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## Claire's Class

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by Susan Keese

**It's snack time in Claire Oglesby's classroom** in the red, two-room public school in Westminster West, Vt. (pop. 800). Twenty-two first- and second-graders gather around Oglesby in a carpeted corner discussing the ingredients in their snacks.

One boy snuggles with a life-sized, brown-skinned doll named Grandmother, made by an African-American fabric artist. Here in Vermont, the faces are mostly Caucasian, but to Oglesby it's important that her students learn to enjoy, not fear, the diversity of the wider world. Each year her class and the third- and fourth-grade class next door study a different culture, and Oglesby casts a wide net to bring in visitors from the country they are studying.

Oglesby's classroom offers proof that very young children are capable of thinking deeply about serious matters and that people can be taught at an early age to respect themselves and one another. "She gives them a sense of community, and that's a real gift," says parent Patricia Whelan, a family court magistrate whose three children have all been in Oglesby's class.

Westminster West is a farming community that's seen an influx of newcomers in recent decades. Oglesby has spent the last 35 years teaching first- and second-grade here. Many of her current students' parents began their education in her classroom. "Toby's mom knows a lot about that," she'll say. "Let's ask her in to tell us about it." Sooner or later almost everyone in the community is called on to share some bit of knowledge or expertise.

"Okay, we've got something important to talk about," Oglesby announces as the children finish their snacks. She mentions a member of the class who's been "taking things." The child is working on the problem, Oglesby assures them. Then she asks, "Who else has been in

that situation? Where you really wanted something that wasn't yours?"

Hands go up. A curly-haired boy confesses that he sometimes looks longingly at his neighbor's toys. Another child recalls seeing a racecar in a store and thinking about taking it.

"What made you not do it?" she asks. As the discussion continues, the child caught stealing listens with interest. Instead of being isolated, she is made to feel she's not alone.

After snack, the children work independently on math. One boy measures his chair. Another draws shapes. Instead of pandemonium, a purposeful order prevails, allowing Oglesby to spend time working one-on-one with each student.

Oglesby begins each school year working on social skills. "A lot of teachers feel pressured to get right to the academics," she says. But the children learn better if they spend some time first becoming comfortable with who they are, both as individuals and in relation to the group. Oglesby talks openly about differences in abilities and background and learning styles. Refusing to acknowledge such differences—which are obvious to the children, she notes—can magnify their importance in a child's imagination.

Once the children grasp that everyone has something to contribute as well as some areas where they need help, the class is ready to function as a community.

Recently, two Vermont filmmakers produced a full-length documentary, *The World in Claire's Classroom*, which captures the wisdom of Oglesby's approach. The film has been well received among educators.

For the movie's Westminster West debut, local parents staged a gala celebration. They even hired a limousine to transport Oglesby and her co-workers and students, elegantly dressed in borrowed finery, to the village church where the screening was held. The event celebrated not just Oglesby's success, but the entire village's involvement in its children's education.

"This whole community is Claire's classroom," one parent says.

Susan Keese writes from her home in South Newfane, Vt.

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