

How can I use aspects of the Tribes Program to build community within my Grade 5 classroom, specifically enhancing the self esteem of special education students?

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Biography

I began teaching in the fall of 1993 for the Haldimand Board of Education, which later became the Grand Erie District School Board. I spent the first five years of my career in a variety of classroom placements as so many new teachers do. In November of 1999, I began my current teaching placement of Grade 5 at River Heights Public School in Caledonia. I wrote my first action research paper on literature circles in 2003 (DeLong, 2003.) This second paper is about how I have implemented the Tribes program into my classroom.

Abstract

My journey along the Tribes Trail began in 2003-2004 when I received my Tribes training. I have been able to implement some aspects of the program this year, 2004-2005 and am looking forward to adding more each year. This program is like that. As a teacher it is possible to pick and choose what works for you in terms of the 165 plus activities/strategies provided; as long as you support the philosophy behind it. Without a doubt, I find the program works for me in both a social as well as academic context. This year has been an usual year for me, both personally and professionally. It's also been an unusual year for River Heights. Yet despite circumstances, the school has flourished, which in my opinion, it a testimony to both the staff and the students and the values in which we believe.

What Does My Classroom Look Like?

When we first met with Diane Morgan on November 22, she asked us to describe our classes. At that point, my Grade 5 classroom at River Heights currently had 22 children. Overall they were really great children. They were respectful, friendly, and talented but many of them struggled academically. For example, there are two formally identified students, one student is on an informal Individual Education Plan (IEP), and three other students are possible candidates for identification. Hence about 27% of my class requires special education assistance. However, there are also four or five other students whom I would consider low average academically, but do not need to be assisted through special education services. As well, there are some students who struggle with physical issues such as speech, stature, and one with an anxiety disorder. Without a doubt, my class has many needy students. Therefore, I felt it was essential to develop, early in the year, an inclusive environment, supporting the good things that the students had to offer rather than focusing on the obstacles that many were facing.

What a Fall!

Even though, I officially began participating in the action research process in November, I had actually already been implementing some of the Tribes philosophy and activities in the fall since I was one of the staff members who had received the full Tribes training throughout 2003 -2004. September is always a month where teachers work on building community within their classrooms. Therefore, this was the perfect time to introduce the "Community Circle" (Gibbs 2001, pg. 219). By doing this, I was able to learn more about the students and they got to know each other better. I also had my co-op student create a poster outlining the Tribes agreements (Gibbs 2001, pg.21). Other great energizers I tried included, "Name Game" (Gibbs 2001, pg. 248) and "People Hunt" (Gibbs 2001, pg.280). I did "Bumper Stickers" as part of an art activity (Gibbs 2001, pg. 268). Note that I had the students attach their "bumper stickers" to the backs of their chairs. This worked well for three reasons. First of all, it was my first "art mark." Secondly, it clearly identified the student's chair and thus eliminated the fighting that sometimes occurs over chairs. Lastly, it was great for supply teachers because this provided a creative alternative to "name tags." Besides, since I change class seating arrangements once a month, it saved me always having to make a new seating plan for my supply teacher folder. Note that the best thing about the Tribes activities/strategies is that you don't have to do them exactly as the texts suggests but rather use the concepts as a framework in which to develop your own style.

A New Community was Formed

In early October, after six weeks of school River Heights received funding for a new classroom teacher and three junior classes had to be recreated to make four. Although the benefits of having smaller classes would certainly outweigh the disruption, I felt horrible about having to pick students to "give up." The students themselves were feeling very uncomfortable with the idea of changing rooms and teachers after they worked so hard at building community. During this process we did many of the activities promoted in Tribes. We discussed, while sitting in the community circle, how losing seven classmates to a new classroom made us feel. Our Room 10 community had been broken and we needed to redevelop the sense of security and comfort that had been previously established. As a division we had a party to celebrate the forming of a new class. We all decorated our doors with our "new classes" and enjoyed cake and socializing amongst all the rooms. We knew it was going to take some time to rebuild in the Junior division but that the changes would be better for everyone in the long run

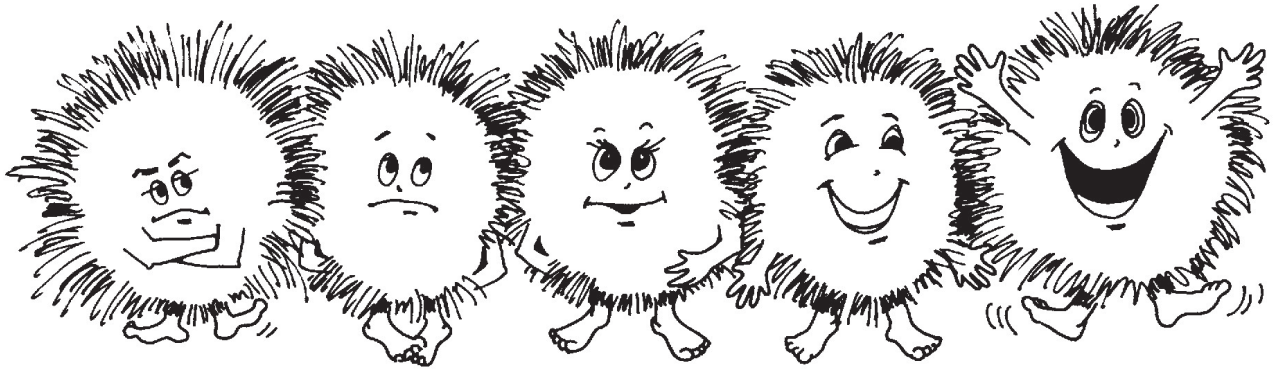
The Tribes Program - How Should I Start?

Although I was very excited about doing Tribes activities in my classroom, I didn't quite know how to begin. One thing that I found to be helpful was to begin to colour code the suggested activities that were explained in the back of the text (Gibbs 2001 pgs.219 -395). For example, if I thought it was an activity that I could use in a particular season, ie. the fall, I highlighted it yellow. If I thought it was a good language activity, I highlighted it blue. If I thought it was a good activity in the area of the arts, I highlighted orange. Sometimes, I made little jot notes about which expectation could be achieved by using a particular activity. Often I reviewed the poster my co-op student made of the Tribes

Agreements. I regularly used the community circle as a tool to improve learning and sharing. I found that it was imperative to actually plan - write in my daybook, the specific activity I wanted to do for a particular academic subject, that way, I made sure it happened.

Tribles - An Essential Component

“Tribles” every Friday afternoon became essential. If I forgot, Arian always reminded me. Tribles (Gibbs 2001 pg. 250) are these cute little characters the students can relate to.



The students all had their own copy. Every Friday, we would sit in a community circle and share how we were feeling about whatever we wanted to talk about. For example, one student pointed to the happiest Tribble and said, “I am feeling like this because..... I’m going away this weekend,” etc. Sometimes I found out how they were feeling about personal things whereas other times they talked about school issues. For example, one student might point to the saddest Tribble and say, I am feeling this way because... I didn’t do well on my math test. I believe, without a doubt, that doing “Tribles” at the end of the day on Friday afternoons was the best part of the Tribes program. When I asked the students to reflect on the Tribes process, Emaleigh stated, “I mostly liked Tribles because it let me know how everyone was feeling.” As a teacher, I felt that way too. I learned more from my students in those ten minutes than I did all day. For example, that’s when I learned Eric’s uncle was dying of cancer and how I found out Paige was moving because her parents were divorcing. What a powerful tool!

Panic Stricken in January

As I’m sure some teachers can appreciate, I became panic stricken in January. It was at that point in time, that I began to fear I wasn’t collecting enough data. How was I going to “prove” that I was using aspects of the Tribes program to build community within my grade 5 classroom, specifically enhancing the self esteem of special education students? That’s when I came up with the idea of the self-esteem checklist. I decided I would administer it January, March and May and see if there was any improvement in self esteem reported by the students. Here is a copy of the check list.

How I’m Feeling About Things

Name _____

Date _____

Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible. There are no right or wrong answers. I am trying to get a sense of how everyone is feeling in the classroom. Please circle the response that you agree with most - 5 means: I strongly agree, 4 means: I agree, 3 means: I don't agree or disagree, 2 means: I disagree, 1 means: I strongly disagree.

I feel very comfortable in my classroom environment.	5	4	3	2	1
I feel accepted by my classmates.	5	4	3	2	1
Generally students don't do "put downs" to other students.	5	4	3	2	1
Generally I listen attentively to the teacher and other classmates.	5	4	3	2	1
Generally students demonstrate mutual respect.	5	4	3	2	1
Generally students respect the right to participate or pass when sharing.	5	4	3	2	1
We often use the "community circle" for sharing.	5	4	3	2	1
We often use "energizers" to help us refocus.	5	4	3	2	1
Doing "Tribes Activities" in our class has helped my learning.	5	4	3	2	1
Doing "Tribes Activities" has improved how I feel about school.	5	4	3	2	1

Each checklist received a total raw score out of 50. Please note that in order for this to be a successful tool for the purpose of collecting data, I had to make sure the students were aware of which "Tribes activities" I had implemented in the classroom. In reality, Tribes should just be a part of your program, not an extension you tell your students about. Furthermore, after the first (January) submission, I requested that the students write comments on their papers for the second and third checklists. I found the information they provided to be much more useful than just the numerical scores that I had generated by doing mathematical calculations. Here are a couple of their comments:

April 4 - Erica , "I think Tribes really helps everyone and I like how we feel comfortable because we have the right to pass or the right to speak.

April 4 - Jordan I still don't like school but I'm beginning to like it better."

April 4 - Ben "I like doing Tribes because we share all of our ideas and we learn more about people."

June 3 - Tyler "I think you should do Tribes again next year."

June 3 - Spencer "I like Tribes a lot because I get to talk about stuff I don't get."

June 3 - Kyle "I like how everyone listens during Tribes."

Although the majority of the students enjoyed "Tribes" some did not. What they expressed was that although they liked doing some of the activities, they didn't like their actual Tribe. I will elaborate on that more shortly. Although, I originally planned to do my checklist every other month, it was actually early June when students completed the third questionnaire. I converted the numerical data from the checklists into a percent and here are the results:

January: 39%

March: 38%

June: 37%

Despite the fact the numerical data declined, which implies the students felt worse about the program,(or the environment) rather than better, did not discourage me. Rather, I choose to believe the data remained relatively consistent from the time I started tracking the program to the time I finished tracking it. It is my opinion that students are more excited about a program when it's

“new” so I’m actually very happy that the scores for June remained as they did because by June, Tribes was no longer something “new.” Thirdly, there are some students who enjoyed doing the Tribes energizers and strategies, but they just didn’t like working in “Tribes” or groups. Or perhaps more specifically, they didn’t like their particular Tribe. See “Creating Tribes” for clarification.

Creating Tribes

In March, I actually created “Tribes.” That means, I physically established groups for the students to be in. We had come nicely along the “Tribes Trail” as outlined in the text on page 77. I felt that, as a class, we had achieved (step one) *inclusion - a sense of belonging*. What I failed to realize was that although many students were ready for (step three) *community - working together creatively* some were still stuck in (step two) *influence - valuing differences*. I have since come to the conclusion, that for some students, they will never leave step two simply because they have difficulty managing conflict, solving problems and making decisions collectively. Hence, it was of no surprise that on some checklists I received comments like,

“I don’t like Tribes at all. It does not help me. I do not like my Tribe. I do not feel like I am in the Tribe.”

“I don’t like Tribes because some people don’t listen and they argue.”

“I don’t like Tribes because I work better alone.”

I think it is important to remember that although most students enjoyed being in Tribes, not everyone did nor would simply because we are all different and it’s impossible to please everyone all of the time. However, next time I physically form Tribes for the students, I will remember to reread chapter six, especially the section entitled “Seven Friends” from the text (Gibbs 2001, pg. 109). I should have! Perhaps if I had, I would have remembered to better set the criteria for the Tribes. I did not specifically tell the students to choose three boys and three girls as potential Tribe members. This made forming the Tribes a little trickier, for me, than it needed to be. The exciting thing about creating the Tribes was being able to tell the class that they were in a Tribe with at least one person who wanted them to be in their Tribe. Interestingly enough, the students that were “most requested” weren’t the “smart” kids or even the “popular” kids. In fact, two of my special education students were amongst the few students who were chosen most often. This provided the conformation that I was looking for. Namely, that I had achieved some success in terms of building community in my Grade 5 classroom. It also confirmed for me, that the class as a whole, was very accepting of the all students in my room even those who struggled academically, physically or even socially.

What Do I Use Tribes For?

As I mentioned, it was the beginning of third term when I actually put the students into physical Tribes. I used several Tribes activities for the process. For example, I quietly gave each person a nursery rhyme to sing. When instructed to do so, they found their “Tribe” by locating other members that were singing the same rhyme. I continued with the music theme by having each Tribe decide on a Tribe name and create a song. Many groups added actions and everyone enjoyed watching the performances. I had five Tribes this year. Their names were: Purple People Eaters, Cool Tribe, Flames, Spongey Bobbity Squirtpants, Silly Gooses.

Some activities that students did within their Tribes included building/contributing to our class’ “Haunted Mansion.” This was a huge project that we undertook as part of River Height’s Mall

activities. During this activity, each Tribe was responsible for a certain part of the Haunted Mansion. For example, some helped build it while others made posters advertising the event. During a particular art activity using clay, students shared storybooks (illustrated by Barbara Reid) within their groups. After a short period of time, they passed the book on to the next Tribe. Games were often played with each Tribe being a team. Center activities were done in both science and social studies with students being grouped in their Tribes. Although I didn't always group the students in their Tribes, (I believe you should not), it became very useful to have that option. Looking back, I think it would be beneficial to create new Tribes at the beginning of second and third term so that if there is a Tribe that is not as successful as the others, the necessary adjustments can be made. Although it truly depends on the class, I don't think a teacher can put students into any Tribe prior to second term because, in my opinion, I don't think they are really ready.

Improving Student Success

A key point to remember is that Tribes is supposed to support the academic program as well as reinforce the value of the social experiences of learning. This can be best achieved by using a variety of teaching strategies including whole group activities as well as engaging in Tribe tasks. In term two, I used activities such as, "Three Ball Pass" (Gibbs 2001 pg. 389) to promote academic review. Note that I only use one ball though. We started out by passing a ball in a particular pattern; hence, you had to remember from whom you received the ball and to whom you passed it to. We did this a few times, gradually increasing our speed and accuracy (sometimes the ball would exit the community circle unintentionally). When we had just finished our social studies unit on ancient civilizations, Ancient Egypt, we decided to use the game to review facts about Egypt. For example, every time you caught the ball, you had to tell the group something you knew about Egypt. After we completed the activity once, the students wanted to do it again, so we did. After the second round, they wanted to do it a third, so we did. We likely could have done a fourth round but I was saved by the nutrition break bell. As a group, we (21 students and myself), came up with 66 facts about Egypt. I drew this point to the class' attention, highlighting the fact that I couldn't possibly think of anything to put on the test that they didn't already review! I think this activity really made the students: a) realize just how much they had actually learned, b) feel less anxious about the test, c) feel good about being able to contribute to the game (if someone got stuck, someone would offer an idea).

The test was actually held the following week and I was extremely pleased with the results. Overall the class did much better on this test than they had on any unit test thus far. In fact, the class average was in the mid 70's. For example, one student named Heather achieved 72% on the test. She was so thrilled that she told me she was going to "act like she didn't do well and ask her mom to sign her test" as tests under 65% need to be signed. Heather's plan to trick her mother brought a huge smile to her face. "She will be so surprised." I don't know the reaction Heather got from her mother, but her plan and excitement certainly brought a smile to my face. Even the special education students did better. They didn't all pass but some of them did better than I was anticipating they would do which was a nice surprise!

I did similar sorts of review third term when I had completed science units on "The Human Body" and "Weather." I wish I could say the test results were as good as the Egypt test but they were not. I suspect for some, the topic may have contributed to the test results. In fact, the Human Body unit test was a disaster with the class average being 57%. I had tried a different strategy for this

particular review. Although I modified the activity to meet my needs, it was based on a strategy called, "Group Inquiry" (Gibbs 2001 pg. 380). While in their Tribes, groups brain-stormed "test" questions for the science unit. Then the "test" that each Tribe had created was passed amongst other Tribes. Each Tribe discussed the questions and answered them. Unfortunately, I suspect that the "smart" kids were the ones answering all of the "test questions" and the students who really needed the review just went along with things. Needless to say, I was very discouraged with these results. When it came time to review for the Weather unit, I decided to try a new Tribes strategy called "Milling to Music" (Gibbs 2001 pg.267). Basically what happens is I play some music. When the music stops, each student asks a student closest to them a question about the unit. I let the students have their notebooks with them so they were better equipped to ask as well as answer the questions their peers asked them. The results were much better. The class average for this test was 68%. Since I have so many students who struggle academically, I was thrilled with a class average of 68% as it was a huge improvement over the previous unit test of 57%. However, I do think it is important to keep in mind that since the tests were on two different science units, there were many uncontrolled variables which may have indirectly contributed to the results.

Did I Reach My Goal?

As I reflect, I think about my initial question, "How Can I Use Aspects of the Tribes Program to Build Community Within my Grade 5 Classroom, Specifically Enhancing the Self Esteem of Special Education Students?" Without a doubt, I sincerely feel that I have accomplished the first portion of the task which was to use aspects of the Tribes program to build community within my Grade 5 classroom. For example, we regularly have community circles, share Tribes, try to uphold community agreements (mutual respect, appreciations/no put downs, right to pass, and attentive listening), and consistently use a variety of Tribes strategies and energizers to enhance learning. In fact, I was very impressed that many students actually put "attentive listening" as a goal for themselves on the third page of their second term report card.

But what about the second part of the task which was to enhance the self esteem of the special education students. Based on classroom observations, I would say that the special education students are readily accepted by their peers. It is particularly exciting when other people agree with your observation. Needless to say, I was thrilled to have Sherri Wencel, one of the Board's Child and Youth Workers write to me about one of my special education students whom she sees on a regular basis. This is what she had to say,

"A student transferred to River Heights Public School and from the first day of my seeing him there was a distinct transformation from an unmotivated and quiet student to a student who was accomplishing tasks the teacher set out for him. He is able to talk positively about the changes and the friends he has made. This student previously had difficulties in the winter months with motivation and work completion and these became less of an issue in the new classroom. I feel the positive, nurturing and gentle aspects of the class, as well as the instant acceptance of a new student, has benefitted him greatly. I also feel that by treating the student as he was presenting and not how he may have been described in the OSR was a benefit to giving him a fresh start. The transformation has been so complete that my services were required only on a monthly basis and his file will be closed at the end of the school year. I think the change of space and the welcoming, positive nature of the classroom has benefitted him greatly."

Furthermore, I had student teacher, Joanne Moir in my room for her first teaching block in late November/early December. She was a great asset in the classroom. She fell in love with teaching, so much that she returned in June to volunteer. She was in awe over the growth of some of my students. Here are her comments:

“In December, Tanner was very quiet, he stuttered and never spoke in class or answered questions. Now it seems Tanner’s independent work has greatly improved. He is much more smiley and sociable. Jenna was a student I was really worried about. She seemed so weak academically as she really didn’t comprehend directions (written or verbal) and struggled with math basics. Wow! Jenna is successfully working on two-digit by two-digit multiplication. She is asking for help but not really needing it. Arian’s stuttering has greatly reduced. This is a lively, happy boy. In December he was very pleasant but seemed anxious and nervous. Colin tries so hard and when he experiences success (like in math) he is so proud of himself. He is working well and although he still needs lots of help with explaining things, he is becoming a great risk taker.”

The insights that Joanne Moir and Sherri Wencel shared in their observations was the data that convinced me, that perhaps in some way, the Tribes program was contributing to the success the special education students were achieving and as a result their self esteem was improving. Sometimes we forget that as educators, it’s our job to make all children feel special and part of an inclusive environment. By providing that foundation for them, we are equipping them with the tools they need to be successful in life.

Final Thoughts

This whole experience has provided me with a much needed affirmation of the things I am doing right. At the same time, it has allowed me to envision the kind of teacher I strive to be. I see the Tribes program, with its strategies and activities, as a vehicle to take me where I want to be and to allow me to grow both professionally and personally. I believe it has made a difference in my life, the lives of my students as well as have a positive impact on River Heights as a school. I now know it is possible to engage students in a program that has both academic as well as social benefits to all who participate. Tribes can be a powerful tool in the classroom. I’ve come to realize how important it is to live by the Tribes agreements. Always being an attentive listener and demonstrating mutual respect for others is something we need to consistently model. Using appreciative statements and respecting an individual’s right to chose to participate is equally important. Wouldn’t the world be a better place if we all could live by these agreements?

References

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