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"From Chaos to Community": Inclusive Community Building in Middle Schools

Kenneth Lloyd Reimer, Ph.D.
University of Winnipeg (Canada)

Abstract

This paper highlights a study (2022) conducted in a Canadian school division which explored the perceptions of classroom teachers (n=4) in middle schools. The purpose of the study was to highlight ways in which middle school teachers successfully connected with middle years aged students in their classrooms. Participants spoke of the importance of building community in their classrooms and highlighted several ways in which they developed an inclusive community throughout the school year. The approaches and strategies teachers shared to create an inclusive community are compared to several models related to community building, including Peck's (1998) model highlighting the four stages of community: *Pseudo Community*, *Chaos*, *Emptiness*, and *Community*.

Keywords: middle school, teachers, students, connection, inclusive, community

"From Chaos to Community": Inclusive Community Building in Middle Schools

Middle school is a very interesting time for students in terms of developing and maintaining relationships with their teachers and their peers. As many students transition from elementary school to middle school, relationships with their peers become even more of a priority than relationships with adults (Prewitt et al., 2019). Even though middle school students greatly value relationships with their peers, it doesn't mean that they are necessarily proficient at developing and maintaining these relationships. In fact, as students move on from elementary school to middle school, many young people experience a "normative decline in relationship quality" (Duong et al., 2019, p.212) as a result of "an increase in social, academic, and physiological challenges faced by middle school students" (Reimer, 2023).

This is where middle school teachers can play a critical role in helping students connect with their schools and their classmates (Nasir, Jones, and McLaughlin (2011). It has been well established that positive teacher-student connections are important for social and academic reasons at all grade levels (Davis, 2001; Reimer, 2014; Reimer 2020, Reimer, 2023). For example, positive teacher-student connections have been attributed to "higher grades and graduation rates" (Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, 2011, p.1755). They also help many students feel safer in schools (Hamre & Pianta, 2006) and can facilitate personal identity development (Reimer, 2024). While it is beneficial for middle school teachers to positively connect with their students, it appears that teachers should also find ways to help connect students with each other. In other words, teachers need to find ways to create a sense of *community* in their classrooms and schools. When building community, it is essential that teachers seek ways to ensure that they are inclusive for everyone.

Creating this sense of an inclusive community in schools is likely easier said than done. Carrington and Robinson (2006) ask, "Why is it so hard for school communities to respond to

diversity in learners, staff and parents in inclusive ways?" (Carrington and Robinson, 2006, p.323). The following article explores the difficult task of how middle school classroom teachers go about attempting to establish an inclusive community in middle schools. Specifically, it highlights a qualitative study (2022) conducted in a Canadian school division where middle school teachers were asked to share ways in which they successfully connected with middle years aged students in their classrooms.

One of the key themes that emerged from the study on teacher-student connections was the importance teachers placed on building a sense of an inclusive community in their classrooms and schools. In the first section of the article, the term "community" is defined. Different types of communities are described, and several different models explaining the phases and/or stages of community building are highlighted. Second, a brief summary of the methodology of the 2022 study is provided. Third, key findings based on participant responses related to ways in which middle school teachers developed community in their classrooms throughout the year are shared. Finally, the approaches and strategies teachers that shared in the study are compared and contrasted to the term "community" and to the community building models highlighted in this article.

What is a Community?

Cambridge (2024) defines community as, "the people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group, or nationality" (para.1). Millington (2010) believes that there are five different types of communities, described as follows:

> Interest: Communities of people who share the same interest or passion.
> Action: Communities of people trying to bring about change.
> Place: Communities of people brought together by geographic boundaries.
> Practice: Communities of people in the same profession or undertake the same activities.
> Circumstance: Communities of people brought together by external events/situations.
> (Millington, 2010, para.3)

McMillan and Chavis (1986) posits that the definition of community typically requires four key elements - "Membership", "Influence", "Reinforcement", and "Emotional Connection". They describe these elements as follows:

> i.) Membership: The feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness.
> ii.) Influence: A sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members.
> iii.) Reinforcement: Integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group.
> iv.) Emotional Connection: The commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences"
> (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p.9).

An Inclusive School Community

From an educational perspective, classroom and school communities that are inclusive in nature can be very beneficial for all students. The Province of Manitoba (2024) states that one key element of an inclusive school is, "Fostering school and classroom communities where all students, including those with diverse needs and abilities, have a sense of personal belonging and achievement" (para.8). Carrington and Robinson (2006) later contend that, "School communities that value and respect members and provide a safe learning environment for everyone to express their views, build awareness and develop capabilities together are more likely to be inclusive." (p.326). While these descriptions of inclusive school communities are helpful, it would be interesting to investigate ways in which such communities can be built.

Community Building

In regards to the stages or phases of community building, researchers have several interesting models that connect with each other in many ways. For example, Tuckman's (1965) four stages of community building (which he refers to as "Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing") is similar in nature to Peck's (1998) community building model consisting of "Pseudo Community, Chaos, Emptiness [and] Community" (p.86).

Tuckman's Community Building Model

Tuckman (1965) describes "Forming" as the stage when the group is first created or established. "Storming" is the second stage of community building, and is "characterized by conflict and polarization around interpersonal issues" (Tuckman, 1965, p.396), as individual differences cause resistance to group objectives. "Norming" is the third stage of community building and is where "resistance is overcome… ingroup feeling and cohesiveness develop, new standards evolve, and new roles are adopted. In the task realm, intimate, personal opinions are expressed" (Tuckman, 1965, p.396). Tuckman's (1965) final stage of community building is referred to as "Performing". In this phase, "interpersonal structure becomes the tool of task activities. Roles become flexible and functional, and group energy is channeled into the task. Structural issues have been resolved, and structure can now become supportive of task performance" (Tuckman, 1965, p.396).

Peck's Community Building Model

Peck (1998) offers a similar model, stating that even though it is not always the case, "groups assembled deliberately to form themselves into community routinely go through certain stages in the process. These stages, in order, are: "Pseudo Community, Chaos, Emptiness [and] Community". (p.86). In the "Pseudo Community" stage, "a group in seeking to form a community is most often to try to fake it. This stage is similar in nature to Tuckman's (1965) "Forming" stage described earlier. The members attempt to be an instant community by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement (p.86). In a sense, individual differences in the group are dismissed.

This phase does not last, as the group eventually moves into the "Chaos" stage. This stage is similar in nature to Tuckman's (1965) "Storming" stage. In the "Chaos" stage, individual differences in group members begin to emerge, with some group members don't just ignore or dismiss them, but instead seek to find ways to "obliterate" them (Peck, 1998, p.90).

Peck (1998) states that after the "Chaos" phase is the "Emptiness" stage. This stage is what Peck (1998) describes as a very difficult phase for group members, but also as "the bridge between chaos and community" (p.94). This stage is similar in nature to Tuckman's (1965) "Norming" stage described earlier. Group members are challenged to remove potential communication barriers with each other by emptying themselves of prior preconceptions, expectations, prejudices, and the need to "control" or "fix" others in the group (Peck, 1998).

In the final phase, the group enters what Peck (1998) refers to as a true "Community" stage. In this stage a "kind of peace" emerges within the group, and community members feel truly able to be "vulnerable" and share their true selves (p.103). This stage is similar in nature to Tuckman's (1965) "Performing" stage.

Middle School Teachers and Community
Upon review of the aforementioned definitions of community and inclusive community, the different types of community, and models for community building, it is interesting to speculate how they relate to the practices of middle school teachers in building inclusive communities in their classrooms and schools. For example, **w**hat do middle school teachers do in order to build an inclusive community in their classrooms and within their schools? How do the approaches and strategies that middle school teachers utilize compare and contrast with the aforementioned definition of community? How do the practices of middle school teachers correlate with the community building models featured earlier in the article? This article attempts to respond to these questions (and others) based on some of the findings of the following qualitative study.

Methods

The purpose of the study (2022) was to seek out ways in which middle school teachers successfully connect with middle years aged students in their classrooms. After receiving approval from the University of Winnipeg's University Human Research Ethics Board (UHREB), a Canadian school division was contacted and consent was received to conduct the study. Principals of several middle schools were contacted by letter, telephone, and/or email. After receiving principal consent, teachers from their school's teaching staff were contacted and asked to participate in the study. Teachers were informed that their participation was confidential and voluntary, and instructed to contact me directly by email if they were interested in participating in the study. Teachers who consented to participate in the study were provided with a list of questions that they would likely be asked in interviews. The principal and superintendent were never informed of who participates and who does not..

After completing this process, four teachers indicated their willingness to participate in the study. After participants provided written consent, those who agreed to take part in the study were sent an email outlining possible dates and locations for up to four focus group meetings. Participants were also asked about their preference for meeting alone or in a group. Participants were also asked to complete a short information sheet to fill out and return, regarding factors such as number of years they taught, post-secondary education they have completed, and awards and other recognition they have received related to teaching.

All four participants asked to meet and conduct interviews individually via zoom videoconference. Participants could withdraw their consent to this study at any time. None of the four participants withdrew from the study. During the semi-structured interviews, participants were free to disregard any questions or withdraw from the interviews at any time. The interviews were audio taped, and written notes were taken while interviews occurred.

Transcripts of each interview were generated using the speech to text software Otter.ai. Participants were sent their transcripts for their own review. Each participant approved the transcripts they were sent. Each transcript was reviewed independently by myself and a research assistant (RA). Potential themes were generated, and eventually the RA and I agreed on several themes. These draft themes were then sent to each study participant. Three of the four participants responded to my email, and agreed on the themes. One participant asked that I consider slightly amending one of the themes. I agreed to amend one of the themes as suggested.

Findings

While several themes emerged from the study, the theme that will be highlighted for the purposes of this article is that middle school teachers emphasized the need to "create clear and consistent classroom opportunities for students to connect with each other". Participants thought it was imperative that they establish an inclusive classroom environment where that everyone feels welcome. They deliberately taught empathy and social-emotional learning in the classroom, and created opportunities for students to see situations from other perspectives.

In order for students to connect with each other, teachers also sought out opportunities outside of the classroom. Participants in this study spoke of the importance of connecting through the establishment of extracurricular opportunities (clubs, theatre, sports teams), cultural connections, and connecting with community members outside of the schools (elders, for example). These opportunities will be highlighted in greater detail throughout this article.

Establishing an Inclusive Community in the Classroom

The participants stressed the importance of establishing an inclusive community in their classroom. One participant noted, "I think it's important for kids to be in a positive community." One participant added that classrooms were ideal places to create a sense of community because, "They build the sense of community within it." One participant shared in detail how essential community building was as a middle school teacher.

> It's really important to have a healthy [as] possible community. Because as one teacher and 25 kids, you can do only your part to support them. But when they have peers that they engage in, peers that they like, who are supportive as well, it just lifts everybody up. I think I can't stress enough how important the classroom community is to being for the classroom be a positive place for all kids. [It] doesn't matter what their learning ability is, it doesn't matter what level are special, any needs they have, as long as they're in. When they come in this room, they feel welcome, liked, and appreciated. That's already super important in terms of building relationship with the teacher and the students.

Classroom as a "Second Home"

One participant spoke of wanting to "make the classroom a second home". One participant shared that they did this, "[the] first step in my classroom is a very colorful room. It's a very colorful room that takes shape from the kids themselves." At the start of every school year, one participant shared that they "get them to put up posters or get them to put up things that they want to see…I've got a few questions, but …you let the kids decorate the room at the beginning of the year. So what a way to build community than to say, 'Okay, here's kind of the focus we're having this year, [but] as we set goals, and we sort of work towards the learning, how do we want this place to look?'".

Routines

Participants stressed that the establishment of consistent classroom routines and practices were a vital component of making connections with middle school students. While the establishment of routines was considered to be an essential component of identity development for students (Reimer, 2024), it was also a critical component of inclusive community building. They incorporated predictable, visible routines that allowed students to connect with their peers (paired up at the beginning of each class for a quick visit, silly games, listening to each other share) throughout the school day. At times they created intentional student groupings for content area exploration. In middle school, they also shared the importance of establishing clear, consistent boundaries. One participant noted that in their classroom, "there's a sense of this is our community, this is our space". One participant noted, "I'm trying to build community within the classroom so that they know that I'm a person they can relate with someone I can talk to. Before teaching happens, I can't be a stranger in front of the class".

One participant shared a routine they incorporated where students paired up at the beginning of each day to talk and listen to one another. This was done as a means of "getting kids to communicate with each other to start a day, and then getting to understand how their communication skills are, what their listening skills and habits are. That is…a routine that's kind of crafted itself naturally in my room." The participant shared how this practice was most important for students at-risk of disengaging from school, stating, "I'm thinking of vulnerable kids and kids who don't belong, who don't feel like they have that sense of belonging in schools, and specifically in middle schools."

Playing Games as a Class is an Excellent Community Building Routine. One of the routines that participants incorporated in their classrooms was scheduling time to play games with each other. Participants shared that creating scheduled opportunities for middle school students to play games with each other was an excellent way to build classroom community. One participant stressed that, "middle years kids really actually do like to play. They need all the excuses to play and also to be told to put those in phones away." One participant shared that in their classroom, "we play tons of group games [and] board games."

One participant shared that in September, "Everyone has to know everyone else's name. So I probably spent two weeks on different name games. That might seem excessive." One participant noted that at the start of every school year, "we went to the park practically every day [with the] grade seven and eight kids and said 'go play' and that allowed them to connect with each other and different kids. They sometimes played in large games like…grounders." The

participant added that these park activities provided opportunities "to talk to kids individually. And… make the connections and get to know kids."

One participant stated that they have committed, "two periods a cycle [where] we've devoted to games. And we have enough games in our repertoire now that I have a calendar on the board, and kids sign up for that day. And they're the leaders. And they have to have two or three games." The participant added, "If you put this as a culture, then they develop the culture."

Empathy
Participants used the word "empathy" often. Like the establishment of clear routines, developing empathy was also considered to be an essential component of identity development for students (Reimer, 2024). One participant noted that "building on their empathy" was critical in order to learn about other students in their classroom community. One participant elaborated on this belief.

> [H]aving that student build relationships with peers, and being able to have empathy is a part of it. It's hard to have empathy for other people. When you don't, when you're in a position where you don't necessarily feel comfortable in your own position. And you're in, you're not, you lack a sense of belonging, and you are uncomfortable in your own shoes. 'How do you put yourself in someone else's shoes?', so to speak, to be able to learn someone else's perspective or have empathy.

'Circle of Courage'
In order to be inclusive, participants shared that having and implementing models like the 'Circle of Courage' (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2013) was very helpful. The Circle of Courage model is described as follows, "Drawing on First Nations' teachings that encourage a holistic and affirming perspective of culturally diverse learners, the Circle of Courage model details the way the four foundations of self-esteem (significance, competence, power, and virtue) can be applied in different contexts." (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2013, p.67). Further, it is described as "a model of youth empowerment that identifies the four vital signs for positively guiding youth through belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity" (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2013, p.67). One participant shared that they have been using this model for some time, and emphasized that, "one of the big ones is belonging".

Focusing on "Belonging" is Critical. One participant shared the importance of letting students know that school was exactly where they belong.

> I was talking to one girl who's not in my class, who has trouble getting to class, who doesn't like to go into class…I had said to her that morning, 'Oh, good to see you. Glad you're here. And then I said something like, 'You're exactly where you belong.' And she looked at me, like the look of …She was shocked… I said to her, 'What, does that feel awkward?' And she said, 'Yes'. And I said, 'Why hasn't anyone ever told you that this is where you belong?' And she said, 'No'. Now chances are, maybe people have said that. I don't discount anything. And the kids can hear things one hundred times, and still not hear… And then if she doesn't feel like she belongs, she very well might not hear it. But that's all the more reason to say it over and over and over again.

One participant shared that when students are made to feel like they belong by their teachers, they in turn make other students feel the same way. The participant shared a story of how students in their classroom made genuine efforts to sit and visit with a young person with special needs, and in doing so make him feel that sense of belonging in their classroom.

> Everybody has an assigned seat. His seat looks a little different…But he's with somebody. So he has a student that's always there. And that student will talk to him. He will make eye contact. He will not verbalize because he's unable to verbalize. And kids are patient with him. Kids don't bat an eyelash [when] we often have coughing [fits] with him where he ends up vomiting. And nobody responds negatively to that. Nobody's grossed out. Nobody. And I think for him, it makes him feel like he's still a 13-year-old boy."

In conclusion, participants stressed that in order to make positive connections with their middle school students, the establishment of consistent classroom routines was critical. Predictable and fun routines that promoted inclusive community-building in the classroom allowed students to connect with each other. Participants thought that adopting models like the 'Circle of Courage' (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2013) were very beneficial, especially as they helped all students feel like they belonged. Participants sought out any opportunity for their students to learn about and build empathy, and to practice being empathic with their peers. Finally, participants believed that consistently scheduling in time that allowed students to play games with each other was an invaluable community-building tool.

Building Community Outside of the Classroom
Participants shared that opportunities outside the classroom provided excellent opportunities to connect with middle school students. Clubs, student groups, theatre productions, and sports teams also allowed teachers to develop positive relationships with their students. are opportune places to make connections. Sports teams and theatre productions, and connecting students to outside communities provide excellent opportunities for positive teacher-student connections. One participant shared that even "oddball" clubs like knitting or gaming clubs can provide tremendous opportunities, especially for students who might otherwise not get involved or connect with others.

Extra-Curricular Community
One participant proudly exclaimed, "We have we have tons of extracurriculars offered in our building. We have a dynamic staff who offer a variety of different things. And the variety out there really helps kids feel like 'Oh, I can be with that group and feel like I'm in the knitting group. And I know that other like-minded knitters are out there, I could never knit. But there are kids that flocked to our knitting group." One participant said, "We have all these game consoles that we bought a couple years ago, and kids are gamers and they want to be like-minded." One participant shared that by middle school extracurricular activities helped prepare students prepare for high school. The participant offered, "Our high school programs for theater are phenomenal and even in sport. They're phenomenal. And if kids can leave our school with a bit of background knowledge in certain directions on a stage or certain spots on a court, we know that the feedback from high school teams and teachers has been very praiseworthy."

One participant posited that many middle school students prefer an eclectic mix of extracurricular opportunities to participate in as they continue to discover their talents and interests. The participant noted, "For some, we've had odd times where there have been athletes in the production and production kids in athletic stuff, or in the knitting club or whatever. But I think if kids can find their anchor, it's really valuable." One participant acknowledged that, despite the wide variety of choices in extracurricular activities that their school offered, "the push to get every kid in an extracurricular can be tough." Still, they did their best to get as many students involved in activities outside their classrooms as possible. While sports teams provided excellent opportunities for many students, school productions and teams also provided excellent opportunities.

Sports Teams
One participant shared that being involved with extra-curricular activities like sports teams was a natural extension of their role as a teacher, saying, "I think coaching is teaching and teaching is coaching." One participant stated, "[T]hat coaching role is also part of the teaching role. And I think even though I'm not really being paid for the role of coach outside of that. I'm doing it voluntarily because I get to know kids in a different way."

One participant shared why they coached school teams, even if they did not consider themselves to be a good athlete. The participant noted, "And even though I'm not a skilled athlete myself, I almost think that you can be a good artist, you can be a good athlete, but you may not always be a good coach, or good artists. You have to be a good teacher at the end of the day of teaching, and not so much about the topic you're teaching. But you don't even need to be good on the court but giving kids tools and skills that can make them better teens." Another participant offered, "I'm not an athlete, but I also really got pigeon holed into coaching volleyball, and basketball, and badminton, I'm like a fish out of water...But again, I'm connecting with kids that are not necessarily my students. Kids that are solid athletes that have gone on to aspire to be great athletes in the world. And I know nothing other than to be there to support them to help out with a team practice or a game."

Productions and Teams
Participants shared how their involvement in extracurricular activities such as theatre productions and sports teams provided them with tremendous opportunities to connect with middle school students and create community outside of the classrooms. One participant shared that being involved with extra-curricular activities was a natural extension of their role as a teacher, saying, "I think coaching is teaching and teaching is coaching." One participant stated, "[T]hat coaching role is also part of the teaching role. And I think even though I'm not really being paid for the role of coach outside of that. I'm doing it voluntarily because I get to know kids in a different way."

One participant offered that, "Getting kids involved in an extracurricular, whether it's a production or team is also a real big focus for me, because I think connecting them outside of the classroom with a passion is sort of what gets them rooted into joining school and being in school." Participants shared that being involved with productions and teams gave students opportunities to connect with students they might otherwise not teach. One participant offered that, "Getting kids involved in an extracurricular, whether it's a production or team is also a real

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Theatre Productions
According to participants in this study, middle school theatre productions seem to provide a wonderful opportunity for scores of students to participate. One participant shared, "[B]ecause I do the production work, I typically don't see a lot of my own students in the production. But the kids that I'm working with and around the school, there's quite a few that participate." One participant, who has been involved in numerous middle school productions, shared, "We've had upwards of 120 kids in our productions." When asked why so many students are drawn to theatre productions, the participant stated, "Kids join that because there's a collective that's created and …people find their niche when they join an extracurricular and a committee of kids that are like minded. So I always say the theatre kids are a little bit of the oddballs."

Clubs and Groups with a Cause
One participant shared how their interest in sustainability created opportunities for teacher-student connections. The participant shared, "I'm big into sustainability, our school practices, a lot of sustainability composting. We have an urban chicken farm, we've got we've got stinkbugs, you name it. But one thing I've done from the very beginning [was] I took on the role of Recycling Coordinator for our school."

The participant found a way to connect classroom curriculum with this passion for sustainability, stating, "And it dawned on me that social studies is about teaching sustainability, that if we every week as a class went around and picked up all the recycling and put it into the receptacle back for the big green BFI truck to come and get it once a week. It helps and saves the work of other people and the kids feel an investment in the school community" They described this informal recycling club as "a group thing". Further, the participant shared the following. They've got five or six kids in a group every week, I randomly select those two, they were named to honour that they're in the hallways [and] that they're not just skipping class or running a month. But they are there for a purpose. And they can be noisy, but they haul a lot of recycling. And I think over the last [almost 20 years] years, we've had tons and tons of it. But we've left less of a dent on the landfills because of our effort to say this is real world social studies. If we recycle weekly, if we practice here to recycling, maybe you'll go home and do it. Maybe you'll compost.

The participant later added, "This is a real application. We do it…taking care of the environment is an important lesson that this generation needs to learn. So that that's another part of the

community piece that connects the kids within the community of the cause, but to the broader community of our school, and the impact is huge."

Cultural and Outside Community Connections

To be inclusive, participants spoke of the value in connecting middle school students to their own culture and the outside community. One participant shared how valuable it was for students in their school to connect with Indigenous community leaders. The participant shared, "And in the last…10 years, we've been doing a lot of Indigenous work, and a lot of work with connecting kids to their communities and, and leaders in the community. And for a long time, we had kids who were disengaging that identify as Indigenous, and we couldn't figure it out. But they were lacking connection." When asked how they did this, the participant said, "You bring in some Elders, and we have Elders working in our school now who were former residential school survivors. And they're soft spoken, and they're quiet, and they're working with kids who are at risk... but you connect them with another soul who is in their…element. And the relationship piece that happens with that is mind blowing, because you don't think it had happened outside of that." One participant noted the following.

> I think the kids that have been disengaged in the past, have reengaged with what our schools doing. We smudge every day in our school. Everyone's invited to be in it. But not everybody has to do it. We do land acknowledgement which are traditionally Indigenous. And then we also do some of our national anthems in…Ojibwe, to just give voice to the kids that are in the school that may not feel connection. And it's powerful when you see that, that they want to be in school. They're showing up on time. They're being at school because they want to be at school. They want to connect with the Elders they want to do, they're such that the traditions are being celebrated.

Connecting with Elders

Participants commented on how the school making these initial connections with Indigenous Elders and leaders within their local community resulted in even more opportunities for middle school students to connect with themselves, their own communities, and their school.

> We had a group that went…to the feast…[They] spent a week making ribbon dresses. We have a divisional grad Pow Wow in June. And we have a group of kids that wanted to learn how to make a ribbon dress for traditional Pow Wow. As a result of their work, [students were] brought to the feast and none of the kids had ever been to this restaurant before. But it gave them an Indigenous leader in the community who was a strong chef in the community. And she gave him a whole bunch of traditional Indigenous foods. I think that work in the last few years in our building has reinforced the importance of community and it doesn't matter who you are, where you're from, or what is ailing you at the time you've entered the building. But if you can feel grounded and connected in our school, there is there is a power to some of the most disengaged kids and I think that is a reflection of our schools, but middle school especially.

"Flock to the Flock that Supports You"

The participant then astutely noted the following motivating factors for being involved in so many extracurricular theatre productions.

You flock to the flock that supports you. And we've had kids that don't engage in their content learning but have shone on the stage because they found their like-minded people and to see that come out is such an experience and a half. But again, it's all [about] celebrating the kids…the music teacher and I don't do this for any benefit of ourselves. We don't like to shine and it's great for the kids by the way of the connectors as a culture. It there's something to say about being involved with that. And knowing that you're part of the process in connecting these kids that may not have ever connected before.

Finally, one participant shared how creating opportunities to connect outside of the classroom for students, especially those who don't always feel like they belong, was perhaps the biggest motivating factor for them.

I get a lot of kids with "big folders" [underlining student's past academic or social personal history and/or issues] that come with them. But at the end, what happens, they feel a sense of connectedness, even though they've got all these things going on in their file, I make them part of this experience like recycling and the happiness that comes out of that, in this sense of feeling invested in something beyond themselves, is a big piece of creating that culture. It seems to me that one thing you're doing is when you talk about connecting, and you go back to that patchwork. Without you the patchwork doesn't exist. Like, you're [the students] connected because you're essential. Does that make sense?

In conclusion, extracurricular activities provide amazing opportunities for students to discover and develop their interests, passions, and talents. Clubs, student/community groups, and cultural opportunities help middle school students meaningfully connect with themselves, Elders, culture, and a broader community. Sports teams and theatre productions also provide tremendous opportunities for positive interpersonal connections, and provide places where students feel accepted and valued.

Discussion

In the first section of this article, a brief review of the terms "community" and "inclusive community" were provided and several questions were asked as to how what was highlighted related to the practices of middle school teachers in building an inclusive community in their classrooms and schools. The "Findings" section seemed to answer the first question, "What do middle school teachers do to build an inclusive community in their classrooms and within their schools?" Teachers in this study seemed to prioritize inclusive community building. The strategies and practices that teachers in this study shared seemed to align well with Carrington and Robinson's (2006) contention that inclusive school communities "value and respect members and provide a safe learning environment for everyone to express their views, build awareness and develop capabilities together are more likely to be inclusive." (p.326). The participants in this study also shared practices that aligned with the province of Manitoba's (2024) assertion that an inclusive school "[fosters] school and classroom communities where all students, including those with diverse needs and abilities, have a sense of personal belonging and achievement" (para.8).

Here are a few ways in which the participant's practices aligned with the aforementioned interpretations of "inclusive communities". To promote inclusive community building within their classrooms, participants incorporated routines like pairing students together to chat on a daily basis (everyone expresses their views) and regularly scheduling classroom game time, promoting empathy (developing capabilities together), and trying to make the classroom feel like a "second home" (safe learning environment). One participant incorporated the 'Circle of Courage' model (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2013) into their classroom philosophy and practices, heavily emphasizing the importance of 'Belonging' with their students. Outside of the classroom, participants shared about the importance of creating and supporting extracurricular activities for students, like teams, clubs, and theatre productions (sense of achievement). They also spoke of the importance of establishing cultural connections for students like Pow Wow involvement and having opportunities to learn from Elders in their community (build awareness and have a sense of belonging/achievement).

Defining and Describing Community in the Middle School
Another question asked at the beginning of this article was, "How do the approaches and strategies that middle school teachers utilize compare and contrast with the aforementioned definition and descriptions of 'community'?" As stated earlier, Cambridge (2024) defines community as, "the people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group, or nationality" (para.1). The schools and classrooms that the participants find themselves working in certainly fall within this definition of community, in part due to location and in part due to the efforts of the teachers. The first half of the definition was easy to connect with the middle schools involved in this study as they are public schools that are filled with students living in the same neighbourhoods. This reality of middle school students attending the school based on their family home's geographical proximity to it only aligns with the first part of definition of community of "living in one particular area" (Cambridge, 2024, para.1).

The act of placing students together in a classroom seems to only associate with Millington's (2010) types of community based on "Place" (neighbourhood school) and "Practice" (students study similar curriculum), and to a lesser degree "Circumstance".

However, it was the teachers in the study who made concerted efforts to establish what is defined as community within their classrooms and schools by highlighting and establishing common interests (routines, games, empathy building, belonging), social groups (teams, productions, and clubs) or culture ('Circle of Courage', Pow Wow participation, learning from Elders). Due to the efforts of middle school teachers, classrooms and schools can be "considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group, or nationality" (Cambridge, 2024, para.1).

Participants in this study also shared numerous examples of ways in which McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four key elements of community ("Membership", "Influence", "Reinforcement", and "Emotional Connection") could be achieved in the middle school environment. For example, the participants provided numerous examples of ways in which they tried to make students feel like they belonged ("Membership"), their attendance and voice mattered ("Influence"), their needs were met ("Reinforcement"), and that students could share similar experiences like playing games and extracurricular activities ("Emotional Connection").

Tuckman's (1965) and Peck's (1998) Models and Middle School Teacher Practices
The next questions asked earlier in this article was, "How do the practices of middle school teachers correlate with the community building models featured earlier in the article?" Participants Tuckman's (1965) four stages of community building (which he refers to as "Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing") and Peck's (1998) community building model consisting of "Pseudo Community, Chaos, Emptiness [and] Community" (p.86). When one thinks about the start of the school year, the terms "Pseudo Community" and "Forming" intuitively make sense. A classroom is certainly "formed" by school teams in the form of a list of student names that the classroom teacher will be given prior to the first day of class. In many ways the classroom also represents a "pseudo community" as students do seem to "attempt to be an instant community by being extremely pleasant with one another and avoiding all disagreement (Peck, 1998, p.86). Murillo, Blanc, and Veyrac (2022) described the beginning of the school year as the "honeymoon phase", noting that during "classroom situations in secondary education at the start of the new school year…researchers agreed that pupils tend to be particularly quiet during the first few days" (p.351).

Inevitably the honeymoon ends and community building moves on to the next stage, which can often be more tumultuous in nature. Tuckman (1965) refers to this stage as "Storming". To recap, this second stage is often "characterized by conflict and polarization around interpersonal issues" (Tuckman, 1965, p.396). Peck (1998) calls this stage "Chaos". When associated with schools and classroom dynamics, Murillo, Blanc, and Veyrac (2022) refer to this stage as "the test phase", which they describe as a "less calm phase" (p.352) than the honeymoon phase. They further describe this phase as a time where students are prone to "messing around" yet "not necessarily malicious", but rather done in order to "define and clarify the classroom situation" (p.352). Based on the descriptions of these phases, it is not difficult to make the connection between Tuckman's (1965) "storming" and Peck's (1998) "Chaos" with Murillo, Blanc, and Veyrac's (2022) "test phase".

The "Bridge Between Chaos and Community"
It is during the first two stages of each of the aforementioned constructs where middle school teachers in this study provided numerous ways in which they build the essential "bridge between chaos and community" (Peck, 1998, p.94) within their classrooms and schools. To review, Tuckman (1965) refers to this critical third stage of community building as "Norming", whereby "resistance is overcome… ingroup feeling and cohesiveness develop, new standards evolve, and new roles are adopted. In the task realm, intimate, personal opinions are expressed" (Tuckman, 1965, p.396) and the community can move toward the final "Performing" stage. Peck (1998) calls this stage the "Emptiness" stage, where communication barriers are removed and the bridge to true "Community" is stage is constructed.

Based on the findings of this small study, it appears that this "bridge" to community is often built through hard work, insight, and creativity of the middle school classroom teacher. It was constructed through consistent routines, empathy awareness and development, playing games together, making the classroom feel like a "second home", and ensuring that students know that they belong. It was formed by adopting and integrating invaluable constructs like the "Circle of Courage" (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2013) into their everyday practice. It was

created through the organization of clubs, teams, and school productions. The bridge was established by connecting students with community groups, and providing them with meaningful cultural opportunities. Finally, classroom community would not be possible without the necessary commitment by the teacher to build it.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study which need to be stated. The most obvious limitation of this study was the small number of participants who contributed to it. Although great efforts were made to secure between eight to twelve participants, only four middle school teachers volunteered. Additionally, the study was attempted during the Covid-19 pandemic which restricted the opportunity for participants to meet in person or assemble in a group. Instead, interviews were conducted individually and remotely via Zoom. It would have been interesting to have been able to meet together as a more traditional focus group on ways in which teachers positively connect with students (Reimer, 2014; Reimer, 2020).

Recommendations

After completing this study, several recommendations for further research can be made.   As this study had only four participants, in the future it might be helpful to conduct this study with more middle school teachers. It might also be worthwhile to interview middle school students and hear about their thoughts on establishing community from their perspectives. Finally, it would be interesting to conduct further studies on the roles that elementary and high school teachers play in community building, and compare and contrast their approaches to those shared by the middle school teachers in this study.

Conclusion

Carrington and Robinson's (2006) contention that, "School communities that value and respect members and provide a safe learning environment for everyone to express their views, build awareness and develop capabilities together are more likely to be inclusive." (p.326) has been highlighted on several occasions in this article. Middle school teachers appear to intuitively understand this sentiment, and incorporate a multitude of respectful practices and strategies that promote the building of inclusive classroom and school communities. Peck (1996) described these types of practices as "the bridge between chaos and community" (p.94). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the strategies middle school teachers highlighted in this study helped to build the "bridge" between chaos and community. Perhaps teachers deserve even more credit than this. That is, middle school teachers don't just help build the bridge - they *are* the bridge.

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About the Author

Ken Reimer is an Associate Professor at the University of Winnipeg (Canada). Prior to this, he had a twenty-five year career in Canada's public school system. This included positions as a mainstream, special education, and resource teacher, guidance counselor, and school principal in six different schools in two different school divisions. Dr. Reimer holds a PhD (Inclusive Education focus) from the University of Manitoba. His primary research interests have focused on inclusive special education, school leadership, creativity, educational policy, graduation rates, at-risk learners, and teacher collaboration. He has served as President of the Manitoba Council for Exceptional Children.