Relationship, The Fourth 'R': The Development of a Classroom Community

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"My name is Elga Brown. You can call me Elga. You can call me Elga Brown. You can call me teacher if you forget my name. Some people call me Grandma if they forget my name. I don't mind that. I'm one of the teachers here. Do you know how many teachers we have in this class?"

I gathered on the floor with 21 children and their assorted relatives, on this very important day in the lives of each person in the room—the first day of kindergarten. We sat there, like loose skeins of yarn, about to participate in the creation of a weaving, about to begin the process of forming a classroom community. I was there in the role of participant observer, with the hope of discovering how Elga Brown nurtured the development of a classroom community over the course of a school year.

Teachers are being recognized as "community-builders," rather than as conduits for information. Richard Prawat (1992, 13) states that if we agree that learning is a social act, "the criteria for judging teacher effectiveness shifts from that of delivering good lessons to that of being able to build or create a classroom 'learning community.' " In order to be participating citizens, our children must learn how to be both strong individuals and members of communities. Kevin Ryan and Thomas Lickona (1987, 3) state that if our society is to grow and develop, young people "must learn to function as part of an increasingly complex world community, where global peace and justice demand ever increasing levels of cooperation." Indeed, the act of teaching children to function in this way can influence the character of our society. The quality of social life can improve as the social character of each individual develops. The quality of our schooling can also improve as students learn to be part of a classroom community.

In education, as in our society, individualism is the dominant value orientation. However, as Bellah et al. (1985) point out, interest in commit-

ment and community is increasing in the public sphere as people recognize the interconnectedness of environmental, political, and social systems. At the same time, social reformers are calling for a new concept of the "public good." The concepts of cooperation and conflict resolution have moved to the forefront of concern. As children participate in an elementary school classroom community, they receive guided practice in relationship skills necessary for active involvement in both the private and public spheres.

A Metaphorical Understanding of the Classroom Community

Although life in the classroom is a social experience, it does not necessarily constitute a community. Teachers have certain images of their classrooms; they are guided by a metaphorical understanding of teaching, learning, and ideas. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980, 3), co-authors of *Metaphors We Live By*, explain that ". . . the concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning." Since our conceptual system is metaphorical, metaphor helps constitute our reality. Although sometimes this understanding is beneath the level of awareness, we can determine the teacher's conceptual framework through an examination of actual classroom practice. For instance, Lakoff explains, if teachers perceive ideas as "locations," and thinking as "moving" from one place to another, the role of the teacher is then perceived as guide, one who opens doors, and who serves as a travel agent or tour leader. If teachers believe that ideas are objects, teaching is seen as the transference of knowledge. Ideas are "sent" from the teacher to the learner through a conduit (Reddy 1979). If knowledge is "seeing," the teacher "shows" students the right path. Another metaphor for ideas is the food metaphor, where ideas are food that is "spoon fed" to students. If the mind is perceived as a body, teachers must provide "exercises" to strengthen and train the mind. Similarly, in the "mind as machine" metaphor, we "fine tune" the students' comprehension.

Each of these generative metaphors gives rise to a corresponding view of the classroom. The factory model, which focuses on student-as-product, control, accountability, standardization, efficiency, and a hierarchical style of management has dominated public school education during the twentieth century. As Edward Fiske (1992, 25) states, "public schools are nineteenth-century institutions because they were organized around an industrial model that prevailed at the turn of the century." This metaphorical understanding of the classroom experience de-emphasizes the

social aspects of learning and teaching.

An alternate metaphor that can guide our understanding of the classroom experience is that of weaving, where each individual strand interacts with others to form an integrated whole. The beauty of the weaving is created by the relationships of the strands, one to another. Relationship, in some form, is involved in all teaching and learning, with many of these relationships negotiated by the students. Interactions between students and other students, between teachers and students, and between students and texts or other curricular materials constitute most of the learning that occurs in classrooms. The weaving metaphor emphasizes the relational aspects of the teaching and learning process. The view of the classroom as a community is a natural outgrowth of the metaphorical understanding of learning as the weaving or related elements into patterns.

Relationship is integral to the classroom community, and, as such, is the fourth 'R' in our schools. Ideas are the outgrowth of recognition of patterns of relationships and teaching is an interactive process. Certain phrases highlight this understanding of teaching and learning. For instance, "Are you with me?" acknowledges the feeling of connection when one person understands another.

The Strands of a Classroom Community

Many reformers have called for an emphasis upon interconnectedness (Bateson 1979; Berman 1981; Sullivan 1982; Bowers1987), relationship skill training (Solomon and Solomon 1987; Kohn 1991), control theory (Glasser 1986), the development of learning communities (Johnson 1987; Peterson, 1992; Prawat 1992; Raywid 1988; Ryan and Lickona 1987), and cooperative learning (Johnson and Johnson 1989). Each of these impacts the development of the classroom community. A classroom community is built on relationships, guided by the teacher, and develops in a synergistic context of culture, school district, school, staff members, teacher, parents, and students. Although not all teachers can depend on a fully supportive atmosphere, they can move toward the development of a classroom community in a variety of contexts. The process for developing community in the classroom is not fixed, nor is community-building an all-or-nothing proposition. The more elements of a community that are incorporated into the classroom, the richer the pattern in the weaving.

Prawat (1992, 13) chronicles the movement in education from emphasis on individual differences to the creation of schoolwide and classroom learning communities. He states that, "... figuring out how to accomplish these goals is a task that could engage the productive energies of teachers

and researchers well into the next century." My ethnographic study specifically addressed this question—how is a classroom community developed?

Ten strands of a classroom community were identified through following the development of community in one kindergarten during the course of one school year (Meltzoff 1990). The examples of community-building events herein are drawn from this classroom community, located in Eugene, Oregon. I chose a kindergarten class for this study since the students had few preconceived notions about "public school," and so were able to participate in this communitarian environment without self-consciousness and resistance fueled by expectations. The teacher, Elga Brown, was a gentle and strong 20-year veteran who had earned a reputation as an outstanding teacher. She maintained that development of a classroom community was of utmost importance. Although these strands are presented separately in this paper, in practice they are interwoven. Each strand affects the other, and an internal balance and harmony evolves as the unique community grows. The ten foundational strands—shared leadership, responsiveness, communication, moral unity, cooperation as a social process, shared history, shared environment, identification/involvement, wholeness, interdependence—are reviewed below.

I participated in the activities of the classroom throughout one entire school year, watching Elga carefully construct the physical environment before school started, and then attending class on an average of two or three times per week. Through numerous informal and formal interviews with the teacher, classroom assistant, parents, and children, and examining extensive audio taped observations, I pieced together Elga's conscious and careful process of community building. Elga also participated in the research process by reading all research drafts and by reflecting on her own work with the students.

Shared Leadership

Shared leadership is one of the more obvious characteristics of a classroom community. Teachers and students share "ownership" of the space, time, language, and curricular content of the class.

"Do you know how many teachers we have in this class?" asked Elga on the first day, a twinkle in her eye.

Most of the students counted the adults in the room. One student guessed two, and another three.

"Would you like to meet all the teachers?" Elga asked. "Are you ready? You're going to be surprised! Watch me—I'm going to introduce them to you. My name is Elga Brown. (She placed her hand on the shoulder of the

child seated next to her.) This is Steve. He's one of the teachers here. This is Jean. She's a teacher. I'll bet sometimes Jean's mom will be a teacher here." Elga continued around the circle, introducing each person present. "We're all teachers here. Who do you think are the learners?"

"All of us!" called out one excited boy.

Thus, within moments of the start of school, Elga had framed shared teaching and learning. In an atmosphere of shared leadership, democracy can flourish; children truly participate in decision-making and problem-solving. A skilled teacher can frame the teaching-learning experience so that students are aware of their rights and responsibilities as members of the shared learning environment.

Berlak and Berlak (1981), in analyzing the extent of control in the classroom, named four "control dilemmas." These include control of time, control of what children do and how they do it (operations), and control of evaluation (standards). In a classroom community characterized by shared leadership, there is strong evidence of shared control of operations and of responsibility for learning.

Communication

Since learning is interaction, students need to learn relationship skills. These skills not only help them as they engage in direct negotiation with other people, but also as they interact with people indirectly through the printed word and other forms of communication. The role of the student is one of reaching out, of actively receiving. Therefore, two of the major strands of a classroom community are *communication* and *responsiveness*. As teachers encourage children to be responsive and to communicate clearly, they make it possible for the children to participate in a community, to have a voice. The following interaction is an example of Elga encouraging a child to be responsive to the needs of others.

The children were signing up for their day's work—one activity for "first turn" and one for "second turn." Danielle wanted to play with the block towers, which required two players. Elga addressed Steve, an only child who was accustomed to making decisions based on his own desires. "Anybody who'd like to be Sarah's first turn block tower partner? Would you, Steve?"

"Well, I'll have to change my turns if I do that," answered Steve, characteristically focusing on his own needs.

"Could you do that?" Elga asked. "Could you change your turns?"

"Well. . . " Steve paused, "of course!"

"Oh my goodness, Steve, really! How wonderful! That's terrific!" Elga responded. The other children laughed in surprise, as Steve had never

displayed flexibility before. Elga continued to praise him, saying, "Steve, you are learning new things! It's wonderful!"

Communication includes literacy skills, conversation skills, and formalized verbal interactions. It also involves interactions that are nonverbal. For example, specific communication skills that have particular relevance to young children are: literacy skills; turn-taking in spoken dialogue; learning to say no and to set personal boundaries; learning the importance of expressing and accepting feelings and doing so in a safe and appropriate manner.

In Elga's class, the "talking and listening chairs" serve as physical aids for oral communication skills, and for resolving conflict. Young students can learn to speak when in the "talking chair" and to listen when in the "listening chair." The children were introduced to the labeled chairs on September 28, when two girls experienced difficulty sharing wallets and calendars in the playhouse. After Elga explained how to use the chairs, the two girls sat in them.

"There you go, now tell her what the problem was," Elga said.

"Well, if you took the wallet then I would have two calendars and you would have a wallet and a calendar," Anne said.

Diane started to talk, but Elga said, "Oops! Now get up and trade chairs. When you're in the listening chair you can only listen."

The girls switched positions, and Diane spoke. "The other one doesn't have a calendar in it, it has something else in it."

"Can you get up and trade places with Anne?" Elga said.

The girls changed places and Anne offered a solution. "Well, um, I don't think there's another wallet. How about we can take turns," Anne suggested.

As they shifted positions, the children learn concretely what it means to take turns in a dialogue. "It gives them a procedure to learn to use and then they can transfer that procedure just about anywhere," Elga said of the system.

Responsiveness

Communication is intricately intertwined with *responsiveness*, another strand in the weaving of community. Etzioni (1987) identifies the "responsive community," wherein members are responsive to the needs of both the "I" and the "we," the individual and the group. In addition, I believe that members of a community must be responsive to the needs of the environment within which they exist. Thus, there are three aspects of responsiveness in the classroom community—to the "I," to the "we," and to the environment. In a classroom community, children learn to pay

attention to what works for the group as a whole as well as for individual members. This level of awareness gives rise to a situation where the "whole is greater that the sum of its parts."

Moral Unity

A classroom community is characterized by both moral unity and cooperation. *Moral unity* means that members of a community share common values and beliefs. They share a view of the common good and work toward common goals for the group. The adults in a classroom community encourage children's personal and interpersonal moral growth, which serves as a basis for the development of public moral growth. Henry Johnson (1987) proposes that human beings need membership in a morally sensitive community. Without such a commitment, people suffer from dehumanization, feelings of estrangement, and even fear of life. Members of a community will be able to articulate the group's shared norms and values and will engage in reaching and living a moral consensus. In other words, members of a moral community know what is "right" and they know that other members of the group accept the same guidelines.

Morality in a classroom community is inclusive of the feminine perspective of morality and justice, as articulated by Bareback (1987), Eisenberg (1982), Noddings (1987), and others. Brabek (1987, 166) states that the feminists' goal for education is "... to transform education in the direction of development of the ability to sustain human relationships based on what Jane Roland Martin calls the 3 C's: care, concern, and connection, and ultimately, to create a social order that will not tolerate any group holding power to determine or limit the sovereignty of any other group."

In short, caring is a value that pervades. In Elga's class, the phrase that summed up her moral stance for the children was, "Everyone gets to feel safe and comfortable and do their important work." This far-reaching, but clear, phrase helped the children focus upon that which was considered morally correct in the classroom.

"The question, 'What makes you comfortable?' is an on-going exploration," Elga explained. "You can say to children, 'Everyone gets to feel safe and comfortable,' but comfortable is a very abstract term, so the whole year is spent defining those terms. Is this safe? Is this comfortable for that person? Would it be comfortable for you? Learning to think about events in that way is how children grow, rather than for me to tell them, that this is not done, or you can't do that, or I won't let you do this. However, I am ultimately responsible. It is my job to make sure that this place is safe and comfortable."

Alfie Kohn (1991) identifies different approaches to changing behaviors

and attitudes, crystallized by questions children might ask. They are: "What am I supposed to do? What will happen to me if I don't do it? What kind of person do I want to be? How do we want our classroom (or school) to be?" The final question illuminates the concept that, "the idea is not just to internalize good values *in* a community but to internalize, among other things, the value *of* community."

Cooperation

Cooperation is an obvious indicator of moral unity. Children who are cooperating demonstrate the ability to behave in ways that further the welfare of others (Eisenberg 1982; Noddings 1987). They are generous, helpful, kind, and compassionate. In Elga's classroom community, the children were encouraged to behave cooperatively. They were instructed in the fine arts of winning and losing, sharing, helping, turn-taking, and befriending. Elga set up situations in the classroom which forced the children to negotiate with one another. For instance, there were two playhouses, and only one set of dishes. When children were playing in both playhouses, they had to confront the reality of "limited resources." Within this very realistic context, they learned that cooperation was necessary. In another example, the wooden block boxes could be carried to a building site, but it took two children to carry each box. Although a strong child might be able to hoist one, the class rule was that a block box must be carried by two people. The physical act of carrying a heavy object with another person requires cooperation on a primary, physical level. Thus, the strands of moral unity and cooperation as a social process provide the community with a firm basis for the development of a cohesive group.

Shared Environment and Shared History

In a classroom community, members come together and co-create a unique version of reality. Their pasts, presents, and futures are intertwined. Through "shared practices of commitment" (Bellah 1985), and the sharing of feelings and emotions in a non-threatening environment, the members of the community create a *shared environment* and a *shared history*. While the sharing of space and of the present is easily observed, the sharing of the past and the future is more subtle. Shared space is communal space, which is owned and utilized and cared for by all members of the community. Two examples of this are the reading corner, and large tables instead of individually "owned" desks. At clean-up time in Elga's class, all children were encouraged to sing the "clean-up song" (Clean-up, clean-up, everybody do their share . . .), and to put the room in order without

focusing on who made which mess.

Through the telling of personal stories and dreams, the past and future are brought to the group. The past continually joins the present as these stories, and a fresh supply of new tales, are told and retold. Traditions can be carried from the past in many forms. A regular topic of conversation was about the first day of school.

"Do you remember the first day of kindergarten?" Elga asked.

"I was kind of worried," a child answered.

"Me, too," another child added.

Hannah said, "I wanted to go home!"

In this discussion, the children recognized their history and shared the meaning of their experiences, thus defining both their own personal growth and their growth as a community. Individuals may bring traditions from their families to share with the group, and group traditions, rituals, and ceremonies evolve as the community grows and deepens.

Identification/Involvement

The *identification/involvement* strand is central to community building. Members of the community are aware of the existence of the group, and they identify themselves as members. Poplin (1979) states, "Members of the moral community have a deep sense of belonging to a significant, meaningful group." Members not only know that they are part of the community, they are actively involved in the workings of the group. Whether consciously or not, they are involved in group development. They form meaningful associations within the community, and they participate in group decision-making, rule-making, and problem-solving. For instance, students help formulate classroom rules and problem-solve solutions and consequences when rules have been broken. Activities such as class big-books, class banners, and projects shared with other classes help students become involved with the group and continue to identify with their class in a positive way. Class symbols and rituals are created and honored. This identification with the group evolves slowly, as the children become more and more comfortable with the others in the community and more and more comfortable with themselves as social beings.

An example of forming group identity is seen in the following interaction, where the children slowly worked out "rules" for group projects. On November 27, Judith and Jesse were making a castle with long blocks and cardboard cones. Danielle walked by and looked at what they were doing.

"You wanna help us?" asked Jesse.

"What's it called?" asked Danielle.

"It's a castle," said Jesse.

Danielle picked up a block and started to play. After some time, other children joined in. One child asked, "Who made it?"

"We started it, then people wanted to come help us 'cause it looked like so fun," answered Judith.

Alan constructed a portion of the castle that accidentally fell over and crashed another part of the castle. Jesse was quite unhappy and said, "I don't know if it's okay for Alan to stay."

"It's a group project," Alan responded.

Elga called a meeting of all the children who had worked on the block castle. Since Alan thought it was an "everybody project," he didn't feel that it was necessary to ask permission to join, while Jesse felt that Alan shouldn't have joined in without an invitation. The conflict brought out the need for the children to develop fair and consistent rules for group projects. Alan began to cry, stating, "I knew it was an all-person thing and you really hurt my feelings." These large group projects were a step on the way to identification with the entire group. Little by little, the children learned to extend their concept of "group" to include the entire classroom community.

Wholeness

In a related strand—*wholeness*—members of a community regard one another holistically. Berlak and Berlak (1981) identify, as their first "control dilemma," the whole child vs. the child as student. That is, do we view the young person as a whole child or do we focus primarily on intellectual and cognitive development? Certainly, in a classroom community, the child is seen as a whole, many-faceted person—physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. However, there is more to wholeness than this; it is also concerned with the respect afforded to community members. In a moral community, people view one another as "whole persons who are of intrinsic significance and worth" (Poplin 1979, 6).

The whole person is recognized as a complex individual self and as a social self. For this to happen, the children must learn social perspective-taking, which is, for many, an alien concept. For instance, Steve was encouraged to remember the other students in a good-natured manner when he was eager to answer a question.

"You are really good at thinking!" Elga said. "How come you can think about all this stuff and come up with all these great answers?"

"I'm really smart," he answered simply.

"I believe it. Do you know who else is really smart?" Elga asked.

A boy called out, "Joseph?"

"Look around," Elga suggested. "Look at all these really smart people.

They're *all* really smart people." Thus, Elga effectively modeled re and appreciation for individual talents and differences.

In order for the community to be strong, each member must ha positive self-concept, which allows the child to be independent and dependent, competent working both alone and in a group. Indiv expression is recognized and appreciated and children practice partic ing in the public discourse.

Interdependence

Finally, the strand of *interdependence* ties all of the other strands toge Members of a classroom community learn that their interdepend strengthens their interpersonal bonds and their social structure. As learn to be interdependent, the children learn to adjust their own beh in response to the others in the group. They begin to recognize that ways of being affect others and that the social process of cooperation c part of everything they do.

All of these strands intertwine and interconnect as the group acqu sense of community. As Elga said, "At the beginning of the year, there a community yet. The community that they come from is home. Ar everybody is a loose little molecule buzzing around here. And the connections start being made . . . As they make connections withi group, a community structure begins to develop."

Each classroom community will be unique, with certain strands be ing thicker, or more fully developed, than others. Teachers, aware of vital roles as guiding members of the community, can help encourag growth of these strands through structuring of time and space, thr class discussions and activities, and through modeling respectful int tions at all times. Since Elga knows what a classroom community " like," and can "recognize when it's happening," she can help the chil as they learn to weave the strands of community.

The Classroom as a Hybrid Community

At this point, we must still question whether or not the existen these strands constitutes a community. The term "community," mea "common," usually refers to a community of place; that is, a commun a group of people that lives and works together. Over the past decade term "community" has been applied to other circumstances. Jacqu Scherer (1972, 119) identified the "hybrid" as one form of community can be located in modern societies. The hybrid is "composed of ins

tions or organizations that adopt essential communal characteristics."

A classroom can be such a hybrid, a weaving together of elements of four types of communities. A classroom community is a hybrid of a traditional community of place, a moral community (Poplin 1979), a responsive open community (Etzioni 1987), and an institution (Goffman 1961). This hybrid community may never reach full communal status, but it can be closer in practice to a community than it is to an institution.

In many ways, a classroom is like a traditional community of place. The members strive for effective communication skills. They experience a high degree of moral unity, evident in the prevalence of the social process of cooperation. However, since children live much of their lives away from the classroom, in some respects the classroom community is not like a community of place. Shared history and environment, identification, involvement, wholeness, and interdependence are strongly developed while the children are physically present in the classroom, but necessarily weaken as they leave the presence of community members and participate in other social structures.

The classroom community is a moral phenomenon in that it is directed by essential values such as caring, sharing, and helping. These highly-valued moral ideals form a framework upon which social unity is built. As children learn skills of effective and sensitive interpersonal relations, they establish membership in the community, working towards the good of the group and creating a microcosm of the public good (Pereira 1988). Thus, through participation in the moral community, members are entwined in an ever-expanding web of meaningful relationships that are characterized by genuine caring.

The hybrid community in the classroom is responsive to both the individual and to the group. Thus, both the person and the society are afforded moral standing. Individuation is nurtured, but not at the expense of the collective. The functioning classroom community is made up of strong individuals who are able to work together.

An important aspect of a classroom community is its institutional bearing. The nature of a classroom community is necessarily affected by the institution within which it develops. The school—a structure organized to perform the particular function of teaching children—provides the context for the classroom community. Although teacher, students, and parents in many self-contained classrooms enjoy a fair amount of autonomy, they are deeply embedded in the school, the district, the town, or city, and the very cultures of the people involved. Thus, the classroom community is shaped by its socio-cultural context.

Although all of the strands, then, are affected by the context, certain strands are more affected by the institutional structure. If children are not

permitted to influence the curricular content of the class, for instance, and if the class must follow a certain schedule each day, the strand of shared leadership is greatly affected. Thus, the particular nature of each classroom community is determined, in large part, by the school wherein it develops.

Summary

A classroom community such as Elga's develops in a synergistic context of culture, school district, school, staff members, teachers, and parents. Although not all teachers can depend on ideal circumstances, they can move towards the development of a classroom community in a variety of contexts. The strands of community are not fixed, nor is community-building an all-or-nothing proposition. The more strands incorporated into the classroom, the closer the members come to developing a community. As teachers—at all levels—develop classroom communities, additional strands may become evident.

Community-building is a viable and essential goal for all teachers. Our society needs to foster the growth of people who are skilled in personal and interpersonal relationships, as interpersonal moral development precedes civic virtue. In order to create communities that are inclusive of *all* people from all backgrounds and abilities, our citizens must learn to share leadership and power, to participate in decision-making and problem solving. Teachers must provide opportunities for students to express opinions and to communicate clearly in group settings. Students must practice working individually as well as in groups of varying sizes. If we long for healthy communities in a sustainable world, our citizens must cooperate with one another for the common good, and acknowledge our interdependence with the rest of the ecosystem. As children participate in communities in the context of schooling, they are given the opportunity to evolve as mature citizens, skilled in the intricacies of relational living.

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