

discipline framework. Had the students been invited to think outside of that box, to reflect on alternatives to "doing to" tactics, then the dilemma of whether to implement their troubling suggestion might not have arisen.

Of course, it can be just as hard for adults to think in unfamiliar terms as it is for children. Educators who have spent years pursuing the goals and practices described earlier in this book ought not to expect a rapid conversion to democratic teaching. For teachers who are themselves controlled by administrators, the task may be even more difficult. On one level, it seems ironic that teachers who complain bitterly about having to turn in lesson plans, adopt a certain discipline program, or attend specified inservice events—in short, those who resent being deprived of autonomy—often turn around and treat their students exactly the same way, tightly regulating their behavior.

On another level, this behavior is not ironic at all; it is exactly what we would expect. "When teachers are treated as pawns, they don't teach, they become drill sergeants" (de Charms 1977, p. 444). Sure enough, researchers have discovered that when teachers are pressured to improve students' performance on tests, they tend to act in more controlling ways with students, giving them less choice than do teachers who are free to facilitate students' learning (Deci et al. 1982).

For administrators to share power with teachers, and teachers with students, is to undertake a monumental challenge. But we might well ask about the long-term implications of *denying* people a role in the decisions that affect them. Winston Churchill's remark during a speech to the House of Commons half a century ago should resonate with educators today: "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government—except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."



Chapter 7

THE CLASSROOM AS COMMUNITY



The evident weakness in American schools has much to do with the weakening of their community context. . . . Education can never merely be for the sake of individual self-enhancement. It pulls us into the common world or it fails altogether.

—ROBERT BELLAH ET AL., *THE GOOD SOCIETY*



WHY COMMUNITY?

For all the talk one hears in certain educational circles about the importance of creating "communities," few people indicate precisely what that term means. Perhaps they find it difficult to nail down the concept; like Justice Powell struggling to define *pornography*, they may resort to saying that they know it when they see it.

But I think we can do better. Indeed, we have an obligation to specify what this idea means if we are proposing that it should guide our work. In saying that a classroom or school is a "community," then, I mean that it is a place in which students feel cared about and are encouraged to care about each other. They experience a sense of being valued and respected; the children matter to one another and to the teacher. They have come to think in the plural: they feel connected to each other; they are part of an "us." And, as a

Community

result of all this, they feel safe in their classes, not only physically but emotionally.

To say that a classroom is a community, in other words, is to say that it is a place where

care and trust are emphasized above restrictions and threats, where unity and pride (of accomplishment and in purpose) replace winning and losing, and where each person is asked, helped, and inspired to live up to such ideals and values as kindness, fairness, and responsibility. [Such] a classroom community seeks to meet each student's need to feel competent, connected to others, and autonomous. . . . Students are not only exposed to basic human values, they also have many opportunities to think about, discuss, and act on those values, while gaining experiences that promote empathy and understanding of others (Child Development Project 1991).

In recent years, more educators have begun to pay attention to these dimensions of schooling. Thomas J. Sergiovanni (1994, p. xi) has gone so far as to declare that "community building must become the heart of any school improvement effort." After all, how many children can grow—intellectually, emotionally, or any other way—without a supportive environment? Virtually any meaningful long-term goal we might have for students requires us to attend to the climate of the school and, specifically, the extent to which children feel related, as opposed to isolated.

Some of the most important work on formulating, researching, and implementing the idea of caring communities has been done in connection with an elementary school program called the Child Development Project (Battistich et al. 1989; Watson et al. 1989; Kohn 1990c; Solomon et al. 1992). The staff of the CDP, based in Oakland, California, has worked in eight school districts both within and beyond California to promote students' social, moral, and intellectual development.¹ The definition of community cited just above comes from the CDP, and in fact the whole of this book reflects the impact of this group's work: it has profoundly shaped my thinking about what ought to happen in schools, about how a caring community can be constructed as well as why it is so important to do so.

The rationale for promoting community is powerfully evident from a recent CDP study of two dozen elementary schools around the country. Students in the upper grades were asked about the extent to which they experienced their classroom and school as supportive communities. It turned out that the stronger that community feeling was, the more the students reported liking school and the more they saw learning as something valuable in its own right. These students also tended to be more concerned about others and more skilled at resolving conflict than those who didn't feel part of a community. What's more, these positive effects were particularly pronounced in schools that had more low-income students (Battistich et al. 1995).

The CDP study suggests that taking the time to help children care about each other might just affect their enthusiasm about academic learning. That is an insight with the potential to reshape the whole enterprise of school reform, but it really shouldn't be surprising. Students need to feel safe in order to take intellectual risks; they must be comfortable before they can venture into the realm of discomfort. Few things stifle creativity like the fear of being judged or humiliated. Thus, a supportive environment will allow people of any age to play with possibilities and challenge themselves to stretch their thinking. The moral is: if you want academic excellence, you have to attend to how children feel about school and about each other.

Note that the CDP study also supports the idea that students in communities are better at conflict resolution and more likely to care about others. This finding is consistent with the work of Piaget (1965) and other researchers who have argued that cooperative relationships among children are the key to moral development. Each member of a community has the opportunity to see things as they appear to others, and in so doing to think in a way that is deeper and less self-centered.

Another way of emphasizing the importance of community is to point out how difficult it is to do other things of value without it. Three examples should illustrate the point.

- "When a spirit of cooperative community is missing, 'democratic' [class] meetings can become merely a forum for pressing and

defending one's narrow self-interest" (Lickona and Paradise 1980, p. 334). Of course, these meetings can themselves help to build and support that cooperative spirit, but it is important that they are construed from the beginning as activities by and for *us*. A meeting should be experienced as one important way that our community shares and decides, plans and reflects. Otherwise, it may come to resemble something closer to a courtroom, where individuals press their case against one another: a meeting of the "mines."

- Multi-age classrooms and cross-age activities are enormously useful; they have the potential to promote generosity as well as better thinking skills for both the older and younger children involved (Foot et al. 1990; Pavan 1992; Child Development Project 1996b). How, then, do we explain the complaints that in some of these classrooms the younger children are teased or excluded? The likely culprit is a failure to create a community, to promote a sense of connection and caring. Unfortunately, some teachers or parents may be inclined to reject the whole idea of multi-age education rather than embracing the idea of community to make it work.

- I visited a well-known free school in Massachusetts not long ago, a place where students not only direct their own learning but decide when and whether to have a lesson. Yet discipline in this stunningly unconventional school is suspiciously familiar: it consists of an intricate welter of bylaws, along with a Justice Committee to enforce them by meting out punishments to those found guilty of wrongdoing. To be sure, the process here is distinctive by virtue of the fact that power rests in the hands of students. But one is led to wonder why the school is still stuck on the traditional arrangement of threats and punishments to deal with conflicts.

After some reflection, I concluded that a move from "doing to" to "working with" is impossible unless there has been an effort to create and sustain relationships among the people involved. The alternative to discipline is to treat an inappropriate act as a problem to be solved together—but that is predicated on the experience of *being* together. With nothing more than a loosely confederated bunch of free individuals, one is left with the same old rules-and-penalties model. The

pursuit of laissez-faire liberty condemns us to a system of control, even though different people may be doing the controlling.

Autonomy is not enough; we need community, too.

OBJECTIONS TO COMMUNITY

The idea of community at first seems so bland and unobjectionable that support for it might almost be dismissed as hollow rhetoric. On closer inspection, though, it represents a radical and disconcerting challenge to much of what we take for granted. This is true because it calls into question several overlapping aspects of the status quo.

When we talk about "discipline," for example, we are talking about how the adult intervenes with this student or that one. Moreover, the intervention—like the usual view of teaching itself—is often conceived as instilling something in, or transmitting something to, each student. Even people committed to cooperative learning often see their mission as changing each participant into someone who can listen, make eye contact, encourage others, and so forth.

The community approach goes beyond teacher-student interaction and asks us to consider the broader question of how everyone gets along together. It also suggests that the way students turn out is a function not only of what each has been taught, but of how their environment has been set up. If we want to help children grow into compassionate people, we have to help them change the way the classroom works and feels, not just the way each separate member of that class acts. We have to transform not just individuals but educational *structures*.

The structural approach has another interesting implication: caring is more than just a characteristic of teachers. Obviously it's very important that the adults in a school be generous, warm people. But it's just as vital to attend to how the classroom or school is arranged. When administrators proudly tell me how caring their teachers are, I am apt to reply, "That's great. But do you have awards assemblies?" If things have been set up so that one student can succeed only if another fails, if the school sets children against each other in a race

* for artificially scarce recognition, then nice teachers can accomplish only so much. Similarly, the personal qualities of the staff may not be able to mitigate the harm of practices like posting lists of consequences on the wall or singling children out for public praise. While it's important that the teacher is sympathetic, this does not a community make.

The questions we ought to be asking, in other words, go well beyond "Does this teacher want the best for her students?" We need to ask as well: How does the classroom system work (Alschuler 1980; Bowers and Flinders 1990)? Are students helped to develop a sense of responsibility for each other? By what means? What happens if a child is reduced to tears by cruel taunts, or by deliberate exclusion? What expectations, norms, and structures have been established to deal with such an incident—and to make it less likely to happen in the first place?

Here's a paradoxical exercise worth trying out at a faculty meeting: Start by talking about the meaning of community in a school context. Invite participants to come up with some concrete markers for the concept, some indications of what an observer would see and hear and feel in a place that truly deserved to be called a community. Then ask everyone to think of the most effective ways by which a community can be *destroyed*. If, for some perverse reason, we were determined to eliminate that sense of community, what practices would be most likely to have that effect?

Don't be surprised if participants nominate competition as the number one community destroyer—not only awards assemblies but spelling bees, charts that rank students against each other, grading on a curve, and other things that teach each person to regard everyone else as obstacles to his or her own success (Kohn 1992).

Certain broader educational practices are likely to be mentioned, too. It would be hard to think of a more effective way to snuff out a sense of community than grouping students by putative ability. The most extreme versions of this practice—segregation of students with special needs or of those lucky enough to be deemed "gifted" (Sapon-Shevin 1994)—are likely to have the most extreme effects.

Finally, traditional discipline, or some aspect thereof, may round out the list. That's another reason that this emphasis on community is more controversial than it first appears. (It also explains what a chapter on this topic is doing in a book with a critical perspective on discipline.) The creation of caring communities clashes with the theory and practice of classroom management. It's not just that students who truly feel part of a community are less likely to do the things that bring down the weight of discipline on their heads. It's that a serious commitment to building community offers an invitation to move beyond discipline.

PSEUDOCOMMUNITY

Talk about turning classrooms and schools into communities may make some people nervous for another, very basic reason: anything that smacks of a social orientation can raise suspicions in a culture like that of the United States. Some see any emphasis on community as a potential threat to the rights of the individual.

Is there reason to be concerned? It is certainly true that some sort of balance needs to be struck between the rights or needs of the group and those of each person in the group. But the United States in general, and U.S. schools in particular, are tilted so far toward an individualist ethic that we have a long way to go before we have to worry about excess in the opposite direction. (This may not be true in places like Japan.) Here, students are given solitary seatwork assignments followed by solitary homework assignments followed by solitary tests. At best, they are exhorted to take responsibility only for their own behavior.

* But we can go further than that. The individual is not likely to be swallowed up in a true community because a community is quite different from a collective. This distinction, vividly drawn by the philosopher Martin Buber, is as relevant to education as to political theory. A community not only preserves and nourishes the individuals who compose it but also underscores the relationships among these individuals. These functions are missing in a collective, whose

members must simply overcome their private preferences in order to serve the group. (Interestingly, the latter model calls to mind the emphasis on obedience and loyalty to the social order that defines the work of conservative proponents of character education.)

The distinction between a community and a collective may seem awfully abstract, but it springs to life in real classrooms. There are some places where children develop a genuine commitment to each other and to the "us" composed of these real people. There are other places where children are exhorted to silence their own needs in the name of an abstraction called "the group" or "others"²—or are roused to jingoistic fervor in the name of something called "school spirit." The point in a collective is conformity, which pretty well excludes the conflict that is essential from a constructivist perspective (see Chapter 5). "Real community is forged out of struggle," observes one educator. "Students won't always agree on issues, and the fights, arguments, tears, and anger are the crucible from which a real community grows" (Christensen 1994, p. 14).

It may help to think of conformity to a collective as a sort of "pseudocommunity," analogous to what I have called pseudochoice. This is what critics sometimes have in mind when they warn about the dangers of community, which means their criticism might be misplaced. A second version of pseudocommunity is peer pressure. It is discouraging to find thoughtful educators endorsing an arrangement whereby students are essentially bullied by their peers into doing the right thing. Because the pressure comes from other students rather than from an adult, some people confuse this behavior with the dynamics of community. Of course, it is nothing of the kind. The goal is compliance (rather than learning), the focus is on behavior (rather than the students' underlying motives and values), and the climate of the class is characterized by the very opposite of safety, warmth, and trust.

One more variant of pseudocommunity might be identified before we move on to some thoughts about how to establish the real thing. I remember participating in a teacher workshop one summer that featured a rather self-conscious bit of community-building. The participants were divided into colors, and I watched the members of

the red group try to carry out their assignment, which was to invent a logo and a slogan. This activity was supposed to model the process of creating "commonality," and these teachers would presumably go back and do something similar with their students.

But why *should* any of these strangers have felt part of the group to which they were assigned? They didn't know each other yet, and there was nothing of substance—no honest commonality—around which to create community. The earnest attempt to get consensus about whether they would henceforth be known as the Red Hot Chili Peppers led me to wonder why anyone should care. Indeed, the participants were not particularly responsive during the exercise, leading the facilitator to assume they were just shy or tired and in need of some artificial inducement to participate more energetically. But the problem was not with the attitudes of the individuals; it was with the forced attempt to create a community out of thin air.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY: PREREQUISITES

A real or authentic community doesn't feel empty. It is constructed over time by people with a common purpose who come to know and trust each other. Of course, it is precisely the commitment to make a community that helps these things happen. But a bunch of strangers cannot be tossed into a room and expected to emerge in a matter of hours as anything more than a bunch of acquaintances.

If the strangers are students and the room is in a school, there are three essential prerequisites for helping them build a community. First, they need time. A schedule that limits them to 45 minutes a day together, like "pull-out" programs that regularly remove some of their members, makes it much harder to succeed. By contrast, the chance for a teacher to work with the same group of students for more than one year makes it easier to succeed (Burke 1996).

Second, they need to be relatively few in number. Lost in the debate about whether excessive class size interferes with academic achievement is its unequivocal effect on a sense of community. Things become even more problematic when the whole school is too large (see Meier 1995).

Finally, they need a teacher who is herself part of a community of adults in the school. Just as teachers who are controlled from above tend to control those below, so teachers who are not part of a collaborative network of educators find it difficult to help students work together. What's more, research has found that shallow, unimaginative instruction—as well as a cynical set of beliefs about children—tends to be associated with teachers who are left to their own devices and wind up valuing their privacy more than anything else. To put this positively, teachers who do exemplary work in helping students engage deeply with what they are learning are invariably part of collegial communities of educators (McLaughlin 1993).

Where those communities do exist, teachers always seem to be in and out of each other's rooms—not as part of a formal (and intimidating) observation process but in order to give and receive feedback voluntarily. Teachers feel safe enough to acknowledge they need help with a problem instead of pretending they have everything under control. They have frequent opportunities to discuss their work—general pedagogical issues or the status of a particular student—with their colleagues. A real effort is made to address threats to community such as cliques or rivalry between teachers. Besides improving the quality of life for the educators themselves, such a school provides the skills and support that will help them replicate this community in their own classrooms.

BUILDING A COMMUNITY: STRATEGIES

Someone more interested in constructing a community than destroying it might well begin by thinking about how to promote a feeling of *safety*. What can be done in a classroom or school to help every student feel at ease? What can be done to minimize the chance of being ridiculed—by children or adults?

As is so often the case, the best way to proceed is to ask the students these very questions. Early in the year, a teacher might say, "Look, it's really important to me that you feel free to say things, to come up with ideas that may sound weird, to make mistakes—and not to be afraid that other people are going to laugh at you. In fact, I

want everyone in here to feel that way. What do you think we can do to make sure that happens?" (Notice that this is another example of meaningful student choice within a teacher-devised framework.)

The ideas that students come up with, perhaps after a few moments of quiet reflection or conversation with a partner, ought to be written down, discussed, and posted. They also ought to be amended later, as needed, when new situations present themselves. For example, imagine that the teacher asks a question of the whole class one morning, and someone waves his hand while exclaiming with boastful disdain, "That's easy!" It might occur to another student that this is a perfect example of how *not* to foster safety or trust. Without humiliating the first student, the teacher might ask everyone to think about how it feels to hear someone else say that a question you are struggling with is supposed to be easy to answer. (Of course, the teacher may need to consider that the underlying problem rests with the whole instructional model that calls for students to race to answer factual questions posed by the teacher.)

The pursuit of safety in particular, or community more generally, is a project best pursued on four levels at once: strengthening the adult's relationship with each student; building students' connections with each other, one dyad at a time; providing for numerous classwide and schoolwide activities in which students work together toward a common end; and weaving the goal of community through academic instruction. Let us take each in turn.

Relationship with the adults. Children are more likely to be respectful when important adults in their lives respect *them*. They are more likely to care about others if they know *they* are cared about. If their emotional needs are met, they have the luxury of being able to meet other people's needs—rather than spending their lives preoccupied with themselves.

To be a *caring* person, though, an educator must first be a person. Many of us are inclined instead to hide behind the mannerisms of a constantly competent, smoothly controlling, crisply authoritative Teacher (or Principal). To do so is to play a role, and even if the script calls for nurturance, this is not the same as being fully human with children. A real person sometimes gets flustered or distracted or

tired, says things without thinking and later regrets them, maintains interests outside of teaching and doesn't mind discussing them. Also, a real person avoids distancing maneuvers such as referring to him- or herself in the third person (as in: "Mr. Kohn has a special surprise for you today, boys and girls").

Here, again, what initially looks like a commonsense prescription reveals itself as challenging and even controversial. To be a person in front of kids is to be vulnerable, and vulnerability is not an easy posture for adults who themselves had to strike a self-protective pose when they were growing up. Moreover, to reach out to children and develop genuine, warm relationships with them may compromise one's ability to control them. Much of what is wrong with our schools can be traced back to the fact that when these two objectives clash, connection frequently gives way to control.

Beyond being a real person, what does it mean for an adult to be caring in a school context? It means remembering details about students' lives ("Hey, George! Did your mom end up taking you to the museum over the weekend?"). It means writing notes to students and calling them up and even visiting them at home. It means being available, as time permits, for private conversations about nothing in particular.

Caring teachers converse with students in a distinctive way: they think about how what they say sounds from the students' point of view. They respond authentically and respectfully rather than giving patronizing pats on the head (or otherwise slathering them with "positive reinforcement"). They explain what they are up to and give reasons for their requests. They ask students what *they* think, and then care about the answers.

Once again, behaviors are less important than the purposes to which they are put. Rule enforcers may indeed be observant—they may, in fact, "continually monitor the class" (Canter and Canter 1992, p. 147)—but not out of any real concern for who their students are and what they need. The vigilance is more about "withitness" (see p. 55) than connection. Similarly, in an article entitled "Prepare to Take Effective Control," teachers are advised "to learn as many names as possible. Your discipline will be far more effective when you can

issue a quiet rebuke to a pupil by name" (Wilson 1995, p. A6). The question is not whether a teacher watches or knows his students, but why.

Educators who form truly caring relationships with students are not only meeting emotional needs; they are also setting a powerful example. Whenever an adult listens patiently, or shows concern for someone he doesn't know, or apologizes for something he regrets having said, he is modeling for students, teaching them how they might be with each other.

Connections between students. Many elementary school teachers like to have children create their personal "shields," decorated with words or icons that say something about who each child is. But why should students draw their own shields when they could pair up and draw their partners? From this simple exercise, every student might learn about someone else, disclose something about herself, and figure out how to represent the information about the other child to his satisfaction. In fact, any number of familiar activities, which subtly perpetuate an ideology of independence, could be transformed into a lesson in *interdependence*.

In some classrooms, students experience cooperation only when the teacher announces that it is time for cooperative learning. This is not enough, however: communities are built upon a foundation of cooperating throughout the day, with students continually being invited to work, play, and reflect with someone else. Of course, solitary activity has its place, too, but doing things together ought to be, as a computer programmer might put it, the "default setting" in class. Students should have the chance to interact with virtually every other student at some point. This can include getting-to-know-you activities (for example, interviewing someone and then introducing him or her to the class) as well as periodic opportunities to find a partner and check in about whatever is being discussed at the moment.

A community rests on the knowledge of, and connections among, the individuals who are part of it. This knowledge, in turn, is deepened by helping students imagine how things appear from other people's points of view. What psychologists call "perspective taking" plays a critical role in helping children become generous, caring peo-

ple (Kohn 1990a), and activities designed to promote an understanding of how others think and feel (Feshbach et al. 1983) have the added advantage of creating the basis for community.

Classwide and schoolwide activities. While it is important to cultivate the teacher's relationship with each student, and each student's relationship with others, the recipe for community also calls for plenty of opportunity for the whole class to collaborate on common endeavors. Thus, a teacher might have all her students work together to produce a class mural, or collage, or quilt; to choose or even compose a class song; to decide on a name or image that captures the spirit of the class³; to write a book, stage a play, or publish a newspaper together; or to do some community service activity as a class (see Child Development Project 1996a, pp. 20–23).

The single most significant and multifaceted activity for the class as a whole is the class meeting, described at length in the previous chapter. Such a meeting at the beginning of the year can be particularly effective at helping students experience themselves as part of a community. Rather than asking students to simply create a list of rules, though—or worse, getting them to think up consequences for individuals who break the rules—the teacher might propose some broader questions for discussion: “What makes school awful sometimes? Try to remember an experience during a previous year when you hated school, when you felt bad about yourself, or about everyone else, and you couldn't wait for it to be over. What exactly was going on when you were feeling that way? How was the class set up?”

Not enough teachers encourage this sort of rumination. Particularly in elementary schools, one often finds an aggressively sunny outlook, such that space is made only for happy feelings. (In a 3rd grade classroom in Minnesota, I once saw a poster near the door that read: ONLY POSITIVE ATTITUDES ALLOWED BEYOND THIS POINT. The message here might be restated as “Have a nice day—or else.”) Alas, feelings of anger or self-doubt do not vanish when their expression is forbidden.

We can put such feelings to good use by inviting students to consider carefully why some of their previous school experiences provoked negative reactions. And, of course, the crucial follow-up

question is this: “What can we do this year to make sure things go better?” It may make sense to ask students to recall some good memories, too—memories of when school was exciting and appealing, and real learning was taking place—and then puzzle out the common denominators of *those* experiences so they might be re-created this year.

Here is a second way to help students think past the confines of discipline—and to use an early class meeting to begin fostering a sense of community.⁴ Begin by asking this question (adapting it as necessary to the students' developmental level): “What if, some time this year, you found yourself acting in a way you weren't proud of? Suppose you hurt someone's feelings, or did something even worse. How would you want us, the rest of the community, to help you then?” After everyone has reflected privately on this question, and perhaps discussed it, pose the follow-up question: “What if *someone else* acted that way? How could we help that person?”

This thought experiment represents nothing short of a revolution in thinking about classroom problems. Actions that would normally be defined as misbehavior—and therefore as requiring discipline—are reconstrued as signs that somebody needs help. If a student had trouble with long division, after all, we would naturally want to help him understand the procedure (and its rationale), rather than seeking to punish him. So if a student instead had trouble, say, controlling her temper, our response again ought to be “How can we help?”—not “What consequence should you suffer?” We should ask, in other words, “What can we do for you?”—not “What can we do *to* you?”

It works both ways, really: The best choice for dealing with problems, or for preventing their occurrence in the first place, is to invoke the support and ideas of the community. And the best choice for building a community may be to take on this sort of challenge together.

Now let's take that idea one step further. If activities and discussions involving the whole class can help to turn that class into a community, then activities and discussions involving the whole school might help to turn the entire student body into a community. The fact that few schools have tried schoolwide discussions may sug-

gest that few schools are small enough to allow everyone to gather and do anything other than listen passively. Fortunately, some creative educators are finding ways around the barrier of size. Each solution amounts to a different way of setting up mini-communities within the school.

• An elementary school in Minnesota reserves an afternoon every week for what might be called advisory groups (more commonly found in cutting-edge secondary schools). Each cluster consists of two kindergartners, two 1st graders, and so on—as well as two adults, one of whom is typically a staff member who doesn't teach. (Office assistants, custodians, cafeteria workers, and others are, after all, part of the school community, too.) People spend their time together getting to know each other, learning conflict resolution skills, and doing service projects.

• An elementary school in Florida divides its entire student body into four parts, with each grade represented in proportion to its total numbers—in effect, creating four small schools. Every day begins with a morning meeting for each community.

• A number of schools have begun to pair classrooms of older and younger students—say, a 5th grade with a 1st grade—for a block of time every week or two, with each child assigned a “buddy” from the other class. Wildly popular wherever it is tried, this activity creates focused cross-age interactions that can improve the feel of the whole school.

When children are given opportunities to develop caring, trusting friendships across grade levels, when these friendships center around shared learning experiences that are engaging for both older and younger students, and when students see that their teachers have buddies, too, the concept of community is experienced, not just idealized (Child Development Project 1996b, p. 1).

The Child Development Project has developed a series of other schoolwide programs toward the same end, many of which involve families. These include a film night (with the movie selected for its potential for generating thoughtful discussion), a science display (in

place of the usual science fair, where parents are not supposed to help with the projects and students are forced to compete against each other), and a read-aloud activity (Child Development Project 1994).

Using academic instruction. The quest for community is not—indeed, cannot be—separate from what students are learning. Teachers can deliberately use one to promote the other in any of several ways.

First, community-building activities can be devoted to academic issues. If a class meeting can be used to talk about the best way to make sure that materials are put back where they belong, then why can't one be devoted to talking about how to approach the next unit in history—or how confusing last night's homework was? In fact, even when meetings are not explicitly devoted to curricular questions, they often provide intellectual benefits as students learn to think clearly about problems.

Second, skillful teachers can often find a way to work academic lessons into other tasks and discussions. I visited a kindergarten in New Jersey where students had complained about “too many floods in the bathroom.” The problem became a science lesson, as the class generated hypotheses about why the floods were happening, and also a lesson in reading and writing, as the teacher helped students record various proposals for solving the problem. In Japanese elementary schools, academic skills are similarly woven through community-building activities (Lewis 1995).

Third, academic study is pursued cooperatively: students learn from each other and, in the process, form connections with each other. Cooperative learning is likely to provide these benefits, however, only if it is not based on incentives—a process I have called “group grade grubbing” (Kohn 1991)—and if teams are never set against each other in a competition.

Finally, elements of the curriculum may be selected with an eye to supporting social and moral growth and, indirectly, the construction of community. This can be done most readily in language arts units, with works of literature chosen and taught in such a way as to promote reflection about things like fairness and compassion,

along with topics such as narrative construction and character development.

ALL OF THE ABOVE

This last example of how academic instruction can support social learning gives us a chance to pull back and reflect on the larger question of how building community may have certain academic prerequisites. Recall that this chapter began with the argument that a classroom devoid of community, one where children's need for connection is thwarted, has an adverse impact on learning. So it is that the absence of a learner-centered curriculum makes it difficult to create a real community:

How could we create a caring community in the classroom when children's own needs—to make sense of the world, to be known and liked by others, to influence the environment—were being ignored by a skill-and-drill curriculum? A curriculum that holds little intrinsic interest for children forces teachers to use "motivators," "consequences," and competition to keep children on-task, thereby undermining community and demonstrating that some children are more valued than others (Lewis, Schaps, and Watson 1995, p. 552).

Another teacher describes the problem even more bluntly: "I can sit students in a circle, play getting-to-know-you games until the cows come home, but if what I am teaching in the class holds no interest for the students, I'm just holding them hostage until the bell rings" (Christensen 1994, p. 15).

If we are committed to moving beyond discipline, we need an engaging curriculum *and* a caring community. But we need something else as well: the chance for students to make meaningful decisions about their schooling. That, of course, was the subject of the last chapter, but it is worth reiterating here that a community without choices is just as incomplete as choices without community.

This incompleteness is painfully obvious when we visit "schools with a 'community' emphasis where children memorize 'correct' answers to moral questions and issues" (Goodman 1992, pp. 156–157).

It is obvious when we read manuals for teachers filled with practical advice on how to design a safe, caring classroom—except that the students have little to say about how or why this happens: the teacher is essentially advised to *impose* a community, using praise, time-outs, and other mechanisms of control (e.g., Charney 1991).

And let's add one more piece of evidence to the case against such an approach: in the course of its research, the Child Development Project discovered that elementary school students who reported feeling a sense of community in their classrooms were also apt to exhibit *low* levels of moral reasoning if they lacked an active role in decision making. More sophisticated, principled ways of thinking about ethical questions went hand in hand with community only in those classrooms where students were involved in choosing how to design that community (Battistich et al. 1994).

Community is not enough; we need autonomy, too. In fact, when both of these features are present, there is another way to describe the arrangement that results: it is called democracy.

