
Did You Know | Why It Matters | For Equity Now

Creating Caring Classroom Communities



“Taking the time to build community, to get to know your people will have long-lasting benefits.”

- Clifton Taulbert



Did You Know

Not All Classrooms are Communities, But They Have the Potential to Be

The benefits of a caring classroom community (CCC) can be robust and transformative for a classroom environment; creating a CCC requires educators to exemplify the behaviors of [allyship and/or accomplice-ship](#) in order to “dismantl[e] structural and systemic barriers to equitable access to resources and opportunities for all students” (Jackson, Huskins, Skelton, & King Thorius, 2020)—but particularly for historically marginalized students. In this edition of *Equity Dispatch*, we will discuss what a caring classroom community is, its benefits, and practices that educators can leverage to create them.

Nationally, students in k-12 schools spend on average 6.64 hrs/day in classrooms physically, anywhere between 1-4 hrs/day virtually, and an average of 180 days a year in school (Illinois State Board of Education, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). For youth possessing non-dominant identities in particular, the classroom can either be a place of solace and positive development, or a place where students experience everyday acts of dehumanization (Skelton, 2020). For example, students from historically marginalized populations may experience district-level macroaggressions such as [zero tolerance disciplinary policies](#) (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013), in which some students have to constantly worry about physical and psychological violence for minor infractions, disproportionate removal from educational spaces, and the increased likelihood of facing incarceration (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013; Ferguson, 2010; Jackson, Thorius, & Kyser, 2016). Relatedly, these same students may also experience classroom-level microaggressions—subtle conscious or unconscious behaviors directed at a member of a marginalized group that has a derogatory, harmful effect (Pierce, 1970)—such as being told that they “speak well” (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013), or by having their name consistently mispronounced (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). These acts of aggression reinforce, and are reinforced, by a dominant narrative that positions students of Color, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, students living in disinvested communities, and transnational students as less than their white, middle class, non-disabled, straight and U.S. born peers. In order to begin shifting the deficit narrative imposed upon historically marginalized students, it is important that [social justice-oriented](#) educators are intentional in their actions to disrupt institutional violence, and promote [culturally responsive and sustaining learning environments](#) - the foundation of a caring classroom community.

What is a Caring Classroom Community?

A caring classroom community (CCC) is a physical or virtual educational space that provides a warm, safe environment for students, their families, and teachers to learn, grow, and engage in positive relationships, built on mutual and shared respect (National Association of Young Children, 2016). Communities are made up of individuals who develop a bond with each other through the sharing of common experiences, interests, values, customs, goals, and identity (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). However, for many students, classrooms are spaces of isolation, *not* community; by intentionally implementing aspects of caring into classrooms, educators can ensure

all students experience a sense of community that is inclusive, supportive, and culturally sustaining. In a CCC, students experience an effective and productive sense of their own culture—a feeling that historically marginalized students may not always experience in their classroom setting (Ellerbrock, et al., 2015; Gay, 2018; Lundy & Swartz, 2013; Rogoff, 2003; Utah Education Network, 2003). Creating a CCC requires educators to deviate from dominant mainstream approaches of classroom construction, discipline, and management (Dermody, 2003; Pohan, 2003). These approaches typically focus on controlling the classroom environment via “sit and get” teaching, reflecting the banking method of instruction (Freire, 1970b)—but should move toward a more liberatory classroom (i.e. a problem-posing education) (Freire, 1970a, 1970b, 1978) where students are free to question, increase their critical thinking, and connect to their rich cultural histories (Lazzell, Huskins, Jackson, Skelton, King Thorius, 2020). In co-creating a space for students to have agency in how they engage in their education, such as the problem-posing method, an atmosphere of shared collaborative inquiry is stimulated, towards building trust and mutual respect, building blocks of a caring classroom community (Durakoglu, Bicer, & Zabun, 2013).

It is worth mentioning here that in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in light of the abrupt shifts many students and educators had to make towards online/distance learning, CCCs are as important as instruction itself. The need for caring classrooms for students and families during these times is critical if educators want to continue to create environments that promote the positive development of student learners.

Some Characteristics of a CCC

- ◇ Students feel physically and emotionally safe. They see the classroom as a place where they can be themselves and express themselves and their ideas without judgment (Johnson & Thomas, 2009; Lundy & Swartz, 2013).
- ◇ Students know that they are valued and respected, and appreciated for their personal characteristics related to ability, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or religion (Gay, 2018).
- ◇ Students have ownership and input related to class structure and expectations (Dermody, 2003; Pohan, 2003).
- ◇ All students are challenged to achieve high expectations, and all students receive the support necessary to meet those expectations (Dermody, 2003; Garza, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014).
- ◇ Standards of behavior are established and are consistently and equitably enforced for all students (Dermody, 2003; Garza, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014).
- ◇ Class structure provides multiple and varied opportunities for students to experience success, and the teacher gets to know all students, using that knowledge to create meaningful experiences.
- ◇ There is a positive rapport (relationship) between the teacher and students, and among students, in the class (Dermody, 2003; Garza, 2009; Gootman, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014).



Why It Matters

Caring Relationships are Transformative

Educators can position themselves to work alongside students, encouraging students to strengthen their self-efficacy toward becoming empathetic individuals inside and outside of the classroom. To this end, CCCs aim to develop a culture that is conducive for students to engage with the content in ways that allow them to self-actualize into dynamic, talented learners by meeting their needs for a loving, belonging, and safe environment (Utah Education Network, 2003). There are many benefits to creating a CCC that range from the cultivation of positive trusting relationships, academic improvement, communal sense of feeling in the classroom, the embracement and acceptance of cultural diversity (Allen & Fitzgerald, 2010; Cabello & Terrell, 1994; Ellerbrock et al., 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lundy & Swartz, 2013, National Association of Young Children, 2016).

Caring learning environments foster the conditions for positive, trusting relationships with historically marginalized students (Ennis & Mccauley, 2002). For instance, allowing students to collaborate in the creation of classroom rules, communicating and exchanging their personal and/or cultural stories, and constructing their learning experiences to address their collective needs begins to encourage trust, open lines of communication, and encourage overall classroom affinity (Lundy & Swartz, 2013).

Additionally, studies have shown that caring student-teacher relationships can promote growth and achievement for students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Allen & Fitzgerald, 2017; Gay, 2018). Students from historically marginalized communities, regardless of students' attitudes towards schooling, are more likely to experience low levels of trust on behalf of their teachers, as compared to their white, more affluent counterparts (Ennis & Mccauley, 2002; Van Meale & Van Houtte, 2011). Lack of trust is harmful for the classroom community, stagnating the relationship building between everyone in the classroom by stifling authentic and honest dialogue. Educators being an example of openness and vulnerability can shift this dynamic, leading students to more likely mirror similar behavior in the classroom (Allen & Fitzgerald, 2017; Ellerbrock, et al., 2015).

CCC and COVID-19

Attention to cultivating a strong student-teacher relationship is also important when teaching and learning in virtual spaces. Many studies have found that online learning can make the student-teacher relationship more distant (Miller, 2018; Wilkins, 2014). This may cause some unease in educators; despite this challenge, online learning has the potential to be caring and transformative. Online learning presents an opportunity for educators to co-construct “virtual classroom” culture with students by cogenerating the rules of “netiquette,” and other norms for online interactions that can personalize the online experience, and connect students with one another. An example includes creating daily interactive activities that allows for the open and honest dialogue among and between student and teachers (Miller, 2018; Wilkins, 2014).

CCC and Authentic Cultural Diversity

Another benefit of CCC is that it creates the conditions for students to learn about cultural diversity and build self-esteem. In a CCC, the classroom is constructed in a way that allows students to connect their personal and cultural identities to the content that is being taught (Cabello & Terrell, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, educators should be keenly aware of the significance of [intersectionality](#) in the classroom, or “the ways in which social, economic, and political identity-based systems of oppression and privilege connect, overlap, and influence one another” (Crenshaw, 1989; Jackson et al., 2018, p. 2); in doing so educators recognize their historically marginalized students as complex, dynamic human beings who experience discrimination in multiple ways. Many times students’ personal and cultural experiences are full of “isms” (e.g. racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc.), operating in tandem to compound the oppression that they may experience, or create new realms of expression to combat (Lazell, Jackson, Skelton, 2018). When given the chance to make a connection between students’ lived experiences and the content, it builds another layer of shared communal experiences that helps them understand academic content and each other better (Cabello & Terrell, 1994).

Educators who conduct online learning should be especially thoughtful around intersectionality; a study found that learners from more collectivist cultures felt that their individualist instructors were not usually aware of cultural differences in the online classroom, and that their cultural histories and experiences were not being considered to make learning relevant to their context (Tapanes, Smith, & White, 2009). Students’ cultural perspectives and backgrounds can offer a chance for collective classroom enrichment, providing an opportunity to create a student-centered, culturally responsive and sustaining learning experience.

Finally, educators act as mediators, serving as a bridge between the school environment, and the individual student. In many cases the school environment itself is hostile (Jackson, Moore, Kyser, Skelton, & King Thorius, 2015); therefore educators have the imperative to leverage their privilege and power to create caring classroom communities that challenge harmful hegemonic norms that are commonplace in our educational systems, nurturing a space where students know they are welcomed and valued (Cabello & Terrell, 1994; Jackson et al., 2020; Skelton, 2020).



For Equity Now

Educators Creating a Caring Classroom Community

In this newsletter we have explored the concept of a CCC, educators' roles in facilitating a CCC, its characteristics, and benefits. For educators to create and sustain a CCC, here are a few considerations:

- ◇ **Understand your privilege as a classroom educator:** As an educator you have the power to create the classroom as you see fit. Critical self-reflection of one's biases, cultural knowledges, and experiences will lead to recognizing what privileges you have, that historically marginalized students and families do not. It is important to understand the privileges you hold before attempting to create a caring classroom community for students and students' families who may not share the same socially constructed affordances (Jackson et al., 2020). Without critical self-reflection of oneself, educators run the risk of re-inscribing systemic inequities in the classroom.
- ◇ **Practice active, critical listening:** When educators actively listen to students, they are demonstrating behaviors necessary for peaceful functioning in the classroom community (Gootman, 2008). In order to understand the dynamic histories and experiences that students and parents/caregivers bring with them into the classroom, educators must actively listen to learn, making efforts to understand these experiences (Jackson et al., 2020). This process can lead to a constant unlearning and relearning process, which may cause dissonance. It is important for educators "to remain vigilant and present, to demonstrate commitment to advocacy—no matter how it may feel" (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 6).
- ◇ **Collaboration is important for sustaining a classroom community:** In the case of the CCC, educators will be collaborating with the students and their families. Parents, students, and educators have the same goal: everyone wants the best for the student. Because students' families and communities have the greatest influence on student's lives, educators should collaborate with students and their families to create a classroom community where everyone feels loved, respected, and accepted.
- ◇ **Self-awareness is key:** Which means educators must decenter themselves and be willing to look at topics from different perspectives. Notice the ways in which privilege is promoted and denied, and the make the connection to the historical contexts and storytelling of students and families. This act will allow educators to get know students' cultural, social, and communal histories that they bring with them, and how they can be used to strengthen the classroom community (Ferber, 2010).

Finally, we must consider that creating a CCC is a constant process; educators must always consider how to maintain a CCC, and must be thoughtful about how the classroom community is perceived by the students and their families. Perception of caring has been shown to be influential component on how students and families view the classroom (Alder, 2002; Garza, 2009), and ultimately contribute to the success of students.

“...educators have the imperative to leverage their privilege and power to create caring classroom communities that challenge harmful hegemonic norms that are commonplace in our educational systems, nurturing a space where students know they are welcomed and valued.”

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