

## 2.2 Create safe conditions for rigorous learning: Build a community of learners



**Essence >**  
The teacher creates a culture where everyone inspires and encourages each other's learning.

### Key actions: Teachers

- Remember that learning is social
- Value my students' experiences, cultures and personal stories which will help them to develop strong individual and group identity and a sense of belonging
- Embed collaborative activities that model and promote mutual support, respect and trust to facilitate learning
- Create opportunities for social interaction so that students can develop new relationships to transfer into their learning contexts
- Use my students' learning strengths and preferences to structure diverse groups where they can draw on each other's expertise
- Work with students to develop a learning environment where there is shared responsibility and equitable access to resourcing and support
- Teach explicit skills needed for teamwork
- Provide discussion time for students to share thinking, clarify ideas and inspire each other
- Pose challenges where individuals need to work independently and collaboratively to achieve success
- Use strategies that highlight the power of the learning community, such as a skills/interest register
- Model and reinforce processes for giving and receiving constructive, encouraging feedback
- Actively seek out opportunities for all students to make a contribution in teamwork across classes and year levels
- Celebrate individual achievements and shared successes as a community of learners
- Connect with students by reflecting on the meaning of 'community' for people through time and cultures

### Key actions: Students

- Get to know my classmates so we understand each other better and can help each other in our learning
- Listen to my team mates and help solve problems together
- Play my part in teamwork and try out different roles
- Ask for help when I need it—from friends, classmates, teachers and family
- Tell my classmates and my teacher when I think they've done a good job
- Encourage my classmates when they're stuck



*I get along with everybody and I specially get along with myself.*  
Year 1 student

**Justice alert**  
Who struggles to feel a sense of belonging?

### Ways to build a community of learners

**Community and service:** Begin a class/school program where all students take on roles/responsibilities, keep records of their ongoing involvement and are formally acknowledged for their contributions (eg credit towards SACE subjects). This strengthens school culture and enhances students' connection to school. Roles might include peer tutoring, mentorship, forums, action groups, sports coaching, and classroom duties.

**First two weeks program:** Many schools begin the year with a specific focus on the shared values, attitudes, skills and community goals that will prepare the class/school for success. All learning activities are designed to develop the theme. Home-school links are an integral part of this process which is continually reinforced and revisited.

**Embed cooperative activities:** Use simple processes to extend students' connection within the learning community:

**Trust Walk**—Students pair up, one is blindfolded, and the partner walks beside, guiding the blindfolded person on an outside walk, while using a reassuring voice but no body contact.

**Tangles**—Eight students face into a circle with their right hands out in front. Each grasps the right hand of another person. Adding to this, the group now grasps left hands, making sure that no two particular people are joined by both hands. Now the challenge is to 'untangle' the group back to a simple circle without letting go of any hands.

**Trust builders and trust busters**—Students consider what they value for their learning community and compile two lists: attitudes/actions that 'build' learning community capacity and those that 'bust' it. These are revisited frequently.

**Think, Pair, Share**—Students gather information/make notes alone. Next, students pair off to share ideas/combine notes. Then, each member of the pair joins with a member of another pair to think more deeply. Students continue this process, resulting in total class involvement.

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### Year 8 camp a buzz

The beginning of a new school year is always coloured by high levels of organisation, catch-ups with colleagues and great hopes for the learning year ahead.

With several newly appointed staff and a Year 8 camp in week 5, the pressure was on! What were our plans for creating a culture of positive engagement and valuing the strengths of our new Year 8 staff and students? Could the camp be the vehicle?

During the induction process for our new Middle School teachers, we discussed the purpose of the camp. We welcomed their input, and acknowledged their experiences and talents for coordinating it. In the week before students arrived, we met to make initial plans. We agreed to begin the school year by facilitating discussions with our students. We would focus on *responsibility, equity, organisation* and *effective communication*, and we'd use these as a foundation for planning our year and, in particular, the camp. The students would nominate peers for a core group to represent the six home groups.

The year got underway. At the Year 8 assembly on the second day back, we could feel the excitement building. The various organisational aspects of the camp were allocated to home groups. Class discussions evolved, and the core student group was established. They met daily with the Middle Years coordinator to convey home group thinking and to relay shared information back to classes for further input.

In classrooms, the engagement was tangible—the buzz was happening! One home group researched the best deals and availability, and cabin preference forms were designed. Another group booked buses and, in the process, they collated student 'travel sickness' data before allocating buses. The catering group was busy surveying students and teachers, checking dietary requirements and allergies, negotiating a menu democratically based on preferences. Kitchen duty rosters were developed to bring different groups and individuals together and encourage new networking.

Staff and students discussed explicit learning outcomes for the camp. They did collaborative research on the campsite to explore learning possibilities. One class consulted all home groups in an inclusive process to compile 'camp expectations'. They aptly chose to use the school values as their basis, showing insight that impressed staff!

One home group developed team building activities. They surveyed students' individual strengths and mixed them up for Trivia Quiz teams. A definite highlight was going to be the Red Faces Talent Night; everyone would be expected to participate, even the adults.

Everyone played their part in ironing out hiccups and problems as they arose.

After much anticipation and a lot of great teamwork, Week 5 was upon us and the Year 8 camp became a reality. With every learner in each home group actively involved in organising it, the attendance far outstripped previous years. Student engagement was high and our new Year 8s achieved all the intended learning outcomes.

Back at school, teachers built on the friendships and the shared experiences. Students continued to work in teams with common purposes. The cohesive culture that had grown at camp allowed them to take risks in their learning, even at this early stage of the year. They all knew something about each other as people; they willingly talked with others about their learning, built on the ideas of their peers and sought assistance from both peers and teachers.

Through planning the camp, and participating in such a successful way, students and staff had all shown immense collaboration and trust. Our year was now set with the safe conditions and connections for students' rigorous learning.

*Deputy principal of a metropolitan secondary school*

build a community of learners

2.2



