How does an elementary school teacher support classroom community through dialogue?

This website documents the challenges, complexities and successes of an elementary school teacher’s experiences in supporting a classroom community through the use of dialogue. It centers on the third-grade classroom of Sangita Satpathy-Lem, at PS 29 in Brooklyn, New York. The documentation focuses on three methods, grand conversations, small group work, and teacher-student conferences, in which Sangita uses dialogue to help support the development of a community in her classroom. It also provides a glimpse into three other aspects of Sangita's practice that she sees as central to the development of community: community supports, classroom procedures, and reflection.

Using the process of promoting community through dialogue, Sangita builds on the idea that children must have the space to make choices in her classroom. They need to talk, share and learn from one another. For Sangita, giving students the power to choose is non-negotiable; it is also the foundation of her beliefs about building community.

By using these methods, Sangita has successfully built a community in her classroom that has the freedom to discuss social issues, classroom goals, and grade level content. This “talk” assists Sangita in supporting an environment that fosters community and academic success. "I have had to work hard to build communities that reflect, infuse, and celebrate the power of choice..."

School Context: PS 29 is a pre-K to 5th grade school located in Brooklyn, New York. Situated in the heart of Brooklyn, PS 29 serves students from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. The student population is very diverse ranging from family members who have lived in Brooklyn for many generations to those who have recently immigrated. Building a community environment is central to the school’s philosophy and through professional development, teachers work collaboratively to develop a well-rounded schooling experience for all students at PS 29. A page on Sangita Satpathy-Lem contains written and video reflections on Sangita’s philosophy and her purpose of fostering classroom community.
**Grand Conversations**

Grand conversations are discussions held by the entire class community. What makes grand conversations different from other forms of whole group activities is that the teacher does not direct grand conversations. Sangita allows for dialogue among students that is student directed; the children have the opportunity to critique, debate and extend upon each other’s ideas.

Sangita uses grand conversations as a method of developing a recursive relationship between community building and understanding literature. For example, literature themes discussed during grand conversations are purposeful in that they facilitate literature knowledge and skills acquisition, while reinforcing the beliefs of community in the classroom.

The grand conversation section features four videos of Sangita and her students discussing grand conversations, as well as a short segment of a grand conversation, an entire grand conversation, and a grand conversation progress chart.

**Small Group Work**

Engaging students in small group work is central to Sangita’s philosophy about how students learn. These activities are a catalyst to Sangita’s implementation of dialogue and decision-making in her curriculum. Students work in a variety of pairings and groups throughout the day. These allow the students to work collaboratively in order to problem solve, critique, and learn from each other. Topics upon which the webpage elaborates include pairing partners, peer editing, book clubs, and “turn and talk”. This webpage contains a reading chart that Sangita utilizes during book clubs and other small group activities, as well as two videos of students engaging in peer conferences.

**Teacher-Student Conferences**

During teacher-student conferences, Sangita has the opportunity to talk to students individually or in small groups. Through these meetings, she gauges students' learning and assesses their understanding of various content areas. Sangita makes it a priority to record her interactions with students during these discussions and uses the findings to plan subsequent lessons and discussions. This web page contains a chart Sangita uses during conferences, and two teacher-student writing conference videos.
Community Supports

In order for Sangita to foster a community environment in her classroom, she relies on various members of the larger community context for support. Collaboration with parents, teachers, and her principal serves as an invaluable resource to the classroom community. The community supports section includes a video of Sangita describing how teacher collaboration has supported community building in her classroom.

Community Procedures

Sangita believes that community procedures are very important for fostering an environment in which all students feel that they are part of the classroom community. She engages her students in a variety of activities to facilitate choice, collaboration, and pride. These procedures described in the site include flexible scheduling, choices, star of the week, employment center and community standards. The webpage includes Sangita’s letter to parents regarding the star of the week, her employment position descriptions and an employment application available in pdf format.

Reflection

Reflection plays an integral role in the classroom because it allows Sangita and her students to discuss, assess, and improve academic progress and classroom community. The students look to each other and Sangita for guidance and feedback regarding their work, choices, and behavior. The reflection section of the webpage includes video of a student focus group and a slide show of student work as students reflect upon community in the classroom.