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COMMUNITY BUILDING:

A THEME FOR SMALL SCHOOL GATHERINGS

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## ABSTRACT

As students enter into an elementary school classroom, they are not simply looking to gain knowledge of ABCs and 123s, but they are seeking to know how to belong to the society that surrounds them. These students are seeking to find a classroom in which they can experiment with ways of interacting with others and the truths about themselves that make them a member of the community of their school. Students are looking for a teacher who will allow them to be themselves in a place where being yourself is a potentially risky and petrifying idea. Students are seeking to find a place of trust and of acceptance.

Schools are a place in which students are learning the ways in which they can be helpful, productive members of a much greater society. According to the National Council for the Social Studies, “In a society such as ours, where citizens have been divided and diverse throughout history, it is essential that schools and communities foster a reasoned commitment to the founding principles and values that bind us together as people” (National Council for the Social Studies, 1997). It is a primary responsibility of schools to provide students with an opportunity to develop a deep understanding of these principles so that they may reach their full potential as members of our society.

Along with that idea, students are also seeking to feel as though they are being heard. There is such a great importance in allowing students to find a place in which they know that the teacher is listening and values their ideas. However, so often, teachers say that they are giving their students a voice in the classroom, but they are really simply directing the students’ voices in a way that pleases them. Giving students a true, authentic voice is a difficult and daring idea within the context of a classroom, bound by traditional power structures of teacher as expert and student as learner. Because of this, it can be the tendency of teachers to give students limited voice into the workings of the classroom.

This study sought to investigate the ways in which a Small School Gathering could become a place of community building. Within the context of this study, allowing children to simply become a member of a community became the primary goal and focus of a small group meeting at School A. I seek to present sub-themes that allowed this overarching theme of community building to occur. These sub-themes are caring relationships, collaborative interactions, autonomy, and common purposes or ideas. The data from this study was collected from one case study, which is part of a larger research study called “Young Citizens Engaged.” The study looked at the development of that culture by the teacher directing that group. The researchers collected data that shows that the primary goal and motivation of the teacher leading the Group E Small School Gathering was to allow students to come together as a group to get to know one another and build a community among themselves and within the entire school. The data

collected from this study shows how community building could become the primary focus of a Small School Gathering and what community building looks like in the context of Group E's small school gathering at School A. This case study provides a clear picture of what factors may influence a teacher to use a Small School Gathering to enhance the community of a classroom or of a school.

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## INTRODUCTION

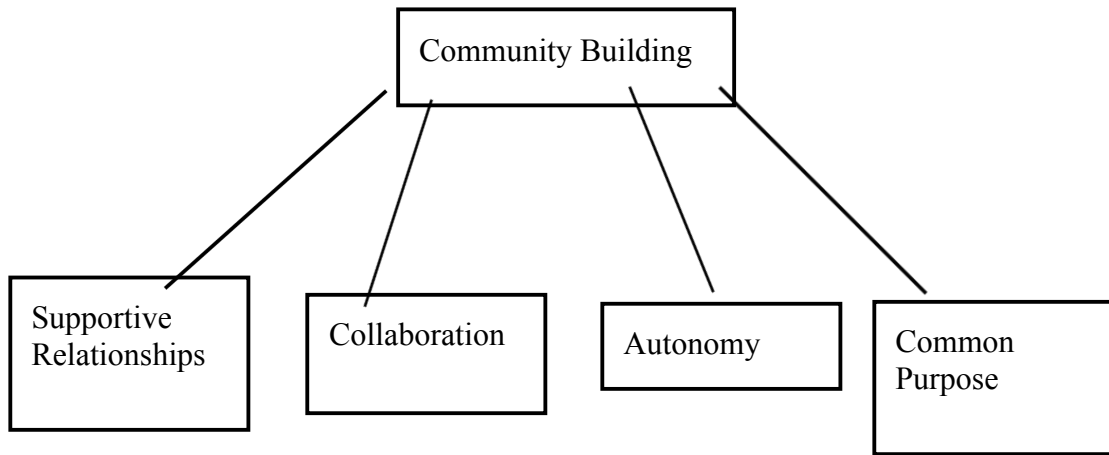
Community Building is not one of the four major school subjects that one hears discussed in relation to elementary curriculum and instruction. It is not one of the subjects tested on any standardized test. Community building is simply seen as a skill that will eventually develop through social interactions among children and teachers. However, according to the “Civic Mission of Schools Report,” community building has been recognized as an important function of education since the formation of public schooling. According to the “Civic Mission of Schools Report,” civics education is on the decline, but one way to combat this problem is to have “an emphasis on the ideas and principles that are essential to constitutional democracy” (Carnegie Corporation of New York 2003, p. 23). Below, I describe how researchers and educators describe such a community.

One of these principles is the development of community and the importance of working together and exchanging ideas as a community. Moreover, “Given that early school experiences can have important implications for later social development and functioning, it is not surprising that promoting the positive social development of students is an important goal for many elementary school teachers” (Solomon, 1988, p. 528). The importance of giving students a place and time in which they are simply asked to develop socially is an idea that has been suggested by, and advocated for, by many, such as John Dewey (1958), and the implications that it has for children’s success should give educators pause. Although this study does not seek to measure ‘success’, it does seek to qualitatively show the ways in which one school developed a time and a place for students to develop socially, and how oncteacher used democratic principles and ideals to

become the centralized theme of her Small School Gathering. These findings show how young students can have a place in which they feel comfortable to develop as social beings so that they can also develop into civic beings. Within this study, the importance of genuine and clear “student voice” in younger years is discussed. The true relevance of the follow-through of a teacher with encouraging student voice is extremely important.

### **Implications of Community Building on Children’s Development**

As stated by the researchers involved with the “Child Development Project”, which aimed to enhance students’ social learning, “We believe that various experiences associated with participation in a caring school community help students not only to satisfy their basic psychological needs, but also to develop their intellectual and sociomoral capacities...” (Solomon, 2004, p. 192). They espouse that a main goal of community building in a school or in a classroom can be to develop a caring environment in which students are able to see that interacting with others can be helpful and beneficial. Community building is part of a child’s development socially because it provides a basic model for what positive interaction with others and active group participation is supposed to look like. Students who are part of a community can be more sure of themselves within that community. Developing a place in which students are able to understand their place and value in a community is one way to ensure that students are able to develop their capacity for positive social interaction with others. Below is a diagram which depicts the five components of Community Building as described by the “Child Development Project” (Solomon, 2004, p. 192).



*Figure 1. Community Building*

### **Developing a “Caring Community of Learners”**

According to findings from the Child Development Project (Solomon, 2004), community building is essential, and there are certain keys to developing a “caring community of learners” to ensure that positive community building is possible. First and foremost, students need to know that there are “respectful, supportive relationships among students, teachers, and parents” (p. 190). Students need to know that there is a trusting environment in which the teachers are invested in them and in their lives. Also, there is a need for “frequent opportunities to help and collaborate with others” (p.190). Students must have a place in which they are able to work together with others to develop a sense of community for themselves. Along with times of collaboration, students also need to have “frequent opportunities for autonomy and influence.” Children desire to have a place in which they can make choices for themselves and that they are given personal responsibility for their actions. The final combining glue for a caring community of learners is an “emphasis on common purposes and ideals” (Solomon, 2004, p. 190). The idea of community building is to have students feel that they are a part of something larger, and allowing students to work together to work for common

goals and ideals is the way in which teachers enable students to work together to develop community. The suggestions made in the “Child Development Project” are extremely valuable and important, but it is also just as important to understand what these different ideas may look like in the practice of creating a caring and cohesive environment that could be the bond that allows students to begin to feel the sense of community around them. This study seeks to capture a qualitative portrait of what community building looks like in practice.

### **Respectful, Supportive Relationships Between Teachers and Students**

The first idea facet to the findings of the “Child Development Project” is that, “Stable, supportive relationships with peers and adults affirm students, inspire their effort and initiative, and enable them to ask questions, venture opinions, make mistakes, reflect on experience, tackle new subjects, and otherwise do all the risk taking that true learning entails” (Solomon, 2004, p. 190). Students need to have a place in which they feel safe in order to feel comfortable testing the waters of the learning process. In a study conducted examining the importance of student voice (Bragg, 2007), findings about teacher/student relationships were gleaned. Specifically, the authors found that the relationships between students shifted as the teacher gave them access to discourses of care and mutual concern for each other rather than competition between one another. Within this context, “changing relationships between pupils and teacher ultimately became supportive” (p. 677). With this idea, one can see the impact that a caring teacher/student relationship can have on a group of students. Developing a caring and stable relationship between the



teacher and student allows for compassion and consideration to develop between the students in the classroom as well.

### **Frequent Opportunities to Collaborate with Others**

In order to develop a community within the classroom of learners, it has been suggested that these learners need to be provided with an opportunity to work together with other members of that community. It has been posited that without cooperation and collaboration, students would simply be on an island of their own within the great ocean of the classroom. “So it follows that students should have regular opportunities to collaborate with or help others—and they should be encouraged to reflect on the ins and outs and ups and downs of these interactions. They need to learn how to work well with others, and for the welfare of others, and why it feels good to do so” (Solomon, 2004, p. 190). Students who are introduced to the idea of working with one another are more capable of developing a community of learners around them because they are being given the keys to community through cooperation. Creating a family of learners begins with working together.

### **Frequent Opportunities for Autonomy and Influence**

It may seem as though the only way to really create a community is to allow the students to work together in groups. However, there is much to be said for the power of autonomy and influence in the life of a community of learners. “When students have a genuine say in the life of the classroom...then they are committed to the decisions they have been trusted to make and feel responsible for the community they have helped

shape” (Solomon, 2004, p. 190). Students need to know that they have a place of responsibility and importance within the community of the classroom. This often can manifest itself in the amount of “student voice” found in the classroom setting. “Through increasing ‘student voice’ in schools, students have the potential for contributing their opinions on a variety of levels, including sharing their views on problems and potential solutions in their schools” (Mitra, 2003, p. 289). Allowing students to have a voice within the classroom provides students with an opportunity to find a place of importance and value within the community of a classroom.

### **Emphasis on Common Purposes and Ideals**

In order to create a community of learners, there must be a common denominator or purpose to join them. This is the unifying factor that allows all members of the community to feel valued and to have joined together for an important, unified reason. “Part of being a community is having a sense of common purpose; part of feeling included and valued in a community is living by that common purpose” (Solomon, 2004, p. 190). Students who feel unified by a common goal are more likely to feel as though they are part of a community. The feeling of having an intended goal is something that gives a group a sense of purpose and therefore could allow the group to feel as though they are not just individuals, but a class with purpose.

### **A Democratic Focus**

Community is one of the main outcomes of a democratic society because it demands participation of those who are a part of it. The same can be said for democracy

within the classroom. As Benjamin Barber puts it, ‘At the heart of strong democracy is talk’ (p. 173). ‘There is simply no day in the life of a democracy when citizens can afford either to stop talking themselves or to stop others from talking to them’ (p. 193)” (Beck, 2005, p. 103). Teachers who value community within the classroom engage students in discussions about democracy and democratic values. In the context of this study, I utilize the term “democratic ideals or values” to encompass the practice that teaches students different qualities of a good citizen or member of a democracy. “Preparing students to participate in a strong democracy requires the apprenticeship of students to democratic talk” (Beck, 2005, p. 103). Students need to be introduced to the idea of democracy within a community and democracy to shape a community. The basis of this introduction is democratic discussions about community and democracy.

To summarize, community building is a practice that allows students to come together as more than just individuals. A study of the research literature about community building shows that there are some key practices that help to give students the opportunity develop community with one another. Supportive relationships, collaborative learning, autonomy, and common purpose are all ways in which teachers can effectively develop community within a group of students. This current study shows an example of the ways in which these ideas can be fostered through Small School Gatherings. This study also shows the extent to which the teacher of this Small School Gathering truly used these ideas as a framework for her group.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The following methods were used in the current study to determine the ways in which community building develops within the culture of Small School Gathering E at School A.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In order to understand the true importance of community building within the culture of a school, this study examines how the formation of community building within a small school gathering can be accomplished and beneficial. This study seeks to examine the case study of Group E to see how the influences of a caring teacher/student relationship, group activities, autonomous decisions, and common goals allowed the culture of community building to be developed within this group. Because I was a researcher in this context, I noticed the theme of community building, and consequently I desired to investigate into it further.

- How does the structure of a Small School Gathering develop based on the focus of community building?
- What instructional activities does a teacher use to foster a focus of community building in a Small School Gathering?
- How does the teacher of Group E exemplify the four components of a “Caring Community of Learners”? (Solomon, 2004)
- What is the extent to which students in this Small School Gathering are given a voice?

- How does the teacher foster a democratic focus within the context of this Small School Gathering?

## **PARTICIPANTS**

### **School A:**

School A is a K-5 elementary school located in a suburban area of central Pennsylvania. This school has 476 students. Of those 476 students 65 students are eligible for free lunch. 24 students are eligible for reduced lunch. There are 3 American Indian/Alaskan students. There are 38 Asian students. There are 11 African American students and 11 Hispanic students. Finally, there are 400 White students. Of those 476 students, 226 are male and 237 are female. This is a Title I School. The teacher population is a mostly white teaching population, but this does not match the student population. The students of the school are mostly white. There are 35 classroom teachers. The ratio between the teachers and the students is 13.4 students to one teacher.

The culture of the school is focused on service learning and developing a culture of democracy. The students are often engaged in service learning projects led by teachers or as all-school projects. Each week, there is a new citizenship theme introduced during the All School Gatherings. The teachers and staff include this theme into the working of their classrooms. Each week a student from each classroom is chosen to be recognized for embodying that citizenship theme for the week. The students are encouraged to help with projects that will enhance their school and the community surrounding their school.

**All School Gatherings:**

At School A, once a week, the students meet for a town hall meeting that the school has named “All School Gatherings.” At these meetings, the entire student body joins together in the cafeteria of the school building. There is a great emphasis on the leadership of the 5<sup>th</sup> graders in this school. Because of this, 5<sup>th</sup> grade students lead the school in this meeting that addresses issues within the school building, community service projects, and citizenship themes. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade students are asked to create skits, games, and discussions about these issues in order to inform the entire school about their latest community service and democratic endeavors. These meetings are intended to foster a sense of community cohesion within the school. These meetings also give the older students a chance to experience the responsibility of facilitating a large meeting.

**Small School Gatherings (SSG):**

The students of School A gather monthly in small groups called “Small School Gatherings” for 35 minutes. Small School Gatherings are composed of approximately fifteen students. There are two to three students from each grade level represented in these small groups. There is one teacher or staff member assigned to each group. The students meet with this teacher for 35 minutes during the school day. These groups remain the same for the duration of the child’s career at School A. At the end of each year, two to three fifth graders leave each group. The next year, two to three new Kindergarteners enter the group. For some teachers, this is an opportunity to extend the citizenship theme of the week; for others, this is a place where service learning can occur. The students are often presented with the citizenship theme for the week in a personal,

discussion-based manner. This is often accomplished through a storybook or a craft related to the theme. The teachers often facilitate a community-building activity. Some teachers have used these groups as a catalyst for service learning projects. These gatherings are seen as democratic outlets for students to voice opinions and concerns.

## **METHODS**

Of the 35 SSGs, 6 have been observed by members of a research team from the Pennsylvania State University since October of 2009. Two researchers are assigned to each SSG to take rich, contextualized notes about all of the events at each SSG. One researcher is assigned to simply capture as many quotes as possible from the SSG. These researchers are especially looking for incidents of student voice or service learning. The other researcher is dedicated to capturing the context and description of the events occurring. I was a researcher in Teacher E's SSG. At the time, I was a junior pursuing a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education at Penn State. My role as a researcher was often to take the quotation data, and my partner in the room took the contextualized data.

Teacher E, at the time, was a first year teacher at School A. She had been a Penn State student teaching intern at this school and received a job there the following fall. She was a third grade teacher in her regular classroom. She was not very sure in her abilities to lead the SSG as evidenced by her conversations with me before each of the SSGs, but she was interested in making it a place where students could enjoy themselves. Often, she would talk to me about her ideas and her hesitations. I believe this is because I was an undergraduate, and she had just graduated.

After the data was collected, each month the researchers joined together to discuss

the findings from the data. At these meetings, each pair of researchers presented a short description of what is occurring in their SSG. After each researcher explained his/her thoughts, the group looked for trends or outliers in the data collected.

Analysis:

This research was analyzed using the Constant/Comparison Method because both induction and deduction were used to process the data. According to *Introduction to Research in Education*, induction is when one observes a sample of a group and then infers from that sample what the characteristics of a larger group could be (Ary, 2010, p. 4-5). In the context of this research study, I completed a case study of Group E. I reviewed the data. Then, I looked to the data reflected in the “Child Development Project,” and I used that to shape a deductive analysis of the data. From this case study, implications for the possibilities of other Small School Gatherings were made. This is all true, but the complete definition of how this data was analyzed is more appropriately described by the definition of the Constant/Comparison Method. This method uses four distinct stages: comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and writing the theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 339). This study was analyzed in such a way that the data were categorized and then themes were identified from the analysis of the data using those categories.

## **RESULTS**

The data collected from Group E presented an interesting trend that was not found in many of the other SSGs that were studied in the larger research study. The main focus



of Group E was simply that of community building. As many of the other SSGs were developing interests in service learning projects, Group E was simply dedicated to building a community.

Teacher E developed this SSG into a place in which students came to develop a small community within the larger school community. The all-school citizenship theme for each week developed into a continual focus for this SSG. Each week, the students were simply coming to Teacher E's room to engage in conversation and develop a multi-aged community of learners.

### **A Basis for the Formation of Community**

From the first week of Group E's meetings, the focus of the group was apparent and clear. Teacher E explained to the group from day one that the purpose of this group was to have a place to talk and participate in fun activities. The students were encouraged to think of each other as a small part of the school community. The teacher allowed the students to discuss their individual classrooms and the happenings within those classrooms. The discussions were all positive, so there was never a need to establish confidentiality within the group. There was a focus on the importance of learning names and knowing each other as individuals who are a member of a bigger community. The students within this SSG knew that they would always have a place where their ideas and thoughts would be valued and appreciated. The teacher laid this foundation from the first week that the students attended the SSG.

Each week, the teacher built upon this foundation of community building by maintaining the idea of open dialogue within the group. This idea was formed from the first SSG because the teacher encouraged the students at the conclusion of this meeting to

remember who was a member of this SSG and to greet them with a smile in the hallways. The students were encouraged from the first meeting to consider each other as a small community whose primary motivation was to grow to know one another. According to the field notes from the first SSG, “The teacher tells the students that they are going to get to know one another. The teacher tells them that she doesn’t know anyone and it is her first year teaching at School A. The students then play the name game. Teacher E said it is, ‘...going to be really fun.’” Also, according to these same field notes, Teacher E also tells them that they are now getting to know one another and, “They will all have new familiar faces in the hallway.” She made clear her intent to have the students know one another so that they can interact with one another inside the SSG and outside of it, as well.

### **Instructional Activities to Foster Community Building**

Each week, Teacher E provided students with different opportunities to learn and grow as a community through activities and games focused on developing a connection with each other. The first week’s meeting was simply focused on the importance of knowing each others’ names. The teacher stressed the significance of knowing each and every child’s name and being able to identify them from that meeting to the next meeting. The students were encouraged to tell their name and remember the names of the other students in the group. The teacher also had each of the students tell what grade they were in and what their favorite subject was in school. She then showed the students the similarities between all of the different students within this one SSG. According to the field notes from the first SSG, “The teacher asks them what they have in common.” The teacher showed them that a lot of the students love reading and math. A few of the

students are in the same class. She also showed them that there is someone from every grade.” She was having each student communicate his/her own personal answers, and then she, as the teacher, compiled those ideas for them to show them that this group had a lot in common even though they were from different grades and classes. These activities used in the first SSG showed the students how important knowing one another and developing a community was going to be for Group E. She was establishing their purpose as a group in a way that made the students feel comfortable and welcome.

At the beginning of the subsequent SSGs, the teacher made sure to take time to review the names of the members of the SSG and even play a game using their names. She also took the time to go around the circle and ask the students to talk about how their week was going and what their favorite part of the week was. This gave the students some time to talk about how they were feeling and start the SSG as a part of this group. Students contributed things such as what their favorite activity of the day was or what they were going to be doing for the weekend. Teacher E would often ask the students all the same question as they came in the door and had them all answer that question to start the SSG.

At the conclusion of each SSG, Teacher E often had the students discussing what was learned during the SSG. She would frequently tell them that she was going to miss them and that she would be seeing them in the hallways until the next SSG. The act of summarizing the events during the SSG seemed to be very helpful for the students because they were able to come together as a community to summarize what they had learned and accomplished.

### **Caring Community of Learners: Teacher/Student Relationship**

Something that was always very clear and evident to me was the development of a caring relationship between the teacher and the students. Each day, as the students entered the room, the teacher was prepared with a smile to ask them to join the circle on the rug. She would greet them using their names, and asking them to tell her something positive. Each week was a different entrance question. According to the field notes from the third SSG, “Teacher E has all of the students sit in a circle on the floor and talk about why they are excited for the weekend.” Each child knew that coming to Teacher E’s classroom meant that they would be recognized and acknowledged.

Throughout the time that the students were in the SSG, the teacher was constantly working to develop relationships with the students. Often, she would create an activity in which the students would be asked to work together. At the first SSG, the students were challenged to pass a soda can around the circle without using their hands. The students had to work as a group to think of strategies and ways to pass the soda can without it dropping to the floor. The older students were thinking of the strategies and trying to show the younger students how to use those strategies. Often, these activities were ideas that required the younger children to be assisted. Teacher E was always looking to work with the younger children and to develop a relationship with these students. The importance of the way that she communicated with the students was the key to her success at creating an atmosphere of trust and of care. With many of the activities, students were asked to write or to complete something that may have been difficult for

the younger students, but the older students were encouraged to help the younger students. These activities helped to foster cross-age trust within the group and researchers could notice cross-age relationships developing.

As the students left the room each week, Teacher E always made a point of saying how much she appreciated them attending the SSG. She often would address each student by name and tell him or her to have a good time in school until the next time that she saw them. She would remind them that she would be seeing them in the hallways that she would be making a point of developing a relationship with them outside of her classroom. She extended the offer for these students to come to her room and talk to her between SSGs. According to the field notes from the second SSG, “Teacher E said that they are always welcome to stop in and visit or say hello in the hallways.” The idea of community was partially built through the caring words and actions of Teacher E.

### **Caring Community of Learners: Collaboration**

Cooperative learning was the basis of the instruction within this SSG because of the small-group nature of the meetings. Each week, the group would first meet together to talk and discuss what was going to happen during the SSG. After this time of whole-group instruction, Teacher E would instruct the students to work in pairs or small groups on all activities. These groups were hand-selected by her, and they were meant to form a more cohesive bond between the different grade levels represented in this SSG. Before the second SSG, Teacher E approached me and explained that she was going to have them work on an activity in partners. She told me that she was going to pair the older students with the younger students so that they could get to know each other.

At the SSG prior to Thanksgiving, Teacher E asked the students to create a turkey out of paper. She did not provide them with an example, and she told them that they would not be able to use scissors. This exercise was developed to help them learn to work together in pairs. Teacher E had each of the older children paired with a younger child. She was walking around the room to ensure that both the older student and the younger student were participating in this activity together as a team.

This exercise challenged the students to work together to develop a turkey as a pair without using scissors. Many of the pairings allowed for older students to mentor and shepherd the younger students. Overall, the students seemed to enjoy the activity, and they seemed to have fun while getting to know one another. A greater sense of community was gleaned from this exercise because for the first time, the students were not only asked to “get to know” one another, but they were actually encouraged, and in some cases, forced to work with one another. At the end of the activity it was evident to all who were watching that some students were better pairs than others. For example, in one of the groups, there was a first grade boy and a fifth grade girl. The fifth grade girl was doing all of the work. The only task that the boy was allowed to complete was gluing the pieces on where she told him to glue them. The older girl was controlling what the boy was allowed to do and what he was not allowed to do. These two were not working together. One was simply being told what to do by the other student. Often Teacher E would circulate the room to try to help the students work together with their partners more successfully. If she saw that there was an issue, often she would simply address it with the two students.

However, it was also evident that all students within the SSG were more knowledgeable about those around them. According to the field notes, “One of the girls shows the turkey for her group. They problem solved by drawing and outlining what they wanted. Then they ripped the paper. Everyone worked together and everyone in the group had a specific job to do.” The bond that began to form between the younger students and the older students was a direct result of this activity.

However, not all of the pairs were quite as successful in their cooperation during this activity. According to the field notes, in one of the groups, the older student was not allowing the younger students to help, and the younger student said that he felt he was, “messing up the turkey.” Some of the groups had a more difficult time adjusting to the group work, but, for the most part, judging by the reactions of the younger students while they were working with the older students, the younger students began to feel as though they had found friends in the older students. For the older students, researchers noted a sense of pride that was derived from the act of working with a younger student evidenced by the way that the older students began to offer to help the younger students even without being asked to do so. Also, often the older students would note how they helped the younger students when they were talking about their project or activity.

Through the work of collaborative thinking, for the first time, any outside observer could see that this was not just a meeting of students from all over the school. This was a group of students who were learning to become a community of friends and learners within the school. The identity of the group began to form through the clear bonds of friendship being formed. The students were more open to working with one another as the year progressed because they were becoming friends. As the year went on,

many of the students were talking about how they had spent time with each other at recess or at lunch. Friendships were growing out of this SSG.

### **Caring Community of Learners: Autonomy**

Throughout the course of the year, autonomy was the one aspect of the SSG that was not quite as visible but still merits a theme because its absence made it more obvious as a necessity. This SSG was mostly focused on collaboration and decisions made by the teacher for that collaboration. However, the teacher did not provide many times when the students were working for themselves or speaking for themselves on an issue. A key component to autonomous learners is student voice. Student voice, as discussed in an article entitled, “Sound, Presence, and Power: Student Voice in Education Research and Reform” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 362), is, “having a legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/or having an active role.” In other words, student voice is allowing students to speak up and actually be heard, showing them that they have legitimate and worthwhile opinions. Within the context of this research study, the teacher gave the students small amounts of this, in what I will call “teacher-led student voice.”

There were a few instances where the teacher provided the group with choices. The most common choice was whether she needed to pair them or if they thought they could pair themselves. This type of student voice appears to be an instance of allowing the students to speak for themselves. However, often student voice was nuanced by other factors that mediated it being truly a chance for students to impact decisions. Often, Teacher E would preface the question with a statement that would lead the students to the



answer that she desired. Many times, Teacher E would tell the students what she thought about the subject or about the decision that they were about to make in order to ensure that the students would answer the question in a way that would satisfy what she wanted. During the fifth SSG, Teacher E gave the students the choice of writing a letter to their best friend or making a keychain for that person. However, as she began to put it to a vote, she began pushing the idea of the letter. Teacher E provided an example of a letter she wrote to her best friend, but she did not provide any examples of the keychain. She simply explained the directions for making a keychain. She also talked about how the letter would be a great idea to send to a friend in the class or at another school, but she did not mention the positives of making the keychain. In the end the majority of the students changed their votes from the keychain to the letter idea because of this.

One illustrative instance of student influence was when Teacher E posed the question to the students, “What is your favorite thing that we have done in our Small School Gathering?” The students all considered the question for a few minutes. They then began to respond. Many of them really enjoyed some of the games that they had played at the end of the SSGs in the past. The teacher was asking these students what they thought they would like to do again in the SSG and what they would not like to do again. This seemed to be a true moment of student voice and influence in this SSG because Teacher E was allowing the students to guide and direct the future of their SSG. According to the field notes Teacher E said, “Is there anything that you hoped we could do in the future? We only have two SSGs left. I want you to give me ideas for what we want to do.”

However, in the end, Teacher E never followed through with these responses. She asked the students for their opinions frequently, but those opinions – for whatever reasons -- seemed to almost fall on deaf ears. Many times she would take their opinions and find a way to make them fit into her own. It was almost as if, because she was a new teacher, this was a new idea to her. In a teacher interview with Teacher E, she said, “...because it was helpful for me to have a focus, especially since it was my first year teaching.” Focus and structure was something that was very important to her, and it was difficult for her to give over some of the planning responsibilities to her students. Giving over control of the flow and sequence of the SSGs was something that she did not seem to be comfortable with, but she still thought it would be a good idea. At the following SSG, the students never did any of the games or ideas that they suggested.

Also, one of the students suggested that they have a party for the fifth graders who would be graduating from Park Forest. This is something that Teacher E seemed extremely excited about, but in the end she simply followed the suggested plans for the final SSG, and the students never had the party. This is why I define the basis for the autonomy in this group as teacher-directed student voice. The teacher’s reactions to students’ opinions seemed to make them feel valued at the time, but the lack of follow through also seemed to send a message to the students that they were not respected or even heard. The students were given a voice, but the ultimate say still resided with the teacher.

### **Caring Community of Learners: Common Purpose or Ideals**

Group E had a very clear common purpose, to develop a community. Teacher E asked at the beginning of each meeting about what was the citizenship theme of the week was. The students could expect that the activity for the day would be centered around this idea. In order to develop that community, Teacher E used the common ideals of the school to serve as the framework. According to the school's website,

School A is dedicated to the historic purpose of schooling: preparing young people to participate thoughtfully and actively in our democratic society. Our practices are based on the principle that the role of education in a democracy is to sensitize young people to the delicate balance between individual growth and community responsibility.

Each meeting was focused around the citizenship theme for the week. Teacher E chose to focus her SSG on this topic, but not all of the SSGs were focused on the citizenship theme. The students were asked each week to remember what the citizenship theme was, and then the teacher used that theme to develop an activity for the students.

One week in particular, the citizenship theme was friendship. Teacher E took ideas from the group about what they thought made a good friend. She collected their thoughts on the board. She then explained to them that she felt that trustworthiness was the most important quality of a good friend. She provided the directions for the activity. The students were going to make a chain of trust. Each student was asked to write a quality of a good friend on the slip of paper, and then Teacher E was going to connect all of those slips of paper to create a chain of trust. Teacher E used the common ideal of the school of friendship to build a community of friends within this SSG. She talked to them

about the importance of being a good friend and helped them to verbalize that to create a friendship chain of trust.

Teacher E used the school's unifying mission to become the unifying factor of her group. As she had expressed to me many times, she was a new teacher in the school and quite nervous about creating a "good" SSG. In a teacher interview with Teacher E, she said, "and also I really did focus on those citizenship things because it gave me a good focus." She seemed comfortable with the idea of using the school's mission as the focus for her group because it seemed logical. She told me that she was able to develop activities to go along with the theme, and she felt that that was a good focus for the group. Also, sample lesson plans for these groups were provided to the teachers, and these sample lesson plans used the citizenship theme as the focus of the lesson. Teacher E urged the students to delve deeply into the ideas of the school to help to bring her SSG together as a small community. This teacher simply chose to maintain the mission of the school on a smaller scale.

### **Democratic Focus**

The overarching theme of School A is democracy. The principal of School A is widely known for her extensive work to develop democracy within the everyday workings of the school. The purpose for these SSGs was to give the teachers a time and a place to incorporate the democratic ideas of the school through activities or even service learning projects. This SSG did not take that route, but that does not mean that there were not democratic principles being taught. Teacher E did use the democratic idea of public talk with the students as she provided a place for them in which they could discuss

their ideas and speak to a topic such as friendship. Also, she fostered the idea of consensus-building within the group because she did allow the students to work together to form generalized conclusions about discussion topics.

Through this idea of democratic talk, Teacher E was encouraging the students in her classroom to become students who are productive members of society. According to Westheimer and Kahne's article entitled, "What Kind of Citizen," which discusses a large research study that classifies various types of citizens promoted in schools, the students in this SSG were being guided to become "Personally Responsible Citizens" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240). According to this article, the core assumption about "Personally Responsible Citizens" is "To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240). Teacher E accomplished this through her focus on the citizenship themes and by encouraging talk within the setting of the SSG.

However, by only allowing for students to advance to the first level of citizens, she was limiting them from many possibilities. Service learning within the context of this SSG could have allowed the students to move past simply being a "Personally Responsible Citizen" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240). Teacher E did not introduce her students to the idea of service learning within the SSG, so therefore, these students were not able to become "Justice-Oriented" or "Participatory" citizens (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240). In the interview with Teacher E, she said, "I think as far as Service Learning is concerned, I like the concept of it and the idea of it. I'm not ready to necessarily use it ..." Within the context of this interview, it seemed as though Teacher

E felt that a large project such as a service learning project was more than she could accomplish as a new teacher in a new teaching situation such as an SSG.

In the four ways I have described, this SSG was focused upon developing a community. This community was a democratic community in that there was a constant focus on the importance of communication and dialogue. These are important skills to be encouraged in order to build a democratic community of learners. This was a forum for students to talk about the citizenship theme of the school in a way that made sense to them.

Thus, I want to point out that the democratic focus of this group was one of conversation and dialogue. Teacher E was very focused on the ways in which she could clearly explain and demonstrate the citizenship themes to the students who were members of her SSG. Each week she developed strategies, read-alouds, and activities to help her students process the importance of understanding why one should be trustworthy or hardworking. Using these themes as a basis for her SSG was her way of developing a community of students who were knowledgeable about how to be an informed member of a community.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This case study of an SSG provides a clearer picture of the ways in which community can be developed through a small group facilitated by a caring teacher. Teacher E used strategies in which she was guiding and directing students in the ways of developing a community. She was focusing their conversations on the citizenship theme of the week and creating activities that encouraged the students to work together to develop a community. It seems obvious that a small group would set the stage for

community building within this school. However, often, small groups are places that are undemocratic and are sources of bullying. Because of the ways that the teacher and the school constructed and supported this SSG, it became a place of effective community building. These students were joined together and are able to spend time in community with others.

### **What are the Implications of Community Building Within this SSG?**

The process I have described, of developing a community within this SSG, is something that shows the importance of small groups within the larger community of a school. The students within this SSG were able to join together and develop a community simply because they were chosen to be a small group. These students may not have otherwise been friends or even acquaintances across ages within the school community, but the development of small groups within the larger school of School A allowed these students to feel as though they could form a community. The relationships that were formed between the students and the teacher show the value of creating small groups within the larger school community.

The value of developing a smaller community within the context of a school is revealed in this case study. Students within this SSG felt as though the teacher was someone who cared about them and wanted to develop a relationship with them. As time went on during the year, many of the students within the group became more willing to discuss personal ideas with Teacher E, and the students talked about how they had talked with Teacher E between SSGs as well. The teacher developed an atmosphere in which the students felt as though they were members of a small community within in a

larger school. The multi-aged aspect of this group unified them because the younger students were looking to the older students as mentors, and the older students saw themselves as examples for the younger students. During an activity in which the students had to write ways that they could be brave like Ruby Bridges, the students were not assigned to groups or to pairs, but the older students simply naturally began helping the younger students write their ideas. Teacher E emphasized the importance of the impact of older students on younger students.

### **What is the Importance of Creating a Caring Community of Learners?**

From this study of Group E, one is able to see how students can be affected by a caring community of learners. Most of these students mentioned the fact that they really enjoyed SSGs because they were able to be a part of a small group in the school. At the sixth SSG, the students had a visitor to the group. They were asked to describe SSGs to the visitor. One of the students said, “It is a thing we do once a month. Our school breaks up into smaller groups, instead of a big assembly, so that we can meet other people. We do it instead of being in the All School Gatherings where we just listen and don’t do anything.” It is true that students each week were part of an ASG, and they were introduced to the idea of an all-school community, but these students found more value in the SSG than the ASG. There were a few instances where the students asked Teacher E if they could meet more than once a month. They said that they liked the SSG more than the ASG. As the student stated above, the students who were not involved in facilitating the ASG felt as though those meetings were boring because they just had to sit there and not do anything. This shows that students found value in a caring community of



learners. Students saw that there is an importance within the intimacy that only comes from small group settings, in which these four aspects are present.

As is seen from the students within this SSG, there was value in the relationship of a teacher and the student within a small group setting. It is as if students can feel the validity of the concern of a teacher when that teacher allows him/herself to be real and open with the students. This idea was seen with Teacher E because she always made herself open to the students. The relationship that was developed was one of care and concern because she developed that relationship with each student through her language. She made a point to connect with them not only in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom.

The importance of collaboration within a small group to develop a caring community of learners was seen in this SSG, and it has implications for the value of collaborative learning in small group settings that are multi-aged. The students in this group felt a unity and a bond because they were working as peers with students who may have been younger or older than them. The bonds of friendship and mentorship that were formed between the youngest students and the oldest students show the true value of allowing students to work in collaborative multi-aged settings.

The noticeable lack of autonomy in this group reveals its importance. It could be observed that students felt unheard or were discouraged when Teacher E asked for their opinions and then that opinion was not used. To me, the students appeared to be very discouraged each time their ideas were not heard, and very hurt when the teacher did not follow through with student voice she had given them. This does not mean that the teacher did not value their opinions; it just means that it appeared to the students and to

the observer that she did not. Teachers have important roles in the development of community, but there is something to be said for the power of development of community through the leadership of students within the potential community. The community of this SSG might have developed even more quickly or more deeply had the students been given a chance to give voice to their community. It is true that the students were being heard through dialogue and conversation, but the activities were never led by any of their thoughts or ideas.

The unity of this community of learners through common themes and ideals shows that there is great importance on the ways in which groups unify themselves. The cohesion of a group can hinge upon the glue that binds it. The glue that bound this group together was the citizenship themes of the school that allowed for deep and intimate conversation to be developed. There is definite power in the binding glue of common ideals in the development and formation of a cohesive community.

### **A Need for Community**

Students of School A in this SSG had a small community within a larger community of the school. They were given a caring environment in which they were able to develop friendships and relationships with fellow students and a teacher. They were joined together in collaborative activities to form the community that would allow them to discuss and deliberate topics that would allow them to become better members of the larger community—the school.

This case study brings to light an underappreciated value and job of schooling: to allow students to become productive and collaborative members of society through the

development of community. This subject is not tested on the latest version of the standardized test, but that does not devalue the necessity of community building within a school or a classroom.

This group shows the real value of a time set aside for this very idea. SSGs provided an environment in which students were able to start fresh and develop community from the ground up. With the help of the teacher, students of different ages were able to join together to create a smaller community within their school. They were able to identify with the similarities and differences that they all shared to find a place of unity within the context of their school.

There is something to be said for the possible positive implications that SSGs could have within a school if they were used for the simple purpose of community building especially when student voice is present. Students of all grades and of all ages would be joined together and bonded within these different classrooms to become one school community. The students of School A in Group E had the chance to experience the benefits of a unified group of students simply by joining to become a group and a community.

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Isaac Sheppard Elementary School – Philadelphia, PA	January 2011-Present
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Young Citizens Engaged Research Study	September 2009-Present
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Urban Hope Training Center	January 2011-Present
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Friendship Tutoring Program-State College, PA	September 2007-December 2009
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