

Building Classroom Community in a Second Grade Class

Jane J. Leonard
Florida State University School

ABSTRACT. Discipline in the 1990s presents a challenge for many classroom teachers. One solution arising from a teacher-researcher project involved creating a "working community" in a second grade class. Community officers, rules, consequences, and elections were incorporated and maintained by the students. Participation helped develop students' responsibility for individual behavior, and concern for others flourished. Some of the most difficult community offenders were forced by their peers to re-examine their actions and be in charge of them. A new appreciation for "responsibility" evolved as the community concept led to new understandings for the students and the teacher. A difficult group of second graders became citizens who were in charge.

Classroom discipline is an age-old problem to which solutions are still being sought. Today, perhaps more than ever, the answers are increasingly difficult to find. How does a teacher instill in a child the desire to change his behavior or to at least be in control of it? The basic solution must lie with the individual, where the issue is to transfer responsibility back to that person. The question every teacher must resolve is: How can that be accomplished in the classroom? My answer to this question came as a direct result of being involved in two programs: the Family/School/Community Partnership Program and the teacher-as-researcher program. The first program is a collaborative effort by the K-12 staff at the Florida State University School (FSUS) and the Division of Vocational, Adult and Community Education in the Florida Department of Education. It is designed to promote strong families through family education (roles, responsibilities, and relationships) and family support systems (providing and building supportive environments).

The teacher-as-researcher program enables the faculty at FSUS to work with undergraduate educational psychology students to set up and conduct research in

their classrooms. The students work with the teacher to define the research questions, collect the data, and analyze and draw conclusions. With the support of three students I had during the fall semester, I decided to examine the following questions:

Why not allow my classroom to be a community that builds relationships and encourages students to become responsible, caring members? What better way can be found than real-life experiences?

My belief was that elementary students need to be put in charge if you want them to be responsible, and I felt my classroom was the perfect place to begin. I was teaching a second grade class with 27 students in it. The behavior problems were terrible. There were very few good role models and an abundance of poor ones. Their language was appalling and the solution to any disagreement was a physical one. I had been teaching for 20 years and I had never had a class as undisciplined as this one. Instead of being a teacher, my job became that of "peacekeeper." Something had to be done or we were not going to survive.

Community Beginnings

Creating a community of responsible, caring students would certainly not just happen by itself. It would take careful planning and lots of hard work. Where to begin? I started by getting the students to buy into the system. We got in a circle, and I posed the following question to them: "If you could pick the neighborhood you wanted to live in, and it could be exactly the type you wanted, what would you look for?" The very first response I received was, "I would want it to have only nice people in it." As the list came to an end, it contained such things as:

- No bullies
- A place where people would treat you the way they want to be treated
- Good schools
- No crack houses
- Only nice people live there
- A place where you know you are loved
- A place where people help each other

The class was divided into groups of five to six students each. For several days, we worked on ways to achieve such a community. Most of the groups accomplished very little, but two of the groups came up with some excellent ideas involving community helpers, and the students being in charge of the community. We decided to go with their ideas as long as they worked hard on the academics for the teacher.

Community Helpers

Several class meetings were held, but soon dismissed because of behavior problems. Small-group meetings were set up, and they too were difficult because of the lack of discipline. However, the few good role models did not give up. They continued to work at it and because of their perseverance, the students produced these ideas. Our community would have helpers, and would function with the students totally in charge of the good and the bad. They decided they needed the following helpers:

- Four patrols - to help remind others to act appropriately when they were misbehaving (instead of my having to do this).
- Two counselors - to talk through problems that arose between the students. They would also help with problems at home if necessary.
- Two traffic directors - to move the class from place to place in an orderly fashion outside the classroom.
- One nurse - to help anyone who was sick or injured to the clinic. The nurse would also apply band-aids when necessary.
- One emergency counselor - responsible for getting adult help if something came up that was out of the student's realm of solving, e.g., serious injury or a fight that couldn't be stopped by other students.
- One judge - responsible for making the decision to put a student's name on the board or not.

Community Rules

Next, the students decided on the rules of the community and the consequences of breaking them:

- No fighting or cursing.

- Use your time wisely.
- No running.
- Keep personal space.
- Talk quietly.
- Treat others the way you want to be treated.

The consequences were:

- Verbal warning by a community helper to correct your behavior.
- Name on the board - 10 minutes of community service (cleaning up the room or bathrooms, working in the reading center filing books, etc.).
- + by your name - no free play after lunch.
- ++ by your name - 30 minutes in another classroom doing work.
- +++ by your name - phone call home by the student with teacher supervision, which could result in being sent home for the rest of the day.

Many of their ideas were similar to decisions I would have made, but the difference was that they came totally from the students and not from me.

The Community Evolves

At first, the students wanted me to appoint the community helpers. I refused since this was their community. After a lengthy discussion, they decided that the students should vote on the people they wanted in office. Immediately, friends were sought to fill positions. "You vote for me, and I'll vote for you," was the standard for voting. When it came time to vote, many "friends" were elected to positions. This really worried me because I knew these were not the best leaders in the room. By the end of the week, my fears were lessened when I heard remarks like, "You're not getting my vote next week because you are not doing your job." Little by little, they began to see that friendship is not necessarily the best criterion for selecting job holders.

The next Monday, when it came to election time, a new question came up. How many times could a person serve in one office? This took some time to

resolve. Finally, they agreed that a person could serve as many times as he/she could get elected, but this could be discussed again if problems arose. I was worried that the same students would be elected every week and the community ideas would die. This did not happen! Someone suggested in one of our meetings that everyone who wanted to should have a chance to serve in an office. This idea went over well and the voting strategies changed. So did the people in office.

What happened then was incredible. People were elected who took their jobs seriously, and the classroom community started to change. Students were correcting students and telling each other what a nice job each were doing. It was hard to comprehend that the same students who once were fighting and picking at each other were now working together, and it was so much better. The students soon liked what was going on, and the ones who were the misbehaviors were now wanting to be community officers for the right reasons. They also knew they would never get elected until they proved they could do a good job. That meant they had to behave and set good examples instead of getting negative attention.

Although things were going well, a whole new problem came up. "You don't have to be so bossy." "Don't tell me what to do." Students resented other students telling them what to do, and they wanted the teacher to solve it. Instead, we called a community meeting and they had to resolve it. It was interesting listening to the discussion that followed. They finally decided they needed to practice the right ways to say things or to ask someone to do something. It was perfect and relieved a lot of the tension. There were lots of reminders about the right ways to correct someone, but it was up to them to change and they did.

About the fourth week things hit a low point. The students began to lose interest and assumed that I would step in and straighten things out. It would have been easy for me to do just that; however, it would not necessarily have been the best thing. I chose the more difficult path and allowed the situation to fall completely apart in hopes that they would realize what they needed to do. It was their responsibility to straighten things out, not mine. At first I wasn't sure they were going to do it. When it finally got so bad that I was about to step in, a small group of girls came to me and wanted a community meeting because they could not stand what was happening any more. I wanted to jump for joy!!! They were really going to do it. We had that meeting, and these young girls took it upon themselves to scold the entire class. The changes that took place were great, and it happened because of the students, not the teacher.

The following week, when it came time for elections, a couple of people were elected who were difficult behavior problems. By the middle of the week many of the others realized that it was a mistake to put them in office. They

wanted another meeting, and they decided to "kick" them out of office because they were not setting the right examples. It was beautiful to watch. It was also the best thing that could have happened to those particular students. They were down to serious business. This class was changing slowly but surely. Instead of jumping on the band wagon of bad behaviors, they were emulating behaviors they could be proud of.

The Community Matures

There continued to be a struggle with the consequences for poor behavior. Many of the students felt the consequences were not stiff enough. In fact, some of them wanted to kick the worst offenders out of the community! This problem required extensive work. Because students wanted the parents involved, they developed a community report card that would go home each Friday. Because of a speech they heard by an invited speaker to our school, they decided that on Mondays each child would be given five stars (one for each day of the week.) If a student had his name put on the board he would lose his star for that day. Again, the judge made the decision about whose name was placed on the board. (It was a tough job, but every judge who was elected did a truly special job and was extremely fair. They also commented frequently about the toughness of being a judge. They were learning a lot about responsibilities.) If a student lost one to two stars during the week, that student had to take home a "needs to improve" report. If more than two stars were lost, the student took home an "unsatisfactory." Any student who kept all five stars received an "outstanding." In addition, each student was given 20 minutes free time on Mondays. But, if the student received "unsatisfactories" three weeks in a row, the parents had to come in and meet with the community officers to discuss ways to improve the behavior. The community report cards on each student were filled out by the community officers and signed by the student and their parents. There was also an explanation of the star losses at the bottom of the card. In addition, the judge kept a record of the stars in a small book and on a chart on the board, so the students knew what was happening at all times. The students were tougher on each other than the teacher would have been.

Each week the community grew stronger. What we had wasn't perfect, but we had come a long way and we were all proud. We still had problems we had to work on. Because we were reading the book The BFH, by Roald Dahl, some of the students came up with the idea of a BFH, a Big Friendly Helper. It was designed for the students who still had some difficulties with their behavior. They simply paired the ones with problems with students who were good role models, and those students helped each other. It worked beautifully! We even had quiet reading time with BFHs. We changed these pairs every two weeks and allowed the

students to choose a new BFH. They were very aware of the problems and who could help the most. If someone made a poor choice, the others would say, "You need to pick someone else. The two of you will just get into trouble." The idea served its purpose well.

The community continued to change for the better. Students were acting more responsibly and were moving toward being responsible for themselves and each other. They had a more mature understanding of "community" and the responsibilities it entailed. We had some low days and lots of good days, but it was worth the pain.

Conclusion

As we worked through the process, there were days when I cried because I was so frustrated. I had always been in control of my class and had never had such overwhelming problems. Some of the students also cried because they wanted me to be in charge and they knew I was not. I really had no choice except to force them to take charge and get activities back in order. I knew the students could do it, but "how" was the important part. By allowing them to define and work within their own structure, the responsibility for success rested on them. There was no longer a battle for control. They were in charge and it had made an enormous difference. They assumed responsibility and what happened was like watching a butterfly chrysalis. The change on the inside was concealed, but what emerged was beautiful.

It's very hard as a teacher or parent to step back and let your children learn to be responsible and productive. It is especially hard if you think you can spare them some pain. Sometimes the pain brings the most gain. I think we all grew from this experience and it will make a difference for a long time. I certainly will be trying this again next year. I know it will never be exactly the same, but the idea can generate a system that will allow my students to grow to be productive members of society because they want it to happen. It won't be because I want them to, but because they were motivated to change. Every teacher should put this motto over her/his desk:

**STOPPING MISBEHAVIOR DOES NOT MEAN CHANGING IT.
CHANGE WILL OCCUR ONLY WHEN THE STUDENT SEES
THE NEED OR HAS THE DESIRE TO CHANGE IT.**

Jane J. Leonard, Teacher Researcher, Florida State University School, Florida State University B-166, West Call Street, Tallahassee, Florida 32306