Running Head: LITERATURE AND COMMUNITY

**Children’s Literature and Community:**

**Building Community Through Read-aloud Experiences Addressing Starting School and Making Friends**

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Abstract

As students begin their school careers, teachers in the early grades (kindergarten and first grade, especially) can use children’s literature as a tool to facilitate a feeling of community among the students. Topics such as making friends and interacting with peers, especially those with different cultural backgrounds, and what it’s like to start school are among some of the concerns beginning students have when starting school (Nieto & Bode, 2008). By using children’s literature that represents the different cultures within the classroom and selecting books that address issues of starting school and friendships, these shared experiences with children’s literature will set the stage for learning by creating a starting point for all students to access learning for the school year, in addition to fostering community among members of the classroom.

This paper explores the impact of the partnership of children’s literature and community building within a classroom on the classroom environment, learners, the curriculum, and assessment. Constructing a curriculum around a universal concern of kindergarteners and first graders to address the issues of starting school and making friends in this new environment will allow children to confront their worries together. The impact of the community that results from these shared experiences with books extends to facilitate learning and build necessary social skills for children at this age.

Also included within this discussion is a list of references for teachers to utilize to select quality children’s literature, according to the criteria that it is appropriate for the readers’ developmental and reading level, relevant to the topic, and also culturally relevant, so that readers gain a better understanding of and respect for their classroom community.

**Children’s Literature and Community:**

**Building Community Through Read-aloud Experiences Addressing Starting School and Making Friends**

Walt Disney once affirmed, “There is more treasure in books than in all the pirate’s loot on Treasure Island” . While children’s literature is commonly used in reading lessons, the treasures found in these books can extend beyond the initial uses of reading for enjoyment, learning to read, and building literacy skills. When incorporating children’s literature into the curriculum, it is important to take into account students’ interests and to make learning relevant to their lives. As students begin their school careers, teachers in the early grades (kindergarten and first grade, especially) can use children’s literature as a tool to facilitate a feeling of community among the students. Topics such as making friends and interacting with peers, especially those with different cultural backgrounds, and what it’s like to start school are among some of the concerns beginning students have when starting school (Nieto & Bode, 2008).

In today’s increasingly diverse society, educating students with a multicultural perspective allows for students’ global vision and understanding to be broadened, while also allowing students’ to relate to the literature. Stories found in children’s literature are the “internal language of all ages, of all races and cultures. The universal themes found in good literature give children a sense of solidarity with all people,” and builds upon this notion of community by sharing a story that the students experience together (Igoa, 1995, p. 18). The magic that occurs from reading a book together is “not achieved by the book alone, nor by the child, nor by the adult reading it- it’s the relationship winding between all three” that creates the mutual experiences and builds community among the readers (Fox, 2001, p. 10). By using children’s literature that represents the different cultures within the classroom and selecting books that address issues of starting school and friendships, these shared experiences with children’s literature will set the stage for learning by creating a starting point for all students to access learning for the school year, in addition to fostering community among members of the classroom.

Learning Environment

*Establishing Community*

At the start of school, building classroom community is the goal of many teachers. “Creating a classroom community is the first step teachers can take to help students realize their personal & academic potential, as well as learn about how people live and work together” (Whatley & Canalis, 2002, p. 487). While this type of environment is advantageous, this does not happen overnight as it takes time to build a community of learners (Avery, 2002). The classroom community is not limited to just the students, as teachers play a critical role to initiate this environment within the classroom. Teachers who are resourceful, caring, supportive adults are valuable members of learning communities. When this type of environment is successfully executed, the teacher conveys an attitude of genuine care for students and has an expectation of high achievement for all students, which everyone in the community then works together to reach this goal (Kirk Senesac, 2002).

This notion of a community of learners occurs when the learners know one another and value what each member brings to the learning environment (Short, 1990). In the end, it is beneficial, as intellectual growth is a result of school and classroom communities; teachers utilize the cohesiveness of the class to promote learning (Whatley & Canalis, 2002; Roessing, 2006). A classroom community is also favorable for students’ individual growth. Students within a classroom community acquire a sense of self- worth, as they recognize the importance of their membership within the group (Whatley & Canalis, 2002). Classroom communities learn together, teach one another, and take responsibility to help all members to learn (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition, according to sociocultural theory, successful literacy development depends on the community environment. Multicultural literature and interactions with the literature (through activities such as read-alouds) also serve as an important tool to foster the development of community and literacy.

*Members of the Community*

The classroom community is especially important for students who are historically “invisible” within the school system, including students from minority groups, low SES backgrounds, and English Language Learners (ELL’s) (Toohey, 2000). Because learners’ identities impact on what they can do & how they can participate in classrooms, this naturally affects how they can learn. These identities could eventually lead to isolation & to restricted or less powerful participation in their classroom community. Building a community environment within a classroom can be a challenge; one goal of the community is that it becomes a place where learners can respect multiple perspectives held by other members in the community, including ELL’s and students with differing cultural backgrounds (Peterson, 1992). The community environment within the classroom encourages students and the teacher to come together to learn and build knowledge, but to do so by working in light of cultural issues, such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender (Fine, Anand, Jordan, & Sherman, 2003). By sharing read-aloud experiences together, the class connects over the experience of sharing and discussing the literature together. This eliminates a bias to students who have differing background experiences, and creates a starting point for all learners by sharing the literature together in a read-aloud. When all members of the class can develop a shared understanding through children’s literature read together, the community begins to see the beauty of their differences, including language, ethnicity, cultural background (DeStigter, 1998).

As this community environment is established, the teacher needs to address the individual needs of students to make them feel safe and comfortable in this new environment. A true community demands the recognition of each member’s individuality and that all members are respected and valued for who they are (Avery, 2002). When students are invited to share who they are, the atmosphere of trust is built (Blecher & Jaffee, 1998). Having a preschool background may not be the case for all students, and typically, elementary school is a bigger change for most students to transition to a full-day program. Beginning kindergarten and first grade are typically students’ first exposure to a new “big” school; this is a place where older children also attend and where they will possibly spend the next four to seven years, depending on the grades included in the elementary school. Using children’s literature to explore the topic of starting school together as a class can help students to realize that they are not alone in this time of newness and transition, and thus facilitate a classroom environment where community is encouraged and expected.

*Facilitating Community*

Literacy plays an important role in creating and nurturing a learning community within a classroom (Whatley & Canalis, 2002). “Children's literature can be used as a vehicle for building community and personal transformation and presents a model adaptable to other communities”. When the class reads together (through whole-group read-aloud experiences), students are able to reflect on their own lives and then share with their peers (Igoa, 1995). Within a classroom, the students will represent a plethora of different backgrounds, cultures, and experiences. Children’s literature is a tool that can be used to promote understanding of and respect for other cultures, as the classroom community is established. As students learn more about one another’s differences, the shared experiences created through read-alouds create a common experience for students so that connections can be made. Discovering connections will provide an environment where learning is secured within the classroom, and talking about experiences builds community (Avery, 2002). The shared literacy experiences also act as a way for students to develop a “critical lens” together, which leads to understanding of their worlds, in and out of the classroom. As students interact with children’s literature together, they grow socially, and simultaneously, a genuine classroom community is constructed.

Learners and Learning

*Considering the Learners’ Needs*

The learning that occurs in the classroom is an overarching goal of the educational system. Taking a closer look at how students learn, however, reveals that variables such as students’ needs, identity, and sense of trust all work in harmony to result in learning. Separately, each of these elements is important, but collaboration of these ideals must occur to maximize student learning. Considering students (or “learners”) is an important part of any classroom, and motivation specific to students’ interests is essential for students to engage in the lesson and topic. Teachers encourage excitement about learning by talking about upcoming activities so that students share the enthusiasm and engage in the task (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). What is being taught must be meaningful to be learned by the students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). A student’s identity also impacts what they do and how they participate within classrooms, which ultimately affects how the student learns. All members of the class shape the classroom community by contributing their personality, experiences, and knowledge (Avery, 2002). Interactions with children’s literature also allow children to develop expectations of themselves as readers and writers, and act in ways consistent with this belief (Schlichting, 1998). Creating an environment and curriculum where students can fulfill these expectations of themselves as a reader can only lead to more successful learning experiences.

Considering learners at this level within the early years of school, one can conclude that students will face similar challenges related to the start of school and making friends within their new school environment. This is a need that all students will encounter, and it is one that teachers can prepare to include within the curriculum. When students are in kindergarten and first grade, they are most likely apprentices in the world of “full-time” school. Children’s fears about starting school abound, and they have many questions about this new environment. Addressing the topic of starting school together, by using children’s literature, will allow students’ concerns to be expressed and their fears (hopefully) alleviated. Especially for students with diverse backgrounds, creating common experiences within the classroom allows students to have shared images and life experiences that otherwise may not have these encounters together (Whatley & Canalis, 2002). Learners at this age are also dealing with the challenges associated with making new friends. The way students treat one another is a vital part of the classroom community that affects the learning environment. At this age, especially, friendships are important for children to establish and maintain (Igoa, 1995).

*Diverse Learners*

For students from diverse backgrounds, and especially for ELL’s, having an established classroom community is important to prevent students from restricting participation, and from feeling isolated and invisible (Toohey, 2000). Viewing students’ identities positively results in successful learning as well as developing students who are self-assured and dedicated to continue learning (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Students from all backgrounds bring valuable resources into the learning community; culturally and linguistically diverse students possess “funds of knowledge” that should be utilized to guide and enhance the curriculum. “Culturally connected teachers” value every students’ culture and take responsibility for building relationships and rapport with students. While building the classroom community environment, students must feel safe with one another and establish a level of respect and trust. “When trust is established, students are free to take risks, engage in intellectual explorations, and envision themselves as teachers contributing to the learning of others” (Whatley & Canalis, 2002, p. 479). Recognizing the importance of helping children to feel visible and that they are a contributing part of the class team sheds light on the significance of using techniques, such as shared readings of children’s literature, to build classroom community. The efforts spent building classroom community will pay off, as the community practices increase the effectiveness of the way the human brain learns (Caine & Caine, 1994).

The increasing diversity in the United States almost guarantees that students will be entering school with different background experiences, cultural beliefs, and expectations from their family regarding school and behavior. “Culturally relevant teachers utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). Building on learners’ personal and cultural backgrounds is one key to effective teaching (Hall, 2003). It is known that “learning is enhanced when teachers pay attention to the knowledge and beliefs that learners bring and use this knowledge as a starting point for instruction” . Connections between what the learner knows and the current topic should be developed well and in ways that are meaningful to the learner. Doing this is especially important for ELL’s, because this background knowledge is vital to the utilization of other literacy skills as readers work to make meaning of the text. The more teachers can facilitate the activation of prior knowledge and create shared experiences from which to draw upon with reading and other literacy-building activities, the more students (especially ELL’s) will benefit. The philosophy of constructivism advocates that knowledge is constructed from the background knowledge and experiences that learners have. Encouraging students to develop deeper understandings based on the background knowledge enables learning. With ELL’s students, it is also important to build their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Reading aloud to children not only benefits them by increasing opportunities to practices listening and building literacy skills that help them to learn to read, but it also rapidly develops their speaking skills.

Curriculum and Instructional Strategies

*Designing the Curriculum*

At the start of their school careers and at this age in their development, many kindergarteners and first graders (ages five to seven years old) are concerned with their new physical environment and social setting at school. Teachers can address these topics of what it’s like to begin school as well as how to make friends within the classroom as a part of the curriculum at the beginning of the year. One role of teachers play is as the “agent of socialization” within the classroom (Wong-Fillmore & Snow, 2000, p. 11). Teachers fulfill this responsibility by facilitating lessons to include opportunities for students to talk about their feelings in this transitional time and to discover ways to go about making friends and proper behaviors to keep friends together as a class; this allows the classroom community to learn about and establish these expectations together. The importance of considering learners’ needs was discussed previously, and these needs should shape the structure and pacing of learning within the course of the year. Students want teachers to teach “content meaningful to their lives and who have high expectations of them” . As students relate to and learn from the books dealing with beginning school and making friends, they should be encouraged to adopt this practice into their own life.

*The Power of Read-alouds*

Read-aloud sessions are a vital part of any curriculum for students in the lower grades, and experiences with quality children’s literature can be used to facilitate a learning community, as sharing a story allows readers “to come to know and love each other better” (Fox, 2001, p. 4) Through literature, children’s cognitive capabilities are enhanced; readers navigate the skills, strategies, and concepts associated with literacy, which have lasting effects beyond the current lesson or topic for readers. During the shared reading times, students build emerging reading skills, such as phonemic and print awareness among other language and reading skills (Avery, 2002). Students are naturally familiar with the structure of fictional stories, so they are able to comprehend more of the text and theme of the book rather than spend additional time trying to figure out story elements.

The connection read-alouds provides among class members is priceless, as the books bring the class together (Avery, 2002). Using read-alouds in lessons to address issues of starting school and making friends, topics that are uncertain for students at this age, would be an appropriate means to facilitate learning on these topics. This shared experience (the read-aloud) builds background knowledge for students, so that the students can learn the lesson’s objective together as a class. Students also benefit from the shared experience of reading aloud together, as they learn about themselves, learn about their peers, and make connections with one another (Townsend & Fu, 2001). Reading stories together as a class contributes to the continual building of the classroom community, as they engage in the activity together (Whatley & Canalis, 2002).

*Selecting Texts*

Incorporating children’s literature into one’s teaching repertoire and into the curriculum requires careful consideration when selecting books. Choosing literature that serves as both a mirror to reflect the student and a window into a new idea or culture is important to creating a curriculum that supports students’ learning. The curriculum should authentically reflect students and their backgrounds. Literature should also engage readers in stories to help them see the similarities and differences among people, and ultimately, to change the way they view the world. The purpose of using children’s literature is to give students a shared experience by reading, discussing, and extending the story and its ideals within the classroom. These activities invite students to utilize their personal experiences to create personal understandings and understanding of others. Shared experiences are also language experience opportunities for students who are learning English (ELL’s); these mutual experiences and interacting with books helps to build language skills (Garcia, 2005).

Selecting appropriate, authentic, and multicultural children’s literature is the first step in building a solid learning foundation and community (Cullinan & Galda, 2006). Teachers should look for books that are appropriate for the read-aloud level of his/her students and address the desired topic. When selecting pieces of children’s literature to build shared experiences with the group, using stories and characters in the stories with whom the students can identify is important (Igoa, 1995). Books are the “common ground, and they are a part of the language and history of the community” to which all members of the classroom can relate (Avery, 2002, p. 39). It is important to make the differences and similarities among students (even the youngest students in kindergarten and first grade) a visible, accepted, and valued part of the curriculum, especially when selecting literature to include within the classroom library and to read-aloud with the class (Nieto & Bode, 2008).

In addition to considering reading and developmental levels of students, using materials that are culturally relevant aid in building a community among the learners. The quality of children’s literature is determined by the cultural appropriateness of the text; one such example of criteria for selecting titles is to choose books that provide an authentic portrait of different cultures and represent differences among students. “Multicultural education means finding and using culturally and linguistically relevant materials to develop students’ cognitive skills,” which includes children’s literature (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 418).

The resources teachers use heavily influence the curriculum choices and the learning that results. Of course, teachers should rely on their knowledge of books provided by a children’s literature course from their teacher education program. Librarians are always a valuable resource when selecting books and developing a literacy curriculum. Another resource for teachers to utilize in the selection of quality children’s literature is *Book Crush* by Nancy Pearl. This book suggests books based on various, themed topics. One chapter, “School Daze,” recommends books specific to starting school that are appropriate for students in the early grades (kindergarten and first grade). In “You’ve Got a Friend,” the author suggests books about making friends and the issue of friendship. Another chapter, “Many Cultures, Many Voices,” lists books for the youngest readers that have a theme of diversity, so that multicultural books are selected to read together in the class. Another reference is *Promoting a Global Community through Multicultural Children's Literature*, written by Stanley Steiner. This book can be used to spur ideas of relevant literature to use within the curriculum, such as starting school and navigating their social world to make friends, while also allowing readers to build an understanding of the world around them (Paige, 2004; Del Negro, 2002). In his book, Steiner presents a compilation of multicultural books that focus on bringing people together.

Multicultural literature is an important part of today’s classroom, and can teach through cultural images, characters, languages, and dialects. As the student population becomes increasingly diverse in all aspects of the term, it is essential that the literature used in the classroom also reflect this. “Culturally relevant teaching requires that students maintain some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Kindergarten and first grade are great stages for students to be immersed in opportunities to understand and expand the world around them. Choosing literature and building a curriculum that addresses issues important to all students of all backgrounds allows students to see connections between themselves and the content, as well as connections with their peers (Fine, Anand, Jordan, & Sherman, 2003). “Learning to affirm differences, rather than deny them in what a multicultural perspective is all about” (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 170).

Assessment

At this level (kindergarten and first grade), many states, including Tennessee, incorporate “socialization” standards in the list of competencies students should acquire by the end of each grade level (Tennessee Department of Education, 2009). For kindergarten and first grade, teachers are required to assess these skills for report cards and other records. Teachers continually conduct informal observations and assessments of student (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). To formally and systematically assess students to ensure that a learning community has been achieved, teachers can use simple, yet structured methods such as checklists of social skills and discussion contributions. While it may seem arbitrary to assess these kinds of skills, teachers can measure students’ grasp of the social standards through structured observations. Using checklists, rating scales, and anecdotal records to log student behavior at varied times and activities will assist the teacher in judging student competency in these areas. It is recommended to evaluate students with multiple measures, so that the teacher can gather a representative sample of student knowledge and behaviors. To assess the impact of the shared readings of children’s literature on topics, teachers can observe students before and after readings to see if a change in students’ behaviors is visible. Assessing the classroom climate among students can also be used to measure how well the shared experiences with the books help to build classroom community. Studying these topics early in the year will create a collaborative classroom environment, and the understanding of these topics can be measured by the social-emotional responses of the students throughout the year. Data collected from these evaluations of students can help determine future planning and instructional strategies, as well.

Reading children’s literature together as a class can also jumpstart other literacy activities shared by the book. Having a shared experience with a text, particularly on a topic that addresses a vulnerable issue for students (such as starting school or making friends), can lead to writing done by students about this topic (Avery, 2002). Within the writing cycle, writing typically extends from the author’s (the student’s) experiences (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). While it is sometimes harder to judge the community aspect within the realm of other literacy activities, observations can still be used to the extent to which students incorporate shared reading topics and include classroom experiences within their text. With other activities, students’ literacy skills are also extended.

In the end, a caring teacher sets the example for the classroom community. Teachers who demonstrate care and who build meaningful relationships with students play a key role in student achievement (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Tracking the progress of students within a classroom that employs community-building strategies shows that students achieve more within this type of environment.

Conclusion

*Future Questions to Address*

While research has addressed the importance of reading aloud to children, building on students’ backgrounds and interests, creating a community of learners, and teaching within a multicultural framework, it would be beneficial to have studies that provide empirical evidence that support these teaching techniques when used in conjunction, especially in kindergarten and first grade. Much of the literature seems to pair a few of the elements, but lacks evidence to support all elements discussed in this paper working in tandem. In addition, another question that emerged from this paper is to discover what other topics are appropriate and relevant to study in order to build classroom community. While this very much depends on the specific community of learners, it could be a good reference for teachers to have a generic list of community-building topics that children’s literature addresses. Lists such as these could then initiate the creation of additional resources and children’s literature texts to use within curriculums that address these other community-building topics.

*Impact on Practice*

Using children’s literature as a resource to build community among learners through shared read-alouds to address sensitive issues, such as starting school and making friends, creates an environment in which students learn together. As books are selected, choosing literature that reflects a sense of multiculturalism is important for students to feel represented by books, as well as to broaden perspectives as readers are introduced to new cultures. In addition to the benefits discussed above, these shared experiences with books instill a love of literature with children, as it builds literacy skills.

Overall, teachers can use techniques described in this paper to build a community of learners through the use of children’s literature in the earliest grade levels (kindergarten and first grade). Through this community, learners’ differences are affirmed and valued, as members learn together (Nieto & Bode, 2008). “We all learn within a community of some kind…The activities that compose learning not only engage us in our own quests for answers and for meanings; they also serve to initiate us into the communities of scholarship and into the human community, in its largest and richest sense” (Fine, Anand, Jordan, & Sherman, 2003, p. 132).

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