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Episode 59: Building Classroom Community and Culture

Becky: Welcome listeners! As the start of a new school year gets underway, I think that it is really important that we focus on building classroom culture and climate.

Sam: Yes! I am looking forward to our conversation today. I know educators are excited to return to their classrooms this month. The beginning of the year can feel a little overwhelming; maybe you redid your classroom theme or décor, you're getting a whole new group of students, and families, on top of just getting back in the routine of being back to school. Not only is it important to be intentional about getting to know your students and their families at the beginning of the year, but it is imperative to foster community building in your classroom.

Becky: You are right, Sam. Having a strong classroom culture and climate that is centered on community building, respect, and makes students feel safe sets classrooms up for not only academic success throughout the year but also supports other areas as well such as behavior and social emotional. When I think about classroom culture, one troubling aspect of it is that it works indirectly- meaning it's not something we can physically see or control. However, we can help our students build those relationships with one another and their environment to promote having a successful learning experience.

Sam: I had never really thought of it like that before- how culture in our schools and classrooms is difficult to see, but really, it is everywhere. As Jim Knight says in his book *High Impact Instruction- A framework for great teaching-* Every interaction, every learning experience exists within a culture, and one aspect of effective instruction is creating a learner-friendly culture. And in this book, he recommends five ways to shape a culture that positively influences how every student learns every day. So, Becky would you like to start by talking about the first recommendation Jim Knight gives us?

Becky: Absolutely. The first way that teachers can create learner-friendly cultures is to co-construct norms with their students. You could really create norms on any

number of topics, but some common themes are approach to learning, respectful interactions, conversation, and support. With younger students, you could have a classroom discussion about how they should approach learning, maybe have them think of some ways they can communicate and collaborate with one another in a respectful way, have them think about what classroom discussion should look like, and how can students support each other. With older students, you could have them discuss these questions as a group and write down their answers.

Sam: I really like and support this idea of creating class norms with your students. When I was teaching first grade, this is something we did together during the first few days of school. Since they are younger students, I was guiding their conversations a lot, but it was easy for us to come up with 4-5 norms. I would write them on a big piece of anchor chart paper then all my students would sign it, myself included- to just add that extra piece of being responsible for ourselves and our actions. I also took a picture of this and sent it home to families, so they were aware of what our classroom norms were.

Becky: I love that idea of taking a picture and sharing it with families! That is a very powerful way of involving families. In my fourth-grade classroom I followed a very similar protocol with developing the class norms with my students. I think that this step can often be overlooked in the intermediate grades because it is easy to assume that older students should just know school and class norms since they have been in school for so long at this point. However, from my experience it is critical that even with intermediate students we have conversation around norms because all classrooms function differently and also students forget things over summer break because norms at home are very different from those in the classroom.

Sam: That is a great point! Speaking of cultural norms in the classroom, the second recommendation Jim Knight provides is to reinforce students when they act consistently with the cultural norms. So, once you establish those norms with your students, you can't just leave them and not use them. It's important for the teacher to really embody the classroom norms and watch students to call attention to situations where students are demonstrating following the norms.

Teachers also need to correct students when they are not acting consistently with the norms.

Becky: Yes, it is important that the teacher clarifies in his/her mind what each norm means so that they can give praise and recorrect when needed. The third recommendation is to spread learner-friendly emotions.

Sam: I really liked this recommendation because it is important for educators to understand that emotional intelligence plays a key role in shaping culture. From research we have come to know that emotions are infectious. Just think, if you're going on a road trip and whoever you are with is grouchy and grumpy the entire trip, you can also end up feeling grouchy- so it's like other people's emotions can rub off on us and as leaders of a classroom, it's important to be aware of this. Knight refers to emotional intelligence leading expert Daniel Goleman. In our resource, Goleman states that when someone dumps their toxic feelings on us, explodes in anger or shows disgust- they activate in us circuitry for those very same distressing emotions. Every interaction has an emotional subtext. Along with whatever else we are doing, we can make each other feel a little better or even a lot better, or a little worse, a lot worse.

Becky: I know that I experienced this when I was in the classroom. It wasn't just the students' emotions who impacted my own but also the other teachers in the building. One way that I was able to be proactive and ensure that I was not allowing my negative emotions to rub off on my students was to let them know when I was having a bad morning. Of course, I wouldn't share details about why I was upset, I would just state that I was having a bad morning and could really use some support throughout the day. My students would always be extra empathetic that day and were really supportive. Inevitably what it did was that it allowed students to begin sharing with me and their classmates when they were not at their best and we were able to give them the support and grace they needed on those days. It really made the classroom feel like a family full of kindness, love, and empathy.

Sam: I love that story, Becky. The courage to be vulnerable with our feelings doesn't always come easily but I love how you were honest with your students and therefore you modeled how you were handling some hard feelings with your students.

Even as educators, we are still humans and have feelings/emotions. Maybe you're struggling with something in your personal life, it is important for you to be aware of how you're sharing your emotions with others. There are things teachers can do to spread those positive emotions in their classroom. For example, prompting students to use please and thank you when interacting with each other. You can also teach your students how to give effective, authentic praise and encourage them to do this often.

Becky: So, once you have worked on spreading those learner-friendly emotions, the next thing you will want to do is design a learner-friendly learning environment. Every classroom should be designed to produce optimal learning. First, you want to make sure that your classroom is organized and tidy. You need to think of the materials your students will use and where you can place them in your classroom for easy access. A lack of order in the way the classroom is put together might reinforce a lack of order in the way students approach their work.

Sam: When I was a first-grade teacher, I made it a priority to have my classroom feel warm and inviting. I had several lamps in my room so that students didn't always have to work under those fluorescent lights, I also had differentiated seating so students had choice over how they wanted to do their work for center/lesson, I hung student work so they could see their work/art displayed, and I also displayed books and a few posters that were diverse and inclusive to all.

Becky: I also did many of those things you just mentioned. One way that I created a learner-friendly environment was that I created a living room like space with a rug, lamp, a couple of comfy chairs, and some yoga mats. Students were able to visit this location during independent work time. I also ensured that the classroom library was stocked with books that interested them. I remember one year my students were into nonfiction animal books, so I added some of those to the class library. Another year it was Goosebump books. And I know that educators do not have enough money to be able to purchase these on their own, but I was able to do this mainly through the scholastic points that I earned, so it was little to no cost on my part. Again, Sam and I have just discussed a few strategies to help create that learner friendly environment but keep in mind that having norms, the way emotions are spread, and even the way the room looks all contribute to a learner friendly culture.

Sam: The last recommendation Jim Knight gives us is to Walk to Talk. I'm sure that might be a saying you have heard before and if you haven't, it just means that you do exactly what you expect others to be doing, especially if you are in a leadership position. In education, teachers expect teachers' students to treat each other with respect or be prepared, so they must also treat their students with respect and be prepared themselves. Students are constantly watching their teachers so it's important that teachers are consciously and intentionally modeling the cultural norms they expect from their students.

Becky: It also mentions that the challenge of walking the talk is more complex than what it might appear. And this is true for a teacher who has 25+ students that you oversee and move through the day—this can inhibit a teacher's ability to really see how he/she is acting. A few strategies teachers can use to determine how well they are walking the talk is to video record their classroom and watch how your actions embody the norms in your classroom. You could also do an audio recording, or even have your students complete a survey.

Sam: Those are all great ideas, Becky. We all have blind spots when it comes to our own behaviors and if we truly want to shape a learner-friendly culture, we should do what we can to understand clearly how well we do, or do not, walk the talk. And this is a quote Jim used in his book that is a paraphrase of Ralph Waldo Emerson by President Kennedy's, "What we are speaks louder than what we say".

Becky: What a powerful saying...and it is absolutely true when we think about walking the talk in our classrooms.