

# Making Relationships a Priority

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One of the biggest myths I hear in my work in inclusive education is about friendship. Teachers commonly share that they struggle to facilitate relationships during the middle and high school years because older students simply are not interested in socializing with students with disabilities. As one teacher told me, “When they are little, they are more accepting but as kids get older...they are just more into their own thing. We can’t force friendship!”

It is certainly true that no teacher can create friendships between students, but it is equally true that every educator can create conditions in the classroom that will give students opportunities to strengthen social relationships, learn about and from each other, and get and give support. These opportunities may then lead to the development of friendships.

## **Facilitating Friendships: Five Ideas**

Many students with disabilities—including those with significant disabilities—make friends during the secondary school years and sustain those friendships for years. We know this dream is possible. The goal, then, is to create a context that will make the dream a reality for a wider range of students. Five ways that schools can encourage interactions, build community, and facilitate relationships are offered here.

### **Make It a Priority**

It almost seems too simple to be true but when students with disabilities do have a robust network of friends it is often, in part, because they are supported by teachers who value and cultivate student collaboration and interaction. In other words, schools that succeed in bringing students together understand relationships as a priority and engage in practices that are related to that priority. In these schools, for examples, social interactions are prioritized on Individual Education Plans and considered in the development of lesson plans.

### **Build a School Community**

The development and sustenance of an inclusive school community involves strategies and practices that purposefully encourage and teach sharing, learning, interdependence, and

respect. For example, teachers might encourage community through cooperative learning experiences, conflict resolution opportunities, play and games, class meetings, service learning, social-justice education, cross-age and same-age tutoring and mentoring, and school and classroom celebrations. Teachers can also cultivate community by working for whole-school change. For instance, by lobbying for smaller classes, challenging competitive school structures (e.g., cutting students from sports teams), and developing ways to connect students across classrooms and grade levels (e.g., in-school e-mail pals), teachers can not only strengthen the classroom community but help the school as a whole become more responsive to all learners.

### **Create Spaces for Sharing**

Teachers who seek information about students' experiences, dreams, interests, and needs can use this information to better educate their students and to facilitate relationships between learners. Too often (especially in secondary schools), students are educated in the same classrooms day after day without developing personal relationships. When I was observing one middle school classroom, I asked a young man to tell me the name of one of his classmates. "I don't know his name" the student replied. "I've never talked to him". I later found out that these two students had been in the same classroom for over two months!

Students' voices must be central to work in the classroom and time must be carved out for communication and idea sharing. Teachers interested in incorporating students voices might begin by increasing forums for student participation and leadership. For instance, students might be asked to lead weekly class meetings or to mentor one another.

### **Look to Peers to Teach and Support**

Peer support is an essential part of inclusive schooling for students with and without disabilities. In some cases, students succeed when teachers cannot. Often, peers will learn quite naturally how to support a friend with disabilities. They will know how to calm, how to teach, and how to encourage a classmate without any direction or interference from adults. In addition, peers are valuable resources because they tend to understand each other in ways authority figures or adults do not. Even the best teachers lack the same degree of intimacy with students that students share with each other. Students know each other's secrets and their fears. They often recognize each other's needs and gifts in ways that adults do not. This type of help and mutual support is great preparation for adult life for all participants.

In any peer support model, however, it is critical that teachers seek opportunities to give all students opportunities to both give and receive help and support. Relationships where some individuals are always helped while others are always helping are neither natural nor

particularly useful in building a classroom community. It is a teacher's job, therefore, to cultivate a classroom culture that allows all students to give assistance and receive assistance.

### **Provide Opportunities for Social Connection Beyond Classroom**

In order to support the development of relationships in the classroom, teachers may need to help students find social opportunities outside of the classroom. Extracurricular activities with all of the related fun, camaraderie, and socializing can offer some of the richest opportunities for relationship building students are likely to have during their school years.

While some schools offer activities to meet the needs of all students, other schools need to develop a wider array of activities so that every learner can find an extra-curricular home. Some schools, for instance, are moving beyond the traditional sports-based and arts-based extra-curricular options and offering clubs and activities related to academic content (e.g., chess club), political issues (e.g., conservation groups), and social support (e.g., anti-drug groups).

All schools must be conscientious about offering options that will interest and engage a range of students in the school (Sapon-Shevin & Kluth, 2003). This means questioning whether or not all students can afford certain clubs or sports; whether meeting times are convenient for students who may have after-school responsibilities; and whether students can get the appropriate supports they need to participate in after-school activities. If a student with a disability, for instance, needs personal support to participate in activities, teachers must brainstorm ways to provide this. Schools may try to provide natural supports by structuring the activities in creative ways or they may ask paraprofessionals or teachers to provide this support or look to student or adult volunteers.

### **Conclusions**

When most of us look back on our high school days, our relationships dominate our memories. This memory making is possible for all learners if ideas such as the ones in this article are employed. It may not always be easy to attend to the social needs of learners, but effective teachers will keep in mind that schooling is more than the three "Rs" of "reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic". The fourth "R", "relationship building", is critical too.

## References

Sapon-Shevin, M. (1999). *Because we can change the world: A practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive classroom communities*. Boston: MA: Allyn & Bacon.

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