

CULTURE, COMMUNITY, AND CONSTRUCTIVISM: EXPLORING THE  
ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL CLASSROOM

by

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## ABSTRACT

This work draws on personal experiences in classrooms in various international settings, literature review on best educational practices, and interviews with teachers to elicit key components of a culturally sustainable elementary classroom. I analyzed and compared information gathered to determine whether there are universal elements contributing to a successful classroom environment that are applicable regardless of cultural context. There are many differing beliefs about how to best approach certain facets of the classroom, and I aim to outline what has been most effective based on commonalities between my observations, research, and collected data. Cultural practices of students must be included in the classroom, unique to each specific student body; teachers must draw on community and incorporate this as a resource in learning; and constructivist forms of knowledge should be utilized to provide each student with the opportunity to participate in the construction of their own knowledge based on prior experiences. In conducting my research, I drew on past interactive experiences working in elementary classrooms in the United States, South America, and the Caribbean. I developed further questions about certain practices I had observed and opted to interview two elementary teachers in a public school in Central Texas. I supplemented these ideas with published research from academic journals, and compiled my findings to comprehensively discuss the key components of a culturally relevant elementary classroom. My findings demonstrate that regardless of student population or classroom location, there are certain aspects that contribute to an effective classroom environment. I outline three key concepts, culture, community, and constructivism, that teachers should strive to include in their classrooms to further promote the academic success of their students.

## I - INTRODUCTION

Elementary school is often considered to be one of the most critical stages of development during a child's formative years. During the elementary school years, students learn how to participate in effective social interactions, form the basis for academic learning, and begin to develop into engaged members of their community. Education is a complex field with students at the center; teachers care about their students and hope to foster growth during the years that they are responsible for them. There are many aspects of the classroom environment that determine student success in learning, and teachers must be aware of how to foster the most effective learning space for their students. In this thesis, I set out to establish three key elements characteristic of a successful elementary school classroom, based on my personal experiences in the field of education and literature reviews of best educational practices, which I have determined to be culture, community, and constructivism.

I aimed to distinguish ways in which I can utilize what I have learned through these various avenues to create the most positive learning environment for my future students. To extend this to a broader scope of educators, I considered universal elements necessary to the creation of a successful classroom that may be applicable to any school setting. To present a cohesive exploration of these ideas, I merge my own insights and information gained through interviews with teachers with research on best educational practices found in literature. As "observation is selective", I have provided context for my participant observations and research, and engaged in structured interviews to provide a comprehensive overview my determinations (Frank, 1999, p. 90). My research included

in this thesis was qualitative in nature, and focused on the exploration of universal elements that contribute to a successful classroom environment.

### **Personal Experience**

In undertaking this project, I was motivated by the desire to utilize what I have learned during my personal experiences with elementary education. I have had a strong interest in the field of education for many years and have sought out countless experiences working with children, each of which has shaped my perspective on and knowledge of education. Over the past ten years, I have worked with children in various capacities, ranging from camp settings to tutoring and nannying. As I have progressed through my program in Texas State University's College of Education, I have shifted my focus towards furthering my understanding of working in a classroom setting, and consequently engaged in many experiences that aligned with this goal. Key experiences that I invoke in the following chapters include a yearlong mentorship in a fifth-grade classroom in central Texas, a volunteer experience in an after-school program in Cusco, Peru, observations from a Kindergarten classroom in Ballenitas, Ecuador, and a study abroad experience in the Dominican Republic. Due to my position as a future educator, I have utilized these opportunities to work with children to further my understanding of teacher-student interactions and effective learning practices. As I will be certified to teach early childhood through sixth grade and the experiences I draw upon center around this age group, the information presented in this thesis is focused on elementary classrooms.

## **Participant Observations**

The participant observations I have included in this essay were recorded during my time in each different setting. As opposed to general observations, participant observations allow the researcher to engage with participants while taking note of certain happenings. I chose to include observations from experiences I have had in classroom settings in South American, the Caribbean, and the United States, because I believe that there is something to be learned from each educational approach. In the discussion of these observations, I explain ways in which I learned from teachers in the classrooms and interacted with their students. Some communication included informal conversations, in which I attempted to gain further insight; this particularly applies to my experience as a mentee in a fifth-grade classroom in central Texas. Through this relationship and opportunity to observe, I was able to “learn about the culture of teaching from the perspective of a practicing teacher” (Frank, 1999, p. 28)

In order to best apply the information gathered from the observations I have compiled, it is critical to understand the context in which my research took place. Context refers to conditions or circumstances that may impact the way in which something is understood. To this effect, all observations are through the lens of myself as a student, future teacher, and observer. In each of these experiences, I assisted teachers, worked individually with students, and engaged in the classroom environment. I must note that there are multiple perspectives to any situation, and it is critical to understand that “reality is not a given but depends on the position from which you are standing” (Frank, 1999, p. 2). My position is as a senior undergraduate student at Texas State University in the College of

Education. Engaging in participant observations with children in various educational settings in multiple countries caused me to take note of similarities and differences in what I was experiencing, and wonder about how I could apply this knowledge.

### **Teacher Interviews**

In order to gain additional insight and opinions about the ideas I explore, I interviewed teachers from a public elementary school in a district in central Texas. I spoke with two teachers in structured interviews, which refers to interviews in which each participant is asked the same set of questions in a predetermined order. I selected the questions to be asked based on where I felt I had gaps in my understanding after compiling my observations from various experiences. I asked about family and community inclusion, the effectiveness of certain practices, and student engagement in the classroom. I elected to interview elementary school teachers in a public school setting as this is what is most applicable to my experiences and to myself as the researcher. I contacted all second- through fifth-grade teachers at the given school and spoke with those who were able to participate to ensure fair participant selection.

For each interview, I obtained consent from each teacher before scheduling a Zoom call. Zoom was the necessary avenue for conducting these interviews due to current COVID-19 restrictions and the desire to ensure comfort and safety of myself and the participants. During the Zoom call, I asked each teacher the predetermined set of questions and recorded their responses. I then utilized the qualitative information gathered to corroborate the ideas I had derived from my observations and research. These structured interviews allowed me the opportunity to gain firsthand perspectives from current teachers and better understand “teacher thinking”, which includes “multiple and complex concepts



concerning students and classrooms”, and connect this to what I already believed (Frank, 1999, p. 33). The qualitative data and analyses provided in this exploratory thesis can be applied classrooms to aid teachers in the creation of a successful learning environment.

## **Literature**

In providing a complete discussion of my ideas, it was important to collate my findings with literature on best educational practices. I reviewed various academic articles and journals to investigate how studies and common schools of thought compared to my experiences through observations and interviews. The majority of my experiences supported positive findings in literature on best practices, but I additionally discuss and evaluate observations that challenge these academic findings. After completing interviews with teachers, I analyzed their responses through the scope of generally accepted educational ideals found in literature.

Each of the three elements that I discuss, culture, community, and constructivism, encompass a variety of specificities and instructional suggestions. Student cultural practices and personal experiences should be included in curricula and in the physical classroom environment; the community of any given school should be viewed as a resource and incorporated into learning; students should be given opportunities to construct their own knowledge as unique, individual learners. To completely explore each of these specific facets of the elements of a successful classroom, it was necessary to include adequate academic research studies and literature discussing best practices and other aspects of education.

## II - CULTURE

Culture is a conceptualization that is integral to our history, society, and future as people. As culture plays a critical role in our daily lives, cultural practices should not be excluded from the classroom. As educators, “we can think of culture as a set of inquiries” (González, 2005, p. 39) and must recognize the importance of acknowledging the “interculturality of households, drawing on multiple cultural systems and using these systems as strategic resources” within school settings (González, 2005, p. 43). A paramount component of an inclusive learning environment is ensuring that each student feels represented as a fundamental member of the classroom. Cultural practices are often strongly tied to identity, and educators have the responsibility of ensuring that all aspects of a diverse student body’s cultural practices are adequately included. Teachers play a key role in shaping the learning environment, which in turn affects comfort, engagement, academic success, relationships, and other essential components of a classroom. “As educators, we have the power to determine whether students feel included or excluded in our schools and classrooms” (Christensen, 2010, p. 33); teachers must lean into this responsibility and foster a community of acceptance based on the importance of the unique cultural practices of students.

### **Importance of Inclusion of Culture**

Culture is a broad term that refers to the many aspects that are characteristic of any given group, and cultural traits and practices may differ based on individual backgrounds. The umbrella term of culture may include language, traditions, and other norms, all of which are typically deeply tied to identity. People may relate to cultural aspects of the community in which they were raised, a religious body, or a combination of other

groups and experiences. Including relevant cultural aspects in the classroom promotes an inclusive learning environment in which students feel represented and respected; this is the aim of multicultural education.

A fairly recent movement within the twentieth century, multicultural education is an educational orientation that centers around the students rather than any given standard. Standards are historically based upon testing and other assessment requirements, without strong consideration to the students who are being presented with this material. Content is less effectively taught when students have no relationship to the information or their classroom environment. Creating a realm in which students' cultural practices are integrated with each aspect of learning promotes a safe space in which students are able to connect with what they are learning. Students enter the classroom with funds of knowledge derived from their backgrounds; therefore "the validation of the experiences of students and the lived practices of households is an important aspect of critical pedagogy" (González, 2005, p. 41).

Within multicultural education is a strong emphasis on the inclusion of the diversity of the student body, which may refer to backgrounds, personal experiences, language, and other values. Students enter the classroom with a unique perspective that affects the way they relate to the material, meaning that each student will respond to content differently. As such, "multicultural education should be grounded in the lives of students, not only because such a perspective provides a diversity of viewpoints, but also because it honors students' identities and experiences" (Au, 2009, p. 84). It can be beneficial to students of all cultural backgrounds to be exposed to and learn an appreciation for

various cultures, as this promotes the development of open-minded citizens. To this extent, I will be advocating for the inclusion of diverse students' cultural practices as a means of creating a successful classroom in the following chapter.

As stated, culture is an entity that is unique to each individual based on their personal experiences. During the summer of 2018, I traveled to Cusco, Peru to volunteer in an after-school program for children in the city. A predominantly Roman Catholic area, Cusco offered private, religion-centered schools that students attended for part of the day. The after-school program served as a safe space for students to finish homework while their parents were not home; here, I observed a leader include cultural practices in the classroom in a way that was relevant to their specific community and based on students' needs. In this case, all students participating in this program shared the same religion, as did the majority of the community. To this effect, the leader built in time to provide education about this religion as well as include families in this process. One evening when families came to pick up their children, the leader invited them to participate in supplemental instruction regarding this religion and its customs, namely confirmation, which students would soon be going through. This represented support for the integration of cultural practices and education, and the connections of this experience with various literature further supported my understanding of the importance of cultural inclusion.

As culture is a broad term encompassing many varying aspects unique to each individual person, it may seem daunting to incorporate multicultural education into pedagogy, and many teachers may feel ill-equipped. However, multicultural education should not be treated as an optional strategy to be periodically included, but rather as a framework with which teachers build their classroom and improve curricula. The absence of

the inclusion of students' cultural practices may send a strong, negative message to students that discounts their experiences, whether teachers intend this or not; educators should strive to align the school culture with students' cultural experiences. This cultural inclusion approach affects each aspect of the classroom and, when deliberately considered, can provide countless benefits to both students and teachers. The ways in which cultural practices should be integrated that I will discuss and exemplify are language, curricula, and classroom representation, in reference to materials and organization. "[Multicultural] education inherently connects learning to the world outside of our classrooms" (Au, 2009, p. 86), and teachers should strive to provide their students with this broader exposure, representation and deeper level of understanding.

### **Language**

As stated, language is a key feature of the inclusion of cultural practices in the classroom. Teachers must be aware of the linguistic variations and dialects they embrace as well as any preconceived biases they may have. Language especially plays a critical role in identity as supported in academic literature: "cultural identity is utterly akin to linguistic identity" (Christensen, 2010, p. 33). Acceptance and inclusion of language is key in creating a learning environment in which students feel comfortable engaging with the teacher, peers, and the material; "by bringing students' languages from their homes into the classroom, we validate their culture and their history" (Christensen, 2010, p. 33). In the United States, a country often referred to as a 'melting pot', there is a plethora of languages that may comprise any given classroom. From monolinguals to emergent bilinguals to students fluent in multiple dialects, teachers are responsible for incorporating all

varying levels of communication in instruction. Some teachers are equipped with an English as a Second Language certification; however, all teachers, regardless of preparation, may have students at varying levels of proficiency in “Standardized English”, a subset of English that is often referred to in educational settings. Regardless of student proficiency in any language, teachers must be prepared to provide an equal education.

The term ‘language’ encompasses many methods of expression, from written language or sign language to a multitude of vernaculars. English itself may be broken down to refer to Standardized English, African American English or Ebonics, Spanglish, and other unique dialects. Within each subset of language, specific families or cultural groups may have unique terms or divergences. Standardized English is the most widely accepted written vernacular in an American school setting, as this is what most standardized assessments occur in. However, this is not to say that each other language or spoken variation does not have a place in the classroom. Many schools operate under “assumptions about the superiority of Standard English” (Christensen, 2010, p. 34), which downplays the validity of other languages and places many students at a disadvantage.

The term African American English refers to a language spoken by people of African American descent across the United States and Canada; the term Ebonics is often preferred as it denotes this form of communication as its own language, rather than a subset of English. It may include unique words, spelling, and grammatical rules, such as omitting consonants in certain words. Ebonics does not follow the same directives as Standardized English, as it is influenced by African languages. Common examples include the use of double negatives, such as “I ain’t found nothin’” and use of words such

as “ashy” or “chillin” (Christensen, 2010, p. 35). Spanglish is a form of speech that combines English and Spanish terms, also its own unique dialect, typical of LatinX and other speakers of both languages. Many students opt to code switch, a term that refers to alternating forms of speaking, to include their home language as well as Standardized English.

Standardized English is defined as a version of English that adheres to specific grammatical and pronunciation guidelines. This is often viewed as the most ‘correct’ version of English due to country and state standards as well as assessments, and is the most common language in which American school instruction occurs (Christensen, 2000, p. 237). As stated, this places students with a primary home language other than English at a disadvantage. Many teachers are under the impression that, to encourage success on a state test, Standardized English is the only acceptable language to be used in the classroom. This often discourages teachers from promoting differing variations of students’ home languages. It is additionally falsely assumed that having a comprehensive understanding of multiple languages causes proficiency in any one language to deteriorate. However, these misconceptions have been disproved by various studies and research, including examples outlined by McCarty in her 2018 article “So That Any Child May Succeed: Indigenous Pathways Toward Justice and the Promise of *Brown*”. While providing a working understanding of utilizing Standardized English is a responsibility that educators have, this instruction should not prevent other languages from taking their place in the classroom or deter any student from excelling in their home language as well.

McCarty’s is simply one instance in which the academic benefits of the inclusion of students’ home languages have been proven throughout time. As described, Native

Americans were historically suppressed with the intent of assimilation when their land was encroached upon by early settlers. These English-speaking colonizers viewed their version of English as superior and forced Native children to participate in English-only education (McCarty, 2018). Many Navajo educators, in an attempt to rectify the situation, began teaching students in their home language first before extending this instruction to English. The inclusion of and emphasis on the Navajo language yielded impressive results: “Navajo-speaking children who learned to read first in Navajo outperformed comparable students in English-only programs on standardized tests” (McCarty, 2018, p. 276). This serves to prove that forcing students to use an idealized version of Standardized English that they may not connect with does not necessarily increase test scores, as many educators hope. The inclusion of home languages is beneficial, rather than detrimental, to academic results, as supported by literature.

A language is an embodiment of culture, and all students can benefit from exposure to the history of the language of their peers. This inclusion may also “evoke pride” in the students who bring a certain unique dialect to the classroom. These positive feelings contribute to an inclusive and successful learning environment, as well as provide academic benefits, as students learn that their thoughts are the most valuable information communicated, rather than syntax. When teachers are biased in favor of Standardized English, this “silences many students in our classrooms when we value how they speak more than what they say” (Christensen, 2010, p. 33). As I conducted interviews with teachers at a public elementary school in central Texas, connections emerged between these ideas and the thoughts shared. Bilingual educator Ms. Garcia (a pseudonym) explained that when working with her students who spoke multiple languages, she places



emphasis on creating an environment in which students feel welcome and understand that she sees “no difference depending on any aspect” (Interview, 2020, September 28). Communication is her paramount consideration, with academic correctness taking a back seat.

As mentioned, many English-speaking teachers face trepidation when considering including other languages and dialects in their classroom, whether it be in regard to state testing or their lack of ESL and linguistic preparation. This is a concern I understand; when I traveled to study abroad in the Dominican Republic in the summer of 2019, I was immersing myself in the experience of educating students who did not share my language. I worked with students who spoke Spanish and Haitian Creole, and while I have an adequate understanding of basic conversational Spanish, I am not fluent in either language. The students I worked with ranged from elementary-aged to adulthood, and shared the aim of furthering their proficiency in English. English, to them, is an invaluable skill that increases their opportunities of finding work in the tourist industry of their country. My peers and I utilized gestures, facial expressions, visuals, and other nonverbal communication methods to aid us in our instruction, tactics that educators can employ as well. We viewed our students’ languages as a support resource rather than an obstacle, and we found this to be effective.

During our final week in the Dominican Republic, we presented an English camp for adults called Dream Project, specifically designed to increase their English skills in terms of finding a job. We served teenagers and adults ranging in English ability, from none to nearly fluent. We utilized their linguistic ability upon beginning our camp rather than forcing a higher level of English proficiency. We found that relating English instruc-

tion to practices our students had knowledge of in their home language was the most effective instructional method. We communicated in Spanglish, nonverbal gestures, and visuals, and encouraged code switching until a higher understanding of English was developed. One group of students created short stories in English explaining the origin of their name or a family member's name; they explained the meaning in Spanish or in Haitian Creole and its significance to their family. We found that this method of instruction was beneficial for not only our students, but us as well. Rather than teaching in a linear progression of basic English vocabulary, we learned from our students and their languages and used their feedback and information to better present subsequent lessons. In turn, our students were encouraged to learn a new language in a context that was relevant to them and their linguistic background knowledge.

### **Culture in Curricula**

It is understood that much of the hesitation in moving towards a multicultural education approach is rooted in curricula. Many districts have set curricula they opt to use, and certain lessons are geared towards state testing preparation. However, there is a multitude of ways in which teachers can build off of curricula and incorporate cultural practices into their classroom. This may occur in a way as simple as the modification of lesson completion to allow group work or individual work, as it has been found in literature that certain cultural groups respond to collaboration in different ways. As there is a “link between culture and cognition”, culture plays a role in how students respond to the format in which a lesson is taught (Hurley et al., 2005, p. 514). This article by Hurley outlines a study comparing various learning methods of African American children; the resulting findings showed that African American students respond well to communalism

due to the emphasis on family and community that is typical of their culture. Conversely, students of Asian American or Caucasian descent may flourish when given an individual task with an element of competition. Teachers may use this concept to present a given curricula in a variety of modes based on the most effective learning strategies for their students.

When looking to develop a lesson or activity that emphasizes cultural inclusion, there are many strategies teachers can employ. Many of these ideas will vary based on the specific student demographic, as each classroom is unique. One simple method is encouraging the use of home languages in Language Arts or English assignments; students may engage in translanguaging, which refers to “both the complex language practices of plurilingual individuals and communities, as well as the pedagogical approaches that use those complex practices” (García & Wei, 2018, p. 20). A student may produce a written work including terms in multiple languages, or may read a passage in their home language in order to formulate a response in English. For teachers who place importance on sufficient Standardized English instruction, specific activities can be designed that create a space for students to explore their home language. One educator advocates for her method of encouraging students “to use their ‘home language’ as they write stories and poems” about their families, communities, and other personal experiences, further supporting this idea (Christensen, 2000, p. 236). Sharing students’ works with the class opens the classroom up to students learning about their peers and fostering positive communication.

Jody Sokolower (2009) provides many ideas in “Bringing Globalization Home” that teachers may find constructive; she suggests gallery walks and utilizing family as a resource. Her example of a gallery walk included posting images around the classroom

relating to the lesson's topic, permitting students to circulate and observe, and allowing the images to spark conversations that related to student's personal cultural experiences. The subsequent dialogue was an important component of this activity. She further asked her students to interview a parent or relative about their experiences; students sharing what they had learned additionally reinforced the inclusion in learning that Sokolower hoped to promote (Sokolower, 2009). Another educator pushes this concept further by proposing that teachers consider the perspectives they are portraying in certain subjects, namely history. The example of Thanksgiving illuminates the issue that many educators present one side of the story, leaving out the truth of Native people or other minoritized groups (Sleeter, 2014). It is important to provide all viewpoints, both to honor the cultures of students in the classroom as well as present all students with truthful information from which they can draw their own conclusions. Including students' cultural practices in curricula can be done in a variety of ways, and adapting conventional lessons and activities is one place to start.

### **Culture of Poverty**

One unfortunately common misconception of how students learn is the concept of the culture of poverty. This deficit school of thought mandates that impoverished people are "substandard in their socialization practices, language practices, and orientation toward scholastic achievement" (González, 2005, p. 34); in terms of education, the culture of poverty "[emphasizes] linguistic and developmental deficiencies among the lower classes" (Foley, 1997, p.116). This term is related to the language gap, a second postulation that unfortunately labels children in poverty as having lower language exposure and lower ability to succeed. The myth of the language gap mandates that children being

raised in lower socioeconomic households are assumed to be at a significant disadvantage upon entering school, due to being exposed to drastically lower amounts of vocabulary than children in affluent families. “These types of characterizations are based on a deficit orientation that views cultural features that differ from those of dominant groups as defective and in need of remediation” (Johnson, 2019, p. 97); this further highlights the importance of being knowledgeable and inclusive of various cultures.

Poverty is not a ‘culture’ that must be accounted for in the classroom, as many pieces of literature reinforce, and modern ideologies “have left the culture of poverty concept of culture and deficit thinking in the dust bin” (Foley, 1997, p. 124). Thus, teachers must understand that all students are capable learners and deserve equal inclusion and recognition of the value they bring with them to the classroom. “Recognizing that linguistic differences are determined by community context (instead of judging them hierarchically) is a positive step” (Johnson, 2019, p. 103); teacher focus should shift towards language, representation, and familial experiences from viewing socioeconomic status as an appropriate scale with which to measure student success.

### **Cultural Representation in the Classroom**

Culture is widely present in many aspects of our schools today, whether or not educators recognize this. Many schools host holiday celebrations and decorate classrooms with items indicative of certain cultural concepts, without acknowledging the implications or significance of these ideas; the thoughtlessness of these practices has since been challenged. “Multicultural education should seek to draw on the knowledge, perspectives, and voices of the actual communities” (Au, 2009, p. 84); to this effect, teachers should

take into account customs and aspects of their school and alter them in favor of their unique student body.

Representation is another aspect in which culture must be considered. Teachers must be aware of the message their classroom materials are portraying. Classroom libraries should include a variety of languages, cultures, and experiences, and posters and decorations should depict a variety of different students. Teachers should take these ideas into account when considering whether certain materials are appropriate to be included in their classroom and ensure that students see themselves represented in a positive way within their classroom environment. This representation has a strong impact not only on the way students view themselves but the abilities of their peers as well.

The inclusion of cultural practices in the classroom has a strong impact on many aspects of the learning environment. Culture is a lens through which “student experience is legitimated as valid, and classroom practice can build on the familiar knowledge bases that students can manipulate to enhance learning” (González, 2005, p. 43). When students feel that their cultural practices are viewed as assets and worthy of inclusion in instruction, teachers will see higher levels of engagement as students connect with material and learn from each other. Students can benefit from learning about the experiences of their peers and gaining a broader cultural understanding that may develop into an open-minded perspective. Teachers should strive to utilize this educational ideal in order to create an inclusive learning environment. Because each classroom will be unique in student makeup, I am not calling for specific cultural standards to be put in place; there are a variety of adaptable ideas, such as the ones I have discussed and supported with experiences and references, that may be implemented to reach these goals. Multicultural education

leads to academic benefits, higher student self-concepts, positive peer relations, and more effective communication. This is one key component of a successful classroom that teachers should incorporate.

### **III - COMMUNITY**

Philosopher and educator John Dewey wrote, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely” (Dewey, 1899, p. 19). Dewey’s statement of the importance of family and community involvement in education has shaped many educational ideals and continues to influence many schools and educators. It has been discussed that students’ outside experiences must be included in learning. In order to serve students most successfully, teachers must specifically involve the outside community in the classroom and learning process. Aside from academic learning, elementary school is a critical stage in which children develop social and life skills to help them become positive members of their community, and support is necessary throughout this development.

#### **Importance of Community Involvement in Learning**

The community in which students are attending school plays a key role in shaping how they learn; where students come from, available resources, and traditions and customs are all brought into the classroom by students. By having a deep knowledge of the community itself and making a conscious effort to include it in learning, teachers can in turn create a more successful classroom environment. A 2006 study found that “the effect of outside school factors on student academic achievement was greater than inside school factors” (Hiatt-Michael, 2006, p. 9). This supports the idea that in order to help students

fully reap the benefits of their education, teachers must involve the community. This chapter will serve as an explanation of the relationship between school and community, as well as a discussion of how to include these ideals in the classroom.

Community is a broad term; in regard to education, teachers should consider how to involve the families of students, the physical community in which students reside, resources or other aspects of the community that may impact education, and current events within the community, which I will further explain and support. Being cognizant of these outside factors and consciously making room for them in classroom can deepen relationships between teachers, students and their families while building a learning environment in which students feel a sense of belonging and representation. Specifically, the concept of funds of knowledge explains that teachers can “construct communities of learners” by researching their students’ communities and acknowledging the impact that this has on the prior knowledge they bring to the learning experience (González et al., 2005, p. 28). When students can create intentional connections between academic learning and their lives, they relate more extensively to the information and may feel more secure in their classroom. This, in turn, may also lead to increased academic achievement and engagement:

“Family and community involvement in education is linked strongly to improvements in the academic achievement of students, better school attendance, and improved school programs and quality. Family and community involvement also is associated with improved student behavior and school discipline” (Michael et al., 2007, p. 568).



## **Possibilities of Including Community in the Classroom**

There are many ways in which educators can include elements of the community in their classroom. Inclusion of families of students is a critical first step; teachers should maintain an open line of communication with families at all times and provide updates or information about the classroom. Home support and extension of learning is beneficial in overall achievement, and teachers may encourage this by inviting families to participate in the classroom as well. Ms. Brown (a pseudonym), a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher that I interviewed from a public elementary school in central Texas, presented an idea that she referred to as “peek at the week” (Interview, 2020, September 30). Every Sunday, she shares a short summary of the upcoming week’s goals and activities with families, which is communicated through multiple platforms to ensure accessibility. This simple act creates a bridge between school and home settings, while drawing families into student learning. If there are any positive behaviors or achievements to report, she will include this as well. Ms. Garcia was also in support of this idea, stating that “constant communication [is] the key” and that she places a high priority on this in her classroom (Interview, 2020, September 28). Deepening learning beyond academic instruction is critical to creating a positive classroom community in which students can interact, participate, and grow. Ms. Brown chose to incorporate this concept at a previous school by extending a traditional back-to-school night; she mentioned to me that she invited both students and families and arranged a setup in which “they had to be able to manipulate or do something in [the] room with their parents” (Interview, 2020, September 30). Families are a source of students’ funds of knowledge, and this demonstrates a positive way to integrate learning.

In my experiences working in various educational settings, I have observed how many different learning environments incorporate community in a way that is directly relevant to their particular population of students. My experiences in the after-school program in Peru provided further insight to the interrelatedness of community and education. Many students whose parents worked in the streets selling goods to tourists relied on the free after-school program, offered by the police department, as a place to complete homework and wait for the work day to end. This program made an effort to involve the parents and families of these children as a way to help integrate the key aspects of the community with education.

As the after-school program served all grade levels and ages, I witnessed the coming-together of many community members to serve the students. The head leaders of the program were members of the police department who volunteered their time to ensure that students had a safe, supervised, space to work and learn when they could not go home. While they were not educators, they provided food and support to encourage learning, supporting ways in which learning extends beyond the classroom. Older students often helped younger students with homework, and parents were free to drop off younger children for care as well. During the evenings of my time volunteering at the program, all parents were invited at the end of their work day to speak with the program directors and receive any information they needed. This commitment of the police department represented an understanding of the importance of providing family support in learning and was a direct example of integration of community and education. This program provided the necessary assistance to ensure that students could continue their learning outside of

school and be successful while in the classroom, and exemplifies the link between school and community.

In another case during my experience working in a private school in Ballenitas, Ecuador during January of 2019, I found that schools themselves may also serve as a vessel to connect members of the community and build a stronger support system for students and families outside the classroom. I observed a community that centered around encouraging its students and furthering their development as individuals, rather than simply as recipients of knowledge. The orientation of this particular school was drastically different from any other I had encountered; students learned in their classrooms with teacher instruction from seven o'clock in the morning to one o'clock in the afternoon. At that time, they would be given a short recess for lunch, then attend a club of their choice, directed by the school, until their parents came to take them home. Rather than being offered an extracurricular outside of school hours that perhaps some students cannot afford, as I have encountered in the United States, students were encouraged to broaden their interests and skills. The clubs ranged from physical activities such as basketball or dancing to music, theater, and band, and many students opted to participate in multiple clubs.

At the end of one week that I spent at this school, all members of the community were invited to view a presentation of the clubs. We all gathered in an outdoor courtyard and watched students perform dances, demonstrate sports skills, and exhibit what they had learned. The turnout was impressive; parents, families, and neighbors were eager to visit the school and be involved in the event. Students were thrilled to see people they

knew showing support for them in the audience. The opportunity within the school setting to engage in multiple interests with the incentive of showing new skills to the community led to students who were well-behaved in class and focused during the allocated instructional time. A study centered around a rural Ecuadorian elementary school, similar to the school I am referencing, supports these observations with an explanation that involving community is a key educational concept in many parts of the country; “By focusing on community participation, the rural school can help students, families and communities to provide a ‘center for [their] life interests’” (Vender, 1994, p. 116).

Community may also be included directly in instruction, whether it be the lesson topic or organization of a specific activity. Students should be aware of their community and how it impacts their life. Incorporating aspects directly into academic learning can foster this connection and understanding. While in the Dominican Republic, my time was spent time working with English language learners of various ages in a setting designed to teach conversational and workplace-applicable English skills. It is beneficial to understanding for students to have the opportunity to relate new information to previously held experiences or knowledge. In introducing the English language, we employed this idea while utilizing the community around us. We engaged students in a community walk to build connections between the information they were learning and their lives; this is a strategy that teachers can utilize in a variety of applications.

The purpose of our community walk was a familiarization with the English alphabet. In the classroom, we practiced exploring the relationship between each letter and its corresponding sound. We then allowed the students to be our guides around the community in search of something that began with each letter they had learned. Students noticed

names of buildings or businesses, and sounded out items such as foods specific to their area. We took photos and went so far as to buy and eat some of the foods to truly connect with these concepts. As teachers, we were able to learn more about our students and what their daily lives consist of as well as what is important to them. Students were able to take control of their learning, demonstrate responsibility, and relate a foreign concept to something familiar. Engaging in learning outside of the classroom is an effective way to connect with the community and deepen learning. For aspects of curriculum that may not readily allow for community inclusion, teachers can incorporate adaptations based on this idea in a variety of applications.

Involving community ideals as a way to foster a positive learning environment is a successful classroom management technique as well, which is something I observed during my year-long mentorship in a fifth-grade classroom in central Texas. The teacher I shadowed implemented procedures to consistently begin the day in a way that was centered around community. Once the bell rang, she sat amongst her students and engaged them in a conversation. During this time, she would discuss any relevant current events, whether it be an upcoming school field trip or an important occurrence, and check in with her students. One related suggestion that teachers can implement to effectively check in is to ask students to share one word that represents how they feel that day; if someone is ‘tired’ or ‘frustrated’, this could prompt a short conversation, at the student’s comfortability, to ensure they have the support they needed. These actions bridge the gap between the school environment and the outside world and additionally encourage the development of students into positive members of their classroom and local communities. Stu-

dents feel like their voices matter and are given the opportunity to practice listening respectfully to their peers; when speaking with Ms. Garcia in our interview, she highlighted the importance of these conversations in fostering a successful learning community. She explained that she acts as a mentor, and not solely as a teacher, for her core group of students. Through individual conversations, she connects with her students, learns about them, and finds ways to relate to commonalities between them (Interview, 2020, September 28).

There are many attainable ways in which educators can intentionally incorporate community into their classroom that I suggest based on comparisons between the aforementioned experiences, interviews, and literature. Beginning with open communication, parents and guardians should feel confident in how their child is learning, as well as feel comfortable reaching out to the teacher. Families should be considered critical resources and contributors to knowledge; all children bring with them to the classroom their own prior knowledge, and their funds of knowledge illuminate the relationship between how home life impacts school learning:

“This totality of experiences, the cultural structuring of the households, whether related to work or play, whether they take place individually, with peers, or under the supervision of adults, helps constitute the funds of knowledge children bring to school” (González et al., 2005, p. 75).

This postulation can be expanded upon to facilitate the formation of connections between school and home. Teachers may elect to invite family members to participate in a lesson, volunteer in the classroom, be a guest reader, or speak to the students when appropriate. This serves the purpose of bringing support for the student directly into the

learning environment, expanding upon the ideas brought into the classroom, and allowing parents to be involved with their child. In situations where this may not be possible, Ms. Garcia reiterated the importance of constant communication. She explained that family involvement is “not always academic”; as a bilingual teacher, she is aware of a common misconception that families “feel like they are not able to support the students” if they are not fluent in English (Interview, 2020, September 28) In reality, there is always a way for families to be involved. A suggestion she presented was providing parents with pictures, videos, or other comprehensible input to review at home to connect them to student learning in a way that is appropriate for them. Engagement between teachers and students’ homes “based on non-academic topics will often cause the student to be more engaged at school” (Johnson, n.d.), and is something teachers can strive for.

When discussing community, it is the responsibility of the teacher to remain engaged with and aware of the community that their school serves. Teachers should attend community events that may be important to their students, educate the class on important current events, and help students engage with the community through lessons, as supported in the following piece of literature:

“To the extent that your time and life outside the classroom permit, participate in school and community activities that bring you into contact with your students and their parents... consider such activities as eating lunch or breakfast in the school cafeteria with students or allowing students to bring theirs to your classroom as a special reward; attending school athletic events or other performances, schoolwide fairs, and other scheduled events; and looking for opportunities to

have conversations with students outside the classroom, such as in hallways, before or after school” (Evertson & Emmer, 2017, p. 21).

Forming these connections through seemingly simple actions is beneficial to students and may lead to a deep host of benefits.

### **Effects of Community Involvement**

Community involvement and the specific classroom community affects students in a multitude of ways. When teachers draw upon the resources and cultural practices of their community, they can help students create deeper meaning in academic instruction. Connecting the classroom to the outside world is incredibly powerful; this allows students develop a stronger relationship with what they are learning. The community within the classroom itself is critical to student success as well. Students should feel comfortable making mistakes, feel safe, and know they are supported. Ms. Brown stressed the importance of making each child feel cared for; she mentioned in our interview, “I am not shy about telling them that I care for them. I am not shy about listening to them” (Interview, 2020, September 30). She allows students to freely share with her stories from their home lives, creating a positive classroom community by acknowledging the importance of students’ experiences. The more support a child can have throughout their learning process, whether it be from their teacher, peers, family, or mentors, the more success they can have within the classroom; these actions uphold the assertions presented in this thesis.

The paramount component for educators to keep in mind is ensuring that students feel supported in both in life and in learning in order to foster successful classroom com-



munities. The inclusion of community may look different depending on the school setting, availability of resources, and other restrictions; however, it is entirely feasible for teachers to adjust their practices to incorporate certain aspects of the outside community as well as provide for a positive classroom community based on suggestions and information I have provided. To best strive for a successful classroom environment, teachers must take this element into consideration.

#### **IV - CONSTRUCTIVISM**

As educators, we are trained to recognize that each student enters our classroom ‘full’. That is to say that students bring with them a wealth of prior knowledge and background experiences that will affect the way they learn and interact with material. Constructivism is an educational theory centered around the idea that students create their own understanding based on their prior knowledge; there are many integrated facets of this theory that outline how teachers should implement instruction. This theory is tied to important philosophers, psychologists, and educators such as Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky and Dewey. In the words of Dewey, “education is not an affair of ‘telling’ and being told, but an active and constructive process” (Dewey, 1916, p. 46). In order to foster a successful learning environment, educators must teach in a student-centered way that recognizes students’ prior knowledge and provides them with opportunities to build upon it.

##### **Discussion of Constructivism as an Educational Theory**

Constructivism is a complex philosophy that has many strong implications in the field of education. While discussing this theory and its benefits, I will provide specific strategies and examples of its information of pedagogical practices. I believe that the student-centered aspect of constructivism can, and should, additionally be extended to the

ways in which a classroom is organized. In reference to this particular application, Qiu states that constructivism “is a theory about knowledge and learning, which emphasizes learners’ initiative. It holds that learning is a process in which learners generate meaning and construct understanding based on their original knowledge experience” (Qiu, 2019, p. 1167). Many of these current understandings are based upon discussions of constructivism by the people who helped define it, such as Jean Piaget. Piaget believed constructivism to be “a reconstitution of reality by the concepts of the subject who, progressively and with all kinds of experimental probes, approaches the object” (Bringuier, 1980). Jerome Bruner’s works additionally supported these definitions as they “propose a cognitive constructivist approach in that learning is an active social process where new knowledge is constructed through exploration of their world, or based on prior knowledge” (Stapleton & Stefaniak, 2018, p. 4).

Teachers must be aware of the implications of constructivism and how to create a student-centered learning environment in order to effectively serve students. It is important to note that an “important restriction of education is that teachers cannot simply transmit knowledge to students, but students need to actively construct knowledge in their own minds” (Olusegun, 2015, p. 66). By allowing students to draw on prior knowledge and struggle and work with material on their own terms, they can develop an understanding that is deeper than anything they could gain from simply passively listening. This is an interesting but important perspective on the role of a teacher supported in literature; when referring back to the concept of funds of knowledge, “we find the students engaged in their own production of knowledge. The teacher has become a mediator,

providing strategic assistance that would facilitate the students' inquiry and work” (González, 2005, p. 27). Students should be able to approach a topic from their current level of understanding and collaborate with peers and the teacher to improve upon this.

Focusing on the students as producers of knowledge rather than the teacher as a communicator of knowledge can allow students to find enjoyment in the learning process and to form a stronger connection to the material. “Children learn more, and enjoy learning more when they are actively involved, rather than passive listeners” (Olusegun, 2015, p. 68), and teachers must keep this in mind when preparing and implementing lessons. Educators should incorporate varying interests, learning styles, and differentiated instruction to reach a diverse group of learners. No two students approach learning the same way, and teachers must value and address individualities. This thought concept may additionally aid teachers in successfully working with students of varying language backgrounds or special needs. Providing students with choice, responsibility, and opportunities to engage with learning material interact in the classroom to create a successful learning environment.

### **Importance of Constructivism**

As each student's background knowledge and experiences entering a classroom will be unique, educators must meet students where they are and scaffold as learning ensues. Fostering connections between academic material and students' prior understanding, as well as incorporating student experiences and interests, can help students find enjoyment in the learning process. Open communication, and the incorporation of group work and collaboration, can help students feel free to express their emotions and make mistakes while learning, as each student may approach concepts differently. Teachers can

foster this communication and openness through class discussions, partner shares, and guided group work. When students do make mistakes, teachers should discuss the thought process behind them and guide students towards making adjustments. The teacher themselves should not be afraid to make mistakes and correct them; this serves as a way to model appropriate learner behavior.

Purposefully incorporating constructivist ideals and centering learning around students has a strong impact on the classroom as a whole. When students have responsibility, choice, and feel represented in what they are learning and how they are learning it, they may feel more comfortable taking risks and pursuing growth. Students should feel secure in who they are as members of the classroom and be able to communicate vulnerably with peers and the teacher in order to deepen understanding and learn from mistakes. I have witnessed the setbacks students may experience when none of these ideas have been put in place in a classroom. When comparing my personal experiences to literature, I have identified an example that did not adhere to ideas supported throughout my readings and consequently negatively affected students.

While the school I volunteered at in Ballenitas, Ecuador, had admirable qualities as a facet of the community, it was severely lacking in certain approaches within the classrooms. The classroom is a unique environment where students construct knowledge both academically and in relation to the world around them. The Kindergarten classroom I assisted in focused solely on the teachers as transmitters of knowledge, with no regards to the students as learners. As Olusegun states, “education works best when it concentrates on thinking and understanding, rather than on rote memorization” (Olusegun, 2015, p. 68). The teachers I observed did not implement this concept in any way, and I noticed

students struggling. While the inclusion of clubs, as discussed, served as an incentive for attentiveness, many key academic concepts were not effectively taught.

While Kindergarten standards may vary across the world, the focus I observed was counting from zero to twenty-four. There are many hands-on, engaging ways to help young students understand counting concepts such as cardinality or subitizing; however, the teachers in this classroom simply focused on the order of the numbers. While this is an important aspect of counting, the methods they practiced left no room for corrections or scaffolding in any way. Each student was asked to come to the front chalkboard and count aloud from zero to twenty-four, and then down from twenty-four to zero. If students were incorrect, they were not corrected, and rather asked to sit down. After each student had completed this task, I helped pass out related worksheets and moved around the room to assist. The worksheets featured the same numbers, zero through twenty-four, with spaces for students to copy the numbers. I noticed that many students were simply scribbling on the page, and not one demonstrated understanding of the concept, even with my intervention. They had formed no connection to the material they were learning and did not understand how to apply it. This example serves to maintain my affirmation of the importance of constructivist ideals.

### **Possibilities of Implementing Constructivist Ideas in the Classroom**

There are many ways in which educators can interact with this concept and incorporate student-centered ideas to foster a successful classroom environment. With an understanding of the importance of practicing pedagogies from a constructivist orientation in the classroom, educators may feel overwhelmed. “To date, a focus on student-centered learning may well be the most important contribution of constructivism”, and a key first

step is being aware of how we are treating our students (Olusegun, 2015, p. 66). If we communicate respectfully with our students and treat them like capable learners, we can help them learn how to understand the material we are presenting. There should be no power dynamic in play within the classroom. As students are responsible for constructing their knowledge, this means the teacher should not be placed above them in a position of the sole transmitter of information. Both Ms. Garcia and Ms. Brown are proponents of this notion; they stressed the importance of being clear in the fact that they care about their students and connecting with them where possible. To do so, one idea shared by Ms. Brown was to share a few personal facts with her class each day during the first week of school. She selected facts that were relevant to her students; these conversations and subsequent student reactions allowed her students to relate to commonalities they may share, and allowed Ms. Brown to present herself as someone her students could talk to and learn from comfortably.

I observed the effectiveness of adhering to constructivist ideals and support for teaching in student-centered manner during one of my personal experiences. As a mentee in a fifth-grade classroom in central Texas, I worked with many students at varying levels of mastery. One student in particular was a young girl, Rachel (a pseudonym), who my teacher immediately identified to me as someone who was falling behind; she had attended a Montessori school for years prior and this was her first experience with public education. Being thrown into a high achieving district from an entirely different learning environment was a difficult adjustment both in terms of structure and presented content, and I was tasked with working individually with her to help her catch up to her peers. With the understanding that she did not have the same background knowledge as the

teacher expected from students who had been attending this school for years, I scaffolded mathematics concepts beginning with her current level. Rachel had been learning to manipulate fractions with her class and had not passed the assessments her teacher had administered. While working with her, I noticed that she struggled to add, subtract, and simplify fractions because she lacked a basic prerequisite skill: multiplication. We spent time one-on-one practicing multiplication and division flashcards, and discussing strategies, until she constructed a foundation that was solid. Her subsequent improvement was drastic, and she gained confidence in herself as a learner.

Scaffolding, as mentioned above, is a critical teaching strategy; as defined by Vygotsky, scaffolding refers to the “role of teachers and others in supporting the learner’s development and providing support structures to get to that next stage or level” (Vygotsky, n.d.). Teachers should cater support to the specific student and stage of learning and adjust as students begin to construct knowledge. Scaffolding draws on the prior knowledge of students and ensures they have created understanding before moving forward, an important tactic in teaching in a student-centered way. Ms. Garcia demonstrates this in her classroom in the following way: “Something that I like always to do with math is a statement objective and let them know why they’re learning and why it’s important in their lives” (Interview, 2020, September 28). She begins with a basic objective statement, prompts students with questions or a visual to assess background knowledge, and continues scaffolding from there.

The theory of constructivism additionally mandates that collaboration is an important aspect of a successful classroom that allows students to construct their own knowledge by communicating with peers. Teachers should “encourage students to engage

in dialogue with the teacher and with one another” (Olusegun, 2015, p. 69); I experienced this facet of constructivism during my time in Peru and can compare these statements to what I observed. As I am not fluent in Spanish, I faced difficulties working with students in the Cusco after-school program on their homework. Many of the questions that students had about their assignments could not be answered by someone with conversational-level Spanish, such as myself. When they grew frustrated, they demanded that I tell them the answers, which I could not do. As many students were working on assignments from the same subject, I encouraged them to collaborate. Successful learning “should reflect collaboration between both students and teachers, and students and students” (Honebein, 1996, p.12), and I witnessed the effectiveness of this idea during this time. I provided guidance where I could, but I noticed that my students fell into a rhythm of discussing the topics of their homework and working towards a solution together. In the end, this was a more effective method of practicing these skills as students constructed this knowledge on their own.

As previously mentioned, a critical aspect of establishing a positive constructivist learning environment is providing student-centered materials and activities. Teachers should “encourage ownership and voice in the learning process. This illustrates the student-centeredness of constructivist learning” (Honebein, 1996, p. 12). This inherent focus on students as individual learners may be presented in many ways; a simple writing exercise may be adapted to fulfill these ideas. As a volunteer at the English camp for adults that I led with my peers while in the Dominican Republic, we found a way to implement this concept in a way that was meaningful and effective. We had split students into



groups based on their English proficiency level, as we wanted each student to receive instruction that was beneficial to them. Near the end of our camp, we helped the more advanced students write a short story.

In this writing exercise, we asked students to write about a name, a culturally responsive idea previously mentioned. We presented them with the choice of explaining the meaning of their own name or the name of a family member that was important to them. While many chose their own, some students wrote beautiful pieces about how they chose their children's names. This was a topic that each student could relate to, but that was unique to each person as an individual learner. As the process of writing had become centered around each student, I noticed that they began to connect to English as a way to share their experiences. While we, as 'teachers', could assist in questions about English conventions, we did not know the story behind these names. Our students were put into a space where they could construct linguistic knowledge in English to tell their personal stories.

### **Choice**

It is important to be aware of how we, as educators, plan and implement lessons as well. Choice, responsibility, and learner differences should be addressed. Choice can occur in something simple, such as choice in what to write about or which math problems to solve. Choice can also be integrated in differentiated instruction; each student may learn best in a different way, and it is critical to incorporate different methods of learning, when applicable, to best serve the class. Honebein suggests "the use of multiple modes of representation" (Honebein, 1996, p. 12); teachers may combine audio, visuals, text or kinetic activities to help students form connections. While offering multiple variations of a

topic within a lesson demonstrates a respect for students as individuals, it also ensures that students can construct knowledge in a way that is effective for them and allows an additional avenue for choice.

Ms. Brown agrees with the benefits of choice and implements this in her classroom. She mentioned that her class schedule includes a designated “self-directed and a blended learning time”. She may specify a goal for students to focus on during this time, but they have the choice of which adaptive program they would like to work with. Additionally, projects her students complete incorporate the idea of choice as well:

“We’re learning the same things, but then when it comes down to it, the product that they’re going to physically create, they get the choice of which one they want to create. But they’re going to learn all of the information beforehand to create each of the choices; at the end, the final project is going to be their choice” (Interview, 2020, September 30).

Choice may also be integrated into group collaboration, another important facet of constructivism that has been discussed. Students may choose roles within a group that allow them to learn most successfully; they may assert themselves as a leader, flourish in reading as a researcher, or take on another task related to the specific activity. Collaboration reinforces communication within the classroom and allows students to draw on the experiences of their peers in order to best construct their own knowledge. The exposure to many perspectives is beneficial, and group collaboration additionally gives the teacher more opportunities to scaffold students’ learning.

## **Student-Centered Classrooms**

Student-centeredness can be extended beyond lesson planning and classroom interactions to create a truly successful learning environment. Teachers may apply these ideals to the organization of their classroom; student work should be present throughout the room to show support for the knowledge students are constructing. Students should feel represented and appreciated in a learning environment that is focused on them. Areas such as centers can be spaces for choice in activity and for individual construction of knowledge. Student interests can be incorporated into classroom decoration, furniture, and items such as the books in the class library, and desks can be arranged in a way that encourages communication and interaction. Ms. Brown reflected on an experience she had teaching at a private school in Texas; she noticed her students were expressing a strong interest in snakes. She gathered many relevant living science materials, brought them into her classroom, and taught a lesson about snake identification and safety during science class. While not all teachers may find themselves able to exercise such freedom, the concept of representing students within the classroom is universally applicable.

Classrooms are a space in which students learn in a variety of ways. While the teacher plays a critical role in this system, they must consciously build an environment that focuses on students as constructors of their own knowledge in order to create a successful classroom. Constructivism is an important educational theory that places students at the center of their own learning, and has proved effective within school settings, as identified throughout my personal experiences, interviews, and literature reviews. There are many simple ways in which teachers can draw on this conceptualization, and the benefits are monumental. Communication, collaboration, and centering on students can allow

educators to construct a classroom environment in which their students can flourish as learners, earning constructivism a place as a key element of a successful classroom.

## **V - CONCLUSION**

There are countless ideologies that have guided educational philosophies over the past centuries. While education is an ever-evolving field, there are certain concepts that have been proven effective within classrooms. As a future teacher, I wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to dive deeper into what elements are common among successful classrooms, regardless of cultural context. As each school environment and group of students is unique, I compiled research, interviews, and experiences from school settings in South America, the Caribbean, and the United States to ensure that I provided a comprehensive, unbiased view. The ideas presented, regarding culture, community, and constructivism, can be applied and adapted to serve many diverse groups of students.

The three key concepts of culture, community, and constructivism integrate to outline a classroom environment that is cognizant of its students' cultural experiences and backgrounds, home surroundings and support, and ability to create meaningful knowledge. Each intention can relate to curriculum, methods of instruction, or establishment of the classroom environment. I observed both positive and negative implementations of these concepts in my field experiences, which I drew on to further support my claims. My experiences in central Texas, Peru, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic allowed me to speak from an informed perspective based on my data. I am aware of the restricted amount of time spent observing each setting and the hindrance this placed on gaining a comprehensive perspective, and I have taken this into account when analyzing data. I further supplemented my assertions with academic research and interviews with

teachers in a public central Texas elementary school. Speaking with these teachers allowed me to connect my thoughts to ways in which they are currently being implemented in classrooms in my community. The confidential, Zoom interviews allowed for an engaging, pressure-free conversation about effective classrooms.

I believe that the research I have conducted and compiled will serve to better prepare me for my future career. The concepts I have outlined will be applicable to any teaching position I fill and can be adjusted to my specific students; as all ideas are based on genuine classrooms, they are easily adaptable. Practicing these notions will allow me, and any other educator, to create an environment that is responsive to students and allows them to engage with material in the most effective way. Students are, and should remain, the center of our classrooms, and aligning with these ideas can ensure that teachers are best serving their students.

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