Modeling, Molding, and Maintaining the Classroom Community

Carly Fredericks has two goals in mind as she begins the school year. The first is to get to know each of her first graders so as to foster and support the learning of each student throughout the year. Her second goal is to create a classroom community where students are able to learn and work together. These goals are closely related, and Ms. Fredericks recognizes that achieving them takes time. In this case, Ms. Fredericks shares how she lays the groundwork for creating a positive and supportive learning environment that is responsive to the needs of each learner and how she builds on that foundation throughout the year.

It is important to take time at the beginning of the school year to establish routines and expectations that help to build a safe and, hopefully, exciting environment for learning. Regardless of whether the focus is literacy, science, social studies, or math, my goal is to support each student's own journey. I have come to realize that establishing a community that recognizes and meets the needs of each individual and fosters understanding of the subject matter takes time and needs to be modeled, molded, and maintained from the first day of school until the last.

Early in the school year, I focus on a number of things: putting routines in place for where to find and how to use materials, establishing guidelines for following a schedule, organizing work, and establishing expectations for student work and behavior. In some ways these are tangible stepping-stones in building our community. The more I focus on their importance early in the year, the stronger our foundation as a class. The students and I work together to learn how to navigate the classroom and the curriculum. While exploring materials, learning new games, and diving into new investigations, students are simultaneously learning how to work together and how to learn from and with each other.

Before too long my focus shifts to thinking about how students are engaging with the mathematics and with each other. There is a great deal of emphasis on how to work together when playing a game or working side by side on the same or similar problems. In the early stages, I move around the classroom and listen for ways students talk with each other. Initially, I hear comments such as, "No, it's my turn," or "I don't think that's how you play." I recognize that my students are trying to negotiate a number of things at once: how to play, the mathematics being highlighted in the game, and the interpersonal dynamics of playing competitively or cooperatively with a classmate. For some students, one or more of these essential elements fall into place easily. Others struggle each step along the way.

I have found it helpful to share some of the conversations I hear with the whole class. Often to end Math Workshop, but sometimes even during, I bring the students back together to share what I have observed. Sometimes this is focused on a mathematical strategy. For example,

I noticed that when Tim and Marney were playing *Double Compare,* Tim counted the pictures on only one of his cards. Tim, can you tell us more about this strategy?

Other times I might focus on the ways the students talk to each other.

I heard Rae and Siobhan encourage each other. Rae noticed that Siobhan had different solutions to the problem than she did. I heard Rae say, "Siobhan, my answer is different. How did you get that?"

Sharing the students' actual language, successes, and confusions helps all of us learn.

I begin Math Workshop in different ways—sometimes by focusing on the mathematics, sometimes by teaching a new game or about new kinds of problems to solve, and other times by focusing on organizational skills. After several years of work with this curriculum, I know where organizational skills can become problematic. For example, for many of my students, it is initially difficult to deal with all of the different kinds of story problems. They seem to do well keeping track of game pieces and rules, but when it comes to tackling word problems, many seem to be all over the place. I have tried several different ways to organize this work for students. I have thought about how much room they need on a page and how many problems they can solve during one session.

I have also needed to address the readability of each problem. For many of my first graders, once they get the gist of a problem type, they are able to read similar problems on their own. For others, both the oral and written language is too complex. When I first started using the curriculum, I didn't really focus on this and became frustrated when the students were not working independently. My first resolution was to read the problems orally, but this did not last long, because each student works at a different level of mathematical understanding, speed, and confidence. Therefore, I decided to pair students and match them to problems, just as I match texts and students in reading. I realize that it is often *not* the mathematics that is difficult; it is the amount of reading required and the skills it takes to organize and communicate solutions. Pairing students guarantees that all students have access to the work and are not hindered by their inability to read a problem.

As we encounter story problems in the curriculum, I keep a list of students based on various criteria, including how independent they are with the task at hand. I try to assess whether my students are able to make sense of the mathematics. For example, in a *How Many of Each?* type problem, I know that for some students the number being targeted is not too big or too small but well within their range. For other students, I know I can adjust the number in the problem to make it more challenging or more manageable. In thinking about the mathematics in the problem, I also have to make sure that my students understand the language. We use class discussions to highlight specific words such as *more* and *less* and phrases like *"How many more?"* Asking the class to talk about these ideas is important and gives us a basis for other kinds of discussions that focus more on strategies. In fact, part of any strategy is figuring out what the problem is asking.

Finally, I check in to see if my students are making sense of the problem. For students who are moving quickly through the work, I consider additional options for when they are finished. With students for whom the work is just right, not too easy or too hard, I focus on making sure the environment in the classroom is conducive to them building confidence and skill. I know what these students need most is uninterrupted time to focus and practice. I want to make sure that they have enough time and the materials they need to work efficiently. They also need ways to feel safe when asking questions, showing frustrations, and sharing enthusiasm about successes and new understandings.

For students who are struggling, I work more on helping them understand the language used in a given problem. I have realized that it is easy to take for granted that my students comprehend such concepts as *more, less,* and *how many.* At times I set up alternative choices to let them work specifically on understanding *one* of these concepts.

Throughout the year, looking for ways to group my students effectively and differentiate the curriculum when needed has been very important and contributes to the success of all my students.

In this case, Ms. Fredericks illustrates the many components involved in building a strong classroom community. To begin with, she introduces her students to a variety of classroom routines to familiarize them with how the classroom is organized and provide them with a safe way to begin to work together. Next, through modeling and sharing, she helps her students learn how to work together in a positive and supportive way. Finally, Ms. Fredericks assesses the individual needs of each of her learners and thinks about how she can best meet their needs through partnering, individualized instruction, or specific accommodations. In this way, Ms. Fredericks is able to create a positive work environment that is supportive of the range of learners in her classroom.

Questions for Discussion

1. **In this case, Ms. Fredericks writes that establishing a community is a process that needs to be modeled, molded, and maintained from the first day of school until the last. Can you find examples of how Ms. Fredericks models, molds, and maintains the classroom community?**

2. **Ms. Fredericks writes specifically about the challenges that word problems pose to first graders. What are the issues that she identifies? What steps does she take to make word problems accessible to all of her students?**

3. **Early in the school year, what do you focus on when creating a mathematical community? What structures do you put in place early on to support the range of learners in your mathematics classroom?**