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PREVIEW

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Community building in a whole language first grade classroom

Rogers, Sheri Everts, Ph.D.

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PREVIEW

COMMUNITY BUILDING
IN A WHOLE LANGUAGE
FIRST GRADE CLASSROOM

by

Sheri Everts Rogers

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Administration, Curriculum and Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Karla Hawkins Wendelin

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 1994

Community Building In A Whole Language First Grade Classroom

Sheri Everts Rogers

COMMUNITY BUILDING IN A WHOLE LANGUAGE FIRST GRADE CLASSROOM

Sheri Everts Rogers, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1994

Advisor: Dr. Karla Hawkins Wendelin

The purpose of this participant-observational study was to describe and understand the processes involved with creating a community of learners in a culturally diverse classroom from the perspective of the teacher. The study focused on a first grade teacher who voluntarily examined with the researcher the process of building a community with her students. Ethnographic techniques were the primary methods used and included participant-observation, interviews, the informant's teaching journal and other documents.

The results of the study indicated that particular themes emerged as vital components in this teacher's process of building a community of learners. They were: unconditional love, empathy, positive regard for children, teacher's own positive regard, valuing the children, asking children for their understanding of events and activities (questioning), genuineness, parental connections, and listening to the children's individual stories.

The teacher struggled with lack of community within her own school environment and sought to provide for the children what she wished for herself. She was, however, able to create a community of learners with the other adults (e.g. the student teacher, the paraprofessional, and the researcher) in the classroom, which proved beneficial to her sustained growth.

The children were substantially changed by the community of learners of which they felt a part. They were socially as well as academically connected with a tightly-woven net of caring which allowed them to take risks.

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PREVIEW

**COMMUNITY BUILDING
IN A WHOLE LANGUAGE
FIRST GRADE CLASSROOM**

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEM

Watching from the sidelines may have merit when viewing a stage production, movie, or sporting event, but in order to learn how to perform a specific activity, direct entanglement is integral. Piagetian and Vygotskian approaches consider that an individual actively builds his or her knowledge, interacting both with others and with the objects of knowledge, developing his or her organized schemes and abilities through "facilitations" offered by teachers and more capable peers (Piaget, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978). This notion is coupled with the idea of learning as a transactional event beginning where the learner is and maintaining the position of the learner at the very core of any learning situation (Bentley and Dewey, 1949; Rosenblatt, 1978). Knowledge, relevant and meaningful, is gained from "funded experience" (Dewey, 1958). Donald Murray related the notion of experience to writing: "We do not teach our students rules demonstrated by static models; we teach our students to write by allowing them to experience the process of writing" (Murray, 1985, p. 20). This "allowing" students to learn was shared by Carl Rogers (1983, 1969):

The primary task of the teacher is to permit the student to learn, to feed his or her own curiosity . . . Learning how to learn is the element that is always of value, now and in the future (p. 18).

Further, whole language incorporates the concepts of language as social semiotic and language learning as "learning how to mean" (Halliday, 1975). This very social nature of learning, especially in a whole language classroom where a student writes, reads, speaks, and listens with, and for, an authentic audience is of vital importance when one considers the risks apparent in such a classroom.

According to Hansen (1987),

Writing and reading by their very nature place the individual in the center — not alone, but in the midst of others. Writing takes nerve, courage. To write with a strong voice draws attention to yourself. The people who read your writing find out who you are (p. 63).

The establishment of a learning community within the classroom environment serves as a viable cocoon of comfort for the child, and the teacher, each of whom is taking measured risks as they learn, especially through writing and reading. It can be scary business sharing personal writing and responses to literature with a group of unknown people. It may be intimidating and can stand in the way of growth for each member of the class. However, with the establishment of a community, each member comes to rely on the other members of the community as people to learn with, people to lean on, people to question, people to wonder with. The community is responsible for jointly creating meaning. Each individual becomes a new fund of experience upon which all group members may draw. Graves (1983) stated:

Group sense is reached when the class becomes aware of what individual members can do. Helping other classes with conferences, sharing music and choral speaking, or published books, are all contributions to this important dynamic. Classroom visitors who are continually told about the way the room functions, or what the class

has accomplished, remind the children they have gone the full range from individual progress, to helping each other. The children then recognize that there is a force in the room, a group force that lifts each child, no matter what his ability (p. 42).

Graves (1983), Calkins (1983, 1991), Tchudi and Huerta (1983) and Atwell (1990) have documented the need for a sense of community in the classroom, especially in a setting where reading, writing, and the sharing of ideas is of paramount importance, as in a whole language classroom. Establishing trust is a vital element in the establishing of community so students feel comfortable sharing themselves, their ideas and their writing with others. This trust must encompass the knowledge that others will attempt to understand and support them in their endeavors. Further, the need for a comfort level is essential (Calkins, 1991) for students to feel unconditional acceptance, for they are sharing their very selves when they write. ". . .they need to feel at home. They need to feel safe and respected and free to be themselves" (Calkins, 1991, p. 27).

Frank Smith (1986) advocated the urgency of students' feeling invited into the "literacy club," not for comfort reasons, but in order for the child to become a successful reader and writer. Smith warned of the dangers of children not feeling included as members:

If we do not belong to a particular club, then we do not apprentice ourselves to people who are members of that club. Our minds fail to engage with the demonstrations that are provided for us - they do not become part of us. We cease seeing ourselves as 'that kind of person.' (Smith, 1986, pp. 47-48).

Despite the increased interest in the need for community building in the classroom, only recently has research begun to look at how one effectively goes

about establishing a cohesive, supportive community. Further insight into how one teacher creates such an environment should prove useful to teachers aware of the urgency for building community and for administrators who need to understand the special commitment undertaken by the teacher as s/he builds a community of learners. Kenneth Goodman calls for research looking at the concept of admitting members into Smith's (1986) "literacy club." Goodman wrote: "What happens in classrooms that includes or excludes pupils from this club? . . . Does whole language do a better job of making more pupils feel like members of the literacy club?" (Samuels and Farstrup, 1992, p. 63).

QUALITATIVE PURPOSE STATEMENT

The objective of this ethnographic case study was to discover how a whole language teacher develops community in her first grade classroom. The learning process described included the teacher's perceptions of the community building process and her understanding of her role in that process.

THE GRAND-TOUR QUESTION AND SUB-QUESTIONS

The grand-tour question of this study was "How does a whole language teacher create a learning community in her first grade classroom?"

Further questions which were addressed during the course of the study included the following:

How was the classroom organized?

What activities did the teacher orchestrate, especially at the beginning of the school year?

How did the students react to these aforementioned activities?

What topics were discussed, and who introduced them?

What types of interpersonal dynamics existed and how were these manifested?

What did the teacher do to ensure a risk-taking environment?

How did the students respond to the teacher's actions?

What are the teacher's perceptions of the community-building process?

DEFINITIONS

Because of the inductive and evolving nature of qualitative research, only two definitions are provided for the purpose of this study:

Community of Learners: A community of learners is one in which each member, including the teacher, considers that what he/she says, thinks, and writes will be treated with respect and acceptance. No one person will be seen as having all the answers; no one person will be seen as the autocrat. Each member of this community will feel comfortable and at home within the classroom. The classroom will be a safe place in which to think, talk, and write for each member of the community. Each member will feel that s/he has a contribution to make. All members are valuable. Each member desires that all other members feel and

experience success. A sense of cooperation is imperative; competition is not deemed necessary (Frank Smith, 1986).

Whole Language: For the purposes of this study, whole language will refer to the philosophy espoused by the case study subject. Whole language proposes that children learn from the whole to parts. Reading and writing are considered social events and discussion is encouraged. Students, as well as the teacher, read, write, talk, and listen in authentic situations. Quality children's literature holds a prominent place, as students and teachers read it and make connections for discussion, writing, further reading, and listening purposes. Halliday's (1984) conclusion that we learn through language while we learn language is fundamental to the whole language philosophy.

ASSUMPTIONS

The following assumptions of qualitative research (Merriam, 1988) served as the foundation of this study:

- 1) Qualitative researchers are primarily concerned with process rather than outcomes or products.
- 2) Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning and how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world.
- 3) The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Data are mediated through this human instrument rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines.

4) Qualitative research involves fieldwork. The researcher physically goes to the people, setting, site or institution in order to observe behavior in its natural setting.

5) Qualitative research is descriptive in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures.

6) The process of qualitative research is inductive in that the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from details (Merriam, 1988).

Additional assumptions were:

7) The classroom chosen for this study and bearing the label, "whole language," illustrates characteristics consistent with the given definition of a whole language classroom.

8) The teacher chosen for this study has a deep and abiding interest in community building and exhibits this interest in her careful attention to the building of a community of learners in her classroom.

9) The teacher is the primary facilitator of a community of learners in the classroom.

10) The children in the room, and their behaviors and reactions to this presumed community, will be important gauges of the success of the community atmosphere.

11) The presence of the researcher in the classroom may have affected the conditions of the study in several ways:

a. it may have increased and prolonged the commitment of the teacher to building a community.

b. in providing feedback to the teacher the researcher may have influence the teacher's perception of the success or failure of certain aspects of the community building process during the course of this study.

c. in providing feedback to the teacher the researcher may have influenced the teacher to modify certain aspects of the community during the course of the study.

Additionally, the qualitative research methodology makes sense for this particular study given the nature of the research question: How does a whole language teacher create a learning community in her classroom? Quantitative data and analysis would be inappropriate since the grand tour question asks for a rich and thick description of the classroom and the processes involved in community building.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant to practitioners, administrators, and to the research community.

For practitioners, this study may suggest a model of how to build a community of learners in their particular classrooms. It further explored the process a teacher goes through to be successful in this area. Additionally, it outlined the benefits for the children in a classroom with a sense of community.

Their willingness to take risks, to trust the teacher, and each other, may be a meaningful and vital model for teachers unsure of the benefits of a community of learners.

For administrators, this study will prove helpful in noting the special commitment on the part of teachers who do spend additional time establishing a learning community in their classrooms. They may also choose to use this model for building a sense of community in their school environment for the teachers and support staff.

For the research community, this study will allow a glimpse into not only how a teacher builds community but the level of caring necessary for this individual creation of a community of learners. This study does not profess to be the model of community building in an elementary classroom, but instead, serves as one teacher's journey on the path to community. This path is not always a straight one, nor is it a consistently smooth one, but it is a worthwhile endeavor. The learning and achievements of the children in this study are noteworthy from the respect that the community not only allowed but fostered this growth.

LIMITATIONS

This study was designed to discern the processes explicit and implicit in building a community of learners within a specific classroom based on the beliefs and behaviors of those who were directly involved in the processes. The goal of this study was the development of an understanding of the particular and quite

individual community established. The results of this study are not generalizable to other classrooms and individuals, except as other individuals find common characteristics in their own situations.

OUTCOMES

The outcome of this study will be the story of a community. This story will encompass how a community is built, what this process means to the teacher, to her students, and to me, as the researcher.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

An initial literature review in a qualitative study is somewhat unique in its scope. While it provides a foundation for why a project is valuable, it should stop short of influencing data analysis. Rather, the inductive process which helps define a qualitative study must be allowed to guide the direction determined by the data as gathered. The literature should not bias or guide interpretation of the data, or obscure what the participant/observer sees, or may deem relevant or not, based on prior studies. In order for the familiar to appear strange, for accurate representation in the data, the observer should be open to everything that may be applicable for the study. Too close adherence to the current research may skew what the researcher deems important and viable for the study at hand. In this study, the literature prior to the study itself primarily established why a sense of community is vital in a whole language classroom. The initial literature review purposely ignored the most recent research into how community is successfully built, and instead served to support the interactive collection-analysis process which accompanied data gathering and advocated deductive verification of the questions of this study. The initial literature review was supplemented following data collection and beginning analysis to verify emerging themes. The literature review for this study briefly discusses three major themes and their theoretical underpinnings for community building in the classroom. Specifically these are:

1) Whole Language and Social Constructivism; 2) Cooperative Learning, Grouping and Learning Communities; and 3) The Teacher's Role in Classroom Environment.

WHOLE LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIVISM

A whole language belief system was chosen as the dominating philosophy of the case study classroom for a simple reason: the informant refers to herself as a whole language teacher. Further, the two philosophies of whole language and social-constructivism, while similar in many avenues, are best defined in the actual classroom. The philosophy behind social-constructivism is connected to the work of Wittgenstein (1953) and Mead (1934). They share with Kuhn (1962) the notion that knowledge is a "social artifact" that is created and fed by a community of peers. Knowledge is consensually formed through social interaction (Bruffee, 1987), not based on an objective reality for measurement and quantification.

The psychological bases of social constructivism are the theories of Vygotsky (1978) and others who have developed and modified his views (Bruner, 1987; Rogoff, 1984). From this perspective, knowledge is constructed by the interactions of individuals within society, or a given community. Learning is an internalization of social interaction that occurs first between individuals and then within an individual. Internalization occurs in the "zone of proximal development" through "adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).