

The Power of Vision

Volume VIII No. 2: The Power of Community

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Imagine...

Creating and being part of a school **COMMUNITY**, where all students:

- Experience a sense of **BELONGING, CARING** and **RESPECT**
- Have a growing network of meaningful **RELATIONSHIPS**
- Look forward to each day because they have ongoing opportunities for relevant **CHOICES** and shared **FUN**
- Know that their **VOICES** and opinions are acknowledged and valued
- Experience an increasing sense of **COMPETENCE** as they grow in awareness of their gifts and talents
- Know they **CONTRIBUTE** something unique, as they **LEARN** with and from each other

Making this vision a reality is the dream of many parents and educators, and although we have a long way to go, there are some simple steps we can take to move us in the right direction.

The interview with Joyce Eckes continues

AbleNet:

Given the broader context for learning in community we discussed in the last issue, what are your thoughts about how to provide students with quality opportunities for teaching and learning that address the needs for social, emotional and relationship building skills?

Joyce:

I have found AbleNet's "Power of Vision" [email newsletter series](#) relates well to the important elements of community as a learning context and the relational aspects of community building. Often it is not so much about the teacher "doing more" but about "doing differently." I'd like to share a few examples, from a recent team discussion, of how the crucial elements for "growing community" can be linked to

past *Power of Vision* series topics:

[The Power of Conversation](#)

- Students make “life-bringing” connections by engaging in natural conversations - as they talk with others about their lives, ask and answer questions, express and acknowledge each other’s emotions (happiness, sorrow, confusion, etc.), and share their everyday experiences.
- It is when one’s feelings are acknowledged along with one’s message that we as humans truly feel that we have been heard. This takes a partner in conversation who is really listening - who is fully present. Teachers and classroom staff have countless opportunities each day to model this or to “catch” and use a teachable moment.
- Students build connections with members of their classroom and school community through everyday conversations - in the hallway, in the cafeteria, during group projects, or while partnering to solve a problem. These conversations are spontaneous, they are natural, and they are real.

[The Power of Choice](#)

- Choice allows students to have a sense of control regarding what happens to them or for them (for example, provide choices of activities, peers, food, books, music, things that generate enthusiasm, and that are calming and comforting).
- When students have opportunities to vote for an activity, they learn that every voice in their community is valued.
- Preferences are shared and acknowledged as students are able to communicate their choices to others in their community.

[The Power of Literacy](#)

Students read and write as ways to:

- Gain knowledge through access to a variety of tools for learning and participating (for example, books, magazines, websites, writing tools, conversations), so they can talk about it with others in their community.
- Share their ideas, feelings and dreams with each other in order to learn more about those in their community.
- Learn more about what is meaningful or fun for themselves and for others.

[The Power of Voice](#)

- When every student has a voice, they are able to effectively communicate with other members of their classroom community. Everyone should have a

way to effectively communicate so that their voice is recognized, respected, and acknowledged by others.

- When a student uses their voice, they experience the natural consequences of being heard by others in that group.
 - “They heard me”
 - “They understand how I feel”
 - “They acknowledged that this is hard for me”
- A student can use their voice to communicate with others in their community for a variety of purposes. For example, to greet each other, to give and get information, to protest, to advocate for themselves, to clarify, to compromise, to problem solve, to joke, to share or to work through their emotions.
- When every voice is valued in the classroom community, it then becomes a safe place to use one’s voice to make mistakes, to try things out, to take risks to be wrong, and to try again.

The Power of Learning in Context

- Social interaction is the groundwork for students to learn about and from each other as they develop mutual respect and caring, and create “ways of how we are going to be together.”
- Parents say the most important activity for their child is the interaction with other children.
- Learning is a process – not isolated events but rather interconnected experiences that are meaningful.
- Community participation can move from classroom to the whole school. The school community then becomes a place where everyone is respected, cared about, and encouraged to contribute. Students and staff members know they belong and are valued.

The Power of Voice in Language Rich Environments

- Students give and receive messages of acknowledgement.
- Students experience their school as a community that grows in understanding, predictability and safety, reassurance, independence and interdependence.
- Contributions are named and recognized, making students feel that they have value.

The Power of Fun

- Fun creates common, shared experiences, and provides fertile ground for building relationships.
- Fun experiences shared together break down differences.
- Fun engages everyone.

Think About

I like to think about community as a verb. It is honoring every voice, every culture, creating ways for being and learning together, reaching out with respect and care, displaying everyone's work in the classroom, and nurturing each others gifts and talents. It is creating fun and a sense of play, gathering and listening to each others' questions, telling and listening to stories from significant moments in each others' lives, celebrating the little things, sharing books, movies, experiences, and gaining courage as we learn and grow together. It is knowing that over time we are stronger for this and that we are not alone and that we are indeed part of something more and bigger than ourselves-something that makes living and learning a wondrous and beautiful miracle every day!

Try This

- On Monday morning, encourage students to "use their voices" to have a conversation with another student about their spring break or weekend. Have them share one of their partners' "highlights" with the whole class.
- Have students vote for a game to play (adapted as needed for all to participate) and invite another class to play with them. Promote game ideas that require or encourage cooperation - a sense of "us."
- Go for a "walk and talk" in the school or out in the community and have each student engage in a conversation with their partner with the goal of learning one new thing about that person.

More to Know

Books

[Building Classroom Communities](#), David A. Levine,
National Education Service 2003

[Building Community in Schools](#), Thomas J. Sergiovanni,
Jossey-Bass 1994

[Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community](#), Alfie Kohn,
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996

[Tribes: A New Way of Learning Together](#), Jeanne Gibbs,
Center Source Publications, 1994

That's Life! Literature Series, from AbleNet. This new series addresses the needs of secondary school students of all abilities. Designed in themed sets, it emphasizes social skills that students need for making friends, going places, and other important challenges. These books are filled with real life photographs of

youths of various ability levels and ethnic backgrounds, making it easy for readers to identify with the characters. Additional opportunities for learning are provided in sections on “Words to Know, Things to Think About, Talking Points and Creative Ways to Use This Book.” [Don't miss the books in Set I: - Friendship:](#)

§ *Friends O' Mania!*

§ *Jitters*

§ *Friendship Frenzy*

§ *I'm Somebody. Who Are You?*