

# **Building Community with "Rock Buddies"**

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# Abstract

*Is there a way to make students feel a sense of belonging in the classroom and to build classroom community? Many students in the classroom often feel that they do not have friends and do not belong in the group; "rock buddies" is a classroom management strategy that creates a sense of belonging for students. Students trade a rock to stand as a concrete symbol of their buddy who they will work together with for the week. Knowing that someone is looking out for you and is a friend has made students feel that they belong in the classroom community.*

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## **Background Information**

### **Teaching Context**

Through spending an entire year in a classroom, I was able to become very familiar with the students in my first grade classroom. I was able to see my students through an academic, behavioral, and social lens. When people think of the word "school", the first thing they think of is academics. However, as I have learned throughout my yearlong experience in this classroom, there is much more to school than simply learning.

A classroom setting is an important place for learning; however, in order to learn students need to feel safe and happy in the classroom. In looking at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Gwynne), for an individual to feel happy and content his/her needs must be met. As you move up the pyramid starting from the bottom, schooling and classrooms meet students' physiological needs. These needs are the basic needs for living things such as oxygen, food, water, and a moderately consistent body temperature. These needs are important for survival and thus are not a worry for children in school. When these needs are satisfied one can move a single step up the pyramid to a need for feeling safe and secure. Many schools work to keep their students safe and while at the same time many teachers work to keep their classroom safe. The rules, routines, and expectations set in the beginning of the year in a classroom often fulfill this need. Through curriculum and schooling schools try to achieve the ultimate goal of students achieving self-esteem and self-actualization (the top of the pyramid). However, a need that is often not addressed in schools today is a sense of belonging and a need to feel loved. Without this need met it is difficult to move up the pyramid.

### **How I was led to this topic**

In December, I came to the realization that many children did not feel a sense of belonging in my classroom. This issue initially arose when one student (A) raised her hand because she did not like having to choose whom to sit with on the carpet. In fact, she was physically hurt when children fought to be first to sit next to her during rug time. Because this student is so caring and thoughtful, many students were drawn to her and wanted to be her friend. They wanted to sit next to her on the carpet and play with her at recess. My mentor and I had noticed these issues evolving with this particular student and how others interacted with her. We were unsure of what approach to take, but because this student decided to bring her problem to the whole group we were able to solve this problem as a class. In discussing this issue in a class meeting, one student said, "Well no one is fighting to sit with me or play with me outside" (classroom observation). In asking that student how he felt, he simply said that he felt sad. As we continued our class meeting, we brainstormed solutions to the problem. Many students said well maybe (A) should have to sit by herself. Then the students decided that they would not want to have to sit by themselves, so that was not a fair solution. Other solutions were that (A) should have to pick with whom she wanted to sit; but students felt that was not fair to them or to student (A). Unfortunately, this class meeting did not seem to solve our problem. We were stuck with no solution to our problem; so we decided to stop the meeting and continue it the next day after the children had time to think about it.

After the class meeting that day, I became extremely interested in how we could solve our problem. I was worried because I knew one student in my class felt sad because he voiced his opinion; I feared that there might be many more students who felt

this way which were not comfortable sharing their emotions. I was concerned that there were children in my classroom that were sad, uncomfortable, and felt as if they did not belong. How is a child supposed to learn in school if he/she is constantly thinking about not having friends and with whom they will sit, do work, or play outside at recess? I cannot possibly imagine absorbing or completing any academic work if I was feeling worried about who would play with me at school and who would be my friend.

In talking with my mentor and another fellow intern, we thought a possible solution might be the community building activity, "Rock Buddies" that most classes (the ones I am familiar with) start in the beginning of the year. Rock buddies, a strategy that one colleague uses in her classroom, involves students working in pairs. They exchange rocks (a concrete symbol) and they are partners for a week. In her class, rock buddies would work together for the week on certain activities, do nice things for each other, and act as good friends to be someone they could depend on throughout the week. My mentor and I also thought that this would allow them to sit with their rock buddy on the rug; therefore, it would solve the problem of children fighting over whom to sit with (or not sit with) on the rug. We came to the conclusion that this community building strategy would be simple and concrete and build friendships throughout the class in allowing children to get to know each other. We also felt that this was something that we could easily add into our daily schedule and not something that would need additional time, for which we did not have any in our jam-packed day. Also, in using rocks to trade, they are easy to find and easy to replace if lost or broken. In decorating the rock, children are able to add a touch of themselves and their personality.

When returning to school the next day, we continued our class meeting. One student said something similar to having partners for a week; it was something that they did in their kindergarten classroom. I discussed my idea about Rock Buddies with the students and they thought it was a hit. In the next couple of days we met and discussed as a class what our visions for rock buddies was for our classroom and how we thought we could make it work. We decided how to decorate our rocks, where to put our rocks, what we can do to, for, or with our rock buddies, and we brainstormed some ideas on how to end our week on Fridays; should we have a rock buddy "end of the week" celebration?

### **What others think or know**

The idea of rock buddies in the classroom is not something that is a "known" classroom and community building activity. However, there has been research done on students' sense of belonging in the classroom and also in promoting students' success in collaboration rather than competition. In generating this program in my classroom, I used many class meetings (some more official than others); class meetings alone often "enhance students' sense of belonging and responsibility to the classroom by providing opportunities for them to express opinions and contribute to class decisions" (Ideas from the Child Development Project, 4). Students often feel friends are very important because "without them we would die of loneliness" (Woodfin, 2). In my online search of other schools' practices, I did find that there were some schools that use a form of Buddy Systems. For example, Sawgrass Elementary School uses these because "students help students, allowing students to help themselves".

## **Wonderings**

### Main Wondering

- Will the "Rock Buddy Program" influence our classroom community and the students' sense of belonging?

### Sub Wonderings

- Will the "Rock Buddy Program" solve our classroom problem?
- Over time will students become more comfortable with the program to add other elements to the program that will become more automatic?
- Will the Rock Buddy Program allow students to get to know each other better?

## **Data Analysis**

### **What I did to carry out the plan**

My data analysis began in discussing how Rock Buddies could work in our classroom. In another meeting with the children I began by saying, "Now that we have come to a conclusion that Rock Buddies is something that we want to do in our classroom, we need to come to a class decision on how to work with rock buddies." I felt it was important for the children to make their decisions on how the program should work. The first question I posed on them was that we knew we were going to trade our rocks, but where were we going to put our rocks? Children brainstormed ideas such as to put them on their home base nametags toward the center of the table, to place the rock on the "No Touch" table (the green table by the classroom door), to put the two rocks together in a small box so that it would be safe on the green table. They also thought of

putting the rocks on the tan bench in the front of the room so that when they were on the rug they would be able to see it and it would remind them that they have a rock buddy. After the vote was complete, the students decided to put the rocks at their home bases. Although I thought that this decision had many reasons for not working, for example students will be distracted with the rocks on the table and will be playing with them. It was their decision and I thought that their input was so vital and their reasoning for placement that I let them put the rocks there. We then had to talk about how to treat the rocks. The children came up with ideas as not touching the rocks and remembering that they are not theirs, but that it belongs to their rock buddy. They also stated that they should not be throwing or "mishandling" the rocks, but just to leave them sit on the table. We gave this placement a try even though I thought it would not work; it turned out that the children were very rarely distracted with the rocks on their tables and we hardly ever heard any rocks moving around or falling when the children were at their home bases. In the situation that a rock would fall off a table and break, be dropped, or lost we talked about that the rock could be replaced and that it was no ones fault if this happened. Even if something happened to your rock, your rock buddy was still a good rock buddy.

The second decision that the class had to make was a question that came from them. They wanted to know what would happen if their rock buddy was not in school or was not in the classroom for a particular activity? We used a variety of the solutions that they brainstormed throughout the entire Rock Buddy program. Sometimes students would buddy up with another classmate whose rock buddy was also not there, or students could work with another rock buddy group. They also thought that the student might be

able to work with my mentor or myself, or finally, that students could just simply work by themselves and be responsible for him/herself.

The third decision involved how to end the week that they spent with their Rock Buddy. We used a variety of their choices throughout the weeks we used Rock Buddies in our classroom. They wondered if they should wrap up the week with something special with their Rock Buddy in a way to celebrate their friendship. Some ideas that the class shared were to just say good-bye at the end of the day on Friday to their Rock Buddy or to make something special for their rock buddy, like a small present. They also thought of things like singing a song on Friday afternoon, doing a line dance, playing a game with their Rock Buddy, writing their rock buddy a funny poem, or creating a picture for their Rock Buddy. Lastly, they thought to just make their Rock Buddy smile and laugh by telling them a funny joke or story. They thought all these ideas were good because they always wanted to leave the week in celebrating with their Rock Buddy on a happy note.

I think that, however, the most important discussion that we had about Rock Buddies and how it would work in our classroom was decisions on what we should do with/for our Rock Buddy each week. Students mentioned all kinds of ideas from putting their chair down in the morning to putting their chair up for them at the end of the day. One way that they thought they could treat their rock buddy is to use kind and encouraging statements such as "you can sit by me on the rug". They also mentioned sharing things with their rock buddy when doing an activity together. For example, you could share markers. The students liked the idea of having proximity to their rock buddy throughout the day. For example, the students could line up and walk down the hall with

their rock buddy, walk to lunch with their rock buddy, sit with their rock buddy at lunch, when they are working they could sit next to their rock buddy and they can sit next to each other on the rug. I think in first grade proximity is a very important part of creating friendships and making each other feel good. One student mentioned that they could play with their rock buddy during choice time or recess. They really liked the idea of reading with their rock buddy in the morning before school started or during Sustained Silent Reading time. Lastly, they suggested that they can help their rock buddy make good choices like sitting correctly on the rug or to help them listen. To do this, they suggested giving their Rock Buddy a silent/quiet cue, quiet verbal messages, and good reminders.

Lastly, before I analyzed the data that I gathered through my inquiry project, my class and I discussed how we should react when we find out who our new rock buddy is each week. I made sure that the students did not give an "oh man" or even a "yes!" when they found out who their rock buddy was. However, when all the students were gathered toward me when I was giving rock buddies each Monday it was wonderful to see their little smiles when they found out who their Rock Buddy was for the week. We did talk about not showing outward expression to the whole group for how it might make others feel; for example, how would it make you feel if someone reacted negatively to having you as a rock buddy.

### **How I Collected Data**

I collected data for my research in a variety of ways. I spoke with the creator of the Rock Buddy Program, Nancy Kelly of Gray's Woods Elementary School. I researched outside sources to find if any other schools were doing programs like this one,

and also to find out about how to help my students obtain a feeling of belonging in the classroom. The most important area of my data collection was the recorded statements that my students said or did throughout the day. These comments really allowed me to take in their relationships and their interactions with their "Rock Buddy". I also kept information and student artifacts on how we used rock buddies each day to how we celebrated and ended that week of rock buddies. I interviewed the children to get their feelings and opinions at the beginning of Rock Buddies, in the middle, and at the end of Rock Buddies. Through communication with some parents I was also able to see what they felt about rock buddies. Finally, I kept my own journals and commentary on how I thought rock buddies was working in our classroom.

### **How I analyzed my data**

Once started, "Rock Buddies" became a common phrase in our classroom. We would ask children to sit with their rock buddy or line up for the hallway with their rock buddy. The children began to catch on and would often do these things naturally. In analyzing my data, I thought it was important to search through the information in a chronological order so that I could truly see the results. I asked myself did children's sense of belonging grow or diminish as a result of "Rock Buddies"? I recorded daily notes of children's statements to their rock buddy or about rock buddies. Through this I was also able to see when I mentioned rock buddies or used rock buddy partners for different activities. I noticed how certain children interacted with each other, some friendlier to their rock buddies than others. I noted how children began to work as teammates rather than opponents. Children began to read together and do activities

together and children who barely knew each other before first grade were playing outside together. I documented any issues or problems that rock buddies had and how they were solved. I found that through Tuesday's interview morning meeting I noticed children learning things about their classmates that they may have not known before. Through this they also found that there were similar interests in the groups.

In having the students do activities together, I often had them giving their rock buddy compliments or thanking their rock buddy. Through rock buddy letters that were written on some Fridays, children highlighted some of the things that they liked doing with their rock buddies. They often also told their rock buddy, in their letter, that they thought they were a good friend and often wished for them another good rock buddy next week.

However most of my ability to compare the classroom and their feelings of their sense of belonging in the classroom came from student interviews. Through the first interview, I learned that there were many children in the class who felt lonely or left out before we started doing rock buddies and they knew little about their classmates, some even felt that they were not liked or had no friends. Then in the second interview many students' opinions changed and they felt more welcome in school and felt as if they had more friends.

## **What I Learned or Now Know**

Through my data analysis and research on Rock Buddies or collaboration of students, I have been able to come to conclusions on what I have learned from my data and other resources.

**Claim:** *Rock Buddies have allowed the students in my classroom to get to know each other better and learn things about each other.*

Every Tuesday in my classroom we began our morning with a morning circle just like every other day; then on Tuesdays once Rock Buddies was started, I taught a new greeting that involved Rock Buddies. This new greeting was "Rock Buddy interviews", which took place of a type of question and answer sharing news that we had previously been sharing on Tuesday mornings after we did a greeting. These interviews worked so that there was a prompted question that the students had to find out about their rock buddy. Then they would introduce their rock buddy to the group and share the information that answered the prompt. For example it would sound like this: "This is my rock buddy \_\_\_\_\_, and her favorite game is \_\_\_\_\_." Children enjoyed finding out that their rock buddy liked the same ice cream they did or that other people like to play the same things outside that they do. These greetings came from Kriete's The Morning Meeting Book. Children enjoy finding others that have similar interests as them.

Also, while working with their rock buddy they might find out some things that their rock buddy is really good at that they did not know before. Or in playing with their rock buddy, they might find that he/she is really good at throwing a football. I think it is

very important for children to learn about their classmates in areas other than just the obvious physical things, but find out more about things that they like things that they do not like and their feelings about things. In completing my final interview with my students, I was only able to interview 16 students. All 16 students said that Rock Buddies helped them get to know each other better.

**Claim:** *Rock Buddies provides all students with the feeling that they belong in the classroom.*

Children come to school wanting their peers to like them and want others to spend time with them. Sawgrass Elementary School believes that through their Buddy System Program "children benefit from the attention of others." In my classroom in which children were very self-centered, students began to think about others and their feelings. Children began to say hello to their rock buddy in the morning before school started, even though they were not directed by the teacher to do so. Children would tell me that they hung their book bag next to their rock buddy's book bag. Students became proud of their buddy that they had each week they often even gave their buddies compliments at the end of the day. Children now had someone to sit on the rug with and do activities in school with. They could count on their rock buddy; in fact one day one student said to her rock buddy "Hey, watch out!" warning him of something that would be harmful. She was looking out for him like many other pairs did throughout this program. The most powerful evidence is that there was a student in my class, in fact he was the one who said that he felt said cause no one wanted to sit with him on the rug. Now at the end of the

year he enjoys coming to school in fact he was sick and missed school and all his friends, which he told us at Parent Teacher Conferences.

Rock Buddies prevent feelings of popularity and/or loneliness. In looking at interviews with the students in my class, many students when asked why they thought that we were doing rock buddies was because everybody wanted to be friends with the little girl who everyone wanted to sit with on the carpet. In asking students how that situation made them feel many of them said that they were sad or lonely when no one wanted to sit on the carpet with them. It was also wonderful to see children playing with all friends at recess, not sticking with just a few. Because we have been doing Rock Buddies in our class, there are no popular groups in our class or no children that are loners; but everyone seems to enjoy everyone in the classroom. This is not something that I see in all classrooms that I have observed playing outside at recess. I might see in my class some students playing with some children for a while and then moving on to play with some other children but they never exclude anyone. In fact, one day I observed a student who began shooting a basketball into the basketball hoop by himself and before I knew it his rock buddy was right there with him and along joined some other children.

Children do not often focus around what buddy can do for them, but what they can do for their buddy at an age when they are developmentally "egocentric". Throughout the week children would look for things to say or do to help their rock buddy. For example, one rock buddy aided and took her buddy to the nurse when he scraped his knee playing outside at recess. Children would help their rock buddies put chairs up at the end of the day. But one thing that I found very interesting is that children wanted to help their rock buddy learn. Behaviorally Rock Buddies did wonders in our

classroom; children would tap their buddy if they were not listening or gently tell their buddy that they need to follow directions. On Friday's children enjoyed making things for their buddies like letters or pictures or cards. It was amazing to see children working together and asking them how they spelled their name so that it would be spelled right on their rock buddy letter. Children took great pride in those things that they made for their buddy.

I often found children sharing with one another, not only school supplies but so much more. If I think back to observations of my classroom before rock buddies children mostly kept their things to themselves. We often had to work on sharing and thinking about what that meant. Through rock buddies this became a natural action. I saw rock buddies sharing snacks and sharing school supplies. On Saint Patrick's Day the sign in question was "Are you wearing green?" As a pair of rock buddies were talking about getting ready for the day, they noted the question and the fact that the one partner was not wearing anything green his partner gave him one of his green necklaces so that he could wear green in school. I also found that children turned to their rock buddy to help them zip up their jacket or help them tie their shoe. Instead of coming to the teacher for help they went to their friends.

**Claim:** *It eases new students into the community and helps them feel as if they belong in this new community even though it was built before they came into the school. It also enables new ESL students to cross the language barriers and become members of the classroom community that belong and feel comfortable, even though they may speak little or no English.*

One week, I had paired a student who joined our class in January with a student who had recently moved to the United State from China and knew little English. It was wonderful to see these students working together knowing that they both had some of the same anxieties about being in a new school even if one of the children could not express those ideas in English. These students were working together on a particular activity in math in which they built things with three-dimensional blocks and then had to draw a three dimensional representation of it. Both of these student excelled in this activity while other students struggled with this new perception on paper. The one partner stopped to give this ESL student a compliment. Some of the other students in the class had also noticed her drawings, in that the one boy said that she had helped him draw his blocks. The students in the class were amazed that "D" was so good at this; I had "D" put some of her drawings on the board. They thought that because "D" could not speak English that meant that she could not be a helpful part of the community. After this day I really noticed "D" starting to play with the other students and laugh and interact with them building her social and academic English language. At parent conferences in April, the one student's mother mentioned how he had the ESL student as a rock buddy and how much they had enjoyed working together.

In the same manner, I paired our new student from China with myself for a week since she came and all the students were already paired up. As her rock buddy, I read to her and helped her get acclimated to the school. I am sure that as a new student coming to school was scary for her, especially since all the children around her were speaking a language that she didn't know. Her second day in school we had art in the afternoon. When I went to pick the children up from art, she ran up to me to show me her art work;

she was so proud of it and so proud that she had a friend to show. Having friends at this developmental age is very important (Wood, 62).

**Claim:** *Rock Buddies promote collaboration, not competition.*

With twenty-one children in one classroom, I have come to learn that every child is different; however, in pairing them they seem to overcome their differences. Sawgrass Elementary school states on their website that "when paired, children share strengths and balance out weaknesses". When one pair of Rock Buddies was getting ready for a science experiment, Student X asked Student Z if he knew how to read and if he could help him read the directions so he would know what to do. This child was not worried in telling his rock buddy that he could not read the directions, but was proud to be able to ask him for help. Again from the Sawgrass Elementary School Website, "children of the same age collaborate ideas and different perspectives". Children in my class are so diverse in, not only learning abilities, but also, ethnic background. Through these differences children often bring those different perspectives to the learning environment. I think it is beneficial to all learners to see the different perspectives that they may have and to work together and to collaborate so that they can come together and build upon what they know, think, or feel and learn. For example, a pair of rock buddies was struggling in getting along. We had them remove themselves from the group and find out two new things about each other. In doing that they both found out that their favorite color was blue. After that they were able to rejoin the group and were able to get back to work and work peacefully together.

Rock Buddies can also affect academic learning in the classroom. At their developmental age of six and seven, "children delight in cooperative projects, activities,

and tasks (Wood, 59). Sawgrass Elementary School believes that, "peer education is enjoyable for students and has far-reaching effects on learning". In the morning we often have students read before we start our day. Sometimes the students would choose to read with their rock buddy. Because these Rock Buddy pairs are sometimes heterogeneous or homogenous depending on the situation, many times strong readers were reading to weak readers or would choose a book that they knew their buddy could read and would help them read it. Or on the other hand, when students were at the same reading ability they were able to work together to read a book on their independent level. I think it is so amazing to see students working together to help each other become better readers.

I also find this true with writing. There were times that we used Rock Buddy pairs in our classroom to work with writing. Whether it was getting new ideas for a story or editing each other's work students fostered a collaborative working environment where they helped each other, rather than knowing that "my work is better than yours". The children encourage each other and believe in each other. One student said to his rock buddy, "I don't think you will get your work done if you don't get started" (classroom observation, 2/4/05).

We often also had students working together in math using their rock buddy partner. In math our curriculum often involved the children working with learning through playing games. Many times when children play games outside school there is a winner and a loser. However when games are played in our classroom there is no winner or loser (even though often the kids think that there is). When children play these math games with their rock buddy they know that they are both strengthening their math skills. In fact one pair said, "Oh, it does not matter if you got out of cards first because we both

learned some new things". It is important to take the "competitive edge off games when used for learning" (Wood, 65). Through working in pairs as a team students are not as focused on winning and losing, but instead learning.

## **Conclusion**

### **Further Wonderings**

- If the rock buddy program was stopped before the end of the school year; would the children revert back to their old ways or have they adapted to the community in the way that everyone is their "buddy"?
- Does this carry through with the students as they move through school grades?
- They feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, but do they have tolerance for others?
- How would this have worked if students didn't feel if they were solving a classroom problem?
- How would Rock Buddies work if they children didn't have input into how it worked in the classroom?
- Will this activity work with a different classroom or different grades?
- When is the best time in the year to start the program; are children to overwhelmed with entering school in the fall that it is better to save it to a mid year project?

### **Future Implications on Teaching**

I will definitely use Rock Buddies in my classroom next year. I think that it is important for children to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, for without that they are more distracted in their thinking about the classroom that takes time away from their learning. When a child is thinking about someone sitting with him/her on the carpet or someone to play outside at recess there is no way that they can think about reading, math, etc.. I think that any program that makes children work together and collaborate, as a team is beneficial in a classroom setting. For we live in a society that many people have jobs that need interaction with other people and students need to learn to work with others no matter the differences.

I think that doing Rock Buddies also promotes something that is important for children to learn in looking out for others. When children learn to think of others even at an age that they are developmentally egocentric there are many benefits. Lastly, I feel that it is important for schooling to be collaborative rather than competitive. Children at this age should not have to worry about being competitive with other students but know that they can work together to help each other be the best students that they can be!

Finally, I would like to share my knowledge about this program with future colleagues. I think that I have a wealth of information to share with others that have never heard of a program like this before. I know that I am willing to try many things in my class and I know that many other teachers think the same.

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# **Appendix**