

Inviting Success in the Elementary Classroom: The First Steps from Theory to Practice

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The notion of a community of learners where all participants are treated as valuable, able, and responsible was investigated. This article reports on the findings of the first year of a two-year study that examined a range of practices designed to promote an inviting learning-centered classroom community, tailored to cater more effectively to the diverse needs of all participants. The findings are congruent with the tenet that the core of an effective school program is knowledgeable teachers who have the expertise and inclination to encourage all children to reach their potentials.

The call for better education in our schools now seems almost universal in the United States. ...The central element of quality education is, of course, the teacher. Knowledgeable teachers are the core of an effective school program. (Stevenson, 1987, v).

The easiest part of becoming an inviting teacher is embracing the theoretical foundation of invitational education; the challenging part is putting that theory into practice. While there are excellent resources outlining various ways to invite school success (see Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Stanley, 1991), many teachers remain overwhelmed by the prospect of significantly restructuring their curriculums. "How do I start?"; "Where do I start?"; "What are the important questions I need to ask about my practices?"; "How can I encourage the realization of the potential of all my students?" are familiar pleas.

In recent years, there have been calls to move away from transmission models of learning and teaching, which emphasize the learner's passive receipt of knowledge, to models which emphasize the learner's active construction of an understanding of the world (see Au, 1993). Invitational education is a collaborative approach to learning and teaching where all participants are treated as valuable, able, and responsible. Most importantly, it is founded on the premise that "potential can be best realized by places, policies, and programs that are intentionally designed to invite development, and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally" (Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 2).

Routman (1991) underscored the importance of developing a happy, nurturing community where successful learning and teaching experiences are shared by the teacher and students. The establishment of such an environment is contingent upon components such as the active involvement of all students, regardless of ability levels; collaboration instead of competition, including the teaming of teachers, students, and parents; a variety of instructional methods designed to cater to all learning needs; the acquisition of knowledge that is of interest and pertains to the lives of students; and the treatment of

students as self-motivated and invested learners (see also Maaka, 1994; Purkey & Stanley, 1991; Short & Burke, 1991).

This article describes the preliminary, collaborative efforts of a Hawaii elementary school teacher and an educational consultant with the state university to invite school success by developing a learning-centered curriculum, tailored to cater more effectively to the diverse needs and interests of all participants. For the purposes of this ongoing study, curriculum is broadly defined as the total school-related experience including subject matter, social interactions, administrative policies and procedures, teaching strategies, classroom environment and management, assessment methods, and parental involvement. It is believed that this encompassing view of curriculum enables a consideration of the overall coherence and effectiveness of the classroom program (see also Short & Burke, 1991). Some findings from the first year of program implementation are presented.

Method

The school is located in a densely populated area of the City and County of Honolulu, Hawaii and is attended by approximately 600 children from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds, although most are from lower/middle income families. The ethnic composition of the student body is very diverse, with the majority of students being a mix of Polynesian, Caucasian, and Asian. A large percentage of the students have "Pidgin" or Hawaii Creole English as their first language and often struggle with the standard English requirements of the formal schooling system. Parents are invited to become involved in the school program, however, many have been resistant, possibly because as students they did not find the education system a positive experience.

Participants

The teacher is a ten-year veteran with teaching experiences across the elementary school grade levels. Hers is a sixth grade, full-inclusion class of twenty-seven students (14 boys and 13 girls, mean age = 11.6 years).

Design

Work on this long-term study formally began during the fall of 1994 in response to growing concerns that traditional transmission models of instruction, which adopt a prescriptive "one-size-fits-all" approach to education, were ineffective for the children at this school. During the summer months preceding the school year, the teacher and consultant conducted weekly meetings in the Hawaii style of "talk story" (an important speech event that involves the joint production of rambling, often humorous narratives about personal experiences) in order to establish a starting point (see Au, 1993). By drawing on their educational experiences and beliefs, they began to redefine the curriculum in terms of a learning-centered community. As such, it was agreed, for the first year to develop practices that would invite co-ownership of the classroom program, in anticipation that this would promote each child's feelings of positive self-worth and shared responsibility for success in learning.

Data were gathered and read by the teacher and the consultant in order to identify salient patterns and themes within the classroom community. The teacher kept a journal that included classroom observations and reflections on her teaching and these were discussed at each meeting. During the meetings, notes were taken regarding student participation, performance, attitudes, and concerns;

organizational decisions; curricular plans; teacher interests and concerns; and other related matters. In addition, data were collected through classroom observations, student surveys, and student interviews.

The following teacher's narrative describes some of the practices that were implemented during the first weeks of the school year and maintained throughout.

Procedure: A Teacher's Account

When I first read Purkey and Novak's (1984) commentary on the importance of keeping "connected" with children by taking personal interests in them and respecting individuality, maintaining realistic expectations, and encouraging responsible participation, I became greatly motivated to refocus my curriculum. I decided that this would be the foundation for the first year of this field-based research.

Getting Off To A Fast Start

I began the first day of school by gathering the children under a large banyan tree outside the classroom and greeting them with high enthusiasm and an invitation to talk story (Teacher—My name is Pam Lipka. This is going to be a great year and we will be learning lots of wonderful things together!). I continued by telling the children about myself and inviting them to ask questions. Not surprisingly, the old favorites arose; Was I married? Did I have any children? How old was I? What did I like to eat the most?.

As the children became more relaxed, I began asking them questions about themselves and encouraging them to talk to each other.

Throughout our conversations, I used collective references such as "we," "our," and "us" to help emphasize that learning and teaching would be collaborative activities. I watched as they enthusiastically broke into small groups and started to make connections—slowly interests such as surfing, roller-blading, martial arts, and hula began to pull them together. The seed for establishing a community of learners had been sown!

Building Momentum

After these initial introductions, I began the first phase of negotiating co-ownership of the curriculum by outlining my general expectations for the coming year. I told the children that I wanted all of us to do our best and feel proud of our efforts; to talk about working as a team to set and achieve our goals; to share the things we learn with our classmates, parents, and others; and most important of all, to be **EXCITED** about learning and have **FUN!!!** Although it was obvious that many of the children found this an "unusual" way to begin the year, I continued to emphasize the notion of interdependence or common purpose by asking the children to discuss their own expectations. It was not long before they had their own list of general expectations—they said they wanted to feel safe enough to take risks, make mistakes, and work hard to fix them; to be able to talk about problems as they arose; and to be kind and helpful to each other. Our community of learners, based on a solid foundation of trust and support was beginning to emerge.

Claiming Ownership

After setting the preliminary ground work, we reconvened in the classroom, where we were confronted by stacked furniture and bare walls and bulletin boards. With the entire class participating, I re-em-

phasized the notion of responsible co-ownership and asked the children to arrange the room (Teacher—Why is it important that we all have a say in organizing our room? How can we best set up our room so that we can all be responsible learners?). In response, the children set about asking questions and brainstorming their ideas on classroom organization (Children—What are some of the things we need to consider as we set up? Where will we place the different learning centers? Large group meeting place? Classroom library? Teacher's area? Where will we need to sit to be able to do our best work? Should we be allowed to sit with our friends?). Finally, in response to my subtle direction, a spokesperson was elected to draw a floor plan on the chalkboard that represented the input of all the children. After careful deliberation, the children enthusiastically began to establish the classroom space.

The next day focused on the second phase of negotiations—developing and institutionalizing the classroom guidelines. I considered it imperative to address this early in the school year in order to reinforce each child's sense of being an important contributor to the group and of needing the group. I began the session by asking the children to examine the notion of self-governance (Teacher—How should we behave in our classroom if we want to establish a community of successful learners? What consequences shall we have if our rules are broken? What rewards shall we have for good citizenship? Can we change the rules if they prove ineffective?).

After two days of intense discussion we developed a detailed list of appropriate behaviors and rewards, and consequences for inappropriate behaviors. The responses were recorded on a chart and this was hung in the classroom where all the children could see it. As I

read the list, I was pleased to note that the children had included several dimensions to the classroom guidelines. For example:

- We will be responsible for ourselves.
- We will avoid "crushers" or nasty comments/actions.
- We will tell others about our good achievements.
- We will go on educational field trips as a reward.
- We will spend quiet time reflecting on our inappropriate actions.

The children also decided that: (a) Outdated rules would be re-examined and modified as needed; (b) they would self-monitor and monitor each other's behaviors, rather than appoint classroom monitors; and (c) initially, I should remind them of the classroom rules when necessary, model appropriate conduct, and give them time to practice expected behaviors. Because the latter suggestion was in keeping with my belief that effective classroom management is dependent upon the teacher as a positive role model, I accepted the responsibility.

Daily meetings as a class group also helped reinforce a sense of camaraderie and community pride. These were times for greetings, news and announcements, clarification of classroom guidelines, discussion of problems and concerns, recognition of successes, and the like. Interestingly, it was during one of these sessions that the children decided to create a rotating list of official "greeters" who would be responsible for welcoming and entertaining visitors to our classroom.

Maintaining the Momentum

Establishing a physical and social framework for a community of learners was only the beginning. I spent the remainder of the year ex-

perimenting with ways to invite success in our classroom. These included:

- Examining and monitoring my relationship with each child to ensure that I accepted individuality and promoted high self-esteem. This included an attempt to have some form of positive, supportive interaction with each child, every day.
- Developing a non-competitive, collaborative learning environment that involved the co-planning of integrated, literature-based, thematic units of study, including the choice of books, activities, assessment methods, field trips, and displays.
- Fostering independent learning by encouraging the children to take risks and seek their own answers to problems, rather than rely on me for easily accessible information. It did not take the children long to learn that helpful resources included computers, peers, parents, books, the television, and me (only when all avenues were exhausted!).
- Developing methods of assessment that supported, rather than dictated my curriculum. By expecting success in every endeavor, rather than failure, I was more able to build on strengths and address areas for concern. The successful implementation of portfolios allowed us to monitor the processes of learning as well as the products—for each child, I was able to negotiate realistic expectations, offer immediate feedback, and encourage input.
- Enthusiastically exploring the world of knowledge with the children and having fun doing so. This was an essential part of maintaining high levels of motivation as the children moved from one unit of study to the next.

Preliminary Findings

The data gathered to date indicate that the curriculum, which is anchored in the assumption that all children are valuable, able, and responsible, positively impacts the learning experiences of children in this elementary classroom.

It was clear that the teacher's highly enthusiastic first-day welcome and personal talk-story session set a very secure tone for the rest of the year (Amanda—You talked about yourself and no teacher has done that. I liked it when you had lunch with me too. Crystal—From that time on, I felt good around you. You made me feel comfortable.). However, the initial "handing over of power" to the children by asking them to organize the classroom environment and rules and regulations was more challenging in practice than in theory, especially in a system that recognizes the teacher as the ultimate authority (Teacher—I had to restrain myself from saying, "No! The two of you can't sit together, you'll talk too much."). Similarly, some of the children appeared uncomfortable when given such freedom of choice (Mehana—On the first day of school, I thought you were weird because the room was not fixed and the desks were not in order. Andrew—You mean we get to decide where we are going to sit? Michael—and we can move the desks, right?).

It was not too surprising that during the first couple of weeks, several children embraced the notion of "freedom to be irresponsible" rather than freedom to work together to form a community of learners, as was evidenced by the number of seating changes due to inappropriate, off-task behaviors! And it was also a time when the teacher began to question the wisdom of inviting co-ownership of the classroom! However, as the weeks progressed, it became evident that the children were viewing curriculum co-ownership as something that should be valued and approached with great respect and responsibility (Alan—This is neat, We never had to decide how to fix a bulletin board for

something we thought of. Jordan—How are we going to fix the room up this time?).

The system of classroom governance proved especially effective and it was interesting to note that, in general, the children adhered to the guidelines throughout the year. An emphasis on personal satisfaction as well as extrinsic rewards such as free assignment choices, field trips, and verbal praise helped maintain a high level of investment and motivation throughout the year (Teacher—I work hard at mentioning the children's names in positive contexts as often as possible. Carl—You expected a lot from me, but I felt good about doing things. This is the best class.). It is of particular interest that along with this willingness to self-monitor behavior, there was a lower incidence of disruptive behavior and absenteeism (in comparison with classes of previous years).

Although the classroom program was governed by the broader school curriculum, it was important that the teacher provided a plethora of exciting and challenging choices for the children. As they grew confident in their decision-making abilities, the children readily accepted the joint responsibility for planning a curriculum that included a variety of interests and a combination of teaching approaches (Teacher—The children soon learned the importance of reading and writing activities and that the learning in the classroom should relate to their lives. Teacher—My children created a scene from the novel "Terabithia" within our room. We had vines hanging from the ceiling and walls and a tree encasing the doorway. The children loved it!). Within this learning-centered environment the teacher observed greater investment and motivation to participate in the classroom program (Mehana—Ms. Lipka, you forgot to do reading response. Farris—If we go to the computer lab, we can use Kid Pix for

our "Terabithia" report.), as well as improvements in the standards of work, including requests for more time to read and write (Alan—I know I can read this part. Jesse—Can I go to the library to look for more books on Bosnia? B.J.—We'll have to do some more research on this topic. I think I'll write a story after.).

Cooperative work proved to be an enjoyable and effective way to learn, especially in that it promoted fluency in reading and writing and encouraged children to share their ideas (Amanda—When we work together with other kids, it makes learning fun. Plus we can learn from them too. Cherie—Ms. Lipka, we read with Ami and now she can understand the story.). Teacher demonstrations of good learning habits by reading and writing with the children also proved effective, as did collaborative journal writing which allowed the children sufficient time to write and later, share their ideas (Ricky—I like being able to work how I like.). Probably one of the most important aspects of the cooperative approach was the encouragement of parental input (Teacher—I mail a postcard which simply states, "Ricky did a super job on his research". The parents and children love this! Nadine—Can I take this and show it to my dad and mom?). As a result, this year's parent/teacher meeting was attended by over 80% of the parents.

Assessment practices focused on both the processes and products of learning. Portfolio assessment was particularly successful in encouraging children to set challenging standards and self-monitor their progress. Combined with this, ongoing conferences with the teacher allowed the children to make decisions regarding the standard of work that would be achieved and problems that needed to be addressed (Teacher— The children and I work together to set learning goals, do mini-lessons on skill areas, edit papers, evaluate writings, or discuss issues that are on the children's minds.).

Although the teacher had significant success in promoting most of the children's feelings of positive self-worth (Jennifer—I knew I could do something wrong with my work and you or the kids would help me....., not laugh), this was more difficult than anticipated especially for a small group of children who had a history of failure within the school system. Attempts to break the cycle of low self-esteem and associated poor school performance at this age level became a daily challenge, often with varying degrees of success. As such, the results of this study lend strong support to the proposal that this type of esteem-enhancing curriculum should prevail at the beginning levels of the formal education system.

However, despite areas for concern, at the first year mark, the data indicate rewards for all those involved. The teacher and consultant came away from their meetings energized, but most importantly the children talked frequently of feeling capable of achieving success and of school as a 'fun' place to be (Ian—School is fun. We like it here because the things we do we are interested in. We don't do basal stories. The work is interesting, we get involved.).

Concluding Comments

For the teacher, the true value of this project, lies not so much in the pursuit of an end goal, but rather, in an empowerment to change or to maintain practices as deemed appropriate. The second year of this project will continue to focus on the development and fine-tuning of practices that invite all children to succeed in the education system. Data relating to specific learning-related behaviors including self-esteem (Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory), locus of control (Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale) and literacy attitude and habits (student Literacy Survey) will also be collected.

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