Snapshot of a Community of Caring Elementary School

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Abstract

Research has found that students' experience of school as community is causally linked to student concern for others, democratic values, skill and desire to resolve conflicts fairly, altruistic behavior, positive interpersonal behavior, and achievement motivation (Battistich, 2001; Schaps & Lewis, 1999).

Brewer, Maine elementary schools have adopted Community of Caring, a project of the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation. Community of Caring, begun as a program to decrease teen pregnancy, now has the broader purpose of promoting positive development and good decision making among children and youth through teaching and modeling the values of respect, trust, caring, responsibility, and family. Community of Caring is perceived by Brewer elementary school staff to be a positive, community-building project. However, we wanted to go beyond positive perceptions to study the Community of Caring project.

This paper describes a study involving elementary students, teachers, and staff in one Brewer elementary school. The purpose was to see whether benefits attributed to sense of community and belonging were present, and if so what role, if any, Community of Caring played in creating such an environment.

Students reported a very high sense of belonging. Both students and staff credited Community of Caring for the safe, respectful school environment. In addition, both identified identical academic benefits as a result of Community of Caring.

Introduction

For years I have regularly driven by one of the elementary schools in Brewer, Maine, a small city close to the University of Maine, and have often noticed a huge banner hanging across the front of the State Street School. "WE ARE A COMMUNITY OF CARING," it proclaims. Since teacher caring and building school communities have been foci of my work for many years, I was very interested in Community of Caring. Three years ago I began working in the city's elementary schools as part of a professional development partnership between the schools and the university. I co-teach an on-site curriculum inquiry class for teachers and administrators, and supervise graduate level student teachers in the K-8 Brewer Schools. That work has allowed me to learn what Community of Caring schools are, at least in the city of Brewer, Maine. This paper describes a study of Community of Caring in one of the Brewer elementary schools, carried out in the spring of 2001.

Context

Community of Caring was founded in 1986 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver as a project of the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation. Originally a program to decrease teen pregnancy, it now has the much broader purpose of promoting positive development and good decision making among children and youth through teaching and modeling the values of respect, trust, caring, responsibility, and family. In teaching and modeling the stated values, the aim is for classrooms and schools to become communities where students and staff are respected and valued and where children feel safe to learn. Community of Caring does not have a specific set of program components but is more a philosophy of educating centered on its five values. However, trainers from Community of Caring school sites travel to new or continuing Community of Caring sites to provide, through presentation, activities, and discussion, a rationale for the focus on the five values and ideas of ways to infuse the values into the curriculum and school activities. In Brewer K-8 schools, the core values are taught as part of the classroom and school rules and routines as well as infused mainly in the study of literature and social studies. In addition to teachers and students, bus drivers, secretaries, and other school personnel, as well as recreation department employees and parents, have all been introduced to the values and purposes of Community of Caring. Brewer received initial training in Community of Caring in 1994 and the most recent follow-up training was in the early spring of 2001 and was required of all new employees.

Brewer, Maine is a city of approximately 9,000 situated across the river from a slightly larger city. The total population of the two cities and surrounding rural areas is about 40,000 people. Brewer is a mix of residential housing and industrial complexes. Many professional who work in the area live in Brewer as do blue collar and service sector employees. The socio-economic status of the residents is mixed. Education is highly valued in Brewer, evidenced by the fact that teacher salaries are among the highest in the state. The school population is approximately 1,900 with many of the high school students attending from surrounding small towns that do not have high schools.

Rationale for the Study

Over the last ten to fifteen years much educational research has centered on schools as communities where children and adults feel respected and valued, where they feel they belong and their contributions are valued. Research has shown that students' experience of school as community is causally linked to student concern for others, democratic values, skill and desire to resolve conflicts fairly, altruistic behavior, inclusive attitudes toward out-groups, positive interpersonal behavior, and achievement motivation (Battistich, 2001; Schaps & Lewis, 1999). Others studies have found that establishing trusting, respectful relationships among students and between students and school staff increases positive behavior and inclusiveness as well as academic effort and achievement (Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Hyman & Snook, 2000). Osterman, (2000) defining sense of community as a feeling that one belongs and is accepted within a group, reviewed research concerning students' sense of acceptance within school communities. From the review she concludes, "Students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school" (p. 331).

Brewer School personnel and I wanted to know if Community of Caring as implemented in Brewer was realizing any benefits such as those cited above. Community of Caring, through the teaching of respect, trust, caring, responsibility, and family, endeavors to create communities within schools where all individuals are respected, valued, and feel they belong. We wanted to go beyond the positive perceptions many staff held toward Community of Caring to study what Community of Caring means to Brewer elementary students and staff and how it may benefit the school staff and students.

Betsy Webb, principal of State Street School, and I planned the following study which was carried out at State Street School in the spring of 2001. State Street is a small (105 students), fifth grade only school. We chose State Street because most of the students had previously attended the other city elementary schools for grades K-4, all of which are implementing Community of Caring, and because several staff

members have been at State Street since before Community of Caring was adopted in 1994 and therefore could offer a long-term perspective.

Method

First we wanted to ascertain whether State Street students perceived a high level of respect for and identification with their school, teachers, staff, and peers. Goodenow's Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale (1993b), (Figure 1, items 3-20) which she developed to measure school belonging was chosen to survey all fifth graders who received parental permission and were present on the day their teacher administered the survey. Goodenow (1993b) defines school belonging as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). Goodenow (1993a) identifies three factors involved in belonging and therefore measured by the PSSM: positive relationship with peers; teacher support; and general sense of belonging. Two Community of Caring Advisory Committee members determined that the PSSM was consistent with Community of Caring values and goals.

The PSSM (belonging) scale was administered to students by their teachers in their classrooms. Those students who did not have parental permission to take the survey took a school work related survey set up to look the same as the PSSM so that no child would be singled out by others as either taking or not taking the survey. Students were also told that they did not have to complete the survey and if troubled by any of it could talk with their teacher or Mrs. Webb. In addition to the PSSM scale, students were asked how many years they had been in the Brewer School system and what their grades were on their last report card, in order to see whether either factor was correlated with their belonging score.

From the PSSM scores, a sample of (20) students with high or low PSSM scores were selected to be part of a focus group to further explore Community of Caring and its impact. The composition of the five groups was as follows: one low scoring group of four boys, one low scoring group of three girls, one high scoring group with five boys, and two female high scoring groups each including four girls. Focus groups were chosen as a methodology because I wanted to create an informal group discussion atmosphere in which participants, who I did not know, would be comfortable and more likely to speak freely. This choice follows the advice of Glesne who in discussing interviews stated, "…children often need company to be emboldened to talk"(1998, p. 68). In addition, focus groups enable one to see the interaction among the students. The focus groups were same gender, again, to encourage comfort and contributions (Spethmann, 1992).

Figure 1. **Community of Caring Survey**

Directions: For each question please circle the number below to answer which best matches your experience. There are no right or wrong answers. Please just answer honestly. Remember, if there are questions you do not want to answer just skip them. You may stop and turn over your paper at any time.

Name: _____

	A's	A's & B's	B's & C's	C's	C's & D's
1. On my last report card I received mostly:	1	2	3	4	5

	Since Kindergarten	Since grade 1 or grade 2	Off and on over the years	Since grade 3 or grade 4	This year only
2. I have attended Brewer Schools	1	2	3	4	5

	Not at all true				Completely true
3.I feel like a part of my school.	1	2	3	4	5
4. People here notice when I'm good at something.	1	2	3	4	5
5. It is hard for people like me to be accepted here.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Other students in this school take my opinions seriously.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Most teachers at my school are interested in me.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here.	1	2	3	4	5
9. There's at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem.	1	2	3	4	5
10. People at this school are friendly to me.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Teachers here are not interested in people like me.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I am included in lots of activities at my school.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I am treated with as much respect as other students.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I feel very different than most other students here.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I can really be myself as this school.	1	2	3	4	5
16. The teachers here respect me.	1	2	3	4	5
17. People here know I do good work.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I wish I were in a different school.	1	2	3	4	5
19. I feel proud of belonging to this school.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Other students here like me the way I am.	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you

Student focus group questions were:

1. What does Community of Caring mean to you?
2. Do you see Community of Caring behaviors at State Street? If so, please give examples of student and adult Community of Caring behaviors.
3. Does Community of Caring help you learn academics?
4. Is there something else that hasn't been said about Community of Caring that you want me to know?

All teachers and educational technicians were invited to be a part of a focus group. Again this method was chosen to encourage comfort and interaction. All teachers (5) volunteered, as did the two educational technicians who work in regular classrooms. Another educational technician from a regional program housed at State Street also volunteered. The group of eight was split into two focus groups, making sure that gender and role were balanced in each group.

Staff focus group questions were:

1. Are there characteristics of this school – students, staff – that cause you to feel respected and valued? If so, please describe.
2. What part, if any, does Community of Caring play in the school and your classroom?
3. What does Community of Caring mean to you?
4. Does Community of Caring help students learn academics?
5. For those of you who were here prior to Community of Caring please think back. Do you notice a difference in students' attitudes and behavior since you implemented Community of Caring?

Both student and staff focus groups were audio taped and subsequently transcribed.

Data Analysis

Each student's PSSM (belonging) score was figured by reverse coding the negative items, totaling the scores for all 18 items and then averaging the item scores by dividing the scores by 18. The possible range of scores was 1-5 with 5 representing the greatest belonging. For the school score, the students' scores were added together and then divided by the number of students (62) who took the survey. The possible range was, again, 1-5. Average scores for individual survey items were also figured.

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed between individual PSSM (belonging) scores and length of time in Brewer schools as well

as belonging scores and reported grades (items 1 and 2 of Figure 1).

Each student focus group transcript was read multiple times in order to minutely code responses to each question. Coding frames were then employed to organize the data and to identify findings (Berg, 2001; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Strauss, 1987). Then student focus group transcripts were shared with a colleague not involved in the study for verification of themes identified. I analyzed the staff focus group data in the same manner, but rather than sharing the transcripts with a colleague, I shared my tentative findings with the focus group participants and received verification from them as to the integrity of the themes.

Results

Student Survey

Sixty-two of the 105 students took the PSSM survey. The overall belonging score for the 62 students was 4.30 with a score of 3 being neutral. This compares very favorably with a suburban middle school (3.86) and an urban middle school (3.11) (Goodenow, 1993b). The individual student survey scores ranged from 2.39 - 4.83 with only two students scoring below 3.0, eight between 3.0 and 3.99 with six of those eight between 3.70 and 3.99, and 52 at 4.0 and higher. These scores show that the vast majority of students who took the survey feel respected and cared about by fellow students and staff.

There were no significant correlations between belonging scores and reported grades nor belonging scores and number of years in the Brewer School system. Students who receive low grades and therefore, one could assume, struggle in school reported belonging as much as the academically successful students. Such evidence suggests that peers and teachers accept students, regardless of academic standing.

I must admit I thought those who had been in the Brewer elementary schools longer would score higher on the PSSM since Community of Caring seemed to be very present in all the elementary schools. I was wrong. Betsy Webb predicted correctly. She said that the new students at State Street were immediately welcomed into the routine. Teachers made expectations clear. Students were assigned to introduce them to the school, staff, and students, and since most students acted on the Community of Caring values the new students would not feel new for long. Although there were only three "new this year" students, Principal Webb was definitely correct. Also, those who had arrived the previous year or the year before that felt equally respected and cared for as those who started kindergarten in Brewer.

Student Focus Groups

Focus group interviews ranged in length from 35 to 45 minutes, with the high scoring boys group and one of the high scoring girls groups being the shortest and the second high scoring girls group being the longest. The difference in scores between the low and high scoring focus groups was not large. Since only two students scored below 3.0, and two more below 3.75, some of the low scoring focus group members had scores in the high 3's, while the high scoring focus group members were in the high 4's.

All focus groups were very similar with their answers, with one exception. The low groups both mentioned that although most students exhibited respectful, Community of Caring behavior, there were lapses on the playground and during the bus trips to and from school. The high groups did not bring those lapses up, yet when asked they agreed that there were lapses. The low girls focus group had the following exchange when asked about students exhibiting Community of Caring values: "I know a lot of people who don't." "Me, too." "And nobody on the bus does." "They swear and fight." The low boys focus group, when asked about students exhibiting Community of Caring values responded: "Some of them don't because I've seen kids picked on and stuff like that. I've seen kids being picked last for soccer and stuff like that. Like me." With the high groups it was not until I specifically asked about the playground or bus that exchanges like the following were elicited: "How about Community of Caring on the playground or bus?" "Sometimes." "It's mainly on our bus because there's like bad words and people swearing and hitting each other." And when I followed up with: "How about on the playground?" "Sometimes." "Yeah." Yep." "Because sometimes people get mad and throw the ball at someone in anger." "But they're just angry. They are still nice on the playground, too." "Yeah." "Yeah."

Except for the difference noted above, the five student focus groups were very similar in their responses to the questions. When asked, "What does Community of Caring mean to you," several themes clearly emerged in student responses, demonstrating student sense of community or belonging in their school. The themes were: empathy, Community of Caring values, the golden rule, and being safe. Students were quick to offer their views, and the following quotes represent the specific themes.

Empathy: "respecting other's feelings,"

"Caring for other people and helping them with their lives,"

"Understanding how they feel about things. Like how they feel about the way

things are happening at recess or inside the classroom."

Community of Caring values: "being respectful,... people that care about you,... being nice to other people, not calling names."

"People trusting other people and caring about other people. Helping others. Being respectful and caring and kind to other people."

"Be responsible."

The Golden Rule: "Treat people the way you want to be treated, and respect teachers and everybody else."

Being Safe: "I think it means you are supposed to feel safe in your community and you are trying to make your community safe and stuff like that."

"I think it is to make the world a better place."

Together these themes reflect much of the research demonstrating that sense of community, or belonging, exist when members feel that the group will satisfy their needs to be cared for and supported (Osterman, 2000). And empathy, in particular, has been shown to be significantly related to sense of community (Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996).

In response to the second question, "Do you see Community of Caring behaviors at State Street School," the unanimous answer was YES! Students spoke of Community of Caring behavior from staff toward students as well as among the staff themselves. They also believed the majority of students exhibited such values at State Street and other Brewer schools and noted occasional lapses in Community of Caring behavior. One low scoring group, without prompting, decided that 90% of the students followed Community of Caring values, and the other low group decided 97% did so. Other groups didn't mention percentages.

Students described the staff's behavior toward students in the following ways:

Staff Toward Students: "Our teachers are always following the rules and they are always trying to do their best and helping other kids, even if they are not in their room."

"They don't just call on one person all the time."

"They care and they don't let other people boss people around, and they keep name calling down."

"Teachers respect your opinions and they want to know how you feel about issues and things in the classroom that are going on."

These responses reflect teacher support for all students, which is regularly related to student school interest (Wentzel, 1998), and along with positive relationships with classmates and a general sense of belonging, is one of the three components of belongingness (Goodenow, 1993b).

And here are student comments regarding how the staff treat each other:

Staff Amongst Themselves: "They [teachers] treat each other as teachers toward each other and friends toward each other."

"They show respect for each other and what they do in the classroom and outside of the classroom."

Students at State Street see their teachers as collegial. Working in a collegial environment in schools is one of the most important organizational characteristics influencing professional commitment, sense of efficacy, and performance (Johnson, 1990). Many times sense of community and its benefits are confined to teacher/student and student/student interactions, yet all school personnel can benefit from a respectful, caring , valuing environment.

They were explicit about their fellow students exhibiting Community of Caring behavior by demonstrating positive relationships with classmates. Students are more likely to be supportive of others when they experience belonging (Osterman, 2000).

Majority of Students: "Most of the people, kids, in this school are like brothers and sisters."

"Helping people with their work."

"Letting everybody join in the games..."

"People don't steal stuff from me, like money and stuff."

In the discussion, students regularly offered that Community of Caring values were also very evident in the schools they had previously attended in Brewer and were consistently followed at the Brewer Recreation Department.

Other Schools: "By the time we got here [State Street] we already knew it all."

"We knew what to expect."

"So we knew how to behave and stuff."

However, nothing is perfect. Lapses in Community of Caring behaviors were noted.

Occasional Lapses: "At four-square they change the rules and they cheat."

"Most people are respectful in school and on the playground, not so on the bus."

In the focus groups when students were asked, "Does Community of Caring help you learn academics," the resounding answer was again, YES. Student responses clustered into the following themes: no distractions; feel safe to learn and make mistakes; and feel respected, trusted, capable, and responsible. The comments below provide a sample of their perceptions.

No Distractions: "Yep, because nobody is swearing and talking and disrespecting the teacher."

"People don't distract other people during class . . . they like respect other people's space, care about learning everything."

"Kids actually do their work in class because there are no distractions."

Feel Safe to Learn: "In our class you are not allowed to laugh at a person if they make a mistake."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"Yeah, It's true. "Yeah, it's trust and family because you have to be nice to family."

"It's respect too, because they tried their best."

"And it's your responsibility to do that."

"We work like a family."

Feel Respected, Trusted, Capable, and Responsible: "The teachers at our school give respect and they tell you (that) you can actually do it when you say you can't. They know you really can."

"Yeah, it helps you learn to, like, be mature enough to do things and hopefully know that you can do things."

"Community of Caring helps students respect themselves, and then they learn better."

"You trust another person with helping you with things and playing games in math to help you learn . . . you trust the other person not to cheat."

"We have learned to work together."

". . . By being responsible I get my work done."

"It helps you think about what you are going to do before you do it."

Again, the students, through their words, demonstrate a sense of community or belonging. When students experience such, they are more considerate and accepting of others. In addition, as sense of community or belonging increases, sense of personal risk decreases and participation increases (Osterman, 2000). The students speak to that when they talk about not being laughed at if they make a mistake, but rather being respected for participating by trying.

In answering the last question, "Is there anything else that hasn't been said about Community of Caring," the students reiterated the things they had learned from Community of Caring values for the short- and long-term. Samples of this are:

"That we respect other people and you are respected when you are here, and whatever you make for a choice, like if it's a bad choice, people will correct you."

"If you want to have friends you need to be one."

"To be trusted yourself, you give what you want to receive."

"Community of Caring helps . . . and when you get ready for life it teaches you how to respect people and care for people."

Staff Focus Groups

There were two staff focus groups, both made up of four teachers and educational technicians. The two groups were very similar in their responses to questions and in the additional issues mentioned. However, only one group talked about Community of Caring as a process that will never be complete. That conversation will be described later.

In analyzing the tapes from the focus groups two major themes emerged in the answers to the first question: "Are there characteristics of this school - students, staff - that cause you to feel respected and valued? If so, please describe." The themes were: we are a team, and an ethos of respect.

We are a Team: All the staff interviewed spoke of teamwork and everyone helping each other and enjoying each other's company. The following quotes capture some of that sentiment:

"I do the ed. tech. job and I am treated equally with the rest of the staff, teachers, administrator."

"We are very much a team."

"Yeah, we are. We're so much a team; I don't think there is any division when you put all the adults together. We are just staff. That's what we are and the kids view us that way, too!"

"So we really do depend on each other...And we don't mind helping each other out."

Ethos of Respect: Many descriptions offered by the staff focused on the environment of their school:

"The school has an ethos. Betsy [principal] and other people use the word family. They said we're family here and we want you to feel that everyone is approachable and that we all just work together . . . So I had that as a model."

"It's a non-threatening environment."

". . . but again, our ideas are always respected."

"I never have to worry about something being repeated or challenged outside of the conversation we just had. The conversation takes place there and it stops. It doesn't continue behind you."

As did the students, the staff describes themselves as a respectful team, exhibiting collegiality across classrooms and roles. This teamwork within a school creates a sense of community for staff and positively influences teacher practice (Johnson, 1990).

For question two, "What part, if any, does Community of Caring play in the school and in your classroom," the responses centered on two themes: Community of Caring is an outgrowth of what was already at this school, and Community of Caring provides a common language and a focus for what we do.

Outgrowth: "I think Community of Caring was an outgrowth of what was here."

"Those values that we hope to perpetuate in Community of Caring were here."

"The respect was here. Caring was definitely here. You don't see any teacher not caring for a child or treating them with disrespect."

Common Language and Focus: "I think what the Community of Caring does with kids is certainly [provide a] common language and it allows us to identify with them certain things that we feel are very important, so if we talk about what respect is or what responsibility is, we are all talking from the same definition, so they all understand what is being discussed. It's easier for us to stand back in any situation and ask: 'Was that showing responsibility? Was that respectful?'"

"I think the language and also being able to let kids know as well as parents, or whoever wants to know about it, that the five values that we talk about came

from what was written in the Constitution . . ."

"I think Community of Caring has helped a lot to allow students to understand what we are doing . . ."

"So what makes Community of Caring different or helpful is that it gives you that language."

Many of the answers to question three, "What does Community of Caring mean to you," were similar to the answers to question two. The themes that emerged were: common language and focus, and it's a way of life.

Common Language and Focus: "Community of Caring gives five emphases that simplify and help you know what we are aiming to do."

". . . a set of standards for behavior."

"To me it's something that brings a common thing . . . that helps bring all the schools in Brewer . . . to make them feel a little more connected."

"I think the logo is helpful . . . having the five points so that there is a common language is very helpful."

It's a Way of Life: The following words exemplify this theme. ". . . It's an attitude, a feeling and a way of life."

"I would say it's an expectation, too."

"It's sort of a tone that we expect in the classroom. They get that respect from the adults in the room and we expect that respect back from them and to each other."

"It's the way we do business here."

". . . there is no prescription with this program. It's just what you want to make it . . . it's emphasizing some core values."

From responses to the above two questions, it is clear that the staff see Community of Caring as a mechanism to provide a common language, which reflects their beliefs in teaching and modeling respect, caring, and the other core values. As an

outgrowth of their beliefs, common language provides for consistent communication with students and each other. Also, the staff views themselves as having been part of a respectful community even before Community of Caring came to their school.

For question four, "Does Community of Caring help your students learn academics," the staff agreed that it did. The answers from staff were very similar to those of the students. The themes are the same although the teachers did not separate safe to learn from feeling respected, trusted, capable, and responsible, as the students did.

> ***No Distractions:*** "If you have that tone in your classroom, then the things that could get in the way of the learning aren't there. You can focus more on learning."
>
> "... we don't have to mess with other things ... We can spend more time focusing on more things that are meaningful for the learning part."
>
> ***Feel Safe, Respected, Trusted, Capable and Responsible:*** "... with kids getting their homework done and being responsible for it, I think responsibility is a big part ..."
>
> "Obviously when a child is feeling respected their response to anything is going to be different than if they feel not respected."
>
> "Kids that don't feel respected will resist, will close up. They are not going to be with you and I don't see how they'll learn. So if you're in an environment where it feels safe, where it feels like family, where you feel your ideas are respected in the way we do, you're starting at the right point."
>
> "I don't know how many years it has been since I've had a child not willing to raise his or her hand and read even if they are a poor reader. They read in science and social studies knowing nobody is going to laugh at them or judge them or think differently of them."
>
> "... We had class bathroom break [and] this child wouldn't go to the bathroom with the rest of the kids. So, I finally said to him: 'why aren't you going to the bathroom with the rest of the kids?' And he said: ' because at my old school the kids used to spit on me and beat me up ...' I was quick to say: '... in this school those things aren't going to happen to you because we respect, and we

think of each other as family.' I said: 'The next time we have break you go in and when you come out you let me know how it went, and if anything ever goes wrong, you let me know because it won't happen again. It does not happen in this school. You are safe here.' And everything was fine after that."

Staff echo their students' responses concerning Community of Caring benefiting academic learning. In doing so, they clearly portray the safe atmosphere at State Street that allows children to risk making a mistake. Like the students, they mention responsibility and how students act responsibly in doing their work. Such student academic effort and motivation has been significantly related to school belonging or sense of community (Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Hyman & Snook, 2000) and seems to be present at State Street School.

In response to question number five which asked if student attitudes and behaviors had changed since Community of Caring has been in the school, the answer from all five teachers and one educational technician who had been in Brewer long enough to make a comparison, was yes. Responses focused on the differences and included the themes of common language or framework and behavior and accountability.

Common Language/Framework: "... this is probably the second year we've had kids that have been through Community of Caring for two or more years so they already have the language."

"They can come up to us on the play ground and say: 'Today out on the playground so and so was not responsible with the ball.' They can cite examples of how each word fits. It gives them a way to communicate to us and with whom they had that difficulty."

"They really have a framework that they are operating from."

Behavior and Accountability: "We haven't had a group that has been challenging for many years, behaviorally, have we?"

"I think Community of Caring has seemed to have made the kids more accountable for a lot of things."

"I think it has made us accountable for a lot more things, too, and how we might handle certain things."
Interviewer: "Because you have to be the model?"

"Right. I wouldn't say that that is for everyone, but for a lot of people because if you are expecting the children to act a certain way then you need to model what you want in return."

"I remember when I first started to teach there used to be fights on the playground."

"Oh, yeah."

"Yeah, fist fights, bloody nose stuff."

"Yeah."

"I haven't seen any. When was the last fight we had?"

"Yeah, there would be fights. I forgot all about that."

"I'm not sure I can remember when we had the last one. No."

Again, staff responses reflect positive student social behaviors regularly associated with students experiencing belongingness (Battistich, 2001; Schaps & Lewis, 1999).

Beyond the Questions

Students regularly kept their comments to answering the questions, with the exception of commenting on the presence of Community of Caring in the other Brewer elementary schools. Staff often went beyond the questions to speak of several other factors involving Community of Caring at State Street and in Brewer Schools as a whole. Three themes emerged in those conversations: administration/staff; integration; and a process.

Administration/Staff: "For whatever reason that [another response] triggered another thought of mine. I'm not sure where this fits into your questions. I look at a big factor, and I think it could go back to Lester [former principal] and where he empowered us to make decisions."

"Oh yeah. A lot of it goes back to him."

> "Once we were given the control, it was up to us to set what we wanted for the school. I think we saw a difference. We decided what the rules were; we all agreed on consistent enforcement of those rules and we just created, we actually had some ownership in this building."
>
> ". . . I still remember someone had asked me: 'What's different about State Street School?' and I kept going back to the administration has to respect and trust their staff. We have had that throughout."
>
> "We also have had very little change in staff."

Here, the staff speak of the role leadership can play in creating and/or fostering a positive school climate. As models, through words, nonverbal messages, and actions, leaders—whether administrators or influential staff—are key to building positive climates (Deal & Peterson, 1994). The staff noted the presence of such leadership.

Integration: They talked of initially struggling to bring Community of Caring examples into their social studies, science, math, and language arts lessons and how it has become much easier for them, to the point that students are doing it also.

> "When we first started Community of Caring we said we're going to integrate this in as many content areas as we can. So we just worked really hard. Like when you're talking about Pocahontas, think family. But now I've noticed the kids are doing it for you. You don't have to stop and think about where you can pull this word in. They're doing it while they are reading.
>
> "I think because they came in with that background, it's much easier for that to happen."

A Process: One group spoke of the long-term goals of Community of Caring and how implementing Community of Caring will never be complete but rather a continual process.

> Group participant relatively new to Brewer Schools: "Can I ask where is the Community of Caring in its life cycle? Is it in the infancy stage or is it reaching its peak or is it getting old?"

"...We have a long way to go and I don't know of any places that feel like they've got to a point where it is an ideal situation."

"...and I don't know how you could ever get to an end because . . . because we change."

"... And new kids come every year."

Language is Automatic

A practice that I noticed in both staff and student focus groups was in answering questions, individuals often used the Community of Caring language automatically. Their familiarity and ease with the common language and what it stands for were obvious. Students in responding to the question concerning Community of Caring and learning academics peppered their talk with the values.

"In our class you are not allowed to laugh at a person if they make a mistake."

"Yeah."

"Yeah, it's true. Yeah, it's ***trust*** and ***family*** because you have to be nice to your family."

"It's ***respect*** too, because they tried their best."

"And it's your ***responsibility*** to do that."

Staff also used Community of Caring language regularly. One example is in the answer to the question about what part Community of Caring plays in the school.

"... We are all talking from the same definition so they all understand what is being discussed. It's easier for us to stand back in any situation and ask: 'Was that showing ***responsibility***? Was that ***respectful***?'"

And in speaking about Community of Caring as an outgrowth of the values at State Street:

"I think we were treating each other with ***respect***, sort of like ***family*** . . ."

"And ***'respect,'*** we've already said that about sixteen times in the past ten minutes!"

Summary

State Street School students reported a high level of belonging. Approximately 60% of the students took a school belonging survey and the vast majority perceived their school as a place where they were respected by staff and other students. Although this study does not prove that the Community of Caring program is the cause for the high scores, both the staff and the students who were interviewed credited the program with creating or maintaining and enhancing the sense of community.

The 20 students interviewed represented a range of belonging scores yet to a one were positive about the program. They gave the program the credit, as implemented by the staff at State Street as well as the other elementary schools, for making the school a safe, respectful place to learn. Teachers echoed the students while realizing that work must continue to create the safest, most respectful, caring learning community possible.

For students, Community of Caring meant the five values and the behaviors those values represent. For the staff, the five Community of Caring values (respect, responsibility, trust, caring, and family) served as a common language and framework to maintain a respectful school community. Staff and students agreed that the academic benefits of Community of Caring included the following benefits: freedom from distractions; feeling safe to learn; and feeling respected, trusted, capable, and responsible in their learning. Staff saw Community of Caring as an outgrowth of their values, and in a reciprocal manner saw Community of Caring serving as an expectation and reminder for them to model and teach the five values as a way of life.

The support for Community of Caring was uniformly strong. One staff member said, "I want to say at this point that I have never regretted the decision to do this [Community of Caring]. I've never felt like this was a waste of time . . . the Community of Caring activities, the times we've involved those outside the group [parents and community]. All those things have been very beneficial. I've never felt like I've used my time ineffectively." Such dedication to the program came through in all the focus group conversations. What also came through were the specific examples of how and why Community of Caring is helping children and staff feel safe to work and learn.

The school staff, through teamwork and the modeling of Community of Caring values amongst themselves, has established an environment where most students feel safe and respected most of the time. Staff integrate, model, and teach the values as part of the school curriculum. Community of Caring serves as a framework for all school activity and is understood and valued.

In recent years school reforms across the country have included various strategies to enhance sense of community among students, and, in some cases, among teachers and staff. Belonging is significant to adults as well as children. Teacher collegiality is important to their professional commitment and performance (Osterman, 2000). It is worth working for and valuing. State Street teachers and other staff do just that.

Research has documented positive academic and social/emotional gains as a result of building a school-wide sense of community with all students, rather than just targeting those deemed at risk (Battistich, 2001; Schaps & Lewis, 1999). Community of Caring as a way of life at State Street School appears to be accomplishing similar gains by involving all students and staff.

Final Thoughts

Community of Caring at State Street School is a way of life. The core values of respect, responsibility, caring, trust, and family mirror how the staff believes everyone should behave and be treated, including themselves. The permeation of the values throughout the school through a common language, infusion of the values across the curriculum, and consistent modeling by staff and students, has created an environment where respect and caring for each other reign.

What will it take to maintain the Community of Caring focus when teachers change or when the administrator of a school or district changes in Brewer or anywhere else? And how can staff in schools come together in beliefs and actions to create and maintain an environment where students feel valued, respected, and safe to risk learning? This study only hints at those answers. However, using those hints and other research findings (Battistich, 2001; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b), I suggest that school personnel, parents, and community members need to understand the importance of belonging. It is not a frill. Staff need to feel respected and valued as do students. In return all must respect and care about each other and act accordingly. That respect must not be confused with "anything goes." It isn't respect or caring if teachers don't expect high achievement and work with students to make that happen. It isn't respect or caring if they let some students "slide by." It isn't belonging if some are left out. It won't work if staff and students fail to see the value of acceptance, of belonging. Creating a school environment where students and staff feel valued and respected is important to academic achievement (Battistich, 2001; Osterman, 2000) rather than a side trip that takes away from learning. And as important as such an environment is, it is not easy to create. Leadership must support it, teachers and staff must buy into the importance of creating such an environment, and everyone must work together to model supportive behaviors and

explicitly teach those behaviors, not as an add on, but as an integral part of school curriculum and life.

> "Kindness has the same etymology as 'kinship.' When a person behaves kindly, he enlarges the scope of his kinship relationship and promotes the strengths of all of us."
>
> Dr. Arnold Beisser
> 1925-1991

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