


## CHAPTER 2

# Creating Democratic Communities



**A**s you think about creating a classroom environment, take a moment to consider what it will feel like—not what it will look like physically but how it will feel. How would you like students to feel when they think about going to school? How would you like them to feel when they get there? Why do you want them to feel that way? What kind of environment would best support these feelings?

Nel Noddings (1995b) believes that we want students to feel cared about when they come to school—that teachers care not only about them as students but about all aspects of their lives:

Caring is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling that make people kind and likable. Caring implies a continuous search for competence. We want to do our very best for the objects of our care. To have as our educational goal the production of caring, competent, loving, lovable people is not anti-intellectual; it demonstrates respect for the full range of human talents. Not all human beings are good at or interested in math, science, or literature. But all can be helped to lead lives of deep concern for others, for the natural world and its creatures, and for the preservation of the human-made world. All can be led to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to make positive contributions, regardless of their occupation. (p. 1)

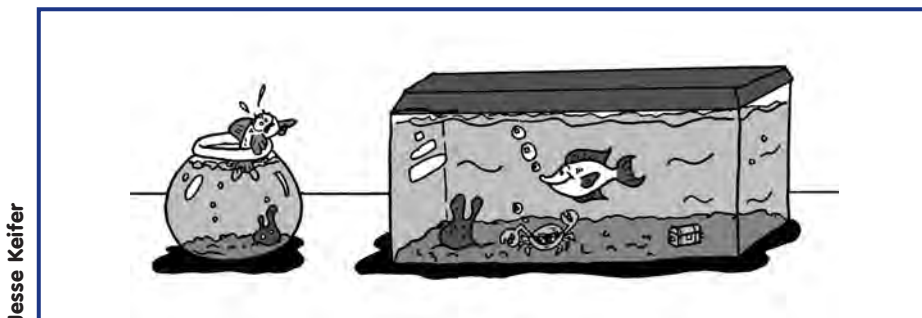
When we care about students, we know them in deep ways. We care about their talents, even if they lie outside of the school curriculum. We care about their circumstances, their needs, their goals, and their futures. In other words, we care enough about them to know what they have experienced, who they are, and what they want to become. To know students in this way, we must create an environment in which they can access autonomy, belonging, and competency and care about themselves and others.

Educators want motivated, well-behaved, and caring students. We expect them to care about their grades and topics in class. Yet we often we create environments where it is difficult for them to care about anything (Kohn, 1996). New teachers are told not to smile for the first few months of the school year so they don't give up too much control. Children are expected to like reading but have no opportunity to read something that interests them. Students learn to walk down the hall in straight, quiet lines—perhaps not because they care about the people learning in other classrooms but because the teacher said so. What do those things feel like? Is caring a part of the above processes? According to Noddings, “We have to show in our own behavior what it means to care. Thus we do not merely tell our students to care and give them texts to read on the subject; we demonstrate our caring in our relations with them” (1995a, p. 190). How will your classroom environment promote caring about autonomy (self), belonging (others), and competency (curriculum)? See box below.

### Reflections on Caring Teachers

Write about a teacher who cared about you. What did he or she do to get to care about you? Why do you think he or she did these things? What happened as a result?

You may be thinking, “How do I care about *all* of them? Do I need to come up with a management plan for *each* and every student? Yikes!” Once again, we have come to a paradox. How can we create a single environment for a classroom of students that is individualized enough to meet their needs? How can one teacher care deeply about a whole class? The answer may lie in the water (i.e., the classroom environment) that we create for the fish (i.e., the students). The metaphor from Chapter 1 about fixing the water and not the fish is central to the ideas in this chapter as well. We cannot change what happens to children outside of school, but we can change their inside-school environment (Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004).



Jesse Keifer

**Our goal as teachers should be creating an environment where children want to be and learn.**

We do not want to change who students are but rather help them reach their full potential. Chapter 1 discussed students' need for autonomy, belonging, and competency; however, these needs will not magically appear. We cannot have just any old water (i.e., classroom) sustaining their needs. As teachers, it is our job to work with students to create a caring environment for all of us who spend time there. If we want students to reap the benefits of autonomy, belonging, and competency, we must consciously create places where these needs are nurtured and where students nurture others.

By the end of this chapter, I hope you have:

- Ideas about how to deeply know your students and how to use that knowledge
- An understanding about and strategies for creating a **democratic classroom**
- An understanding of and strategies for creating classroom communities that nurture individual students

## Knowing Students



For material related to this concept, go to Clip 2.1 on the Web-based Student Study Site.

Bronfenbrenner (1991) said, “Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her” (p. 2). To care (or be crazy) about students, you must know them. Knowing someone—and in many classrooms around 28 someones—is not an easy task, yet it is vital to classroom management and the world in which we live. Caring about and knowing the students in your room doesn’t mean keeping track of everything about their lives. It means opening the environment and yourself so you can know each other when the opportunity arises.

Children come to school with a variety of experiences, ideas, and values that influence how and what they learn. Right now I could list statistics about how many students live in poverty, how many come to school from abusive homes, and how many experience depression, but they would just be numbers to you—important numbers, but just numbers nevertheless. Along with the pressured children who are not poor and the children whom teachers and schools ignore because they are “just fine,” those numbers leave out what is really happening to children. You don’t need these statistics to help you create a classroom environment where autonomy, belonging, and competency thrive. You need to know and care about the children in your classroom. You need to know that Sonya sucks her thumb in class because her mom agreed to put her in a foster home instead of leaving her husband who sexually abused Sonya. You need to know that Derek’s mom works nights and that might be why Derek is late for school every day. You need to know that Michael steals from other children because his family often steals to get what it needs. You need to know the whole story rather than just the behaviors that accompany them. “Once you have the knowledge about the children—once you really see what they care about—then you can do a great deal for them” (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, & Dutton, 2000, p. 122).

**LETTER FROM A MASTER TEACHER 2.1****Democratic Communities Require Acknowledgment  
of Every Child's Effort and Contributions**

It was my first class as a teacher. Those bright, shining faces were looking up at me, waiting to learn. Wait, what was that? Who was sitting in the trashcan? How did he somersault himself onto the wall? How could he possibly get nothing done all day? I didn't know a notebook of paper could get cut into so many pieces in such a short amount of time. Was there a point in the day that he ever sat still? I always thought that bouncing off the walls was a metaphor, but not for this child.

As the months went on, however, I got to see him as a person, not just his behavior. He knew more about animals and aquatic life than anyone else I know. He could add and subtract like crazy in his head. He just couldn't get it down on paper, and when I went to fill out his report card, it looked like he wasn't very successful at school. By the standards set by the state and the district, he was a struggling student. I knew he was incredibly smart, but I had nothing that could prove that to him or his parents.

I then knew that I had to do something. I couldn't let students pass through my classroom without letting them know that they were special and unique and had something to offer. I wanted them to know that they counted.

As soon as I started highlighting this student's achievements and celebrating his strengths, asking him to help other students when it came to his knowledge in animals, I began to see a change. He started to work on the things that he wouldn't even try before. Students began to treat him as part of our class instead of a huge disruption.

When this student began to feel important, he began to behave like he was important. He no longer had to gain attention through other avenues. The students began to work as a team to help each other. It was amazing to see what could happen when the students knew that their efforts were meaningful. This student's grades never got to where they should have been, his report card wasn't perfect, but I hope he and the other students left my room knowing that he counted.

I hope you will let students know that their effort matters—that while their grades might not be perfect or they might not be the best athlete, a drama star, or a musical wonder, they still have something to offer. I hope every student who walks through your door will learn to feel successful as a person.

—April Broderson  
First-Grade Teacher

## What Does Knowing Students Mean?

You may think this section is a no-brainer. Of course we need to know our students. As you begin to unravel what it means to know students, however, it becomes more complex than just knowing their names and perhaps their interests. Knowing students is not just about the surface-level information that comes from being together for some time; rather, it involves a constant, conscious effort to figure out why they do what they do both academically and socially, working with them to figure out what they need in their environment to move forward, and celebrating who they are and as they grow. Knowing students at a deep level can have a huge impact on their lives even though it may not seem so at the time.

### *Case Study 1: Chris*

Chris was a student of mine who, in second grade, struggled to read. Funny, hardworking, and friendly, he was not a behavior problem and was well liked by his classmates. I knew, though, that if his reading struggles continued, his need for competency would erode his attitude. I cared about Chris and his struggles to read.

Sometimes, as teachers, we try to solve problems without really knowing why they exist. Asking a “why” question can help save time, ease frustration, and help us truly solve a problem. In Chris’s case, I listened to him read, asked him what he thought about his reading, and asked some of his past teachers what they thought. I knew Chris struggled with fluency. He could decode the words, but it took him so long to read a sentence that he forgot what he was reading. Finally, I talked to his parents, and we decided that Chris’s eyesight had not been checked in a while—one bit of information we didn’t have. Chris’s parents had his eyesight checked and discovered that one of his eye muscles contained a small stutter. In other words, Chris’s eye moved slightly back and forth, causing blurry vision. Reading fluently or smoothly would be fairly difficult if your eye moved back and forth. Chris did exercises to help his eye, and we continued to work on reading together.

Let’s take a moment to analyze this story. How did I get to know Chris? What did I do first? Who was involved in this process? What do you think would have happened if I had not gotten to know Chris? Indeed, Chris’s story turned out to have a “happy ending.” Knowing someone is not necessarily about fixing him or her; sometimes the solution is beyond our capabilities. Knowing someone is about caring enough to wonder and reflect, think through all of the possibilities, and create an environment where children open up to you. Chris felt safe enough to read aloud to me and was able to choose both appropriate and interesting books. I welcomed other teachers’ and his parents’ help in getting to know Chris better. He wasn’t pulled into another room to work on reading.

### *Case Study 2: Emzie*

At times, teachers encounter children who are not easy to care about. Their behavioral issues may get in the way of knowing them. Although caring is tough in these situations, it is important that we find support and work to know these students as well. Emzie, a child I will never forget, was from Nigeria. Bigger than the other children in my fourth-fifth combination room, he spoke English, though not very well, and loved to draw superhero cartoons. He was

very quiet in our classroom and didn't always smell very good. Emzie often punched his classmates at recess as they played soccer. No matter how I asked or how much time I gave him, Emzie only shrugged his shoulders when asked why he behaved this way. The other children who played soccer and I talked together with Emzie about what was happening. I tried assigning a peer to help him on the playground, but nothing seemed to work. One day after school, I noticed Emzie's mother picking him up. I ran out to meet her and invited her to the classroom for a moment. She accepted, and I told her that Emzie was fighting on the playground. Was there anything we could do to help him? She proceeded to punch Emzie with a closed fist right in front of me. Emzie cowered behind me, and I told his mother to stop. I told her that everything would be OK and that she need not be upset with him, and they left. I called Social Services, which got involved for a while, until Emzie and his family moved the next month. On his last day before they moved, he was late, and I panicked that we would not get to say goodbye. However, he came late because he had waited until the stores opened to get me a present—a purse that I know his family couldn't afford. I know he felt cared about and often wonder what happened to him.

Emzie's story does not have a happy ending, at least that I know about. So why did I choose to tell it? Sometimes knowing students happens by chance. In this case, Emzie was never going to tell me that he hit because he was hit. He probably didn't realize it. However, that piece of information was crucial for me to know Emzie. As a teacher, you must be open to the information that comes your way. Emzie's story also highlights the fact that we often live and know from our experiences and our cultures. I do not believe that Emzie's mom was abusing him. In her culture, hitting may be what happens to students in trouble at school. That doesn't mean I let it continue, but it helped me understand and begin to know where to go and what to do. Knowing a student takes time, and though in Emzie's case I didn't have enough, I continue to learn from him even to this day, and he has helped me know other students along the way.

## What Knowing Students Does Not Mean

*First, knowing students so you can care about them does not mean you are the only one who cares.* Classrooms need to be designed so the students can care about each other. Students need opportunities to get to know each other academically and socially. This means working on juicy problems together, helping each other when needed, and understanding that everyone has stars and wishes (things they do well and things they want to do better). This means they must have opportunities to talk to each other and celebrate each other's accomplishments.

*Second, you have to live in the “water” too.* Your values, ideas, and needs are just as valid as those of any other member of the class. Let the students know you. Tell them what you worry about. Tell them when you feel sick, and let them care of you. Ask them for help on a management problem. For example, “The teacher next door says we are too noisy. I don't know what to do. How can we solve this problem?” Classrooms need not be about perfect people and behaviors but rather about knowing each other well enough to help each other become better each day.

*Third, knowing students doesn't mean letting them get away with unacceptable behaviors.* This is not about poor Emzie, whose mother hits him, so we are just going to let everything slide. If you lower your expectations because of students' past experiences, you are not helping them gain autonomy, belonging, or competency. On the other hand, punishing them for actions that may need more diverse solutions is not acceptable either. Knowing children is not about justification but about understanding and then smart problem solving. I would certainly be able to fix my computer (which, by the way, hasn't caused me any fits yet) if I knew more about it.

Speaking of fixing, *knowing students is not about fixing them.* Computers can be fixed, problems can be solved, but students can't be fixed either. Knowing students needs to involve helping them learn about interesting topics, themselves, why they do what they do, and caring for others. Only students can change their own behaviors. You can't. If you know them, however, you can create an environment where they have the tools and strategies to do so.

*Finally, knowing students is not about getting them to the next grade level.* Knowing students means learning about their whole lives, not just caring enough to teach them fractions so they can pass fourth grade. You must know the students so they will be good citizens, have happy lives, and continue to learn. If you help them do that, they will succeed in fourth grade.



**Mr. Johnson listens carefully to a student share her ideas.**

## Why Do You Need to Know Your Students?

*Knowing your students deeply will help you develop an environment, lessons, and assessment tools that will help them become competent.* We do not learn from present experiences alone but instead through connecting past, present, and future experiences. Jensen (2005) reports that the frontal lobes of our brains hold new data in short-term memory for only 5 to 20 seconds. Irrelevant, trivial, or not compelling enough, most of the new data are thrown out and never get stored. In other words, if we want students to learn a particular idea or concept, it must be relevant and compelling and connect to something else they know or want to know. It is much easier to help students make connections if you know them.

In Chapter 1, Dewey's (1933) idea of continuity was highlighted as integral to the connections between your past experiences with classroom management and your future actions. "An everyday **inquirer** draws on her past experiences and knowledge in order to make sense of a problematic present situation" (Schutz, 2001, p. 270). Dewey was convinced that understanding something involves seeing how it connects with other things and events (Schutz). Knowing students helps us begin to scaffold lessons for them. For example, think about all of the skills necessary for learning measurement. One must understand that the units of measurement should be the same, what the different standardized units of measurement are, and when to use different units of measurement. Knowing your students will help you determine what kinds of lessons to create. Stiggins (2005) calls this assessment *for learning*.

When issues exist and a child is having difficulty learning a concept or struggling with competency, you need to know him or her well enough either to find out why he or she is struggling or to find different ways to help him or her learn. I once had a student who could not spell words for spelling tests correctly when writing them on paper. Together, we discovered that she could spell them if she said them aloud. She had been practicing her words with her mother in the car every morning and did not write them down. She took the tests verbally until we figured out how to use her effective strategy for spelling through a different medium. Students learn in many different ways, and we need to realize and use them.

*We also need to know students for social and emotional reasons.* Sometimes we treat young people as subhuman. I, for example, complain to my mom that my 4-year-old son is awful on particular days, and she says, "Well, you have grouchy days too. Give him a break." Just as I expect my son to always be happy and energetic, we often expect our students to come to class each day with attitudes fit for learning. If you think about it, though, students' out-of-class experiences affect them just as ours do. They have grouchy days for no reason apparent to us. How would you want to be treated if you had a bad morning and walked into a classroom? Indeed, we cannot make our classrooms places where students don't have to learn if they had a bad morning. We can, however, create environments where we all care, wonder, and understand.



## How Can I Get to Know My Students?



There are certainly many different ways to get to know students. You will probably come up with better ones than I did. After you read my suggestions, brainstorm for some more. One way to spark your brainstorm is to look back at the piece you wrote about a teacher who cared about you. How did that teacher get to know you? Why did he or she care? How did you know that he or she cared?

The main thing to remember about getting to know students is that it is important. Time getting to know students is time well spent. Many of these same ideas will be fleshed out in later chapters in ways that will help you plan and implement them; however, it is important to see these strategies as learning tools as well as ways to know students.

Be a researcher who collects many kinds of data.

- Collect data about what children do and do not understand. This can be as sophisticated as a pretest, a journal entry, or filling out a KWL (Know-Want to Know-Learned) chart together. It can be as simple as asking students to show you with a finger scale how comfortable they are with the material (one finger indicates struggling; five indicate the students have got it).
- Assess students using many different formats. For example, have them draw pictures, write stories, make concept maps, do skits, do projects, make posters, develop their own tests, and verbally explain what they know to show what they understand about a concept.
- Take pictures (with permission from parents) of happenings in your classroom. Pictures are powerful evidence of learning and growing, as well as a fun way to get to know students. Sometimes, let the students have the camera.
- Write down students' verbal statements and questions in class (I did this on a computer whenever I had a chance, and then student quotes became evidence of learning on their report cards).
- Take class surveys and share the results with the class. For example, 10 out of 28 children think they understand division well enough to teach it to others, 5 out of 28 think they need a lot of help with division, and 13 out of 28 think they understand division but need more practice.
- A **portfolio** is a great way to know students. Unfortunately, portfolios take a lot of time. I suggest letting the children keep track of their portfolios. Have them decide what pieces go in and how they will look.

Ask and then listen.

- Sometimes we try to know children without talking to them. Instead of jumping to conclusions or making assumptions, we should just ask students what they think or are going through (Noddings, 1992).

- We need to have conversations with children and not interrogations. This applies to both social and academic interactions. Instead of asking children what answer they got to see if they are right or wrong, ask them because you really want to know their perspective. Instead of asking them why they fought on the playground so you can punish them, ask so you can help them solve their problem.
- Get in on the conversations about juicy problems. Pull up a chair while children are working and wonder with them or just listen to their conversations. “Teachers can create an ethos of caring in the classroom by engaging in ongoing, frequent conversations with their students” (Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004, p. 17).
- Sometimes, sit at the lunch table with children.
- Sometimes, sit at groups of tables or desks and purposefully get off the subject . . . just for a minute.
- When you see students outside of class, stop and talk to them, even if you’re in a hurry.

Think outside the box.

- Open your mind to new ideas. Sometimes the craziest ideas work. I have heard of teachers putting stationary bikes in their rooms for children to peddle while they read because sitting still wasn’t working. I also know a father/teacher who is studying different diets for his young son who has been diagnosed with **ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder)**.

Ask others to think outside the box with you.

Let students have choices.

- You can learn a lot about students from their choices of books, science topics, whom to work with, and materials. Having many choices around the room will help you know your students immensely.
- Schedule times during the day where students choose what they will do. **Plan-do-review** is one great **thinking routine** that will allow for a lot of choice (Williams, 2004).
- Let students pick appropriate music to play during work time.

Create opportunities to get to know children all year, not just in the beginning.

- Have opening-circle time each day where you ask students to answer the same question—for example, what they like to do best when it snows. You could also ask them something about learning, such as what they remember about insects.

- Sometimes, take your whole class to the playground when no one else is there and play a game with the whole class.
- Create writing or other projects that help you learn more about the students.

Know your students' parents or caregivers.

- Invite parents and caregivers to the classroom often. Invite them to plays, to science fair activities, or to the classroom for a special activity. I invited parents to see the projects their children made for our human body unit. We set it up fair style, and they wandered the room looking at all the projects. I just chatted with them.
- Ask parents with all kinds of special talents to visit your room and teach children. I invited seamstresses to teach any children who wanted to know how to sew. I invited a father, a chemical engineer, to show the students what happens when different chemicals are mixed. Sometimes, parents just wanted to help in the classroom whenever they were available, and I didn't require them to call ahead of time.

Let your students know you.

- Share your life with your students. Show them pictures of your children or dog. Tell them you are moving or getting married, and so on. Let them celebrate with you.
- Commiserate with them about problems you have experienced. For example, I always told children whose parents were getting divorced that my parents were divorced.

There are many, many ways to know students. These are just a few to get your mind going. Before you begin reading the next section, review my suggestions as well as your own ideas for getting to know students. If you categorized them, what themes would emerge? What do they have in common?

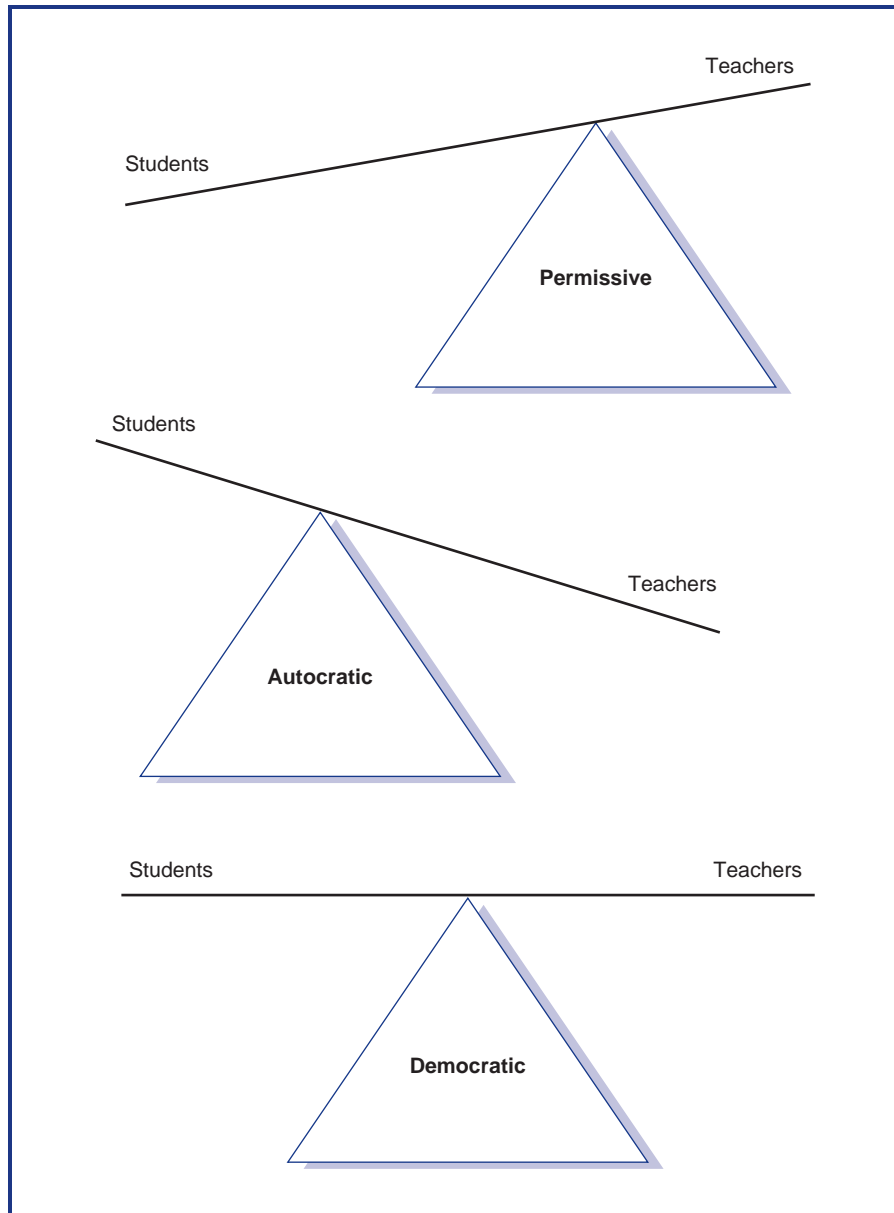
## What Is a Democratic Classroom?

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### Three Kinds of Classrooms

For me, the strategies above all relate to how a classroom environment is balanced. There are basically three kinds of classroom environments, and the differences have to do with the balance of power and control.

As the diagrams in Figure 2.1 show, two of the environments are unbalanced (the **autocratic environment** and the **permissive environment**), and one is relatively balanced (the **democratic environment**). The differences in management among them are striking. “An autocratic teacher is one who lays down the law in the classroom, feels a strong need to



**FIGURE 2.1** Kinds of Environments

These three diagrams show the different levels of control students and teachers have in three different environments including permissive, autocratic, and democratic environments.

be always in charge, and doles out harsh consequences when rules are broken” (Charles, 1999, p.44). On the other hand, “A permissive teacher is one who fails to insist that students comply with reasonable expectations. Permissive teachers do not help students realize that freedom must be linked to responsibility” (Charles, 1999, p. 45). Before we discuss democratic classrooms, let’s think about how autocratic and permissive classrooms look, sound, and feel (see Table 2.1).

In addition, think about how you would get to know your students in autocratic and permissive classrooms. Would the strategies for getting to know students work in autocratic and permissive classrooms? Would students have opportunities to gain autonomy, belonging, and competency in these environments?

I suppose I should spend more time on autocratic and permissive classroom environments, but I think we all know what those are like. Think back to a classroom you would label autocratic. What do you remember? I remember my fifth-grade math teacher held “question time” right after every lecture, and we were not allowed to ask any questions outside this window of time. Even as a fifth grader, I didn’t know what questions I had until I started to work on the problems. Autocratic environments have rigid rules with no flexibility for individual needs.

**TABLE 2.1 Autocratic and Permissive Classroom Environments**

In autocratic or permissive classrooms, you might see, hear, and feel such things as these.

	<b>Autocratic</b>	<b>Permissive</b>	<b>Democratic</b>
Looks Like	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students sitting in rows</li> <li>• Teacher at the front of the room</li> <li>• Behavior charts on the wall</li> <li>• Lots of rewards and punishments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students all around the room</li> <li>• Teacher at his or her desk or nowhere to be found</li> <li>• No sign of any structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students working on projects with support from teacher</li> <li>• Structures that promote cooperation and learning</li> </ul>
Sounds Like	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very quiet with only teacher talking</li> <li>• Teacher making all decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Noisy</li> <li>• Each student talking about whatever he or she wants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Productive noise</li> <li>• Students and teacher solving problems together</li> </ul>
Feels Like	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No control</li> <li>• Stressful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No control</li> <li>• Boring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-control</li> <li>• Interesting</li> <li>• Safe</li> </ul>

We've all been in permissive classrooms as well. What do you remember about a permissive classroom? I remember my sixth-grade music teacher really just wanted us to like her. She tried to make lessons fun, yet they had no purpose. She didn't really care what we did as long as we were doing something. Permissive environments don't promote mutual respect and learning but force children to find their own way.

I could spend more time on these kinds of classrooms, but I would rather use this book to discuss classroom environments that you may not have experienced and that we desperately need: democratic classrooms.

### What Does Having a Democratic Classroom Mean?

I once visited a truly democratic school. Children and teachers worked together to make everything work—and I mean everything. The children made decisions about lunch based on the food pyramid, served each other, and cleaned up after each other. The students made the phone calls when they wanted to set up a field trip, helped each other understand concepts, and made sure everyone participated in discussions. They cared about their school and each other. Teachers in this school helped students make decisions by asking them questions, wondering aloud, and creating a rich learning environment full of materials, juicy problems, and plenty of student-teacher interaction. Considering the main ingredients in this democratic school, I think of a cause larger than self, shared decision making and responsibility, voice, choice, and shared values.

*In democratic classrooms, there is a cause larger than self* (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 1998). I like this definition because it encompasses many of the things that come to mind when we think of democracy—namely, voting, responsibility, and freedom—and takes them farther. To work on a cause larger than self, classroom members must do their best for each other, and in turn, everyone will grow individually. A cause beyond self does not have to be a big project where students do something for the whole school or community, although those projects are important as well. A cause beyond self might mean making sure each member of a group understands the concept being studied or understanding why it is important to walk down the hall quietly or to help others learn. Shared decision making, problem solving, and **individual accountability** thrive in classrooms where students are a part of something that goes beyond their grade. In democratic classrooms, then, the students do their best to benefit the class, the community, and, in turn, themselves.

*In democratic classrooms, students and teachers make decisions together and feel responsible for one another.* “The opportunity to make decisions is a responsibility: it means students have an obligation to participate in figuring out how things are going to be done in the classroom rather than leaving everything to the teacher” (Kohn, 1996, p. 141). We often complain that students are not responsible, yet they have no experience with responsibility. You might argue that handing in homework is a responsibility, but most homework has no purpose other than making children practice something over and over that they don't understand or that they understand and shouldn't have to study any longer (Kohn, 2006). Experience with responsibility needs to be about caring: for other people, about learning, and about concepts. Children need the opportunity to make decisions and to be responsible for

things they believe are important and that affect them and their classmates. “To summarize Thomas Jefferson, public education has two corollary purposes: (1) to provide for an educated citizenry to participate in decisions about promoting the future good of our democratic society and (2) to allow for leadership in a democratic society to develop from the merits, abilities, and talents of the individual” (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 1998, p. 452). These two ideas cannot be accomplished without opportunities to make and learn from decisions.

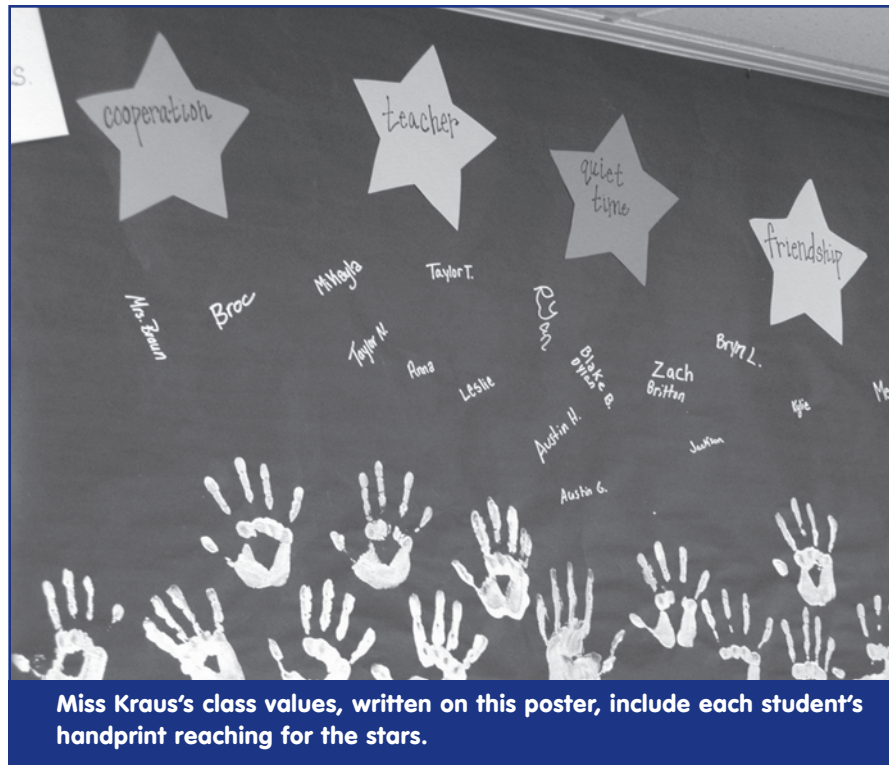


For material related to this concept, go to Clip 2.2 on the Web-based Student Study Site.

***In democratic classrooms, all voices are heard.*** This means voting at times, as well as listening to the minority. “Our democracy is not a process of decision making always predicated on the rule of the majority. The rule of the majority can be tyrannical. We balance the rights of the majority with the right of the minority” (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 1998, p. 456). Students must experience coming up with solutions that are good for everyone involved instead of merely voting and not bothering to think about the minority. Having a voice means having the right to ask why and to disagree respectfully. It means having an opportunity to share different ways of getting an answer and to attack problems in ways that make sense. Often, students in classrooms are voiceless, required to sit and listen for hours. Being respectful often means not saying anything.

***Democratic classrooms make it possible for individual students to choose what they do best.*** I find it interesting that in many classrooms we try to make students be good at the same things. Everyone must do well on tests, write well, and be on the same page of the same book. In our world, we really need people who are good at different things and who are willing to share their talents for the betterment of society. “Effective schooling, Dewey argued, must begin with the interests of the child, using them as resources to develop problems for the child to grapple with, something that requires constant and careful planning on the part of teachers” (Schutz, 2001, p. 270). We must still encourage students to try new things, but we needn’t keep them from things they do well. Compose a list of things you don’t like to do or don’t do well. Now imagine doing those things every day for 6 hours. Wouldn’t you start to misbehave or try to disappear? The subjects we teach in schools are vital to every concept and idea. You might think there are certain skills that every child should know and be able to use. I agree but would add that those skills are important in a wide variety of topics. Why does it matter what topic we read about as long as we learn to read and comprehend? Wouldn’t conversations in social studies be rich if we all studied a big concept from different angles? Choice, infused into everything we do, makes learning valued and interesting.

***Finally, in democratic classrooms, there are common values.*** This might seem frightening at first. Voices in your mind might scream that teaching values in school is not OK because parents should do that at home. Let me clarify. In democratic classrooms, there are common *classroom* values. In other words, no one has to give up his or her values or adopt values he or she doesn’t believe. Instead, students and teachers must agree on what kind of classroom they want to have. You need not necessarily call them values; call them rules, goals, beliefs, whatever, but know your classroom needs them. If each member of a classroom decides that he or she wants kindness as a value, it can be a cause to work for beyond oneself. The members of the classroom must define values and expect them for and from every member. Broad values are the glue that holds the members together, even when times are tough.



### What a Democratic Classroom Is Not

*Democratic classrooms are not places where there are winners and losers.* I have been in many classrooms where teachers try to get students to behave by making some children “good” and some children “bad.” Sometimes it is subtle, as when some students get to choose an activity because they finished an assignment early while others struggle and never get that opportunity. Sometimes it is overt, as when students sit in a group and the teacher hands out stars/stickers/classroom cash, and so on, to students who are sitting still and acting like they are listening. Those who are “bad” get nothing. We must get it out of our heads that there are good children and bad children. Children are innately good when in an environment with autonomy, belonging, and competency. You may have experienced these techniques as a student. Think about other management techniques that divide students into winners and losers, bad children and good children. What do these techniques teach the winners? What do they teach the losers? In democratic classrooms, there are no winners and losers, only children who can sometimes help and who sometimes need help.

Democratic environments inspire students to be good at some things and to improve others with support and appreciation for trying something difficult. If a child does something wonderful, you must celebrate in a way that doesn't make others into losers. If a child does



something not so wonderful, you must help him or her in a way that doesn't turn others into winners. You may think the U.S. democracy thrives on competition with winners and losers or that students need to learn how to become good winners and good losers. As Brooks (2002) reminds us, however, "Childhood need not mimic adulthood in order to help youngsters prepare for it. It's true that effectively dealing with disappointment and loss helps people live longer and happier lives. But it's not familiarity with loss that helps adults cope with death, abuse, neglect, and various other negative experiences; rather it's the internal strength that comes from a childhood that has known the warmth of safety and the comfort of community" (p. 51). Young children will have plenty of opportunity to compete in their lives. Let's not make learning a competition. Learning for everyone benefits everyone. Democracies don't survive if their citizens cannot think and make decisions, be good family members, and be good neighbors.

***Democratic classrooms are not manipulative or coercive.*** If we create classrooms where students have a cause beyond self, opportunities to make decisions, voice and choice, and common values, manipulation and coercion are unnecessary.

Children who are genuinely and continuously cared for usually turn out to be reasonably good people. Thus when things go wrong or threaten to do so, we have to reflect on our own actions and beliefs. It is not just a matter of tightening up the rules, getting tougher, being consistent about penalties, teaching "them" what's right. It is more a matter of bringing relations into caring equilibrium, balancing expressed and inferred needs, and helping children understand both our actions and their own. (Noddings, 2002, p. 154)

Letting go of manipulation and coercion as tools for behavior management can be frightening. Remember that democratic classrooms are not perfect. Instead, they are places to learn. I have certainly had children get out of hand during a lesson. I remember one time we were testing peanut butter to see if it was a solid or a liquid, and the children got carried away. It was loud, students weren't working on their experiments, and it couldn't go on. I stopped them, brought them to the front floor where they would be close to each other and me, and told them I was concerned that class members were not doing what they were supposed to and were thus taking away from learning in the classroom. I asked the students if they could continue the experiment or if they needed to stop for a while. They needed to stop, but as they calmed down, they continued their experiments. Though honest about my feelings, at the same time I gave my students a voice. Manipulation may work for the short term. Handing out prizes for good behavior certainly works in the moment, but in the long run children who are manipulated into doing what's right don't really understand what "right" is (Kohn, 1993). "Right" can become whatever the teacher says, and although that may sound good in a moment of chaos, do we want children who don't know how to act when the teacher is not there? If we have to coerce children into doing something, is the activity appropriate?

***In democratic classrooms, teachers do not force values on others.*** Democracy is not about believing in the same things as everyone else. In a democratic classroom environment, students and teachers can have meaningful conversations about what is important to them and what they need for success. In addition, democratic environments help students

understand that they must be willing to give others what they need as well. “As teachers, we [must] concentrate on establishing conditions that will call forth the best in students, that will make being good both possible and desirable” (Noddings, 2002, p. 2). Those conditions and that environment depend on the people involved in the conversation. Even preschool-aged children have the ability to talk about kinds of classrooms that meet their needs.

In my second-grade classroom, we created a living community (Curtiss & Curtiss, 1998) so that students could construct meaning about living in a community. They built buildings, roads, and houses for the community and then dealt with problems that developed. At one point, the second graders decided they needed laws, so we talked about kinds of government. At first, they wanted me to be a dictator because it would take less time. After I talked to them about what that would mean, they began to value their voice and ability to choose what would happen in the community. They, as a group, came up with laws (values?) that they wanted for their community. I was a part of it, but only a part. Although I was only one voice in our classroom, my voice had experience behind it. I was able to ask questions and guide the students, but I didn’t force them. If they had decided to go with a dictator, I would have been one. We would have learned a lot, and then I hope they would have changed their minds.

***In democratic classrooms, choice is not an absolute.*** Slipping into a permissive state is easy when thinking about democracy. The students in a democratic classroom don’t make all of the decisions. Learning concerns, safety concerns, and social concerns must be considered. Students should not be able to choose to bother others who are trying to learn. Students should not be given the choice to hurt or bully anyone in the classroom. They should not be able to choose to exclude a classmate from a game or an activity. Indeed, you need to determine what you will and will not accept in a classroom and then be consistent. The things you will not accept, however, must revolve around a caring environment and not necessarily around what is best or easiest for you.

***Democratic classrooms are not chaotic.*** If I had a nickel for every time someone said that democratic classrooms have no structure, I would be rich. Democratic classrooms may look different from other kinds of classrooms, but they have a definite structure that children in democratic classrooms know as well as their responsibilities. Movement of the students may make democratic classrooms look more chaotic than others. Students may be working on the same project yet be in different places in the room, or they may be working on different aspects of the same problem. Students may be working alone or in small groups. In democratic classrooms, the structure is flexible and there are choices, but clear directions, time management procedures, and juicy problems also keep students engaged.

If you are in a classroom that feels chaotic, stop for a moment and try to figure out why. Is there really chaos (i.e., neither the students nor the teacher have focus or direction), or are you merely not used to seeing a classroom where children make decisions, talk together, and work on projects of their own design? If you kneel down with a student and ask him what he is doing and he can tell you not only that but when his time is up and what will come next, there is no chaos in the classroom. We have grown so used to the routine of the teacher telling the students what to do that when something looks different, we perceive it as chaos. Sometimes quiet is optimum for learning, but at other times group work is optimum. As

a teacher, you must work behind the scenes so the structure promotes the best environment for learning. You must give clear directions that include opportunities for choice. You must teach children how to work in groups effectively, and you must help them learn to manage their time. Finally, when management becomes an issue, you must include students in the problem-solving process to fix the issues.

### Why Have a Democratic Classroom?

You might think there are some benefits to autocratic or permissive classrooms, and indeed there are, depending on what you hope to achieve. Researchers have studied the three types of classrooms to determine the benefits and limitations of each. We will look at one particular study because it provides insight into how the environments we create for children affect them, not just in the moment but for a lifetime. Before you read about the study, think about the benefits and limitations of autocratic, permissive, and democratic classrooms on your own.

The aforementioned study is valuable because it is longitudinal, meaning that the researchers followed the participants for more than 30 years. Since it is so long, the study sheds light on long-term benefits and limitations of different classroom environments. Beginning in the 1960s, researchers with the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation studied preschool curricula and environments, but any grade-level teacher can gain perspective from the study.

The Curriculum Comparison Study examined the High/Scope Curriculum (democratic) and two other common models of the time—nursery school (permissive) and direct instruction (autocratic). Three groups of preschool children were formed through random assignment, each group experiencing a different curriculum model. The main difference in orientation of these three models related to the amount of teacher control: “These approaches differ[ed] with respect to the degree of initiative expected of the child and the degree of initiative expected of the teacher—whether the child initiated much or little or whether the teacher initiate[d] much or little” (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997, p. 119). On a continuum of control, the three approaches were at very different points. The traditional nursery-school approach was nearest to control by the child. “The traditional nursery school was a child-centered approach in which children initiated activities and the teachers responded to them” (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1998, p. 58). Direct instruction, represented in the study by the DISTAR (Direct Instruction System for Teaching Arithmetic and Reading) program, was at the other end of the continuum, with the teachers doing most of the initiating. “Direct instruction was a scripted approach in which the teacher presented activities and the children responded to them. Teachers clearly defined academic goals in reading, arithmetic, and language” (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1998, p. 58). When the study began, many people believed that lower-achieving students would learn best by direct instruction. The High/Scope Curriculum tended toward the child-centered end of the continuum but added a framework of teacher support and involvement. “The High/Scope Curriculum was an open-framework approach in which teacher and child planned and initiated activities and worked together” (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1998, p. 58).

The majority of the children in the three groups had similar household situations. For example, these children’s parents had no significant differences in level of income, education,

or work status. The three groups of preschool students spent the same amount of time in preschool and went to kindergarten at age 5.

The students' progress was monitored until each turned 23. Researchers collected data periodically from the students, the school, the community, and social services records. Thus, they examined not only participants' academic success but their social success as well.

The Curriculum Comparison Study showed strong positive results for all three preschool curricula. Each substantially improved young children's intellectual performance, with the average IQ rising 27 points (Weikart, Bond, & McNeil, 1978). Over time, however, major differences among the three approaches emerged. The High/Scope Curriculum's effectiveness for creating a disposition to continue to learn, as well as promoting **self-regulation** and academic achievement, stood out in the results. "The curriculum study's most recent data suggests that there are important social consequences to preschool curriculum choices" (Weikart, 1988, p. 37).

At age 27, most of the High/Scope Curriculum participants had completed high school, earned \$2,000 a month or more, owned a home, and were married. In addition, only a small percentage of the High/Scope group had five or more arrests, received welfare payments as an adult, and had children out of wedlock (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993). These amazing results suggest that curriculum is important to both social and cognitive development. The study magnifies the importance of who initiates learning in the classroom. "The results of this study suggest that children in developmentally appropriate and child-initiated programs—who plan, who have responsibility of their own making, and who initiate their own work—develop the capacity to work independently of adults" (Weikart, 1989, p. 28). The components of the High/Scope Curriculum provide children opportunities to initiate learning and to construct their own understanding with adult support. In doing so, children develop cognitively and socially in a way that lasts beyond their school years.

The High/Scope program highlights the importance of a curriculum that is cognitively oriented, encourages child initiative and choice, and promotes a disposition to learn. In addition, the High/Scope approach produced unanticipated benefits related to socialization and self-regulation. The students learned much more than facts and ideas. They learned how to initiate learning, how to regulate themselves, and how to ask questions, and they discovered that they could achieve in school and throughout their lives.

The effectiveness of the High/Scope program was also studied at the elementary level. Three different sites—Leflore County, Mississippi; Okaloosa County, Florida; and Public School 92 in Manhattan—adopted the High/Scope Curriculum. Researchers found that students using the High/Scope approach scored significantly higher on achievement tests than students in comparison classes and comparable national norm samples. In addition, High/Scope students wrote longer, more descriptive, and more effective reports with richer vocabularies. They spent more time working in small groups, talking with adults, and working with adults individually. Finally, they initiated reading and writing activities more frequently and had better attitudes toward reading and writing than students in non-High/Scope classrooms (Schweinhart & Wallgren, 1993). "If the High/Scope Curriculum has the same effects for elementary-aged children that it has for similar preschool-aged children, it is reasonable to expect that the High/Scope children will engage in less crime and achieve greater school success and later socioeconomic success" (Schweinhart & Wallgren, 1993, p. 54).

These studies show that if we want classroom environments that promote only cognitive growth, any of the three kinds of classrooms will work. If we are looking for classroom environments that promote cognitive growth as well as decision-making abilities, creativity, dispositions to continue to learn, and social/emotional health, however, we must create democratic environments. “All students deserve rich educational experiences that will enable them to become active citizens in a democratic society” (Noddings, 2006, p. 5).

It is important to note that this study began in the 1960s. We are almost 50 years beyond that, and our world continues to change. The children in that study are now in their 40s. Do you think the democratic curriculum that was created taught the students about computers? Did the students in the study learn all of the information we now use in the 21st century? Did they learn that the world would, in a sense, shrink and that they would need to be able to work in a global economy? No. But they did discover that they were able to make decisions, learn, and be creative. They learned that their voices were important and to care for each other. We do not know what our students will encounter in the next 50 years. We are teaching for a future we cannot see. Do we really want adults who can only follow specific directions, who can answer a multiple-choice test but not be creative or solve problems, who cannot work together, or who only care about getting ahead in the world and not about their fellow citizens?

## How Do I Create a Democratic Environment in My Classroom?

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Creating a democratic environment will not happen the first day and will not be finished on the last day. About always moving toward democracy, even if you never get there, creating a democratic environment is like aiming for the bull’s-eye on a dartboard. Sometimes you hit it, other times you get close, but you are always aiming for it: a cause larger than self, shared decision making, choice, voice, and shared values.

### Believing in Democracy for the Classroom

The first step in developing a democratic environment in your classroom is belief in its importance. If you do not believe, it will be hard to implement and even keep aiming. The environment must continue to evolve as its members grow and change. The second step is to continually reflect on what you have attempted, what happened, and why. Creating a democratic environment requires support. Find someone who believes in you and what you are doing, and ask for support in your aim to create a democratic environment. Finally, creating a democratic environment requires a process of continual renewal within a community.

### Developing Community as a Process for Democracy

We have a lot of ingredients now for creating a democratic environment. The “water” requires a teacher who knows and cares about the “fish,” a cause beyond oneself, shared decision making, choice, voice, and values. Indeed, those ingredients are vital; however, the classroom environment cannot be a packaged product but must be developed with processes that help

use those ingredients. We as teachers cannot just put those ingredients into a classroom and expect great things to happen. As with learning, the students must be a part of the processes of developing that environment.

If we stick with the fish and water metaphor a bit longer, the water pump on fish tanks that clean the water, provide oxygen, and keep things moving could represent the processes needed to create movement in the classroom, or community development. Some would call this community *building*, but I like *development* better because it connotes learning and growing. Indeed, community development processes must exist for any democratic environment to thrive. Without them, classroom environments are just places where students go to get knowledge and then go home. With them, the environment becomes a place to care about others, about content, and about themselves.

## What Does It Mean to Develop Community?

*Classroom communities are developed through stages of communication.* If students are to benefit from a democratic environment, they must be able to communicate. You might think that learning to communicate means teaching them listening skills and how to be articulate. The process of communication within a group of people, however, is about developing through stages just like a baby develops the ability to talk or walk. We don't teach babies sounds, syllables, and then words. We talk, read, and play with them. In developing the ability to communicate in a classroom environment, people go through stages as well. Peck (1987) identified four stages of developing communication within a group: pseudocommunity, chaos, emptiness, and true community.

In pseudocommunity, members communicate to get along and emulate true community. They try to avoid conflict, ignore individual differences, and try not to offend anyone else. Pseudocommunity resembles wearing a mask. What is really under it?

In the chaos stage, however, problems begin to emerge. No one really listens, but instead everyone tries to get his or her ideas out, creating a lot of talking but no listening or understanding. In chaos, people try to fix each other or convert others to their beliefs. Although this may sound bad, it really provides a way from pseudocommunity to true community. Trying to avoid problems in the classroom, teachers often stay in pseudocommunity, which is easier and less messy and causes no bad feelings. Though less pseudo, the communication in chaos is still nonproductive, like being on a phone that doesn't connect to anyone. Working through this stage rather than pushing it under the rug or returning to pseudocommunity is important.

In the emptiness stage, perhaps the hardest part of reaching true community, members "empty themselves to barriers to communication" (Peck, 1987, p. 95). This means that members must stop; look at their expectations, needs, and prejudices; and get rid of them so they can be open to new thoughts coming in. In a sense, whatever was blocking the phone call from getting through is eliminated, and the lines of communication are open. Listening closely to others when you disagree or when the experience is contrary to yours is difficult. Really listening, though, is about emptying out anything that might keep you from hearing the message.



**Developing community is not merely about being together in the same room.**

True community may be the last stage on this page, but it is not last as we try to help members of a classroom work together and communicate. True community comes and goes. In this stage, members can communicate effectively, are honest in their conversations with others, and work together toward a common goal. Just as the water in a fish tank may become dirty even after it is cleaned, communities can fluctuate among periods of pseudocommunity, chaos, and emptiness. The stages of communication are more like a circle than a line.



For material related to this concept, go to Clip 2.3 on the Web-based Student Study Site.

***Classroom communities develop within goal-setting and problem-solving processes.*** Without something to work toward, students really have no reason to come together. They must develop a sense of connection to each other and understand that they are a part of an “us” (Kohn, 1996, p. 101). Many communities outside of school come together because of a crisis (Peck, 1987), and though there is no need to set up a crisis for students in a classroom, they do need a cause beyond themselves and those juicy problems to develop a community. Goal-setting and problem-solving processes are similar. Whether it is in small groups or a large group, whether the students or the teacher comes up with the problem, and whether it

is academic or social, students need a process for solving problems and making and obtaining goals. For example:

- Identifying the problem or goal
- Previewing the problem or goal
- Assembling resources
- Analyzing resources and plans
- Selecting and implementing the plan
- Monitoring the process
- Assessing the solution (Williams & Veomett, 2007, p. 122)

As with the stages of communication, students need to go through processes to solve problems and set goals. You may help them with a thinking routine, but you also might let them develop their own processes for solving problems and setting goals. In the process of doing so, they will experience juicy problems, shared decision making, voice, choice, and values. They will also go through the stages of communication in a group and make the environment a place they want to be, where they believe in each other and themselves.

*Classroom communities develop within processes where students to get to know each other.* We talked earlier about ways you, as the teacher, can get to know children deeply. Equally important is that the students in your classroom get to know each other. Many times teachers just expect students to be able to work together without giving them any processes to learn about and from each other.

Such processes as classroom meetings (Murphy, 2002), cooperative learning (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002), whole-class service activities (Elias, 2003), “Tribes” activities (Gibbs, 2001), and class maps (Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004) have all proven to strengthen peer relationships and to help students know and thus care about each other in the classroom. I will detail these processes in later chapters. Certainly, if you know someone’s situation and where he or she is coming from, it is much easier to understand and accept him or her. Teachers should not try to control whom students like or with whom they choose to play (Gibbs, 2001). In this type of situation, Gibbs believes that the teacher’s responsibility is to live up to the facilitator role—reminding the students of how to include others, what they have learned about inclusion, and what you expect of them as community classroom members.

Processes to get to know each other must also include sharing and celebrations. Not necessarily full-blown parties, processes of celebration can be as simple as students reading their writing in an author’s chair to the class or sharing a new way to solve a math problem. Nancy Lockett (personal communication, February 10, 2008) calls tests “celebrations of knowledge.” All cultures have celebrations (Deal & Peterson, 1999), and your classroom needs them as well.



## What Community Development Is Not

**Community development is not led by a dictator.** “A healthy classroom community exists when students feel included in the group, know they have influence in how the community functions, and trust they can be open with their feelings, abilities, and opinions” (Obenchain & Abernathy, 2003, p. 60). The teacher does not push students through the stages of communication but instead determines the group’s position and helps the students move forward through questioning, juicy problems, and reflection. Nor does the teacher drill problem-solving skills or come up with goals for the students; instead, he or she encourages students to go through the problem-solving routines and reflect on what works for them, as well as to come up with goals and work together to achieve them. The teacher does not coerce students into doing projects and lessons because there will be a celebration. Celebrations are not used as bribes.

**Community development is not phoo-phoo.** With all of the accountability expectations and talk of rigor in education lately, it is easy to think that processes of community development take too much time and are not worthwhile. Killion and Simmons (1992) discuss the importance of going slowly to go fast. If you take the time to help children develop as a community, know each other, and work on problem solving together, learning will be easier and more productive. “Taking the necessary time to create a supportive classroom community where students accept each other’s differences and support each other’s learning is a crucial issue for teachers” (Harriott & Martin, 2004, p. 49). Community development is as important as learning math facts, yet we need not have one without the other. Academic work can be learned within community processes. “It is not an add-on, something extra to make time for, but rather an integral part of the day’s planning and curriculum” (Kriete, 2002, p. 9).

**Community development is not problem-free.** I once worked with a teacher who was implementing some community development processes in her classroom. I think she expected that once she implemented the processes, everything in her classroom would be perfect. Quite disappointed at first, after a while she found that the students really valued the processes and were getting to know each other in meaningful ways. The key to community development is that it is a work in progress. Communities don’t just happen. “Building community is a deliberate process that a teacher or leader facilitates over a period of time” (Gibbs, 2001, p. 88). Note that problems will help rather than hinder developing community. Problems show us the strategies we already have, where we need work, and who needs help. Community processes should be just that: processes rather than products.

## Why Develop Community?

“Once a group has achieved community, the single most common thing members express is: ‘I feel safe here’” (Peck, 1987, p. 67). We often talk about how classrooms need to be safe, but that usually means physically safe or safe from a harsh teacher. The safety that comes from community development is more a safety from within, a feeling students get when they have control over their lives and know that they can solve problems.

## LETTER FROM A MASTER TEACHER 2.2

### Building a Classroom Community

One of the most valuable things a teacher can do is instill a sense of community. Make the classroom feel like it is the students' learning home for the year, and tell them so. Send out "Welcome to School and *Our Classroom*" notes the week before school begins in the fall, make family stick pictures to help students introduce their families during the first week, or put everyone's handprint on the door. In this way, you will get to know your students better, and they will feel a connection with you and everyone who'll be sharing that room for the year.

For many, the democratic classroom includes actual elections and meetings. You can set up formal class meetings that include electing class officers who learn parliamentary procedures. This provides a way for students to propose ideas for change, for action, or for continuation of sameness. Class meetings foster a structure for doing things, making decisions, and supporting each other. Students will learn how they can disagree with each other without being disagreeable; they can see that there are other opinions besides theirs to be heard. Children are shown how to appropriately applaud when the election results are announced; they are guided how to offer a word of care or encouragement to a class member who wasn't successful in this election. All of this supports each person in the room and offers a way to make positive change.

In a classroom where community is nurtured, where students feel connected to their teacher and each other, they learn how to deal with each other in a genuine way, how to allow for differences among themselves, and how to open their senses to the excitement of learning. In these classrooms, the teacher is not seen as the center of the classroom with all students joining hands around the outside circle. Rather, the teacher is one of the members of the group joining hands in a circle.

Whether or not your classroom community includes parliamentary procedures or class officers, work toward a goal of efficacy. Picture how you can impact the students' experiences so that as adults they will be problem solvers, have consideration for others, and develop skills to make positive contributions to their families, their communities, and the world.

As Dr. Haim Ginott said, "I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my daily mood that makes the weather." Think about what kind of classroom you want to have and what elements you want to incorporate into your day.

—Rae Brown  
Fourth-Grade Teacher

Community processes make the classroom interesting, fun, and social. Doing the same thing day after day is tiresome. Routines, especially thinking routines (see Chapter 5), are important, but learning about each other through an interesting morning question or while playing a game livens the classroom and makes coming to school exciting rather than dull. Students need not dread learning. “When students experience a feeling of community they become more willing to take on tough tasks because they expect to succeed; absenteeism drops; and their attitude toward the course [becomes] more positive” (Hamby Towns, 1998, p. 69).

### *How Do I Develop Community?*



Having come full-circle now, we must go back to the beginning to make some connections. You develop community by making sure your students have opportunities for autonomy, belonging, and competency; by ensuring the environment has a teacher who cares and who knows the children, opportunities to think about a cause beyond self, shared decision making, voice, choice, and shared values; and by encouraging students to go through such processes as the stages of communication, problem solving, and goal setting. You may think you want some practical ideas about how to develop community, and many will indeed come later in this book. It is up to you, however, to make these ideas your own, and you can't do that until you understand why they are important and where they come from. Wouldn't it just be easier to sit the children in rows and pour the knowledge they need for the test into their heads? Probably, but what would you and your students be missing?

## So . . . What?

We have thought a lot in this chapter about the environment of a classroom. Not just about furniture placement or the routines put in place for movement or behavior issues, the environment you help create is also about feelings of care, control, and safety.

In democratic environments, students gain autonomy, belonging, and competency.

To create a democratic environment, you need to know your students at a deep level and care about them as whole people.

To create a democratic environment, you need five ingredients:

1. A cause beyond oneself
2. Shared decision making
3. Choice
4. Voice
5. Shared values

To create a democratic environment, you need to develop community within three processes:






1. Communication stages
2. Problem solving and goal setting
3. Opportunities for children to know their peers

There are many ways for an environment to support democracy, and you need to tailor your classroom environment to meet your students' needs.

## Get Ready For . . .

*Motivation!* We have talked throughout this chapter about why you must get to know your students, why you need a democratic classroom, and why processes that develop community are so important. One answer for each of those questions might be motivation, and the next chapter is all about motivation from within. Unless you understand the ideas surrounding motivation, including environment, the brain, and relationships, more than likely you will end up motivating students extrinsically, or from an outside source. What's wrong with that? Check out the next chapter and find out. Are you motivated to do so? Why or why not?

## Activities to Try

-  Although we have not discussed the physical classroom yet, begin thinking about what physical pieces would support a democratic environment. Where would the furniture and supplies be? Why? What would be on the walls? Why?
-  In Chapter 1, we talked about the teacher being "behind the scenes." What would this mean for developing a democratic environment? What would you need to plan? What would you need to gather?
-  Interview a child about what he or she most wants in his or her classroom. How do his or her answers connect to this chapter?
-  **Make a collection!** Gather activities that would help you and your students get to know each other throughout the year.
-  **Conduct action research!** Find an environment that you think is democratic. Spend some time there talking to people, and consider how the evidence you collect relates to this chapter.

## Student Study Site

The companion Web site for *Elementary Classroom Management* can be found at [www.sagepub.com/kwilliamsstudy](http://www.sagepub.com/kwilliamsstudy).

Visit the Web-based student study site to enhance your understanding of the chapter content. The study materials include video clips, practice tests, flashcards, suggested readings, and Web resources.