

**Building Community in School:  
The Child Development Project**

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## **Introduction**

When second-grade teacher Ruby Tellsworth returned to her classroom after a break, she was surprised to find that her students had convened a class meeting, and were intently discussing a problem that had come up during recess. They listened carefully to one another's ideas and solved the problem, while she observed from the sidelines (Kohn, 1990a).

How did second graders learn to solve a playground conflict without help from an adult? Why did they take responsibility to call a class meeting, and, even without an adult present, endeavor to treat one another respectfully? "Discipline," in most educational writing, connotes student obedience and the methods to elicit it. By "discipline," we mean something quite different: the qualities of heart and mind that will enable children to sustain a humane, caring society. The second-graders who spontaneously cut short recess to solve a class problem already show many of these qualities: a sense of responsibility for problems that threaten the common good; willingness to take initiative in solving these problems; and some skills (such as convening a community meeting and listening to each other) needed to work collaboratively toward solutions. Helping students to develop these qualities is the focus of the Child Development Project.

## **Program Overview**

The Child Development Project (CDP) is a comprehensive elementary-school improvement program designed to help children develop both the skills and the inclinations to be respectful, responsible, and caring. CDP helps schools to foster,

students' social, emotional, and ethical development, in concert with their academic growth. Specifically, CDP helps educators to reshape many aspects of the school environment around four basic principles:

- (1) Build warm, stable, supportive relationships among and between students, teachers, and parents;
- (2) Provide regular opportunities for students to collaborate with others;
- (3) Provide regular opportunities for students to exercise "voice and choice," (i.e., influence and autonomy);
- (4) Articulate, discuss, and encourage reflection on core values and ideals.

To help teachers bring these principles to life, CDP offers strategies, materials, and professional development aimed at building students' *sense of community* in the classroom and school. This term "sense of community" refers not to knowing the surrounding neighborhood, but rather to students' feelings of being cared about and influential in school. In its emphasis on supportive interpersonal relationships, sense of community overlaps with the terms "belongingness" and "connectedness," that are also used in the literature (e.g., Resnick et al., 1997). But it also reflects students' sense of "voice and choice," that is, their sense of influence and autonomy in the classroom and school at large. For reasons explained below, we have come to believe that bolstering sense of community in school is one of the most important goals that a school improvement effort can address.

The CDP program consists of several mutually supporting components designed to affect daily life in the classroom, in the school at large, and in the connections between home and school:

- **Cross-grade “buddies” activities.** Whole classes of older and younger students come together every week or two, and each older student pairs up with his or her younger “buddy” for an academic or recreational activity. Buddy pairs are assigned for the entire year, so that powerful cross-age relationships can develop, important social skills can be learned, and a caring ethos can be created in the school. The book *That’s My Buddy* provides advice on how to set up buddies programs, how to prepare students for them, the types of activities that work well in the buddies context, and ways of deepening the learning that occurs via buddies activities.
- **Home-involvement activities.** These are short conversational activities that students do at home with a parent or other caregiver. Eighteen activities per grade level (K-6), in both English and Spanish, provide parents and children with opportunities to share ideas and experiences, while also offering parents a window on what their child is learning at school. Presented in reproducible form in a series of seven *Homeside Activities* books, these activities promote student communication skills, help them learn more about their parents’ lives and perspectives, and validate the family’s culture and traditions.
- **Whole-school community-building activities.** These fifteen activities involve students, parents, and school staff in building a caring, inclusive school environment. Such activities as Welcoming Newcomers, Grandpersons Gathering, Family Heritage Museum, and School-wide Mural Painting are detailed in the book *At Home in Our Schools* along with the materials and procedures needed to implement each one. Also described is a structure and process for involving diverse parents and school staff in choosing, adapting, and staging the activities.

- **Class meetings.** Class meetings provide a useful forum for students and their teacher to set class goals, norms, and ground rules; to make plans and decisions; and to discuss and resolve issues and problems. Class meetings help to build unity and a sense of shared purpose, and help students learn the skills of group participation and collaboration. Several forms of class meetings are described in the book *Ways We Want Our Class to Be*, along with suggestions for starting the year, facilitating effective meetings, and deepening students' skills over time.
- **Cooperative learning.** CDP's approach to cooperative learning is similar to a number of other approaches in that students work in pairs or small groups to deepen both their understanding of subject matter and their capacity to work together effectively and respectfully. The emphasis is not just on what students learn academically but on how they work together. Where CDP differs from some other cooperative learning approaches is in its avoidance of inter-group competition, extrinsic group rewards, group grades, and pre-assigned group roles (e.g., facilitator, encourager). The CDP framework for cooperative learning and a variety of specific cooperative learning formats are contained in the book *Blueprints for a Collaborative Classroom*.
- **Literature-based reading.** Two values-rich, literature-based reading programs, called *Reading, Thinking, and Caring* for grades K–3 and *Reading for Real* for grades 4–8, foster students' motivation to read and their development as principled, caring people. Central to these programs are 250 multicultural books, which are used as teacher read-alouds or as “partner-reads” by pairs of students. A teacher's guide for each book summarizes its main ideas and themes, offers

discussion questions, and suggests engaging writing and follow-up activities.

- **Developmental discipline.** This approach to discipline and classroom management is based on the recognition that children develop social skills and moral understanding in much the same way they learn academic skills and concepts. It emphasizes relationship building and a proactive "teaching" approach to discipline rather than efficiency and control. Teachers are encouraged to use unity building activities and to control misbehavior in non-punitive ways. The book *Among Friends: Classrooms Where Caring and Learning Prevail* describes the rationale and methods of developmental discipline.

Over time, these approaches are intended to lead students to naturally reflect on the ways that they treat one another and on the feelings and perspectives of others. In addition to promoting academic motivation and learning, they are designed to help students understand one another, build social bonds, internalize the fundamental values that underlie our democratic society, and become *intrinsically* motivated to act on those values.

### **The Effects of CDP and Community Building**

A large-scale comparative evaluation of CDP was conducted from 1991-1996. The study involved 12 CDP program schools and 12 matched comparison schools in six school districts nationally. These districts ranged from large and urban to small and rural in character. The major results from this evaluation demonstrated a) the importance of building community in school for students' overall development, and b) CDP's

effectiveness at building sense of community when it was well implemented (Schaps et al., 1997; Watson et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1999).

The evaluation showed that implementation of CDP was substantial in five of the 12 program schools and weak in the remaining seven schools. In the five “high-implementing” schools, teacher practices changed significantly in line with CDP’s principles and methods, relative to teacher practices in the matched comparison schools.

During four years of annual assessments, students in the five high-implementing schools, relative to their comparison school counterparts, showed significantly greater:

- concern for others
- altruistic behavior
- motivation to be kind and helpful
- conflict resolution skill
- acceptance of outgroups
- enjoyment of class
- liking for school
- motivation to learn
- amount of reading

In addition, program students were significantly *less* inclined to:

- use alcohol or marijuana.

Students in the five high-implementing CDP schools also showed significantly stronger sense of community as measured by a 31-item questionnaire scale that taps both perceptions of a supportive, friendly environment (e.g., "People in this school care

about each other," "Students in this school help each other, even if they are not friends,") and of influence or "voice" at school (e.g., "The teacher and students decide together what the rules will be," and "Students have a say in deciding what goes on.") Further analyses (Solomon et al., 2000) showed that this bolstering of sense of community mediated all of the positive student outcomes just listed (Battistich & Hom, 1997, Battistich et al., 2000; Solomon et al., 2000), as well as a number of additional positive outcomes (e.g., trust in teachers, self esteem, sense of efficacy). In other words, CDP's broad-ranging impact was due in large part to its effectiveness at building community in school.

In a follow-up study involving three of the six districts, students from high-implementing CDP schools continued to outperform comparison students during the middle school years. During middle school, former CDP students had significantly higher:

- involvement in positive group activities such as school sports, other extracurricular activities, and community youth groups
- educational aspirations and expectations,
- trust in and respect for teachers,
- liking for school,
- grades
- achievement test scores.

Also, former CDP students were *less* likely to:

- disobey school rules,
- cheat on a test,



- show disrespect for teachers,
- skip school without an excuse
- engage in serious delinquent acts such as carrying a weapon, using a weapon in a fight, selling drugs, and committing burglary.

Why does fostering a sense of community in school have such broad and lasting effects? When educators meet students' basic needs for close, caring relationships and a sense of influence and contribution (Deci & Ryan, 1985), they help their students become committed to the school's values and goals. Students strive to fit in and to succeed in such schools, just as they try to emulate parents to whom they feel close. When a school engenders a sense of community, peer group dynamics tend to work in support of, rather than contrary to, its goals and values, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive effects.

### **Program Adoption**

Because of CDP's demonstrated effects, the U.S. Department of Education has listed it as an effective violence prevention program as well as an "Obey-Porter" (Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration) model, and the U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention has selected it as a model drug prevention program. CDP has also been cited as exemplary by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, National School Board Association, Character Education Partnership, and National Council for the Social Studies.

Because of its broad scope and complexity, the original CDP program was challenging to implement. Consequently, the Developmental Studies Center recently

revised the program to strengthen its focus, increase its feasibility, and decrease its cost of adoption. As now constituted, the program consists of four of its original components: its class meetings, buddies, parent-involvement, and school-wide components. The intent is to focus the program tightly on strengthening community using the components that are most practical, affordable, and directly targeted at this goal.

The streamlined program also has been renamed the Caring School Community program, to better signal its focus on building community in school. An independent multi-year evaluation of the revised program is currently underway, and its “early returns” are quite promising.

Caring School Community program materials and staff development are available from the Developmental Studies Center. The materials consist of the books referenced earlier for its four components, and videos that can be used for orientation and training purposes. On-site workshops are available to schools and districts, as are training-of-trainers institutes for school teams of 3-6 people headed by a principal. The Developmental Studies Center can be reached at (800) 666-7270 or [www.devstu.org](http://www.devstu.org).

Finally, other CDP-related materials can still be obtained from the Developmental Studies Center, including those for the literature-based reading, cooperative learning, and discipline approaches described earlier.

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Community service can help many different groups of people: children, senior citizens, people with disabilities, even animals and the environment. Community service is often organized through a local group, such as a place of worship, school, or non-profit organization, but you can also start your own community service projects. Many people participate in community service because they enjoy helping others and improving their community. Some students are required to do community service in order to graduate high school or to receive certain honors. Some adults are also ordered by a judge to co