**Reflection on Effective Learning Environments**

*Cheryl Miller*

Establishing a safe and positive classroom environment is typically the first thing on every teacher’s agenda for the first week and following months of a new school year. This is because a trusting learning environment is the first step to fostering cooperative and effective learning. Students need to feel respected by their teacher and peers in order to gain the confidence to participate and take risks knowing that they are free of prejudice and judgement. Students need to be able to realize that every student has the right to learn at their own pace, and in methods that work for them in order to make their learning meaningful and lasting.

In order for an environment like these to succeed, the teacher must begin fostering these attitudes from the second that students step into their classroom on the first day. Teachers can show that they care about their student by greeting them at the door, asking them about their day, and listening and sharing stories in order to build trusting relationships. Also, teachers must encourage their students to learn to share, to complement each other, to include everyone, to respect others’ differences, and to support one another when someone is struggling instead of putting them down. Teachers need to establish their expectations and begin setting routines so that students can begin to feel a sense of familiarity in order to suppress their anxieties. Teachers also need to be the students’ strongest believers that all kids can conquer their struggles - and then need to instill these beliefs into the students too in order to foster growth. All of these practices and attitudes must be emphasized in the first few weeks of class so that students can feel loved, comfortable, and safe enough to focus on the needed curriculum later on.

Students must also be able to understand that not all students learn the same, or in the same way. They need to learn that it may not seem ‘equal’ all the time, but the adaptations that their classmates may need actually makes their ability to learn more ‘fair’. With this in mind, kids must come to learn that they can’t get jealous of other kids that may need extra help or require extra learning tools, and in return, the students who need these tools can use them in comfort without feeling ashamed, embarrassed, or judged by their peers. Once a caring learning environment has been established, the teacher must make sure that the success of that environment continues to be practiced throughout the year. Teachers must make sure that they include the parents, families, technology, and community into their class’s success as well which can be accomplished by maintaining communication and by allowing children to positively interact and learn about their community and surrounding cultures.

Once the classroom community has been set up the teacher can begin to differentiate the class activities to nurture the various learning needs. Because students understand that everyone learns differently, the teacher can now group students in a way that will foster the most effective and active learning at once. Teachers may decide to make homogeneous groups based on student interests, learning style, readiness levels, etc. or to make heterogeneous groups to do jigsaw activities, to join varying students’ weaknesses and strengths, or to join a strong reader with a weaker reader, and so on. Teachers may also need to do more individual or small-group conferencing with certain students, so the other classmates need to have the common courtesy to be respectful of their needs. Also, an accepting learning environment makes it easier for teachers to give tiered assignments and modified assignments because all students will have an understanding that they are all required to meet the same goals, but that some students will just achieve those outcomes in different ways.

Some of the ways that I personally hope to create a classroom community such as the one that I have mentioned above is to make sure that I am modelling the beliefs and attitudes that I expect the students to follow as well. I think that having some sort of a “theme” that builds classroom community such as the “How Full is Your Bucket?” theme or “Let’s Stop the ‘Juice Box Bully’” helps kids to understand issues about being nice and caring through the use of picture books, discussions, and then visual reminders so that you can refer back to them during teachable moments later on. Another strategy I plan to use in order to build community is the jigsaw learning approach where kids always have the chance to feel like the expert about a subject, and get to feel like they are important in groups even if they may not be the best at everything else. I will also try to implement respectful tiered assignments for struggling students (such as ELL students) so that each child has the chance to succeed at their projects without fearing failure.

I hope to have a classroom community where my students don’t mind being paired up with a stronger or weaker reader (or whatever the task may be) because they understand that it is okay to be different and that it may even be a chance for them to help out a friend. I hope that my students can realize that there are always chances to make yourself a better person and to make someone else feel good about themselves instead. This is the type of classroom that kids deserve to be a part of every day: a classroom where they know that they are loved and respected by everyone, regardless of their background, gender, race, or learning abilities. That is when you know that you have succeeded in creating a fair learning environment.