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**In Cathy's Classroom:  
Creating Community in a Multi-ethnic Classroom**

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**Introduction**

Forming close-knit relationships in a multi-ethnic classroom is a challenge faced by an increasing number of teachers in a shrinking world. Every young child wants to (and needs to) feel that they belong. A bright-eyed fourth grader, Anna, stated during an interview that she has 25 good friends out of the 25 other members of her classroom. I had visited Anna's multi-ethnic classroom the previous day and had found 24 students apart from Anna and one motherly, energetic teacher, Cathy. Each of these, Anna considered as being a good friend of hers. I was eager to understand the strong connections between the members of Anna's class. This report shares some of my findings.

I have a personal interest in children experiencing warm relationships in schools. Consequently, it was my desire to observe the human interactions in a classroom known for its friendliness. Cathy's fourth grade classroom seemed to be well suited. I hoped to observe some of the patterns in the way the teacher treated the students, as well as discover whether student-student interactions were patterned after the teacher-student interactions.

**Method**

This micro-ethnographic study was brief and spanned merely one week. I obtained permission from the principal of the school to approach Cathy regarding the study, after which I contacted her. She was quite willing to participate. Data gathering consisted of at least six hours of classroom observation, one teacher interview, three student interviews, and one document analysis. Content analysis was employed afterwards to process the raw data coming from these data sources, consequently allowing themes and patterns to emerge.

Semi-structured interviews were held: one with the teacher and three with a purposeful sample of students from the classroom. The sampling was based on teacher nomination and my observation in class. I had asked the teacher for a list of the three best behaved and the three worst behaved children in her class. I chose

*October 2000, Vol. 3 No. 2*

to interview JJ who was mentioned by the teacher as being one of the worst behaved in the class. She seemed to get into trouble very frequently and it seemed of all the students that she may not be that well accepted by the other children. To make matters worse, JJ also had a particularly hard time academically. Another interviewee was Mark who was also from a minority ethnic group; while the last was an Asian girl, Anna, who seemed to be very active, seemed to seek special attention yet was treated no different than the other students. I was sure these three students, if any, would feel the most estranged from the rest of the class. I figured that the way the “worst” cases were treated would say a lot about the quality and genuineness of the interactions in the classroom. I was acquainted with each one interviewed before hand, though not very well. Each student interview took place in a home setting but only after obtaining written permission from the student and his or her mother. Afterwards, member checks were utilized for all the interviews to ensure the accuracy of the data in the transcripts.

The document used as a data source was a teacher written paper in which she expressed herself more fully regarding some of the questions that I had asked during the interview. This was done completely on her own initiative and provided further confirmation and insight into how she dealt as a teacher. I was very pleased about this document and it again indicated to me her eagerness to participate in the study. Cathy had an extremely busy schedule, particularly since her teacher-assistant was on sick-leave. The day I went to interview her, I was quite surprised to find that, though she had made the appointment, we were unable to have a private interview. She requested me to have it right there in class while four children were present in the classroom but busy with completing art projects. The rest had gone to the school's library, returning again at the end of the interview.

I attempted to carry out the observation on a typical school day. It all took place in one classroom with the same 25 students and one teacher. At first my presence was quite disregarded. The students seemed used to having visitors in the classroom. However, after two hours some students started to ask the teacher why I was there. Perhaps it was because this visitor (i.e., I) was staying longer than usual. After a brief comment, stating that I was interested to see what it was like to be in that classroom, class continued with apparent normal behavior as before. While most of the observation took place during instructional time, some of it did take place during recess when the teacher was for the most part not present in the room. This gave me the opportunity to observe the behavior of several students while not

under the immediate influence of their teacher and so helped to confirm many of the findings.

### **Background**

Placed in an Asian country, the school where Cathy taught was operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It was an English-medium elementary school. At the time of this study, school had been going for about three months in the new academic year.

### **The Classroom and Students**

On the day of observation all 25 students were present in Cathy's fourth grade class. From their greetings to their songs and answering of questions, I could see that they were full of enthusiasm and life. The students were quite a mix of races. They came from at least five different ethnic groups. Most of these groups were fairly well represented, though there were two groups which were not. One group (Caucasians) had only one member while the other (Africans) had two members. The students were an energetic bunch.

In the classroom the desks were arranged in neat rows, 5 by 5 and remained that way throughout the day despite not being fixed to the floor. Girls and boys sat in an alternate seating arrangement in general, with few of the same gender sitting next to each other. Each desk was of unit construction with the seat not being loose from the table section. Each having been made for one occupant only. Below the seat portion of each desk was a rack on which the students put their books. Several children had bags (containing books and personal belongings) hanging over the rear of their seats while others had them on the floor just in front, behind, or under their desks. It was interesting to note that the three worst behaved children (as identified by the teacher) did not necessarily sit in the front of the class.

The classroom was only adequately equipped for teaching. There was a whiteboard (it stretched across the front of the room), a few bulletin boards, some book shelves, and on the cupboard was a tape recorder and a few small potted plants. There was also an upright piano placed near the door but looking rather worn in appearance. No advanced teaching equipment could be seen around the room. The classroom was fairly average in its maintenance with a few things (e.g., some chairs, desks) showing that they had been well used, yet clearly not falling into the ancient nor decrepit category. At the front of the room was the teacher's desk with a chair. On the one side and at the rear of the room were large windows. Along the side where the windows were was a built-in waist-high cupboard running the length of the classroom. At the back of the classroom I had taken a seat near a

small square table with three or four chairs around it. Though not very spacious, there was sufficient space in this classroom for traditional methods of teaching.

The bulletin boards were of different sizes. Each had a display with pictures that had been commercially produced. The large lettering and the colorfulness of these displays helped to make the room feel quite upbeat. Some of the children's work was displayed against the wall at one end. High up on the walls were several honey bee posters: "be fair, be polite, be prompt, be honest, be a good listener," they stated. At the front, on the edges of the whiteboard, the teacher had written important information. On the left were the names of the classroom helpers assigned, and on the right was space for special announcements. On that particular day the announcements related to an upcoming field trip. In general, the room was airy, colorful, and definitely not bland nor overly decorated.

In the interviews, I had asked each of the three children what they would like to change in the classroom. Few suggestions came forth. One suggestion (from a girl) was that she would have liked it more if the girls sat together. The only other was from JJ who wanted the students to be less naughty. Generally, the students seemed very satisfied with the room and the rest of the class.

### **The Teacher**

Cathy is a Filipina, probably middle-aged. She frequently has a smile on her face. When she does, her eyes narrow, yet at other times they will light up and open wide full of expression. On the day of observation she was dressed in a long black skirt with a speckled top hanging over. While her hair was neat it was not perfect, being a little wind blown. In sum, her appearance was neat, yet quite modest.

After graduating from an Adventist college, Cathy decided to become a teacher. So, in addition to her first degree, she completed a BS in Elementary Education at a Christian University. At first she worked at a non-Christian school for 8 years but then desired to come and work at this Adventist school despite the financial constraints that accompanied the move. Her main reason for the move was because of difficulties in attending church on Sabbaths. She has since taught several years at this school.

My impression of Cathy was that she was a very busy person and very much on the go. She was frequently involved in several things at the same time. For example, while I interviewed her she was giving me completely adequate attention responding to my questions, yet at the same time, keeping an eye on several children and also cutting out teaching devices.

Cathy did not see herself as a good teacher. In her own words she stated:

I really try my best. And the thing is I am not a good teacher, but I try my best to be one (a good teacher) to the kids.

This was one point where I could not agree with her after careful observation of her teaching practice. Instead, I considered that she very effectively put into practice the essence of teaching. As will be seen later in this report, her lack of satisfaction with her current abilities did lead her to strive continually to improve, which of course is quite commendable.

### **Evidences of Classroom Community**

During the few days of my association with the fourth grade class, I noticed a few statements that were made and several incidents that I observed which evidenced that “familial” relationships did exist in Cathy's multi-ethnic class.

One of the worst behaved children felt good towards his teacher and his classmates. Another student, JJ, when asked for the best part about school, was quick to answer, “Teachers, also friends?” She considered the teacher to have never been unkind to her despite my personally having observed her being disciplined at least three times during the period of observation. (As will be seen further in this report the discipline did tend to be of a redemptive nature and this surely added to JJ's positive impressions.)

Other evidence included Mark's statement when describing himself. When asked to say something about himself, he only stated, “I like to be in school. I am also fond of watching TV. I want to be friendly.” His desire to be friendly ranked high in his own values which could have been influenced by his class situation.

Even more convincingly, probably a dozen or more older children (not from this grade) came to visit the teacher at different times during recess, though they did not always find her in the room. I got the distinct impression that they liked Cathy, she having been their teacher in a previous year. Amazingly, the present fourth graders did not deplore this but seemed quite happy to share her attention with others.

I was also amazed to see how the children responded under provocation. I observed at least two occasions on the day of my visit. On one occasion, Anna hid her songbook while two other grade four boys collected the books. When they had finished and were going back to their seats, she pulled the book out and said that they had not collected all the books. They took it from her without any audible or visible complaint and put the book with the other songbooks. This impressed me. On another occasion, while the class members were busy coloring, one student

made the comment to another one, "You don't even know how to make a color." This too was taken in good jest.

Further evidence of good relationships were seen in several children's reticence to fight. At one stage, five or six students came to sit at the back table for coloring. It seemed to be a popular place because quite a number tried to come. Somehow there was no fighting or arguing despite some being turned away due to a lack of space at the smallish table. If the children had not been secure in their relationships, this situation would have surely developed into a nasty event.

Lastly, the way minorities were treated also gave evidence of the quality of the relationships. They appeared to have few difficulties being integrated in this class and were well accepted. During the interview it became clear that the little black boy, Mark, did not believe that he had any enemies in the class. In fact, his testimony was that none of his classmates are nasty to him. He just said, "They don't do that [fight, tease] to me." I must say that during the period of observation, I did notice a general lack of derogatory language or put downs despite the variety of cultures being present. Not even once was there a remark or insinuation against another ethnic group though several situations were open to such.

Thus, the evidence made it clear to me that this class promoted excellent teacher-student and student-student relationships amidst the multi-ethnic setting. Hence, I was eager to discover some of the themes and patterns that emerged from the data analysis in order to understand, hopefully at least in part, how these relationships existed.

### **Themes and Patterns**

After analyzing the data collected in this study, several themes and patterns seemed to emerge that could help us understand the relationships in Cathy's classroom. The most prominent included: (a) Cathy's view of teaching and of the student; (2) her classroom management, particularly the established classroom procedures, and her approach to discipline; and (c) her overt actions to building relationships.

### **Attitudes and Views**

Particularly during the interview with Cathy, certain themes became evident with regard to her attitude towards her work as a teacher as well as her attitude towards her students. Right through, she had a very positive attitude as depicted in her words, "I'm proud to be a teacher."

**View of teaching.** For Cathy, teaching was considered much more than a job. At one point she stated, "I think teaching is not only just a job for me." On

quite a few occasions, she told me about her sense of responsibility towards the children. On one of these she explained why she believes a teacher's responsibility to be so great and that she believes that students also share this responsibility. She stated:

I have 25 souls who depend on me. I have a big responsibility to these children. I'm trying my very best to be a good teacher to them. So what I do is, I see to it that what I'm teaching them is balanced (referring to academic, moral, and spiritual learning). . . . But, I need to explain it to them, that as students they have a big responsibility too. They need to be obedient, they need to do their homework, and need to spend their time wisely, because . . . time is gold and [one] can't bring it back again. Students spend more time with their teacher than with their parents so for me being a teacher is a big, big responsibility.

Another theme that emerged from her statements was that she believed in continuous learning. She emphasized the high expectation of learning on the students. In her words:

And I told them, you know, the thing that is really important here is for you to learn. That is the reason why your parents are working hard, just for you to get a good quality education.

Further, on this same theme, Cathy emphasized, on a number of occasions, her belief that she as a teacher should also learn continuously and put that learning into her practice. She saw this not only as important for good teaching but also essential to keep her work interesting. A few of these statements speak for themselves.

So by God's grace, every year I learn more. And every summer I am trying to take . . . [some courses] . . . I think that is good because I teach in an international school.

So I learned a lot and I impart it to my children. So I think as a teacher I don't need to stop learning more, because if you learn, the more you learn the more you can impart to the children.

Every time I attended an in-service for teachers I try to apply what I have learned . . . and what I've learned from reading some books and magazines.

So definitely every year, there are some changes. I always remember that a teacher should grow and grow. Try something new, so that the children will not feel bored and me, too.

This attitude also rubbed off on the children I believe. At recess time many children stayed to finish a class assignment. Halfway through recess, more than a third of the class were still busy completing the assignment. Despite her belief in building strong relationships and frequently chatting to them while they work, it was clear that learning is important in this class. At times she would allow the children to talk while they worked as long as they did, in fact, work. Yet, on one occasion she made it very clear that they were not working fast enough and that they would have to stay after class if they did not finish. Cathy said, “You are not finished because you are talking. Stop talking and you can get done,” after which the children continued working quietly. One got the impression that it is okay to talk in this class as long as it does not prevent the work.

Thus, I found that Cathy's attitude towards teaching was very positive and that she saw it as a major responsibility; some of this responsibility, she felt, needing to be shared with the students. Furthermore, she understood the importance of learning and of continuing to do so, both for the students and for herself. Finally, Cathy has put her faith in God in order to perform her work. Her belief was declared to be, “you know, the Lord is teaching us.”

**View of students.** Cathy was very positive about the students in her class – even on a Friday when she had had a particularly difficult week due to her teacher assistant being on sick-leave. When I had asked her who her three worst behaved students were, she wrote down some names but then quickly added that they were not really that naughty, just ‘talkative.’ Even in this list, I noticed that it was fairly representative of the ethnic makeup of the class. Her general positive attitude was displayed in statements such as:

The class that I have – for me, you know, I think I have blessings. Sometimes they are children that are really naughty but that is very natural. It is normal.

Sometimes they tend to annoy somebody, you know. And for me that is not bad. You know it is just them growing up – their curiosity. Experience teaches a lot. And sometimes when they tease somebody, they will learn: “I hurt somebody. So I will not tease anymore.”

Probably, most striking was the extent to which Cathy loved all her students and disliked favoritism. My observation confirmed her fairness to all and her attempt to involve all her students. In reading, for example, Cathy would give each one a turn. She explained:

Whenever we have reading, I ask them by rows so they know who will do it next. Because sometimes children say no – some children do not want to read – they are ashamed but they really want to read, right!...



So I start them on science reading, so they know their turns and who will follow next. That way they know that I do not have favoritism. Because I don't want favorites.

Lastly, Cathy's attitude towards weaker students was also impressive. She felt that, "most slow learners have their own special skills, like drawing" and that makes them valuable to the class because they can also contribute to the class by helping others in their particular areas of strength. Further, her patience and positive attitude towards the learning of a struggling child was demonstrated when, for example, on one occasion a boy gave a wrong example of an action verb (the concept under discussion at the time). Cathy stopped the lesson and had the child stand up to ensure she had his full attention. Then she carefully went back over the crucial steps giving step by step help. After that she told him, "Give me an example of . . ." and he had to answer. Others were not given an opportunity to answer for him despite their hands being up and him struggling. He had to continue giving examples until it became clear that he had mastered the concept. Only then did she let him sit down. A little while later Cathy again called on the same boy to give another example. He got it right the first time to which she responded, "Very good."

Hence, I found Cathy very positive about all her students, even the worst behaved and the struggling ones. She seemed to value each student and wanted each one to experience learning in a positive way.

### **Classroom Management**

I was intrigued to see a number of innovative procedures and disciplinary measures in Cathy's classroom. I could see these were used on a daily basis in this class since the class members were well versed in them and their implementation ran smoothly.

**Procedures and behaviors.** Cathy had established set procedures in her classroom. Yet the management of her classroom did not feel restrictive. She seemed to understand the children's need for physical movement and emotional expression very well. Yet at the same time it was clear that she had certain basic expectations.

Right from the start of the day, I noticed that the established procedures in this classroom were well known. As the class members entered the room after school assembly, the children sat down immediately without even a reminder from the teacher. This was followed soon after by a boy going to the front and leading out in a song service while one of the girls played the piano. All of this took place seemingly by their own initiative. All this time Cathy never said a word, yet the

students seemed to know exactly what to do. At the end of the song service, two boys collected the songbooks and put them away. These two turned out to be the monitors (class helpers) for the day. (The children take turns at being monitors.) Later, on a few occasions, these same two handed out learning materials to the class. To do this, Cathy would merely say that she had materials that needed to be distributed. From there the students knew what to do. Each of these times, the two boys went to the front, received the materials from her and gave the correct number of copies to the child at the front of each of the five rows. That child would then take one and pass the rest back to the child behind them. This worked particularly well. It was the monitors' responsibility to make sure that each student did, in fact, receive a copy.

Similar procedures existed for handing in worksheets, moving from one subject to another, and for tidying up at the end of the day, as well as for several smaller functions. Some of these, however, Cathy needed to remind the children of on a few occasions, during the day. This particularly included clearing their desks of all other books and stationery except the one being used at the time. On these occasions, Cathy would instruct, "I want your table cleared" and then start counting, "1, 2, 3, . . . ."

A very interesting procedure occurred after lunch. About half an hour after lunch break, Cathy suddenly said, "chun" to which everyone jumped up in unison and then sat down again. They had been sleepy. Cathy next had them sing the song Father Abraham, with actions. They were then given a minute to put their heads on their desks. The period of "rest" ended with "chun," and with everyone jumping up momentarily and then sitting down. They all seemed to enjoy this and class soon got back to serious learning again with the children much more alert.

Apart from the expectations on the class as a group, Cathy did allow for considerable individual freedom of movement. On numerous occasions through the day, I saw students leave the classroom, particularly during learning activity times. This would be for a very short time (probably no more than a minute or at most two). They would usually frequent the drinking fountain down the passage. Other movement, I observed on several occasions, consisted of students getting up out of their seats even while a lesson was in progress. Sometimes they would just stand and sit down again, while at other times it did involve leaving their desks. All of this movement usually took place without getting special permission, though JJ did mention that they were supposed to get permission to leave the room. Particularly in the afternoon session I noticed that the children were quite restless. For instance, on one occasion a girl got up and stood swinging her legs next to her desk. She then sat down for a short while and stood up again, sat down and stood

up again. This did not seem to disturb the learning experience of the other children and drew no comment from the teacher.

Cathy also allowed appropriate emotional expression. In fact, she herself taught and spoke with much expression. On one occasion two children jumped up giving shouts of joy. This seemed quite acceptable and I immediately got the impression that emotions are not unnecessarily suppressed in this class. On another occasion she told the children that they could not take their coloring assignment home. Four children immediately complained saying, "uhhh. . . ." but Cathy ignored this completely despite it being very audible. Once expressed, the complainers seemed quite content and got on with their work with no further complaints.

**Discipline.** The fourth graders were not perfect. Their misbehavior ranged mostly from excessive noisiness in class to teasing. Cathy's classroom was not particularly quiet all the time. It appeared to me that the children's noise was probably quite unintentional. On several occasions during the day, Cathy had to address their misbehavior. She never did this by raising her voice (confirmed through observation and interviews) but rather in some very interesting ways.

Inattention was addressed on a few occasions. When two students had not been listening, Cathy stopped teaching, had them stand up and asked them questions on what she had just said. They did not know what she had talked about. On another occasion during reading time, a girl at the back of the class did not know where to start reading when it was her turn. She had been inattentive. Consequently, she had to stand while the turn passed on to the next student. Cathy did, however, give her a turn later on again to read, after which she was given permission to sit down. As a result reading continued down the rows with everyone knowing where to read. No further correction was necessary.

Cathy frequently used signals to warn students of their misbehavior. One of her signals was to just keep quiet all of a sudden, in the middle of a sentence. Sometimes this would be for excessive noise while at other times it would be for inattention. Marcus explained some of the signals and their consequences as follows:

She just keeps quiet and then the children will also keep quiet. Or sometimes she will put an ugly face on the board and then she will put one [strike]. And if she puts one we will go home at 3:20, if she puts two then 3:25, and if she puts three then 3:30, like that.

The children responded quite fast to these signals and showed that they were, in fact, eager to do what was right. She had several of these signals ranging in severity and consequences. They all seemed to emphasize warnings or reminders

rather than threats of fear. On one occasion Cathy did remind a student of the meaning of a signal, “If I look at you it means something” and then continued to remind the class that two fingers stands for a second warning, and three. . . .

Though Cathy or the students did not emphasize punishment, it was evident that punishment did get meted out at times. She saw this as an important part of being their “mother.” Punishments evidently included knee bends (squatting) for 15 minutes or “something hard” like that according to some students. However, none of the students interviewed resented Cathy for her punishment, not even JJ. In fact, she thought her teacher was particularly kind and not very strict.

It was clear that the way Cathy managed her classroom was in order to maximize learning rather than to ensure conformity amongst the students. There were definite expectations which were well understood by the students. The class environment was thus fair yet firm.

### **Building Relationships**

Another definite pattern observed in Cathy's classroom was her attempt to actively build relationships. This involved relationships between her and the children as well as between the students themselves.

Cathy used acts of love to bind her students to herself. I observed her use of physical touch in the classroom. Every now and then she would walk through the aisles in the class and touch several students on their shoulders. Furthermore, Anna related some of her teacher's actions as follows

Every time she talks with us, she comes near and looks at us, then [hugs us] then she says “Hi, you are so very good” and like that.

Anna liked being hugged by the teacher. I am sure that other students also liked her acts of love and care. For instance, Cathy helped one girl cut out her “Joseph shirt” to which she responded afterwards, “Thank you for cutting out, Ma'am!” However, when Cathy started cutting the same object for a certain boy, he walked off to the front of the class. She consequently refused to carry on because he was not helping to finish the assignment and promptly moved on to another student's desk. By so doing she indicated that she was not eager to build relationships at the cost of spoiling students.

Cathy also tended to throw in value-laden thoughts – thoughts that if put into practice will build good relationships. For example, on one occasion she loudly stated, “If somebody throws you a stone, you throw them what?” to which the children promptly responded in chorus, “bread.” It was evident that they had

heard this message several times before. She was quite intent that they regard themselves as brothers and sisters,

That being brothers and sisters they should love each other, have a concern for each other. That is very important to me so that they can work harmoniously with love in their hearts.

And, there was plenty of growth needed with respect to building student-student relationships! JJ was particularly avoided by the other children. This is not to say that she had no friends, but just that she was not well accepted into the “family” by all the children. For instance, during recess, while JJ was not present, two students came, looking at her incomplete work, and shouted “JJ is a baby.” JJ was aware of a lack of acceptance by the students in general. In fact, in my interview with her, she shared that this made her very unhappy.

Another child from a minority group also needed plenty of relationship building. He sat near the middle of the class and easily erupted to even minor incidents. Twice during recess I noticed that he was involved in unresolved conflicts with his classmates. Though these never became very, very nasty I did sense that the child was not completely happy amongst his classmates.

Though there was only one incident of students making fun of another child’s “mistakes” it is worth mentioning here since it did portray Cathy’s motherly role. While reading, JJ pronounced several words incorrectly. Some children started to make fun of these but Cathy was quick to reprimand them for laughing at another’s mistakes. She immediately asked one of the children, “How do you feel when someone laughs at you when you make a mistake?” and gave the class time to think about the answer. She ended this episode by asking them for a commitment for appropriate Christian behavior. Class continued after two or three minutes of this diversion with JJ reading again.

A way that Cathy has used to build stronger student-student relationships has been through group work. She explained her reasoning behind this method as follows:

I tried not to group them with their friends and in groups in which they wanted to be. Instead, I group them with those whom they don’t want to be with so that they will learn to like them too and in the end to love them too. . . . That’s my perception and what I believe.

She admitted that she sometimes has groups that have difficulty working together. Yet she took quite a forceful approach in this regard. She said:

I . . . try to work with them. You know, sometimes others do not like to be among certain children because they don’t like some children.

They hate to be near them and so when I put them in groups to read, sometimes I say to them, "I know they are from Africa but they could be a miss universe, you cannot tell the one you are hating now . . . you don't know who they will end up being. Just because you don't like him because he is like this or like that. . . ." If I learn that he does not like that one then I will put them in groups so that they will learn to love each other. I will just help them because they can be good friends and those that they don't like to be with, that's the time I put them with each other. For me, in my class if they do not like to be with them I let them do something together so that they will be good friends. They will find out, "she is good in this and so you can join together and she's a good girl."

Sometimes students experience problems or are unhappy in Cathy's classroom. For this purpose, Cathy had a "worry box" in her classroom. A student having a problem or grievance would write such on a slip of paper and put it in the "worry box." On the day of my observation, Anna came in from recess and complained that JJ was teasing her. Cathy reminded them of the "worry box" and for the moment solved the issue in a mere two seconds. Cathy's procedure for dealing with such cases was fairly consistent. At the end of school she looked at the notes and read the names of the students who needed to remain behind. There were seven or eight children. Taking each case, Cathy had both sides explain themselves followed by prayer from both students. Each case probably took no longer than three minutes. She explained the results of this method as follows:

After that they shake hands. Sometimes they really cry, because they feel that it's not a good idea [to behave the way they did].

And later she added:

After that I think that they learn. And they do learn. As I look at the worry box the letters become less and less. They think "I should not do that."

Cathy did not always have this approach. She said:

Before I didn't have that idea. Before that I would get angry with them and say, "Why are you doing this, why are you doing that?"

She no longer believes in scolding the children because, she said:

Once you scold them, the more they become so naughty. I experience that in how many years of teaching [when] I tried to do it in that way.

Cathy had endeared herself to the children in her class. She had also taken an innovative approach to addressing tensions between students and building stronger relationships between them. She saw the whole class as a family and considered it

essential that all members not only learn to get on with each other but to also work in harmony with each other.

### **Synthesis and Discussion**

Cathy's classroom promoted excellent teacher-student and student-student relationships amidst the multi-ethnic setting. While many of the ethnic groups got on very well together, it was clear that the students were not perfect. Fortunately for them, Cathy was a caring, kind, motherly teacher who was firm and at the same time, highly interested in both their social and academic learning.

Forming strong teacher-student relationships is a very important part of children's education. Comer (O'Neil, 1997) considered relationships with caring adults to be as essential as books in the classroom. Educators and researchers are recognizing it more now than in the past with the result that in recent years, "research has shifted from cognitive outcomes in the classroom to teacher qualities and their effect on student outcomes" (MacAulay, 1990).

One of the major themes and patterns that ensued in this study was that Cathy had a very positive attitude towards teaching and towards her students. She regarded teaching as a major responsibility that also needed to be shared with the students. She understood the importance of learning and of continuing to do so, both for the students and for herself. Her attitude influenced her practice and it appeared as if the students developed a similar positive attitude towards learning. I was surprised that she maintained it even amidst the additional pressure of not having a teacher assistant. A teacher can only maintain such positive attitudes towards her students and towards teaching if the social climate in the classroom is good (Byrne, 1994). The quality of the social climate in the classroom influences both students and teacher enhancing personal fulfilment (Pollard & Filer, 1996). It was not surprising then that her students developed similar attitudes to hers since it is well recognized that "values are caught more than they are taught" (Wagner, 1996, p. 149). Cathy's students certainly had a good model.

"Much of children's behavior is developed by emulating the behaviors of adults who play significant roles in their lives" (Jones & Jones, 1995, p. 61). Teachers are just such significant adults. Children observe the teacher's behavior closely. The acts, the words, the very look of the teacher continues to mold the child (White, 1952). The teacher's responsibility for setting the tone of the classroom was emphasized by Bobbi Fisher (1995), an elementary teacher with many years of experience. She described it this way:

The children look to us to set the tone for caring and learning, and they copy what we do. If we listen to them, they listen to each other. If we

value them and support, encourage, and celebrate what they do, they will do the same for each other. If we encourage risk taking and accept approximations, they do the same for themselves and for others. If we are learners in the classroom, they become learners, too. (p. 3)

Of particular interest to this study, the teacher's interpersonal behavior is also closely observed and consequently molds the child's interpersonal behavior. For instance, research has shown that "the higher the level of interpersonal understanding enacted by the teacher, the higher the level enacted by children" (DeVries et al., 1991).

Cathy valued each student and wanted each one to experience learning in a positive way. She was consistently positive about all her students, even the worst behaved and the struggling ones. Each student needs to perceive caring from a significant adult, the teacher. After studying six teachers who had excellent reputations for developing nurturing connections with students, Deiro (1995), concluded that "the overarching strategy teachers used to communicate caring to students was to treat them, at all times, with dignity and respect." This highlights the importance of being impartial and consistent. No wonder then that impartiality and mutual respect are essential ingredients of school reform (Wagner, 1996).

Another pattern that could be clearly seen was that Cathy managed her classroom in such a way as to maximize learning rather than to ensure conformity amongst the students. There were definite norms and expectations which were well understood by the students. At the same time, as teacher she understood the children's need for physical movement and emotional expression very well. The class environment was thus fair yet firm.

The third pattern that emerged was that Cathy had endeared herself to the children in her class. She had clearly taken on a "working with" approach as encouraged by Kohn (1996), rather than the "doing to" approach where the teacher's will is unquestionably imposed on the students. She had also taken an innovative and proactive approach to addressing tensions between students and building stronger relationships between them. She saw the whole class as a family and actively encouraged strong bonds between them.

Cathy's classroom was clearly based on "social covenants" rather than "social contracts" as delineated by Sergiovanni (1999). The former (i.e. social covenants) goes beyond the latter in that it binds the members of the class together through kinship, sense of identity, obligation, duty, responsibility, and reciprocity. By contrast, social contracts bind members together through fear, punishment, or reward only. This must have been how in this classroom, there could be less of an emphasis on rules and compliance where each party needed to look after their own



interests. Instead, class members could experience a sense of community where they were compelled into action by obligations coming from the commitments they had made. Their actions were norms-based rather than trying to stick to the letter of a list of rules.

A sense of community is a key element in good schools and classrooms (Bennett, Finn, & Cribb, 1999; Kohn, 1996; Marks, 1989). "A caring community . . . simultaneously both conveys a set of values and helps establish the motivation to abide by them" (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995, p. 649). Better academic achievement has even been linked with higher sense of community (e.g., Allen, 1991; Sato, 1992), but it is likely that the intervening variable is motivation (Battistich et al., 1995). Research "findings clearly suggest that students' motivation is enhanced . . . when they feel cared for, supported, valued, and influential in schools that they experience as communities" (Battistich et al., 1995, p. 652). However, regardless of the academic benefits, a strong sense of community is important in its own right for it addresses important needs of every child.

While there was some evidence that the children were patterning their interactions after Cathy's, it must be remembered that they had only spent three months with her as teacher. Furthermore, she was not the only person to have an influence over their lives, although hers was a significant one. I expect these grade four children to still grow much in their social dimension in the months to come. Not only will this stand them in good stead as they face a multi-ethnic society, but it will also pull them up into a much more mature level of interaction with their fellow humans.

**Editor's note:** *Non-critical details may have been altered in order to protect the confidentiality of individuals described in this study.*

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