

Questions about the Learning Community

How do differences between teachers' reinforcement impact student participation in small and large group activity in a learning community? This question stems from my interest in the ways in which environments are created that contribute to students' overall learning. In my recent observation at Sweet Valley Elementary School¹, I witnessed two varying types of instruction that resulted in various behavior patterns exhibited by students, which in turn impacted the overall learning community. In a small group led by the teacher, Mrs. O, encouragement and positive reinforcement was given to students, which resulted in an increase in participation by students, thus forming an ideal learning community. However, in a large group led by Mrs. M, students lacked encouragement and voice, which resulted in a decreased level of interest, and even loss of interest, thus impacting the overall learning community.

According to Sapon-Shevin, a community has the following characteristics: security, open communication, mutual liking, shared goals and objectives, and connectedness and trust, (Sapon-Shevin, 1999, pp. 17-18). Building this type of community within my future classroom is crucial to me. I genuinely believe first and foremost teachers must establish a comfortable environment that is conducive to their students' needs-not just for academic learning, but for building relationships, fostering social interactions and for students to become comfortable about sharing themselves with others.

Teachers have the utmost responsibility to modeling behavior that students can admire as well as engaging students to learn. Teachers also have the task of assuring to their students that their social, emotional, and intellectual needs are met. Our schools and classrooms are the foundation on which students become learners, and teachers have the great duty of captivating

¹ All school and teacher names used are pseudonyms.

our students and engaging our students to learn. We must create an environment early in our students' educational career in order to ensure that schooling for them is as enjoyable and fulfilling as we hope. As a teacher, I hope to create an environment that results in positive behavior among my students-an environment that engages learners, promotes positive discourse and uses collaborative learning as described by Duckworth (1996), Cazden (1993), Kazemi (1998), Palinscar and Herrenkohl, (1999).

Sweet Valley Elementary School introduction

Sweet Valley is a K-5 elementary school with 263 students attending. It is mostly Native American (nearly 76%), with a total of 77% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. I spent most of my time observing a multi-age 1st and 2nd grade classroom with Mrs. M. Mrs. M has over twenty-five years of teaching experience and is in her 14th year of teaching at Sweet Valley. As I entered her classroom, I was impressed with the literacy-rich environment that surrounded me. For example, the library in her classroom was filled with lots of fiction and non-fiction books that were organized into categories. She called this section "Hawaii" because of the sun always shining through those windows. Various things were labeled around the room, for example, the board, desks, shelves and flag. There were also various charts posted around the front of the room, including a Know, What, Learn (KWL) chart and the words they already knew how to read and spell. Some of the words include: the, mom, dad, a, it, an, see. Literacy in the 1st and 2nd grade classroom takes place in the morning for an hour and a half block of time. Students are placed in small groups based on ability levels. Small groups are led by the teacher, Mrs. M and the music teacher, Mrs. O who has also been teaching for over twenty-five years.

Data Collection Methods

One data collection method I decided to use was narrative observation. In order to observe any differences in instructional methods, I needed to look at various ways in which students were organized during literacy tasks. For example, I needed to see how a literacy task was introduced to the whole group, how groups were organized, and what types of activities members of the group did within those groups. With narrative observation, I took data on what type of dialogue was being conducted between student and teachers, as well as conversations between student and students. Additionally, I took note of any non-verbal movements that students did, for example, eye contact, hands raised and any actual physical movement.

Another method I used was conducting an informal interview with both Mrs. M and Mrs. O. Because each led small groups during literacy blocks in a very different way, I was interested to know what thoughts they had about facilitating a small group. I asked them two main questions: How have these groups grown or further developed throughout the year? What is the purpose of this particular group? I conducted these interviews rather informally after the first day in Mrs. M's classroom, because I was fascinated by the varying styles that will be described below.

Finally, I decided to collect samples of students' activities that they did in small and large groups. This helped me see evidence as to what sorts of activities each group was involved in, as well as the amount of work that was put into each assignment. Also, it has concrete evidence of written praise given by one of the teachers, that contributed to the overall community.

In order to accurately measure what counts as evidence, certain behaviors need to be defined. One of things observed was the level of engagement displayed by students in the classroom. Engagement is any non-verbal communication, measured as the number of hands

raised, eye contact made between teachers and students, as well as between students and students. Participation also counts as students' willingness to volunteer answers. Lastly, reinforcement is defined as the level of verbal and non-verbal motivation given to students by teachers during small and large group discussion. These pieces of evidence are important because of the level in which the presence of engagement, participation and motivation differed in the small and large group setting.

Data Analysis-Small Group with Mrs. O.

According to Mrs. M, students are placed into groups according to their ability level. One particular group, which Mrs. M and Mrs. O call, the "highly capable" group is composed of five 2nd grade students. They join together in one of the corners of the room, hidden behind one of the charts. They sit in around a rectangular table, with Mrs. O at the head of the table. On this particular day, the students are to read the story, "Watch out, Ronald Morgan!"

Prior to beginning the literacy circle, students are asked by Mrs. O, how their day is going so far. This struck me because it was the first time during my observation at Sweet Valley that a teacher asked how students were doing in both the larger group as well as the smaller group. One of the most important themes discussed this quarter thus far is the importance of knowing your students, as well as students knowing one another. "The ideal [classroom] is a place in which students feel comfortable showing themselves-all their complexities-to the teacher and their classmates," (Sapon-Shevin, 1999, p. 35). All the students answered positively, with a 2nd grade boy, Zach, remarking, "I'm excited to be back!" after a few days absence. The teacher, in turn, welcomed Zach back to the group saying, "It hasn't been the same without you." This nurturing attitude that Mrs. O provided contributes to the overall existence of a community. Zach felt safe enough to tell his peers and Mrs. O that he was happy to be back, and in turn, Mrs.

O supported this by her communication. According to Sapon-Shevin (1999), “A nurturing community is a place where it is safe to be yourself. A safe, secure community allows for growth and exploration,” (Sapon-Shevin, 1999, p.16).

After a little “checking in” done by both teacher and students, the small group proceeded with their task. Before beginning their reading, Mrs. O had written vocabulary words on a flip chart. These words were: snowflake, slid, snowman, windshield, wipers, frames, and office. According to Mrs. O, these words were the words that seemed challenging for the students. In an interview with Mrs. O, she said that “having students define these vocabulary words will help further their understanding and comprehension of the text,” (Mrs. O., Personal Interview, 2003). The students proceeded to read the words out loud. Mrs. O asked them to define these words, as well as asked what types of words “snowflake, snowman” and “windshield” were. Students started to call out the definitions of these words, which all of them correctly defined. Mrs. O commented to the students on how well they were defining the words, not just by “Good job,” rather, she complimented them very specifically. The following is an exchange between members of the group and Mrs. O:

Mrs. O: Who would like to start? Raise your hands, please. (All students raised their hands immediately, calls on Zach)

Zach: Weelll, windshield is the thing that is in front of my mom’s car. Wipers are the things on top of the windshield that is on my mom’s car.

Mrs. O: Wow, Zach. What a nice way to use a real life example. ((Smiling)) That is a neat way of defining the word so that every one of us can learn what the word means. Let’s see if we can do that for the other words. Gracie, which word would like to define?

Gracie: (pauses to think for a moment) I want to define frames. Frames can hold pictures. Like that, see? (points to a picture frame on the wall) Also, my grandma wears glasses, and she calls that thing that holds the glass part, you know? She calls those frames.

Mrs. O: Yes, that is right. You see my glasses? These are the frames on the glasses. They go around the glass part. (Makes a circle around her frames).

This discourse above is an example of a common discourse found in classroom. As defined by Courtney Cazden, (1993) “this three-part sequence of teacher initiation, student response, teacher evaluation (IRE) is the most common pattern of classroom discourse at all grade levels,” (Cazden, 1993, 23). However, there were also other conversation patterns present in this small group discourse. Cazden also notes that teachers need to find relevance in what they are teaching their students, so that students can grasp the materials. She writes, “It [relevance] should be considered a characteristic not of the materials but of the relationship between the materials-any materials-and the learners. It is a fundamental teaching responsibility to find ways to help students achieve that relationship,” (Cazden, 1993, pp. 72-73).

This discourse also shows that the relationship between the students and Mrs. O is a comfortable one. The students feel comfortable in sharing what they think the words mean, and feel safe enough to speak about their family, and how that relates to the word. Sharing stories, especially including family members signifies that students not only feel secure enough to convey this information to others, but also that this is making sense of the task at hand. Dyson (1995) argues that when children use real life contexts in their writing, children are more able to understand assignments. She writes, “Children’s use of these stories allows much insight into their lives, and moreover, into the nature of meaning making itself,” (Dyson, 1995, p. 325). As a result, I felt that this type of environment that Mrs. O sets up allows for more sharing to take place, as well as her students knowing that they are able to achieve the task at hand, which in fact contribute to the ideal community that Sapon-Shevin, as well as myself argue for. The fact that she praised Zach for his idea of relating his definitions of windshield and wiper to his mother’s car and then decided to “go with it” in defining the rest of the words was admirable and shows that Mrs. O is willing to share teaching responsibilities with her students.

The students' behavior after Mrs. O commented their work and encouraged them was positive. For example, after Zach received Mrs. O's supportive comment, he had a huge smile on his face. His peers also echoed "good job" signifying a great sense of community that was built among peers. In addition, when Mrs. O commented on Gracie's definition of frames, Gracie formed a big smile on her face, which was not present during her explanation. She was also nodding as Mrs. O proceeded to relate Gracie's definition by using the concrete example of her glasses to show frames. As a result of this continued positive reinforcement coming from the teacher and transferring it to the students, students seemed more willing to volunteer answers.

In one instance, a student read one of the challenge words incorrectly. Rather than reprimanding the student for her mistake, Mrs. O consistently encouraged her and gently nudged the student. For example, when Daffy read the word "slid" as "slide", Mrs. O reminded her to carefully look at the word, and then try again. Daffy paused for a moment and was convinced that the word was still "slide". Mrs. O gently reminded Daffy and the rest of the group that, "Remember what the 'e' at the end of the sentence does to a vowel in the beginning of the word?" This was just enough prompting for Daffy to get to the correct pronunciation. The way in which Mrs. O handled Daffy's mistake is supportive of overall learning processes, according to Stigler and Hiebert (1998). "Students will learn to understand the process more fully, if they are allowed to make this mistake and then examine the consequences...struggling and making mistakes and then seeing why they are mistakes is believed to be an essential part of the learning process," (Stigler and Hiebert, 1998, p.8). Rather than reprimanding Daffy for her mistake, Mrs. O was patient, and softly steered Daffy into the right direction.

Students proceeded to start reading the story. Throughout the story, Mrs. O stops momentarily to make sure students clearly comprehended what they are reading. For example,

she would ask questions that meant students had to think back to what they read, or questions that gave the chance for students to infer from the passage. When students would show signs of difficulty reading (slowing down in pace, stumbling on words), Mrs. O would not necessarily jump in, rather she would wait. She would encourage the students to slow down and really think about the word prior to reading the word hastily. I found this to be effective in encouraging the students to continue with the task at hand and truly concentrate on their work.

After reading the story, students were to begin working on a worksheet (see appendix). The worksheet is three pages with a vocabulary section, an activity where students were to read a short passage and answer comprehension questions and the last page is a word search. Prior to beginning this particular activity, Mrs. O introduced the assignment to her students. The attitudes and discourse illustrated by students were positive, as a result of the way Mrs. O introduced the task:

Mrs. O: Okay boys and girls. Great job reading the story. Now, we are going to answer some questions that relate to the story. On the first page, use the vocabulary that we defined at the start of our day and put the correct word in the blank. The next page, read the story below and answer the questions. On the last page, complete the word search. If you are stuck, ask a friend. If you are both stumped, ask me.

The above dialogue is evident of Mrs. O's gentle approach to promote collaborative effort, collaborative problem solving as well as reciprocal teaching among her students. According to a study conducted by Palinscar and Herrenkohl, (1999), reciprocal teaching is "the focus on guiding students to use strategies that expert readers employ spontaneously," (Palinscar & Herrenkohl, 1999 p. 167). Rather than posing on herself as the authority figure, Mrs. O turned the accountability to her students, and had them become responsible for their learning. This collaboration, again, promoted a positive learning community.

As a result of promoting collaborative group work, students seemed to be more engaged more apt to participate in their task. The following is an excerpt taken from the groups' discussion:

Zach: Okay, I need help.
Betty Boop: Remember what Mrs. O said. We should ask each other.
Daffy: Oh yeah, what do you need help on?
Zach: I'm still on the first page.
Betty Boop: So am I. Which sentence?
Zach: This one. (Starts reading) "The glass blank of the car was co
Lucy: covered.
Zach: (looks up at Lucy and smiles. He continues to read) covered with
snow.
Betty Boop: Okay, yeah. (Smiling) Weeeeee, remember it is a challenge
word
Zach: Yeah I know. But I already put all the words in the blank.
Gracie: It's a word you know. You even said what it meant at the start.
(looking at Zach at the flip chart)
Zach: (looks around) Okay, lemme do it.
During this time, Mrs. O is silent; she is just looking around at the kids.
She is smiling, but no words are coming out of her mouth, she is nodding.
About a minute later, this dialogue occurs:
Zach: (He is so excited, with a big smile on his face) I GOT IT!
WINDSHIELD! The glass (emphasizing) windsheeeeeld of the car was
covered with snow, right?
Betty Boop and the other girls: Yup!
Mrs. O: Nice team work everyone. Let's move on to the next page.

Since Mrs. O set up an environment that promotes teamwork among her students, students were encouraged to help one another on their assignments. Taking note of the participation among all five students of the small group, I gathered that this type of environment set up contributed to their overall engagement and learning of the task. Mrs. O gave her students the responsibility of assisting one another when they were 'stumped', rather than proposing that students come to her when they needed help. Mrs. O, in essence, assigned her students the role of teaching, which according to Palinscar and Herrenkohl (1999), is an innovative way to engage students. "To deeply engage students with the cognitive content and with other participants in the classroom,

they need to be given roles with concomitant rights and responsibilities,” (Palinscar and Herrenkohl, 1999, pg. 169).

Data Analysis Large Group

The type of environment that was fostered during large group activities differed greatly from the environment set forth in the small group. Prior to and after dividing up into small groups, the class meets as a large group to discuss what activities were going to occur in the literacy block. Mrs. M informed her students that they needed to redo an activity. The following is the dialogue that occurred:

Mrs. M: Well, we need to do our snail activity again. They were not very good. Printing is sloppy, we did not spell correctly. Let's take our time.
Boy Student (calling out): What did you do with our papers?
Mrs. M is frowning at this point.
Girl Student (also calling out): Yeah, did you throw them away?
Mrs. M: Yes I threw them away. I threw them away after reading them. They just weren't very good. It's partly my fault really. I didn't give you enough information about snails. I learned my lesson. I will give you some information about snails before you start writing.

The preceding dialogue between Mrs. M and two members of her classroom signals that Mrs. M, is the lawful authority figure in the classroom. The control and power she demonstrated left no room for any feedback by her students, which differs greatly from the responsibility that Mrs. O gives to her students as learners and teachers. Mrs. M. left no room for mistakes, instead of having her students discover their mistakes (i.e. having their old papers to look at), Mrs. M. simply threw them away and had the final decision about starting over. Rather than giving support to her students, as Palinscar and Herrenkohl (1999) previously noted, Mrs. M. had absolute control of the situation, and in essence proclaimed that she was responsible for her students' learning, rather than having her students take responsibility for their own learning.

Mrs. M proceeded to read a non-fiction story about snails. Throughout the course of her reading, students were “oohing” and “aahing” at all the facts about snails that were being read. For example, “Snails have thousands of teeth on their tongue”. After this statement was read, students began to chatter excitedly among themselves and seemed surprised as the number of teeth snails truly had:

Boy Student: Whoa! Snails have a thousands of teeths?

Girl Student: Yeah, really, Mrs. M?

Mrs. M: That’s what it says. Let’s move on.

This exchange really surprised me because Mrs. M did not stop and recognize students’ observations. Students seemed genuinely excited about this topic, especially about this fact. Instead of acknowledging students’ interest, it seemed as though Mrs. M glazed over her students’ excitement. The type of reinforcement in this case was negative, in the fact that Mrs. M did not take the time to recognize her students’ observations.

In turn, the students exhibited a loss of interest after this exchange happened. Students started to get up from where they were sitting and start walking around the room. Students started talking among themselves, and some even came to visit me at the back of the room and asked me what I was doing. This signaled to me that students were losing their engagement in the activity.

Summary of Data Analyses

In the small group led by Mrs. O, she acquired a few key aspects, which I would argue contribute to a learning community. These key aspects were: providing an environment that is comfortable, safe, positive and an environment that promotes collaborative effort. These key

aspects, I believe, along with other researchers, contribute to a community that is conducive to students' learning, and overall development.

As a result of the type of environment that Mrs. O sets out in her small group, certain types of discourse became present, which again, contributes to the overall learning of students. One example is Cazden's (1993) notion of how students have speaking rights. In the small group, students' voices were heard in every aspect of the conversation, especially at the beginning of the small group activity. Although Mrs. O initiated conversation, students felt compelled to share what was on their minds (i.e. how they felt that day), as well as volunteer answers. The comfortable setting that Mrs. O set forth contributed to the overall engagement of her students, evident in the higher level of participation by them.

Additionally, in the small group that was led by Mrs. O, she acquired "press for learning" as defined by Elham Kazemi, in her article, "Discourse that Promotes Conceptual Understanding," (1998), which contributes to the overall ideal learning community. Three key characteristics of press for learning were evident in Mrs. O's small group, which include: Mrs. O's emphasis on students' effort; the focus on learning and understanding and the support that Mrs. O gave to her students autonomy. According to Kazemi, the "higher the press in the classroom, the more students learned," (Kazemi, 1998, p. 410). This was clearly evident in the way in which each teacher handled mistakes. For example, in Mrs. O's group, rather than pointing out Daffy's decoding mistake, Mrs. O allowed the entire group to think about the word, instead of telling them the answer. Kazemi (1998) writes that mistakes are opportunities for students to become accountable for their thinking:

Instead, her [teacher] response to this mistake was to encourage her students to explore the error by providing conceptual reasons...she engaged the entire class in thinking about which solution was correct instead of talking with only the two

presenters or correcting their mistake herself, and she created an opportunity for her students to practice articulating their thinking, (Kazemi, 1998, pg. 413)

As a result of this environment, Mrs. O encouraged her students to become thinkers of their own learning, as well as provide opportunities for her students to learn from themselves and one another.

The behaviors exhibited by Mrs. O' students after completing their task were optimistic. They completed their task within the time allotted, using their peers for assistance. After completing the worksheets, students were praised by Mrs. O both vocally and on their papers, as shown in the appendix. By using press for learning in conjunction with collaborative problem solving, Mrs. O fostered an ideal environment that contributed to their students' success and evoked positive behaviors among her students.

In contrast, the large group led by Mrs. M seemed to inhibit students' level of engagement and as a result impacted their overall learning. The key components of a learning community found in Mrs. O's group were absent in Mrs. M's group, which fostered a different type of behavior within the learning community. One important difference between the two groups is the way in which mistakes were handled. In Mrs. O's group, mistakes created an opportunity for students to learn. However, in Mrs. M's group, mistakes created a more negative environment, one with which students were not able to learn as much. Rather, Mrs. M. put an emphasis on her students making mistakes, and instead of assisting her students to learn from their mistakes, Mrs. M. provided a platform in which she became the authority figure. In Kazemi's (1998) article, she writes about a teacher who did not press her students, instead took control of the situation. "Ms. Andrew did not describe and discuss collaboration...Neither individual accountability nor consensus emerged as topics of discussion in whole-class activity. Typically, only one person would be in control of group work at any particular time and would

complete most of the work,” (Kazemi, 1998, pg. 414). This illustrates Mrs. M as the authority figure who does not allow room for discussion or her students’ voices to be heard.

The environment created by Mrs. O is indeed the type of environment that contributes to the overall community that Sapon-Shevin (1999) argue as conducive to children’s learning. It is important to take note that creating an environment in which students feel free to share themselves with others, safe, nurtured and feel valued as individuals foster a more cohesive learning environment. Mrs. O’s students felt this way, and as a result were more willing to share and were more engaged, in contrast to the behavior they exhibited when they were in Mrs. M’s large group. The students in Mrs. O’ groups were clearly more excited to learn, motivate to try and learn, and were made to feel competent by the reinforcement and encouragement given by Mrs. O.

Reflection

This specific assignment was truly a challenge. The actual work done was stimulating and it proved to be truly a learning experience. This assignment helped me synthesize the “big ideas” that I would like to take with me as I continue to my road to becoming a teacher.

As I stated in my first paper, research will be forever be an ongoing process, just as education will always be a never-ending phenomena. One of the obstacles I faced going into this assignment are my previous experiences. Teachers and researchers alike, have the challenge of always carrying with them their past experiences while they proceed with their jobs on a daily basis. Going into Sweet Valley elementary school, I almost had developed preconceptions about the school environment, this stemming from my colleagues, as well as from past experiences. During my first observation at another school, Sunny Hills Elementary School, I was highly impressed by the environment teachers developed for their students; Sunny Hills was truly a

community of learners. Prior to observing Sweet Valley, I had various foci, on what my research was going to be about. However, after only spending a few days there, I found myself immersed by the varying instructional patterns observed. Thus, my focus was examining the types of environment created by teachers, and how that impacted students in a learning community.

If I were to conduct this research again, I would have liked to spend more than three days in the classroom. A longer amount of observation would help me track any patterns conveyed by teachers and students. Certain questions came to mind as I began to shape my paper. For example, was the environment set in Mrs. O and Mrs. M's group the type of environment one can observe throughout the year? Or were those three days, just good or bad days? Research is such a complex process, that it was almost unfair to conclude that Mrs. O's teaching is a "good" way to teach, whereas Mrs. M's teaching is a "bad" way to teach.

Furthermore, it was challenging for me to actually focus on a certain research question, since so many other interesting events were taking place within the classroom. It was complicated for me to narrow down the lens in which I look through to decide what counted as evidence, and what would help me understand what was truly taking place in the classroom.

However, within the span of three short days, I was enlightened by the type of environments that were created by the teachers within the classroom. Not only did it give me insight as to what kind of environment that is conducive to children's learning, but it also solidified the sense of community I long to have within my own classroom. I truly think that this assignment gave insight to the kind of teacher I strive to become. Seeing the educational practices set forth by Mrs. O at Sweet Valley solidified my feelings about teaching. Teaching is truly a challenging career, and there are always going to be challenges to the vision, but I also

believe that teachers, like researchers, need to continue to self-reflect on who they are as individuals, and to keep their centers.

As teachers, we need to motivate our students to become critical thinkers of their own education and understanding. We, as teachers, in essence, become students of our own students. Through all the readings and school observations, as well as past experiences with children, in addition to the world around me, I am constantly re-evaluating my role as a teacher as well as what my personal philosophy of public schooling is. I know the kind of teacher I want to be, which is constantly being tested with every relationship I form and have. I want to be a teacher that fosters my students' learning and engagement with the world around them. In order to do this, an environment in my classroom must be created, with one that parallels democratic ideals and beliefs. Among those that are important to me are trust, civil discourse and civic engagement, which were all present in Mrs. O's group. Those traits, along with the others we visited and will continue to visit are crucial in preparing our students to become active participants in a democratic society.

I want to be a teacher who supports and motivates my students to their fullest potential. However, in order to do this, I must examine my personal character, and keep this character as I move through my career as an educator. In the chapter from *The Beat of a Different Drummer*, titled, "In Keeping with Character", Roger Soder (1999) illustrates the importance of keeping your center as a teacher, using Mr. John Goodlad as a living example. As educators we face great challenges and obstacles along the way, but what is so important to keep in mind, which Soder (1999) gracefully writes in his piece, is that we keep our center as teachers. Principles are so important to keep in mind as we move on our career paths. Through time, we will often be tested not just by our students, but also by our colleagues, principals, parents as well as district

administrators. It is key to keep in mind and in our hearts what our values and principles are as educators, for that is the reason we persevere. While battling our challenges, we must keep focusing on why we are here in the first place; we are here for our students, to help them discover their passions and to continue motivating and encouraging their pursuit of these passions. We must create an environment that will be conducive to our students' growth in our classrooms, but also in their development, as they become participating and engaging citizens of our democratic society.

This particular class, along with 511, has really opened my eyes to the ways in which educators continue to make impact on their students. Teachers don't necessarily produce knowledge; we share this knowledge to our students, and to the world around us. We are individuals who continue to learn and share this learning with others; that is what we do.