

Relationship-Driven Teaching Cultivates Collaboration and Inclusion

by Lorraine Slater

The need to develop trusting and respectful relationships among adults and students to foster learning overlaps with democratic education's goal of helping students learn decision-making skills and understand and respect the rights of others. Current research strongly suggests the creation of a collaborative culture as the single most important factor for successful school improvement (Little 1993; McLaughlin 1997; Newmann and Wehlage 1995; Rosenholtz 1989). Similarly, authors such as Glickman (1998) and Darling-Hammond (1997) have advocated democratic school renewal and indicated that the challenge is to educate all students to be responsible members of a democratic society. Phrases such as "equal voice, involvement for everyone, fairness, freedom to be a part of the group, and the common good" (Slater 2001, 241) echo the principles of democracy that are enacted in school through the collaborative process.

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Relationships, collaboration, democracy, and student achievement and success are closely interrelated. In fact, if relationships are "the building blocks of collaboration" (Slater 2001, 211), and because "relationships matter for learning" (Darling-Hammond 1997), teachers need to take the time to know children well. It is important for teachers to use a relationship-first approach in their teaching to maximize student learning and enable students to experience and participate in their schooling in democratic ways.

Developing Relationships of Trust

Knowing people is crucial in developing the trust and respect that characterize collaborative relationships. Trust appears in communications between work partners, friends, family members, and especially between teachers and students. Trust must be earned through the pedagogical communication process that teachers engage in with their students. Teacher immediacy behaviors such as movement, gestures, eye contact, and vocal variety, along with effective verbal communications and listening skills help build relationships by reducing the psychological and physical distance between individuals. Another key factor in meeting the needs of learners is knowing who they are, their background and interests, their

strengths and weaknesses, and their passions and possibilities. As individuals share time and experiences and reveal these things to one another, they establish the common ground needed in relationship development. When teachers know children well and are able to consider the vast differences that children bring with them to



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school, they then are able to negotiate the curriculum with students and tailor the learning event to meet individual needs.

Building a Sense of Community

Relationships are also important components in developing a sense of community within a school. Sergiovanni (1994) has argued that the school must play a vital role in community building by providing care, developing relationships, creating

a common purpose, and fostering a sense of attachment or interconnectedness amongst people. Collaboration—with its emphasis on common goals, relationships, and mutual interdependence (Friend and Cook 1992; Welch and Sheridan 1995)—is a way to build community and a “way of life” within a community. Without this sense of interdependence, community cannot exist. Being part of a community is the true meaning of inclusion. When students feel positive connections to peers and adults and know that they have a voice in their education, they experience a sense of belonging. Students then may participate in the benefits of their community knowing that others in that community care about them and value them as members. This sense of community can improve schooling for all students, enhance academic and social development, and provide experiences that are needed to prepare students to be responsible citizens in a democratic society.

Collaborating for Integrated Services

Finally, there is a need for educators to collaborate with special education colleagues as well as to form interprofessional partnerships that integrate services for children. Welch and Sheridan (1995) suggested that no single person or agency can meet the needs of the increasing number of children with educational, social, and medical problems who are at risk of being unsuccessful in school and society. Interagency collaborations involve new relationships between schools, community

agency personnel, community members, and the children and families they serve. For teachers, the opportunity for professional collaboration with partners outside the classroom is closely related to standards of student achievement inside the classroom.

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To this end, research has revealed that a professional community—characterized by a collaborative work culture—inside schools provides teachers with the kind of organizational setting that makes continuous learning and improved teaching possible (Little 1993; McLaughlin 1997; Newmann and Wehlage 1995; Rosenholtz 1989). Collaborative cultures, which by definition have close relationships, are powerful in enhancing student learning. However, as Fullan (2001) cautioned, when relationships are not benevolent and do not focus on the moral purpose of schooling, their power may have a negative impact on the school culture. Accordingly, instead of focusing on individual agendas, collaborative partnerships need to define the goals for collaboration in terms of specific outcomes for student learning.

Cultivating an Inclusive Environment

The challenge of today's school reform agenda is to create a collaborative culture that supports the individually appropriate teaching needed to produce high levels of success for diverse learners. Teachers who make connections with students take the critical first step in cultivating an inclusive environment. The interpersonal ties that bind a group enable students to feel that they are part of a greater whole. When students sense that they are valued, they are confident that they can contribute to and gain from being a part of the group; they feel included. As a school comes to look, act, and feel like a democracy through collaborative interaction, students in turn come to believe in, practice, and sustain a democracy both in school and at a societal level.

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