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A Classroom Culture that Teaches to the Whole Student in a K-2nd Grade Classroom

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## BEST WAY TO CREATE CLASSROOM CULTURE

### **Abstract**

This research paper analyzed the meaning of classroom culture, and how to shape it to address the needs of every student in a K-2nd class. The research explained that teachers should create their classroom culture prior to the school year, as opposed to letting it play out year-to-year. The research provided insights about the role a positive teacher-student relationship had on classroom culture, and how effective teachers were when they connected with students on an academic, social, personal, and experiential level. A literature review was conducted that included peer-reviewed articles, research journals, and past university research projects. Several articles indicated that when teachers were aware of how to teach not only the academic side of their students but also the emotional side, class production went up, while behavior problems went down. The research explained that building classroom culture requires that teachers must educate the whole child.

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## **Introduction and Background**

This Senior Capstone answers the following question: How to create a classroom culture that teaches to the whole student in a K-2nd grade classroom? This question can be broken down and made easier to digest when classroom culture is defined. The research included peer-reviewed articles, journals from former teachers, and in-class service learning. The definition of classroom culture used in this paper includes creating an environment where students feel safe and free to be involved. It is a space where everyone should feel accepted and included in everything. Students should be comfortable with sharing how they feel, and teachers should be willing to take it in to help improve learning. Classroom culture includes teaching students in ways that engage them in their own learning using methods that include teaching to the whole child.

The definition of the term “whole student” means a teacher not only teaches for academic success but also maintains their student’s physical, social, and emotional needs. Effectively teaching to the whole student will show every member of the class that not only does their teacher care about them learning, but also how their life progresses, problems students may face personally and academically and give students a sense that their teachers understand the struggles they may face while at school. Through the first-hand experience in elementary school classrooms as a child, and now during service-learning, it is apparent that teachers may not realize that they have a bad classroom culture. A culture that only teaches to the “academic side of a student” instead of the whole student. I took multiple classes as a child and I felt disconnected from the teacher because their sole focus was on the content and not on the way the class felt. When my peers or I struggled in these classes, the teacher would place the blame on us, and instead of understanding why we may not understand the content. The teacher's in these

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“bad” classrooms would move on before everyone had enough time to take in the information, and because of this, we not only felt lost in the class, but we did not respect our teacher, as we felt they did not respect us. Although I learned much of the coursework by the end of the year, it felt like a chore to be in the classroom. Many of my peers felt the same way. I witnessed the same thing during service-learning, as a teacher disclosed to me that they are working on a way to get a better student-teacher relationship

The primary question of the research focuses on Kindergarten, 1st grade, and 2nd-grade classrooms, these grade levels were chosen because it is a very important time in a child's life. The secondary questions are, What is the role of students in classroom culture? What is the role of teachers in classroom culture? What is the role of parents in classroom culture? Is it possible to shape a classroom culture, or does it depend on the children and/or the environment you are in?

Students in these early elementary grades are just starting their long journey into education and learning what it is to be a student. Students are learning what subjects they are strong in, as well as subjects they struggle with. Having a good classroom culture in these grades will give children a positive and friendly connotation with school and learning. If students experience a bad classroom culture, are not being taught to their whole selves, or both, at this early age, they may assume that all of school will be like these early classes they are in and be less motivated to continue on their education journey with the best mindset.

This topic is important to me because my elementary school experiences had both good and bad classroom cultures, and these shaped me for the rest of my life, inside and outside the classroom. I was most motivated to research by the experiences I had in my 6th-grade class. The

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elementary school I attended was K-6, this was the last class with just one teacher before middle school. My 6th-grade teacher, Mr. G, had the most positive classroom culture I have seen first hand. My peers and I felt a sense of family and friendship with each other and most importantly, our teacher. Mr. G was very serious about teaching us the material we needed to know, but he was also serious about caring for us all not just as students, but people. There was a feeling of mutual respect between student and teacher, and this made students work harder to meet Mr. G's standards, but he also made students less likely to misbehave because of the fear of disappointing the teacher, and the connection we all had. Mr. G created this classroom culture by sharing details of his current life with us, as well as past anecdotes when necessary, such as detailing a trip he took to Europe when studying ancient Rome. This qualified the information in a real way as opposed to hearing about it or seeing it in a textbook. Instead, we had someone we know and respect tell their account of these places we are learning about. He would also ask about our lives and made us know he genuinely cared about the people we are outside of the classroom.

Comparing Mr. G's class to previous grades classes before 6th grade, the change in classroom culture is very apparent. There was a class that felt like a chore every day I attended and it led to myself negatively viewing the entire concept of school. The teacher would rarely do things such as go off topic from the material, have one on one conversations with students to gauge progress or gain insight to their lives, and allow students to be creative and share their interests. This bad classroom culture discouraged me and peers from looking forward to the grades ahead, as we felt that it was "all downhill from here" so to speak. Mr. G's willingness to create a good classroom culture, as well as teach to the whole student, changed these perceptions that schoolwork becoming more challenging meant that the environment in the classroom would

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become less welcoming. Although Mr. G's class was not during the K-2nd grade window that the primary research question is based on, his class shows just how important a good classroom culture is on a student, no matter the grade.

The research is important to students, teachers, and parents because they are all involved in playing a part in creating a positive classroom culture. Students must be willing to accept their teacher's methods, even if they differ from previous ways they were taught. A teacher could do whatever they can to improve the classroom culture, but if the students do not cooperate, then it may be for nothing. Parents also play a part in the knowledge of their children outside of school. Sharing information with the teacher that will help give a better understanding of how every individual student learns the best. Gaining outside information on a student is also important for teachers. Knowing how a student best responds to material in a classroom setting is important, therefore asking questions of the teachers from prior classes can benefit teachers year after year. grade previous to yours will be beneficial to help shape your own classroom culture.

Finding what strategies and evidence support the creation of a classroom culture that teaches to the whole student will lead teachers in a direction of classroom community that promotes students to try their best in class, while also looking forward to coming every day due to their perception that the teacher has their best interests in mind.

### **Literature Review**

The articles I found relating to this topic were not in as much of an abundance as I would have hoped, so in turn, there will be older data. However, I feel that creating a positive classroom culture will have multiple variables such as the students in the class and the experience of the

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teacher. No class is exactly the same as the other even if it is the same teacher in the same grade, there will still be year to year differences that will affect the everyday environment of the classroom. The biggest difference a teacher will have from year to year will be the students in their class. Every class composition will be different, whether it be yearly changes in gender, the number of students with a disability, students who misbehave, or all of the above. With this in mind, the older articles I found still give necessary insight into how different teachers deal with different classes and what they did to shape their classroom culture in a positive direction.

The study conducted on 9 Full-Day Kindergarten classes (FDK) found that students having a positive relationship with their teacher closes the achievement gap for the next grade (Hughes, J. N., Gleason, K. A., & Zhang, D, 2005). A positive relationship was shown to be achieved through four themes, classroom atmosphere, instructional strategies, student management, and the relationship between the teacher and the student. The most effective of the four themes in relation to improving student academic success was the classroom atmosphere. Classroom atmosphere is defined as the cultivation of trust, caring, and demonstrating flexibility. These themes play a role in achievement viewed by kindergarten teachers in this study to influence student achievement. The theme of classroom atmosphere was the most important of the four themes in improving student achievement because students will have a sense of comfort at an early age, as well as start to feel motivated and in control of their emotions during the early stages of their education journey. It is believed that students who come to this sense of motivation and emotion control earlier in their life, will be more successful as their education continues (Hughes, J. N., Gleason, K. A., & Zhang, D, 2005).



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There may be students who have a troubled home life and do not get the motivation or emotional support from their family, but coming to a classroom culture that is very friendly and understanding is very beneficial in changing their views on themselves and other adults (Hughes, J. N., Gleason, K. A., & Zhang, D, 2005). Giving students with a wild home life a sense of structure and love at school will help them feel like they can be themselves at school and will always look forward to coming to a happy and structured classroom.

In the article *Child temperament, teacher–child interactions, and teacher–child relationships: A longitudinal investigation from first to third grade* (Moritz Rudasill, K. 2011) it is further shown that giving children a positive classroom culture by having a strong teacher-student relationship early in their education will directly affect how they perform academically and socially in later grades. The showed the positive correlation between student-initiated contact with a teacher causing an increase in teacher-initiated contact with a student. Student-initiated contact is when a student initiates a conversation with their teacher. This is usually done by raising a hand or directly coming to the teacher and asking a question in a private setting. Teacher-initiated contact is when a teacher initiates conversation with an individual student. This is done by calling on the student to answer a question, calling the student over to discuss their academics or to check on how they are doing as a whole. The article further explains that when a child feels comfortable enough to have one-on-one talks with their teacher, the teacher will have more talks with the child. (Moritz Rudasill, K. 2011). This is significant because when students have questions on classwork, they may feel too shy to ask their teacher for help. If they are in an environment where they feel connected to their teacher they will make the extra step to initiate contact and feel more comfortable getting the assistance they need

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(Moritz Rudasill, K. 2011). A key detail when comparing these interactions was that teacher-initiated interactions did not increase the number of student-initiated reactions, students were less likely to speak to teachers who spoke to them one-on-one at a higher rate. The reasoning for this was that if the teacher is initiating contact with students first at a high rate, it is likely that there will be negative interactions. Because of this, students were shown to be more reluctant to ask for one-on-one help or even initiate a talk with the teacher at all.

As a teacher, establishing a relationship with your student's parents or guardians is most beneficial in early elementary grades (Sadiku, G. S., & Sylaj, V. 2019). Students in grades K-2nd have very strong bonds with their caretakers at home, due to this, seeing their teacher have a good relationship with their parent or guardian will open the students up to view their teacher as someone who cares for them on an emotional level, giving a sense of being an extended family member (Sadiku, G. S., & Sylaj, V. 2019). The parent-teacher relationship has further relevance in regards to building a positive classroom culture when the parent or guardian is involved with in-class activities and collaborations (Izzo, C. V., Weissberg, R. P., Kasprow, W. J., & Fendrich, M. 1999). Research showed that if a student's parent collaborated with the teacher at least twice during the school year, the quality of the student's work went up, and the student would have more motivation to do homework with their parent at home (Izzo, C. V., Weissberg, R. P., Kasprow, W. J., & Fendrich, M. 1999). Collaboration in this study is seen as a parent coming to sit in class with their student during a lesson, attending field trips with the class, or attending after-school tutoring sessions with their child. This parent-teacher collaboration is shown to increase student's work quality due to the students seeing their parents and teachers as equals when they are together (Izzo, C. V., Weissberg, R. P., Kasprow, W. J., & Fendrich, M. 1999).

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Children are the main variable of how a classroom culture will develop. Children will create their own culture with peers in the classroom, and the tone of this child created culture is entirely dependant on how comfortable their teacher makes them feel (Lash, M. 2008). In this study, the peer culture of two kindergarten classes was examined. Both classes had the same teacher, were in the same room, but one class took place during the morning and the other during the afternoon. Peer culture is described in the study as the normal daily interactions between students. This gave the researcher a sense of what the children thought about the class and their teacher. The study found that the students in the morning class had a peer culture with a very tight bond with each other, and this bond was founded due to their imagined competition with the afternoon class (Lash, M. 2008). The students started to blame anything that went wrong on the afternoon class, and this teasing made them all grow closer as a class. If a toy was broken, or supplies were not put away properly the previous day, the morning class would always say that the afternoon class was responsible. The teacher found this humorous at first, but it soon spiraled out of control and even after blatant instructions to stop blaming the other class and to be accountable instead, this teasing became the cornerstone of the classmate's bond with each other, much to their teachers dismay. The author emphasized the theme of students feeling like a united group striving for one goal (in this case, blaming the afternoon class) and how a teacher can use this to structure a peer culture that gets students to work together, but not in a malicious way as shown in the study (Lash, M. 2008).

As students get older, they will start to form more opinions on their classmates, positive and negative (Hughes, J., & Im, M. 2016). With this increasing awareness of differences between each other, students will be less inclined to have solidarity with each other and in turn will have a

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weak peer culture, causing a negative classroom culture (Lash, M. 2008). In a study that took place in 32 classrooms and over 700 students, the correlation between how students viewed their classmates (like or dislike) and how warmly teachers treated their class was analyzed (Hughes, J., & Im, M. 2016). The term “warmly treated” in this study refers to teachers approaching all situations with a calm and positive attitude, instead of being confrontational. Studies found that students tended to dislike an increasing number of students as their grades increased (Example: Going from 1st to 2nd grade). The students who were disliked the most tended to be students with special needs such as ADHD, or students who kept to themselves in class or at recess. The research showed that teachers can indirectly cause students who may be disliked, to be viewed differently in the classes’ eyes, and in turn be liked by students who disliked them before (Hughes, J., & Im, M. 2016). This change in opinion was caused by the teacher implementing targeted positive interaction with these “disliked” students. The positive interaction would be in the form of the teacher having a one-on-one interaction with the student in front of the entire class. This is done by asking the student in question to explain their answer to a problem, praising a student’s strengths, or sharing a personal anecdote, with notable interest from the teacher. This caused students to see commonalities with their peers that they disliked before, and changing their social standing with their peers (Hughes, J., & Im, M. 2016).

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### **Methods and Procedures**

The majority of my methodology was initially going to be interviewing teachers of varied gender, the grade they teach, schools, districts, and years of experience. I was in line to do in-person interviews with 6-10 teachers, however, due to COVID-19 closing down schools and emphasizing the importance of social distancing, in-person interviews were off of the table. I then pivoted to finding as much online research as I could. The way I found the Journal articles and Peer-reviewed studies was through the CSUMB Library article database. Through this database, I went to the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), went to the “education” tab, and started looking for articles that will help answer my research questions. The concept of “classroom culture” varies from every article to the next, leaving the meaning up to the author’s discretion, therefore, searching for the keywords “classroom culture” alone was not sufficient enough to find the more niche data I was looking for. The keywords that helped me the most on my search on the database were classroom environment, student-teacher relationship, whole student, outside of class interaction, and comfortable classroom.

### **Results & Discussion**

Although the research took many unexpected setbacks in regards to the methods used to find studies relating to my topic, the research that was eventually found was satisfying, and can now confidently answer the primary and secondary questions with this information. All of the

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secondary questions tie into the primary question, so it is appropriate to go over these first. The questions below are the ones I initially proposed.

### *1. What is the role of students in classroom culture?*

Students were found to be the most important factor in creating a classroom culture. This does not come as a surprise, but what needed to be analyzed is why this is the case. Students are the driving force of making a positive or negative classroom culture because their opinions are often shared among each other, especially at the young ages of K-2nd grade. Once the class forms an opinion on everyday class procedures, it is a challenging task as a teacher to change their mind. The opinions students may form about the classroom are their thoughts on the work given by the teacher, how they feel about their teacher, how they feel about the material the teacher is teaching. All of these areas are what makes up a classroom culture, and when students feel negative about how the class feels, or how the teacher treats them, the classroom culture will be a negative one.

### *2. What is the role of teachers in classroom culture?*

Teachers must have a vision of what they want their everyday classroom culture to look like, while also taking steps to make students feel comfortable in class. Teachers must balance having a vision before the school year, but also being flexible throughout the year, in regards to changing how they envision their ideal classroom culture. An example of this would be a 2nd-grade teacher who wants to have a classroom culture with a heavy emphasis on reading literature. They can take steps toward building their classroom culture before the year starts

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through communication with the incoming students past teachers and their parents to gauge their reading skills. However, once the year starts, if the children do not feel confident or comfortable with the reading activities, it is up to the teacher to analyze why the lesson is not working, and what they can do to connect better with the students. The research showed that having one-on-one communication with students is one of the best ways to start teaching to the whole student and building a better foundation with students to ultimately create a positive classroom culture.

### *3. What is the role of parents in classroom culture?*

Parents should be involved in their children's academics through their relationship with the teacher and participating in at school activities. Classroom culture is shaped due to how students perceive the class, and this perception can be heavily shaped at a young age by their parents. When parents have a positive relationship with their children's teacher, their child is going to respect that teacher as a parent as well.

### *4. Is it possible to shape a classroom culture, or does it depend on the children and/or the environment you are in?*

The answer to this question is complicated because both parts are the correct answer. It is possible to shape a classroom culture, but how much you will be able to shape it will be fully dependant on how the students in the class perceive the teacher, and interact with each other as a group. Teachers will not have full control of every aspect of their classroom culture, but that is an unrealistic expectation in the first place. What teachers can control is the way they make their

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students comfortable and how they chose to teach to the whole student, in turn making the students feel a level of respect and friendliness with their teacher. The goal of this question was to see if it was even possible in the first place to have any control of creating classroom culture, and the answer to that is yes.

### *5. How to create a classroom culture that teaches to the whole student in a K-2nd grade classroom?*

This question was successfully answered with the caveat of accepting the fact that once you create the ideal classroom culture, there is a possibility that it may deteriorate in quality as the year goes on due to many factors. The factors that cause this deterioration are the same factors that must be followed to create a good classroom culture that teaches to the whole student. In order of importance, these factors are: student perception of the classwork, student-teacher relationship, peer culture, teacher-teacher contact before the school year, and teacher-parent relationship. When planning the school year out with these factors in mind, it is possible to create a classroom culture that teaches to the whole student in a K-2nd grade classroom.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of answering this question is to not only find a way to create a classroom culture that makes children and teachers be the best versions of themselves but to see if it is even possible to do that very thing in the first place. This research shows that there are in fact steps that teachers may take to create this classroom culture the primary question ponders. There is no



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one or two things that a teacher can do to guarantee a positive classroom culture that will help them teach to the whole student, but instead, there are things that teachers must be aware of when planning out the school year, and during the year during class every day. Teachers will need to take into mind what each student needs in order to feel comfortable in class and give them a safe space to be themselves. Not only must they keep in mind this classroom management, but also be aware of their student-teacher relationships. When creating a positive classroom culture during the school year, a teacher must be able to not only determine when it is necessary to take action but must also know what action to take. Teachers must have the awareness to gauge their students' peer culture in regard to what material their class will respond best to. To gain insight into what students are feeling about the classroom culture, teachers must have good relationships with the students and that can be fully controlled by the teacher themselves.

Every teacher would love to have their students look forward to coming to class every day to learn, feel safe and have a sense of family with their peers and instructor. It would be naive to think that building your classroom with the goal towards having a positive classroom culture while teaching to the whole student will solve every problem that will arise during the school year. While a class will have its ups and downs, having a positive classroom culture will, however, make the ups much more enjoyable for everyone involved, and the downs happen much less often. Not only will having a positive classroom culture give students the opportunity to be the best student and person they can be, but will give them a fond memory of that class for the rest of their lives.

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