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Introduction

The Beginnings of a Belief System

Most people have no time to settle into the essence of a place or the essence of a person and recognize the beauty in that place or person. All living things have it. All living things emanate such grace and beauty, but you don't get energy from it unless you recognize it and honor it. . . . It is not just what you say to the people around you, but what you think.

—Chris Schimmoeller, *A Dance With the Woods* (p. 27)

MY FIRST TEACHING EXPERIENCE was with a fourth-grade class created after the first 6 weeks of a new school year. Two large classes were divided into three manageable ones, and I was hired to teach the new class. The other two fourth-grade teachers chose nine children from each of their classes to go into the new one. You can probably guess what happened. On my first day, I found myself working with 18 young people who were feeling rejected, angry, disappointed, and stupid. I temporarily put my plan book aside and focused my efforts on reconnecting the students to school. Together we sat in a circle and talked about the difficulty of being taken from one class, with all its familiar routines, and

being plunked down into a new one. I shared my own misgivings about moving into a new community, teaching in an unfamiliar school, and having my own class for the first time. It was the beginning of an unintentional community-building process. I learned more in that first hour about teaching and making connections than I had in my previous 2 years of graduate school training. Over time we grew into a solid, supportive classroom community where students listened to each other and worked together. Each person felt as if he or she had a place and purpose.

Since that time, as a teacher and then workshop facilitator, I have been in search of ways to replicate what happened spontaneously in my first class. This book is an attempt to share some of what I have found. Teachers, after all, interact daily with young people and can have a profound impact on their lives. The ways in which they communicate with their students, the messages they deliver, and the lessons they teach can help create emotionally coded experiences that make lasting imprints. Such imprints can have a direct effect on a student's self-perception. If the imprint is positive and validating, the emotional memory of the imprinted moment will be positive. If, on the other hand, a child experiences a negative and hurtful event (especially in front of others), that child will feel hurt or scared whenever something happens that is reminiscent of the original event. The child may continue to experience the pain, fear, or anger over and over again long after the original event has passed.

Family counselor John Bradshaw speaks and writes on the impact of parents on children's core beliefs and sense of personal power. He uses the metaphor of a doorknob and its location to illustrate what happens to young people as they deal with

the world. He imagines the child in a room with a single door for escape. If the doorknob is located on the outside, the child is not in control over what happens to him or her. If another person wants to turn the doorknob and open the door, it is opened, whether or not the child wants that to happen. Likewise if someone else wants to keep the door closed, it stays closed. The child copes and deals with each situation as best he or she can. However, if the doorknob is located on the inside, the young person can determine if and when the door opens.

When social skills are taught (asking for help, working with others, making friends, making decisions, and solving problems, for example), children have access to the doorknob. The more skills a child has and the more positive experiences or memories that child affiliates with those skills, the more personal power the young person will accrue.

We can help our students develop their personal powers if we work to create a sense of community and connection within the classroom through the teaching of social skills. By consciously teaching social skills and applying them in the classroom setting, the teacher is building a sense of community through shared experience and honorable action. It should particularly be our goal to help produce children who are *resilient*—young people who demonstrate flexibility and adaptability in the face of life's challenges. This book offers guidance in doing just that.

Section 1 deals with the notion of a classroom community and offers suggestions for turning a group of students into a true community of learners. Section 2 spells out the components of what I refer to as a "Culture of Caring." Section 3 provides the practitioner with a variety of group processes and team-building

experiences designed to strengthen and maintain the classroom community, while Section 4 focuses entirely on teaching empathy as a social skill in a unit format. Together these four sections will emphasize how to name, teach, and transfer specific social skills while creating an emotionally safe and unified classroom environment.

Section One

The Classroom Community

*This is the bright home
in which I live,
this is where
I ask
my friends
to come,
this is where I want
to love all the things
it has taken me so long
to learn to love.*

—David Whyte, *The House of Belonging* (p. 6)

ESTABLISHING A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

What Is a Classroom Community?

A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY IS A PLACE where students feel safe both emotionally and physically, where they feel supported, and where they feel enthusiastic about the discoveries each new school day will bring. It is a place where every individual is honored and where a sense of interdependence is built into the culture. David

Whyte's poem speaks of such a place—where a person feels most at home, free to be his or her own true self without fear of being judged, labeled, or excluded. In this “house of belonging” an individual's unique life experience is embraced, celebrated, and treasured; to belong to the group does not mean giving up one's individuality. The classroom community, properly constructed, is also a house of belonging, and students thrive when exposed to the sense of security such a community can provide.

In a classroom community all community members have significant roles to play, just as in a tribal village where each individual's skill and talent is necessary to the survival and function of the group. There is great pride in such a situation; people are honored for who they are, and a sense of belonging and collective purpose is fortified. Malidoma Some (1996) writes:

Without a community you cannot be yourself. The community is where we draw the strength needed to effect changes inside of us. What one acknowledges in the formation of the community is the possibility of doing together what is impossible to do alone. This means that individual problems quickly become community problems. The individual can finally discover within the community something to relate to, because deep down inside each of us is a craving to be honored and be seen for who we are. . . . In community it is possible to restore a supportive presence for one another. The others in community are the reason that one feels the way one feels. The elder cannot be an elder if there is no community to make him an elder. The young boy cannot feel secure if there is no elder whose silent presence gives him hope in life. The adult cannot be who he is unless there is a strong sense of presence of

the other people around. This interdependency is what I call supportive presence. (p. 25)

It is our challenge as educators to facilitate this “supportive presence” in our classrooms, where kindness, compassion, generosity, and empathy must abound. It is a gift of spirit when a teacher presents numerous opportunities for discovery through inner reflection, outer focus, and direct application. Students not only learn academic, social, and other life skills, but are encouraged to apply those skills by helping, supporting, and honoring others. From this they derive the sense of significance, purpose, and accomplishment that can come from generous community-centered acts. The classroom community is not a program or series of activities but rather a “way of being.” It is a belief system that provides the foundation upon which everything that goes on inside our classrooms is situated.

TRANSFORMING A GROUP OF STUDENTS INTO A CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

Michelangelo often spoke of himself as searching to find the figure concealed in the stone, knocking the surface away as if seeking a miner buried in fallen rock.

—Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization* (p. 69)

Forsyth (1983) offers a framework for understanding the development of groups. He identifies five stages, which he calls Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Adjourning (p. 738). These stages are also evident in the process of transforming a student group.

When a group of students comes together as a class (**forming**), the simple model of group development plays out. Sensitively handled, the development can be **transforming**—turning a random group into a true community (and, like Michelangelo, working with the given materials to bring out the positive energy that was already there). The approach is easily remembered as a series of rhyming terms: **norming** (*establishing group operating procedures*), **storming** (*weathering natural dissonances*), and **performing** (*accomplishing tasks together*).

In the beginning or formative stage, a group of students and its teacher(s) are not a classroom community but a variety of individuals feeling their collective way through a maze of uncertainties. Guidelines for how the class will operate have yet to be established, and the only social connections that exist among the students are between those who already know each other.

What follows is a process of **norming**. The norms within a class will establish themselves naturally, but it is preferable for the teacher to create them intentionally, working toward the classroom culture he or she desires. If, for example, the teacher encourages, models, and facilitates cooperation, support, honor, and trust as part of the normative process, then the class will begin to internalize those behaviors. If, on the other hand, the teacher says little about the way people treat each other, tolerates subtle forms of teasing, sarcasm, and putdowns (possibly even modeling these behaviors), and speaks to the class in a stern tone from the outset, a far different norm is created—one that may create an atmosphere of fear, a lack of trust, and uncertainty.

In many schools there is often one class that has the reputation of being “the worst class that’s ever come through this