

# WITH EYES TO SEE



## PEACE AND JUSTICE CONCEPT: COMMUNITY IN THE CLASSROOM

ideas for  
teachers  
  
who want  
to  
integrate  
social  
justice  
concepts  
  
into what  
and how  
they teach

September  
2003

Think back to a time when you felt you were part of a community. What was the group (organization, church, family, neighborhood, etc.)? What made it a community? Most of our responses to these questions will refer to a positive experience, and the term community itself is often synonymous with words like harmony, safety, and cooperation.

During the build-up to the U.S. led intervention in Iraq this year, an anti-war movement grew throughout the world, crossing borders, cultures, and communication medias like never before. Dr. Robert Muller, former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations (now Chancellor Emeritus of the University of Peace in Costa Rica), reflecting upon this movement, stated:

*As unhappy as I am that war is upon us, I'm taking great comfort in what's going on in our world today. The world community is waging peace. . . It is tense, it is tough, it is challenging, but this kind of global conversation has not happened before on this scale - not before World War I or World War II, not before Vietnam or Korea. This is a stunning new era of global listening, speaking, and responsibility.*

Creating community brings hope; living community brings reconciliation, understanding, and peace. We at Concern America strive to help build community in our world, and so we will dedicate the four editions of *With Eyes to See* for this school year to this topic by focusing on the theme of **"Building Community from the Classroom to the World"**. We will begin with *Community in the Classroom*.

### COMMUNITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Mara Sapon-Shevin, in her book *Because We Can Change the World: A Practical Guide to Building a Cooperative, Inclusive Classroom Community*, lays out five characteristics of community in classrooms (paraphrased):

1. **SECURITY:** a safe place to be one's self
2. **OPEN COMMUNICATION:** between students and between students and teachers
3. **MUTUAL LIKING:** opportunities for students and teachers to work together, support each other, leading to mutual respect and understanding
4. **SHARED GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:** a sense of ownership among students for "our class," "our project," "our goals," etc.
5. **CONNECTEDNESS AND TRUST:** students feel part of a whole, and trust the group

The activities and resources in the following pages are aimed at helping to create a classroom community, as described above, that fosters a healthy learning environment, mutual support, and a hopeful tomorrow.

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# IDEAS

The following activities were chosen to help build the five characteristics of community in the classroom. Many activities relate to more than one characteristic, and these are listed for each activity. We have attempted to provide ideas spanning across the curriculum and grade levels, yet each activity can be adapted to suit a wide variety of classrooms. May your classroom community be a wonderful space for you and your students this year!

"The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say, 'What are you going through?'"  
-Simone Weil

K-12

## What is Community? (*shared goals, connectedness*)

Use the same questions asked at the top of page one to get the students thinking about the nature of community. After thinking about communities in their lives, form groups of four students and have them discuss their answers. Each group should then come up with their own characteristics of community, and share them with the class. Present to the class the five characteristics of classroom communities from page one, and together make the class' own community list. This list of characteristics can be a blueprint for the work of the class throughout the year. (From *Because We Can Change the World*)

## OUR Rules (*security, shared goals*)

It is important in every community to have guidelines for the conduct of its members. Whether the guidelines be unspoken or codified, the more that they are mutually agreed upon by the members of the community, the healthier the community will be. The same can be said for the rules used in the classroom. First, talk with the students about the need for rules/guidelines, how they differ depending on the situation, and how they are enforced. Once the class has discussed these issues and explored the meaning of community (above), co-create the rules to be used in the classroom for the year. In addition, make sure to come up with the consequences for breaking the rules, and how they will be enforced. Try to keep the discussion focused on the positive energy of BUILDING community, and not on the negative side of breaking rules and punishment.

K-12

"I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can."  
-George Bernard Shaw

K-12

## Classroom Meetings (*security, open communication, connectedness*)

The importance of meeting together with students and discussing various issues cannot be overstated. If used on a regular basis, and set up in such a way that they are safe spaces to talk, meetings can be a very useful educational tool. Meetings can be held for class support for students dealing with tough issues (a fellow student is in the hospital; a parent is ill); meetings can be used to plan activities and discuss curriculum; when disciplinary issues arise, they can be used to talk about the problems and what will be done; meetings can even be used to check for understanding of topics being learned in class, like a review session. Like any skill, meetings take practice. Try rotating the facilitator role for most meetings between the students.

## Trust Building (*security, mutual liking, connectedness*)

Various games exist to help build trust within a group. There are many resources explaining these games, and most people have played them at camp, or during inservices or meetings. Trust games get us to rely on others, move our bodies, connect with each other physically, and have fun too. Try a different activity each week during the beginning of school, and pull them out as needed throughout the year. Examples of common trust building games are the Blindfold Trust Walk, the Sitting Circle, the Trust Fall, and many others. See Resources on page four for book ideas, or search the internet using the terms "Trust Building Games."

K-12

## What is in a Name? *(mutual liking, shared goals, connectedness)*

K-8

- What is your classroom called? A quick way to bring the class together is to come up with a class name and theme for the year together with your students. The name refers to the class as a whole (and not just Ms. Garcia's class, for example), and a theme provides a goal towards which everyone is working throughout the year.
- What is each of us called? A way to get students to share of themselves, thus bringing the class closer together, is for them to share about their names. Each student is assigned to learn more about her/his name, and then share the information in pairs with another student. The information is then presented to the class as a pair. Questions that can be used as a guide are *After whom am I named? What does my name mean? Where does my name come from? Any stories about how I was named?* (From *Because We Can Change the World*)

## What Do We Have in Common? *(mutual liking, connectedness)*

K-8

Knowing about the people around us, their lives, what they do, what they like, etc., won't necessarily lead to close friendships in all cases, but this shared understanding of one another can promote mutual respect and understanding. Between the students and their teacher, do a *Chart of Commonalities*. Make a large chart with everyone's name along the top and left side, using a grid, so that each person "shares" a box with everyone else in the class. Throughout a set period of time (one month, or the first semester), everyone will fill in the boxes where her/his name intersects with another with something they have in common (e.g. both Shontel and Jaime are only children; both Mr. Ewing and Chen play tennis, etc.). To complete the activity, each person must talk to everyone else, and on the wall there will be a lot of information about the class. (From *Because We Can Change the World*)

## Classroom Yellowpages *(mutual liking, shared goals)*

2-6

Each person is full of talents, and in most classrooms the collective talents of the students will be quite diverse. Why not share the wealth? Create a classroom yellowpages directory. Each student should submit ads for their talents (start with one a piece, and then add more if there is a desire), which are then brought together for the guide. Example could be "Want drawing lessons? Max is here to help! My specialty is caricatures." "Chess in no time. Learn from a master! Contact Edith for more information." (From *Because We Can Change the World*)

## What is New and Good? *(mutual liking)*

K-8

The moments we get to catch up with a friend, chat with a coworker about the weekend, or check in at the end of the day with a spouse bring us closer together. Much the same thing can happen in a classroom. Students who are good friends already do this on a daily basis at school, but as a way to include everyone, take 5 minutes each day, or once a week, to share what is "new and good" with each other. Students (and teachers) can quickly share about a movie they saw, a book they read, the birth of a sibling, etc. (From *Because We Can Change the World*)

## Bulletin Boards *(mutual liking, shared goals, connectedness)*

K-8

Most teachers arrive at school a few days before the students to do their final planning and set up their classroom, which often includes creating inviting and informative bulletin boards filled with rules, schedules, and lessons. Instead, leave the room blank, and together with your students, design and create the classroom. Groups of students can be in charge of different boards, or areas. In the end, much of the same important information will be on the walls, but it will mean so much more to the students for they will have ownership of what has been created. (From *Because We Can Change the World*)

"Were it not for communal life every human being would have to begin from the beginning."  
-Erwin Wexberg

"We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own."  
-- Cesar Chavez

# RECOMMENDED

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

1. A good book for trust building games and activities is Alanna Jones' book *Team-Building Activities for Every Group*. Ms. Jones has written two other related books as well.

2. An important component of building community in the classroom is the curriculum itself. Do students ever feel as though what they are learning is based on "their" curriculum? Deborah Stern contends that the results of a co-created classroom are powerful for both teachers and their students. Try her meaningful book, *Teaching English So it Matters: Creating Curriculum For and With High School Students*.

3. Successfully creating community often has more to do with one's vision of what is possible than specific activities that are found in a book. One of the most important education books of our time is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire's experience with literacy work in his home of Brazil and around the world produced a powerful pedagogy that is applicable in education, business, government, and our own personal lives.

"-Good Morning."

"-Good morning. How did you sleep?"

"-I slept well if you slept well."

-Shona  
people of  
Zimbabwe

"The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community."  
-- William James

## CONCERN AMERICA

is an international development and refugee aid organization that sends doctors, nurses, engineers, educators, and nutritionists as volunteers to train and empower the materially poor in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Guinea, and Mozambique.

In support of these projects, Concern America offers educational services in Orange County which include:

- \* The St. Nicholas Project
- \* Walk Out of Poverty
- \* Infusion Method Workshops for teachers
- \* "Training for Transformation" Workshops for adults
- \* School and parish consulting for the implementation of the Bishops' Pastoral: "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions" (June, 1998)
- \* Lending library for resources of peace and social justice

Feel free to contact the Education Coordinator at Concern America for more information on any of these projects.

**LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK!** It is hoped that the *With Eyes to See* newsletters provide teachers with useful ideas for infusing peace and justice concepts into their curriculum. What is helpful to you? What would you like to see added? What would be more helpful to you? When you get a moment, we would appreciate hearing from you. Send a note to us at Concern America, P.O. Box 1790, Santa Ana, CA, 92702, or an email to [concamerinc@earthlink.net](mailto:concamerinc@earthlink.net).

**Mark Your Calenders Now for Concern America's Next WALK OUT OF POVERTY, April 3, 2004.** JOIN US! Call Janine or Eli at Concern America to get information, walk packets, posters, flyers, and/or to schedule a presentation for your group. The Walk provides education for the participants and a sense of solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world, while raising money for Concern America's development work in Latin America and Africa.