Profiles in Caring: Teachers Who Create Learning Communities in Their Classrooms

Reinventing the Middle School

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If we want all students to experience high levels of learning, we must recruit teachers who care passionately about their students and their work, support these teachers in developing hands-on/minds-on lessons, and assist them in reaching out to parents and community.

O ne of the fundamental principles of the middle school concept is that young adolescents learn best in small settings. The first recommendation of *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) was to "create small communities for learning where stable, close, mutually respectful relationships with adults and peers are considered fundamental for intellectual development and personal growth" (p. 9). In *Turning Points 2000,* Jackson and Davis (2000) concluded: "In the ten years since the release of *Turning Points,* an enormous amount has been learned from schools across the nation about how these kinds of middle grades learning communities can be cre-

ated" (p. 123). Our review of research supports this assertion and documents ways that teachers nurture "learning communities." This term, learning community, captures the essence of school success: students and teachers "learn" best as members of "communities."

A GROWING COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

In recent investigations, researchers have explored the nature of successful learning communities. Based on their comparisons of schools in the Child Development Project with matched non-project schools, Lewis, Schaps, and Watson (1996) identified five principles of practice that create what they call "the caring classroom's academic edge":

- Warm, supportive, stable relationships
- Constructive learning
- Important, challenging curricula
- Intrinsic motivation
- Attention to social and ethical dimensions of learning.

Their data highlighted the "synergy of academic and social goals" and illustrated specific ways that "caring" classrooms can also be highly academic classrooms.

Summarizing a number of studies related to school culture and leadership, Peterson and Deal (1998) identified five recurring characteristics that describe schools that have become learning communities:

- Staff have a shared sense of purpose; they pour their hearts into teaching

- Norms of collegiality, improvement, and hard work underlie relationships
- Rituals and traditions celebrate student accomplishments, teacher innovation, and parental commitment
- Informal networks of storytellers, heroes, and heroines provide a social web of information, support, and history
- Success, joy, and humor abound. (p. 29)

While these reports provide convincing evidence that community enhances learning, they offer less insight into the ways that teachers go about creating learning communities on a day-to-day basis. In this article, we describe how some of the teachers we have studied have accomplished this task. Over the past three years, we have had opportunities to spend time in the classrooms of more than 40 middle-level teachers. Collectively, we have observed over 100 lessons and conducted over 200 interviews with teachers and their students. In these studies, we found that the essential dynamic was the creation of learning communities.

To illustrate this dynamic, we present three cases that have taught us a great deal. Each of these cases takes place in a very different setting. Betty Roberts teaches in a small K–8 school setting in the mountains. Jay Burns teaches in a prosperous suburban community. Darlene Wilson and Ashley Cooper teach in an urban middle school. Each of these teachers responds to the needs of students in a unique way and uses carefully crafted procedures to create a sense of community.

Betty Roberts creates community in a rural setting

Betty Roberts teaches in a small school that serves students in Pre-Kindergarten through 8th grade. During the 1998–99 school year, Betty had 30 students in her class, and taught all academic subjects to her students. At the time this data was collected, she was at the end of her fourteenth year of teaching.

A visit to Betty Roberts' classroom

Thirty students, two goldfish, one worm snake, one ringneck snake, five toads, one frog, a five-lined skink, a salamander, a preying mantis, 30 quail eggs, a teacher assistant, and Betty Roberts were the inhabitants of the classroom on the day we arrived. At the time of our observation, Betty's students were working on an assignment they had started the day before. At the beginning of the lesson, Betty spent less than seven minutes reviewing the purpose of the assignment before the class moved to work in groups at clusters of desks and spaces on the floor. Each group of six to eight students worked to write ballads about one of four

different pirates. Betty and her teacher assistant circulated from group to group, monitoring students' progress and answering questions. Betty reviewed the characteristics of a ballad with one group. With a second group, she crouched on the floor to read aloud to them and provide additional directions and encouragement. At one point, she stood and patted her knees to demonstrate rhythm for a ballad. Betty moved quickly from group to group, leaning into each group to read their drafts to make comments. During the group work, students were chatty but seemed productive. Each group seemed to have a "leader" although leaders were not assigned. All students seemed to be involved in the group's activities.

Students went in groups to the front of the room to "perform" their ballads. One student who had been isolated from his group "performed" the ballad he had written while the teacher assistant read it aloud. The teacher led the class in applause after each performance. Betty did a brief assessment of the group work by having students raise their hands if they thought working with the group was fun or easy, or if they learned something new. At the end of the lesson, Betty summarized the information about the pirates, asking students questions to review.

Betty reflects on her teaching

Betty spoke with conviction about her classroom community. She articulated without hesitation one of her primary goals: "My goal is social interaction as much as anything else and especially with all the stuff we're hearing is happening, children killing children. We're taking a real serious look at how children react with one another and interact" (Smith, 1999, p. 84). She understood that her students must feel "safe and free to take risks" (p. 79).

To build a successful community, Betty had established a number of classroom procedures. One of the most important was her emphasis on teamwork. Betty believes that people are more likely to stay involved in community work if they have opportunities to collaborate. She explained, "Unless they are actively grouped and working together, most of them are not engaged. This engages more [people] when they work in teams. So I try to do more teamwork, any kind of interactive planning together" (p. 87).

Betty spoke passionately about her students. She believes that the key to building a strong community, comprised of strong individuals, is to help each person find a niche in the community, a role he or she can play. Her personal goal is to convince her students "that they are valued and that they have a gift within them that is valuable and that they need to find it, find out what it is and they need to make the most of it…and I try to let them see what their beauty is and they are good folks and there is something to be joyful in every day" (p. 87). She views her classroom as

an interdependent community of learners. She emphasized teamwork, collaboration, and responsibility, values that Jay Burns also encourages in his middle school classroom.

Jay Burns creates community in a suburban school

Jay Burns teaches in an affluent middle school that serves students in grades six, seven, and eight. Jay teaches language arts to about 100 students during the school day. At the time of this observation, Jay was at the end of his twenty-eighth year of teaching. During his career, he has taught language arts and social studies to students in grades seven, eight, and nine. He has also taught English to students in grades eight through twelve. He has been teaching 8th grade language arts for the past 17 years.

A visit to Jay Burns' classroom

Jay Burns' third period students sauntered into class, loaded down with Eastbay book bags on their shoulders, Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirts on their backs, and Nike tennis shoes on their feet. Twenty-eight of their growing bodies barely fit into this 8th grade classroom. Jay was writing on the board as they entered. A nod of his head was direction for one student to distribute a set of illustrated file folders to her classmates. Without further direction, students began to copy the problematic sentences into their notebooks:

> *in northern minnesota I did a number of things writed letters laying inthe sun and read.*

> *Yes dan the phone ringed at three oclock in the morning it were a wrongnumber.*

When they had finished copying and correcting, Jay began a discussion of the daily oral language activity. Jay asked questions about which changes were made and then commented on those changes with such questions and observations as the following, "And why was that? So you made a new sentence? You could do that. If it were a specific place, yes." During the discussion, there was some confusion about the conjugation of the verb "to lie," meaning "to recline." Jay indicated that he would look up the conjugation and explain it to the class later. Jay provided encouragement to students with comments such as, "There you go. Pat yourself on the back. Okay, you can, that would work. You are right! How did you know?" (Smith, 1999, p. 76)

Following the daily oral language exercise, Jay reviewed the objectives for the day's class session. Next, he took the "status of the class" by calling the names of the students and recording what they said they would be working on during the class time. After the status of the class was taken,

some students moved to the computer stations and a few moved to designated areas to do peer conferences. The rest of the students worked at their desks.

Jay moved around the room returning papers to students who were seated at their desks. To discuss these papers with students, he crouched to their seated height. He answered student questions and used hand gestures to communicate. Jay made comments to students regarding issues such as theme, tone, and realism; and he praised students with comments such as, "This is good. Very supportive, very thorough. Good." (p. 76).

Just before the class session ended, Jay reminded students of their homework—to complete their portfolios. He suggested that some students may need to come by later in the day to pick up edited papers.

Jay reflects on his teaching

Jay's curriculum and instruction are responsive to the needs of individuals and groups in his classroom. Jay's priority is developmental appropriateness, and he considers students' social, physical, intellectual, and cognitive development as he plans and implements instruction. The writing workshop structure Jay uses in his classroom allows him to monitor the progress of each writer individually. He described his students as "a sociable group." He explains that "they laugh and fool around while they're working… they just have fun with it" (Smith, 1999, p. 92). Jay tries to strike a balance between a directive leadership style and student input: "There are procedures and expectations that I have, but also they have a lot of input" (p. 92). He understands that students will produce better quality work if they believe they have ownership in the product. His classroom is often noisy with the sound of keyboards, computer printers, and voices. Writers are busy moving about, getting the tools and information they need to complete their assignments. Jay is also busy and moving. He spends most of his day talking to students, providing feedback on drafts they have submitted to him. Rather than imposing his idea of correctness on the pieces, Jay wants to discuss student works, using them as opportunities to help the individual writers grow.

In his interviews, Jay has offered suggestions for other teachers who wish to have effective relationships with their students:

1. Combine a high sense of structure and guidance with a high sense of choice and control.
2. Separate content from correction.
3. Model early, withhold judgment during the process; correct thoroughly when they are done, and let them correct/revise what you have pointed out.
4. Focus on process." (p. 95).

Jay's advice captures some of the ways he has learned to create learning communities in his classroom. His students demonstrate a sense of connection with their classmates, with the tasks of writing, and with their teacher.

Students on the STAR team at Washington Middle school also show a sense of connectedness. Their teachers, Darlene and Ashley, encourage a sense of community in a different fashion.

THE *STAR* TEAM CREATES COMMUNITY IN AN URBAN SCHOOL

Washington Middle School is located in an urban setting with 675 students and 60 staff members. Over the past decade, a number of the working class families in this attendance zone have moved to more suburban settings, causing a shift in the school and community population.

The STAR (Strive To Attain Respect) team is a two-teacher team at this school. Darlene Wilson teaches math and science while Ashley Cooper teaches language arts and social studies. Darlene Wilson is the team leader. A veteran of nine years in teaching, she has gained a unique awareness of the needs of her students through her experiences as both teacher and parent. She is admittedly the mothering type, the one students feel they can go to with problems and concerns without disregarding her authority. Ashley Cooper is a second-year teacher with an undergraduate degree in Middle Grades Education from the local university. With this middle grades background, she has become a positive addition to the staff and a contributing member of the STAR team. Ashley feels fortunate to be teamed with Darlene, who not only understands the setting, but also is willing to learn from and not squelch Ashley's progressive ideas about teaching middle school children. Ashley has a solid command of her subject areas as is evidenced by the improved reading and writing scores of her students. She has also aligned herself with Darlene in taking a leadership role on the school improvement team.

A VISIT WITH THE STAR TEAM

On the day of this observation, all 46 students gathered in one classroom. The activity was an auction, and the front tables in the room were filled with well over a hundred different prizes. This was the Big Bucks Auction, and Ms. Wilson served as the auctioneer. Students had received Big Bucks as incentives for good behavior throughout the semester. Today's activity is the culminating event. Students could choose to bid on items of interest such as volleyballs, hair gel, WWF T-shirts, or chocolate bars. Ashley and Darlene had been orchestrating this event for months, seeking donations from a number of local stores and a wide variety of community sources, carefully selecting an odd montage of items that young adolescents crave. Observers watched as the students slowly entered the room and quietly took their places, anxiously anticipating their opening bid on the item they hoped no one else would want. The students were cooperative, sharing prizes with one another, lending money to those in need, and cheering with excitement as the bidding wars escalated. Observers noted that there were almost 50 students in this room, and these two teachers had the control and attention of every one of them.

The STAR team has initiated a number of community service projects allowing students to demonstrate citizenship and build character. Some of these projects were undertaken during school hours while others occurred after school through the SAVE (Students Against Violence) club. Interestingly enough, even after long and often tiresome days, these teachers' rooms were almost always open after school for tutorial sessions, small group discussions, or club meetings, a true indication of their commitment to the students. Darlene explained:

> We try to get the kids involved in different projects. You know, some kids are not so good at schoolwork. Maybe they can't draw, maybe they can't do some of these other things, but they can bring in some canned goods and they can go with us to deliver the stuff or they can go out here and weed the flowers around the school. (McElrath, 2000, p. 129)

Through their own energy and example, Darlene and Ashley often showed students how to put caring into motion.

Darlene and Ashley reflect on their teaching

When asked to talk about those aspects that have allowed them to become a more successful team, Ashley began with the following:

> We know each other well enough to know how the other is going to react in certain situations. We can play off that and read off that. The kids also see that we work together and there is nothing one of us does without the other one knowing about it. They see this and don't try to pull anything over on us. I really think that is the one thing that helps our team behave and respond, for the most part, to what we do. (McElrath, 2000, p. 125)

Both teachers emphasize consistency and high expectations as the keys to being successful with their students. The inti-

macy of a two-teacher team, guided by some unique strategies, allows this to occur more naturally.

Darlene and Ashley know that they need to rely on parents as much as possible in order to develop the sense of community and common cause that will allow their students to excel both academically and socially. Darlene reminded us of just how difficult a challenge this can be at times:

> With the diverse population in our community, we have to deal with a lot of problems, everything from racial feelings of injustice to an inability to communicate because of language barriers. Sometimes we have to go through liaisons, and sometimes the children are the only liaison we have. That can be hard. We have a few kids this year whose parents have not been involved because there is no liaison and this seventh grade child is the only one who speaks English in the family. That can make things difficult. (p. 129)

Darlene and Ashley believe that involving parents and communicating on a regular basis can solve a great deal of problems. Initial phone calls, positive messages, and informal social gatherings invite parents to participate in their child's education and model team beliefs to parents and students alike. The STAR team teachers have found that these efforts can help diffuse traditional barriers associated with home and school relationships while enhancing community views of team and school.

CREATING COMMUNITIES FOR LEARNING

Educational researchers and policy makers have agreed that one of the most powerful factors in promoting accomplishment is the extent to which the classroom is a learning community. The authors of *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) articulated the essence of the concept of learning community as "a place where close, trusting relationships with adults and peers create a climate for personal growth and intellectual development" (p. 37). Recent studies have documented that constructivist learning, challenging curricula, and intrinsic motivation contribute to the success of learning communities. Most important, these studies have identified caring relationships as the heart of these communities. The four teachers profiled here have illustrated ways that individual teachers work with their students to bring to life the concept of community. While their situations are unique, their cases offer two powerful insights into the dynamics of learning communities.

First, the classroom communities they create grow from their own personal commitment to their students.

While the concept of community seems to indicate the importance of group, the participants in this study were equally focused on the individuals in their classrooms. The participants in this study demonstrated their interest in the student/teacher relationship in a number of ways. First, they showed a vast knowledge of individual students. They spoke to the emotional, physical, cognitive, intellectual, and family needs and circumstances of students in their classes. These teachers learned a great deal about their students by working side-by-side with them. As Betty moved from group to group, she got down on her knees to work directly with students. During his lessons, Jay was moving about the room, conferencing with students. He worked closely with them, kneeling, bending, learning, or crouching to their seated height. When they visited a nursing home, Darlene and Ashley showed their students how to interact with the patients by taking the lead and modeling ways to initiate conversation.

Learning with their students, side by side, elbow to elbow, face to face, may have been the most powerful way that these teachers demonstrated their own personal commitment.

The second powerful insight into the dynamics of learning communities that these teachers have offered us is that they put their commitment to students in motion through procedures that fuse academic and social accomplishment. Students in their classes experienced very little tension between "what we learn" and "how we learn" or between "my success" and "our success." Their students achieved a great deal. They also learned to collaborate. These four teachers have developed working procedures that foster connectedness.

One procedure they share is the development of assignments that link inquiry and collaboration. While children were working in groups, Betty got the students' attention several times to have them assess their group dynamic. She also debriefed the students at the end of the lesson to monitor the effectiveness of the group work and to have the students consider their contributions to their groups. Jay incorporated collaboration into his writing workshop structure. Students provided oral and written responses to each other's writing, always working toward improving writing produced in the workshop. Darlene and Ashley linked academic and social learning in a flexible fashion.

Another procedure employed by all four teachers is involving students in classroom decisions on a continuous basis. In response to the question "What do you think makes a successful writing teacher?" Jay wrote, "Kids largely have control over topics and content, while aiming at a rubric or criterion for the end result" (Smith, 1999, p. 110). Jay seemed not only to indicate that he is willing to share control of the curriculum with his students but also that his

success is derived from sharing ownership and control. His advice to writing teachers is to "combine a high sense of *structure* and *guidance* with a high sense of *choice* and control by *students*" (p. 100). The STAR Team also encouraged active participation through regular team meetings.

Finally, each of these teachers extends the community beyond the walls of the classroom. Betty Roberts believes that the most effective way to involve parents is a teacher-by-teacher approach. Although she supports school-wide open house meetings, she believes she has to take additional steps to involve parents. Some of her after-hours events have included Night Walks, a Star Party, and Weekend Stream Walk, a Computer Night, and a Candlelight Christmas. Jay Burns suggests that communication with parents is vital to a student's success in his classroom. He prepares a letter and syllabus describing the year's activities and expectations and sends it home for parents to review with their students. In addition, Jay makes frequent calls to parents, mostly when students are doing well. He suggests that parents are more supportive and students more attentive and motivated as a result of these calls. In the past couple of years, Jay has added student-led parent writing portfolio conferences to his efforts to involve parents. The STAR team encourages continuous communication with parents but also emphasizes service to the school community. Whether by bringing in canned goods, working on the school grounds, or visiting nursing homes, students learn to link their work in school with their membership in community.

When we walked away from the classrooms of Betty, Jay, Darlene, and Ashley, we realized that we had witnessed something powerful: teachers who transformed their classrooms from the ordinary to the engaging, students who accomplished challenging tasks in ways that seemed natural to them, and learning that inspired us as outsiders. If we want all students to experience this level of learning, there is little mystery about what we must do: recruit teachers who care passionately about their students and their work; support these teachers in developing hands-on/minds-on lessons; and assist them in reaching out to parents and community.

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