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Including All Students Within a Community of Learners

Curt Dudley-Marling
Susan Stires

One of the inevitable consequences of schooling is this: a substantial number of children will experience some failure during their educational careers. Evidence for this includes the fact that 11 percent of American school children are placed in special education programs (Lipsky and Gartner, 1989) because they cannot cope with the demands of the curriculum. Fifteen percent of students in grades K-8 receive part-time assistance in remedial, Chapter 1 programs (Steele and Gutmann, 1989) which require that students experience some failure before they are eligible for these services (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 1989). Many students who fail leave school before graduation. Nationally, over 10 percent of students do not graduate from high school (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1990) and in some inner-city schools as many as 80 percent of the students who enter in the ninth grade leave school before graduation (Fine, 1987).

Schools respond to students' failure in a number of ways but special and remedial education – with their underlying assumption that there is something wrong with the student – are typical. When students fail we try to explain their struggles in terms of some disability, deficit, or lack of
critical experiences which are believed to cause their failure. Intervention usually focuses on either "fixing" what's wrong or providing critical experiences students have "missed."

There is reason to doubt the success of our efforts to fix or cure students. Studies of the effectiveness of special education, for example, have consistently reported little or no benefit for students placed in special education programs (e.g., Carlberg and Kavale, 1980; Glass, 1983). Based on a study of both the quantity and quality of reading instruction students received in Chapter 1 programs, special education resource rooms, and regular classrooms, Allington and McGill-Franzen (1989) conclude that "the expectation that participation in remedial or special education will enhance access to larger amounts of higher quality instruction remains yet unfulfilled" (p. 85). Some observers conclude that special education programs may actually harm both students and their families (e.g., Granger and Granger, 1986; Taylor, 1991).

Currently, a lot of attention is being given to the notion of students who are at risk for educational failure. In general, the term at risk is a euphemism for students of color, those who live in poverty, residents of inner cities, those with handicaps, and students for whom English is a second language (Lipsky and Gartner, 1989). Statistically, these students are especially likely to experience school failure and, perhaps, be placed in special education or remedial programs. Presumably, focusing our attention on students who are particularly likely to experience failure in school gives us an opportunity to prevent or reduce school problems. On the face of it, this is laudable. But there are two important assumptions underlying this effort. First of all, it is assumed that once we have identified a student as being "at risk" for failure we can provide some sort of intervention which will
help the student succeed in school. Perhaps we can, although, as we've already noted, previous efforts in special and remedial education do not give us reason for optimism. But there's another more basic assumption operating here. By focusing our efforts on at risk students we necessarily assume that the problem is theirs.

The almost exclusive focus on the problems of children who have experienced failure in school or whom we believe to be at risk for failure overlooks the programmatic and institutional contexts within which students fail. Statistical sorting of students, lockstep, age graded curricula, and a deficiency model which directs attention to what's wrong with our students guarantee that some students will fail in school. We recently overheard a group of teachers arguing that the rigid, subject-organized curricula common in secondary schools be introduced into fifth and sixth grade classes to prepare students better for this instructional organization. One teacher explained that "the child-centered approach in elementary schools might be good for students, but it doesn't get them ready for the realities of junior and senior high school." The reality is that the needs of individual students are often subordinated to the demands of the system.

In general, students fail when they are unable to learn the skills their teachers think they should learn, at the time the teachers think they should. Sometimes, students' difficulties may have less to do with their ability to learn to read or write than with their inability to meet inflexible curricular demands. Taylor (1991), for example, describes the all too common situation of a child whose problem was not that he couldn't read or write, but that he couldn't fit into the basal reading program. Similarly, the problem for some learning disabled and remedial students isn't that they don't
know the "skills," but that they can't cope with worksheets or tests (Rhodes and Dudley-Marling, 1988).

We believe that efforts to reduce school failure must turn away from trying to fix students. Instead teachers should concentrate on transforming their classrooms to make them places which are more congenial to the linguistic, cultural, social, and intellectual backgrounds students bring to school. In short, teachers need to create a community of learners. Rief (1989) captures the spirit of this transformation when she says, "My students are my curriculum. I want to nurture that uniqueness, not standardize my classroom so that the students become more and more alike..." (p. 15).

A community of learners

What is a community of learners and how do teachers construct such an environment? Perhaps it will help to look in a classroom that, in our opinion, contains a thriving community of learners. These students range in age from five to seven and in development from students who can't read print to fluent readers. It is reading time in this primary classroom. While Tristan passes out the folder containing the books that the students are reading, Alden records the title of his book, *Hill of Fire*, by Thomas P. Lewis. He finished reading it yesterday and today he shared his favorite part with the class. Kate and Shane head off to work on their torn-paper art project in response to the book *It Looked Like Spilt Milk* by Charles J. Shaw which Catherine had recommended to them last week. Catherine, Abraham, and Krystin became engrossed in the last chapter of *Owl at Home*, by Arnold Lobel. They will be discussing that chapter with several other students at the end of the reading workshop. On the other side of the room the assistant teacher and a group of six students rehearse their reading of
Rosie’s Walk by Pat Hutchins and use the map that they made of Rosie the Hen’s farmyard. Tristan, who has finished passing out the folders, is reading I Know an Old Lady to his teacher. Rachel and Sarah listen and laugh as Emily reads aloud Sorry, Miss by Jo Furtado and Frederic Joos. Just as Alden begins to read The Littles by John Peterson, Abraham comes over and asks about a word that he, Catherine, and Krystin are unsure of.

In this highly structured, predictable classroom, the students exercise choice and exhibit responsibility in their reading. They help each other and share with one another. They are all part of a thriving community of learners.

In her book, When Writers Read, Jane Hansen (1987) writes about the importance of readers and writers supporting each other in a community. She states, “A community is composed of individuals, each of whom has a unique contribution to make. The supportive community begins with the teacher’s belief that each child has something to share” (pp. 58-59).

Most teachers readily acknowledge the ability of the majority of their students to participate in and benefit from being part of an active community of learners. But teachers may be less able to recognize the ability of those students for whom school is a struggle to participate in a learning community. In reality, specialized instruction and pull-out programs marginalize students who struggle in school by making it difficult for them to participate fully as members of the classroom community. From our perspective, however, in order for a community of learners truly to grow and flourish, all class members must be full and active participants in the community. Donald Graves (1991), who described classrooms as communities in his early research on writing,
extends the discussion to students with learning and emotional problems. He notes the isolation and lack of a sense of community these students have, as well as their histories of failure in taking responsibility for their learning. However, he further stresses the importance of developing a structured, predictable community to help these students overcome their feelings of isolation and histories of failure.

The challenge for educators is to begin to see students in inclusive ways and to value diversity in their classrooms so that those students who have been "ghost," as Nancie Atwell has called them, can become contributors.

The development of a sense of community begins with respect and recognition for individuals and the concomitant freedom of students to take responsibility for their own learning and to share the responsibility for the learning of other members of the community. In this context accommodation and collaboration become primary means through which students learn. In the following sections we begin by explicating respect and recognition and then freedom and responsibility which we see as prerequisites to the development of a vital community of learners. Finally, we discuss how effective teachers can exploit these conditions to encourage accommodation and collaboration within the classroom community.

Respect and recognition

Respect for who students are and what they have to say is an essential beginning. Perhaps the most significant way that we show respect for our students is by listening to them. Yet, even before we can listen, students must have the rhetorical space that they need in order to speak. Teachers indicate their regard for students and invite them to share what they think and what they feel by assuming that
all of our students, even those who are not always successful in school, have something to say. As teachers we need to ask students what they think and what they feel and listen when they tell us. If need be we should bite our lips, clamp our jaws, or count to 100, so that our students have opportunities to give voice to their ideas, concerns, problems, solutions, and joys. Conversely, if teachers concentrate on the "rightness" or "goodness" of what students say, or if they focus on the form instead of the content of their language, they signal a lack of respect for students as individuals and discourage future sharing. The following example illustrates how respect can encourage students to share and provide teachers with windows to students' thinking and learning.

Sara, a girl who had been labeled educable mentally retarded, spent half of her day in a resource room. There Sara and her teacher read together and conferenced about her reading. Since Sara's teacher listened to her and acknowledged what she had to say, sometimes responding to Sara in her journal, Sara learned that her teacher was interested, for example, in the connections that Sara made as a reader. As evidence of Sara's growing interest in genre, Sara commented about the book she was reading, Holling's *Seabird*, "This is a faction!" Sara's teacher didn't question Sara about the meaning of "faction," nor did she correct her. She understood what Sara meant and expressed delight at Sara's insight. (Interestingly, Sara's teacher later learned that Norman Mailer calls non-fiction novels, like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, "factions.")

Lacking the confidence to speak or feeling uncomfortable with the social climate of school, students who struggle often do not share what they know or think unless they are convinced that their ideas will be respected (Fine, 1991). Their ideas may be validated in some cases and celebrated
in others, but students must trust that their language and their ideas will be respected by their teachers and peers. Teachers must be cautious in their use of praise to celebrate students’ accomplishments, however. Teachers’ praise must be sincere and students must understand what is being praised (e.g., their effort, the product). A sixth grade student, for example, wrote in his journal: *One day at art we made watercolors with chalk and everybody’s was real good, but mine looked like junk, but my art teacher said it looked really good. I looked at her and said what is it. She said she didn’t know and she told me to put it back with the other ones. But I still do not know why she said it looked really, really good. To me it looked like junk!*  

Recognition comes when our students’ voices — as readers, writers, and speakers — are heard and established. Recognition does not mean that there is a spotlight on the individual. Rather, it means that the individual has had an impact on the other members of the community, and the group learns what to expect from that member. Usually these expectations will be met but at other times students will surprise their audience and recognition of the individual will grow.  

Recognition of students will not happen without the efforts of teachers who must consciously work to insure that student voices are established and heard within the community. Opportunities for group sharing, for example, insure that students’ uniqueness will be recognized. William, who worked with a special education teacher in both a resource room and the regular classroom, had a fine sense of humor and an unusual way of seeing things. William learned from experience that his comments on books were always welcome. One day after his teacher finished reading *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel,* William looked at the
last picture of the book — which showed Mary Ann, the steam shovel, converted into a furnace with Mike Mulligan relaxing in a chair nearby — and remarked, "Mike Mulligan is smoking his pipe and Mary Ann is smoking hers!" The first time that William spelled "from" conventionally, his teacher insured that William's accomplishment would be recognized by the community. During group share, she asked him how he had learned the correct spelling. William grinned and explained casually, "from all those valentine cards."

Teachers encourage recognition by having all students consistently share their accomplishments and their experiences through their reading, writing, and talking within and outside of the classroom learning community. Like William's teacher, they may celebrate student achievements during group sharing times. Or they may use students' work to illustrate some aspect of reading or writing during teacher- or student-directed mini-lessons. The publication of students' written work, having students read books they are able to read fluently with other classes or their parents, and dramatizing books they have read for their classmates or other classes, also recognize students' work. In general, the recognition of students' work identifies them as members of a vital community of readers, writers, speakers, thinkers, and problem-solvers and this, in turn, helps define the community itself.

**Freedom and responsibility**

Too often students who struggle in school aren't trusted to make choices for themselves or given the freedom to pursue their own interests. Underlying schools' preference for highly structured, prescriptive curricula for less successful students are implicit beliefs about their range of interests and their ability to make choices. In general, we seem to believe that some students, particularly
those who struggle in school, do not have many interests or experiences and, therefore, lack the ability to make choices or evaluate alternatives.

The sorting of students on the basis of our beliefs about their ability to learn and make decisions often begins in kindergarten. Some students quickly convince their teachers of their ability to be successful in school. These students answer questions, follow instructions, initiate ideas which are in concert with teachers' thinking, and are neat and well organized. Other students may do these things less well but manage to convince teachers of their potential. But some students run afoul of their teachers almost from the moment they first enter the classroom. These students may be confused, fearful, or aggressive. They may not initiate ideas or do so at inappropriate times. They may be messy and disorganized. These students just don't seem to fit. The tendency is to attribute these problems to a lack of student ability and/or experience and reason that they need a structured, teacher controlled (i.e., inflexible) curriculum which focuses on giving them the skills and experiences they need to get along in school. When this happens, and it happens all the time, there is no reason to offer students choice since teachers decide what and how these students will learn by reference to the curriculum. Nor is there any apparent reason to consider or build on students' interests. In short, students are assigned to learn predetermined skills because – implicitly – the system does not trust students' ability to learn and does not acknowledge the validity of their interests and experiences. Student ability and experiences are remediated or compensated for instead of being used as a foundation upon which students can build.

A community of learners, in which everyone is a contributor, cannot thrive and flourish unless we learn to trust all
students and insure them the freedom that they must have to pursue learning. Lack of trust, coupled with a tunnel-vision which focuses our attention on students' weaknesses, and not their strengths, has the effect of excluding some students from the classroom community. If teachers can look at students in all their complexities and messiness as learners and accept it as potential, they can provide them with the freedom that students need in order to learn. Teachers can allow students choice in writing when they write on topics that are important to them and in reading when they read real books that they choose themselves.

Heath was a third grader who had a history of reading and behavioral problems. Before he entered the third grade the only books he had ever read were primers and the only strategy he had for reading was sounding out letters and words. In third grade, his teacher encouraged him to read books of his own choosing and provided him with a variety of books from which to choose. One day he poked his head in the door of the resource room and asked, "Do you have The Cross Country Cat? I think you do, I saw it over there," pointing to a shelf where it had been displayed. The resource room teacher assured Heath that she did have it and asked him what made him decide to read The Cross Country Cat. He explained that his cousin had borrowed the book from the library and he had read part of it. He liked the part about the cat skiing and wanted to read more. Because he was given the freedom to select his reading material Heath made great strides as a reader. The freedom to make choices depended, in turn, on his teacher's trust in his ability as a reader and a learner.

Along with freedom goes responsibility. Students who struggle in school, like other students, need the help and support of the community to learn how to make the best use
of their freedom. They need help learning how to proceed, how to choose, what strategies to use, how to follow through, and how to extend their learning. As their teachers, we must present information and ideas continually to build students' stores of knowledge of what is possible in reading and writing. Freedom without content and options is not freedom. It is a void and operating in a void can result in chaos.

Individuals must also learn to accept responsibility for their own learning and members of the community must learn to assume responsibility for each other. Students learn, for example, to read and write when they're given the time to read and write, to develop skills and strategies, to engage in conferences with others, to ask for help when needed, and to be a good audience for other students' work.

It takes time for students to accept responsibility for their own learning and the learning of the rest of the community. This process may take even longer for students who have experienced failure in these schools. Our lack of trust in some students has influenced us to take control of and assume the responsibility for their learning. As a result these students learn to respond passively to school instruction or, in the worst case, actively reject it. But students can overcome their passivity (or rejection) and learn to assume responsibility for their learning.

Kristy, a girl who had been labeled severely learning disabled, found it natural to take responsibility for selecting her writing topics, often planning them ahead of time. One day when she announced that she was going to write about sea animals like seahorses, crabs and lobsters, her teacher asked Kristy when she decided to pick this topic. She replied, "I thought about it in my mind last night." When the
writing workshop began, Kristy did indeed write about sea animals. Students who learn to assume this responsibility are set on the path of life-long learning which, after all, should be the primary goal of schooling.

Accommodation and collaboration

In order to reduce school failure we must create schools and classrooms which accommodate the needs of all our students, including those for whom school is a struggle. We believe the needs of the learning community and the diverse needs of students can be better accommodated by experimenting with different school organizations and through the flexible use of time and space.

A group of undergraduate students doing a practicum for their reading course was surprised to find that the teachers in one school either pushed the teachers' desks against the wall and used them as resource centers or moved their desks out of the classroom to create more space in which students could work. Similarly, other teachers may nourish the community by replacing desks with tables or rearranging student desks to encourage more face to face interactions, providing comfortable places for talking and reading, and so on.

Accommodations must be made in time as well as space. Some students need more time, others need less. Some teachers provide flexibility in their daily schedules by implementing a center-based program in which students choose which activities they do and when they do them, although teachers may mandate some of the centers (Schwartz and Pollishuke, 1989). Providing adequate time for students depends on getting to know them well and trusting that they can, given the needed support, learn to manage their time.
The organization of schools – regular classrooms, resource rooms, segregated classes, tutoring labs, classes with twenty-five to thirty same-age students and one teacher, etc. – often has more to do with tradition or the convenience of school officials than the needs of students. In order to meet the diverse needs of members of the learning community schools could experiment with alternative school organizations like cross-aged, family groupings, various class sizes and teacher-student ratios, alternative graduation requirements, and so on. In general, the currently rigid organization of our schools will never be sensitive to the diverse needs and backgrounds of students in North American schools.

Perhaps the most important feature of the learning community is the opportunity it provides for students to collaborate with their teachers and with each other. Student learning is facilitated through collaboration within a community of learners in which students and teachers use oral and written language to share, discuss, debate, question and extend one another’s learning. One day during lunch period Danny, a kindergarten student who had been labeled retarded, and his teacher built a block tower together. When Danny had put on the last block he stepped back and announced, “I did it myself!” His teacher was surprised and delighted. She realized that she had provided the collaborative support Danny needed to do something he could not yet do himself. Nevertheless, he felt the accomplishment was his and his self-esteem soared as high as his tower.

In collaborative classrooms students learn from and with each other as well as their teachers. Brooke, who was considered to have a language handicap and rarely spoke in class, was sharing an alphabet book with the class with the help of her friend Rachel. Rachel read the “A” page and
then whispered what was written on the "B" page to Brooke who then read it to the class. They continued in this alternating fashion until they finished the book. Along with Rachel the class celebrated Brooke's achievement and she was filled with pride at what she had accomplished. Brooke read the alphabet book to her teachers the next day and a week later she shared a counting book with the class on her own (Stires, 1991).

Collaboration is not a set of activities that students engage in. Nor is it a recently revived idea that we superimpose on the curriculum; it is a way of being and working in the classroom. Information must be shared as resources in communities are shared for the common good. Like villagers at the well, students and teachers dip in for water and talk and talk, as a means of gathering information, sharing ideas and making meanings.

Conclusion

The inflexible instructional arrangements present in so many of our schools will never be sensitive to the needs of all our students. Our best chance of reducing failure in school is to move away from models of remedial and compensatory education – which focus our attention on what's wrong with our students – and concentrate on transforming classrooms into learning communities which are responsive to the range of ability and experiences students bring with them to school. A learning community – in which students and teachers live, learn and work together – not only accommodates individual differences, but celebrates differences and draws on student diversity to sustain the community. Within a community of learners student diversity becomes a resource and not a factor which places students at risk for educational failure.
References


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