

# CLASSROOM COMMUNITY: THE WHY, WHO, HOW, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN DEVELOPING ONE

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## INQUIRY QUESTIONS

- What are the current methods of Community Building?**
- How does classroom space impact students?**
- How do classroom stakeholders impact the sense of community?**
- Can SEL curriculum help create a sense of community?**

## TOPIC DEFINITION

Community can be defined as a social organization whose members know and care about each other, a clear sense of shared values, and a shared purpose that members of the community feel personal commitment and strive towards together. As 21<sup>st</sup> Century teaching methods gravitate towards student-centered learning the community within the classroom becomes even more impactful on their learning. Teachers are the tone setter, so naturally community is established or cratered by our actions.

## TPEP ALIGNMENT

**Criterion 5: Fostering and managing a safe, positive learning environment.**

**Descriptor: Learning environment: the teacher fosters and manages a safe and inclusive learning environment that takes into account: Physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being of students.**

## CURRENT COMMUNITY BUILDING METHODS

Many such methods exist in community development outside of painful ice breakers! Teachers play a large role in the culture of their classroom and can establish or destroy whether everyone feels accepted. Common traits exist like:

- Stefanie Sorbet (2020) recommends that a positive classroom environment requires procedures, rules, reasonable consequences, preparing the whole child, fostering intrinsic motivation, SEL, parent involvement, parent communication, volunteering, weekly progress, tricks of the trade, teacher awareness, group alerting, close proximity, choosing our words carefully, establishing rapport with students.
- Problem Based Learning can improve the sense of community in the classroom. This is because PBL increases social interaction, promotes student autonomy, and increases student motivation to learn the content.<sup>1</sup>
- The Teacher clearly establishes the routines, procedures, and rules at the beginning of the school year for them to be most effective.<sup>17</sup>
- Limiting Classroom Rules to 5 or less. This helps with memory and enforcement

## CLASSROOM SPACE: DOES IT MATTER?

Simply put, Duh! The physical space can either promote inhibit the creation and existence of a community.

- Outside of the United States architectural research for educational spaces has focus: how to design innovative learning environments (LEs) which are "learning spaces that provide a greater degree of spatial variation, geographic freedom and access to resources for students and teachers than traditional classrooms"<sup>10</sup>
- Spatial elements such as lighting, airflow, temperature, furniture, and so on have been proven to affect learning behaviors, learning outcomes, and student well-being.<sup>11</sup>
- flexible, open classroom design encouraged movement and interaction. Students felt that an open and flexible classroom "erased the line" between students and instructors.<sup>12</sup>
- The IRIS Center (2020) recommends arranging your room to prioritize efficient traffic patterns, support frequent interaction, minimizing distractions and disruptive events, and matching arrangement with instructional format.<sup>13</sup>

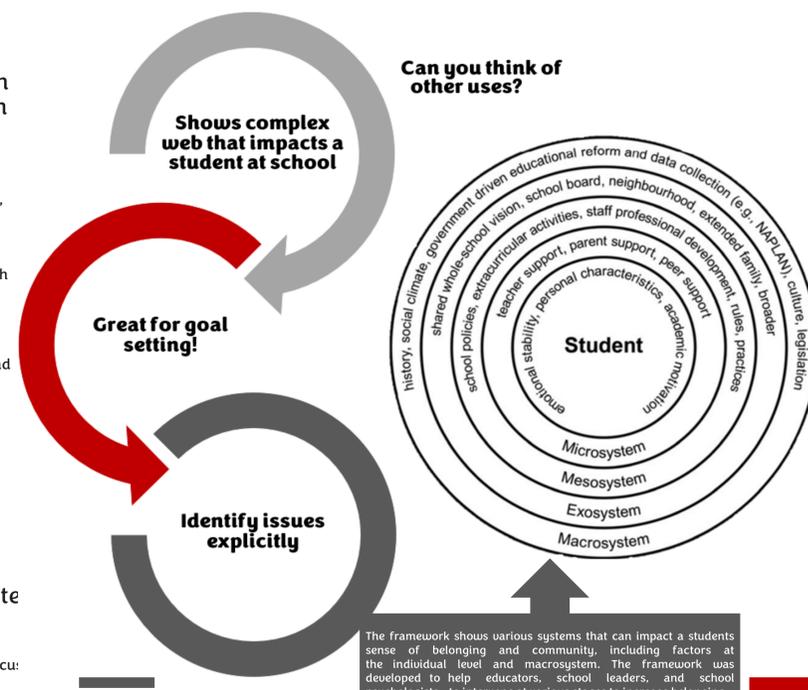


Classroom redesign before and after. Reproduced from Rands & Gansemer-Topf (2017), *Journal of Learning Spaces*, 6(1), p. 27. © 2017 Iowa State University.

## WHY SHOULD TEACHERS CARE ABOUT COMMUNITY?

- Positive classroom relationships are crucial for academic, motivational, behavioral, and emotional success.<sup>5</sup>
- Student-centered learning approaches in general are key in community development by allowing space for academic interaction, engagement, and active learning. By giving students agency and autonomy, students are more likely to bond and reflect the expressed goals and values of a community.<sup>6</sup>
- Positive Working Environment leads to less burnout
- Finding sense of belonging is integral to the human condition and naturally students, who are just beginning to find their sense of self, crave belonging as well.
- Social Dynamics simply cannot be avoided effectively or in a healthy manner.
- Modeling and practicing social skills sets them up for success in life

## CLASSROOM STAKEHOLDERS



The socio-ecological framework of school belonging. Reprinted from Allen et al. (2016), *Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, 33, 97–121. © 2016 Australian Psychological Society.

### Students

Students factor in highly! The teacher may establish expectations and culture, it is up to the students to buy in. Intrinsic motivation and physical needs impact social participation.<sup>2</sup> Students desire classroom environments that support peer and teacher relationships, and spaces that facilitate these connections.<sup>3</sup> Students feel less alienated and more connected to school when they feel welcome, supported, valued, and represented.<sup>4</sup>

### Staff

The teacher establishes the procedures, norms, standards, instruction style, layout, and more. The teachers' attitudes, emotional intelligence, and biases also impact their students' sense of community. Emotionally intelligent teachers can more effectively manage classroom behavior, engage with students, and increase the emotional intelligence of their students.<sup>7</sup> Mutually supportive relationships are most likely to develop when the teacher clearly demonstrates the value of interpersonal kindness and intentionally advocates for it.

### Families & Locals

Those outside the school play a role as well! Just as students pick up on teachers' emotional intelligence and biases, so too do they pick it up at home. Additionally, high family expectations of school performance increases learning outcomes and pride.<sup>9</sup>

## DOES SEL HELP?

Social Emotional Learning or SEL was developed to address emotional intelligence. Higher emotional intelligence greatly aids in the ability to participate in the classroom. Developing it within SEL curriculum can benefit community development as well.

- A 2011 study of 270,000 students found that students who had SEL curriculum in their school had more positive learning outcomes than students who did not receive SEL instruction.<sup>13</sup>
- students with high emotional intelligence were better at resolving conflicts, displaying empathy, and maintaining a positive social atmosphere. They further found that high emotional intelligence leads to more positive social interactions among peers.<sup>14</sup>
- Other SEL strategies that can help with developing and maintaining a classroom community such as Academic discussion, self-reflection/assessment, and student voice and choice.<sup>15</sup>

## ENSURING EQUITY

Lastly but perhaps most importantly in ensuring the community is equitable and inclusive to all your students. A community is not successful if students feel excluded.

- Social exclusion and a lack of community at school can lead students to avoid school or drop out altogether.<sup>16</sup>
- Be observant of social dynamics as social exclusion can be hard to detect.
- Teacher's can serve as the invisible hand that can either promote or inhibit an equitable and inclusive classroom community. A teacher must intentionally and meaningfully address their own implicit biases.
- Students who do not feel seen in the classroom and curriculum will struggle to feel valued, and thus, less willing to participate.

## SO WHAT NOW?

I plan to be a substitute teacher and paraeducator around the Palouse next year while I gain more experience and develop my teacher identity. I can still practice establishing a safe and inclusive room while I substitute in preparation of when I gain a classroom to community. With all this research in mind I think my general useability tips are.

- Intentionally Reflect on your biases and identity. There are several methods to do this.
- Generate an action plan of what you envision your classroom being like. (Procedures, rules, curriculum, values you want to promote and not etc).
- Prioritize Student-Centered Learning. Buy in to the classroom will increase if they have bought in to what they're learning!
- Be intentional with how you address or ignore student behavior. Don't forget to be positive when its warranted!
- Take a risk and talk to your students about their lives! If you expect care and commitment, show it back to them!

# Sources

1. (Ferreira and Trudel, 2012, p. 29).
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3. (Woolner & Cardellino, 2022, p. 132).
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5. (Saxer et al., 2024, p. 7).
6. (Solomon, Battistich, Kim, and Watson, 1996 p. 241).
7. (Qazi, Iftikhar, Murk, Mehak, 2024, p. 292).
8. (Allen, Vella-Brodrick, and Waters, 2016, p. 108
9. Fan, X., & Chen, M. (2001). Parental Involvement and Students' Academic Achievement: A Meta-Analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 13(1), 17.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23358867>
10. (Woolner, Cardellino, 2022, p.5)
11. (Wang, et. Al, 2021 p. 62)
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14. (Sorbet and Notar, 2022, p.5)
15. (Srinivason, 2016, 64)
16. (Juwonen et al., 2019).