

“Listen to me! Connect with me!”

A case for the purposeful creation of classroom communities

By Heather A. Piperato



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Mrs. Piperato is a certified Restorative Practices trainer and has written this article despite the fact that she should be finishing her doctoral dissertation on *Secondary School Principals' Responses to the Process of State Mandated School Improvement Planning*.

Most researchers agree that humans are hardwired to live in community, that we feel the need to be in relationship with others at a neural level (Eisenberger & Cole, 2012). When humans interact with each other as healthy members of a group, they develop a sense of belonging that provides the psychological stability to learn and grow (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Teaching children how to live in community with each other is a necessary skill that has been a part of informal education for years and has traditionally been the purview of both family and school. The daily environment of home and school provides the necessary backdrop for teachable moments, using students' lived experiences to ingrain good habits of community living.

Obstacles to Teaching Community

This learning has not been without external obstacles. Children develop at different rates and so may master these skills according to a timeline different from what we may require in schools. The amount and type of support that families are able or willing to give has decreased. External mandates such as standardized testing afford less time for teachers to impart life lessons. Socioeconomics can affect student access to models of healthy communities and unhealthy groups can compete with our message of acceptable school behavior.



Perhaps unsurprisingly, programs and practices within our very own educational environment

contain impediments to our efforts. Programs such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) focus on teaching students expected behaviors and rewarding them for it for the good of the whole community but are not designed to help teachers purposefully create community in their classrooms. In Pennsylvania's teacher evaluation instrument, Domain 1b "Demonstrating knowledge of students" expects teachers to know students individually but omits the need to deal with student-to-student relationships in the classroom apart from managing conflict. Organizationally, we continue to group students by ability level even when we know these practices "reduce student interaction and have negative effects on peer relationships" (Osterman, 2000) and whole group lecture is still the predominant form of teaching at the secondary level, a form that emphasizes student silence.

Despite the current preoccupation with developing a sense of community within schools, discussion of developing collegiality among students themselves is often missing, with the major emphasis placed on improving the nature of relationships either among adults or between adults and students (Osterman, 2000).

The Added Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As if this were not enough, in 2020 and 2021 medical and cultural emergencies collided to the great detriment of children. Some responses to the COVID-19 pandemic severely limited child access to the physical environments in which we embedded these lessons.

Continued on next page

Even when limited access was granted, health and safety rules created a distant, artificial, even fearful community. Other responses to the pandemic introduced students to new rules of an online community very quickly with no guidance and little ability to reinforce positive or negative behavior in this space. Widespread media coverage of a polarized political climate exposed many students to negative, strident, mean voices that highlighted how NOT to live in community (Kleemans et al., 2017). Racial inequities, long present in our country, resurfaced and again media coverage emphasized people be- having badly in community rather than highlighting the efforts of many to heal and restore their communities.

District Data that Informs the Problem

It should come as no surprise then that the 2021-2022 academic year was replete with symptoms of students who felt disconnected from community and no longer knew how to live in it. In our district alone:

1. Discipline offenses increased in number and severity at all 10 schools
2. Nearly 50 students, an unprecedented number, had behavior so egregious to the community that they were excluded from it for a whole school year
3. For the third cycle in a row, our #1 risk factor on the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) was “Low commitment to school” and the percentage of students INCREASED to 60%, the highest in the last six years
4. To the open-ended question “How could we have made your high school experience better?”, the Class of 2022 responded almost universally with two themes: “Listen to us” and “Connect with us.”

Sample Answers to Senior Survey Question #20:

- *“Make people feel welcomed and that school isn’t a prison.”*
- *“Try listening to them.”*
- *“Understand the students better instead of judging them for who they are.”*
- *“Get more involved with students, reach out to them one on one.”*
- *“Building an actual relationship with students to encourage them to do their work”*
- *“Be there for them when they need you. If they don’t get something don’t freak out just help them.”*
- *“Tell your teachers not to answer with “you should know this” when students ask for help. We don’t know and that’s why we’re here.”*
- *“Have more one-on-one conversations with students.”*

This data seems to indicate that a large majority of students don’t feel heard and don’t feel like they fit into our school community. It is not surprising that they are behaving in a way that reflects that. But also consider three other pieces of data:

1. Our pre- and post-student climate surveys at all four secondary schools indicate a highly positive relationship between students and teachers but a negative relationship between students and students.
2. Despite differences between principals, Domain 3b “Using questioning and discussion techniques” achieves the lowest average score nearly every year on teacher evaluation instruments. Principals at the secondary level further report that few teachers routinely hold discussions, and many teachers use whole group questioning exclusively and at a Depth of Knowledge (DoK) level of 1. Translation: students rarely talk in our classrooms and if they do, they aren’t talking to each other.
3. *Wellness Wednesdays*, instituted this year at the secondary level to help students with their socio-emotional needs, was so unsuccessful it will not return. Teachers reported that they didn’t feel equipped to talk to students in groups about personal things and many of them didn’t feel it was their job to do so.

Without these last pieces of data, we are tempted to ignore root cause and focus on explicitly teaching replacement behaviors so students don’t disrupt the community (“Let’s make students fill out the restorative questions in ISS [In School Suspension] and have them reflect with someone trained in Restorative Practices”) or focus on making students feel good about themselves and their school so they’ll want to be a part of the school community (“Let’s make teachers greet every student with a unique handshake, like I saw on social media!”).

A Focus on the Root Cause

Neither of these suggestions are necessarily wrong or bad. But taken alone, they completely miss the root of the problem: the fact that even though our students feel loved and supported by our teachers, our students don’t know how to live in community with each other because we aren’t giving them the opportunity for guided practice in our classrooms. By omission, we are instead giving them unsupervised practice in our hallways, our lunchrooms and our buses and then writing them up when they break community standards.

Purposefully creating community in our classrooms serves multiple purposes:

1. It creates the psychological feeling of belonging that students need to cognitively handle the academic

content and application we expect of them. Creating community is a pressing concern that is directly tied to student academic achievement.

2. It creates a sense of accountability between students that goes beyond the relationship with the teacher. The desire to maintain mutually beneficial relationships in the classroom community can curb unacceptable behavior without teacher intervention and when internalized, can translate to healthy community behaviors outside of the classroom. Creating community is a pressing concern that is directly tied to student behavior.

Only when we focus our solutions on developing teachers' ability to create communities of learners in their classrooms will we begin to see both a reduction in student symptoms (bad behavior and increased SEL needs) and an increase in student academic achievement.

Some notes of caution in a 2022 context:

1. Creating for students a sense of belonging is largely a Tier I practice and is not designed to address the trauma that some of our students' experience. Continued efforts in trauma-informed care must be made to address the Tier II and Tier III needs of our students.
2. Like any widespread effort, implementation design is crucial to ultimate success and every good educational design MUST begin with alignment to other District goals. Do not add this on as one more thing and expect it to succeed. Be judicious in the amount of work you set out for our teachers, especially after these past two years.

For more information or to collaborate with the author on **how** to help teachers create communities of learners, please contact heather-piperato@esasd.net

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