

Seizing the Moment

Setting up a math community is a process that unfolds over time and can take many different avenues, depending on the teacher and students. Some teachers, like the one in this case, model the behaviors they would like their students to develop and highlight instances when students embody these behaviors. Here, second-grade teacher Linda Thomas reflects on the challenges she encounters and the strategies she uses to help her students become a community of math learners.

The school year begins with a group of energetic second graders. After a few days, it is apparent that the idea of focusing on tasks will be a challenge. One of my most important goals is to jump-start the classroom culture, which will allow students to take ownership of their behavior, thus allowing our work to flourish. As I reflect on the behaviors and attitudes I want my students to develop, I make a mental list:

- Respecting others
- One person talking at a time
- Listening to each other's ideas; restating an idea
- Rethinking an answer
- Valuing asking questions
- Considering a problem over time
- Enjoying a challenge
- Persisting to solve a problem

I remind myself that creating an atmosphere that supports these behaviors is a process that will unfold over the next several months, and I realize that my role will be a powerful model for the attitudes and behaviors I want my students to develop. I will set the tone for how we will interact with each other by listening to and restating their ideas, by asking questions to help them articulate and develop those ideas and to understand where their mistakes come from, and by persisting in solving problems with them.

I will also nurture this community by being vigilant in recognizing situations that demonstrate the attitudes and behaviors we are striving to achieve. By “catching” a student displaying a particular behavior or attitude and bringing it to the attention of the class as it happens, I can help us all “seize the moment.” Here are two examples. The first occurred when we were meeting to share combinations that sum to 10.

Aisha: 6 and 4 make 10.

Darnell: No, it doesn't.

Aisha: Look, I have 6 fingers, and if I raise 4 more fingers, I have 10.

Darnell: [as he counted by himself, touching fingers to chin] Oh, yeah!

Since this was one of those moments I wanted all my students to learn about, I decided to interject.

Teacher: Something great just happened. Darnell didn't agree with Aisha, so first Aisha explained her idea to Darnell and Darnell checked it out, after which he decided to change his initial thought. That is what good math thinkers do: They share ideas with others, listen to each other, and double-check their work to be sure it makes sense. That happens to me a lot!

In another math activity, students were counting out 30 cubes. Akeem and Robert were working together. Robert counted the cubes one by one. Akeem observed Robert and commented:

Akeem: Robert, it's easier and faster if we make groups of ten and count by 10s.

Robert: Let's do it!

Akeem: 10, 20, 30.

Robert: [as he pointed to each group] 10, 20, 30.

This was another moment I wanted to share with the class.

Teacher: It was great to see Akeem suggesting to Robert how he could organize his cubes in tens to make them easier to count. Good math partners help each other. Many times during this school year, we will need to help each other understand or solve a problem.

As these examples show, there are many formal and informal opportunities to highlight good mathematical practices among students. By highlighting positive behavior, I am explicitly drawing their attention to behaviors and attitudes they can use when they interact with each other and with mathematics activities.

Ms. Thomas takes advantage of daily moments in which her students display behaviors and attitudes she would like them to develop as math thinkers and learners. She shares with her class how these behaviors and attitudes will help them become successful math learners who can work together as a class. Ms. Thomas is aware that becoming a math community requires a lot of work over many months. Yet she knows from experience, that with persistence, she and her students will be able to establish a working math community.

Questions for Discussion

1. In what ways did Ms. Thomas make her goals for the mathematics community visible to her students? In what ways do you make positive student behavior visible in your classroom?
2. Can you think of recent moments, such as those that Ms. Thomas describes, that might have been valuable to highlight for your class?