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Our Changing Roles as Teachers

It is very late in the afternoon, way beyond the end of the school day at Suburb Junior High School. Richard, a seasoned counselor, slips inside the doorway of the seventh-grade Social Studies classroom and collapses against the wall with a heavy sigh. Pam, the teacher, is chatting with me, tidying up, and getting ready to go home. I have been interviewing Pam for a qualitative study on caring teachers.

From across the room Pam looks at the fifty-five-year-old bearded and balding counselor and empathetically says, "Rough day, huh Richard?" Pam is aware Richard has been working with an eighth-grade student who lost a dear friend to suicide that morning. The suicide victim had been the girl's neighbor and surrogate parent for years. While still in bed, he put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. Understandably, the young teenager was distraught, confused, and felt betrayed by the behavior of someone she respected, trusted, and relied upon. Richard has just spent the entire day working with her and the other students affected. In between, he continued to handle his regularly scheduled appointments and responsibilities.

While listening to the exchange between Richard and Pam, I am reminded of how emotionally draining it is to be bombarded continually with the problems of young people in distress. I know Richard's entire schedule had been suddenly turned upside down in response to this student's needs. He had to get in touch with the student's parents to make sure they knew what to look for in their daughter's reaction, find a grief counselor to work pro bono with the girl over the next couple of weeks, notify all the teachers of her situation and ask them to be alert to other students who knew this community member and may be in shock

over the incident. And Richard had to do this while handling other student crises that are part of a normal day for a middle school counselor. As I watch Pam listen empathetically to Richard, I realize that most people have no idea what schools cope with on a daily basis. While the general public decries the low achievement scores of students and asserts the need to "fix" our schools, every day teachers are dealing with students emotionally distressed and preoccupied with difficult personal situations such as absentee parents, blended-family traumas, homelessness, sexual abuse, date rape, pregnancies, eating disorders, and so on.

Pam and Richard briefly discuss the other small crises that occurred that day at the school. Then Richard slowly pushes himself away from the wall and starts to walk away. He pauses, turns back toward Pam and says, "I swear, when I first began working as a counselor, I worked with only one crisis a month. Now it seems like every hour I have a crisis. It can be anything—sexual harassment, drug problems, guns on the school grounds, or suicide. My job has really changed over the years—but what's worse, all too often this school is the only home some of these kids have!"

CHANGING STUDENT NEEDS AND THE TEACHER'S ROLE

Teachers want answers. We know the needs of today's students are changing. We know we face more intense challenges with students today than teachers did thirty years ago. We are all too familiar with the difficult situations our students cope with daily. We know they come to school ill-prepared to learn because of problems they are facing at home or in their communities. Physical and emotional abuse or neglect, parental mental illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, criminal behavior, parental indifference—we know the problems, and we are all too familiar with our feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness in response. We watch our students starting out on pathways to self-destruction and feel helpless. Frustrated, disheartened, and feeling ineffectual, we have thoughts of leaving the career we dreamed of. We need answers. We need to know effective ways to deal with the complicated human situations we encounter daily in our classrooms—and we do not want to be social workers. We are teachers!

The Answers in This Little Book

This little book describes effective, role-appropriate ways for teachers to make a difference for our students. It defines ways we can help the growing number of our students who live in high-risk situations—without becoming social workers *or* adding more work to our already busy schedules. Drawing from a qualitative study (Deiro, 1994), I describe the behavior of actual teachers—what they did that made a difference for their students. For some of us, these teaching exemplars will affirm things

we are already doing. If this is true for you, I hope you are reassured and encouraged by research that supports the importance of what you are doing. You *are* making a difference for your students. For others, these teaching exemplars and corresponding data provide valuable ideas and insights into how we can become more positive influences in the lives of our students. This book illustrates ways to help students without assuming additional committee work or adding more responsibilities to our overloaded schedules. The behaviors illustrated are intrinsic to our jobs as teachers. In essence, the teaching exemplars and corresponding data highlight ways we can simultaneously improve our teaching skills and help our at-risk students.

The Key to Making a Difference

The most powerful and effective way teachers can help students overcome the negative influences in their environment is by developing close and caring connections with them (Benard, 1991; Brook, Brook, Gordon, Whiteman, & Cohen, 1990; Deiro, 1994; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). In fact, the healthy development of children in today's society is *dependent* on having more caring adults meaningfully involved in their lives. Richard, in the opening story, is right. Today's students *are* different. Their social and emotional needs are not being met the same way those needs were met several generations ago. Young people today do not have enough adults in their lives who know who they are and genuinely care about them—a prerequisite for healthy emotional and social development. This shortage of caring adults makes a meaningful, caring teacher-student connection even more essential than in past generations.

This chapter begins the discussion about the power of healthy teacher-student connections. First, it documents the positive impact healthy relationships with caring adults have on a young person's social and emotional development. More specifically, it includes descriptions of several studies that document the impact of caring relationships with teachers. The chapter ends with a conceptual model for defining a healthy, caring teacher-student relationship, leading us into the next chapter where we explore ways to make those healthy connections without adding responsibilities to our job.

HEALTHY CONNECTIONS EQUAL HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT

Strong, healthy connections with prosocial adults have been identified as the key protective factor buffering children against the negative influence of adversity (Benard, 1991; Brook et al., 1990; Hawkins et al., 1992). Prosocial adults are individuals who obey the laws of society, respect our

social norms, and care about the well-being of others. For example, being strongly connected with a parent who smokes marijuana, or who drives drunk, does not foster healthy social and emotional development. Being strongly connected with a parent who models good work habits, shows respect for societal laws, and is actively concerned about the well-being of others *does* promote healthy development. It does not matter what the adversity is (e.g., living in poverty or a high-crime area, parental indifference, social isolation, or parental abuse), having a positive connection with at least one prosocial adult mediates the negative impact of adverse situations. Children value adults who value them. Thus children who are living in seemingly intolerable situations but have a prosocial adult outside their home environment who cares about them will adjust their behavior to carefully safeguard that relationship. In doing so, the child begins to internalize the prosocial value system of the caring adult. For these reasons, strong, healthy connections with prosocial adults are essential to a child's healthy social and emotional development (Bowlby, 1988; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Brook et al., 1990; Glenn, 1996). Without caring relationships with prosocial adults, the prospects of a healthy social and emotional development are markedly diminished.

What Happened?

Today, there are too few prosocial adults actively involved in the lives of our children. Since 1940, American society has undergone tremendous changes in demography, economic structure, and lifestyle. These changes have reduced the number of adults readily available to be involved in the lives of young people. To begin with, until the 1930s the United States was primarily a nation of people who lived on farms or in small communities. By the 1950s this census statistic had changed significantly. Due to a combination of factors such as the baby boom, easy mobility, and postwar job opportunities in cities, the United States has become a nation of people who live primarily in large cities or suburbs. This major demographic shift in such a short time brought with it many cultural changes, and we did not fully comprehend the impact of those cultural changes on the social and emotional development of children. With the migration to the cities, young families lost the nurturing support of large extended families, lifelong friends, and close neighbors. They lost the familiarity that naturally comes when living in small or rural communities. In short, our children lost their network of caring adults who know them well, watch them grow up, and even help with their parenting. No longer can a child expect to have a grandma or an Aunt Sue nearby to offer hugs and reassurance during difficult family times. No longer is there an Uncle George or lifelong friend available to attend a child's school play when Mom has to work, or Dad is drunk. Other demographic changes within the family, such as the increased number of women who work outside the home and the increased number

of single-parent families, have even further reduced the number of caring adults and amount of time they can spend with their children.

Education's Response to Societal Shifts

The demographic trends of the 1940s and 1950s also brought changes to our educational institutions that further decreased the number of caring adults meaningfully involved in the lives of young people. The baby boom of the 1950s brought with it large, consolidated schools. Census statistics show the number of high schools stayed relatively the same from 1930 to 1970, despite the population boom (Coleman, 1974). Schools were reorganized from small schools in small districts to large, consolidated schools in large districts. Classroom size shot up from an average of twenty students per classroom to an average of thirty-six students per classroom (Glenn, 1989). Larger classrooms meant fewer teachers for more students. More students per teacher meant fewer opportunities for students and teachers to make individual contact or engage in conversations. These conditions decreased the opportunities for teachers to make quality connections with students and further reduced the number of adults with whom young people could develop close and trusting relationships.

Technology Further Complicates the Problem

Advances in technology have also contributed to the decrease in the quality of connections between adults and children. Technological advances such as the television, videocassette player, and the computer make life more pleasant, but they cut down on opportunities for meaningful interaction. Television is a passive, relaxing, low-concentration activity. The average American spends four to six hours a day watching television. Twenty-five percent of all time spent at home with family members is spent watching television, not talking to one another (Herr, 2001; Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Television is gradually replacing meaningful dialogue and quality time with adults. Some child development experts claim the influence of television on children today has surpassed the influence of church, family, and schools (Glenn, 1989). Our churches, families, and schools were once considered the shapers of our nation's children. Television producers and television characters now hold that power.

What Did We Lose?

Of course, the past was not perfect and all children did not live in caring families. But there were more opportunities for other caring adults to develop healthy connections with young people when communities were smaller, classrooms were smaller, and the media provided fewer distractions. Everyone knew their neighbors and their neighbors' kin.

Young people often spent time in the company of older, more mature members of the family or community, working side-by-side, which created an apprenticeship for adulthood. Communities took responsibility for raising a child. These intergenerational bonds are what is needed to facilitate the healthy emotional and social development of our children. In the past, caring connections automatically facilitated the healthy development of young people, something we as a nation did not realize—and took for granted. We did not realize that we have to do more than feed, clothe, shelter, and love a child for that child to develop into a healthy prosocial adult. It takes more than just a single family to support the healthy emotional and social development of a child. It takes several caring adults.

Today, our rapid-paced, geographically mobile lifestyle makes it very difficult for us to find quality time to spend with young people. Intergenerational bonds are difficult to form. And without time to form meaningful connections, prosocial adults do not and cannot automatically play a key role in shaping the emotional and social development of young people. We are now facing the consequences of not having an "apprenticeship for adulthood" for our children, and, painfully, we teachers see the repercussions played out in our classrooms and in our students' lives. Yes, today's students are different. Today's teachers *are* dealing with more student problems than yesterday's teachers had to face. Many of the problems we face in our classroom today result from the lack of caring adults meaningfully involved in the lives of children.

Working Toward a Solution

We cannot expect to return to a past when women stayed at home, the majority of Americans lived on farms or in small communities, and technology was the topic of science fiction. That is not going to happen. Present economic demands, personal desires, and technological advances preclude that lifestyle. We need to discover solutions compatible with our present-day lifestyle to increase the number of caring adults actively involved in our children's lives. Those of us who are regularly in touch with young people need to discover new ways to use the time we have with children wisely and constructively. We need to understand how to develop close and caring relationships with young people within limited time frames, with limited contacts, and with limited resources.

Teachers Play a Key Role

Parents, primary caregivers, extended family members, close friends, neighbors, community members, and youth leaders can all play important roles in rebuilding the network of caring adults surrounding young people. But of all the various professionals who have the potential to change young lives, probably none have greater potential than teachers.

We have the greatest access to the most children for the longest period of time—sometimes even more than parents or primary caregivers. We are in touch with young people six hours a day for nine months of the year. For this reason, we can be a rich resource for rebuilding the network of supportive, caring adults that young people so sorely need.

To really take advantage of being a rich resource for young people, we need to reassert and reemphasize one of our primary teaching responsibilities—the development of positive and meaningful connections with students (Glenn, 1989; Goodlad, 1990; Lieberman & Miller, 1984; Noddings, 1988, 1992). We need to bring this responsibility to the forefront of our nation's expectations for teachers and for teacher education curriculum. We need to discover and advocate for appropriate ways to become meaningfully involved in our students' lives. Educational administrators need to find ways to support and encourage teachers who are developing caring relationships with students. Community and national efforts to improve education need to make the development of caring school environments a priority. If this is done, teachers can truly become a significant cadre of caring adults in the lives of students. In turn, we teachers will enhance the healthy development of young people and make a difference.

Research Documenting the Power of Teachers

Research on bonding documents a powerful way we can make a positive change in our students' lives. Although few, there have been some studies that highlight the power that teachers have. For example, in a classic thirty-year longitudinal study of Hawaiian children living in adverse home conditions, Werner and Smith (1992) traced factors that helped these children grow up to be successful, well-adjusted adults. More often than not, the key factor was a caring, responsive teacher. Werner describes the children who navigated these discordant homes to successful adulthood as resilient, which means they had the ability to rebound or recover from adversities that could have caused serious psychological harm. These resilient adults raised in adverse home conditions frequently mentioned a favorite teacher as the person who really made the difference for them. In another classic study about the impact of adverse home conditions on children, Rutter (1987) concluded that children from disadvantaged and discordant homes are less likely to develop emotional problems if they attend schools that have caring, attentive personnel and good academic standards. The findings of these classic studies are now being corroborated by other researchers who discuss the teacher-student relationship as key to changing student attitudes and behavior (Hall, 2003; Hoffman & Levak, 2003).

In another interesting study, a caring, compassionate teacher had a positive long-term effect on a group of Holocaust survivors. Moskovitz (1983)

studied twenty-four concentration camp survivors who were children when held captive by the Nazis. These individuals were sent to an orphanage in England at the end of World War II. In interviews with them thirty-seven years later, Moskovitz was amazed at the positive feelings they had about life. The survivors attributed these positive feelings to a teacher in their orphanage who provided them with warmth and caring and encouraged them to treat others with compassion.

Other studies also acknowledge the impact of one responsive, caring teacher on students. Pedersen, Faucher, and Eaton (1978) found that a caring, prosocial first grade teacher helped children from a disadvantaged urban neighborhood overcome adversity and become successful prosocial adults. O'Donnell, Hawkins, Catalano, Abbott, and Day (1995) found healthy connections to teachers were associated with a decrease in delinquency or behavioral problems, an increase in social and academic skills, and higher scores on a standardized achievement test. McLaughlin and Talbert (1990) found personal bonds with adults in the school have greater capacity to motivate and engage students academically than do the more traditional forms of social controls that emphasize obedience to authority or conforming to rules. These findings were later corroborated by other researchers who found student academic motivation increases when students have caring teachers (Dolezal, Welsh, Pressley, & Vincent, 2003; Erwin, 2003; Marzano & Marzano, 2003; Mendes, 2003; Wentzel, 1997; Wolk, 2003). These studies help document what we already intuitively know: a caring, responsive teacher has a positive influence on the overall development of young people.

MEETING STUDENTS' NEEDS: THE CARING TEACHER

In light of the above research—as well as what we know intuitively—there is little doubt that a positive connection with a caring teacher can make a real difference for students. Consequently, identifying effective and appropriate ways for us to help our students navigate childhood to successful adulthood may be as simple as knowing role-appropriate ways to develop close and caring connections with them. It sounds simple, yet when we set out to uncover possible appropriate ways to build these close and caring relationships with students, information is disturbingly scant. When we attempt to visualize role-appropriate ways teachers can develop caring connections with students, images are foggy. More often than not our images involve some type of hybrid of the role of a counselor or social worker. We see ourselves as being incredibly focused on the needs of each child, always available and willing to listen, responsive to all the needs of our students, patient and with endless time—hardly realistic when we consider the number of students we work with and our responsibilities

as teachers. Making meaningful connections with students does require giving individually focused time, attention, and support to students. How can we possibly develop caring connections with 150 students a day without compromising our primary academic responsibilities? The task seems daunting. If we are to assume a more active role as caring adults in student lives, we need to discover realistic, reasonable, and time-effective ways to nurture connections that are compatible with our daily teaching responsibilities.

Appropriate Ways to Develop Close and Trusting Relationships

Understanding appropriate ways for teachers to develop caring relationships with students is contingent upon understanding the unique characteristics of a teacher-student relationship. We form our caring relationships with students for a distinct purpose that is very different from the reasons we form other social relationships.

Four Types of Social Relationships

Bennis, Schein, Steel, and Berlew (1968) have identified four types of social relationships based on the purpose for which they are formed: expressive-emotional, confirmatory, instrumental, and influential.

1. Expressive-Emotional

Expressive-emotional relationships are formed for the purpose of fulfilling ourselves. Friendships, romances, love, and marriage are examples of an expressive-emotional relationship. Usually when we are thinking or talking about relationships we have this type in mind. In fact, we are bombarded daily with references to the expressive-emotional relationship. Songs proclaim its virtues; books and films are created around the theme. But there are other types of social relationships that are formed for different purposes.

2. Confirmatory

Confirmatory relationships are formed to confirm or clarify our values, beliefs, or social realities. Acquaintances who attend the same church or belong to the same political party are examples of confirmatory relationships. These individuals confirm our beliefs or values because they hold the same ones. We may be very happy to see them at church, or at political meetings, and we may even chat with them informally, but we seldom engage in other social activities with them such as going to a movie or having them over for dinner.

3. Instrumental

Instrumental relationships are formed in order to achieve a task or goal. Colleagues, work-related relationships, collaborators on projects, or

committee members are examples of instrumental relationships. We may like who we work with and even have fun at work together, but what draws us together is the job, not the relationship.

4. Influential

Influential relationships are formed to create a change in one or both parties in the relationship. The teacher-student relationship is an example of an influential relationship, and so are parent-child, counselor-client, doctor-patient, and parole officer–parolee relationships. The unique characteristics of the influential relationship help prescribe appropriate ways for teachers to show caring to students.

Characteristics of an Influential Relationship

Influential relationships are distinguished from other social relationships by several characteristics (Bennis et al., 1968). First, the central concern of the relationship is *intended change, growth, or learning.* The primary interest of the change agent (e.g., a teacher or doctor) in an influential relationship is the modification of the situation, behaviors, or attitudes of the change target (e.g., a student or patient). Second, the change, growth, or learning found in influential relationships is *planned*, not spontaneous or accidental. Third, when the change has been achieved or internalized, or as much as possible completed, the relationship is *discontinued*. In a healthy influential relationship, the goal is termination (e.g., advancement, graduation, discharge, parole). Fourth, the distribution of power among the participants in an influential relationship is *asymmetrical.* The change agent holds more power than the change target. With this asymmetrical balance of power comes responsibility. The change agent is expected to give more, to know more, and to understand more than the change target. As a rule, students learn from teachers, clients from counselors, patients from doctors. In healthy influential relationships, the change agent wields this power carefully and respectfully. The emotional needs of the change target must take precedence over the needs of the change agent. So, in a teacher-student relationship, the emotional needs of the student take precedence over the needs of the teacher. In summary, the characteristics of healthy influential relationships are intentional promotion of growth and change, the fostering of independence through encouraging internalization of the growth or change, and a respectful use of the asymmetrical balance of power.

Guidelines for Caring Behavior in Teacher-Student Relationships

Knowing the purpose for a relationship helps us identify and define what behaviors are nurturing within that relationship. The four types of

relationships mentioned are governed by different norms and codes of behavior. What may be considered nurturing and appropriate behavior in one type of relationship may not be nurturing and appropriate in another. For instance, whispering sweet nothings in the ear of a spouse may be nurturing behavior, whereas whispering sweet nothings in the ear of a student may be grounds for a sexual harassment or sexual abuse suit. When defining what teacher behaviors *are* appropriate expressions of caring, the characteristics of a healthy influential relationship—intentional promotion of growth and change, empowerment of students through internalization of learning, and respectful use of power—help frame our definition. As such, caring behavior of a teacher can be defined as doing our jobs well by promoting the academic growth and independence of our students and, in that process, respectfully and ethically using the power that is inherent in our position as teachers.

Friendships With Students: An Ethical Dilemma

Because of the asymmetrical balance of power inherent in the teacher-student relationship, an ethical dilemma is introduced for teachers who attempt to develop caring connections with students by trying to be their "friend." Young teachers are particularly vulnerable here. Attempts to alter the purpose of the teacher-student relationship to be more in tune with an expressive-emotional relationship—a relationship formed for the purpose of friendship, romance, love, or marriage—are difficult, inappropriate, and may even be unethical. One needs to ask whose needs are being met. The asymmetrical nature of an influential relationship always defines the student as the more vulnerable member of the pair. Because of the vulnerability of the student, behaving in a teacher-student relationship as the teacher might in an expressive-emotional relationship is not only *not* nurturing, it is *not* ethical. For instance, we should not share confidential personal information with students for the purpose of developing intimacy, nor should we step away from our role and responsibilities as a teacher when interacting with students in order to gain their affection and approval. The motive for our friendliness is the key. We can be friendly with our students, but we can not be their friend.

When Is It Appropriate to be a Student's Friend?

We know the purpose of an influential relationship is to achieve a goal and then closure. But once terminated as an influential relationship, can the relationship be redefined to be more in line with an expressive-emotional relationship? There are many hazards involved in making such a change. Before such redefinition, the original purpose for forming an influential relationship should be explicitly completed. Such completion is usually signaled by a ritual, a process, or a formal activity such as promotion or

graduation. Even then, some influential relationships are nearly impossible to redefine, and really are not appropriate for redefinition. For example, with parent-child relationships, throughout their lives children usually hold a special esteem for their parents. Even when children move into adulthood and their relationship with their parents takes on the characteristics of an expressive-emotional relationship, a parent still holds a place of honor and esteem in the adult child's eyes. The same is true for the teacher-student relationship. Even though students may mature and move into adulthood, their teachers continue to hold a place of honor and esteem in their eyes because of the important role the teachers once played in their growth and development. We need only to ask ourselves, "Can this student ever really see us as his or her equal?" Equality is the foundation for a true friendship.

Redefining a teacher-student relationship as a confirmatory (based on shared values) or instrumental (based on shared tasks) relationship is usually easier and less ethically sensitive than redefining it as an expressive-emotional relationship. Only when two individuals who were involved in an influential relationship are separated for a significant period of time—usually two or more years—and then meet again on an equal footing is the development of an expressive-emotional relationship ethically defensible. Even then, care must be taken that the relationship is on an equal footing. Usually, if a relationship started as an influential relationship, it is ethically safest to behave as if it is still an influential relationship—even though no learning is being consciously planned and produced. So, when is it appropriate to become friends with previous students? I say only after years of separation and only if we come together again on equal footing—and even then, proceed with caution.

CRITICAL ANSWERS AND MORE QUESTIONS

We now know that healthy relationships with prosocial adults are essential for a child's healthy prosocial development. Because teachers have a responsibility to build effective relationships with students, the positive connections we form can play a meaningful role in the healthy development of our students. Research demonstrates that the close and caring connections teachers make with students have a powerful effect on their social and emotional adjustment. Such connections do make a difference for many young people navigating adverse or discordant conditions. An appropriate way to form such positive, nurturing connections with students is framed and defined by the responsibilities of our jobs as teachers, and the respectful use of the power given to us by virtue of our positions.

Nonetheless, we still need a picture of how we can make healthy, caring connections with many students in a short period of time. Developing

such relationships requires that an adult give individually focused time, attention, and support. So, then, how do we make caring, positive connections with a classroom of twenty-five to thirty-five students? What does a typical teacher's behavior look like? What skills and sensitivities are helpful? And how can we be confident that our students perceive our behavior as caring?

We also need to take care of ourselves in this process. How can we prevent becoming emotionally drained and burnt out? How do we take care of ourselves with so many students wanting to connect with us? If we do not address this concern, how can we assume a caring role with confidence and some assurance of success? The answers to all these questions emerged from a qualitative research study I designed to discover role-appropriate ways for teachers to connect with students (Deiro, 1994, 1996). Those answers are discussed in the remainder of this book.

Although the way students respond to a teacher's attempts to make caring connections is important, this book does not discuss the many student variables that moderate the effectiveness of our caring behavior. A student's degree of social and emotional neediness and vulnerability plays an unpredictable role in his or her receptiveness to our caring. Some students trust more easily than others. Because of the many possible student variables, students are silent partners in the teacher-student relationships examined in this book. The focus of this book is only on what teachers do to nurture healthy teacher-student relationships and how caring teachers care for themselves.