A starting place for addressing inequities in society is recognizing the value of each individual in our classrooms. Underlining and woven throughout my research is a theme of respectful interactions in building a community of learners. Within a body of culturally, personally and academically diverse students, I have explored how respect can be most effectively encouraged and taught in the context of group work.

Community Building in a Classroom

A group of children quietly work and learn, alone and on their own in a schoolroom setting—a class of students. Another group of students interact, help, discuss, and communicate and, in so doing, learn and grow together in their knowledge of and respect for each other and the world around them—a community of learners. There is a vast difference between the two.

From a global perspective, to survive successfully today, there is a growing awareness of the need to cooperate more closely with others, to understand interdependence, and to demonstrate respect for the diversity that our shrinking world encompasses. The values of community sharing, interacting, and connecting with those around us, which were an accepted and necessary part of life in the Agricultural Age, have largely been lost to the promotion of individualism and competition which became common with the onset of the Industrial Age. This pattern of isolation continues to be espoused today in many organizational systems, including schools (Gibbs, 2001).

Mako Nakagawa (1986), a multicultural educator, states clearly the challenge with which all teachers are confronted. It is the one that, in the context of this changing world, I am presently trying to address in my classroom research:

>If we are to succeed as a nation both in international trade and in leadership for democracy, we need to use the diverse cultural laboratory of our own country as a training ground for producing citizens who value differences, respect the validity of our own perspectives, understand the independence of people and who have interpersonal skills to effectively communicate across all spectra of ethnicity, nationality, language, culture, gender, values and even political ideology.<ref>

—Cited in Gibbs, 2001: 34

What does it take in a classroom to create an environment which meets Nakagawa’s challenge? Am I giving my students, in my short journey with them, the knowledge and as many of the skills and abilities as I can to help them live and work in the world as we know it now and as it will be in the future? What are those skills? What is that knowledge? How does that relate to building a community of learners?
Jeanne Gibbs (2001) articulates some of the skills and abilities I believe to be of the greatest importance for children today, “The ability to listen attentively, express ideas, solve group problems, resolve conflict, make decisions, research and analyse material and encourage others are democratic skills needed within families, work settings, government and all organizational systems” (20). This view is reiterated by Johnson and Johnson (1990) as they state what they feel is key for students: “The ability of students to work collaboratively with others is the keystone to building and maintaining the caring and committed relationships that largely determine quality of life” (18).

**Group Work: A Framework For Building A Community**

One of the most powerful factors contributing to community building is group work. It is in the context of groups where social development can be most easily facilitated, encouraged and taught. Some of the personal and social benefits for the children of learning in this type of arrangement include developing more positive attitudes towards others as they interact and work with classmates; growing in understanding and appreciation of the differences and abilities of others; and developing a more positive sense of who they are as they gain confidence in themselves as learners and as active members of a community.

Being an appreciated team member becomes a reality for them and they grow in their ability to work more effectively in a group situation. Strengths and weaknesses can be seen more clearly, and by accepting these in a context of growing together, change, where needed, is seen as an attainable goal which they help to set and monitor (Clarke, Weideman and Eadie, 1990). They also learn the pro-social behaviours of sharing, helping, and taking care of others within the context of interactions with other children.

Hearing and discussing perspectives other than their own, with peers, helps them progress from stages of egocentrism to more mature, advanced levels of social and academic development. Far more time is given to each student to talk when in a group than is possible in whole class discussions or in working on individual projects. Through interactions and relationships with peers, children can clarify their own values and attitudes and, in the process, develop a healthy frame of reference for their own identity (Johnson and Johnson, 1990).

**My Class**

My group of twenty-seven Grade 5’s and 6’s illustrated the typical diversity found in most Vancouver classrooms. It was composed of many students from China as well as others from Korea, Iran, the Philippines, Russia and Japan. There were two designated special needs children, many others who needed Learning Assistance, and a small group of gifted students. Three students began the year with no English skills at all, and another group required some continuing daily English Language Assistance support.

My Research

**Part I**

Initially, for the purposes of my research inquiry, I wanted to know what my students’ definitions of community would include. Their responses to the questionnaire which I had them fill out (see Appendix A), revealed a very clear understanding of the importance of positive social interactions, predominantly in terms of how they responded to class members around them. The most common phrases which appeared discussed communications of some kind between students. Often repeated phrases were, “helping each
other,” “interact with each other, socializing, talking,” “working and learning together,” and “treating others the way you want to be treated.”

Opinions described by other phrases such as, “Treating people nice, showing kindness, getting along with each other,” “friendly...,” and “respecting each other,” also expressed their community building criteria. Apparent also in the section on differences and similarities was an appreciation both for the diversity which was reflected in our class because of the variety of cultures in it, and of the contribution these differences made to our individuality.

From this point, my questions narrowed. How do I take a group, already very aware of themselves as active members within a group structure, and further help them to be an even more effectively functioning and thriving community? What are the factors in group work which would enable them to do this?

**Part II**

My research then involved looking specifically at how four different types of grouping situations or activities, varied in their structural and teaching components, contributed to the building of community within our classroom. The types of groups I utilized were:

1) Changing table groups
2) Discrimination activity groups
3) Cooperative groups
4) Literature Circles

I made anecdotal observations of the children as they worked in these groups over a period of about six weeks. I noted such things as overall group functioning, specific interactions, comments between children, and any problems that were hindering positive group dynamics. In the midst of the group activities or after they were completed, I also had the children answer three general questions about the group work itself (see Appendix B). The students were asked:

- Did this type of activity teach you about others or help you in your thinking about other people? If yes, how? What did you learn?
- How does this new knowledge affect what you will do when relating to others in the class and outside the class? How are you different now?
- How effective was this activity in helping to create a community of learners where respect for differences and kindness and understanding towards one another is encouraged?

They answered this third question with a scale of one to five with one being ‘Not very effective’ and five being ‘Highly effective,’ and then explained why they rated it this way. Some self-evaluation comments were also considered in the data collection process. These responses included information about what the children liked about the group exercises, what they were learning and what they, as individuals and as a group, needed to work on to improve their groups.

1) Changing Table Groups

This first grouping arrangement involved the physical layout of the class. The children were arranged in clusters, mostly of six students, at hexagonal tables. These groupings were changed every month or so to provide opportunities to meet and to get to know different classmates. Before I decided on the group members, I used a sociogram to ensure the children always had at least one friend at their table.

The results on the rating scales indicated they seemed to feel that this type of grouping was ‘effective’ to quite effective for community building. Twenty out of twenty-three students responded with a three or four rating of this activity.

Different comments from the children seemed to indicate a variety of social benefits from this type of grouping arrangement. Because of opportunities to connect with more classmates, there appeared to be an improvement in general social skills. “I have more people and topics to talk about,” was one student’s comment. From another student came a similar statement, “Joe’s sister just got her first birthday so now I might ask, is she walking or talking?” A part of maturing social development is becoming more “other-centered.” “I have at least one thing in common with everybody,” stated one student and, “We know each others’ likes and dislikes...” reflected another.
There seemed to be a growing acceptance of more students as evidenced by comments such as, "...helped me by getting to know people. I got to know some people better and learn who they are and accept them like that. I even like them better now." Friendships were developed. "I didn’t know Angela last year. I got to know her and we became friends," said one child. Other comments voiced similar reflections. "I had no friends at the beginning of the year but table groups helped me make friends," and "We sometimes get together out of class," and "I started playing with people at my table."

2) Discrimination Activity Groups

The discrimination activity consisted of a set of four very structured lessons about marginalized groups and related to:

- disabilities
- ageism
- sexism
- classism or poverty issues

The activities all involved working with one partner, who changed each time, and included a teaching story or video, answering questions with the partner, some role playing, and whole class discussions. The role playing, for example, included pairs working together with one member, whose eyes were closed, being led around by the other. In rating the effectiveness of these activities, a total of sixteen out of twenty-three students chose either a four or five.

Almost all of the children’s responses indicated a growth in their understanding of those with disabilities or disadvantages of some kind over the course of these kinds of activities. Their increase in empathy was clearly evident in often repeated comments such as, “It helped me imagine how other people feel,” “I learned how hard it is for people with disabilities….” “…they might have suffered.” “It made me very sad because they have to go through a hard and rough life….” and “We tried it and couldn’t even stand a few minutes but most (disabled) have to live with it forever.”

The exercises had succeeded in enabling the students to feel what others who are disadvantaged experience. As Kevin Kumashiro (2000) states in his article on anti-oppressive teaching methods, this was a one-time attempt at disrupting the partial knowledge which the students had about the ‘Other.’ Empathy is important but it is only a starting place that hopefully challenges the children to want to learn more.

3) Cooperative or One-Product Group

Although there were aspects of cooperative learning reflected in each of the types of groupings, this particular set of exercises was designed with all of the following cooperative principles in mind, that students:

- work in positive interdependence
- work in small, heterogeneous groups
- are accountable for their own and their group’s learning
- learn through opportunities for meaningful conversations
- learn and practice cooperative skills as they work through and learn the subject matter together. (Clarke, Wideman and Eadie, 1990).

In this set of activities, I included math problem-solving questions done in triads, and different creative thinking exercises conducted in pairs. For each activity, the group handed in one finished product. Members of the math groups were also assigned roles as reader (of the problem); encourager (that everyone was doing okay); and checker (that everyone understood the problem and had their work written out).

The average effectiveness rating for this type of group was three, a rating chosen by most of the children. Many of their comments demonstrated that they saw the value of working together to help each other understand a concept, particularly as it related to the math triads. It was not only okay to help someone or to need help, it was expected that everyone would work together to ensure the individuals in the group all knew how to explain the answer. Being in either position—teaching or being taught—was fine. One student’s comment, reflecting a common perspective, was, “Everybody will understand and know how to solve the problem and not just one person. I know people will help you when you need help and will check if you got it.”

4) Literature Circle Groups
Once a week the children participated in four or five member, non-changing groups to discuss one or two chapters of a novel. The four roles the children took in these groups were rotating and involved different levels of leadership. The roles were:

- Artful Illustrator
- Discussion Director
- Passage Picker
- Word Hunter

Each role required the students to present their thinking and reasons for their thinking. Although one product was not the goal of each meeting, each group member was expected to present a different perspective of the chapter for the group task to be completed. Evaluations at the end of each session gave the children an opportunity to discuss how their work was presented and what might be improved in the group dynamic for the next time.

The ratings given for this group activity were mostly fours and fives—the highest rating compared to all other groupings. The children’s comments about the grouping were very positive and linked their involvement in this type of group with valued social and academic outcomes. A number of participants expressed a growing level of confidence in and an increasing understanding of themselves. Others wrote about changes to their behaviour because of their interactions in the group.

From my observations as well, I could see their involvement and level of social maturity grow in this exercise during the few weeks of observations. They worked on specific group dynamics such as improving eye contact, using appropriate voice levels, and responding to each others’ ideas with comments like, “Do you mean...” or “Well for me...” or “I disagree because...” and in keeping each other on track, “Okay, group, back to...”

In their responses, one student summarized observations I had made of many of them. She wrote, “I like everything about it. It is fun. I used to need to work on eye contact and a loud voice. But now every week I get better...”

Another girl, who often used put-downs, recognized significant growth in her own attitude, “First, I don’t want to be in the same group as...Now I know more about him...he made the group more fun...This affected me a lot. It also teaches me don’t judge the person until I know the person really well because you might be really wrong about them...It helped me think in many ways instead of just my own way.” Another response reflected growth about seeing others’ perspectives, “I like to listen to other people’s ideas because you actually gain interest in their ideas because their thinking is unique...and different. You might change your thinking...”

A couple of students also summarized an important aspect of heterogeneous grouping related to the benefits of changing roles. This was similar to Elizabeth Cohen’s idea of multiple-ability orientation (1994). In this approach to group tasks, everyone has some of the abilities necessary to complete the task for that exercise but no one person will have all the abilities. All students are needed to complete the task successfully and thereby a mixed set of expectations for competence is created. This addresses the problem of what she calls ‘high-status,’ more verbal, controlling students dominating a task and making decisions. Students referred to this with comments such as, “...There are different roles, so everyone can prove themselves at what they are good at. Everyone knows exactly what to do, so the group can function very well and fulfil its purpose fairly quickly,” and “I learned Malcolm is very helpful...[and]...If I would need help on a drawing project I could ask Matt for a few tips.”

Dealing with Problems of Group Work

One of the greatest deterrents preventing teachers using group work more in their classrooms is a belief that the children will encounter frustrations or difficulties when working with each other, and that this could result in more management problems for teachers. Keeping students separate is easier, quieter and simpler for them and helps to maintain better control. This can be the case and it certainly is quieter. While group work can create management problems, this is not a good reason to have the children avoid group work. Rather, the frustrating or negative situations which result when students are together reflect ‘classroom life’ and real world situations. These can be used as opportunities for walking the children through the dilemmas and teaching them how to handle them constructively.

It is crucial to monitor how groups are functioning on a regular basis, to be honest yet respectful about what is not working well, and to work through the
difficulties together. Sometimes, a quick class reminder is all that is necessary, such as, “Please remember to keep your answers interesting and to the point.” At other times, it will take more specific interventions with individuals or groups or more direct and longer teaching sessions. Knowing strategies for handling a problem respectfully is empowering for the students because they are learning important life skills.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

My research into the factors in group work which most contribute to community building in a classroom revealed a few major themes: physical layout of the class; varied grouping opportunities, self-evaluation of group work, and curriculum issues. All of these are connected to each other and revolve around what the children had made clear was the most important element in defining a community—respectful interactions.

Physical layout of the class

The physical layout of the class makes a statement about the teacher’s philosophy of effective education. Does the teacher value the children being close enough to each other to talk easily? Does she believe that, if close to each other and able to talk easily, they will be able to work quietly without talking when necessary? The changing table groups allowed my students to interact and to get to know more children on a personal level than they might have were they not given this opportunity. Judging from the responses of the children and my own observations of this more casual, non-structured grouping arrangement, there was value in continuing with this practice. It did make a difference. A stage was set for the other interactions which occurred throughout the day.

Varied Grouping Opportunities

Providing the children with numerous opportunities to interact in different types of grouping situations with various classmates is a must in creating a community of learners. This affords them practice in knowing how to handle themselves with friends, with acquaintances, and with those they may not know well or even want to know. A tone of comfort and a valuing of the practice of group work is set when interactions with others are expected and are a common part of every day for the children.

In all of their responses to the different types of grouping arrangements, a growing maturity and developing social awareness was clearly evident. Students became increasingly familiar with what other classmates were like. They liked finding out what their opinions were about work and play, and they enjoyed learning how to talk and interact with them effectively and more often. Respect, overall, was increased. Differences were acknowledged and sometimes celebrated and often minimized in the context of the importance of the similarities they saw in each other as they worked on common tasks. Getting to know each other as people became important.

One of the most effective types of grouping arrangements for this was Literature Circles. Every child was expected to contribute some part towards an end product which was, in this case, a ‘whole picture,’ a representation of a chapter in a novel. This type of group gave each child ongoing practice with providing a piece of the puzzle. Doing this seemed to minimize the occurrence of ‘high’ and ‘low status’ students contributing differentially to the group dynamic (as discussed by Cohen, 1994). Some parallels here can be drawn to conclusions Slavin reached in his work on harmonious interracial relationships. He found that having multicultural groups of
students work together on group product tasks produced the “high quality, positive interpersonal interactions...[which led to] interpersonal attraction and seeing similarities as more important than cultural differences” (cited in Cohen, 1994: 18).

Self-Evaluations of Group Work

Children need to know that their responses to their group work and their learning are valued and will help to direct some aspects of their instruction. Self-evaluations could contribute to instructing the teacher in how to make things better. Teachers encourage children to take responsibility for their own learning when they present opportunities to evaluate the processes they are being taken through. A sense of building a community is enhanced when the students’ comments and recommendations for what works well and what might need to be improved are shared and discussed.

Curriculum Issues

Social Responsibility is a part of the required curriculum for students. In the past, I have often dealt with it in only incidental or fractured ways. Ongoing group work provides numerous opportunities to teach important aspects of social responsibility. For groups to function smoothly, there must be a concerted effort to teach the social skills required for respectful interactions with others. With numerous opportunities for interactions, must come the varied types of accompanying instruction necessary for positive and constructive communications to occur. Direction, guidance, and teaching these skills need to be ongoing. For example, direct instruction on the issues of disabilities, ageism, sexism, and classism proved to be helpful in sparking students’ interest in these issues and in dealing with some aspects of the partial knowledge they expressed in these areas. Teaching about social justice issues brings a greater awareness of inequities which students need to address in their own behaviours. Again, respect for all is crucial.

From ‘com’—a prefix from the Latin meaning ‘with, together,’ we have ‘to combine,’ ‘to make a composition from parts toward a whole,’ and ‘communication between others’ in forming and sustaining ‘a community.’ Through my brief journey as a researcher, I caught a clearer glimpse, as an educator, of what I am attempting to create and develop: a peaceful classroom where all know they are welcome, a safe place where students know they will be expected to express their opinions and can trust they will be heard, a space where diversity is recognized and celebrated, a place where talking and learning from one another occurs often throughout the day and where interactions are respectful and kind, an energetic environment where learning—social, emotional, and academic—is maximized, and finally, an arena where there is an awareness of growth as an individual but also as a responsible, contributing member of a vibrant collective whole—a community of learners.

Reflections on Research and How My Teaching Has Been Affected by it in the Last Year

In my twenty plus years of teaching, this research project proved to be one of the most helpful and effective tools for me to examine and improve my teaching practices. By taking the time to read about group processes and ideas, by implementing some of those ideas, and by closely observing and analyzing the resulting interactions and evidence of student growth, my understanding of the importance of group work in a classroom was greatly
Whereas my class from last year modelled some exemplary social behaviours, even before our focus on group work and social growth, this year’s class revealed an entirely different social make-up. Being one year younger, and mostly Grade 5’s, also contributed to significant differences. In the first months of this year, there were nine or ten children who needed extra reminders to practice socially responsible, respectful, and kind behaviour. Although group work with this class resulted in more altercations, rudeness with each other, arguing, and other inappropriate interactions, it was through these social situations that training in proper responses to each other was facilitated.

The students worked very hard at learning polite and respectful ways of interacting and at the time of this writing, just a week after student-led conferences in March, I can truly say that I am thrilled with the efforts they have made and with the progress I have seen them achieve. I see evidence of their progress in their willingness to help each other more, use respectful words and voice tones, demonstrate care towards each other, and monitor tendencies to criticize each other.

Group work is a key structure in supporting and building a community in the process of learning and growing together. After carefully observing this in action for over a year now, I am more convinced of the truth of this than ever.

References


**About the Author**

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