Creating a caring community of learners

The phrase, “a caring community of learners,” occurs with increasing frequency in the early childhood literature (Wisneski and Goldstein 2004). A 2009 position statement of the National Association of Young Children (NAEYC), for example, in explaining the components of developmentally appropriate practice, said that effective teachers of children 0-8 years create a caring community of learners.

But what is a caring community of learners in an early childhood classroom? What are its benefits? How can we create a caring community of learners?

What is a caring community of learners?

According to Sue Bredekamp (2014), a caring community of learners is “[a] group or classroom in which children and adults engage in warm, positive relationships; treat each other with respect; and learn from and with each other.” This brief definition is packed with meaning. Let’s examine what each component looks like in a classroom of children from birth to 8 years old.

Children and adults engage in warm, positive relationships. In a caring community of learners, all members of the group or classroom—children, teachers, family—are welcome participants. The teachers take measures to ensure all children and their families feel that the teacher wants them there. For example, all children are warmly greeted each morning. There are no favorites, and no child is assigned a label such as bad or troublemaker. Within a caring community, children feel safe as they explore all facets of making, keeping, and testing relationships. The focus is on children’s positive, socially acceptable behavior.

Teachers sincerely care about all the children. They view the children as unique individuals as well as valued members of the classroom community. Teachers know the interests and abilities of all the children; they create opportunities for children to experience success.

Teachers welcome family members to the classroom. They are viewed as welcome resources: they are a source of helpful information about the children. Members of the children’s families are encouraged to develop relationships with each other, thus expanding the caring community.

Additionally, forming secure attachments is the core of creating a caring community of learners for infants and toddlers. Building relationships with them requires sensitive and responsive care. Teachers can also model warmth and empathy for infants and toddlers by what they do and say (Bredekamp 2014). A teacher may say, “Michelle is crying because she misses her mommy and daddy. I’ll give her a gentle hug to let her know we are glad she is here.” With Michelle’s permission, the other toddlers can gently pat her back to help comfort her.
Children and adults treat each other with respect. Teachers prize all children and families. They value their thoughts, ideas, and opinions. Differences are resolved in respectful, solution-oriented ways. Everyone listens to each other and has a chance to express an opinion. Solutions emerge from the participants.

Guidance focuses on promoting social-emotional competence. Guidance does not shame, ridicule, or belittle children. At the same time, teachers take measures to ensure that all children feel physically and psychologically safe in their early childhood environment. For example, there is zero tolerance for bullying.

Classroom rules are developed with the children when they are developmentally ready to participate in rule-making, usually by preschool. Teachers apply rules fairly and equitably. Classroom rules are clear and concise and understandable to children. For example, Bredekamp suggests that three rules similar to these can cover all situations in a caring community of young learners:

- We take care of ourselves.
- We take care of each other.
- We take care of our school.

When children break a rule, it is viewed as mistaken behavior rather than misbehavior (Gartrell 2011). It is an opportunity to help children fine-tune their social skills. Teachers ensure the children know what the rule means. If children continue in their mistaken behavior, teachers in caring communities break the rule into smaller increments and work with the children to help them master the rule, one step at a time (Hallie Speranza, personal communication, July 2016).

Toddler teachers can identify a simple rule for their classrooms, such as, “We are gentle with each other.” This rule can be applied to interactions with peers, teachers, and family members. Frequent repetition will be needed to help toddlers internalize this rule. As toddlers move closer to age 3, a teacher can elaborate upon the rule: “When someone grabs the toy I’m playing with, I can stomp my feet and say I am angry. We don’t hit.”

Children and adults learn from and with each other. Expectations are developmentally appropriate for the group as well as for individual children based upon their physical, social-emotional, and cognitive abilities, attributes, and experiences. The classroom activities are based upon research and theory. They reflect individual children’s interests as well as their familial and cultural background.

Rather than imparting knowledge to children, teachers model how to find answers to questions. The teacher asks thought-provoking questions and guides children in drawing connections between new and familiar information. A teacher may ask: “We see that a magnet picks up paperclips, but will it pick up pennies?”

There is a balance between teacher- and child-initiated activities, with ample time for children to explore, conceptualize, and learn individually as well as from and with each other.

Theory and research support the academic and social benefits of creating opportunities for children to learn from each other and adults. In particular, Lev Vygotsky, a Russian educator and contemporary of Jean Piaget, theorized that learning and communication are firmly linked (Mooney 2006). He proposed that children learn from and with each other. For example, 4-year-old Alonzo says to Michael, “You hold the Frisbee this
way.” Through discussions and arguments with peers, children’s understanding of people, places, and things is challenged and expanded.

Vygotsky also proposed that teachers can scaffold children’s learning (Mooney 2006). That is, teachers can assist children to stretch their cognitive-language and social abilities by providing activities children can master with peer or teacher help. By asking thoughtfully crafted questions or by making perceptive comments about children’s activities and interactions, teachers can stimulate children to make the cognitive leap needed to master a new concept or expand their knowledge of a familiar one.

Benefits of a caring community of learners

How can a teacher create a caring community of learners? It may seem impossible if you are feeling overwhelmed by current teaching responsibilities. However, it is possible. If you teach in an NAEYC accredited program, chances are that you and your colleagues are already implementing components of a caring community of learners.

You know it takes time, persistence, and teamwork. You know that obstacles may exist and mistakes will be made. Although creating and maintaining a caring community of learners requires consistent effort by everyone, the short- and long-term outcomes are worth the effort (Bredekamp 2014). Research has found many benefits.

Benefits for teachers:

- a more pleasant work setting,
- more satisfying relationships with children, colleagues, and families,
- more opportunities to experiment with curriculum,
- more professional growth, and
- less burnout.

Benefits for children:

- greater academic achievement,
- more satisfaction with school,
- better relationships with peers,
- greater enthusiasm for learning, and
- fewer behavior problems.

Additionally, because both nurturing care and stimulating education take place in caring communities of learners, children are more likely to:

- develop positive social skills and emotional self-regulation,
- avoid future social and behavioral difficulties, and
- build a foundation for academic success and lifelong learning (Bredekamp 2014).

Benefits for families:

- stronger relationships with teachers,
- greater comfort in school environment,
- greater knowledge of community resources,
- greater experience advocating for their children, and
- greater knowledge about child development and learning.

Building a caring community of learners

Although creating a caring community of learners can be challenging, tools are available to help us (Bredekamp 2014). Here are two: the teaching pyramid model as well as rituals and traditions.

Teaching pyramid model for supporting social-emotional competence

The Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/) has
created a model that “translates research into best practice” (Bredekamp 2014). This model has four layers, each building upon the previous one. It focuses on “promoting social competence and preventing challenging behavior in young children.”

Starting at the bottom layer:

1. **Creating nurturing and positive relationships with all children in the classroom.** The model indicates that teachers who invest time in building a firm foundation of positive relationships with all children in their classrooms will spend less time responding to challenging behaviors of children (Bredekamp 2014; Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain 2003). Children are more likely to respond to teacher guidance when the children and teacher have formed a warm, respectful relationship.

2. **Creating an environment that promotes positive outcomes in all areas of development and prevents negative behaviors.** The environment includes routines and transitions, the curriculum, teaching practices, as well as the layout and furnishings of the physical environment. The organization and accessibility of the physical environment, the timing and order of activities in the schedule, the rules that are set, and the activities provided all influence children’s development and behaviors (Bredekamp 2014; Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain 2003). Children absorbed in interesting activities and enjoyable social interactions are less likely to engage in challenging behaviors. They are more likely to engage in behaviors that help build a caring climate that promotes learning.

3. **Encouraging social-emotional competence and guiding behavior.** Children are born with the capacities to form positive social relationships and to express their emotions in prosocial ways. However, these capacities must be cultivated by caring adults. In this regard, teachers have the responsibility to engage in teaching practices that foster emotional literacy and teach both social skills and conflict negotiation (Bredekamp 2014; Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain 2003). In the short term, these competencies will make the classroom climate more satisfying for both children and adults. In the long term, children can use these competencies throughout their lives.

4. **Planning intensive individualized interventions.** According to Sagai and colleagues (as cited in Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain 2003), when the three previous levels of the pyramid are in place, only about 4 percent of children in the classroom will require more intensive support. When the same children consistently break a rule, we don’t blame inherent characteristics of the children (Bredekamp 2014). Rather, in a caring community of learners, teachers examine their own behaviors and expectations as well as classroom routines and the environment for potential antecedents and consequences of the challenging behavior.

Antecedents are present in the classroom before a child engages in the challenging behavior, and consequences occur after the challenging behavior has taken place. Antecedents elicit challenging behavior, and consequences are factors that either reward or discourage the challenging behavior. Antecedents and consequences can be obvious or subtle.

A classic example of an antecedent is children who have tantrums when told, without warning, they must stop an enjoyable activity. Providing a five-minute warning of a transition can eliminate that antecedent: “We will go back inside in five minutes. Please finish building your sand bridge.”

Conversely, a common example of a rewarding consequence is teacher and peer attention paid to a challenging behavior. A response such as, “Oh, no, look at this mess! Stop splashing! You’re getting all wet!” will often attract the notice of other children. Lessening the attention would probably help lessen the occurrence of the challenging behavior. “Looks
like a wet mess. Here are some towels so you can dry the floor.”

It takes careful observation to determine antecedents and consequences of long-term challenging behaviors, usually because there is more than one of each. Once they are identified, teachers in a caring community of learners will adjust their behaviors, expectations, routines, and environments. They will also seek help from a team of colleagues, the director, the child’s family, and community experts. Individual intervention plans are created and then implemented by team members in the classroom and at home (Bredekamp 2014; Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain 2003).

**Rituals and traditions**

According to Howell and Reinhard (2015), “rituals and traditions have the power to shape classroom routines into times that build meaningful connections and bonds among children, families, and teachers, creating and strengthening a sense of community in early childhood settings.”

To use rituals and traditions to help build a caring community of learners, we must distinguish between routines, rituals, and traditions as well as identify the connections among them. The information that follows is adapted from *Rituals and Traditions: Fostering a Sense of Community in Preschool* (Howell and Reinhard 2015):

- **Routines** are activities that regularly occur in the same order or sequence. Routines help children know what to expect throughout the day. Routines are greeting children, eating breakfast, brushing teeth and washing hands, playing indoors, and other activities in the schedule.

- **Rituals** are classroom routines that have been imbedded with special meaning. They continue to let children know what to expect when, and they also connect members of the caring community to each other. For example, the end-of-the-day routine of the teacher saying goodbye to each child in turn becomes a ritual when the teachers and children chant the *Goodbye Song* together as each child leaves for the day. “Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye. We’ll see Amir tomorrow!”

- **Traditions** are created by the children and teachers of a classroom community. They are activities or experiences that happen at a specified time each year. They may be derived from a classroom ritual or grow out of an experience shared by the children and teacher. They bring together and connect a wider community of people, such as those in other classrooms, family members, or the children’s home community. For example, an outdoor picnic snack shared by the children and teachers of a classroom may grow into an annual end-of-year tradition shared by the entire school as well as family members. Howell and Reinhard (2015) point out that “[e]stablishing traditions that reflect the values, intentions, culture, and experiences of staff, children, and families creates something valuable for everyone.”

**Changing a routine into a ritual**

To change a routine into a ritual requires thoughtful reflection. An overall purpose of rituals is to build a caring community, but an individual ritual also has one or more specific goals. Rituals are meaningful to the children in the classroom and invite their participation. A ritual has a clear beginning and end, and involves the use of a specific tool or technique (Howell and Reinhard 2015).

Let’s look at the often chaotic routine of putting away blocks, for example. The teacher is busy protecting children from being accidently hit by a block and acting as referee between two children pulling on the same block. Moreover, the teacher may find it difficult to ensure that all the children who played with blocks, help pick up the blocks.

To change this routine into a ritual, a teacher can set its overall purpose as building community
through a cooperative task. Its specific goal would be creating a fun, safe, and collaborative activity. As such, block cleanup would need to be meaningful to children and appeal to their interests, such as a fascination with baby animals. The ritual may begin with a statement such as, “Oh, look. There are baby animals all over the block corner. They are tired. Let’s pick them up gently and put them in their beds.” Then the teacher would use a technique such as labeling the blocks and handing a small stack to each child. “Here are some baby rabbits. Rochelle, please put these little bunnies back in their bunny hutch. Here are some puppies. Felipe, please put these baby collies in their bed.”

A teacher could determine the pace of the activity by how many and which blocks are given to the children, which would make cleanup safer. Handing the same large block to two children would foster collaboration: “Mani and Irene, this tired pony is heavy. Please carry the baby mustang to the corral.” Finally, the teacher can monitor who is cleaning up and hand blocks to reluctant children.

The ritual could end with a statement such as, “Let’s look around the block corner. Are there any more baby animals that need to go to bed? No? Hooray! Let’s say good night. Good night, little animals.” In this way, a chaotic block cleanup routine can be transformed into a delightful ritual.

At first, you can create or maintain a caring community of learners by transforming one or two daily routines into rituals. Potential routine candidates include morning greeting, meals, brushing teeth, handwashing, transitions, nap time, and goodbyes (Howell and Reinhard 2015).

Rituals can also be created in the infant and toddler classrooms. Diaper changing can begin and end with simple rhyme games, such as “This Little Piggy,” and handwashing can be accompanied by a song such as Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.

Classroom experiences can be transformed into ritual games that comfort during difficult transitions. For example, Lois cries in distress when her mother says goodbye for the morning. Despite the comfort measures provided by the teacher, she continues to cry. She walks across the room to a basket of sheer scares and draws one over her head. The teacher crouches down by Lois’s side, “Where is Lois? She was here just a few minutes ago. Do you see Lois?” Lois stops crying and pulls off the scarf. The teacher acknowledges her reappearance: “Here she is! We’re so glad you came back!” Lois and the teacher repeat this game twice more, and are joined in the play by four other toddlers. The game continues until the toddlers grow tired of it and leave the area. Lois moves to the water play table, holds up her arms for the waterproof apron, and becomes engaged in water play. The teacher folds the scarves and places them in the same basket. Every morning for the next few months, Lois starts the scarf game when she arrives at school. It has become a comforting ritual.

Because Lois is in a caring classroom of learners, her teacher adjusts the morning greeting to fit Lois’s individual need. Her teacher does so because she respects Lois as a unique individual as well as a valued member of the classroom community.

References
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