

How Can I As a Teacher Encourage My Students to Become a Community of Writers?

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Biography

After working for a number of years as a nurse in critical care units and the Victorian Order of Nurses, Maureen started a new career in teaching in 2002 where she is privileged to teach at Paris Central School. In addition to her 23 students at school, she also shares many activities with her son and four daughters. With her husband, she enjoys their participation in playing stringed instruments in several orchestras, quartets and individual performances. Other family activities include swimming, hiking, biking and quilting. In May of 2004, she started her M. Ed. programme with Nipissing University and looks forward to more learning opportunities with her “community” of educators.



*The Grade 3 Paris Central School
community of writers-January 2004.*

Abstract

This is the description of a teacher using the creation of a class newspaper as a vehicle to improve the writing ability of Grade 3 students. In this instance, there was the added benefit of creating a community of learners who worked and supported each other in their classroom. Notes from parents, comments from students and teacher observations provide the evidence of increased ownership of the writing process as the students wrote, compiled and edited their weekly newspaper.

Background

Two children
One boy, one girl
Taking turns
Placing sunflower seeds in piles of ten.
One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me.
Your turn, my turn, your turn, my turn.
Not a word spoken,
but
to my heart, it spoke volumes.

It was an unlikely pair of students: one child from a privileged home- 2 parents, stay-at-home mom who was able to be actively involved in volunteering at school, extra-curricular activities such as music and sports, proper food, clothing, stimulating family holidays, and a warm secure family atmosphere. The other student: economically, physically, socially and academically disadvantaged in many ways. However, the children weren't aware of the socio-economic variables that influenced their lives. They were only aware of a pile of sunflower seeds that lay before them.



School-wide Sunflower Challenge

On a warm October morning, the students at Paris Central participated in a cross-graded Math activity called “The Sunflower Challenge.” The purpose was to count the number of seeds in several sunflowers and then collectively add the number counted for the entire school.

Working in groups of six, students used different strategies to estimate, count and record. For some reason, these two students gravitated to their own spot on the playground and proceeded to count out small piles of seeds. This image solidified my focus and imprinted a vision that hopefully will last a lifetime: a vision of two children spontaneously working together, communicating and cooperating for a common purpose. It was this sense of “community” that I was hoping to explore in my action research.

Finding a Question

As a mother of five children, I am always amazed that children with the same parents can be so different! Therefore, it shouldn't be any surprise that in a class of 23 students with different parents, backgrounds, academic abilities, interests, philosophies, and home routines that it should be exponentially more challenging. My Grade 3 class at Paris Central School consisted of thirteen boys and ten girls of various academic abilities and personalities. Although there were exceptions, my class had two distinct groups: active, talkative boys who were willing and able to dominate group discussions and quiet, passive girls who sat quietly and offered minimal input. One student was tested in September and qualified to attend the gifted programme the following year as a guest. On the other hand, another student was identified for placement in the Special Education class for the following year. While searching for a research question, I kept reflecting on the diversity of the class. Each child was so unique. My research question revolved around avenues in which I could encourage these students with such diverse abilities and personalities to work well together in my “little microcosm of society.” How could I prepare them for a future of sharing their lives with others with diverse backgrounds and abilities? This was going to be their reality: to share their life, family, community, country and world with others who had diverse personalities, abilities, interests and attitudes. How could I as a teacher, encourage them in this endeavour? As the area of writing allows for creativity in expression, direction and selection, Therefore I chose for my research question, “How can I as a teacher, encourage my students to become a community of writers?” How can I encourage them to encourage each other and work together with a caring attitude? How can I encourage them to retain their individuality while enhancing the abilities of other students? How can I establish and encourage a sense of community and a sense of togetherness or as the Three Musketeers would say, “All for one and one for all.”

Gathering Data

I chose the following format for researching and gathering data for my question:
Encouraging a community of writers:

- a) Within the class
- b) Within the school
- c) Within the community

Encouraging a community of writers within the classroom

Goal: My goal for Term 1 was to concentrate more on the sense of “community” than on the writing aspect of my research question. In order to do this, the class participated in a number of classroom activities which I will briefly discuss.

CN Tower: As a reading incentive, each child participated in a CN Tower Challenge, an activity shared by Jane Townsend, a teacher at North Ward School. For each page the student read, they were able to colour in one millimetre on their CN Tower which corresponded to the 533 metres of the actual CN Tower. Pages read in class were initialled in their daily planner by the teacher and pages read at home were initialled by a parent. My intention was to establish a nightly habit of reading both with the students and their families. After all the students had read to the top of the tower one time, we had a classroom treat. By working on a common goal, my intention was to build a sense of community and encourage one another.

One student wanted to know what would happen if they read to the top seven times, and on the spur of the moment, I told them I would take them out for lunch. For one student who has a food allergy and wouldn't be able to participate in the lunch reward, he read towards the reward of an autograph from one of his favourite National Hockey League (NHL) players. His mother wrote a note in his planner indicating this was the first time her son had actually enjoyed reading (S. M. Nov. 2003). At the end of the first term, the students collectively had read over 28,000 pages, and by the end of the second term over 42,000 pages. Not only has each student personally been challenged to read, each child had benefited from the sense of community of working on a common goal.



CN Tower and Book Bags

Book Bags

In another effort to encourage a sense of community and a common writing goal, my eldest daughter, Mary Elizabeth, painted canvas book bags. Each bag which had a theme such as Challenges, Families, Food, Emotions, Weather, contained 2 books, a mini-dictionary, and an activity sheet which outlined important information for parents plus a choice of 8 book bag activities. Each Thursday, the students returned their book bags with a written activity of their choosing from one of the books in the book bag. As the book bags were numbered 1 through 23, each week

they took home the next bag. When they returned them on the Thursday, the students recorded the number of pages they had read from the books in their book bags into their planners for their CN Tower Challenge, then hung them up on “s-hooks” attached to the chalk ledges. By November, the students were very self sufficient in the book bag routines. The only drawback were students who failed to return them on the Thursday, so the next student could take them home the next day. We continued with the weekly book bags until March Break. By this time, the students had read through most of the book bags, and were very competent in completing activities relating to main characters, plot, setting, problems and solutions to problems in fiction material. This activity not only addressed many reading and writing expectations, but also fostered a sense of community by reading and discussing common books with common themes. It also gave them common writing goals. In addition it allowed me a glimpse into their distinct personalities as each student had unique answers to the same questions for the same books.

Class Rules

During the first week of school, our class discussed and decided on our classroom rules. Each student signed their name on their construction paper handprint to signify their agreement to the following rules:

- 1) Treat others as you would like to be treated.
- 2) Respect your school, yourself and others.

These rules were prominently placed in our classroom and discussed as needed.

Class Play

During the fall term our class read the novel, “Mr. Popper’s Penguins.” As a culminating activity, we performed a play for the entire school and invited family guests. Everyone who didn’t have a role as a main character, was a penguin who performed a song and dance routine. Stronger classroom ties were forged when the CD for our dance routine was inexplicably misplaced as the show was about to begin. The students performed a dance routine that I improvised to music we had never heard before, while performing in front of hundreds of people. The sense of accomplishment and satisfaction of working together far exceeded my original hope for our production. In post-rehearsal and post-performance discussions, I was continually amazed at the sincere encouragement the students gave each another. One boy, Matthew, who was new to our school, was one of six students who auditioned for the main penguin role. The spontaneity and enthusiasm with which the class greeted his performance did more to boost his self-esteem and sense of belonging than anything I could ever have imagined. This was but another step in building a sense of community and trust in our classroom. A journal entry from Nov. 19,2003 states: “ After our Mr. Popper’s Penguins performance, the class is working extremely well. They are so focussed. I don’t even think they would notice if I wasn’t here. They are helping one another, encouraging one another-no one needs to be spoken to.” (Journal entry)

Class Newspaper

Probably the most consolidating factor in our journey of becoming a “community of writers” was our class newspaper titled “The Grade Three Paris Central Star.” which will be discussed in more detail. The idea of a weekly student newspaper first occurred to me during a discussion with Diane Morgan who suggested the idea at an Action

Research Group meeting(Oct. 20, 2003). She proposed having an editor of a community newspaper speak to my class. I spoke with Beth Gurney, editor of *The Paris Star*, who not only agreed to visit our class and discuss her role as editor and the role of a community newspaper, she also agreed to let the students submit a weekly newspaper column. We had only written two weekly papers by this time, but she welcomed the opportunity to widen our scope to the Town of Paris. This was our first venture from becoming a “community of writers within the classroom” to becoming a “community of writers within the community”.

Our newspaper started at the beginning of October and was published weekly during the first term. Every Monday morning, I posted a sheet of chart paper with the date, and two columns: one for the title of the article and one for the author or authors. Suggestions from the class were submitted and discussed with ideas generated from activities occurring within the classroom and school: field trips, guests, novel reports, CN Tower Challenge updates and new lesson topics. Students volunteered to write the articles. As a teacher, I found this part to be very exciting. The enthusiasm on their faces and eager hands waving to write articles was rewarding. In addition, their reactions were spontaneous. It didn't matter who their writing partner was. Usually in group activities, students are busy forming groups and plotting how best to ensure they will be placed with their friends.

With the newspaper, keen interest was shown for the newspaper article itself, and not for a writing partner. Interviews were definitely the most popular articles that were written and read. One day when I was absent for a Math workshop, I left a blank sheet of paper on everyone's desk for bell work, and let them compose their own question for an interview for me. The questions were priceless and being in a lighthearted mood when I answered them, I decided to submit everyone's question for our weekly submission to our local newspaper. Not only did everyone get a chance to be in the newspaper that week, it gave the non-teaching world a chance to get to know a teacher on a different level. When Chris M. asked the question, “Are you always busy?” I answered with: “Only from 6:00 a.m until 11 p.m.” Another student, Adrian asked, “What is it like to teach 23 children at once?” I answered: “Like chasing chickens, only a lot more rewarding”. And “Do I ever get headaches?” Answer: “No, thankfully, I never get headaches, but I sometimes get heartaches when children aren't nice to each other.” I've had dozens of people comment on that article alone. This



Working on a newspaper draft.



Working hard on the newspaper.

column has helped our class to build a sense of community within our community of Paris. Parents have been very pleased with the newspaper and have indicated the following:

“It’s a wonderful opportunity for the children to expand their theatre of education and a chance to explore the adult world in a safe and interesting way. I appreciate children’s work being taken seriously by adults.” J.B. (Dec. 2003)

“There’s nothing like seeing your story in print to get you excited about writing. Its great when “education” connects with the “real” world. When children read a newspaper article, they will have a better understanding of what it is like to write for a newspaper...Writing has become fun, exciting and relevant. The more writing they do, the better they’ll get...and there have been so many opportunities given to the children to write.” K.B. (Dec. 2003)

“Excellent, wonderful way to use skills in a real way. Encourages cooperation, multi-skill tasks on a regular basis. Fun!!!” B.B.

“Nice that everyone has input and a turn to have their articles published, not just the “scholar” students. J’s grandparents live in Nova Scotia and this gives them “common ground” to talk about, and they feel more and more in tune as to what he is doing at school. S.M. (Dec.2003)



Community of writers at work

As stated earlier, this writing activity has been the cornerstone in my writing programme this year and has enabled the students to benefit in many ways. Many specific expectations from the Ontario Curriculum have been addressed through this writing activity. Not only have the students connected with each other as they have shared in the writing activities, but their parents also have observations they have shared with me. Chris G’s Mom states: “It’s nice to get the student’s point of view on classroom activities.” I agree. Since September our school has focussed on a major playground renewal programme. Akeem, Alex and Garnet stated in the Oct. 18th edition that “The old playground was the dangerous one.” and that our Principal, “Mr. Smith is the thinker.” Their choice of words are far more descriptive than mine could ever be. Lizzy’s Mom states: “I think it makes kids feel important when they see that their thoughts are written down on paper and considered important enough to be seen by others.” (Dec. 2003)

Years from now when I reflect on this year’s class, I am confident that our class newspaper will be one of the highlights I will cherish. Our motto is: “News by the students, for the students and about the students.” When my students were asked by my mentor for Action Research, Deb Opersko, what they liked best about writing in our newspaper, students replied: “ I like to write about something that is meaningful to me.”...“something that is important to me.”...I have a choice and can choose what I want to write about.” However, one student replied “ I am nervous in case I make a mistake and people will laugh at me.” I assured him that I carefully check every article before I print them. We have had a tremendous response from the community.

During the course of writing their weekly newspaper, my class has gone through a transition in roles. Initially, I would lead the assignment of writers and during the week, the students would work on an outline and gather data for their articles. Writing with a partner, they would then print their articles on a sheet I had developed for them to guide them through the process. After they had completed their articles, they would put them in a “Newspaper Article” bin and I would type them on a computer. For the first couple of months, their role was to decide on articles, volunteer to write them, work with a partner and hand in the article by Thursday or Friday. My goals for Term 1 were to inspire enthusiasm, creativity and community. Mission accomplished.

Community of Writers within the School

The Grade 3 class also participated in the Sunflower Challenge, a cross-graded math activity which was described in the introduction. My main focus was to concentrate on learning to work well within the classroom and establish routines and effective writing practices both individually and within the class.

Community of Writers within the Community



Playground equipment tour.

The Paris Star- Submitting several articles from our classroom newspaper to our community newspaper worked extremely well. It was a wonderful avenue for my students to communicate with a wider audience.

As a result of an article published in our local newspaper, my class received an invitation for several students to visit the playground equipment factory that was manufacturing a play structure for our new playground.

Belaire Equipment hosted a tour that highlighted the manufacturing process and showed the students the final processing stages of our own equipment as it was painted and assembled for shipping. A photo shoot and more newspaper articles resulted from this tour.

End of Term One Reflection:(September-December)

Upon reflection, my goal of focussing on and building on a sense of community was achieved. The group of students who arrived in my classroom in September were a fairly cohesive group of students who were comfortable working with one another and enjoyed group activities. Our sense of community was enhanced with class activities such as the newspaper, play, CN Tower Challenge and book bags. However, one aspect that I felt needed to be addressed was risk taking and feeling comfortable with trying something new. The first day of school, I handed out “welcome bags.” It was important to me as a teacher that each child knew he or she was valuable in my eyes and that I cared for them and about them. One important item in each bag was an eraser to signify that it is okay to make mistakes. The bag also included a band-aid because I would help them if they were hurt; a penny because each student was valuable to me; a piece of bubble-gum because we were all going to “stick together”; and a box of Smarties because we are all “smart” in our own way.

An author, Donald Graves writes about an “orderly hum to the classroom.”(Graves, p.131) There were many days when I would pause and look with satisfaction at my class and reflect with pride at the work they were doing. These students were working together with a common purpose and encouraging each other along the way. The most telling moment for me occurred one December day during morning announcements. Instead of standing tall and singing O Canada, several students who were struggling readers were quietly and secretly attempting to read “their” newspaper that had been left on their desks that morning. I was proud.

Term 2

Goals: Having addressed the “community” aspect of my research question of encouraging my class to become a community of writers, I now felt it was time to focus on the “writing” aspect. As a class we had devoted most of our time and energy on writing within the classroom. It was time now to expand our horizons and concentrate more time on writing within the school and community.



Typing weekly newspaper on laptop.

My main goal during this second writing period was to concentrate more on the “process than the product”. The weekly newspaper reminded me of “The Shoemaker and the Elves”. Every week the students would leave their rough copies of their articles in the newspaper bin. At the end of the week they would arrive at school to find an edited, colourful and finished newspaper placed on their desks.

Everyone was very pleased. The product was great, but now it was time to concentrate more on the process of writing. Just as making outlines and paragraphs were the main topics in writing for Term 1, editing was our main priority for Term 2. I could no longer expect the class to produce a weekly newspaper if they were going to have to spend more

time self-editing, peer-editing and consulting with the weekly “classroom editor.” It was my own evaluation that I would be letting the school, parents and community down if I didn’t produce a weekly class newspaper with community newspaper contributions. However, at this time a medical crisis in my family necessitated my absence from the classroom for two weeks, and I realized that life would go on without a weekly newspaper. Quality and not quantity became the new focus. It was also rewarding to see that routines, writing and otherwise proceeded while I was away.

A Community of Writers within the Classroom

Classroom Newspaper

By the beginning of December, I told my students my plan for the rest of the year. Just as they came to class every Friday or Monday and found a neatly typed, photocopied and colourful newspaper on their desk, my goal was to

slowly transfer the roles, so that by June, I would arrive at school to find the newspaper on my desk. By January, I was selecting a weekly editor, who was in charge not only of article and writer selections, but also editing and sorting out any issues that might arise. A co-editor was also chosen, who could be observing from the sidelines, and would be the following week's editor. At first, I intervened several times during the process, but as the months progressed, the students realized I was taking a back seat to their leadership, and would defer any questions or problems to the "editor."



Weekly editor leading newspaper activity.

I physically sat at the back of the room, and gave my entire attention to the editor. Also at this time, I started bringing in my laptop from home, so the students could take turns typing the articles on the computer. Working in pairs, one student would read the article and the other one would type, then they would switch. Most weeks only four or five articles could be typed, because their keyboarding skills consisted of a great deal of hunting with a little bit of pecking. At this time I had the students start a keyboarding programme that was installed on our school computers called "Right Type." A tracking sheet was posted and three students were taught how to use the

programme. After they had finished the first lesson, they each chose one student to demonstrate the programme to and get them started. In this "train the trainer" approach, I was able to "teach" the entire class after just teaching three students. Our three classroom computers are centrally located in our classroom, and it was easy to monitor any problems while still circulating within the classroom. A typical morning would include students working in pairs on newspaper articles, an editor circulating between groups, other students working either at the classroom computers or at the laptop typing articles for publication and students taking pictures with the school's digital camera. I would be circulating among groups of students, observing and directing where necessary.

I found during the second term, the type of articles written also took a different direction. In Term 1 as long as the article was appropriate, it was submitted. Interviews, class activities, jokes, riddles, field trips, birthdays of the month were very typical articles. In Term 2, the class decided that only activities that occurred within the class and school would be allowed. Family vacations, births, and events happening outside the classroom would not be reported. However, as each student would have an opportunity to be the newspaper editor for the week, that student would be allowed to write a personal article of their choosing, such as vacations, birth announcements, etc. I also made a new and improved newspaper outline with article suggestions, and an editing checklist. Book, movie and video reviews, recipes, editorials, advertisements, were added as possible ideas. No longer would it be acceptable to copy jokes and riddles from books. Actual outlines, drafts and editing would need to be done with each article submission, in addition to self-editing, peer-editing and weekly newspaper editor editing. As I told them on a number of occasions, I was trying to phase myself out of a job. By June, I planned to arrive at school, and find the newspaper, written, edited, photocopied and placed on my desk!

Community of Writers within the School

Grade 3 and 6 Writing Buddies

At the end of January, we invited an author named Linda Hendry to speak at an evening presentation for students and their families. In order to prepare for her visit, the Grade 3 and 6 students worked together to produce a book called “A Day in the Life of Paris Central.” Working on half sheets of bristol board, each pair of students wrote one or two sentences about favourite activities that occurred at our school. Illustrations were completed using magic markers, crayons, feathers, foil, etc. Not only did this give the Grade 3 class a chance to work beside and learn from an older student, it also gave us a chance to share our writing with the rest of the students and their families. Unfortunately, inclement weather prevented our author from visiting, but we had fun preparing for her visit.

Grade 1 Buddies

During the second term, my class also worked on writing “mini-books” which were eight-page booklets folded from one single piece of paper. In addition they each wrote an animal research project which gave them exposure to non-fiction features that included glossaries. We chose to share their writing with another class within the school and invited the Grade 1 class to our room for a reading and cookie time.



Pupil perimeter.

Grade 4 Math Writing Buddies

As I was looking for opportunities for my students to become a “community of writers within the school” the Grade 4 class across the hall, taught by my mentor, Kathy Taylor, was eager and willing to try a math buddies activity. Wanting to make the most of every learning experience, we decided to incorporate a math measurement activity we developed called “Pupil Perimeter, Group Graphing and Math Mats”.

Working in groups of four, with two students from each grade, students estimated their perimeters and took turns laying down and having yarn placed around their perimeters. After each member was measured, they graphed the results, and recorded their observations on chart paper.

During the five days this activity took to complete, students in both grades were able to observe different problem solving techniques, writing styles and communication strategies. Although many students had favourable comments regarding the activity, one boy stated he was “stuck in a group with all those females.”

Reflections of Term 2

Life in Grade 3 for Term 2 had many facets to it. In addition to our usual classroom routines and activities, our class was privileged to participate in our school musical production of an Italian opera “Corvo” written and produced by Bill Farrell, a Grade 5 teacher at our school. Although this opportunity may not have addressed the writing component of my research question, it further consolidated our sense of community. As each song was sung in Italian, the Grade 3 class had the opportunity to sing their own song, perform a black light dance, and join in the grand finale with the entire school singing in Italian. This school wide venture was possible through the combined efforts of

many parents and staff who designed and sewed costumes for all 200 students in the school and helped design and build props. As a result of this production, another “brick” was added to the foundation of their sense of community.

Another reality of the Grade 3 world in the province of Ontario, is the E.Q.A.O. Provincial Assessment which occurs every May for 5 days. Activities to help students become familiar with the testing format are reviewed to give them a sense of confidence and competence. I often had students write in pairs or small groups to share their problem solving and communication strategies with each other. In this way, the sense of a community of writers was enhanced.

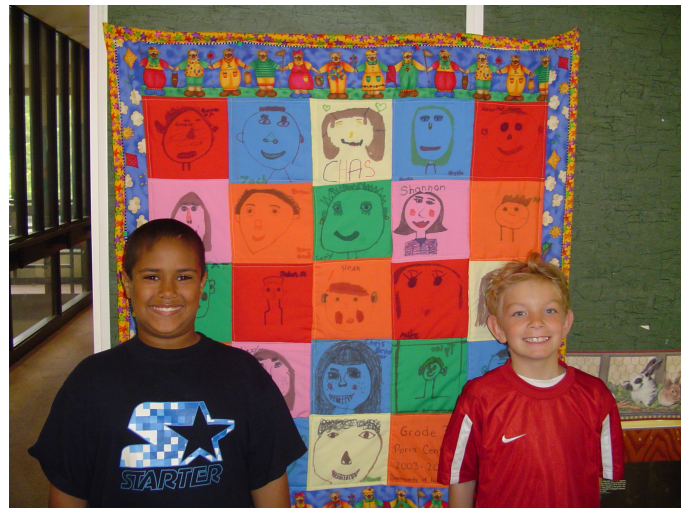
Overall Reflection

As the school year is drawing to a close and I look back on my time with my “community of writers” I am proud of their accomplishments and the joy they have shared both with me and with each other. An image that will remain with me occurred a few weeks ago. It was the day after our final performance of our opera. It was a Friday afternoon, and the students were quietly working on a Mothers’ Day activity. Soft classical music was playing in the background and students were working at their desks composing and illustrating acrostic poems for their Moms.

Although I’m sure every student was tired from the hectic week behind them, they each had a look of satisfaction on their faces. Every now and then, a student would quietly hold up an illustration for a friend to admire, or point at a line in their poem. I was stuck by the fact, that there was very little “talking” but a tremendous amount of “communication.” A nod of encouragement, a smile across the desk said it all. My class of 23 unique individuals had evolved into a community of writers.

Donald Graves writes: “Each child has a place and a purpose in the total fabric of the room.” This quote reminds me of the classroom quilt we made at the beginning of Term 2.

It symbolizes the sense of community I had been hoping to achieve. Each child is unique and equal. Each individual quilt square is special, but when sewn together becomes stronger and more functional. It is a work of art to be shared and appreciated. Together we were able to collaborate, cooperate and communicate and in the process become a community—a community of writers.



Classroom quilt.

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