

Literature Synthesis

How do we as teachers develop strategies that allow our students to find value in each other and form a larger community of learning?

When I was in college, I majored in Asian studies. A lot of coursework was around reading ancient Chinese literature, and trying to understand how the meaning of the work was relevant in our current society. As I was contemplating how to begin my final literature synthesis of my Masters degree, I reflected on two of these proverbs that kept coming back to me given the equity based research theme I'm working on now. "Only when all contribute their firewood can they build a strong fire" is the first proverb, and "A single tree makes no forest; one string makes no music" is the second (Chinese Proverbs). In short, as a community, we can do far more together than what we can do alone. And I believe this. Or at least I want to. However the challenge to create a sense of shared community in the classroom is not as simple as it seems. For this cycle of our research lesson, my lesson study group came up with the equity based research theme that asks, "How do we as teachers develop strategies that allow our students to find value in each other and form a larger community of learning?" In this paper I will discuss the common themes and connections that I read throughout the different articles, explain where I saw disagreement and divergence, and explain how what I read directly affected the way I think about my own classroom. At the end of the essay, I will present my own claim, that curriculum should be designed not only to encourage students to see the value in each other, but to be focused on learning about each other, and rewarded when everyone does well.

Classroom Community Through Relationships

Throughout the different articles, everyone agreed that relationships and trust are common pillars for building community. Teachers need to build relationships with students in order for students to gain trust in their teachers. Teachers also need to give students opportunities to build relationships with each other. When writing about caring for students, Booker explains that if teachers can model what a trusting relationship looks like, students will better be able to form them amongst each other, "What I've learned through the years is in secondary... It really starts with me. If they can build that rapport with me, hopefully it will trickle down." (Booker, 2021 p. 72). Similarly, Nieto and Valery discuss how students' own sense of community is directly tied to their perception of how they are being cared for by their teachers and their school as a whole. "Students' sense of community correlates strongly with their sense of being cared about, treated in a caring way, valued as individuals, and accepted as part of school (Nieto, Valery, 2006 p. 73). In an interview with a student at Nowell Academy, an alternative school in Rhode Island that primarily serves students who come from difficult circumstances, the student explains why this school has been different for him, "We're not just a regular school. We're a community. We're there for one another." (Chu, Casimere 2023 p. 2). The authors can agree that when students feel seen and heard, by both their teachers and their peers, they are more likely to

want to participate in class, engage in the community, and feel valued as an individual that's part of a greater whole.

Methods for Community Building

Though every author emphasized the importance of relationships as a starting point to building community, where authors started to diverge was in their explanations of how to connect students to one another. Most articles focused on one pedagogical approach to allow students to connect and find value in working with their peers. Though many of the examples in the articles are not inherently in disagreement with one another, they each offer their own brand of community building, like different options at a buffet; each with their own flavors, but none of them a full meal. Complex Instruction (Tomlinson 2017) is a pedagogical approach where teachers design lessons and activities that requires multiple perspectives, skill sets, and abilities. When executed correctly, Complex Instruction provides opportunities within assignments for students to get to know each other and see the value in their peers. Classroom contracts (Booker 2021) are a collaborative method that provide a way for students to co-construct rules that support a sense of belongingness in the community. Teachers work with students to brainstorm and create a contract of behavioral norms and expectations that each student has to sign, with hopes that this accountability creates a sense of shared community. Many of the authors also expressed the importance of class discussion in building community, and discussed similar types of practices, only using different names to describe them. For example, Inner-Outer Circle (Loyd, Kolodziej, Brashears 2016), is just another name for a Socratic Seminar (Franco 2013). Though many of the articles provided one or two potential strategies to improve peer to peer work, it felt more like each author was pitching their own idea, hoping to sell the strategy to the reader more than offer the pros and the cons of the method itself. However, after reading each essay, I still left hungry.

The Challenges of Classroom Community in 2024

I'm a firm believer that students have so much to learn from one another. I was excited to explore this topic, talking to other teachers, reading articles, and thinking about how to create meaningful change in my own classroom to create a more cohesive classroom. However, the more I learned, the less confident I became in being able to create the kind of community I'd like to see develop in my classroom. The effects of social media, challenges with mental health, and past arguments or "beef" as the students like to call it, all have a negative effect on students learning to trust each other. In her article, Booker interviews two teachers that sum up how students' experiences outside of the classroom directly affect their learning. "They are so worried about what their friends are doing... what they are posting. The kids will go on social media and embarrass or call them out or start fights over it. You rarely have it in class face to face. It's always because of something that happened outside of school that's being brought into school." (Booker, 2021 p. 76). In my own class, I had students fill out a survey where they were to look at a list of the roster of the classroom and put down a number next to each name, based on how well they knew them. I created a scale from 0-5, where 0 is not being able to pick the person out of a line up, and 5 is best friend. When I presented this task to my students, they all agreed there needed to be an amendment to the assignment. They wanted me to add a -1 score for all of their enemies, or as they call them, "opps". The students often don't see each

other as resources, but instead as potential enemies. Most students would rather stick to their own small friend group than risk widening their circle to others in class.

The Classroom as a Setting for What Could Be

Though many of the authors discussed different methods and strategies for building and maintaining classroom communities, there was very little discussion on how to change the learning goals. We live in a society where as much as it's seen as a positive thing to be able to work well with others, making sure you succeed is the number one priority. What if it wasn't? I believe that curriculum should be designed not only to encourage students to see the value in each other, but to be focused on learning about each other, and rewarded if everyone does well. When I taught 2nd grade English in Taiwan, 10 years ago, I had a rule that if everyone brought in their homework signed by their parents, I would order a pizza for the class. With a group of 15 2nd graders, this never actually happened, however a sense of accountability was created where students felt they needed to do something not for the sake of themselves or for their teacher, but for the larger group as a whole. I believe that these kinds of systems would help foster a community in the classroom, even if at first it felt awkward or strange, rewarding everyone when the group succeeds, not just the individual. Going more in depth, creating assignments where students need to interview one another, be tasked to write, draw, or create a piece of work that requires them to see the world from the perspectives of their peers, and learn how to ask each other for help without it seeming like a burden are all challenges that I will take up next year when I start my second year of teaching. I believe that creating classroom community in today's day and age is harder than ever, but it's also extremely important; which takes me to the final Chinese proverb: If you want happiness for an hour - take a nap. If you want happiness for a day - go fishing. If you want happiness for a year - inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime - help someone else (Chinese Proverb).

Reference List

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