Caring and Effective Classrooms

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I keep being asked, "How do I go about creating an effective mathematics learning community in my classroom where I am able to honour the diversity, gifts, challenges, and constraints that students bring; help all of them to develop healthy identities and competencies in relation to mathematics; and achieve success in examinations in my school?" In this piece I present the core findings of a recent (2008) review of the international literature (in English) by New Zealand mathematics educators Margaret Walshaw and Glenda Anthony, reported in the Journal *Pedagogies,* which synthesises the best available evidence on how teachers create (and fail to create) effective learning communities in mathematics classrooms.

The educators first draw attention to the body of literature on school effectiveness which provides evidence to support the view that how children perform is more dependent upon what happens in the classroom than the nature of the schools themselves. This is used to frame the argument that classroom teachers have greater opportunity and responsibility for significantly influencing students' learning of mathematics *in school* than other sources. They identify five pedagogical principles that effective teachers use which work to create "a web of productive relationships within the classroom community." Before elaborating on these, however, two caveats are warranted. Firstly, I present these principles within a view of *learning* as a complex phenomenon—emergent in the interactions among diverse factors and forces—one that is *dependent upon* but not fully determined by quality teaching. Secondly, the principles relate to pedagogical knowledge, *not* content, pedagogical content, or design knowledge.

They propose that effective teaching is based on: (a) **an ethic of care, (b) negotiating and navigating the establishment of social norms for equitable and respectful participation in classroom discourse, (c) a climate that values reciprocity in the respectful exchange and challenging of ideas, and (d) the ability to create time and space for meaningful and sustained engagement with mathematical ideas, individually and collaboratively**. These are simple and powerful ideas that most teachers, having been students themselves for many years, know and relate to implicitly, even if unable to articulate, or which operate below their conscious awareness in their practice. Bad, unproductive, or ineffective teachers, teaching, and learning experiences, however, often register immediately in conscious experience and remain in memory. All learners, on occasion, have had the experience of teachers who have breached some, if not most, of these principles. These teachers, and oftentimes their disciplines, are remembered with anger, hurt, pain, sadness, fear, disgust, or indifference. Mathematics teachers are disproportionately represented here.

Despite familiarity with these principles, they are often not enacted by teachers in productive ways in classrooms. Thus, it is necessary to examine them again carefully to understand how they can become part of our accessible consciousness in the classroom and, more specifically, some of the dimensions and limits of each. The first principle, *"Effective teaching is based on an Ethic of Care,"* involves more than politeness and

compassion. According to the research literature, teachers who "build their practice around an ethic of care take pains to ensure that their students do not develop a permanent dependency on them," "move beyond providing professional attention and concern for their students by working at developing reciprocity and interrelationships that create spaces for students to develop their social and mathematical identities," offer students "challenge and support[s] them in taking risks," by making it safe to make and learn from mistakes and "practice[s] power sharing to construct more equitable relationships within the classroom."

In my own research, Form 1 students described their ideal mathematics teacher as one who would be patient, knowledgeable, and understanding. They identified a good teacher as one who could teach so that students could understand the material easily. Understanding, however, was also used to describe the *character* of a teacher who is able to appreciate students' difficulties and adapt their teaching, and is linked to empathy for students. For example, one student, Ivanna, says, "*I think the characteristics of a good math teacher is being able to teach in a way that students can understand and the teacher must be able to understand and help the students.*"

Walshaw and Anthony suggest that effective teachers who demonstrate care "establish spaces that are simultaneously nonthreatening and intellectually focused," and "work hard at inclusiveness and student engagement," seeing these as having the "potential to enhance students' capacity to think, reason, communicate, and critique others' ideas." They caution, however, that this is not all that effective mathematics teaching entails. Caring is but one necessary albeit important component of classroom effectiveness.

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