Community in the classroom: a research synthesis

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COMMUNITY IN THE CLASSROOM: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS

by

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Educators often use the phrase "a community of learners" to describe the relationships among teachers, students and others who work in schools. Although most people have a general understanding of the concept encompassed by this phrase, the phenomenon of community is complex; it is often referred to but seldom defined.

A multi-vocal synthesis was undertaken to examine the literature related to this phenomenon. The study's purpose was to define and describe the characteristics of community as it is applied specifically to the organization of the elementary school classroom. The meta-analysis yielded seven elements of classroom community: Respect and inclusion; open communication; collaboration and cooperation; caring, belonging, and connectedness; safety; support for individual and group progress; and self-reflection.
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Chapter I
Introduction

The term community is frequently heard in contemporary educational circles. Many schools define themselves as communities of learners. Others include community building among the goals in their vision statements. Occasionally one can find a definition attached to these references, but more often than not these terms are used casually and with the assumption that there is universal comprehension of their meanings. However, a term's widespread familiarity does not necessarily guarantee unanimous agreement as to its definition. As Kohn (1996) points out, defining community may prove to be as difficult as defining pornography: We know it when we see it, but can we explain precisely what it means?

Statement of the Problem

The problem considered in this study arises when the general concept of community is applied to the specific context of the elementary-school classroom. In any comprehensive dictionary, community is defined in a plethora of ways. Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1976) includes the following among its entries for this word:

- a body of individuals organized into a unit or manifesting usually with some awareness some unifying trait, the people living in a particular place or region and usually linked by common interests;
- any group sharing interests or pursuits; a group linked by a common policy. (p. 460)
Is one of these the appropriate definition to apply when discussing community as a model for the social structure of an elementary school classroom? If so, which one? If not, how might a better definition of classroom community be derived? What are the characteristics of classroom communities that might facilitate the articulation of a meaningful definition and the recognition of real life exemplars? These are the questions that comprise the problem addressed herein.

Background and Rationale

Is the lack of consensus on the definition and description of community as a model for structuring elementary-school classrooms a serious problem? At the very least, there is clear and persistent evidence that many people in the ranks of professional educators as well as in the population at large have grave concerns about the current state of public education in the United States (Merrow, 2001; Kohn, 1999; Postman, 1996; Gatto, 1992). Many of these voices argue for reforms ranging from reactionary to radical. Some would-be reformers advocate changes that incorporate their own notions of community as possible curatives for ailing schools as well as wider social problems (Clinton, 1996; Levine, 2002). But as yet, there is no cohesive interpretation of community as a structure for the organization of the classroom and no comprehensive analysis of the characteristics comprised by the community model. It seems logical that the application of hazy, ill-defined concepts can only lead to confused, poorly implemented policies. Therefore, an exploration and clarification of the concept of community as it comes to life in the classroom may provide valuable insight for practitioners.
The notion that community holds promise as a blueprint for one model that might successfully supplant the current mechanistic factory model of education (Caine & Caine, 1997) is simultaneously emerging from a variety of perspectives. Proponents of inclusion view community as a concept that will facilitate the full acceptance of students with disabilities into the regular classroom (Korinek, Walther-Thomas, McLaughlin, & Williams, 1999). Champions of multicultural education recognize community building as an ideal that will help to promote appreciation for cultural differences (Nieto, 2000). Those who see the merit of honoring multiple intelligences and varied learning styles assert that community allows the development of an environment that is more responsive to and supportive of the individual needs of each group member (Gardner, 1999). Advocates for at-risk youngsters perceive community as a structure that will foster a sense of belonging, and thus promote healing (Berman, 1997). From diverse corners of the education world, calls for community in the school and classroom can be heard. Perhaps it is time to heed the calls and look more closely at this phenomenon.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were threefold. The first objective was to explore the various definitions of community as they are presented throughout the literature base and to synthesize a consensus definition. The second objective was to delineate and describe the components of community as set forth by educators and researchers who have attempted to identify and implement these components in actual elementary classroom settings. These components may be understood as the particular behaviors, strategies and activities that characterize a community-model classroom. The third and final objective
was to identify any commonalities or patterns in the themes that emerge from the exploration of classroom community and its components. The study sought to develop a vivid portrayal and clearer conception of community and its components, to raise new questions about the implications of this model for pedagogical practice, and to point the way to further research about the efficacy of this model and its potential as a reform vehicle.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited in a number of ways. First and foremost, it was limited in intent. The purpose of the study was to use a process of synthesis to develop a definition and list of characteristics of classroom community, particularly as the phenomenon can be observed as a structural model for the elementary school classroom and to develop an impressionistic picture of a classroom community. Thus, the focus of the study was broad and was not intended to yield measurable results. Rather, consistent with the aims of a qualitative, mulitvocal synthesis, the purpose was to provide a "narrative depiction of [a] complex phenomen[on]" (Ogawa & Malen, 1991) in the hope of generating a more consistent understanding of that phenomenon.

Next, the study was limited by the bias inherent in the researcher's control over selection of documents and solitary review of those documents. Further, most of the documents consisted of teachers' self-reports of their experiences instead of objective observations or measurements. These teachers have a strong belief in the efficacy and value of the community model. It is therefore important to frame the results within an
understanding that they are based on personal reporting of a positive and often passionate nature that has been sifted by a single researcher.

These limitations are mitigated by the fact that the results are intended only to help illuminate the phenomenon under investigation—to construct in the mind of the reader a visible picture of classroom community—and to serve as a foundation for further research on the topic.
Chapter II

Review of Literature

Each of the dictionary definitions of community cited earlier takes as its focus a social group. Therefore, the existence of a social group might be viewed as a necessary if not sufficient condition of community. While allusions to the specific concept of community can be found in the literature, a much broader selection makes reference to the importance of the social group to learning. Literature relating to the social nature of learning was therefore included for consideration in this review.

Theoretical Perspectives

A significant body of foundational theory underpins the notion of community as it relates to the learning process. Educational theorists and psychologists, neuroscientists and philosophers all assert the essentiality of the social in the processes of human learning and development. Looking across the last century or more of educational research, one can see a consistent pattern beginning to emerge. And today's insights from the frontiers of neuroscience shed new light on the pattern, using information gathered by cutting-edge technologies to illuminate the intuitive wisdom of the giants in educational theory.

One of these giants, Dewey (1990), espouses the view that social interaction is a necessary condition of learning. He also speaks directly to the concept of community. His ideal school would be designed as a miniature community wherein students could interact with each other as they explore the materials and workings of the real world. Not only does he assert that the best and most authentic learning can take place only in a social
context, he avows the value of the context in its own right. By structuring the classroom as a model community, Dewey (1944) believes that opportunities accrue for children to learn the social skills and values that are needed to support a democratic society.

Dewey found that democracy is an ideal in the sense that it is always reaching towards some end that can never finally be achieved. Like community itself, it has to be always in the making. For Dewey, community involves collaborative activity whose consequences are appreciated as good by the individuals who participate. The good is realized in such a way and shared by so many that people desire to maintain it. When this happens, there is community. And the clear consciousness of a communal life constitutes the idea of democracy.

(Greene, 1995, p.66)

Dewey's keen interest in the relationship between community and democracy sharpens his awareness of the social changes impacting American society as the nation moved from an agrarian to an urban-industrial economy. He makes a compelling argument for the importance of bringing urban children together in the public schools with a conscious plan of providing some compensation for the loss of village life. He recognizes the importance of teaching the social skills of interdependence and cooperation that are inevitably eroded by the specialized and mechanized life of big cities (Jackson, 1998).

Though Dewey offers the most comprehensive and adamant vision of community as an ideal situation for learning, he is not alone in the conviction that a social environment—a necessary if not sufficient condition of community—is prerequisite for
human learning. Vygotsky (1978), a pioneer of developmental psychology, pays homage to the centrality of social interactions to cognitive development.

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (p. 57)

Vygotsky believes that cognitive development takes place as a result of social interactions (Theobald and Curtiss, 2000). For Vygotsky, learning is not a separate activity, but is rooted in interactions with the materials of the world and with other people who share that world (Lave and Wenger 1991). Wells (2000) confirms this view, offering the idea that classrooms function much like communities, sharing not only multiple daily interactions but also a set of goals and objectives.

Piaget (1970) theorizes that children need to explore, invent, and experience in order to learn. And although much of his focus is on the active involvement of the child with the materials of the world, he does not overlook the important reality that this involvement and interaction is not a solitary endeavor and expresses the importance of social interplay to the development of cognitive skills. He asserts the collective nature of human knowledge and recognizes that social interactions are essential to the creation and growth of that knowledge (Piaget, 1965/1995).
Skinner (1971), whose behaviorist philosophy is far removed from the paradigms of Piaget and Vygotsky, acknowledges the importance of social interactions. While taking a very different perspective, he nonetheless admits that many human behaviors develop as a result of social processes, and that these processes are required to transmit knowledge from generation to generation. The social environment, according to Skinner, is crucial to the development of the individual.

Pestalozzi (Anderson, 1974) is convinced that the child's moral and intellectual development have roots in loving relationships with others. It is on this foundation of connectedness that effective education necessarily rests. Pestalozzi believes that if these needs are satisfied, the child will evolve to maturity with the ability to provide for his own needs, as well as the needs of others.

The Constructivist Approach

Bereiter (1994) approaches the notion of learning as a social activity from a slightly different angle. He sets forth the idea that the interactive environment makes possible a shared discourse among a group of individuals. This discourse provides a framework for heightened understanding and an increase in knowledge for all. In this manner, knowledge is constructed by the group and the learning of all members is enhanced. According to Hurley (1999), Dewey asserts a similar line of thinking in his philosophical consideration of knowledge itself. He contends that it is impossible, in many instances, to achieve absolute certainty in pursuit of knowledge. He prefers a vision of knowledge as a set of warrantedly assertible beliefs. He urges a process of inquiry undertaken in an interactive fashion as the best means of increasing knowledge.
Banks (1996) subscribes to the notion of knowledge construction and asserts that the ways in which society formulates beliefs and understandings shapes cultural and political norms. In this lexicon, the collaborative processes involved in building a body of accepted knowledge are essential to the functioning and improvement of any society.

*Findings from Brain Research*

More recently, educators have focused on the research relating to human brain function and its relevance to schooling practices. Investigations from the field of neurophysiology offer new insights into the function of the brain, and suggest that the social nature of man is closely allied with his particular intelligence (Calvin, 1996). Based on his understanding of the human brain, Sylwester (1995) maintains that humans are "social organism[s], dependent on others for many important things in life" (p. 114). He notes that "much of our brain's capability is tied up in processing activities that are chiefly social and cooperative" (p. 117) and that it is therefore imperative that schools move away from practices that emphasize individual competition and evaluation. Instead, he maintains that a cooperative and communal model is much more consistent with the nature of human intelligence and the operation of the human brain. Caine and Caine (1997) firmly agree, stating that

[i]t is now clear that throughout our lives, our brain/minds change in response to their engagement with others...Indeed, part of our identity depends on establishing community and finding ways to belong. Learning, therefore, is profoundly influenced by the nature of the social relationships within which people find themselves. (pp. 104-105)
They have identified numerous instructional approaches that they hold to be congruent with the way the brain functions; chief among these is the use of socially interactive learning environments.

**Psychological Perspectives**

Processes more fundamental than the individual's acquisition of understanding or the group's construction of a canon of knowledge may be predicated on successful social interactions among individuals. Many psychologists believe that human beings, in order to attain normal, healthy development, must have secure attachments to others. Maslow (1970) posits a theory that explains human motivation in terms of the compulsion of humans to meet their own needs. Of course, the most basic of these needs is the body's need for food and water. But as soon as these physical needs are met, asserts Maslow, the human will seek to satisfy his need for belongingness. According to Maslow (1971), all human beings need to feel a sense of connection to a group or family and that this need will be all consuming until it is met. In other words, a student who has not achieved fulfillment of this need will be unable to sustain attention and energy toward other tasks. Persistent failure to achieve this feeling of belonging can result in emotional illness. Glasser (1988) outlines human psychological needs in slightly different terms but with the same result. He includes love and belonging on his list of essential human needs and advocates the integration of activities that foster belonging into the day-to-day operations of the classroom. Erikson (1950) postulates a process of human psychological development that is based upon the successful development of trustful and supportive relationships. While the processes, steps, and hierarchies of needs may be defined in
slightly different ways, all of these psychologists agree resoundingly with the principle that all humans have an essential need to form positive attachments to others and to do so early in their life development. Ryan (1995) is in accord, stating that the need for connection and belonging must be met in order for an individual to be psychologically healthy, to experience motivation, and to establish a positive self-image. Clearly, this has profound implications for schools, the places where young children spend most of their waking hours.

But educators do not always seem to be aware of the imperatives of research and of the importance of the role school institutions play in the lives of children. Berman (1997) notes that current pedagogical practices fail to promote feelings of belonging among students, and calls for a rethinking of school structures and curricula. According to this view, cooperation and an emphasis on social responsibility must replace the traditional pedagogy. This perspective has particular importance in relation to students commonly labeled at risk. These are often students with the greatest deficiencies in the area of belonging, and they are lacking in the interpersonal skills that are needed to repair their deficiencies (Beck & Malley 1998). A conscious and comprehensive effort to build these skills is missing from most classrooms. Brokenleg (1998) offers lessons from his native Lakota culture on the importance of belonging. He suggests that the bonds of kinship and friendship common to partnership cultures can be effectively translated into classroom practices that support children who have experienced emotional deprivation.

This same warm acceptance proves invaluable in the lives of special education students (Logan, Diaz, Piperno, Rankin, MacFarland, & Bargamian, 1994). Reports from
schools where students with disabilities are successfully included in regular classrooms indicate that inclusion works best when the philosophy of the school reflects the understanding that each member of the community, regardless of his or her differences, has something of value to offer the other members.

**Perspectives on the Concept of Community**

In recent years, a number of researchers and educators have acknowledged the relevance of the social environment to human development and learning, and some have described this environment as community (Etzioni, 1994; Gardner, 1992; Sarason, 1974; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Sergiovanni, 1994). McMillan and Chavis (1986) list four elements as essential to community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections. Gardner (1992) adds a sense of wholeness made up of the diverse parts of the community; a shared pride in community achievements; outreach to the larger community; and an emphasis on planning for the future. Bryk and Driscoll (1988) outline three components: shared values, a common agenda, and a caring environment. These descriptions and definitions begin to bring into focus the notion of community as a particular type of social structure that can be recognized and replicated in social institutions, including schools. Some of these researchers seek fundamental reform of the social structure of the school institution, advocating community as an improvement over the traditional, teacher-directed format (Kohn, 1996; Bryk & Driscoll 1988; Sergiovanni, 1994).
The Effective Schools Process

The Effective Schools movement asserts that efforts to build community within schools and districts are vital to successful reform (Chrispeels, 2002). This group frames itself as a collaborative venture that implements systemic improvement throughout a district from the classroom to the highest levels of administration (Taylor, 2002). It promotes a comprehensive process backed by an extensive organization that provides training and materials to schools wishing to adopt the model. Central to the Effective Schools Process is the building of relationships among teachers, outreach to parents and families, and other measures that are described as community building activities. Teachers work in collaborative groups to design curriculum and provide feedback to one another. The team concept extends throughout the school institution and includes all stakeholders. The sustained commitment of these stakeholder groups is essential to the success of the Effective Schools Process for reform (Chrispeels, 2002). Community as an organizing model for the classroom (and beyond) would probably find support within this reform movement.

Traditionalist Opposition

There are, however, voices that affirm the viability of the traditional system with its strong emphasis on individual merit and achievement and deny the value of such community-centered reform movements. The widely quoted report, *A Nation at Risk* (National Committee on Excellence in Education, 1983) asserts that educational excellence can be achieved by implementing a variety of measures that are largely
extensions of traditional practices; it calls for extended school days and school years as well as additional homework and testing.

Other voices insist that traditional, teacher-centered instruction is superior to all other models. Ravitch (2000) rejects all sorts of progressive educational reforms and advocates a staunch adherence to traditional curricula, strict standards, and content examinations. According to Chall (2000), the research demonstrates that traditional, teacher-centered instruction usually results in higher academic achievement than progressive methods. Sommers (2000) adds another dimension, declaring that traditional teacher-directed lessons and competitive structures are particularly likely to promote academic and personal growth for male students. Other researchers posit beneficial motivational effects of competition for gifted students (Udvari & Schneider, 2000; Karnes & Riley, 1999).

Some proponents of teacher-centered instruction go a step further, advocating rigid adherence to pre-planned lessons complete with scripts for the teacher to read. With this approach, called direct instruction, students all work through material at the same time and at the same pace while the teacher calls out information and elicits responses from the group in a formal and controlled manner. Those who favor this method assert that it yields gains in achievement for all kinds of students, and may have particular effectiveness for students who lack economic and academic advantages. (Kozoff, LaNunziata, Cowardin, & Bessellieu, 2000).

Similarly, the supporters of standardized testing advocate a narrowly focused approach to education. Students are to learn factual material and demonstrate their
mastery of this material on multiple-choice tests. Proponents of this strategy are confident that extensive testing programs are key to solid educational opportunities for all students. This point of view is represented by the "No Child Left Behind" legislation of 2001. This policy advocates strong emphasis on accountability through standardized testing. It places primary instructional focus on reading skills and insists that scientifically proven methods of teaching reading are to be employed in the teaching of reading (Paige, 2001).

The social nature of learning is not prominently acknowledged among proponents of these teacher-centered, traditional approaches; instead, they emphasize the more technical and mechanized instructional methods that have long characterized American public schools (Spring, 1997). While supporters of standardized testing and teacher-centered instruction do not explicitly reject the notion of community, they embrace traditional models of schooling that appear to be largely incompatible with that notion.

**Philosophical Opposition**

Dissident voices arise from a more philosophical perspective as well. Postmodernist Michel Foucault posits that the very purpose of social institutions is to transmit cultural norms. These norms, he asserts, are artificial and serve to maintain the unequal states of empowerment found within society; therefore, they are to be scorned and dismantled. He rejects out of hand the very notion of the rights and responsibilities upon which American notions of democracy and community are built. According to Foucault, the school itself is a subsidiary institution of the state whose express purpose is the normalization of children through a system of punishment and rewards (Pickett, 2000). From this perspective, no model of schooling built upon these assertedly flawed
principles can be viewed as legitimate. It is difficult to imagine any model of organized public schooling that could satisfy Foucault's prescriptions against the restrictions inherent in social contracts and societal institutions.

Illich (1971) supports the assertion that the phenomenon of school in itself is destructive and that its functions include the maintenance of class differences and the continuance of a harmful consumer economy. Illich advocates the complete dismantling of the current educational system, insisting that people will find the education they need and desire in less formal and more personalized ways. Those who align with Illich would likely view the classroom community as structure that fosters inherent inequalities and disseminates dependency on the institution. Although this may be seen as a radical position held only by fringe elements, it is important to note that the phenomenon of homeschooling is a rapidly growing testament to the popularity of the notion that effective education can take place outside of the school institution (Lines, 1999).

Although parents choose to homeschool their children for a variety of philosophical reasons (Lange & Liu, 1999), the practical result is in every case the same: the rejection of the school institution and the implication that the social structure offered there is not essential to the acquisition of a satisfactory education.

Summary of the Review of Literature

On the basis of this review, it may be concluded that a substantial body of educational theory reinforces the concept of learning as a social activity. A second conclusion is that psychologists generally assert that social connection and belonging are essential to human psychological development and wellness. At the same time, it must be
acknowledged that certain segments of the population will look askance at these conclusions because they conflict with deeply held personal or political convictions. Nevertheless, the preponderance of the literature offers firm conceptual support. On balance, it appears that there is ample theoretical foundation to justify the further exploration of community as an appropriate framework for the intellectual and emotional growth of young learners.
Chapter III

Methodology

The nature of any research question informs the methodology chosen to examine the question. In this case, the question is open-ended and exploratory. Consequently, a qualitative design is most appropriate. From the variety of qualitative approaches, a multivocal synthesis as described by Ogawa and Malen (1991) was selected as the most readily applicable and utilitarian.

Research Design

The multivocal synthesis approach is designed as a means of conducting meta-analysis of existing literature within the framework of a qualitative case study. Ogawa and Malen (1991) explain that the multivocal synthesis approach allows researchers to undertake an open-ended search for relevant information, identify the major patterns associated with the phenomenon of interest, develop or adopt constructs that embrace the patterns, articulate tentative hypotheses about the meanings of the constructs and their relations, and refine questions and/or suggest conceptual perspectives that might serve as fruitful guides for subsequent investigations. (p. 271)

This approach is ideal for the examination of an exploratory question such as the one posed by this study, a question that is "characterized by an abundance of diverse documents and a scarcity of systematic investigation" (p. 266). Osterman (1998) notes that in answering an exploratory question the researcher gathers bits and pieces of
evidence and information from which a "picture begins to emerge" (p.4), in this case a picture of a community-model classroom. The goal is to develop a "thick and thorough" picture, a "detailed portrait that might serve as an antecedent to, and impetus for, more sophisticated, refined examinations of the topic." (Ogawa & Malen, 1991, p. 277)

Selection of Documents

Because of the investigative nature of this study, the contemporary interest in the topic, and the interrelatedness of several subsets of topics, it was not possible to examine every available document related to community. New research relevant to the concept of community as it applies to schools is ongoing, and arises simultaneously from multiple sources, impelled by varying interests. Some studies examine the holistic concept of community, while others focus on a single characteristic of classroom community. Taken together, the body of research and other writings on this subject is too large to be viewed in total. Yet because of the employment of a multivocal synthesis all types of documents, including books, journal articles, and papers, were considered as valid sources along with more formal research.

With such a plethora of material to consider, strict criteria for inclusion in this analysis were developed. First, each document or "voice" included in the analysis addressed itself to the overarching concept of community within the elementary-school classroom. Documents whose focus was limited to a single factor that might be viewed as contributing to community (such as cooperative learning or conflict resolution) were excluded. Also excluded were documents whose purpose was to examine the whole school as community, the relation of the school to the outside community, or the
development of a community of learners among school faculty and staff. Each source was screened to make sure that it included explicit descriptions and characteristics of classroom community, as well as concrete suggestions for implementation. Finally, because the sociopolitical milieu in which schools function is important and is rapidly changing, studies, reports and articles published after 1990 were strongly favored. This set of criteria narrowed the data pool significantly, leaving a manageable set of sources to consider in this analysis.

An extensive and intensive review was required to complete the process for selection of these sources. When searched for descriptors such as "community" and "classroom community," computerized databases such as ERIC and Ingenta yielded an initial list of thousands of sources. These returns were analyzed for indications that they met the above-mentioned criteria for inclusion in this synthesis. Studies appearing to have potential for the purposes of this paper were obtained and examined. References found in these sources as well as in the foundational literature provided additional leads to other pertinent sources.

Procedures

The multivocal synthesis process employed in this review consisted of a careful comparison of the data in the relevant studies, reports and articles to determine the definitions of community and its characteristics extant in the research base. The researcher then created a compilation of these definitions and provided descriptions of each characteristic using illustrative examples from the sources in the sample.
Qualitative methods were used to develop an integrated synthesis, following the guidance of the research relating to the multivocal approach. In this approach, the writings on a particular subject are collected and analyzed. These writings may be the products of academic researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and others. According to Yin & Yates (as cited in Ogawa & Malen, 1991) each work represents a data set that may be treated similarly to the responses to a survey. A variety of sources were compared and integrated, with conscious effort made to juxtapose disparate viewpoints. Areas of corroboration among sources were noted, as were areas of disagreement. The goal was to construct from the data a valid interpretation of classroom community.

There was potential for bias in the inevitable selection and exclusion of data, as the researcher identified works for inclusion in the study. This problem is offset somewhat by the restricted aim of this kind of research, which Elmore (1991) describes as "focusing and giving definition to prevailing ideas in good currency" and "subjecting common ideas to critical scrutiny" (p. 296-297). The intent of this kind of research is "suggestive and instructive, not definitive or conclusive" (Ogawa & Malen, 1991, p. 271). Variation in data sources (Patton as cited in Gersten & Baker, 2000) provides a means of overcoming potential bias. Another means is the deliberate attention to divergent findings (Noblit & Hare as cited in Gersten & Baker, 2000). Finally, a process called reciprocal translation (Noblit & Hare as cited in Gersten & Baker, 2000) which consists of repeated reading and reviewing of each source in light of information provided by each additional source helped to provide objectivity and validity in interpretation.
Chapter IV

Results

A total of 16 sources met all selection criteria for inclusion in this synthesis. Each source defined community in somewhat differing terms. But as the various definitions were examined, a common language emerged. Again and again, certain descriptors appeared in the definitions outlined in the documents. Communication, safety, trust, respect, belonging, collaboration, cooperation, caring, values, connection, empowerment, reflection, cohesion, common goals, responsibility, commitment, and problem solving were terms that appeared again and again.

Definition and Elements of Community

Although the concepts reflected in these terms overlap in many ways, the details and descriptions provided in the documents served to sort them out into seven reasonably distinct elements. These elements are the defining characteristics of classroom community. In other words, on the basis of this study, classroom community may be defined as a condition where the following characteristics are evident: caring, belonging, and connectedness; respect and inclusion; open communication; collaboration and cooperation; safety; support for individual and group progress; and self-reflection.

Caring, Belonging, and Connectedness

One set of descriptors centered around the concept of caring. Every source described classroom community as characterized by caring, belonging, and/or connectedness. A crucial step toward developing community in the classroom is helping students know and care about each other (Stone, 2000). Dalton & Watson (1997) place
"fostering caring relationships" at the top of their list of four key elements in building a classroom community (p. 10). Peterson (1992) says that the "caring and interest of others breathes purpose and life into schooling" (p. 3).

Caring can be accomplished by helping students get to know each other (Allen, 2000). This is an ongoing process, facilitated by the teacher. As Kim, Solomon, and Roberts (1995) point out, students who are provided with the freedom to interact with one another will almost inevitably come to know one another better. This in turn is likely to lead to caring and concern for one another.

Multiple opportunities are provided for students to connect with one another—partners for chores, peer reading, group murals—and students are also given many chances and strategies for learning to see and say nice things about classmates. . . . Students are not forced to be friends, but the entire classroom is structured so that students learn to see and appreciate their classmates well. (Sapon-Shevin, 1999, p. 17)

In addition to providing a wide range of opportunities for students to interact with each other, the teacher finds that self-disclosure contributes to the sense of connectedness within the classroom. When teachers share personal information with students, they help students see them as human beings who are part of the classroom community, not isolated from it by virtue of their leadership position (Dalton & Watson, 1997). Some teachers write letters to their students before the first day of school. Allen (2000) describes a teacher, Christine Carrier, who sends out a letter about herself, accompanied
by a questionnaire about the students for families to complete and return. Teachers Becky O'Bryan and Laura Havis also prepare letters to their students for the first day of school. They share information about their families, hobbies, and even their fears. These revelations help students discover personal connections that enhance and build relationship (Dalton & Watson, 1997).

Respect and Inclusion

Respect for each individual and inclusion of each member are acknowledged as aspects of community. Students who feel respected feel confident that "I contribute something that is necessary to the group and is valued by the other members" (Graves, 1992, p. 65). This sense of respect is consciously fostered in the community classroom.

The behavioral norms established by the group reflect this important idea. Some sixth grade students in teacher Terry Rice's class describe respect as "excepting [sic] each other's ideas" and "nobody took over other people" (Dalton & Watson, 1997). Ideally, students work together to articulate the ways in which they would like to be treated, and to examine the importance of treating others the same ways. In the Tribes program, this is described as mutual respect (Gibbs, 2000).

Inherent in this concept of respect is the idea that every single member has value and can expect to be fully included (Graves, 1992). Each student learns to recognize and appreciate his or her own set of strengths and weaknesses. They learn to value the contributions they can make, and to value the contributions of others (Bryant, 1999). Sapon-Shevin (1999) describes inclusion as a deep acceptance of all children and their differences. Classrooms where this kind of inclusion is being practiced are marked by
open discussion of the ways in which people are different and the kinds of support and help they need and want; a commitment to meeting children's individual needs within a context of shared community and connection; explicit attention to the ways in which students' differences can become the basis for discrimination and oppression and to teaching students to be allies to one another. (p. 63)

A deep acceptance and open comfort with their differences allows each student to find a secure and important place within the classroom community.

While respect for people is paramount, respect for the property of others and the shared materials of the classroom is also important. Teachers model and guide students through the procedures that provide frameworks for caring for property and materials. For example, a teacher might lead young students through an exploration of felt-tip markers. Students are given an opportunity to draw and experiment with the markers, while the teacher calls attention to their proper use and storage. The teacher might ask students to discuss the ways in which the markers need to be treated if they are to be available for use by the students, eliciting suggestions that the caps be put on tightly and that the markers be placed in the proper storage container (Horsch, Chen & Nelson, 1999).

Open Communication

Open communication is an ongoing process in the construction of a classroom community. This communication is actively encouraged. Students are aware that they may talk about their concerns, needs, and feelings. They know that questions are encouraged (Sapon-Shevin, 1999).
Fostering open communication may result in the airing of sensitive topics. Students may reveal information about difficult happenings in their lives. Teachers cannot resolve all these problems, but they can help children to understand that talking about difficulties with a safe adult can help them to better manage their emotions. Teachers need not probe into the details of students' private lives, but at the same time they cannot limit their communication to simply imparting information. Children are whole human beings who cannot leave their needs, feelings and troubles at the classroom door. Opportunities to share about their lives often relieve stress and establish more favorable conditions for learning (Krall & Jalongo, 1998).

"In everyday life, talk is the primary medium for learning, and for that reason, talk is an essential part of community life" (Peterson, 1992, p. 47). Students need extensive opportunities to converse with each other and with the teacher. These experiences yield understanding of the other. Disagreements are considered an accepted and inevitable part of communication (Peterson, 1992).

The development of communication skills is an important goal in the community classroom. Students need to know how to communicate effectively. Students are given numerous strategies for clear communication and problem solving. "I-messages" frame problems in terms of the needs or feelings of the speaker (Gibbs, 2000). Step-by-step mechanisms for resolving conflicts are introduced by some teachers (Putnam & Burke, 1992; Allen, 2000).

It is important for teachers and students to "express themselves, disagree, and even be vulnerable with one another" (Allen, 2000, p. 24). "It does teachers and their
students good to remember that the words "community" and "communication" come from the same Latin root..." (p. 27).

The class meeting provides a daily opportunity to practice this kind of communication (Graves, 1992; Schaps & Lewis, 1999; Charney, Clayton, & Wood, 1997). A ritual of sitting down together to share news and discuss issues of interest helps to build important communication skills and sends a message that taking time to talk and think together is important.

**Collaboration and Cooperation**

Collaboration and cooperation are terms that can be used almost interchangeably. Both imply that pairs or groups of individuals are working together. However, in the context of the community classroom, a subtle distinction may be drawn between the two. Collaboration carries the implication of working toward a specific goal or to produce a particular product or outcome. For example, students may collaborate with each other (and the teacher) to plan learning experiences (Dalton & Watson, 1997). Cooperation is more focused on process and is infused in all kinds of tasks, even the most mundane. Taking turns at the water fountain, playing games at recess, and sharing a box of crayons all involve cooperation.

In a community classroom, the skills needed for successful cooperation and collaboration are explicitly taught (Sapon-Shevin, 1999). Teacher Laura Havis explains. We start very early in the year and we talk about how we want our class to be. We talk about cooperation and what it means to be cooperative. And out of
that conversation come ideas like: 'When we cooperate everybody feels good about himself or herself.' 'We don't want to leave anybody out.' 'We're all part of a team, so for any of us to be successful we all must be successful.' (Dalton & Watson, 1997, p. 77)

When students are involved in the planning of learning activities and are given some real choice and power in the matter, they are likely to be more invested and to monitor their own behavior (Dalton & Watson, 1997). Students need help and support to learn the important social skills involved in planning and working together. To be effective, the ideas of collaboration and cooperation must go far beyond occasional cooperative learning activities. It must be a value that permeates everything that happens in the classroom (Sapon-Shevin, 1999).

When this philosophy is in play, "students work interdependently in pairs or larger groups, are encouraged to use reason and explanation in their decision making process, and discuss and practice the application of specific social values as they work together. Teachers give guidance where needed but student work is largely self-directed" (Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996, p.723). This element of self-direction is important and should extend to making choices about what activities will be undertaken. Students who are allowed to share this power of decision-making will develop a sense of ownership and take more responsibility for their own learning (Charney, Clayton, & Wood, 1997).

Various cooperative learning formats and cooperative games provide structures for the development of the skills needed to collaborate effectively. Applying these skills
to complex tasks is difficult. Providing practice through specific formats can be very useful. These formats might begin with simple partner tasks marked by substantial teacher direction and evolve toward more complex small group tasks with greater group autonomy (Dalton & Watson, 1997).

You can't just put kids in cooperative learning groups and instruct them (or yell at them) to "cooperate." If the behaviors necessary for cooperative learning (listening, encouraging, problem solving, and negotiating) are not in students' repertoires, then simply telling them to cooperate will not be successful. The good news is that the social skills necessary for successful cooperative learning are all teachable. (Sapon-Shevin, 1999, p. 129)

The teacher has an important role in teaching and guiding students in the processes they need to cooperate effectively. Practices that work to facilitate cooperation and interaction are essential components of the community-building effort (Kim, Solomon, & Daniels, 1995).

Safety

Many students come to school burdened with stresses from less-than-ideal home situations. Anxiety, anger, and grief are powerful emotions that can interfere with students' ability to learn and concentrate. The establishment of the classroom as a safe and comforting space not only supports students emotionally, it promotes academic growth (Krall & Jalongo, 1998).

No atmosphere of community can blossom without an accompanying feeling of safety, both physically and emotionally. . . . When students feel safe they are more
apt to take the kind of risks that stretch them and lead to the kind of learning that will stick with them for a lifetime." (Allen, 2000, p.26)

Before students can even begin to reach for this kind of mental and emotional growth, they must be assured of physical safety. For small children, Stone (2000) suggests putting this assurance into calm, positive words. "It's my job to keep you safe—to keep everybody safe. I want you to help" (p. 28). When the inevitable playground accident occurs, the same calm approach reassures all of the students and provides them with a valuable model. Stone (2000) describes an appropriate response to such a situation:

'Mike, you fell off the climber pretty hard, just now! Come sit on the log with me...are you OK?' To children coming to look: 'Yes, Mike had a fall. Remember that Seiko fell down last week playing with the big ball. It happens...Tony, can you bring the tissue box over? We'll stay here, Mike, until you feel better.' No cajoling, no negative comments about tears. Instead: these things happen, and we take care of each other. (p. 21)

Norms and rules used to help ensure the safety of all children are in place in all kinds of classrooms. But in community classrooms, students need to think about the values they wish to see expressed in their classrooms, and to examine why these values are desirable. To convert these values from external, imposed rules to internal guiding principles, students must be given opportunities to consider "why these values are important, . . .how these values relate to specific behaviors, and . . .how to apply these
values broadly" (Dalton & Watson, 1997, p. 35). Students are given an active role in the
development and application of classroom norms. The teacher is not the sole source of
authority. When problems occur, students and teachers work together to find solutions
instead of falling back on a traditional scheme of reward and punishment (Solomon,
Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1999). Logical consequences, such as "you
break it, you fix it" supplant punitive measures (Charney, Clayton, & Wood, 1997).
These approaches focus on supporting students as they work toward interacting in
socially acceptable ways. Conceptualizing these appropriate interactions in terms of
norms instead of rules has some advantages. Norms differ from rules in that they are
more encompassing and more personal than rules. Rules relate to very specific behaviors,
while norms describe cultural expectations (Putnam & Burke, 1992).

The norms that are used to construct the social environment of the classroom also
impact academic progress. Sapon-Shevin (1999) describes her own experience in a
rigidly competitive academic system that pitted students against one another, diminishing
the sense of safety in the classroom:

My junior high French teacher who sat students by their rank in class established
an atmosphere in which every other student's success was a threat to my status;
eye every other student's failure was in my best interest. I continually looked over my
shoulder to see whether anyone was doing better than I was, always worried about
my own standing. The setting was hardly conducive to a sense of safety and
connection! Actually, the atmosphere was not even conducive to my learning
French with joy and ease. (p. 21)
The classroom that engenders a feeling of safety for all its members not only promotes emotional and physical well-being, but also fosters learning (Krall & Jalongo, 1998).

Support for Individual and Group Progress

The idea of cohesion around a common set of goals or a common vision is another element of community. Involving students in planning for their academic objectives is one way of demonstrating this cohesion. Teachers elicit from students ideas and suggestions about what they will study as a group. After making applesauce together, students in Janet Forero's class discussed their thoughts about the process and developed a list of things they would like to learn about apples. They worked together to develop a list of learning activities that the class wanted to undertake. Students also set individual goals related to the topic (Putnam & Burke, 1992).

Sapon-Shevin (1999) emphasizes the importance of providing a framework to help students learn to assist one another in meeting both group and individual goals. A central tenet is the notion that all people need help at one time or another and that students can learn respectful ways to both give and receive the help that they need. When goal setting is a shared activity, the effort to meet those goals is more readily shared.

Goals can be set by students themselves or by students working with other students or with teachers. Goals can also be shared and student taught specific repertoires for supporting and helping classmates reach their goals, as well as to celebrate successes and respectfully honor challenges. (p. 89)
The success of a well-functioning community depends upon the successes of its individual members as well as the group as a whole. The teacher, as a member of the community, needs to set individual goals as well (Krall & Jalongo, 1998; Kong, 1999). Personal and professional growth is fostered when teachers identify areas for concentration and improvement. Working to change specific behaviors or learn new ways to put beliefs into practice keeps the teacher invested in the life of the classroom community and its goals (Krall & Jalongo, 1998).

**Self-reflection**

Setting goals is not, by itself, enough. Self-reflection is the means by which community members—collectively and individually—review and renew their efforts. "Both students and teachers should actively explore the purposes and benefits of functioning as a community" (Bryant, 1999). Self-reflection must take into account processes as well as outcomes.

Even if schools attempting community are able to include diversity without prejudice and their members meet regularly to work together, they will fall short of their goal if they do not seek to balance a sense of solidarity and unity with an ability to self-examine and reflect on the functioning of the group. (Graves, 1999)

Putnam and Burke (1992) assert that public reflection by the group influences students to think critically about events. This self-reflection process encourages students to analyze and understand an event rather than simply evaluating it as good or bad, or seeking to place blame. In the light of non-judgmental reflection, mistakes are less threatening and can be viewed as opportunities for learning. Peterson (1992) uses the
term critique to describe this process of self-reflection. He asks students to examine a given problem, imagine the preferred outcome, and uncover through discussion some possible steps for improvement. The discussion leads the community to decide on a course of action, which is then subject to further critique in an ongoing process.

Private and individual reflections are also valuable, and should be undertaken by the teacher as well as the students (Krall & Jalongo, 1998). They recommend seeking out colleagues who might be willing to engage in honest reflection on theory and practice. Dalton & Watson (1997) provide some specific topics for teacher reflection. Journals for both teachers and students can be used to facilitate individual reflection (Putnam & Burke, 1992).

Area of Disagreement

The documents reviewed for this synthesis presented largely parallel and congruous notions about community. The single area where there was a noticeable range of opinions was the issue of teacher authority and power sharing. Stone (2000) states categorically that the teacher must retain full authority in order to be an effective leader. "A good leader is firmly in charge. She never abuses power, but also never feels weak or apologetic about assuming it" (p. 11). A teacher whose efforts to establish a classroom community were documented in one of the sources put it this way: "All children need a really sound structure. . . .[A]s an adult, when I go to a class, I know exactly what I can get away with, even in a college classroom. If you're not on them, you are not figuring out what they are doing first before they do it, chaos is going to take over" (Kong, 2000, p. 21).
Peterson (1992) recognizes the importance of teacher authority, but takes a decidedly different view. He believes that teachers can and should share power with students and that doing so helps students gain a sense of responsibility for their own learning.

Authority in traditional classrooms is simple, clear, and certain. It is not open to revision. Students live and work within a fixed frame of reference that is not of their own making, where reality is defined by teachers and the textbooks and workbooks used. The teacher's authority is not open to question, and students are rewarded for following directions and doing what is "right."

Authority in the learning community is directed toward liberation, empowerment, and supporting students in seeing and thinking for themselves. Since students are required to be responsible for their own learning, their willingness to think for themselves and to exercise control over their actions is a must. If students are to learn, they must assume responsibility for making a serious effort. (pp. 120-121)

Schaps and Lewis (1999) note that autonomy has been defined as a basic human need. Allowing students to have some control over their environment helps to meet this need and to provide essential motivation for learning. Providing opportunities for students to make choices about their learning fosters a sense of ownership (Charney, Clayton, & Wood, 1997). Dalton & Watson (1997) concur. They note that when teachers
control every aspect of the classroom, students can grow resentful, leading to a decreased investment in learning and reduced willingness to monitor their own behavior.

Teacher Laura Ecken describes a change in her own use of authority. Early in her career, she tried to control inappropriate behavior by writing children's names on the board or publicly criticizing the behavior, which she now sees as humiliating to the child and resulting in making the child a social "outcast" (Dalton & Watson, 1997, p. 73). Instead, she now tries to discuss privately with the child the reasons and feelings that motivated the behavior, and to build feelings of inclusion that help the child want to work toward self-control. Kim, Solomon, & Daniels (1995) assert that practices that share classroom authority by promoting student autonomy have a direct positive impact on student sense of community.

Schaps & Lewis (1999) caution that the teacher must see him or herself as central to the functioning of the classroom.

[S]ome teachers may move too far from being the 'sage on the stage' toward being the 'guide on the side.' Suddenly aware of the great power of providing students with greater autonomy, teachers may withhold too much of their own thinking and be reluctant to confront or control unacceptable attitudes and behaviors. . . .The line between too much and too little teacher directedness is . . . clearly an issue." (p. 216)

Problems and Barriers to Community

Several sources noted barriers or problems that might arise in the process of building community in the classroom. The most frequently cited problem was
competition (Putnam & Burke, 1992; Allen, 2000; Graves, 1992; Sapon-Shevin, 1999; Gibbs, 2000). Traditional American public schools emphasize competition. Educators and parents sometimes assert that competition in schools is appropriate preparation for adult life. Sapon-Shevin (1999) points out that many aspects of adult life are in fact cooperative, and that collaborative skills may be more valuable than competitive ones. Still, she notes the persistence of the belief that competition is motivating and that it is somehow necessary to children's development. "Some teachers...tend to think that cooperation in learning is cheating in some way, as though only individualistic learning gained in competitive battle is genuine" (Putnam & Burke, 1992, p. 48). If community is to thrive, this commitment to competition must be mitigated. "Pitting students or groups of students against one another can quickly kill the community-building spirit of cooperation..." (Allen, 2000, p. 27).

Additional barriers to community are related to institutional factors. Schaps & Lewis (1999) note that community is more likely to flourish when it is a concept embraced by the whole school and supported by the administration. Training for teachers in community building is essential (Charney, Clayton & Wood, 1997). Further, the fragmented nature of many elementary school days is not conducive to the construction of community. Pull out programs that remove some children from the classroom and short, inflexible class periods hamper the development of community (Graves, 1999).

**Activities and Strategies**

The sources provide myriad suggestions for activities and instructional strategies that might help to implement a community model in the classroom. Each activity
supports the development of one or more of the elements of community. Although hundreds of activities are outlined in the sources, they can be combined into several general categories.

- **Class meetings**

Class meetings involve the coming together of the whole group on a regular basis, preferably every day. Students and teachers use these opportunities to build group identity, conduct class business, to plan and solve problems, and to share items of personal and general interest (Horsch, Chen, & Nelson, 1999; Charney, Clayton, & Wood, 1997). Class meetings help to generate a sense of caring, belonging and connectedness, foster open communication, and build feelings of respect and inclusion.

- **Structured cooperative learning**

Structured cooperative learning consists of carefully planned and organized opportunities for students to work together in pairs and small groups. Students are assigned to groups by the teacher after careful consideration. Groups are given specific tasks and group members are assigned specific roles within the group. The teacher provides explicit instruction in the social skills students will need to carry out these tasks. Students are accountable as group members and as individuals (Sapon-Shevin, 1999; Gibbs, 2000; Kim, Solomon, & Daniels, 1995). Elements of community supported by structured cooperative learning include collaboration and cooperation, respect and inclusion, and support for individual and group progress.
• Student participation in selecting and designing learning experiences

Students might help in choosing and planning thematic units of study. They might help to plan field trips and class parties. They might be asked to help design the class schedule. Students can be given latitude to select topics for individual research or writing projects. The more students are allowed to participate in this process, the more they are likely to experience feelings of respect and inclusion (Horsch, Chen, & Nelson, 1999; Putnam & Burke, 1992). This strategy also builds skills in collaboration and cooperation as well as open communication.

• Cooperative Games

Cooperative games provide students with opportunities to participate in activities without concern about "winning" or "losing." The aim of these games—whether they are physical or mental in nature—is for everyone to participate and succeed (Gibbs, 2000; Dalton & Watson, 1997). For example, students might form a circle, holding hands. A hula hoop hangs over one child's arm. The goal is for the whole group to pass the hula hoop around the circle without letting go of each other's hands (Sapon-Shevin, 1999). Collaboration and cooperation are fostered by these group challenges.

• Class ceremonies and rituals

Class ceremonies and rituals are important aspects of classroom community. Singing familiar songs, reciting favorite poems, or participating in ritual greetings and farewells all help students bond as a group. Birthdays or special accomplishments are greeted with ritual ways of celebrating (Peterson, 1992; Bryant, 1999). Even something as simple as story time may have an attendant ritual. As the teacher invites students to come and sit on
the rug, she pretends that it is a magic carpet, ready to take off with the opening of the book. A sense of caring, belonging and connectedness is strongly supported by the use of ritual and ceremony.

- Reduction or absence of competition

Competition permeates most traditional classrooms. Students compete for grades and right answers. Star charts compare the prowess of students in such matters as returning homework or getting all the words right on a spelling test. Token economies are used to promote "good" behavior. Students compete for teacher approval or for rewards such as stickers and candy. The community classroom dispenses with these strategies and places its emphasis on genuine progress for all (Sapon-Shevin, 1999; Allen, 2000). This leads to a focus on collaboration and cooperation and a feeling of personal safety.

- Frameworks for conflict resolution

In the community classroom, teachers work to help students develop skills in conflict resolution. They explicitly teach how to use "I messages" to communicate. They implement a conflict resolution process whereby students use specific steps to work through disagreements. These frameworks give students practice at participating in democratic processes. The elements of community that come into play are open communication, safety, and respect and inclusion (Gibbs, 2000; Putnam & Burke, 1992).

- Celebration of individual and group identity and achievement

Students in the community classroom are recognized for their individual achievements, but also for being themselves. They have opportunities throughout the year to showcase their talents, their accomplishments, their cultural backgrounds, and their hobbies or
interests. Similarly, group accomplishments are recognized in presentations to audiences of peers, parents, and community members (Peterson, 1992; Bryant, 1999). A particularly exciting project might warrant the invitation of the local news media. Students are thrilled to see themselves on the nightly news or the front page of the local paper. Celebrating both individual and group identity and achievement supports the progress of each member and of the group as a whole.

A community classroom bears little resemblance to a traditional classroom in terms of the activities one can expect to see going on there. Desks will not be lined up in isolating rows, but rather will be arranged in small groups. Students are likely to be seen working in pairs or small groups. The teacher spends little time lecturing and directing from the front of the class. Students are not rewarded with stickers or stars, or humiliated by having their names listed on the board for "bad" behavior. Frequently, the whole class will meet together in a circle or group to have a discussion or planning session. Students will show evidence that they know what to expect and what to do as they move purposefully through their day. Routines and rituals will be well established. In short, the community classroom is a busy, interactive, and comfortable place (Sapon-Shevin, 1999; Putnam & Burke, 1992; Dalton & Watson, 1997).

Emerging Themes

One notable theme that emerged from the synthesis appeared, at first glance, to be paradoxical. There is a great deal of emphasis on the individual throughout these sources. The individual is to be seen, known, respected, accepted, and loved. Yet the importance
placed on the talents, abilities, interests, and needs of the individual seemed to be at odds with the primacy of the group that is implicit in the notion of community. However, it quickly became apparent that it is indeed this celebration of each individual that helps to bring the group together as a community. After all, the group is in actuality a collection of individuals. The special talents, skills, and interests of each individual add to the store of positive attributes held by the group at large. The high level of respect shown to each individual carries with it the responsibility of mutuality and serves to foster ties of affection and appreciation for each member and the group as a whole (Gibbs, 2000).

A second theme relates to the increase in intrinsic motivation that appears to evolve from the development of classroom community. Students who feel that they have the ability to affect their learning environment are more likely to care about that environment and invest their work their with importance (Schaps & Lewis, 1999). Students who believe that they will be listened to, that their needs are taken seriously, that the activities they will be asked to engage in are personally relevant are much more likely to respond with eagerness and commitment (Dalton & Watson, 1997).

Sapon-Shevin (1999) explains that students in traditional classrooms are accustomed to having goals set for them. It may take some guided practice at setting personal goals before students feel comfortable with this new responsibility. A community classroom provides a structure where students can learn to set goals and can learn to take responsibility for seeking the help they need to achieve these goals. A correlate is that students understand that they will be expected to help others reach their
goals as well. She describes the process in one classroom:

One teacher I have worked with has all students generate goals for the week...Because the goals are self-generated, students are afforded an opportunity to think well about themselves as learners and people. And because everyone has a goal, goal setting is not something reserved for people 'in trouble' or 'at-risk.' It can also be extremely positive to have the teacher set goals for himself or herself, too. This establishes the teacher as a growing, learning member of the classroom community . . . . (p. 87)

As responsibility for learning is transferred to students they naturally begin to think critically about their choices. They can no longer wait for the teacher to tell them what to do at every turn. The child's natural and intrinsic motivation to learn is prodded and nourished by the learning community (Peterson, 1992).
Chapter 5

Conclusions

As a result of the exhaustive review of the documents included in this synthesis, it does seem possible to define and to delineate the characteristics of the phenomenon of the elementary classroom community. The seven elements of classroom community identified in the study can be combined to provide a definition of this phenomenon. Classroom community is a condition wherein each member of the class feels a sense of caring, belonging, and connectedness; where each member is treated with respect and is fully included; where there is open communication among members; where collaboration and cooperation are evident; where there is safety for all; where there is support for individual and group progress; and where opportunities abound for individual and group self-reflection.

Further, the vignettes and descriptions extracted from the documents, taken together, compose an impressionistic picture of an elementary classroom community. There is general agreement within the documents about the general kinds of instructional strategies and learning activities that can be used to build community in the classroom; hundreds of specific examples may be found in the documents. The interested practitioner may be able to derive from this synthesis a useful illustration of the community model classroom and a working understanding of its components and characteristics. The following description of a typical day in an elementary classroom community places the elements of community in a real-world context and may serve to further illuminate the phenomenon.
A Typical Day in an Elementary Classroom Community

It is Monday morning. The door to Room 12 is open, and classical music wafts into the hallway. The 25 second-graders who belong to this classroom come trickling into the room in ones and twos. The teacher, Mrs. Austin, greets each arrival with a warm smile and a personal greeting. The students go right to work taking care of classroom business. They turn over name cards in a pocket chart to indicate that they are present. They drop Popsicle sticks marked with their names into soup cans to indicate their lunch choices. They feed and water the classroom pets and clean their cages. They sharpen pencils. The children are active, but purposeful. The atmosphere is calm and cheerful. Mrs. Austin continues to chat with arriving students while she prepares materials for the coming day.

As the students finish their chores, they take out their journals and begin to write in response to their own thoughts or the prompt that is written on the board. After a bit of time passes, the teacher calls the students together in a circle for a formal greeting and opening of the school day. They sing a song or two, recite a poem, and do some calendar activities. They talk briefly about events that have taken place since they were last together. Shannon proudly announces that she rode her bike without training wheels for the first time over the weekend. Juan shyly pulls something out of his pocket. He opens his hand to reveal a tooth and smiles to show the new gap in his grin. The response to both students is a mix of happy laughter and congratulations.
Next, there is a brief discussion and preview of the day's work and planned events. The students are well aware of what will be accomplished this day, as they participate with the teacher in planning the learning experiences. At the moment, the class is investigating a theme called "People and Animals," a vehicle for exploring the many relationships that exist between people and animals. They know that the first work period will be spent on their cooperative group projects. They go right to work in clusters of three or four students.

The cooperative groups are designing presentations about how to care for pets. Each group is working with a different pet—cat, rabbit, bird, snake, and so on. All the groups must provide certain predetermined information, but each group can decide how the information will be presented. Some groups are doing posters or brochures. One group is at the computer creating a PowerPoint presentation. All the children are aware that a local veterinarian is going to come and observe their final presentations. She has offered to display the students' work in her office, so the students want to be sure that their products are accurate and attractive.

When there are only a few minutes left before recess, the students clean up and gather on the rug for a few minutes of group reflection and processing. They discuss any problems they might be experiencing in finding information or working in their groups and seek suggestions from their peers. They also report their progress and share successes.

After recess, the students return to class and pick up clipboards. In pairs they fan out through the school. They have arranged to visit each classroom briefly to gather data
about the number and kinds of pets owned by all the students in the school. They bring the data back to the classroom and work together as a group to compile it and create graphs to display the data. They post the graphs and discuss their findings. They write about the process in their math journals. While students are writing, Mrs. Austin visits with several children who are having difficulty grasping the concepts, reviewing the graphs once more and asking questions to help the students gain insights.

As the students finish their math journals, they turn to their independent research projects. Each student in the class conducts an ongoing research project on a topic of his or her choosing. Time is made available to work on these projects almost every day. Mrs. Austin provides background materials, such as library books and information pulled from the Internet. Students work on these projects outside of school, too, and bring in resources they have found. Research projects usually last two or three weeks. Each must culminate in a product or presentation. Topics vary widely. At the moment, Raquel is working on mastering her multiplication tables. She is creating a book that explains multiplication in words and pictures. David is learning about butterflies. He is reading and doing research on the Internet. He plans to make a filmstrip (using permanent markers to draw on a blank strip of film) to show the life cycle of a butterfly. Kalina, a young girl from Bulgaria, is learning English. She is creating a series of pictures of farm animals. She labels each picture with the Bulgarian name for the animal. Mrs. Austin helps her write the English name on each picture. Kalina plans to teach her classmates the Bulgarian names of familiar farm animals using her pictures.
Each student's choice of project reflects his or her own interests and appropriate level of challenge. Mrs. Austin keeps track of the kinds of projects students choose and provides guidance as needed to ensure that students select a range of topics over time. During the work period, Mrs. Austin moves around the room visiting with children, checking their progress, and providing instruction. At the end of the work period, students briefly report their progress and state their goals for the following day.

Next, children select books for silent reading and find a comfortable place to read. Maria and Lupe choose books in Spanish. Kimia, who is visually impaired, listens to a book on tape. Mrs. Austin reads, too. For the next twenty minutes or so, the only sound in the classroom is the rustle of turning pages, punctuated by an occasional cough or giggle.

The silent reading period passes quickly, and soon it is time for lunch. Students put their books away and depart for the cafeteria. After they eat, they adjourn to the playground for an afternoon recess.

After lunch, Mrs. Austin usually reads aloud to the students. This week's selection is "Mr. Popper's Penguins." However, when the students return to the classroom, Ricardo and LaShandra report that they have had an altercation over a jump rope. It is obvious that they are quite irritated with one another. Mrs. Austin puts aside the book and convenes a conflict resolution circle, where the two students are allowed to role-play their difficulty. They get help from their peers in solving the problem. This is a common occurrence in the classroom, and it takes only a few minutes to restore the peace. Mrs. Austin then goes ahead with the planned read-aloud.
As soon as she finishes reading and closes the book, the students take out their Writer's Workshop folders. Mrs. Austin conducts a brief lesson on the uses of silent letters, as she has noticed that many children are struggling with this concept. Then, students choose comfortable workspaces for themselves and go to work. Writer's Workshop is a process-writing program wherein students maintain folders that contain several writing projects in various stages of completion. Students are familiar with the steps in the writing process, which include pre-writing; creating a rough draft; self, peer, and teacher editing; re-writing; word processing; illustrating; and binding.

Today, all the students are working on stories about Animal Heroes. Before beginning this project, Mrs. Austin and the students collected books, magazines, and newspaper articles about animals doing amazing and heroic deeds. Students could choose to create a work of fiction or nonfiction based on this information. All are working at their own levels and their own pace. While many write intently, others are typing at the computers, creating illustrations, meeting with peers for an editing session, or conferencing with the teacher. Near the end of the session, the teacher calls the students together. Minh has finished his book. It is word processed, carefully illustrated, and bound in a beautiful and durable cover. Minh sits in the author's chair and reads his book to the class. When he finishes, the class applauds enthusiastically and Minh proudly places his book on a special shelf with the dozens of other student-authored books that have been created so far this year.

It is time for Physical Education, and the class troops off to the gym. Today, the students enjoy some parachute activities with the whole group, and then break into
groups of three to practice jumping rope. All of the students are actively involved throughout the period, taking part in the parachute activity, jumping rope, or turning the jump rope. No student has to sit and wait for a turn to participate. There are no "losers."

After P.E., the students come in and settle on the rug for the final work session of the day. They are discussing the huge mural that circles most of the way around the classroom. The mural depicts the human and animal habitats that exist in the ecosystem that surrounds the school. As the students learn about each animal that lives nearby, they add an illustration of that animal to the appropriate part of mural. Today they are very excited because a biologist from the Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Department is visiting the class to talk to them about mountain lions. The biologist provides the class with a lot of new information about mountain lions. Using what they have learned, the students decide where the mountain lion illustration should be placed on the mural. The students (and the biologist) cheer as Mrs. Austin stands on a chair and pastes the mountain lion into place.

When the guest leaves, there are only a few minutes remaining in the day. Like most days in Room 12, this one has flown past. The class briefly processes the events of the day and previews plans for tomorrow. Mrs. Austin leads the children in their ritual closing song, and they head out the door. Mrs. Austin sits at her desk and writes a page or two in her daily journal, reflecting on all that transpired in the classroom community on this busy and typical day.

*Community as Classroom Culture*

Community is clearly a pervasive approach. It is not a strategy that can be applied superficially to the existing classroom structure. It is not a method that can be adopted
like a new textbook series. Implementing community requires an all-encompassing way of thinking about how the classroom functions. It impacts every aspect of classroom life, from room arrangement to planning to instructional methods to behavioral expectations. It cannot be separated from the daily routine of the class. It is not a particular activity for the class to "do," rather, community defines what the class "is." Community is a complex and deeply human phenomenon that speaks to the learning and development of those involved in it. It is the culture of the classroom, and once it develops it colors and informs every single moment of the school day.

Implications for Further Research

On the basis of this synthesis, it might be possible to develop an instrument that could compare the levels of community experienced by members of various classrooms. It would be interesting to compare classrooms that show evidence of most or all of these characteristics with classrooms that exhibit few or none. Once relatively high level or low levels of community are identified, the advantages or disadvantages of the community model might be examined. For example, is there any correlation (positive or negative) between a high level of community in a classroom and the academic achievement of the students in that classroom? Is there a correlation between student, teacher, or parent satisfaction and factors of community?

The ability to measure—at least in this relative way—the level of community in elementary school classrooms would make possible investigations into the correlation of community with such items as test scores, reading levels, disruptive behaviors, and stakeholder satisfaction.
As a follow-up to the analysis described above, it might be worthwhile to determine the relative advantages or disadvantages of a community model classroom to groups of students with special needs. For example, does the implementation of community model classrooms correlate with differing levels of change on the types of measures listed above as they apply to multicultural populations, low socioeconomic populations, gifted students, at-risk students or other specific groups?

In the event that these investigations uncover sufficient evidence that the community model offers benefits to students and teachers, the logistics of implementation would need consideration. These logistics would include devising training programs to assist teachers in implementing a community model classroom. Teachers attempting to transition from a traditional classroom to a community model classroom would need information and support. What are the greatest difficulties these teachers are likely to face? What kinds of preservice and inservice training are likely to be most effective in providing teachers with the skills they need to implement a community classroom? These questions provide a basis for a series of investigations that might yield useful information for practitioners.
References

References marked with an asterisk indicate documents included in the meta-analysis.


