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## Episode 60: Interview with Claire McCoy

**Samantha Statler:** Hello, listeners. We are so glad that you are joining us today because Becky and I are going to continue. Discussing and building positive culture and community in the classroom.

**Becky Lewis:** Yes, and we know that many of you are more than likely working very hard at this moment establishing this in your classroom as we get this school year underway. We know that creating and establishing a strong classroom culture and community within your classroom at the start of the year is so important because it has such a tremendous effect on the learning that takes place throughout the school year.

**Samantha Statler:** Yes, and you are absolutely right with that Becky. And on the last episode we shared information about how educators can work to build that positive culture and community in their classrooms by discussing some high impact instructional practices that come from the work of Jim Knight. And if you didn't have time to check that episode out, I would highly encourage you to do so, that would be episode 59.

**Becky Lewis:** Yes, and I completely agree with that Sam. That episode has a lot of different practices and ideas for educators to either start creating or to continue to establish that strong, positive classroom culture and community.

**Samantha Statler:** So, focusing back to today's episode, we are excited to be welcoming back fellow West Virginia educator Claire McCoy on the show and Claire is going to share some insight into how she works to establish that positive culture and community within her pre-K classroom. Claire, can you tell us a little bit about you?

**Claire McCoy:** Of course, yes. My name is Claire McCoy, and I am the lead teacher at the Marshall University early Education Steam Center on Marshalls campus. The Steam Center is a Cabell County collaborative preschool located on Marshall's campus, and I work to just cultivate an inviting atmosphere for not only. My preschool children, but families as well, also like designing a space for Marshall

students to complete their preservice requirements. And I'm also a collaborative partner with the June Harless and R4 Rural educational Research and development.

**Becky Lewis:** Thanks for that introduction, Claire. We've had you on here before for some of our listeners who have been with us for a while. But let's go ahead and get things started by talking about building that positive classroom climate and communities in our classrooms at the start of the school year. So in your pre-K setting, how do you create classroom norms or procedures with your littlest learner?

**Claire McCoy:** So, I think cultivating just a like harmonious environment can be challenging, but it's not impossible. At this team center, we believe that the environment is the third teacher. So, first is obviously the parent and then we say like the second is us. As the educator and the third is the environment, UM, utilizing you know our classroom walls and maybe things that we place in in the classroom to help us practice those like negotiation skills with children and really embed those procedures that we started from the very. Beginning of the school year.

You know, we offer just a neutral canvas to honor and showcase the children work and just design A space where children can feel creative and view their hard work daily and then I'd say another way is uhm, I don't know if you guys are familiar with Sean Covey his work or Stephen Covey his work with highly effective. We do utilize the seven habits quite frequently in the classroom. Sean Covey being Stephen son, he designed those seven habits more toward. Uhm, young listeners. So, he framed these seven habits with a storyline and really fun characters and children's books to be able to, you know, sit down and read this particular story with children in mind. So, we do utilize those habits on a daily basis. And it's always fun to once all seven have been covered, to bring families into the classroom and have like a family night to showcase all of the work that the children have been doing with the seven habits as well.

**Samantha Statler:** Yes, Claire and I am familiar with Covey work. The first school that I actually taught at we did the seven habits too. So it's really great listening to all of the ways that you make your learning space development appropriate for your students. And one other thing that I would like to know, you know, at the

beginning of the year, it's really important that we make our students feel like they're part of that community, you know, part of that family because this could be the first time you know that they're ever going to school or you know, going to be away from their family during the day. So, what are some activities that you do to help build that sense of community with your students.

**Claire McCoy:** Right. So, at the very beginning of the school year, we start embedding, you know, daily practices or more or less like a routine with the children. So, that they become familiar with the expectations of the classroom, like you said, beautifully put like many times, this is their first experience. It can also be a family's first experience to come, you know, dropping off their child for the very first time. I've seen, you know, tears before and you're holding hands with the child and holding hands with the parents as well.

We really value that routine and structure. I use loosely for both children and so, for on the family side, uh, might have like a message center out in the hallway where families can feel, you know, OK, now I've sent my child inside, and so now this is A to do that I have. I can write messages to my child, that way I'm still connected, and I know that they'll receive this later and then from the child's perspective just having that schedule in plain sight. So, I typically have some obviously after we've been in school for a little bit, I have a daily schedule printed, a pictorial schedule so that the child knows what's coming next. So, maybe a picture of drop off and then a picture of our group time, a picture of clean up, a picture of going outside so that difficult transitions come up during the day. Uhm, I can help them by taking them that, taking them to that area and kind of walking through those pictures and that way they're the concept of the day is more like linear and mathematical they can count, you know?

OK, right now it is lunch time, and there's only three more pictures until Mommy and Daddy get here. And so that's a little bit easier for me to say, OK, there's three more steps till Mom gets here rather than saying, well, Mom will be here at 3:00 o'clock. You know, still trying to grasp that idea of time.

And then another great way that we incorporate, you know, just building that sense of community, we do utilize a greeting or having morning gathering every morning each day and at morning gathering we do utilize greetings with the children. So, the purpose of a greeting is obviously so that children can hear their

names. There's been lots of research that you know that I've read and I'm sure you guys have looked into stating children and students can sometimes go an entire day and not hear their name. They might hear guys or come on; everyone you know but not hear their specific name. So, the greeting is something that we are very passionate about when it comes to the morning gathering to really, you know, share their name. Allow everybody to participate. It encourages that, you know, camaraderie. As far as like saying, I mean even just good morning to someone, I think that's kind of like a lost art on. I know that, you know, sometimes even my son, who's four, misses that like. Hi, how are you? And I'm like, Hunter, say good morning. So, it kind of encourages that it becomes more familiar and just something that they begin to look forward to for sure.

**Becky Lewis:** I think that's great. I love you just mentioning that it is a lost art. I feel like our world is so fast paced and everybody is trying to just get through their day as fast as possible so that we often aren't connecting with each other, especially with technology in the way. So, I think that's really an important way to do that with your kiddos right from the start of their day.

When we're thinking about building that positive classroom environment and these kiddos, many of them, like we've already said, it's their first experience. Often their first experience, and in a classroom setting, how do you go about helping the students build positive relationships with one another? Because some of them may come from homes where there aren't younger brothers or sisters or older brothers and sisters. So how do you handle that?

**Claire McCoy:** Yeah, uhm so I think whenever you think about positive relationships. Uhm, it might not be the first. But the best idea to go toward things like negotiation and problem solving, but that's where my mind goes, is really jumping on that ship of giving the children plenty of opportunity to practice negotiation and problem solving. And so, my best example will always be anything that happens in the block area. And in the block area there will always be a structure that is built and a structure that is that is comes crumbling down for whatever reason. So, from there you know addressing that those problem solving techniques with the children. Really defining the problem, sitting down and talking with them about what exactly happened. You know, if it involves 2 or

more children, then like talking to all of those that are there, addressing like possible solutions.

So now we're taking turns. We're allowing them to share with me possible ways to help fix the problem or work through the problem and things like that and then taking their solution and putting it into action. So, after I have jotted down like possible solutions to help fix whatever it is happened, then you know acting out that. So, that they can start becoming, you know, aware of how to solve their own problems and need a little less guidance from myself or other assistants in the classroom. I just always think like giving them those tools, right way to help prepare them for, you know, other problems that might come about later on in the year and helps them be a little bit more independent in in their problem solving.

**Samantha Statler:** And we, we know clear that they're going to be, you know, working with others for the rest of their, you know, learning lives and, you know, up until adulthood. So, that is really important that they get the opportunity to talk through those experiences with you and I just love how you really take that time intentionally to talk about you know their problems with them and walk them through solutions and have them acted out. I think that's a really great way for them to really grasp the concept of, you know, building those relationships with one another. And you mentioned earlier that you have a message Center for your families that they can leave messages, you know, for their children. And how else do you invite your families to play a role in that positive culture and community in your classroom?

**Claire McCoy:** Well, we actually just hosted our orientation. So, right off the bat, we invite our families to the center and just allow them to learn a little bit more about our program. And the children join them too.

So, this was my first-time meeting all of my children this year, but we do also have some different family opportunities such as family nights, where if we have completed specific project work, then we'll invite our families back to school and there's typically like an hour during the evening that we just highlight some of the learning that has happened with specific experience. And it really allows the children then to showcase this learning. So, it's less about me saying, oh, this is what we've done and more about the child saying look at all of this that has

happened and like this is what I do in the housekeeping every day, or this is what this is who I play with in the block area and so families are always really excited to come back for that.

A key component of our program that was missing because of COVID was really that family involvement. You know, obviously with COVID we had to kind of put those things on the back burner just for safety. But when the mask mandate was lifted, we sat down as a team and we were kind of discussing like, how can we bring our families back in a safe way? And we stumbled across Mystery Reader. So encouraging literacy in the classroom by also allowing a family member to sign up for a specific day provides some kind of, you know, fun. And clues so that we could share those with the children of who might be joining us, and then they would just come in and read a familiar story. But it was always really fun to share those clues with the children because they would sit and, like, really think through like, well, my dad has, you know, dark hair or my mom wears glasses if those were the particular clues. I remember I had one family member that said her clue was you often see me pushing something and she was meaning a baby like stroller. But I had a child, raised his hand, and he was like my Mom pushes the grocery cart at Walmart. So, like really thinking through like that, strategic thinking, you can kind of see his wheels just turning and being really creative with his thought process. But you know, all of my family members loved that opportunity. We even reached Marco on campus. So we had Marco visit our classroom and he of course brought a helper to help him read, so it was interesting. Just the word that got out with that experience, how we included even the community of Marshall, another way that we incorporate families.

We do family style or family lunches, so we have family style lunches in the classroom where it's just more conversational setting, but then we also invite the families to have you know, a family come in and join his or her child, and the child can set the table and get the get the space ready for his or her family to join them, choose particular friends to join them at the table. So that's always really fun. We're excited to be able to give that back this year.

And then we have a lot of collaborative moments with our other classroom that's housed at Explorer Academy, so just a different way to include that community as well. And then lastly and probably the largest component of our program that I've

that I know I hear daily and even like every year, a family member mentions this as our my day. The my day goes out every single day, and it's just a synopsis of our day that includes like, a summary of some experiences that we've had key questions to kind of incorporate the families at home and then also pictures so that way when you receive this my day via your e-mail, you're able to have that conversation with the child. I know being a parent myself, nothing is more irritating than sitting down with my son and saying, like, what do you do all day? Like, tell me about your day and he's like I didn't do anything or nothing, you know, and I'm like, I know that that's not true, but I just know that, you know, after six hours, if that's all I have to ask then some things are forgotten. So we try to give this piece of the my day is just a piece that families can kind of use as a tool to have that communication at home.

**Becky Lewis:** And I love that aspect of having that my day, Claire because I know that even with my own children, I get the same response, like I didn't do anything. It's like you were gone all day. What do you mean? Something happened. So, I love that you have those opportunities for your parents to know specifics about the classroom so they can kind of dig into those days that their kiddo had in your room.

Thinking about the pre-K classroom, it allows for lots of creative learning to take place. So when creative learning is happening, we know with three, four, or five year olds, it can get kind of crazy and chaotic. So how do you ensure that there's a really good balance between keeping your environment very creative and also keeping it orderly?

**Claire McCoy:** Right. I think the balance really comes from just setting those classroom norms like we talked about earlier and expectations just up front. I can't tell you how many times I've heard from families, you know, at the very beginning of the year, like, oh, get ready he's going to need a lot of outside time. Or, you know, she's she's a wild one. Or a drama queen, you know, I've heard, I've heard all the things. But I will say I see a different child because the environment like we've like we talked about earlier, is that really that third teacher.

So, what is happening at home might not be what I see at school and so I think that, you know starting off with that routine and just hitting the ground running with those in particular. Like routine and setting the classroom norms really sets

us up for success with creating that creative environment allowing them to be creative. But also keeping a consistent, like harmonious classroom.

**Samantha Statler:** Thanks for sharing that Claire. So, as we wrap up our conversation today, do you have one tip or a piece of advice that you could offer our listeners who are wanting to build and or strengthen their classroom culture or community?

**Claire McCoy:** I would say in whatever way, you can get to know your families for sure. However, you can do that if you send out like a survey that just allows your family to maybe share a little bit more about them. That's actually something new that we're doing this year is sending out like a family link that they can take a little survey and give us a little bit more information about them so that we can utilize them as experts in our classroom. So, like I said, you know, we do follow the project approach in the classroom. And so, we have different projects always arising. And I know that when we get down deep in projects, it's always like, oh well, who can I bring in? Who can I reach out to and contact and who would come in and you know if we have an interest in doctors like do we know any doctors? If we have an interest in mail, do I know a mailman or a mail woman? If we have an interest in gardening, do we have a garden expert? So, if you have the opportunity or the means to get to know your families, they would be the first people you could reach out to and then that's kind of starting that like community building to them. If they're able to, then I'm sure they'd be like really thrilled to be included in any way they can be in your classroom.