Schools as Caring, Learning Communities

What the best and wisest parent
wants for his (her) own child
that must the community
want for all of its children.
Any other idea . . .
is narrow and unlovely.
John Dewey

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What do we mean by a caring, learning community?

Learning community

Learning is neither limited to what is formally taught nor to time spent in classrooms. It occurs whenever and wherever the learner interacts with the surrounding environment. All facets of the community (not just the school) provide learning opportunities – thus the term learning community.

Teaching

Whenever a surrounding environment tries to facilitate learning, the process can be called teaching. Teaching occurs at school, at home, and in the community at large. It may be formalized or informally transmitted. Teaching happens most positively when the learner wants to learn something and the surrounding environment wants to help the learner do so. That is, positive learning is facilitated when the learner *cares* about learning and the teacher *cares* about teaching. The whole process undoubtedly benefits greatly when all the participants *care* about each other. Teaching in no way guarantees that learning will take place. Teaching in an uncaring way probably does guarantee problems will arise.

Caring has moral, social, and personal facets

All facets need to be addressed. When all facets of caring are present and balanced, they can nurture individuals and facilitate the process of learning. At the same time, caring in all its dimensions should be a major focus of what is taught and learned. This means a focus throughout on fostering positive socio-emotional and physical development.

Teachers are all who want to facilitate learning

This includes professional regular and specialist teachers; school administrators; support service personnel; classified staff; family members; students; aides; volunteers from the community and from institutions of higher education; school and community librarians, recreation staff, and mentors; teachers-in-training and other professionals-in-training; etc.. Together, they all constitute what can be called *the teaching community*.

Everyone is a learner and may be teachers

In the learning/teaching community, all are learners and probably play some role as teachers.

Teaching benefits from organizational learning

Organizational learning requires an organizational structure "`where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision and improve shared mental models' [Senge et al, 1994] by engaging in different tasks, acquiring different kinds of expertise, experiencing and expressing different forms of leadership, confronting uncomfortable organizational truths, and searching together for shared solutions" (Hargreaves, 1994).

Communities of colleagues

In schools, the way to relieve "the uncertainty and open-endedness in teaching" is to create "communities of colleagues who work collaboratively [in cultures of shared learning and positive risk-taking] to set their own professional standards and limits, while still remaining committed to continuous improvement. Such communities can also bring together the professional and personal lives of teachers in a way that supports growth and allows problems to be discussed without fear of disapproval or punishment" (Hargreaves, 1994).

***Why should a school be the hub of a community and
a classroom be a student's home away from home?***

Schools often seem apart from the community

Most schools could do their job better if they were experienced as an
integral and positive part of the community – perhaps even as the heart of
the community. Schools and classrooms often are seen as separate from the
community in which they reside. This contributes to a lack of connection
between school staff and parents, students, other community residents, and
community agency personnel. Development of a caring, learning
community requires creating positive connections between school and
community.

School-community partnerships

For schools to be seen as an integral part of the community, steps must be
taken to create and maintain collaborative partnerships between school and
community with respect to weaving together (blending) learning
opportunities, programs, services, and use of facilities, personnel, and other
resources.

Opening-up use of the school site

Besides increasing home involvement in schools and schooling, schools
must facilitate increased use of school sites as places where parents,
families, and other community residents can engage in learning, recreation,
enrichment, and can connect with services they need.

Welcoming and social support for students

Most classrooms can do their job better if students feel they are truly
welcome and have a range of social supports. Thus, a major focus for
school-community collaborative partnership is establishment of a program
that effectively welcomes and connects new students with peers and adults
at school who can provide social support and advocacy.

Welcoming and social support for parents/families

Increased home involvement in school is more likely if families feel they
are truly welcome and have a range of social supports. Thus, a major focus
for school-community collaborative partnership is establishment of a
program that effectively welcomes and connects newly enrolled families
with other families, with school staff, and with ongoing social support and
home involvement programs.

Volunteers

Parents and other family members, peers, and other volunteers help break down the barriers between school and community. Thus, a major focus for school-community collaborative partnership is establishment of a program that effectively recruits, screens, trains, and nurtures volunteers.

Helping students feel a sense of interpersonal connection

Personalized instruction and regular student conferencing, cooperative learning strategies, curriculum focused on fostering social and emotional development, opportunities to have special status, peer tutoring, peer counseling and mediation, human relations and conflict resolution programs – all can contribute to students feeling positively connected to the classroom.

What is a psychological sense of community?

People can be together without feeling connected or feeling they belong or feeling responsible for a collective vision or mission. At a school, a psychological sense of community exists when enough stakeholders are committed to each other and to the school's goals and values and exert effort to pursue the goals and maintain relationships with each other. A perception of community is shaped by daily experiences and probably is best engendered when a person senses s/he is welcome, supported, nurtured, respected, liked, connected to others in reciprocal relationships, and a valued member who is contributing to the collective identity, destiny, and vision.

Practically speaking, a conscientious effort by enough stakeholders associated with a school seems necessary for a sense of community to develop and be maintained. Such effort must ensure there are mechanisms that provide support, promote self-efficacy, and foster positive working relationships. That is, a perceived sense of community seems to require that a critical mass of participants not only are committed to a collective vision, but also are committed to working together in supportive and efficacious ways. There is an obvious relationship between maintaining a sense of community and sustaining morale and minimizing burn out.

About School and Classroom Climate

The concept of *climate* plays a major role in shaping the quality of school life, teaching, learning, and support. School and classroom climate are temporal, and somewhat fluid, perceived qualities of the immediate setting which emerge from the complex transaction of many factors. In turn, the climate reflects the influence of the underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, and traditions that constitute the school *culture*. And, of course, the climate and culture at a school also are shaped by the surrounding political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

School and classroom climate sometimes are referred to as the learning environment, as well as by terms such as atmosphere, ambience, ecology, and milieu. Depending on quality, the impact on students and staff can be beneficial for or a barrier to learning.

Key concepts for understanding school and classroom climate are social system organization; social attitudes; staff and student morale; power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures; curricular and instructional practices; communicated expectations; efficacy; accountability demands; cohesion; competition; "fit" between learner and classroom; system maintenance, growth, and change; orderliness; and safety. Moos (e.g., 1979) groups such concepts into three dimensions: (1) Relationship (i.e., the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment; the extent to which people are involved in the environment and support and help each other); (2) Personal development (i.e., basic directions along which personal growth and self-enhancement tend to occur); and (3) System maintenance and change (i.e., the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change).

Research has indicated a range of strategies for enhancing a positive climate. All school staff have a significant role to play in ensuring that such strategies are well-implemented and maintained. (See Appendix.)

What's involved in working together?

Collaboration and collegiality

These concepts are fundamental to improving morale and work satisfaction and to the whole enterprise of transforming schools to meet the needs of individuals and society. *Collaborative cultures* foster collaborative working relationships which are spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, and pervasive across time and space. When collegiality is *mandated*, it often produces what has been called *contrived collegiality* which tends to breed inflexibility and inefficiency. Contrived collegiality is administratively regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space, and predictable (Hargreaves, 1994).

Teacher collaboration and teaming

Increasingly it is becoming evident that teachers need to work closely with other teachers and school personnel as well as with parents, professionals-in-training, volunteers, and so forth. Collaboration and teaming are key facets of addressing barriers to learning. They allow teachers to broaden the resources and strategies available in and out of the classroom to enhance learning and performance.

Welcoming for new staff and ongoing social support for all staff

Just as with students and their families, there is a need for those working together at a school to feel they are truly welcome and have a range of social supports. Thus, a major focus for stakeholder development activity is establishment of a program that welcomes and connects new staff with others with whom they will be working and does so in ways that effectively incorporates them into the community.

Overcoming Barriers to working together

Problems related to working relationships are a given. To minimize such problems, it is important for participants to understand barriers to working relationships and for sites to establish effective problem solving mechanisms to eliminate or at least minimize such barriers.

Minimizing Rescue dynamics

A special problem that arises in caring communities are rescue dynamics. Such dynamics arise when caring and helping go astray, when those helping become frustrated and angry because those being helped don't respond in desired ways or seem not to be trying. It is important to minimize such dynamics by establishing procedures that build on motivational readiness and personalized interventions.

Connecting students and families with the right help

A caring, learning community works to develop a comprehensive, integrated approach to addressing barriers to learning and enhancing healthy development. This encompasses primary prevention, early-after-onset interventions, and treatment for severe and pervasive problems. It involves the capacity to identify problems quickly and to respond with the right intervention (e.g., programs and services that are a good match for what is needed).

A Few Related Center Resources

> *What Schools Can Do to Welcome and Meet the Needs of All Students and Families*
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/WELMEET/welmeetcomplete.pdf

> *Welcoming and Involving New Students and Families*
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/welcome/welcome.pdf

> *Working Collaboratively: From School-Based Teams to School-Community-Higher Education Connections* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/worktogether/worktogether.pdf

> *Classroom Changes to Enhance and Re-engage Students in Learning*
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/classchange_tt/classroomfull.pdf

> *Re-engaging Students in Learning*
  http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/quicktraining/reengagingstudents.pdf

> *About Motivation* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/motivation.pdf

> *Natural Opportunities to Promote Social-Emotional Learning and MH*
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/naturalopportunities.pdf

> *Welcoming Strategies for Newly Arrived Students and Their Families*
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/welcomingstrategies.pdf

See also the following Quick Find Online Clearinghouse Topics:

- Environments that Support Learning – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm

- Safe Schools – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2108_03.htm

- Social and Emotional Development – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2102_05.htm

- Transition Programs/Grade Articulation/Welcome –
  http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2101_01.htm

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Appendix

Classroom Climate

Why It's Important

Classroom climate is seen as a major determiner of classroom behavior and learning. Understanding the nature of classroom climate is a basic element in improving schools.

The concept of classroom climate implies the intent to establish and maintain a positive context that facilitates classroom learning, but in practice, classroom climates range from hostile or toxic to welcoming and supportive and can fluctuate daily and over the school year. Moreover, because the concept is a psychological construct, different observers may have different perceptions of the climate in a given classroom. Therefore, for purposes of his early research, Moos (1979) measured classroom environment in terms of the shared perceptions of those in the classroom. Prevailing approaches to measuring classroom climate use (1) teacher and student perceptions, (2) external observer's ratings and systematic coding, and/or (3) naturalistic inquiry, ethnography, case study, and interpretative assessment techniques (Fraser, 1998; Freiberg, 1999).

Analyses of research suggest significant relationships between classroom climate and matters such as student engagement, behavior, self-efficacy, achievement, and social and emotional development, principal leadership style, stages of educational reform, teacher burnout, and overall quality of school life. For example, studies report strong associations between achievement levels and classrooms that are perceived as having greater cohesion and goal-direction and less disorganization and conflict. Research also suggests that the impact of classroom climate may be greater on students from low-income homes and groups that often are discriminated against.

Given the correlational nature of classroom climate research, cause and effect interpretations remain speculative. The broader body of organizational research does indicate the profound role accountability pressures play in shaping organizational climate (Mahoney & Hextall, 2000). Thus, it seems likely that the increasing demands for higher achievement test scores and control of student behavior contribute to a classroom climate that is reactive, over-controlling, and over-reliant on external reinforcement to motivate positive functioning.

Promoting a Positive School and Classroom Climate

Analyses of practice and research suggest that a proactive approach to developing a positive school and classroom climates requires careful attention to (1) enhancing the quality of life at school and especially in the classroom for students and staff, (2) pursuing a curriculum that promotes not only academic, but also social, and emotional learning, (3) enabling teachers and other staff to be effective with a wide range of students, and (4) fostering intrinsic motivation for learning and teaching. With respect to all this, the literature advocates

- a welcoming, caring, and hopeful atmosphere
- social support mechanisms for students and staff
- an array of options for pursuing goals
- meaningful participation by students and staff in decision making
- transforming the classroom infrastructure from a big classroom into a set of smaller units organized to maximize intrinsic motivation for learning and not based on ability or problem-oriented grouping
- providing instruction and responding to problems in a personalized way
- use of a variety of strategies that prevent and address problems as soon as they arise
- a healthy and attractive physical environment that is conducive to learning and teaching.