Creating a Community of Learners in Your Classroom

Getting Started With Making Learning Visible

No matter where, what, or who you teach, creating a learning community is essential to your students' learning. While it is possible to start anytime, the beginning of the school year—when the culture of your classroom is being established—is often the best time to begin. Here are five ways to promote a classroom of learners where children and adults look to each other as resources for learning and revisit and improve their work with the help of others....

Building a Teaching Team that Supports Your Community of Learners

You and your colleagues are a potentially powerful model of collaboration for your students. Children observe you discussing situations and solving problems. Consider having teaching team members participate in a group discussion or activity led by the other adult. In discussions, they can help model collaborative conversations and constructive feedback. This participation sends the message that everyone in the classroom is a member of the learning community.

Offering More Opportunities for Small Group Discussion

It is far easier for children to discuss, debate, and share ideas in small groups. Small groups are a place where children with common interests and complementary skills can work together. Even during whole-group lessons, consider asking children to talk to their neighbors or get into small groups for focused conversations that can be shared back with the whole group.

Using Documentation to Promote Collaboration

Collaboration is not automatic. While some children come to school ready to learn and work with peers, others arrive seeing classmates as the competition and the teacher as the sole source of knowledge. Documentation—notes, photographs, video, student work, partial transcripts of conversations—provides a powerful and engaging basis for group discussion about how well you are learning together. Looking at documentation lets children see how they are interacting and then develop norms for collaboration. Documentation is also a powerful way to celebrate successful moments or advances in learning (highlighting collaborative learning in particular may lead to greater student investment). Consider posting this documentation on a bulletin board as a way to share important aspects of your learning community with others.

Developing the Capacity for Peer Feedback

Children sharing strategies and insights with each other can often be more effective than adult instruction. Consider providing opportunities for peer feedback, ideally in small groups, where children can discuss work in progress such as block structures, scientific drawings, creative writing, and math problems. These discussions can help develop the group's capacity to give helpful feedback and create a shared sense of high standards. Sharing back one or two highlights from the feedback sessions with the whole group can also promote this kind of collaboration.

Involving Students in What Goes on the Bulletin Boards

Bulletin boards can be a powerful tool to make learning visible. Consider asking your students what part of their learning they most want to share with the school community. Think about adding your perspective to a board—through a title and/or a brief summary about what you are learning from your students' work. Consider including children's thoughts about their work—what was hard, surprising, or exciting. Provide a place for feedback from viewers, remembering that specific questions and invitations will elicit more useful feedback (ask students what they want to know).