Creating a Space for Readers

Adding a focus on literature to the curriculum will result in only small changes in readers’ talk about books unless there is also a fundamental change in the social relationships within the classroom.

Kathy Short

Over the past several years, I have found myself spending more and more time, and money, at the large retail bookstore around the corner from my home. Early on Saturday mornings, before the store fills up with people, I wander around the store browsing through the current periodicals, *New York Times* bestsellers, photography books, and travel guides. Some Saturdays, I have a particular title in mind, other times I am simply there to see what new books are available. Rarely, if ever, do I leave the store empty-handed.

The bookstore near my home has gone to great lengths to ensure that their store is a comfortable place to spend time. A bakery located in the back of the store serves croissants, pastries, cappuccino, and other special coffees and baked delicacies. Soft jazz music playing in the background lends to the relaxed atmosphere throughout the store. There are nice comfortable chairs and sofas to relax on while looking through various books and magazines. No one pressures you while you are there, yet the sales assistants are available if you should ever need assistance. These amenities have been designed with the reader, in this case also the customer, in mind. These stores are designed to make the customer feel comfortable, provide access to a large variety of books and magazines, and to invite customers to wander around, take their time, and choose books and magazines to buy.

Inevitably, I am drawn to the children's literature section of the store. The colorful chairs, the posters hanging on the walls, and the enormous selection of
children’s literature entice me to find a comfortable chair and browse through new
titles or reread some old favorites. This section of the store reminds me of where
I sit and read when I am at home. Sitting in the comfortable chair in my office or
relaxing on my living room sofa, I am surrounded by different books to suit my
various moods and interests. At home, or in this bookstore, I can take advantage
of extended blocks of time and a comfortable chair to read in without being
interrupted.

At this bookstore, as at my home, there is no pressure to make a quick selec-
tion. No one is forcing me to choose a book immediately or hurrying me along. In
fact, I rarely go to this bookstore when I am rushed or have a short amount of
time. I like to go there and spend time browsing through what is available. The
store is designed for people to wander around and browse through the available
titles, not to be hurried along. The store designers and managers know that the
longer I spend time looking, the more likely I am to make a purchase.

Unfortunately, in many schools children are given limited time and opportu-
nities to browse through the library collection, choose a book, and find a com-
fortable place to read for extended blocks of time. Shortened library periods force
children to hurry up and make a book selection or run the risk of forfeiting their
opportunity to pick out a book until the following week. Sustained Silent Reading
(SSR) times are usually ten to fifteen minutes long and require all children and
teachers to drop what they are doing and read. Classrooms are coming to resemble
assembly lines, where children move along a conveyor belt while the teacher
drops information into them in thirty- or forty-minute time blocks.

As classroom teachers, we need to provide extended amounts of time on a
daily basis for reading; however, I feel that this block of time alone is not sufficient.
I would also like to see schools and individual classrooms take a lesson from retail
bookstores like those I have described. In these bookstores, the sales clerks are
available, but not imposing. Helpful, but not pushy. The atmosphere is relaxed and
inviting. The physical space is comfortable and aesthetically pleasing, providing
access to a wealth of reading materials and time to enjoy one’s selections. Even
though there is little or no pressure from the sales clerks to purchase any books, I
can’t remember a time when I left the store empty-handed. The question, it seems,
is whether we are providing the same opportunities in our classrooms for our stu-
dents that the bookstores are providing for its customers.

We can learn a few new things from these store managers, sales clerks, and
bookstore designers. Our classrooms, and especially our classroom “library cor-
çers,” need to be inviting places, where students rarely, if ever, leave without mak-
ing a selection. Like the displays and reading areas in retail bookstores, the ele-
mental classroom should provide access to a wide range of reading materials, a
comfortable place to relax and read, extended periods of time for children to
engage in their reading, a teacher who knows about children's literature and reading processes to support children's development as readers, and numerous opportunities for students to interact with other readers. As teachers, we should be available, but not imposing. Helpful, but not pushy. To us falls the task of inviting, not coercing, children into the world of reading and literature.

In this chapter, I will discuss how I begin each year by involving children in the design and arrangement of the physical environment of the classroom. Early in the year, we focus on the creation and maintenance of the classroom library and the various "spaces" we need to create in the room for us to work and share ideas. During the beginning weeks of school, I am trying to create a community of readers, a place where readers read and share their reactions to their reading with other readers. I pay particular attention to how the social dimensions of our classroom evolve and how the students and I create the classroom expectations and routines for the various parts of our day. As the opening quote from Kathy Short suggests, until we closely examine the social relationships and interactions (and I would add the physical dimensions of the learning environment), we will not change the way that teachers and students talk about literature and develop as members of a community of readers.

Creating a Community of Readers

As children enter the classroom on the first day of the school year, the walls of the room are empty, the tables and chairs are placed in a temporary arrangement, and the library books are stacked in boxes in one corner of the room. There are shelves, couches, book racks, easels, filing cabinets, planters, and a stereo set along the perimeter of the room. As students enter the room, I invite them to come over and sit down on the carpet near my rocking chair, located in the front of the room. We introduce ourselves to each other, and students usually share the postcards that they received at home from me before school began. I always send a postcard to my prospective students before school begins, introducing myself and inviting them to come and join our learning community. In a sense, our community begins before my students even enter the classroom.

I begin by explaining that we will be designing the room together, arranging the furniture to meet our needs. I make sure to tell them that it's not because I was lazy that the room didn't get arranged; rather, it is because I believe that we need to work together to design the room. I talk to them about the special areas that we will need to create—for example, the classroom library, the group discussion area, the "work area," the students' cubbies, a place for art supplies, a publishing center, and a classroom museum (see Figure 3–1). Some of the first decisions we will have to make will be to decide how the room will be arranged, where
the library will go, where the furniture will be placed, and how the children will organize the art supplies and other materials they will use all year long. We will have to decide what jobs will be needed and who will be assigned to them. We will need students to volunteer to work in groups to design and organize specific
parts of the room. For the first few days, this creation of our physical space, and the jobs and routines needed to keep it functioning, will be our main focus.

Behind the rocking chair that I use for reading aloud with the class, there is a large colorful sign that reads “Living Together Differently.” As our introductions finish up, I direct students’ attention to this sign. It’s not hard to miss since it’s one of the only things hanging on the wall. I ask students what they think this saying means, and we talk about these words and how they might affect our time together. I explain to them that I hope this motto can help guide our actions and the ways in which we treat each other throughout the whole year and beyond. We spend a great deal of time discussing what this motto means to us and its implications for our classroom community, especially during the beginning of the year. As the year progresses and our community evolves, we will refer back to this motto and its implications for our behaviors and social interactions. For me, this saying is the driving force behind my conception of a learning community.

After this initial discussion, I begin the day as I will for the rest of the year, by reading a story to the class. For me, one of the most important factors in the building of our classroom community comes from the sharing of ideas and reactions to a piece of literature. I begin the year reading from a collection of books that address the issue of diversity and what it means to be different (see Figure 3–2). These books also invite discussions concerning what it means to be an individual, what it feels like to be different, and what it is like to be a member of a community of learners. The discussions that we have about these books help children understand the issues and challenges that arise in living together differently.


Figure 3–2. Books About Building Community


**Figure 3–2.** *Books About Building Community (continued)*
I begin the year, as I have done for my many years of teaching, by reading the picture book *Tacky the Penguin*, by Helen Lester, and the first chapter of *Dominic*, by William Steig. *Tacky the Penguin* deals with the issue of being different and an individual, while *Dominic* talks about making decisions about what road to take in life. The character Dominic is confronted by a split in the road during his journey. As he is wondering which way to go, an alligator witch explains that one road leads to daydreaming and boredom, while the other is the “road to adventure.” These are the messages I want to begin the year discussing with my students: being an individual and making good choices. Of course, many other things always arise in our discussions, but these are certainly a major part of the first discussion circles.

We continue with our discussion by creating a chart about our ideas concerning the motto on the board and the two books we have read. I have a large piece of butcher paper that I roll out on another part of the wall, and we use this to write down our ideas about community. I write the words “Living Together Differently” along the top of the chart, and we add our ideas that we have discussed to it. This chart will grow as we read new books over the course of the next few weeks. Each new book will bring a different perspective to the discussion about community and the concept of living together differently. It is an important discussion to begin with, and one that I feel is worth the time and effort because of the positive effects it can have on the rest of the school year.

After the opening discussion focusing on these two books, I share with my students the expectations that I have for the classroom community. They are simply:

1. Think
2. Say What You Think (in an appropriate manner)
3. Include Everyone
4. Enjoy Yourselves
5. Practice Kindness
6. Do Your Best

It is my hope that these expectations, along with the class motto, will set the tone for our classroom community. Any other rules or procedures that need to be made will be made together. If students know in their hearts and in their minds that we as teachers take them and their ideas seriously, they will be more willing to share their ideas and concerns. We discuss my list of expectations and what they mean to us, and then we play kickball. I believe that we develop community by sharing in events, both inside and outside the classroom. I like to plan a field trip early in the first month of school, usually to the public library to get library cards, to help build this sense of community. We play together, learn together, and live together. That is at the heart of our development as a community of readers and learners.
The Physical Dimensions of the Learning Environment

Traditionally, classrooms have been arranged with children seated at individual desks, row after row, facing the teacher’s desk at the front of the room, in order to facilitate lectures or direct instructional practices. Supplies, books, and other classroom resources are located on shelves or behind cabinet doors along the perimeter of the room. The room is designed for little or no student-to-student interaction. This “all-desks-in-a-row” arrangement has traditionally been used to direct students to interact exclusively with the teacher in the front of the room. As long as the teacher is viewed as the dispenser of information, standing in front of the class in order to effectively dole out knowledge, this arrangement makes some sense. However, when classroom instruction becomes more child-centered, focusing on the social interactions among students, the physical arrangement needs to change to support these new interactions.

I would like to offer ten ideas for you to consider when designing the physical arrangement of your classroom: “Serafini’s Top Ten List of Physical Environment Ideas.” Along with each suggestion, I will provide an example from my classroom to help you envision the ideas I present. I am making this list for my “ideal” classroom, the one I design in my dreams. Of course, we have to live in the real world, with real budgets and real restrictions, and we have to adhere to more regulations and directives than we would like to admit. Some of these things are not physical as much as they are conceptual, but this list represents the things I hope to include in my elementary classroom learning environment. Number . . .

10. Physically Defined Spaces

By physically arranging furniture to define spaces, such as the class library or reading area, students become aware of the expectations for a particular place in the room. In my classroom, I usually arrange several couches, assorted lamps, and a rug in one part of the room that becomes the reading area. Students seem to enjoy the comfortable surroundings, and this area often becomes a favorite place for children to sit and read. By physically defining the reading area with the furniture, shelves, and rug, I can help students understand what is expected of them when they enter this space.

I use bookshelves and cardboard display cases, along with signs and book boxes, to define the library area. The library is a place to browse through books and make selections. When students are in the library area, this is what is expected of them. (Unfortunately, due to the lack of classroom space, students often don’t have enough room in this area to sit and read and still have enough space for students to get around them and make their selections. So much of these expectations are controlled by the amount of space and the arrangement of our classroom furniture.)
9. **Authenticity**

I feel that the classroom should not look like a place that only exists in schools. The room should remind children of home and other places outside of school where people gather. Because of this principle, I invite students to bring in posters, stuffed animals, and other items from home to decorate our room. This makes the classroom a place where children and teachers alike feel at home. Too often, traditional classrooms have a sterile, laboratory atmosphere that resembles a place where no one would want to spend time.

I also believe that music plays an important part in the learning environment. I prefer to have some soft jazz music playing whenever possible to create a soothing atmosphere for readers. Because I dislike fluorescent lighting, I bring in lamps and other incandescent lights to illuminate the room. Many teachers bring in pets, plants, terrariums, and aquariums to brighten up the classroom atmosphere. These things all bring life and experiences from outside the school into the classroom. When the classroom looks like a place that you would choose to spend time, your students will be more comfortable and enjoy spending time there as well.

8. **Group Meeting Area**

In one corner of my room, I always create a place where my students and I can gather together to listen to stories, conduct class meetings, and have whole-group discussions. I generally have one comfortable, special chair in this area that serves many different functions, such as author’s chair, read aloud chair, and a place for guests and me to talk to the class. I often use a large piece of carpet to identify the space we use for these group meetings. The rug itself helps to define the floor space and supports our classroom expectations for these group meetings. The meeting area serves as a place to come together to share our ideas, stories, and experiences.

7. **Round Tables with Chairs**

We all have to deal with what we are given to use in our classrooms, but the items I couldn’t do without are round tables and chairs. To me there is something distinctive about sitting and working at round tables as compared to rectangular ones or individual desks. At round tables everyone can see everyone else, there is no head of the table, everyone has an equal position, and there is plenty of room to spread out our work. For me, desks are too small and confining for the work we do in schools.

6. **Cubbies or Lockers**

When the classroom has tables and chairs instead of desks, students need a place to put their personal belongings. Cubbies are one way to do this that don’t take up
too much space, but I prefer ones with doors on them. It helps students feel they have more privacy in the room for their personal things.

5. **Hidden Teacher Area**

When you walk into a classroom, the first thing you see should not be a huge teacher’s desk in the front of the room standing guard over the rest of the classroom. This traditional arrangement of the room demonstrates that the teacher is in complete control and is the focus of all the attention. Student desks are then lined up to face the teacher’s desk, so the teacher can keep an eye on everyone. I prefer to have my belongings fade away into the background of the room. I hope that when a visitor comes into my classroom, the first thing they notice is the students and their work, and I hope that I am often a little hard to find because I am on the floor working with my students. I have a private place for my things, I just don’t allow it to take up half of the room.

4. **Classroom “Museum”**

I believe that a room should reflect the topic being studied and that when a visitor enters a classroom, they should be able to tell what is happening in the curriculum. If our class has been involved in a study of the Grand Canyon, there should be maps, posters, artifacts, rocks, photographs, and travel brochures of the Grand Canyon displayed and readily available. One important space in my room that I have facilitated over the past several years is the classroom “museum.” Usually starting out as an empty table and some wall space directly above the table, this space is transformed into a museum focusing on the current topic being studied. For our Grand Canyon inquiry project, the table was covered with rocks, travel brochures, topographic trail maps, aerial photographs of the canyon, scenic photography books, and other artifacts that my students and I brought in to display. Each item on the table was accompanied by an index card describing the artifact, listing the name of the donor, and explaining the relationship the artifact had with our study of Grand Canyon.

As the museum grows, we select curators to organize and maintain the collection, and eventually as a class, we develop a museum guide or brochure for visitors to use when touring the museum. The displays and artifacts contained in our museum leave no doubt in a classroom visitor’s mind about the content of our current inquiry project.

3. **Supply Area**

Students need easy access to the materials and supplies in the classroom, and they should not have to ask the teacher in order to get to many of these supplies.
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I believe that students take better care of classroom supplies if they are put in charge of the organization and care of them. Putting the supplies in clearly marked containers, teaching children how to care for supplies, and showing them how to order supplies when they are gone helps students accept responsibility for our materials.

2. Publishing Center

The more books students publish, the more books will be available for students to read. The connection between reading and writing is inseparable. We read what we write and write like what we read. If the writing workshop has a successful publishing component, the books created become some of the most frequently read books in the classroom.

Supplies like contact paper, staplers, special stationery, paper fasteners, binding materials, wallpaper, markers, art supplies, and other materials can be included in this area. The more authentic we can make the publishing materials, the more authentic the books will look. This plays an important part in helping students feel like real authors.

1. Student Ideas

And the number one principle of physical design and classroom learning environments is . . . including students in the design of the room and the decisions about the day-to-day operations of the class. This is something that you can’t plan ahead for, but it needs to be included in order to make students feel part of the classroom community. It is important to ask students about their ideas for the classroom, what they think would make the room work better, what they would like to do, and what supplies they should have. I feel that students should have the opportunity, through class meetings and other avenues, to suggest ideas for the physical as well as the social environment of the classroom. If we take students’ suggestions seriously and include them in the decision-making process, students become more intimately involved in the events in the classroom community, and accept more responsibility for the classroom and their behaviors.

I think closely about these ten ideas as I begin arranging the classroom and developing classroom procedures each school year. Involving students in as many decisions as possible is central to my efforts in building community. Because we develop many of these procedures together and children share in many of the classroom decisions, the classroom belongs to my students and me. It is our room, not mine alone.
The Classroom Library

One of the biggest physical design decisions we will have to make at the beginning of the year is where to put the classroom library and how to arrange it. The library will serve as a central focus for our community of readers, and it must be not only functional, but aesthetically pleasing as well. The design of the classroom library should invite students to browse through the reading materials, make locating a particular title quick and easy, allow students to keep books in some consistent arrangement, and provide a comfortable space for them to select literature to read.

When I began teaching elementary school years ago, one of my deepest concerns was the limited amount of children’s literature I had in my classroom. Because of this concern, I quickly became friends with the school librarian and the librarian at the local public library, checking out my limit of books every two weeks in order to have more books for my classroom. At the beginning of the year, I started sending home order sheets for the Lucky Book Club to provide students with the opportunity to buy books for their own collection and to make funds available to increase the number of books in our classroom. I searched through garage and yard sales, used bookstores, and special closeout sales at retail stores, looking for quality literature at discount prices. I also solicited donations from various sources, including my own school district, to help build my classroom collection. I feel that it is crucial to have a large collection of quality literature, ranging in levels of sophistication, to support the different interests and reading abilities in my classroom.

As I mentioned earlier, at the beginning of the year my classroom library is packed away in boxes, stacked into a corner of the room, just waiting to be discovered. Along with these boxes of books are various shelves, wall displays, cardboard display cases, and other organizing materials and pieces of furniture for the children to use when setting up our library. However, there is a reason why these boxes of books, and other classroom materials, are left stacked along the perimeter of the room. Together, the children and I will arrange our classroom, especially the classroom library. We will make the decisions as to how the library will be designed, where the books will go, and what the procedures for the library and classroom will be. I believe that the more students are involved in the creation and maintenance of the classroom library, the more they will use and take care of it.

Unpacking the Classroom Library

In much the same way as Joanne Hindley described in her book *In the Company of Children* (1996), I open one or two boxes of books each day during the first few weeks of school. It takes about that long to open all of the boxes of books
I now have available. Each day brings a new adventure as we open up a new box to find out what books are inside, what literary treasures await us. This opening of the library boxes is a yearly ritual in my classroom and is designed to help students get a sense of the variety of books that are available. I also do this to help students understand that the books are there for them to read and are not there merely for display purposes. The books in the classroom are there to be looked at, thumbed through, and read. Every book is available to everyone.

As we open each new box, we place the contents on tables around the room to allow students in small groups to spend time investigating each title. We stop periodically to share favorite books we know and love as a whole class, and introduce each other to new titles we haven’t seen before. We get excited sharing the books we remember from previous years, as well as any new titles I may have purchased over the summer. Old favorites and new books are strewn across the tabletops, the conversation is lively, and children are beginning to feel like a part of our community of readers. Students use their writers’ notebooks to write down any special titles that they want to be sure to revisit soon. I also ask students to write down any categories or genres that they are noticing. I want them to begin to think about ways to organize the books in the library. This organization will be our next class project.
As students are going through the books scattered around on the tables in the classroom, we begin to make a chart of all the types of books or genres that we are finding. Using a large piece of butcher paper, I list all of the names they give to the books in the room. Art books, nature books, funny books, books about friendship, poetry books, fairy tales, counting books, alphabet books, and family stories are just some of the names students have given in the past. After we go through all of the boxes and have listed all the types of books we have found, I take each name and make a separate card for it. This way, we can move them around so we can begin to develop categories based on the common features in the names we have selected. For example, nature books, rock books, space books, and geography books are categorized into a group called “Science Books.” This category then becomes one of the shelves or one of the boxes in our library. We have worked together to organize our library, and in the process we have had some great discussions about genres and categories of books.

Of course, there are some books that I keep “hidden away” for surprises during the year, but for the most part all of my books are available to my students from the beginning of the school year. I do keep some extremely valuable books and some autographed copies of certain titles on a special shelf near my desk, but these are also available for students to read—they simply have to ask. I want students to feel free to select any books in the classroom, while at the same time I teach them to assume responsibility for caring for the classroom book collection.

As the various boxes are opened during the beginning of the year, small groups of children assume responsibility for the creation of the library, the checkout procedures, the signs and posters for the library walls, the arrangement of the library furniture, the plants that will decorate the library, and any other library jobs that we decide are important. We decide together what jobs are needed and what routines and procedures should be created. I feel that any jobs or procedures that students can handle by themselves, without teacher involvement, should be given over to the students as soon as possible. The more students are involved, the more books will be handled, read, and cared for. Eventually, everyone in the class is assigned a job. In this way, I hope to make each child feel like an important part of our community.

Displaying Books

Although there is a central library area for a majority of the books to be housed in the classroom, books are also displayed throughout the room. For example, books about weather are located near the windows along with selections of nature poems, while books about plants and insects are placed near our terrarium. Various titles, displayed in colorful book boxes, are arranged by author, topic, and theme throughout the room for easy access and organization. Some boxes are filled with
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Dr. Seuss books, while others may be filled with books about rocks and minerals for our geology study. During the year we have long discussions about the organization of these books and the contents of the various book boxes. The discussions that these organizational efforts inspire are excellent opportunities to discuss the concept of genre and the distinctions between narrative and expository texts.

In many supermarkets, end-of-the-aisle displays, along with other point-of-sale displays near the checkout aisle, are used to draw attention to various products. We can use these same marketing techniques in our classrooms to draw attention to particular titles, genres of books, and authors. Books that are displayed with the covers facing the students tend to get selected more often than books where only the spine is showing. The graphics and artwork on the covers of new books are marketing tools in and of themselves. By creating aesthetically pleasing visual displays and providing easy access to a large variety of books, we are able to entice children into discovering new titles, authors, and genres.

One idea I have used in our library to display picture books is to buy some metal rain gutters to hang along the wall. You can purchase these rain gutters quite cheaply from one of the large retail home improvement stores. They hold a large number of books, are easily mounted on the walls, and provide a nice display of the covers of various picture books. They are also easy to store and rehang each year.

Classroom Library During the Year
Checking Out Books

Over the course of the year, my students and I develop a checkout procedure for the books in the classroom library. The structure of the classroom library should be simple enough so that children can take charge of the procedures for checking books in and out, arranging the collection, and adding new titles throughout the year. The library should be designed to respond to the changing needs of the students in the class.

For the past few years, we have ended up using large index cards containing a student’s name on each card, held together by a metal ring. The class librarians are in charge of writing down the books being checked out on the cards and crossing off the names of any books being checked back in. This procedure makes it easy to see the names of the books a child has been reading, and it provides a record of the child’s selections during the course of the school year. By year’s end, these cards find their way into each child’s literacy portfolio.

At the end of each school day, I use these cards to call off each student’s name as I dismiss them individually. I ask everyone about the books they will be reading that night. This helps me keep track of each student’s reading selections and makes for a more personalized way to say goodbye to each student. It also serves
to remind students that they must always take a book home and that they are expected to read something every night.

The classroom library needs to be an inviting place where children enjoy browsing through the collection of reading materials and are able to locate particular resources when they need them. In and around the classroom library, my students’ colorful posters adorn the walls, and comfortable places to read are readily available. I want the classroom library to resemble those high-end retail bookstores I mentioned earlier, to be a “palace” for literature, if you will, a place that children just can’t stay away from.

Other Shared Experiences

Before leaving this section, I would like to talk about other “shared experiences” that I have used and found successful in developing our learning community. Though I don’t believe that building community can be reduced to these planned experiences alone, they help create the opportunity for students to share their lives and listen to the stories of others. This sharing of our beliefs, ideas, and stories becomes the foundation upon which we build our learning community.

Singing

One of the most important community-building experiences we do as a class every day is sing together. I have been playing guitar for over thirty years and have a guitar that remains in the classroom during the school year. Each day we begin by singing a new song for the week and an old favorite. Students hear a new song on Monday, practice it with me on Tuesday and Wednesday, and sing along and play tambourines and other instruments by Thursday and Friday. We discuss what we think the lyrics of the song are about and how the song makes us feel. It is an important daily celebration that students look forward to. We have sung songs by such contemporary artists as Jimmy Buffett, Trisha Yearwood, and Bonnie Raitt, as well as multicultural folk songs from Ireland, Italy, Africa, and Australia.

Food

Along with music, we also share food and our cooking traditions with each other. I love to cook, and even more important, I love to share what I cook. I usually teach my students how to make pasta the way my father taught me, and the way his mother taught him. We mix eggs, salt, and semolina flour together, roll out the dough, cut the fettuccine, and prepare some tomato sauce. Then, of course, we eat. Food plays an important role in the rituals and celebrations we have outside of school, therefore we should include them in our classroom rituals as well.
Students bring in various dishes from home that represent their cultures and backgrounds to share with the class. This sharing plays an important role in the building of our community. In the past we have shared potato latkes during Hanukkah, tamales at Christmas, corned beef on St. Patrick’s Day, and Vegemite from Australia.

**Shoebox Autobiographies**

Another important planned experience that I begin the year with is the creation of our “shoebox autobiographies.” During the first week of school, I have students take a shoebox and fill it at home with artifacts that they feel symbolize them as individuals. These boxes come to school filled with CDs, photographs, letters, books, toys, cards, and other treasured items. We meet in small groups and share our shoebox autobiographies with each other. These boxes serve as a window into our identities and our cultural backgrounds. By sharing these boxes, we learn about each other, the things we have in common, and the unique interests we bring to our learning community.

**“Wallfolios”**

Often, these shoebox autobiographies become the impetus for our learning portfolios and the beginnings of our reflections about ourselves as people and as learners. Early in the year, I make available a two-foot-square patch of wall space for students to display the contents of their shoebox autobiographies or things they bring in from home. We call these our “wallfolios.” These serve as visual representations of our life histories and experiences. Visitors to our classroom may wander through the room and get to know more about each of us by looking at our wallfolios. This project helps students realize that their individual experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personalities are an important part of our learning community. I always take part in these planned experiences, so that students can get to know me as I get to know them. The more we learn about each other, the more we are able to work together successfully. As a class, we gather our ideas and write about these wallfolios. We put these published pieces in a class book that is available to read during the school year. It becomes a permanent artifact of our learning community.

**Class Meeting**

Another planned experience that I want to mention is our class meeting, a time when we gather as a class to solve any problems that have arisen during the day. In the beginning of the year, we meet daily, and then approximately twice a week thereafter. Students write down any ideas or challenges they have on our class
meeting board. Things like seating arrangements, library procedures, and disagreements with other students are included in these meetings. We gather together in our meeting area and try to solve any problems.

A student is selected as “class meeting director” and serves a one-month term of office. We take nominations and hold an election for this important position. This person then serves as the director of the class meeting discussions, using the ideas written about on the class meeting board to begin the meeting. The class meeting continues until all problems are solved or we run out of time for the day’s meeting. By selecting a student to serve as director, I hope to limit my role in these discussions. The more I can step out and allow students to solve their own problems, the more they accept responsibility for the decisions made and the direction of the classroom community. This is a yearlong, if not lifelong, process. We need to learn how to listen to each other, understand each other’s needs and interests, and find ways to solve these issues by including everyone’s voices in our decisions.

When students come to me with problems that I feel are better handled during the class meeting, I tell them to see the director and put their ideas on our class meeting board for the next meeting. This helps to take care of many of the small issues and keeps me from acting as sole evaluator and solver of my student’s problems. Sometimes it’s hard to stay out of the discussions, but the more I stay out, the more students assume responsibility for our community and their behavior. An effective learning community is built not only upon students being able to work together effectively, but also on their working independently to solve many of their problems without help from the teacher.

Reflections

I don’t want to paint an overly idealistic picture here. The structures that I have described are not in place as the year begins, nor do they simply come into being. These procedures and routines are established over time and are constantly being revised and revisited. As the year unfolds, I introduce new procedures slowly, to maintain consistency and predictability during the reading workshop. Children need to understand the routines and the classroom expectations if they are going to assume responsibility for their actions and their learning. Since I expect my students to assume a great deal of responsibility in our classroom, sudden changes in the routines of the workshop can often be unsettling for them.

The learning community and the physical arrangements of the classroom change over the course of the school year as children’s needs and interests evolve. The expectations, procedures, and routines that we establish must be responsive to the needs of the community and be easily modified to reflect our growth. The reading workshop is situated among these routines, expectations, and
procedures of the learning community. It will have its own set of expectations and routines that evolve as the community comes together.

The physical arrangement of the classroom plays a minor role in the development of a learning environment when compared to the social interactions of the classroom community. As members of our classroom, we create a caring, democratic learning community by sharing our life experiences, negotiating the procedures and rules we live by, sharing favorite stories, discussing our ideas and beliefs, and becoming involved in each others’ lives as we learn and grow together.

Community is often defined as a collection of people who see themselves as members of a group that shares common goals and beliefs. The type of community that we build together in our classrooms needs to support the kind of people that we want inhabiting our world outside of schools. In other words, the social interactions in our classrooms serve as models for the types of interactions we want to occur in the outside world. A caring, learning community is a dynamic, ever-changing entity that evolves with the interactions and events that take place during the school year.

Whenever I am struggling with procedures, or the routines we have created aren’t running as smoothly as I feel they should, I slow down and think through my set of guiding principles described earlier. Are my practices aligned with my theoretical understandings? Have I provided the learning experiences that are necessary to support learners? Am I trying to introduce too many things, too fast? These are some of the questions I often ask myself.

Trying to do too much at once is a typical problem in making the transition to this type of teaching and classroom structure. You read about classrooms, or visit someone else’s classroom, where a literature-based framework is in place, and you want your classroom to run as smoothly as the ones you see and read about. Believe me, it takes a great deal of time and patience for these other teachers to get to the point where things run smoothly and children are responsible for the routines and jobs in the reading workshop.

Slow down! Enjoy your students. Try new things one at a time. When in doubt, read a funny story and laugh with your students. It’s always important to remember why you are there: your love for children and your concern for their development.

I have provided you with a diagram of my room arrangement to help you visualize the space I have created in my classroom. Along with this diagram, you will find a list of books that I read during the year to my class that provides an opportunity for the class to discuss issues pertaining to community. These books help us to understand the aspects of living together during the school year. To help you understand my whole day and how the reading workshop is scheduled, I have included my daily schedule and an annotated description for each section of my day.
Further Readings


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:15–8:30</td>
<td>Share Response Logs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30–8:45</td>
<td>Community Share/Sing-Along</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:45–10:00</td>
<td>Reading Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00–11:00</td>
<td>Writing Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00–11:50</td>
<td>Math Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:50–12:30</td>
<td>Lunch/Recess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30–1:00</td>
<td>Poem du Jour/Monopoly/Class Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00–2:00</td>
<td>Sciences/Inquiry Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00–2:30</td>
<td>Educational Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30–2:45</td>
<td>Reflection Logs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:45–3:10</td>
<td>Chapter Book Read Aloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:10</td>
<td>Dismissal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3–3. Daily Schedule*
Share Response Logs: Students gather in pairs to share their homework. Each night they read for half an hour and respond in their lit logs. These logs are described in Chapter 9, “Evaluations.”

Community Share/Sing-Along: We begin each day with students sharing special events in their lives with the class. This way we all know what is happening in each others’ lives. Then we sing a new song each week as I play guitar, and sing a favorite we learned earlier in the year.

Reading Workshop: This one-hour block of time is the focus of this book!

Writing Workshop: This one-hour block supports students’ writing in their writer’s notebooks, sharing their writing, editing pieces, and publishing their work. Time is allocated for individual projects and author’s chair.

Math Workshop: This hour block is a hands-on workshop, utilizing math manipulatives to help students acquire problem-solving strategies and mathematical thinking. It is set up like a workshop, with minilessons, group work, and a sharing circle.

Poem du Jour/Monopoly/Class Meeting: Each day we read and discuss a new poem. Students sign up to share their favorite poems. We play Monopoly as a class every day. There are two teams, and every day each team gets one roll. The students do the math necessary to keep track of their team and their money. Two days a week we have a class meeting to solve any challenges or offer any new ideas.

Science/Inquiry Workshop: This one-hour block is based on thematic inquiry projects. We study both science and social studies topics such as geology, the Grand Canyon, the water cycle, biology, electricity, and geography. Many of the activities are hands on or research based.

Educational Games: Every day we have a half-hour block when students play educational games like Scrabble, backgammon, chess, checkers, and others I create based on the units of study we have finished.

Reflection Logs: Each day we spend about fifteen to twenty minutes reflecting on our day and writing in our journals. This is described in detail in Chapter 9, “Evaluations.”

Chapter Book Read Aloud: I end each day by reading for about half an hour from one of various chapter books. I always read that year’s Newbery winner and other pieces of quality literature. There is time for students to discuss the book before we leave for home.

Figure 3-4. Schedule Expanded
### Lesson Plans  

Day: ______________________

**Opening Ceremonies:** newspaper, attendance, lit logs, schedule, sharing  

Math Challenge:

**Reading Workshop**  

**Literary Focus:** 
**Read Aloud:**  
**Minilesson:**  
**Lit Groups:** (ok)  
**Strategy Groups:**

**Writing Workshop**  

**Unit of Study:**  
**Minilesson:**  
**Teacher Conferences:**

**Poetry Book of the Week**  

**Song of the Week:**  
**Drama/Art Workshop:**

**Afternoon Ceremonies:** Monopoly, Poem du Jour, Class Meeting

**Math Workshop**

**Science Workshop**

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**Figure 3-5. Lesson Plan Format**
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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