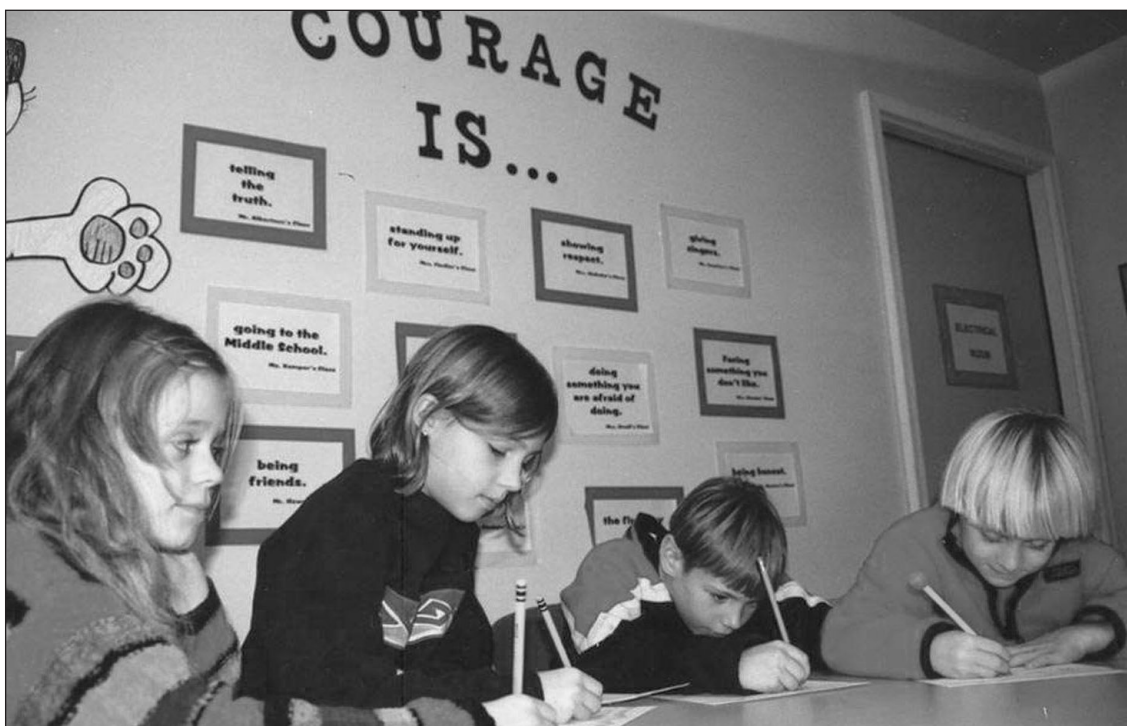
names in the appropriate squares. Students should be encouraged to use each classmate's signature once or twice so that they will have the opportunity to connect with several classmates. The objective is to cover the entire bingo card with signatures. There is no winner in community bingo; rather, helping everyone to cover their entire sheet promotes cooperation, questioning skills, and sharing information.

Facilitating a sense of influence:
Students learn that they have power and that what they say is important.

8. **Conduct classroom meetings.** Begin each week with a classroom meeting. Discuss academic items, providing opportunities for students to discuss and make collective decisions about classroom time management, learning experiences, and classroom relationships. Be sure to have all participants, including the teacher, sitting at the same level. Encourage all students to participate, perhaps by using a "talking stick." Whoever holds the talking stick has the attention of everyone else.

9. **Provide students with choices.** Teachers who provide students with opportunities to choose activities or assignments empower students. Start by giving an assignment that offers students a choice of two to five activities. Later, expand the use of choices by allowing students to work independently or in a small group. Also, vary choices by offering a menu of activities. Students may choose three during the week. The following week, students may choose three different activities. Choices empower students and allow them to consider their own strengths and weaknesses. Choice making also facilitates self-advocacy.

10. **Use group contingency management strategies.** To build students' sense of influence, reduce the use of individual rewards and tokens and reward positive behaviors through group reinforcement structures. When shaping classroom behaviors, such as inviting others into the group, reward the group, not individuals. Students in the group work toward a common goal that they determine.

11. **Participate in community service.** Achieving real goals builds real self-confidence and a sense of empowerment. Create structured opportunities for students to address a community need (e.g., eliminating trash in the park). Include a discussion of the problem, the community need associated with the problem, what students can feasibly do, the development of an action plan, and reflection on the experience of implementing the action plan. The written or verbal reflection attends to what students learned about the community and its needs, the role of cooperation and interdependence in meeting the need, and the development of new relationships.

12. **Use a sharing chair.** This idea is borrowed from the "author's chair" typically used during writers' workshops to share writing samples with others. The sharing chair gives a student or a small group of students an opportunity to bring an issue, current event, concern, or celebration item to the group. The primary purpose of the sharing chair is to give chair holders an opportunity to lead the group in a discussion of personal importance. Students are coached on techniques for including all students in the conversation.

13. **Teach active listening.** Teach students how to be active listeners and how to let others know they are actively listening. We let people know what they say is important by how we respond to what they say and do. Even when not agreeing with everything that is said, students can learn to validate another's voice. Skills include nonverbal cues such as eye contact, nodding one's head, and leaning in toward the speaker. Verbal cues include summarizing the speaker's comments (e.g., "Are you saying . . . ?" "I agree with . . . ") and asking probing questions (e.g., "Will you tell me more about . . . ?" "Explain how . . .").

14. **Use classroom jobs.** Students who take on a variety of classroom jobs learn how people cooperate and depend on one another in a community. To achieve a sense of influence,

it is essential that classroom jobs are interdependent and, in sum, that they create a positive community. Create real jobs or tasks, and be equitable in distributing roles to every student. Rotate jobs frequently. Encourage students to take on jobs for which they have a particular skill and also those that may be challenging and provide an opportunity to learn something new.

Facilitating a sense of openness:
Students learn to share academic and affective experiences in a safe environment.

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15. **Display a celebration board.** Use a bulletin board to celebrate the good citizens in your class. For example, display photographs of students in collaborating situations. Show examples of student work and writing that exemplifies community. Highlight students who do good deeds that benefit the class and the school. Vary the board often, and post examples of good citizens as often as they
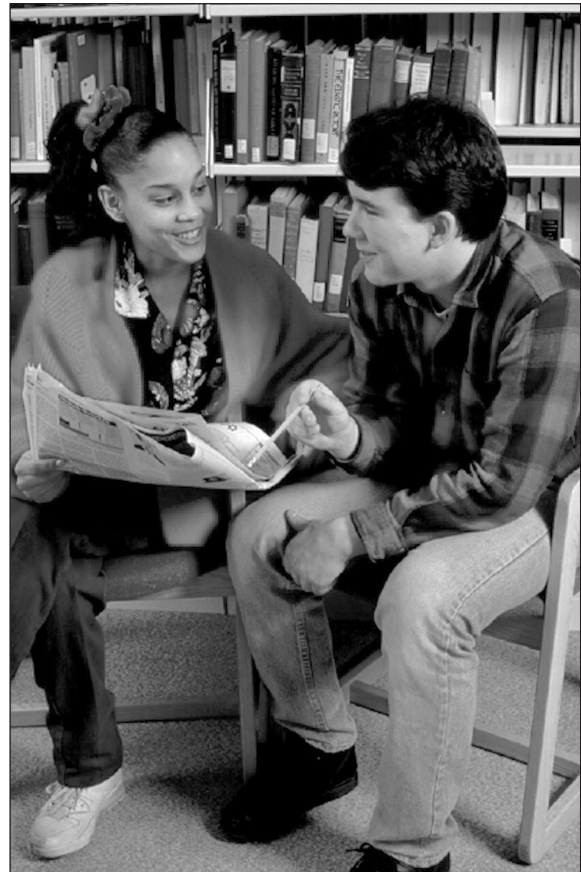
arise. Use the bulletin board as more than a display. Take time to celebrate every posting.

16. **Use cooperative learning.** This item is a friendly reminder to use best practices in cooperative learning. Heterogeneously group students in positive learning situations that include both group and individual accountability. Assign each student a specific and meaningful role in the group. Carefully choose learning experiences that are best suited for group settings.

17. **Build mentoring relationships.** For each student, determine several areas of strength, both academic and social. Work with a classroom of younger students, and pair an older student with a younger one. Early in the process, structure time and experiences for the two to work together. As the mentoring relationship develops, continue to provide time but offer less structured experiences so that the pair of students can determine the continuing development of the relationship.

18. **Teach decision making and problem solving.** Using concrete and relevant situations, encourage students to individually and collectively deliberate on a variety of issues for the purpose of learning to mediate, negotiate, and build consensus. Encourage students to identify the issue or problem from multiple perspectives and propose multiple solutions. Determine what criteria should be used to make the decision and then analyze and evaluate the proposed solutions using appropriately defined criteria.

19. **Use reciprocal teaching.** This technique, typically used to enhance reading comprehension, develops a shared relationship between teacher and students and between students and students. The roles of teacher and student become more fluid as every student takes on the responsibility of teaching. Teachers model questioning strategies for students and then gradually turn over the teacher's role of questioner to the students. Students ask each other questions about a reading and ulti-

mately learn to facilitate a discussion with other students in the group.

20. **Encourage self-assessment.** Provide opportunities for students to assess their own performance. These opportunities suggest to students that the teacher trusts them to be accurate, honest, and thoughtful. Sharing assessment and evaluation with students creates an open environment far removed from the policing teacher who makes all of the rules and decisions. Self-assessment gives students an opportunity to identify personal strengths and weaknesses. Students' perceptions of their work may provide teachers with insight into the value students place on schoolwork and their interest and commitment to particular tasks.

A healthy classroom community exists when students feel included in the group, know they have influence in how the community functions, and trust they can be open with their feelings, abilities, and opinions. Teachers should focus their community-building efforts by select-ing activities in each of the three categories (*inclusion*, *influence*, and *openness*).

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