

# Building Community in The Classroom: Elementary School Teachers in Focus

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*Abstract* — The central objective of the study was to examine and explore the real-life experiences, coping strategies, and insights gained from elementary school teachers' in building a sense of community in the classroom. The researchers adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach, observing eight elementary school teachers from Cluster 12, Division of Davao City. The teachers' revealed their experiences of creating classroom rules and expectations, establishing classroom routines, encouraging student collaboration, and building positive relationships. Coping mechanisms employed by teachers to address challenges included providing positive reinforcement, setting expectations for behavior, creating opportunities for student collaboration, and establishing routines and procedures. From their experiences and coping strategies, valuable knowledge emerged regarding the challenges faced by elementary school teachers' in building a community in the classroom. Ultimately, the lessons learned encompassed embracing and respecting differences, understanding each student individually, and acquiring knowledge in behavioral management. These findings can serve as valuable input in designing effective teacher training programs to equip educators with diverse strategies and techniques for building community in the classroom.

*Keywords* — *Elementary school teachers' lived experiences, coping mechanisms, lesson learned, building classroom community, Davao City, Philippines.*

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## I. Introduction

Building a sense of community in the classroom has been shown to be an effective way of promoting academic and social-emotional development in students. Research suggests that creating a positive classroom environment that fosters a sense of belonging, mutual respect, and collaboration among students can enhance academic achievement, reduce behavioral problems, and improve students' mental health and well-being. However, creating a classroom community is not an easy task, especially for elementary school teachers who are responsible for managing a diverse group of students with different backgrounds, learning styles, and personalities.

Classroom community is a concept that has gained increasing attention in education research in recent years. Scholars have emphasized the importance of community building in the classroom for several reasons. First, building a sense of community is crucial for promoting students' social-emotional development. Students who feel connected to their peers and teachers are more likely to have positive self-concepts, higher levels of motivation, and greater resilience in the face of challenges (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Second, classroom community is essential for

promoting academic engagement and achievement. Research suggests that students who feel a sense of belonging in their classrooms are more likely to participate in class, ask questions, and seek feedback from their teachers (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Finally, creating a classroom community is a way of promoting positive interactions among students and reducing the likelihood of negative behaviors such as bullying or exclusion (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Despite the recognized benefits of community building in the classroom, research has also shown that it can be a complex and challenging process. Teachers face several obstacles when attempting to build a sense of community in their classrooms. For instance, they must manage a diverse group of students who may have different cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and personalities. Moreover, they must balance the need for creating a positive classroom environment with the demands of the curriculum and the pressure to meet academic standards (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Finally, they must navigate the dynamics of interpersonal relationships among students, including conflicts and social hierarchies (Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009).

To address the challenges of building a community in the classroom, several approaches have been proposed in the literature. For instance, some scholars have suggested that teachers should focus on creating a positive emotional climate in the classroom, which involves providing students with emotional support, modeling positive behavior, and building relationships with each student (Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009). Others have emphasized the importance of fostering a sense of collective responsibility among students, which involves encouraging them to work together towards common goals and to support each other in their learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). By exploring teachers' experiences in building a classroom community, this study aims to shed light on the strategies that are most effective in promoting positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for students.

One approach that has been found to be effective in building a classroom community in the United States is the Responsive Classroom approach. This approach emphasizes the importance of creating a safe and positive learning environment, promoting social-emotional learning, and fostering a sense of belonging and community among students (Center for Responsive Schools, n.d.). The Responsive Classroom approach has been found to be effective in promoting positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for students (Parker, 2019).

In the Philippines, building a sense of community in the classroom is also a crucial aspect of elementary school education. Filipino teachers often utilize a variety of strategies to achieve this, including cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and service learning (Kisler, 2015). Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy where students work in small groups to achieve a common goal. This strategy has been found to promote positive interdependence, individual accountability, and group processing, which are all essential in building a sense of community in the classroom (Kisler, 2015).

Building a sense of community in the classroom is vital in promoting a positive learning environment where students feel valued, respected, and supported. According to a study by Strati, Schmidt, and Maier (2017), students who feel a sense of belonging in the classroom are more engaged in their learning, have higher academic achievement, and have a more positive attitude toward school. By fostering positive relationships between students and teachers, a classroom community can help reduce absenteeism and increase participation, which can lead to improved academic performance (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

*Experiences of elementary school teachers' in Building a community in the classroom*

The creation of a positive classroom community is a vital aspect of elementary education that requires considerable effort from teachers. By establishing a sense of community within the classroom, teachers can foster a supportive and engaging learning environment that enhances academic achievement and social-emotional development (Cefai et al., 2016). The experiences of elementary school teachers in building a community in the classroom may vary depending on cultural and regional differences, but common practices include creating classroom rules and expectations, establishing routines, promoting student collaboration, and building positive relationships with students (Freiberg & Stein, 1999). Through these experiences, teachers can support the social-emotional well-being of their students, encourage positive behavior, and promote academic success (Wentzel, 1998). This paper aims to explore the experiences of elementary school teachers in building a community in the classroom, drawing on existing literature and research on the topic (Kohn, 1996).

*Creating Classroom Rules and Expectations.* One common experience of elementary school teachers in building a community in the classroom is creating classroom rules and expectations with their students. This process can help establish a shared understanding of acceptable behavior and create a positive learning environment (Kohn, 1996). Teachers may involve students in creating these rules and expectations to increase student ownership and engagement (Freiberg & Stein, 1999).

*Establishing Classroom Routines.* Another important experience is establishing classroom routines to create a predictable and structured learning environment. Routines such as morning meetings, class discussions, and end-of-day reflections can help foster a sense of community and support social-emotional learning (Cefai et al., 2016).

*Encouraging Student Collaboration.* Encouraging students to collaborate and work together on projects or assignments can also build a sense of community in the classroom. This experience can promote teamwork, social skills, and critical thinking (Kohn, 1996). Teachers may provide opportunities for student-led group discussions, peer feedback, and cooperative learning activities (Freiberg & Stein, 1999).

*Building Positive Relationships.* Finally, building positive relationships with students is crucial in creating a community in the classroom. Teachers can do this by getting to know their

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students' interests and backgrounds, providing individualized attention and support, and offering opportunities for students to share their thoughts and feelings (Cefai et al., 2016). By building strong relationships with their students, teachers can create a safe and supportive learning environment.

### *Coping mechanisms of elementary school Teachers building community in the classroom*

Elementary school teachers face numerous challenges in building a sense of community in their classrooms. Classroom communities refer to the supportive and inclusive environment created within the classroom where students feel valued, respected, and connected to their peers and teacher. Teachers often use a variety of coping mechanisms to build this type of community. Coping mechanisms can include strategies such as setting expectations for behavior, creating opportunities for student collaboration, establishing routines and procedures, and providing positive reinforcement. By utilizing these coping mechanisms, elementary school teachers can foster a sense of belonging, safety, and trust within their classrooms, which can lead to improved academic performance and social-emotional development for students.

Research has shown that building a strong classroom community is essential for student success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2013). Teachers who effectively establish classroom communities often see benefits such as increased student engagement, positive relationships with students, and decreased behavior problems. Coping mechanisms used by teachers to build community in the classroom have been widely studied and discussed in academic literature. Teachers can draw on this research to develop and refine their own strategies for building strong classroom communities that support student success.

*Providing positive reinforcement.* Teachers can use positive reinforcement to recognize and celebrate students' achievements and efforts. This can foster a sense of recognition and appreciation among students (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2009). Providing positive reinforcement is a mechanism that elementary school teachers can use to build a sense of community in their classrooms. Positive reinforcement refers to providing recognition and praise for desirable behaviors and actions, and it has been shown to promote feelings of motivation, self-esteem, and engagement among students. When teachers provide positive reinforcement, they are signaling to students that their contributions and efforts are valued, which can foster a sense of belonging and connectedness within the classroom community. This sense of connectedness can promote prosocial behaviors and contribute to the development of a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

*Setting expectations for behavior.* Teachers can establish clear expectations for behavior and norms for how students should treat each other in the classroom. This can promote a sense of order and respect among students (Leff, Thomas, & Vaughn, 2010). Setting expectations for behavior is another mechanism that elementary school teachers can use to build a sense of community in their classrooms. When teachers establish clear expectations for behavior and norms

for how students should treat each other in the classroom, they are promoting a sense of order and respect among students. This can create a positive classroom environment where students feel safe and supported, which can contribute to the development of a sense of community. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of setting expectations for behavior in promoting positive behaviors among students.

*Creating opportunities for student collaboration.* Teachers can encourage and facilitate opportunities for students to work together on tasks and projects. This can promote a sense of shared responsibility and cooperation among students (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2013).

*Establishing routines and procedures.* Teachers can establish clear routines and procedures for classroom activities, such as transitions between lessons, entering and exiting the classroom, and using materials. This can create a sense of predictability and consistency for students (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

#### *Educational management insights gained from the experiences of the informants*

The insights gained from the experiences of elementary school teachers in building community in the classroom have provided valuable information about effective mechanisms for promoting positive behaviors and academic achievement among students. Through their experiences, teachers have developed strategies for creating a positive classroom environment where students feel valued, connected, and supported. This has contributed to the development of a sense of community in the classroom, which can have positive effects on students' social and academic outcomes.

Research has shown that building a sense of community in the classroom is associated with a range of positive outcomes for students, including improved academic achievement, reduced problem behaviors, and increased social skills (Wang et al., 2019). By sharing their experiences and insights, elementary school teachers have provided valuable information about effective mechanisms for promoting a sense of community in the classroom. This information can be used by other teachers and educators to develop strategies for creating positive classroom environments that support students' social and academic success.

Moreover, the insights gained from the experiences of elementary school teachers have highlighted the importance of promoting positive teacher-student relationships in building a sense of community in the classroom. When teachers establish positive relationships with their students and create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment, they are promoting the development of a sense of community that can contribute to students' social and academic success. By focusing on building positive relationships with students and creating a positive classroom environment, teachers can promote the development of a sense of community in their classrooms that supports students' growth and development.

*Positive teacher-student relationships.* Building positive relationships with students is essential in creating a sense of community in the classroom. Research has shown that teacher-student relationships are associated with positive academic and social outcomes for students (Roorda et al., 2011). Teachers who prioritize building relationships with their students can create a more positive classroom environment where students feel valued and supported.

*Positive classroom environment.* Teachers can create a positive classroom environment by establishing routines and procedures, setting expectations for behavior, and providing positive reinforcement. A positive classroom environment can contribute to students' academic success and social-emotional development (Wang et al., 2019). Teachers who create a positive classroom environment can promote a sense of community in the classroom and foster positive relationships among students.

*Supporting student autonomy.* Giving students opportunities to make choices and take ownership of their learning can contribute to a sense of community in the classroom. Teachers can support student autonomy by providing opportunities for student voice and choice, allowing students to take on leadership roles, and encouraging student-driven projects (Deci & Ryan, 2002). By promoting student autonomy, teachers can help students feel more invested in their learning and create a positive classroom community.

*Promoting student collaboration.* Creating opportunities for student collaboration can promote a sense of community in the classroom and contribute to students' academic and social-emotional growth. Teachers can encourage student collaboration by incorporating group projects, peer feedback, and cooperative learning activities (Johnson et al., 2014). By promoting student collaboration, teachers can help students develop important social skills and contribute to a positive classroom community.

## II. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to research, specifically a phenomenological research design. According to Creswell, (2012), phenomenology was an approach to qualitative research that focused on the commonality of lived experiences within a particular group. The fundamental goal of the approach was to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon. Typically, interviews were conducted with a group of individuals who have first-hand knowledge of an event, situation or experience. Other forms of data such as documents, observations and art were also used. The data were read and reread and was culled for phrases and themes that were grouped into clusters of meanings. Through this process, the researcher was able to construct the universal meaning of the event, situation or experience and arrived at a more profound understanding of the phenomenon.

In qualitative research, interviews were used to pursue the meanings of central themes in the world of their subjects. The main task in doing interviews was to understand the meaning of

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what the interviewees say (McNamara, 1999). With the statements of Quad (2016), the researcher transcribed and typed the data into a computer file, in order to analyze it after interviewing. Interviews particularly be useful for uncovering the story behind a participant's experiences and pursuing in-depth information around a topic.

The researcher collected data, typically via long interviews, from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Next, the data analysis involved triangulation that extracted significant statements from the transcribed interviews. The significant statements were transformed into clusters of meanings according to how each statement fell under specific psychological and phenomenological concepts. Moreover, these transformations were tied up together to make a general description of the experience both the textural description of what was experienced and the structural description of how it was experienced. The researcher incorporated his or her personal meaning of the experiences here. Finally, the report was written such that readers understand better the essential, invariant structure of the essence of the experience.

### **III. Results and Discussion**

The result of the study on the experiences of elementary school teachers in building a community in the classroom revealed that it was creating classroom rules and expectations, establishing classroom routines, encouraging student collaboration, and building positive relationships.

In terms of the coping mechanisms of the elementary school teachers' in building a community in the classroom it was revealed that they cope through using positive reinforcement, setting expectations for behavior, creating opportunities for student collaboration, and establishing routines and procedures.

As to the educational management insights gained from the participants, the elementary school teachers proposed positive teacher-student relationship, positive classroom environment, supporting student autonomy, and promoting student collaboration as important insights in their experiences in building a community in the classroom.

#### *Analysis*

Based on the experiences of elementary school teachers in building a community in the classroom, results of the interview revealed the following themes: First, creating classroom rules and expectations. One common experience of elementary school teachers in building a community in the classroom is creating classroom rules and expectations with their students. This process can help establish a shared understanding of acceptable behavior and create a positive learning environment. Second, establishing classroom routines, wherein the teachers create a predictable and structured learning environment. Routines such as morning meetings, class discussions, and

end-of-day reflections can help foster a sense of community and support social-emotional learning. Third, encouraging student collaboration. Encouraging students to collaborate and work together on projects or assignments can also build a sense of community in the classroom. This experience can promote teamwork, social skills, and critical thinking. Fourth, building positive relationships. Teachers experienced getting to know their students' interests and backgrounds, providing individualized attention and support, and offering opportunities for students to share their thoughts and feelings.

On the coping mechanisms of elementary school teachers' in building a community in the classroom, one of the themes that was shown was providing positive reinforcement. Teachers can use positive reinforcement to recognize and celebrate students' achievements and efforts. This can foster a sense of recognition and appreciation among students. The second theme identified was setting expectations for behavior, as teachers can establish clear expectations for behavior and norms for how students should treat each other in the classroom. This can promote a sense of order and respect among students. The third theme identified was creating opportunities for student collaboration. Teachers can encourage and facilitate opportunities for students to work together on tasks and projects. This can promote a sense of shared responsibility and cooperation among students. Fourth, establishing routines and procedures. Teachers can establish clear routines and procedures for classroom activities, such as transitions between lessons, entering and exiting the classroom, and using materials. This can create a sense of predictability and consistency for students.

On the educational management insights gained from the elementary school teachers' in building a community in the classroom, the first theme identified was positive student-teacher relationship. Building positive relationships with students is essential in creating a sense of community in the classroom. Teachers who prioritize building relationships with their students can create a more positive classroom environment where students feel valued and supported.

The second theme identified was a positive classroom environment. Teachers can create a positive classroom environment by establishing routines and procedures, setting expectations for behavior, and providing positive reinforcement. A positive classroom environment can contribute to students' academic success and social-emotional development.

The third theme was supporting student autonomy. Giving students opportunities to make choices and take ownership of their learning can contribute to a sense of community in the classroom. Teachers can support student autonomy by providing opportunities for student voice and choice, allowing students to take on leadership roles, and encouraging student-driven projects.

The fourth theme was promoting student collaboration. Creating opportunities for student collaboration can promote a sense of community in the classroom and contribute to students' academic and social-emotional growth. Teachers can encourage student collaboration by incorporating group projects, peer feedback, and cooperative learning activities.



### *Discussion*

The creation of a positive classroom community is a vital aspect of elementary education that requires considerable effort from teachers. By establishing a sense of community within the classroom, teachers can foster a supportive and engaging learning environment that enhances academic achievement and social-emotional development (Cefai et al., 2016). The experiences of elementary school teachers in building a community in the classroom may vary depending on cultural and regional differences, but common practices include creating classroom rules and expectations, establishing routines, promoting student collaboration, and building positive relationships with students (Freiberg & Stein, 1999). Through these experiences, teachers can support the social-emotional well-being of their students, encourage positive behavior, and promote academic success (Wentzel, 1998).

In conclusion, creating classroom rules and expectations is a critical component of building a community in the classroom. When done effectively, this practice can promote a positive classroom culture, encourage responsible behavior among students, and enhance academic achievement (Kosty, Sztajn, & Smith, 2017). By involving students in the process and being consistent in enforcing classroom rules, teachers can promote a sense of community, encourage positive relationships between students and teachers, and provide a supportive and engaging learning environment (Carter, Van Norman, & Cartledge, 2019).

On the other hand, Elementary school teachers face numerous challenges in building a sense of community in their classrooms. Classroom communities refer to the supportive and inclusive environment created within the classroom where students feel valued, respected, and connected to their peers and teacher. Teachers often use a variety of coping mechanisms to build this type of community. Coping mechanisms can include strategies such as setting expectations for behavior, creating opportunities for student collaboration, establishing routines and procedures, and providing positive reinforcement. By utilizing these coping mechanisms, elementary school teachers can foster a sense of belonging, safety, and trust within their classrooms, which can lead to improved academic performance and social-emotional development for students.

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Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of positive reinforcement in promoting positive behaviors among students. A study by Fritz and O'Connor (2001) found that praise and positive feedback were effective in increasing prosocial behaviors among elementary school

students. In addition, a study by Maag and Katsiyannis (2003) found that positive reinforcement was effective in reducing disruptive behaviors among elementary school students with emotional and behavioral disorders. These findings suggest that providing positive reinforcement can be an effective mechanism for building a positive classroom community and promoting positive behaviors among students.

In addition to promoting positive behaviors among students, providing positive reinforcement can also contribute to the development of positive teacher-student relationships. A study by Reinke, Herman, and Stormont (2013) found that positive teacher-student relationships were associated with reduced problem behaviors and increased academic engagement among elementary school students. By providing positive reinforcement, teachers can demonstrate their appreciation and respect for their students, which can contribute to the development of positive teacher-student relationships and a sense of community within the classroom.

Furthermore, the insights gained from the experiences of elementary school teachers in building community in the classroom have provided valuable information about effective mechanisms for promoting positive behaviors and academic achievement among students. Through their experiences, teachers have developed strategies for creating a positive classroom environment where students feel valued, connected, and supported. This has contributed to the development of a sense of community in the classroom, which can have positive effects on students' social and academic outcomes.

Research has shown that building a sense of community in the classroom is associated with a range of positive outcomes for students, including improved academic achievement, reduced problem behaviors, and increased social skills (Wang et al., 2019). By sharing their experiences and insights, elementary school teachers have provided valuable information about effective mechanisms for promoting a sense of community in the classroom. This information can be used by other teachers and educators to develop strategies for creating positive classroom environments that support students' social and academic success.

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