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Aspects of a Supportive Learning Environment

The American education system has changed drastically throughout US history, but one question has always been present: how can schools foster more successful students? Recently, the success of students has been attributed to a school's learning environment. Schools that encourage a positive, supportive learning environment allow their students greater opportunities to learn and be successful. Consequently, this initial question has shifted: how can schools create a more supportive learning environment? An examination of various texts displays that the most important qualities that create a supportive learning environment are a sense of community, the discouragement of conformity, equality for all students, and teachers' support of students.

One of the most important characteristics of a supportive learning environment is community and a sense of unity among students and teachers. Theodore Sizer compares a school community to a family in his writing, *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School*: "teachers (like parents) are very much on their own. . . Compromises and common sense and flexibility are always needed in schools, just as they are in good families" (14-16). Sizer implies multiple times that the relationships between students and teachers should resemble that of a family. For students to feel comfortable in their school environment, it should mimic an environment where they feel safe and at ease. Creating a school community like a family allows students to see learning with a positive mindset and feel safe to express their ideas knowing that they have the support of their teachers and peers. Similarly, in the graphic novel, *Friends with Boys*, Erin

Hicks illustrates the protagonist's brother describing the importance of friends in a high school environment when he tells his sister, "Now all you need is to find your people" (204). Maggie, the protagonist, finds the support of her brother, Daniel, as she transitions from home-schooling to public high school. The reader sees Daniel enjoying high school and his learning experience, in great part due to his belonging to a community that encourages and supports him. For Maggie, Daniel and her second brother are part of her community that begin to make high school a positive environment for her when she is very nervous to leave home-schooling. Daniel explains that she should build on to this community and try to find more people that will support her, and eventually school will be a comfortable, enjoyable environment for her. The importance of community is also referenced in the autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, where Maya Angelou recounts her memories of her middle school graduation and her connection with her classmates when she states, "we were going to be made to look bad. I distinctly remember being explicit in the choice of pronoun. It was 'we,' the graduating class, the unit, that concerned me then" (25). Angelou describes her worries that something bad would happen at her middle school graduation that would cause embarrassment to herself and her classmates. She explains the overwhelming sense of unity and how she knew that her grade could overcome anything if they supported each other. Angelou stresses the vital part that the support of her community played in her love of learning and recognizes that she cares about her classmates and wishes the best for them, just as they do for her. Belonging to a community of caring students and teachers allows a student to feel confident and comfortable in school. As a high school student, I have experienced that having friends that care about you makes school more enjoyable. I look forward to school, both outside the classroom, where I have time to socialize with my friends, and in the classroom. Knowing that my classmates support me allows me to voice my opinions in class

confidently, giving me the opportunity to learn better and contribute to my education. This also means that I benefit from the thoughts of my peers, which can give me new perspectives on topics in class and allow me to learn more effectively and in different ways. Therefore, a strong sense of community is one of the most important factors contributing to a supportive learning environment.

In addition, conformity, which leads to harmful stereotypes, cliques, and bullying, must be discouraged. Sizer, a former high school teacher, explains that the first step to eliminating conformity from the education system is deconstructing stereotypes when he writes, “A stereotype is one of the roots of prejudice, one readily confronted in good schools. . . no two people, young or old, are ever quite alike, nor should they ever be treated precisely alike” (17). Sizer explains that stereotypes in schools mean people make assumptions about students that may not be correct, making a student feel misunderstood and uncomfortable. He proposes that schools work to deconstruct these stereotypes and treat all students as individuals that deserve respect. In doing this, it allows students to display their individuality and help put an end to conformity. Moreover, Alexandra Robbins shows that conformity can lead to harmful bullying and cliques in her writing, *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*, when she observed that in a real high school, “Other students walked by the Prep Hall quickly, so as not to attract attention in the area where the preps heckled the ‘weird kids.’ By the end of junior year, one such student was so fed up with the preps’ rude comments that when they made fun of him for drawing a robot, he lashed out” (22). In her writing, Robbins examines a clique, the “preps,” and displays how their bullying creates a negative environment where other students feel unsafe. This bullying even leads to threats of violence that disrupt learning and make school a harmful environment. Robbins links the formation of the clique to conformity, where students feel they must suppress

their individuality and be like others to have friends. Robbins shows the connection between conformity and an unsupportive learning environment. However, Horace Mann in his writing, *The Common School Journal*, voices his opposing opinion that conformity in schools is beneficial: “By wise precepts, by patterns and examples of what is good and great in human character, how many of them may be led to admire, to reverence, and then to imitate!” (3). Mann believes that for children to become productive citizens, they must go to school, where they can imitate teachers that will show them what is right and wrong. However, this model reinforces conformity among students and eliminates the qualities of individuals that make them unique. Robbins shows that conformity has many negative effects that create a negative learning environment in schools. To further deconstruct the conformity that is woven into the education system today, no rules should be placed on the creativity of students, as addressed by Sizer when he reflects on his teaching style and asks himself, “Did my ‘style’ smother one but provoke another to do what he was ‘unsupposed’ to do?” (10). Sizer believes that students in the classroom should have the freedom to use their creativity and think for themselves. He reconsiders his own teaching style to make sure he is not placing rules on students, making his classroom an unsupportive learning environment. He shows that by placing rules on the creativity of students, teachers force them to suppress their individuality, and in doing so, reinforce the conformity that has many negative side effects. In my own experience, teachers that allow creativity in their classroom give students more opportunities to broaden their thinking and show their individuality. When teachers place less rules on an assignment, I have often found that the results from different students vary greatly. This means that each student is allowed to tackle an assignment in a way that supports their unique style of learning. Creativity also combats conformity, which can lead to stereotypes, cliques, and bullying. I have been in the

American education system my whole life and have seen firsthand the harm that conformity causes. By creating cliques, conformity teaches students to exclude others and makes it difficult to collaborate and work together with others to solve problems. Conformity also creates stereotypes that lead to inequality for specific groups of people, which creates a negative learning environment.

Furthermore, equality for students of all backgrounds, regardless of wealth, gender, or race, encourages a supportive learning environment. In his writing, *Against School*, John Taylor Gatto quotes Woodrow Wilson in 1909 to show how inequality between classes of different wealth influence the quality of a person's education: "We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forgo the privilege of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks" (11). Gatto shows that for a supportive learning environment to form in schools, the education system should aim to be as equal as possible. Students from different classes of different wealth should be treated equally. Everyone deserves to have a successful education, and if students separate themselves based on wealth, the school environment will not have a community that cares for and supports one another. Equality between genders is just as important for a learning environment that aids success for all students: "At the age of sixteen or eighteen, a vigorous-minded boy may break away. . . and go abroad in quest of better fortunes; but there is hardly any such option in regard to girls" (Mann 2). Mann explains that for students to be able to better themselves and contribute to society as adults, equality between genders in education must be achieved. Mann wrote this text in 1842, when girls were unlikely to receive any education at all. At the time, people discouraged girls from learning, believing that their responsibility was to eventually be a wife and mother. For everyone to experience a supportive

learning environment, gender inequality in education must come to an end. In addition, Angelou describes the inequality she experienced in her education because of her race when she states, “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises” (35). Angelou was born in 1928. This writing takes place at her eighth-grade graduation, where she scrutinizes the inequality she faces as an African American. In the 1930s and 1940s, segregation between races was a common practice. Angelou explains how segregation meant she was forced to attend an underfunded school because of her race. This meant that when other children had the opportunity to become thinkers and scientists, her and her peers were expected to become athletes. Angelou displays how segregation created an unsupportive learning environment for her and describes the importance of racial equality in schools. As a student in the American education system, I have seen how inequality in education contributes to a negative, unsupportive learning environment. Since a very young age, I have wanted to go into a career in STEM. As I grew older, I came to recognize the gender inequality in certain fields, with STEM subjects as some of the areas with the largest gender inequality. This inequality has led to a much smaller population of women in the STEM fields, an error many organizations today aim to correct. The social expectation that STEM fields are for men has thankfully decreased since my parents’ and grandparents’ generations, but it is still present in society today. Inequality in education can be reduced with the help of passionate students, parents, and teachers working together to form a more supportive school community.

Finally, teachers should strive to make school enjoyable and interesting, know their students and personalize learning, and encourage students to be good people that add to society and make the world a better place. Gatto explains that many students find school boring, claiming that

“their teachers were every bit as bored as they were. . . anyone who has spent time in a teachers’ lounge can vouch for the low energy, the whining, the dispirited attitudes, to be found there” (1-2). For students to enjoy learning, they must be encouraged by teachers that are passionate about their subject and eager to aid students on their academic journey. Passionate teachers work to get their students excited about learning by altering their classes to have variety and interest to the students. If teachers can support their students through encouraging a positive outlook on learning, they contribute to a better overall learning environment. Another action teachers can take to create a supportive learning environment in their classroom is to work to get to know students better and further personalize learning to the individual by “confer[ing] with parents. . . [and] make[ing] time to confer with the student himself, privately—formally or more likely informally—not only in the rush of class time” (Sizer 15). As a high school teacher, Sizer worked to get to know each of his individual students. He claims that teachers should know students “formally or more likely informally,” meaning they should aim to form a strong connection with students where the student trusts the teacher and the teacher genuinely cares about the student’s wellbeing. Knowing a student’s character allows teachers to tailor their classroom environment to better suit individuals. This gives teachers the ability to better support each student’s unique way of learning, creating a positive classroom environment for students. Robbins displays a firsthand example of the harm neglectful high school teachers cause to a learning environment: “Whitney’s group pushed to the front of the line en masse, as students parted without protest. The teachers didn’t bat an eye at the line cut, instead complimenting the girls on their hair or their tans” (21). Robbins’ examination of the “preps” clique, including one member, Whitney, shows that the group’s bullying of other students is ignored, or even encouraged, by the teachers and adult figures at their school. For schools to have supportive

environments for all students, it is the teachers' responsibility to discourage negative actions of students and encourage kindness, acceptance, and compassion. By ignoring the actions of a student that harm the mental wellbeing of another student, teachers show children that not only are these detrimental actions acceptable in schools, but they are also acceptable when students become adults and join society. A teacher's negligence to teach students how to contribute to society in a positive manner and show them the rules of society causes an unsupportive environment both in and out of school. Throughout my own education, I have encountered many kinds of teachers. I can attest that a teacher can either support or discourage a supportive learning environment. The best teachers are passionate about teaching and genuinely care about students, showing they do so by working to keep their classroom a space where all students feel safe. Poor teachers cause greater harm to students by failing to teach them how to positively contribute to society and neglecting to get to know individuals. A teacher's role in creating a supportive learning environment is monumental and can mean the difference between successful and unsuccessful students.

A sense of community, the discouragement of conformity, equality for all students, and the support of teachers are the most important qualities that create a supportive learning environment, as demonstrated by an examination of a variety of texts. Schools with more supportive learning environments foster students that enjoy learning and attending school, creating more opportunities for them to learn and be successful. If all schools work to make their learning environment more supportive, we can ensure a better education and greater success for all students.

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