

Relationships: Now More Than Ever, Part 2

By Kathy King-Dickman | Categories: Classroom Community

In Part 1 of this blog series, I shared an anecdote about a student who was supported by the relationships within her classroom community to move on to a different life with courage. I also shared a couple of situations where relationships were formed in the remote learning environment. As we move forward to more in-class learning, I would like to focus on three relationship dynamics to develop in order to rebuild our classroom communities: teacher to student; student to student, and teacher to parent.

Parent-Teacher Relationships

I will never forget the years I worked with Kenny and Chad and their mother, Betty. She worked long hours at a warehouse and had not once attended a parent-teacher conference. Undaunted, I called her and asked what it would take for her to meet with me to hear how much I enjoyed spending my days with her boys. Without wasting a breath, Betty replied, "If you want to talk to me about my boys, you can meet me on my turf. I will be at the Quick Stop at 6 o'clock tonight for coffee," and promptly hung up. When I showed up that evening, I explained what I loved about her boys and the goals and dreams I had for catching them up in reading and writing. For the next parent-teacher conference, Betty took time from her job (and was most likely docked pay) to meet at school and hear how they were doing. To this day, I am honored to call Betty my friend, and we share a profound love for her boys.

While we don't need to meet every parent for coffee, *wedo* need to form productive relationships with the caregivers of all the students in our charge. Collaborative Classroom provides much support to this aim:

- Family Letters in both English and Spanish included in *Being a Writer, Being a Reader, Making Meaning, and Caring School Community*
- *Caring School Community* home connection activities
- Home-school connection suggestions for English language learners in Collaborative Classroom's Remote Learning Guidance, described in Veronica Vasquez' blog.

Other ideas: phone calls home, parent-teacher conferences, inviting parents into the classroom, family school content nights, and Zoom sessions with families.

When you're meeting with parents, remember this time-honored technique: Always begin the discussion by sharing many positive characteristics of the student, next share only one or two challenges and goals, and close with how much you care about the student.

Teacher-Student Relationships

"A Review of Educational Research analysis of 46 studies found that strong teacher-student relationships were associated in both the short- and long-term with improvements on practically every measure schools care about: higher student academic engagement, attendance, grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates. Those effects were strong even after controlling for differences in students' individual, family, and school backgrounds." —Sarah D. Sparks, "Why Teacher-Student Relationships Matter," *Education Week*

In my four decades working in schools, I have seen the truth of this research first hand. When students feel held in positive regard by their teachers, they are more motivated to learn from them. Stevi Quate and John McDermott explain this in *Clock Watchers*: “Because of the centrality of emotions, if students feel as if the teacher doesn’t like them, they often resist the role of learner. In contrast, those students who perceive that their teachers care about them as individuals are more likely to engage and are more likely to worry about letting the teacher down.” And over thirty years ago, Lucy Calkins wrote in *Living Between the Lines*, “Our first object, then, is to fall in love with our children, and to do so quickly.”

When we truly care about our students, we set the tone for our community. When we truly care about our students, they want to work hard for us. When we truly care about our students, we model what positive relationships look like. When we truly care, we work hard to promote a community of learners.

Here are a few of the ways Collaborative Classroom’s programs support teachers in setting up this relationship:

- Treating misbehavior as a chance to learn, not a failure
- Teaching students at their point of need
- Listening deeply to students
- Asset-based teaching
- One-on-one conferring
- Explicitly teaching relationship-building skills and attitudes

Student-Student Relationships

Nothing detracts from learning as much as constant fussing between children; nothing enhances learning as much as positive peer relationships. At Collaborative Classroom we believe that when children feel safe and cared for by their peers, they enjoy coming to school and working hard. One of the toughest aspects of online learning has been the isolation children feel from not being in a classroom. With the prospect of returning to in-person learning (and even if you have been in class most of the year), here are three of the supports Collaborative Classroom programs offer to encourage children to take care of and respect one another:

- Discussion and sharing with partners in lessons across Collaborative Literacy, and learning to communicate in ways that honor and respect one another
- Peer writing projects and peer conferring in writing in the *Being a Writer* program
- Cross-Age Buddies in the *Caring School Community* program

Many children have been traumatized by the events of 2020. Loneliness, isolation, depression, and fear have been a big part of their lives. The first blog I ever wrote for Collaborative Classroom focused on relationships. Eight years later, I return to this topic more convinced than ever that relationships are still the most important aspect in any classroom. Whether we head back into in-person learning very soon or continue online a bit longer, let’s make a supreme effort to build relationships with our students and their parents and within our classrooms. To this end, Collaborative Classroom offers teachers a Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit to use as they help students reconnect and establish a safe and supportive learning environment and an SEL Essentials blog series that explores how teachers can support students’ social-emotional needs during these times.

I repeat what I said eight years ago with even more conviction: “We haven’t a moment to waste!”

References

Lucy Calkins, *Living Between the Lines* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991), 11.

Stevi Quate and John McDermott, *Clock Watchers* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2009), 14.

Sarah D. Sparks, "Why Teacher-Student Relationships Matter," *Education Week*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/why-teacher-student-relationships-matter/2019/03>.