Ecology of the Classroom

With Kate Sussman
November 14, 2012
Our Guest:

Kate Sussman, M.Ed, a special education consultant in New York City and the newest addition to the Hidden Sparks team, acts as an External Coach and mentor to new Internal Coaches from outside the tri-state area. She worked for seven years with the Opportunity Charter School in Harlem. Previously, she coordinated after school and summer programs for at risk students and worked with Manhattan public high school teachers to create inclusive classrooms. Kate has been a facilitator for Schools Attuned, is a certified trainer for the University of Kansas Strategic Instruction Model and a former adjunct instructor at Bank Street College of Education. Kate has worked with teachers from public, private, and Jewish day schools, grades K—12.
The ecology of the classroom has a great effect on children’s classroom success. We will reflect on the elements that create a positive and supportive classroom environment, which in turn enhance the daily learning experiences of our students.
Session Goals:

• To understand five basic elements that impact the ecology of the classroom

• To reflect on which ones are working well in our classrooms, and which ones can be improved in order to support more student success
Ecology is the interaction between people and environment. All learning and behavior occur in context – everything in a child’s life affects how a child grows and develops. This may include the family, the socio-economic background, religion, gender, race, etc.
Ecology of the Classroom

• The environment that we create within our schools and classrooms has a major effect on the students’ day to day functioning.

• We don’t have control over the home/neighborhood environment, but we do have control over the place where they spend at least a third of their time.
Take a minute to visualize your classroom environment.

*Think first about the physical space …*

How do you feel when you enter in the morning? How do you think your students feel?

What do you like about it?

What are the different spaces in your room? How is it decorated? How does it flow?

Is it clear what the class is working on? What feels awkward in the space? Are there any “traffic jams?”

*Now also think about the people in the space …*

How do the students get along in the different areas?

What is the tone? How do kids speak to one another?

When and where do the misbehaviors/problems happen?
Components of Classroom Ecology

- General Management and Organization
- Community
- Instruction
- Behavior Management
- Teacher Style & Mindset
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The design of the classroom sends a message to the people who use it. Ideally, our classrooms foster a sense of safety and acceptance and are organized to support the academic work.
General Management and Organization, continued

• Is your classroom …warm? inviting?
  • Colors that are calming, spaces that have room to move, places to store belongings.

• Are all areas/materials accessible to all children?
  • Access to materials: labeled bins, designated areas, enough space to move around.

• Traffic patterns/crowd control
  • Rituals for moving from area to area.

• Seating arrangements
  • Assigned spots, seating charts posted, desks that can be moved for various groupings. Also: variation and rotations.

• Personal space
  • Loft, designated “quiet corner” or “cool down” space

• Is it clear what the children are studying/working on?
  • Curriculum-related objects and information are displayed
The environment of the classroom is largely impacted by the **physical space** of the classroom.

- **Lighting/air flow**
  - Florescent vs. full-spectrum bulbs
  - “Warming” elements: plants, soft chairs, rugs, pillows
  - Fans/windows

- **Noise**
  - Student noise level
  - Hand signals, chimes, tennis balls on bottom of chair legs
  - Music

- **Cleanliness/neatness**
  - Classroom jobs, build in clean-up time

Some of these elements we can control/some we can’t.
Includes: *wall space*

- Is part of your physical space, and can be used to support the organization of the classroom/tone as well as the academic work.
- Housekeeping, strategies, vocab, rules, successes/achievements.
- Clear, logical and NEAT.
Using the wall space to support the management of the environment (an example):

What to do when you enter the room...

**Mondays & Wednesdays**
- Silent Reading

**Tuesdays:** Choice day/Read or Write

**Thursdays & Fridays:** Free Write

Homework due
Reflect/Think About ... Other Strategies?

What do you do in your classroom to organize and manage the environment for student success?

What else might be needed?
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Community

How do the students talk to one another and work together in your classroom?

* A positive, supportive community grows out of specific systems you have put into place.

  - Classroom rules/norms
  - Community building activities
  - Traditions/rituals
Classroom Rules

- Eyes Looking
- Ears Listening
- Mouth Quiet
- Helping Hands
- Sit Criss-Cross

What does a good listener look like?
- Crisscross applesauce
- Hands in our lap
- Eyes on the speaker

What does a good listener sound like?
- Voices are off
- No conversation
- Ears on the speaker

=BRAIN POWER!
Guidelines for Creating Classroom Rules:

Goal: Rules/norms set the tone and expectations for how community members will interact.

- No more than 4 – 6 rules
- Need to be measurable and observable
- Positive
- Are developed with the students
- Must be taught explicitly
- Should be posted, followed and revisited
- Compliance should be recognized/noncompliance must be dealt with
Community Building Activities

Goals:

• Students will find areas of commonality and celebrate differences

• Build inclusion

• Students will talk to other students that they don’t typically talk to

• Develop listening skills

• Promote creativity and fun

• Meta-awareness
Community Building Activities

**Example: Put Down the Put-Downs**  
(Can be done as a whole class, or in small groups that come back and share with the whole class)

1. Have a discussion about “put-downs” (hurtful names and behaviors)
2. Brainstorm put-downs that people have heard or used in the past, record them on a chart
3. Make a list of the feelings that occur when one receives a put-down.
4. Ask: What could we do to help each other put down the put-downs?
5. Create a list of strategies that all can use

**Some reflection questions:**
- Why do put-downs hurt your feelings?
- How do you feel when you put down another person?
- What was it like to talk about put-downs with the whole class?
- What do you think of the solutions we came up with?
Traditions/Rituals

• Promote consistency and structure
• Provide a foundation for all of the other work of the day

• Examples:
  » Morning meeting
  » Designated sharing time
  » Songs
  » Talking stick
Traditions, Rituals, and ...

**Classroom routines**
- Entering/leaving the room
- Transitions from one activity to another
- Work/materials collection
Community Reminders

**DO:**
- Work independently
- Get support from peers at your table.
- Ask teachers for support only when:
  - No one at your table knows & a teacher finishes a conference.
  - In an emergency.
Reflect/Think About:

How well are your class rules supporting the environment? Might you return to them for a check-in or revision?
Components of Classroom Ecology

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Instruction

- Developmentally appropriate goals and activities
- Differentiated – multiple learners can engage in various ways
- Multiple modalities/Hands-on learning
- Small-group interaction
- Relevancy/Real-life connections
- Metacognitive – children learn about their own learning
Instruction, continued

• Active engagement strategies
  • *Tell me, I forget; show me, I may remember; involve me, I understand.*
  • Turn to Your Neighbor (TTYN), 12 Word Summary, Exit Ticket, role play, Spectrum/Continuum, Jigsaw, etc.
Instruction, continued

- Time-management/pacing
- Daily schedule
- “Wait-time”: the length of time between a teacher asking a question and student responses
  - Research on extending this period of time shows
    - An increase in the length and correctness of responses
    - A decrease in the number of “I don’t knows”
    - Higher scores on standardized tests
- Complex play/novelty
  - Recess or other opportunities for kids to engage in play affect students’ mood; mood elevation is important for learning.
I’ve finished my work. What should I do?

1. Makeup any missing assignments for this class.
   After that I can choose...
   • Silent reading
   • Free writing in journal
   • Help a friend

   - Please note: if this friend does not sit with you, you must ask permission first!
   • Ask teacher for a special
Varied ways for responding (an example)

Poverty doesn’t give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor” (13).

I disagree because poverty can teach you a lot of stuff.

I agree cause when you are poor you learn.

He thinks ‘bc he is poor he doesn’t have perseverance.

Being poor just came pretty sucks. It means

Being poor

I think this means

Netimes

iden

Lesson

He value

I agree

I agree

When you are poor you don’t know anything else but being poor.
Reflect/Think About:

- Is there a connection between your pedagogy and behaviors that arise in class?

- How do your instructional choices help to create a positive learning environment for all students?

- How are you providing ways for all students to engage and produce?

- What might you want to change?
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Behavior Management

As much thought needs to go into planning behavior management as goes into planning instruction.

- **Assertive**: create an environment in which students learn to choose the appropriate, responsible behavior.
- **Proactive vs. reactive**
- **Behaviors have intentions**
- **Sensory integration issues** (how is the physical space connected to the behaviors?)
Guidelines for Positive Behavior Management *based on Lee Canter's Assertive Discipline*

1. Build positive trusting relationships with students.
2. Establish clear rules that define expectations for the classroom so that students know what is acceptable/unacceptable.
3. Teach students how to follow these rules.
4. Acknowledge when students do follow them.
5. Adopt a positive, assertive manner. Stay calm and consistent.
6. Ask parents and administrators for assistance.
Reflect on Strategies

- Verbal redirecting
- Proximity control
- Teach replacement behaviors
- Provide additional cues/prompts
- Change the academic task/demand
Reflect on Strategies, continued

- Always allow the child an opportunity to save face
- Don’t take it personally
- Reflection
- Communication with home
- Praise must be immediate, specific, and frequent
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This is reflected in the physical set-up of the classroom, but is also the “unconscious” ecology.

- “All children can learn” philosophy
- Growth/fixed
- Biases/assumptions
- Teacher-learner relationship
- Teacher’s view of authority/power
- Self-reflection
Mindset:

• Which of these statements rings true for you:

  • Your intelligence is something you can’t do much about.

  • No matter who you are, you can significantly change your intelligence level.
Mindset, continued

*Growth Mindset:* No matter how much intelligence you have, you can always change it. Working hard can increase your intelligence and abilities.

*Fixed Mindset:* Intelligence is fixed. Working hard won’t do anything to change that.
• Do you get annoyed by students’ moving around the room?
• What is your tolerance for noise level?
• “Almost all of the negative behaviors perceived by teachers are actually typical of all children and youth at various stages of development,” (Martin Haberman).
• Spilled paint – an annoyance, or an opportunity?
• Self-reflection
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Bringing it All Together

- Classroom environment impacts student success.
- Importance of reflection
- How can you involve your students in the creation and maintenance of a positive classroom environment?
- Any of these components can be developed (or redeveloped) at any time
Possible Next Steps …

• Look more deeply at any one of the components discussed tonight. What elements can you strengthen in your own classroom environment?

• Stretch: What ecological factors might you want to look at school-wide?

• Consider the connection between the classroom and the larger ecosystem of the child: what other environments is this child a part of? What happens when there is a clash/a disconnect between home ecology and school?
  • How can families better understand the school ecology/how can the school better understand the home ecology?
Resources for Further Exploration


http://www.pent.ca.gov/pos/cl/increasingengagement.pdf
http://www.middleweb.com/2847/how-to-build-happy-brains/
http://w4.nkcisd.k12.mo.us/~kcofer/social_cooperative_structures.htm
http://educationnext.org/setting-students-up-for-success/
http://mindsetonline.com/testyourmindset/step1.php
http://www.icebreakers.ws/team-building
http://www.tolerance.org/activity/chaos-community
# Upcoming Hidden Sparks Without Walls Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday, 12/19/12</td>
<td>8:00-9:00pm</td>
<td>Temperament- Understanding Children's Pre-set Tendencies</td>
<td>Dr. Rona Novick</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, 2/13/13</td>
<td>8:00-9:00pm</td>
<td>Higher Order Thinking</td>
<td>Karen Kruger</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, 3/13/13</td>
<td>8:00-9:00pm</td>
<td>Internet Treasures and Tools for Literacy and Writing</td>
<td>Jeannie Crowley</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, 4/17/13</td>
<td>8:00-9:00pm</td>
<td>Focus on the Shy and Anxious Child</td>
<td>Meryl Silver</td>
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For more information visit: www.hiddensparks.org

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About Hidden Sparks

Hidden Sparks is a non-profit whose purpose is to help children with learning differences reach their full potential in school and life. Hidden Sparks develops and supports professional development programs for Jewish day schools to help increase understanding and support for teaching to diverse learners.

Guided by a philosophy that by helping schools meet the needs of children with learning and behavioral differences, ultimately all students will benefit, Using a coaching model, Hidden Sparks mentors provide professional development in neurodevelopment, temperament and behavior, and guide classroom teachers in understanding and helping the struggling students.

The Hidden Sparks coaching model and curriculum is currently used in 24 Jewish Day Schools/Yeshivot in New York and is beginning this year in Baltimore, through a partnership with SHEMESH. An additional 4 schools from southern US cities also participate with Hidden Sparks and more than 20 schools have been served by Hidden Sparks through the No Child Left Behind. Hidden Sparks is the proud recipient of a Covenant Foundation grant, recognizing excellence in Jewish education, and is honored to have been listed in SLINGSHOT among the 50 most innovative Jewish organizations in the US.
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