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CHAPTER 5

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS: IMPROVING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

> *It is sometimes easier for schools to target social behaviors or teach social rules than to commit to efforts to foster friendships. This is unfortunate, given a wealth of evidence that suggests the availability of even one friend changes the social experience of a child* (Doll, 1996, p. 5).

INTRODUCTION

Generally, the first thing teachers do at the beginning of the school year is decide how to organize the various resources in the physical space of the classroom and determine a viable seating arrangement for students. For most teachers, this task, linked to classroom management, remains obvious and paramount throughout the year. On the other hand, deliberate consideration given to the establishment and evolvement of the desired emotional tone in the classroom is not always the case. Yet both the physical and emotional aspects of classroom life serve as valuable tools to support and nurture student's social strengths. The purpose of this chapter is to help teachers view the classroom as a place to learn and as a living space where relationships help students experience a rich cultural, linguistic, social, recreational, and academic classroom life.

Students who experience multiple opportunities to practice interpersonal skills develop peer acceptance and experience a sense of community. They use the classroom context as a resource to initiate and sustain friendships. This chapter examines the third diversity pedagogical dimension, which focuses on ways to facilitate students' interpersonal relationships. It begins with a description of the third diversity pedagogy dimension (social interactions) and its corresponding cultural display (interpersonal relationships). The second section, teacher pedagogical behaviors, includes background information on the role of friendship, peer friendship development, and factors influencing students' friendship selections. Next, is a discussion on student cultural displays, which examines students' gender preferences, race and friendship choices, and issues of social isolation. Classroom applications follow.

DIVERSITY PEDAGOGY DIMENSION #3:
SOCIAL INTERACTIONS/ INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The third diversity pedagogy dimension introduces pedagogical strategies (teacher behaviors) needed to apply this dimension in the classroom and points out how students might display signs of cultural competency and evidence of social skills. Definitions, explanations, and observations are based on the work of numerous theorists and researchers (see Crosnoe, 2000; Hartup, 1989; Rizzo, 1988). Table 5.1 defines the dimensional elements (social interactions and interpersonal relationships), and recommends teacher pedagogical behaviors (approaches to creating classroom conditions for the development of social skills) and examples of student cultural displays (demonstrations of social and cultural competence in diverse social settings).

Table 5.1 Diversity Pedagogy Dimension #3: Social Interactions/Interpersonal Relationships

Definition of Dimensional Elements	
Social Interactions: Public and shared contact or communication in dyad or group settings which provide participants opportunity to evaluate, exchange, and share resources.	**Interpersonal Relationships**: Familiar social associations among two or more individuals involving reciprocity and variable degrees of trust, support, companionship, duration, and intimacy.
Teacher Pedagogical Behaviors	**Student Cultural Displays**
Creates multiple opportunities for students to experience different social interactions. For example: • Honors students' entitlement to select friends. • Provides classroom events to help students develop peer relationships, friendships, and a sense of social belonging and group affiliation with individuals and groups sharing common attributes and with other diverse individuals and groups. • Encourages, facilitates, and provides opportunities for students to interact socially with others in multiple diverse settings.	Demonstrations of social and cultural competence in diverse school settings. For example: • Initiates, maintains, and sustains friendships. • Shows behaviors promoting respectful, responsible participation in multiple cultural, academic, and recreational classroom events with individuals and groups sharing common attributes and with other diverse individuals and groups. • Accepts, initiates, and sustains same-race, same-gender, as well as cross-race and cross-gender peer acceptance.
Promotes the skills students need to function as contributing members of own and other social groups, ethnic communities, and as citizens of a pluralistic national and world society. For example: • Understands the difference between cooperative and collaborative group skills and teaches related skills. • Provides opportunities for students to develop leadership skills and responsible group participation.	Expressions of developing social skills needed as a contributing member of own and other social groups, ethnic communities and as a citizen of a pluralistic national and world society. For example: • Interacts comfortably and responsibly in dyad, small group, and whole group classroom and school settings. • Exhibits growth in leadership and group negotiation skills.

TEACHER PEDAGOGICAL BEHAVIORS

This section provides a brief review of the scholarship examining (a) the role friendship plays in the cognitive and social development of children, (b) the development of peer relationships during childhood and adolescence, and (c) factors influencing friendship selections among young people. This background knowledge may be helpful when applying the third pedagogical dimension in the teaching-learning process.

The Role of Friendship

During childhood, children require peer acceptance to develop a sense of emotional adequacy (Dodge, 1989). Likewise, to have, to be, and to keep a friend is more than a wishful expectation — it is a basic need. Doll (1996) explains the difference between peer acceptance and friendship. She defines **peer acceptance** as "the degree to which members of a group like a child and want to spend time with him or her" while **friendship** "represents a mutual selection in which a child chooses and is simultaneously chosen by another as a preferred friend" (p. 1). As such, friendship offers both recreational prospects and the emotional comfort previously provided by their families. According to scholars, it is the special dyadic friendships (between two individuals), rather than overall group acceptance, that offer the vital social support children need (Doll, 1996; Hartup, 1991; Ladd & Oden, 1979). Considerable evidence suggests that intimate friendship connections support students' cognitive and emotional development. Friends assist cognitive and emotional development by:

1. Providing coping assistance to stressful events. Friends often serve as an emotional resource by facilitating solutions to problems. They are trusted to listen emphatically.
2. Functioning as a resource for academic tasks. Friends naturally provide assistance with academic tasks by explaining concepts, homework, rules, and translating from English to the friend's heritage language.
3. Creating opportunities to acquire and develop social skills. Friends can ease inclusion into social and academic work groups. They can foster a sense of group belonging and often serve as a basis of social comparison and self-processing. Friends also provide opportunities to negotiate concerns, practice leadership, and learn cooperation. They can minimize peer conflict through resolution.
4. Facilitating comparisons necessary for identity development. Friendships often are the means youngsters use to process the delicate balance between the cultural demands of home and school. Being with friends provides children with group membership and often changes the way they are treated by their peers.

Additionally, students who relate to others in socially acceptable ways are usually well liked and included in work projects and recreational activities. They are generally more cooperative, emphatic, self-confident, and less lonely. Factors that hinder or disrupt the emerging bonds of friendship can have lasting negative effects on children's lives. Ladd (1990) found that children that have friends like school and show academic performance gains. Conversely, students who experience early peer rejection have less favorable perceptions of school, display higher levels of school avoidance, and have lower academic performance.

Peer Friendship Development

Children's peer connections develop sequentially. The following description of friendship development is based on the scholarship on social growth during childhood (See Crosnoe, 2000; Hartup, 1989; Rizzo, 1988; Sherman, de-Vries, & Lansford, 2000; Tesch, 1983). Although some friendship studies assume that different ethnic groups and social classes characterize friendship in similar ways, most of the current knowledge is based primarily on the social interactions of middle-class European American children (Krappmann, 1996; Sheets, 1999). Descriptions of social development in specific age groups follow.

Infant–Age 2

Infants as young as six months crawl toward and investigate other babies for information or signals that might involve them in a social interchange. Toddlers often display a preference for certain partners in parallel play. Intermittently, they may interact with each other and even create imitation games. For example, one child picks up a block, and a few seconds later a peer copies, or one says *"Da"* and another mimics the sound. The word friend enters many children's vocabulary in the early months of speech and is reinforced by frequent adult references. Pets, playmates, and toy creatures may all receive the label friend. A 2-year-old may point to someone with whom he shares playground space or plays with him at school and exclaim, "That's my friend!" The designation reflects the pleasure and comfort of emerging social routines. Children at this age are concerned with whom to call a friend and what playmates are liked or not liked at the moment.

Age 3–5

For 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, friendship takes on a more intentional aspect. Preschoolers and kindergartners confer and withdraw the status of friend at will according to a number of criteria, including proximity, general compatibility, variable moods, and the nature of the present activity. At this stage, comments such as “Will you be my friend?” “You’re not my friend!” or even “I hate you!” are not literal expressions of emotion but rather perceptions of the momentary prospects for play. Although children may experience disappointment and even anger at a rebuff during playtime, such feelings of momentary rejection generally reverse at the next positive encounter. At this age, children use friendship as a convenience to facilitate bonding and to promote access to play.

Age 6–12

Around ages 6 through 12, children’s friendships acquire a more sophisticated and lasting content. At this age, children have a need to be successful socially. They understand the reciprocity of friendship, experience increased peer influence, and detect their own and others’ social status. Friends are nice. They exchange resources and services, share activities, and maintain a relationship over time. Children at this stage share secrets, things, and promises with their friends. They may also choose to terminate friendships if they perceive that a partner refuses to help, ignores their needs, or destroys feelings of trust. It is common to see primary school age children visibly upset (e.g., crying, distraught, isolated) in the classroom and on the playground when friendships are momentarily suspended or severed. These feelings and experiences provide the groundwork for the mutual respect, responsibility, and long-term relationships that characterize more mature friendships.

Age 12 +

Adolescents 12-years-old and older show many precursors of adult behaviors and attitudes in terms of understanding friendship relationships. At this age, they recognize that friends have rights and that their friends might engage in other relationships that may not include them. Adolescents begin to comprehend the need to be satisfied by friendships and value the importance of sustained relationships. Mutual aid, intimate self-disclosure, trust, commitment, and loyalty become important functions of friendship in adolescence. A major difference between adolescent and adult friendships is that adolescents have not acquired the autonomous interdependence characterizing adult friendships. As a result adolescents may often fulfill the needs of their friends, to their own detriment.

Factors Influencing Friendship Selections

Multiple factors influence friendship selection among young people. For example, they are most often attracted to peers of the same gender, race, and social class. Children also form friendships with those who share similar recreational activities and with peers who are in their classrooms and neighborhoods (Clark & Ayers, 1988; Hartup, 1996). Friendships are largely voluntary and reciprocal. They show commitment between individuals who more or less perceive each other as equals (Hartup, 1996). This section discusses how the teacher and classroom environment, gender, and race play a critical role in children’s selections of friendships.

Classroom Environment

Although family, church, and community are important sources for developing friendship, for most children school is a primary place to acquire a sense of social group belonging and to practice the skills necessary for making and keeping friends. A teacher’s understanding of the developmental aspect of friendships, acknowledgement of children’s social expectations and perceptions of friendship, along with kindness, affection, and respect toward all students can provide a nurturing environment and a positive model for the development of interpersonal relationships. A teacher’s thoughtful planning and skillful observations of classroom social interactions can affect students’ social and cognitive development.

At all developmental levels, children exhibit varying degrees of success at making and keeping friends. The skills required for positive social experiences that come naturally to some may prove more challenging for others. When children have difficulty establishing friendships, it is important for teachers to understand the situation at hand and to identify other possible sources for the problem. *There is a distinction between students who do not have friends because they lack social skills and those who are targets of bias, prejudice, and discrimination.* In the case of the former, guided activities and instructional interventions help students overcome shyness, control aggressive tendencies, or meet other challenges. When students are excluded because of differences in skin color, language, appearance, social-class, clothing, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ability level, or other factors, it is the teacher's responsibility to intercede with reassurances to the victim, corrective guidance to peers and witnesses involved, as well as appropriate instructional interventions to understand the causes and to minimize reoccurrences. It is important to note that research shows that teachers often overrate the social competence of well-behaved and compliant students while underrating the social skills of disruptive students (French & Tyne, 1982).

Peer relationships and friendship connections allow students to develop social competence. Curricular content incorporating friendship as a basic component provides students with multiple experiences to enjoy and benefit from their friendship choices. These social opportunities also prepare them to function competently with cross-race and cross-gender peers.

The powerful resources resulting from the self-selection of friends from the same racial, ethnic, language, and gender groups can be sanctioned in the classroom. Disruption of friendship connections in the name of diversity may be harmful to some students. The challenge becomes how to purposefully balance students' advantageous friendship choices with multiple social and academic experiences involving peers from different races, ethnicities, genders, abilities, interests, and social classes with the unique benefits experienced with members of their same group.

The ways teachers design the classroom environment and plan instructional events play an important role in friendship selection, formation, and development. For example, Epstein (1989) found that the design of the classroom context (physical, instructional, and social) affects patterns of interaction and friendship selection. When teachers assign students to particular tables or rows, place them in ability instructional groups, and select certain children for leadership roles, they are limiting or expanding opportunities for children to form and develop friendships. Teachers' behavior toward particular students, the ways they form instructional groups, and the decisions they make regarding classroom seating assignments can restrict or expand students' choices of friends (Epstein, 1989; Sheets, 1999).

Epstein (1989) further noted that physical proximity places students in a specific social context and defines the boundaries from which friends are chosen. Thus, the formations of friendship cliques, including opportunity for cross-racial friendships, are closely related to classroom characteristics and teaching practices. Additionally, variables such as class size, racial proportions, presence of different races in the same ability instructional groups, integration of youngsters with diverse characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, language, gender, ability, socio-economic status) at the same tables or seating areas, and participation in after school sport and recreational activities may affect the likelihood that students will form cross-racial, cross ability, language, cross-gender, and socio-economic status friendships. Teacher decisions regarding physical proximity in the classroom are exemplified in Vignette 5.1 and 5.2 describing classroom seating arrangements.

Vignette 5.1

Attention to Gender

Mr. Williams is a 2nd year third grade teacher. His classroom has 18 African American (11 girls, 7 boys) and two Mexican American children (boys). Student records indicated that David and Gustavo both spoke Spanish; however, Mr. Williams was unable to determine their levels of proficiency as English Language Learners. Knowing that children prefer same-race friendships and boys prefer boys as friends, he organized his classroom in a U-Shape. David and Gustavo were assigned to the middle table in the back row (Table 3) with Jason and Tyree. The rest of the boys and girls were assigned to tables where there were at least two children of the same gender next to each other. He deliberately assigned Table 3 for responsibility for the outdoor play equipment the first week of school.

Vignette 5.2

Self Selection

Ms. Stuart, a 4th year teacher, works in an ethnically diverse urban high school with a majority of students from groups of color. She allows students to choose where to sit in her U.S. History 11th grade social studies classes. While most students sit in the same seats, they can change or move the individual desks to form groups. While she determines the number of groups and often selects the concepts or topics under discussion for group work, students self-select in group assignments and there are no limitations to the number of students per group. Students receive two grades for group projects, an individual grade and a group grade. They are encouraged to work collaboratively.

Issues for Consideration

Teachers who use diversity as a factor when forming academic groups may inadvertently limit rather than advance cross-racial and cross-gender friendships. Friendship connections, by nature, are mutually selected constructions. Failure to provide an authentic social and academic context with explicit freedom to choose friends, may ultimately deny students opportunity to form emotionally binding relationships. Rejected students may be ignored or forced into uncomfortable interactions rather than given opportunities to self-select groups during collaborative work and social activities.

Consider the teacher decisions in these vignettes. Mr. Williams' physical arrangement and classroom job assignments were purposeful. He wanted David and Gustavo to have each other as resources; however, he also wanted to give them multiple opportunities to interact with the other boys in the classroom. By placing them next to each other and in the center of the room, potential friends surrounded David and Gustavo. Ms. Stuart, on the other hand, did not assign seats. She allowed students to self-select working groups. Students received an individual and group grade for their group work. How did these teacher decisions increase students' social opportunities? What are the advantages and disadvantages of teacher assigned groups versus student self-selection to working groups? Does the location of a student's seat make a difference in the development of social skills?

District Policies

District and school policies, frequently beyond the control of classroom teachers, can also affect opportunities for social interactions in school classrooms, gyms, playgrounds, and lunchrooms. Consistent student separations may discourage the selection of certain individuals as friends. For example, school districts may segregate students by socio-economic status, ethnic groups, language skills, gender, or ability. Assignments to neighborhood schools, special education, gifted programs, honors classes, and second-language learning classrooms isolate particular students. For example, in many school districts neighborhood schools can range from high income to abject poverty. Sometimes students who are identified as having special needs are isolated in portables. Second language learners, advance placement students, and gifted students may be located in particular wings of the school or may be segregated in particular classrooms within schools. Multiple lunch and recess schedules as well as the availability of bussing for after school activities can also affect the availability of friendship choices for some students.

STUDENT CULTURAL DISPLAYS

This section provides a brief review of the scholarship examining (a) gender preferences, (b) race and friendship choices, and (c) social isolation. This information may be helpful when applying the third pedagogical dimension in the teaching-learning process.

Gender Preferences

Gender appears to be one of the first dimensions of identity that young children label in self and others. As young children develop they establish rigid lines around gender roles, which includes gender sorting in their selection of playmates and self-segregation on playgrounds. This same-gender social preference continues through middle childhood and into adolescence.

Research has shown that gender, regardless of race, plays a powerful role in the selection of dyadic peer friendships (Graham & Cohen, 1997; Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987a; Kistner, Metzler, Gatlin, & Risi, 1994). Graham, Cohen, and Zbikowski (1998) point out that (1) preferences for same-sex friends emerge in preschool, continue, and increase through childhood for African American and European American children; (2) nearly 90% of school-aged children's friendships are same-sex; (3) the small number of cross-sex friendships are less stable than same-race friendship selections; (4) girls' friendships are more intimate (smaller friendship networks), exclusive, and the same-race biases tend to be greater among girls than boys; (5) the play styles of boys (e.g., large group play activities) tend to promote cross-race interactions; and (6) when children have opportunity for cross-race and cross-sex friendships, sex is generally a more important variable of mutual friendships than race.

Race and Friendship Choices

Since numerous studies show that children express preferences toward same-race friends, with racial agreement stronger in adolescence than during early and middle childhood, this section **examine**s same-race selection and maintenance (Graham & Cohen, 1997; Kistner et al., 1994). In spite of racial biases in friend choices, children may develop positive attitudes towards those that differ racially from themselves. Generally these relationships remain at the level of peer acceptance rather than friendships. Studies on the friendship selections of American Indian, Asian American, and Latino American children are limited. Research on cross-racial friendships often examines Black and White relationships.

Pre-School and Early Elementary

Aboud's (1988) work shows that most 3- to 6-year-old African American children do not reject playmates that are different from them racially. However, around age 7 African American children form attachments to their own group and become pro-Black. They develop neutral attitudes rather than rejecting attitudes toward European American children but acquire negative attitudes toward American Indians, Asian Americans, and Latino Americans. Between the ages of 3 and 6, American Indian, Asian American, and Latino American children appear to exhibit the same early sequence of attitudes and behaviors as African American children. However, around age 7 they too prefer their own group, are neutral to European Americans, and are negative toward African Americans.

In research settings two-thirds of European American children between 5 and 7 selected pictures of Asian American, African American, or Native American children as both bad and disliked and identified pictures of African American children as their least preferred playmates (Aboud, 1988). Some psychologists point out that studies of this nature are faulty because they do not take into account the children's interpretation of the word *bad*; nor do they prove that these preferences are transferable from the photo to individuals or to real play situations (Branch, 1999). Although studies indicate that European American children's developmentally based prejudicial attitudes begin to decline at age 7 to 8; in real-life play settings, most European American children at age 7 to 8 exhibit preference for other European American children as friends over children from other racial groups (Aboud, 1988).

Middle Elementary

Graham et al. (1998, p. 12) found that "Boys and girls of both races had more mutual friends of their same sex and race when they were older [age 10 to 12] than when they were younger [age 7 to 9]." As children grow older, they are likely to maintain same-race friendships. Same-race, rather than cross-race, friendships are more frequent at the elementary level. Both African American children and European American children are likely to select the same-race peers as best friends (Hallinan & Smith, 1987). While African American children (ages 10-14) do not select European American peers for best friends, they do show greater overall friendliness towards cross-race peers than do European Americans.

Junior High and High School

Students generally choose to self-segregate racially during adolescence. Branch (1999) points out that attendance in racially integrated public secondary schools has not necessarily increased adolescent's cross-racial friendships. He cautions that "the superficial mixing of adolescents in extra-curricular school activities such as athletic teams and clubs should not be construed as a statement that there is racial harmony or … an openness to interracial friendships" (Branch, 1999, p. 333). Atwater (1996) adds, "merely attending an integrated school does not necessarily foster interracial friendships. A lot depends on the climate of learning in the classroom. When minority students are competing with Caucasian students, especially when many of the latter have more advanced skills and higher socioeconomic status, racial prejudice is increased on both sides" (p. 219). The vignette, *Multiracial Friendships* illustrates the role of race in the selection of friendships and the importance of being aware of students' friendship needs.

Vignette 5.3

Multiracial Friendships

The following study took place in an urban high school in the Pacific Northwest (approximately 1200 students) with a majority student population of color (60.6%). A total of 42 first generation (9th –12th grade) multiracial students participated. Twenty-five had one parent from a racial group of color (Black or Asian) and one White parent. The parents of the other 17 students had one Black parent and one from another racial group of color (American Indian, Asian American, and Latino American).

Students in this study felt that rejection was spread and transmitted from one small social clique to another as they tried to "fit in" various groups (Sheets, 2004). They described rude, judgmental, and intrusive attitudes and behaviors of peers from groups of color as well as the insensitive and racist actions of White peers. The frustration of constantly having to prove allegiance to a specific racial group and the inability of their close friends to shield them from an incessant, racialized pressure often resulted in painful, inconsistent, short-lived friendships.

> Lecia (Black mother/White father) explains:
> *Middle school was the worse. They came right out and asked you 'What are you?' For a time I hung out with White friends because Black people were judgmental. But then after a while I went back to my Black friends because the White kids dumped me whenever they did things where I wasn't welcome. Black kids didn't want me to talk to White kids. They would say, 'Do you think you're a White girl?' They'd pick on me constantly and make me feel self-conscious. Whites didn't want me either. Blacks were more accepting, but you had to be blacker than Black."*

> Melissa (Pilipina American mother/White father) adds:
> *I was only in a White group for a short while. I tried so hard to belong. I had a right to belong; I'm part White. But it was happening right before my eyes. They would leave and not ask me to come. They would move and sit at a different table at lunch. I finally just went back to my Pilipino clique."*

Issues for Consideration

This vignette describes how multiracial adolescents experienced making and keeping friends in Middle School. Although these students indicated that they always knew they were of mixed heritage, they also reported that by age 3 or 4 they sensed relatives, teachers, and peers perceived them as having a single racial and ethnic heritage of color. Their multiracial identity did not necessarily limit cross-racial relationships in the early grades; however, around 4th through 12th grade, race became a factor in their friendship patterns. Multiracial children stated that they had to prove racial loyalty and project a single ethnic or racial heritage to make and keep friends. Attempts by multiracial students with a White heritage to forge intimate friendships with White peers occurred mostly during junior high; however, these relationships were intermittent, short-lived, and characterized by rejection.

Students, in this study, felt that they had to resolve issues about self, teachers, and friendship expectations without assistance from the significant adults in their lives. One student stated, “teachers don’t care if you’re biracial, they just assume you’re just Asian or Black” and “my parents don’t know what I go through, they’re not mixed.” Why do you think most of these students repeatedly reported that teachers and parents were unaware of the social pressures and emotional stress they encountered in school on a daily basis? How can you make your classroom emotionally safe for multiracial children?

Social Isolation

Excessive peer rejection in childhood predicts later behavioral and emotional disturbances (Brendt, 1984; Dodge, 1989). Isolated, aggressive, or extremely passive children are “at risk as adults to be unemployed or underemployed, lack independence, be overly aggressive, or experience serious mental health problems” (Doll, 1996, p. 1). Along with issues in later life, other researchers point out that repeated problems with peers are major factors when decisions are made to place students in special educational programs for behaviorally and emotionally challenged children (Hollinger, 1987; Schonert-Reichl, 1993).

Some students may want to interact with their peers but choose to deliberately exclude themselves. They may find it difficult to tolerate large group social settings, may have limited social skills, or may have experienced repeated peer rejection. Often self-isolating students mask their discomfort and anxiety by appearing uninterested and aloof (Engfer, 1993). Keep in mind that researchers who study self-isolating children maintain that these children’s solitary behavior may be appear to be developmentally normal in early childhood but becomes increasingly atypical, as they grow older (Asher & Renshaw, 1981; Coie, Belding & Underwood, 1988).

While teachers are able to identify students with extreme social issues, “it is differentiating the less strikingly rejected but still isolated child that challenges teachers” (Doll, 1996, p. 8). Another challenge teachers face is evaluating the source and responding appropriately to students’ antisocial behavior since we know that this behavior is closely associated with peer rejection and the absence of quality friendships (Coie et al., 1988). Students who consistently isolate themselves or who display excessive aggression may require referral to a specialist.

Sometimes teachers inadvertently ignore the needs of isolated children and minimize the stress caused by constant peer harassment and rejection. Teachers who believe in forcing friendship patterns and peer acceptance, might say: “In this class we are all friends” to justify making instructional and social grouping decisions. Vignette 5.4 exemplifies the issue of isolation in the classroom and points out the value to students when friendship connections are supported.

Vignette 5.4

Merchant Teller

This event took place in an all day kindergarten classroom (28 children) in a low-performing, high-poverty public school in the Pacific Northwest (Sheets, 1998b). Keith was one of four European American children (2 males, 2 females). Seventeen children were Spanish speaking (8 males, 9 females) and six were male Asian Americans (4 Laotian, l Hmong, and 1 Vietnamese). Most of the children were second language learners and all received free or reduced lunch.

Every Friday, a 60-minute free-play period was scheduled to minimize the disruption caused by the school’s pullout programs. (During this period, two groups (8 or 9 children per group) of English Language Learners were pulled out back to back by the ESL specialist for 25-minute blocks each, one child went to the Speech Therapist for 25 minutes, and one attended a conflict prevention counseling small group session every other Friday for 30 minutes). The teacher (author) used this weekly period to focus on specific social or academic goals for individual children or small groups. The incident took place during this time frame.

Keith, a 5-year-old European American male, had 11 older brothers and sisters between the ages of 14 and 27. Raised by his deaf grandfather, he generally played alone in silence. In the classroom he rarely initiated play and found it difficult to join existing playgroups. Keith's extreme shyness appeared to prevent him from interacting when children even when they joined him in his selected activity.

I believed that providing him with consistent and varied opportunities to choose to interact socially in non-threatening ways would enhance Keith's social competency. A solution could include creating situations where children would naturally seek Keith out. I began by making Keith a desirable playmate by giving him things and jobs to attract his peers. For example, children would join him if they wanted to use the classroom's basket of new magic markers, a new puzzle, a new batch of homemade play dough, a pile of specially cut small pieces of multi-colored construction paper, a page of stickers, or a box of Fruit Loops. He could choose a partner to take messages to the office, to the librarian, or to the lunchroom cook. He choose peers to help him pass out work sheets and to organize the science table.

Since all independent work and play groups were self-selected, I watched for optimal conditions that could potentially provide opportunity to ease his entry into group play or work experiences. One day a large mixed gender group spontaneously created a game they called Mall. Some children owned stores, some delivered goods, and others shopped. Blocks became loaves of bread at the bakery, green beads were peas at the grocery store, and play clothes were sold at the Sears. Keith watched wistfully from his desk. He seemed to want to join. I quickly cut small stacks of white, red, green, and blue rectangles to represent money and joined Keith who was coloring alone at his desk. I explained the role of a merchant teller at a bank while we made a cardboard sign that read— MERCHANT TELLER. I told him my friend was a merchant teller in a real bank. When we finished the sign, I said, "Keith, go tell them, *'I'm a merchant teller. If you need money, come to my bank.'*" I moved away from his table. He hesitated, then picked up the stacks of paper money and slowly walked to the Mall. I was not able to hear the negotiations; however, within minutes, a beaming Keith had a spot in the "Mall" (Sheets, 1998b).

Issues for Consideration

Keith was progressing academically and his art projects were detailed, creative, and colorful. His work was accurate and neat; however, since he spent a lot of time watching other children, he usually had difficulty completing his assignments. While children did not appear to purposefully reject Keith, he was ignored. Rarely was he invited to join small work or play groups. He did not seem to possess the social ability to freely initiate or join small groups on his own. He worked and played alone. He was a silent member of the group when other children joined him at his table or at his selected activity. Children were beginning to perceive him as different, and he was beginning to develop a reputation as a loner. Miguel, his desk-mate, once asked me if Keith could talk. Although he was one of four European American children, the two girls played together or joined other cross-ethnic groups and the other European American male was part of the most popular small group of boys who were so involved in their own social events they rarely noticed Keith's solitude.

Concerned about Keith's social reticence, apparent withdrawal, and potential for becoming the subject of peer rejection, the teacher contacted his mother the second week of school. She carefully explained that he was doing well academically but seemed to avoid playing with others and rarely talked. Keith's mother described his family background explaining that she worked full time, and was involved in the various extra curricular activities of the other children. She did not seem to be overly concerned about Keith's social development. His mother felt his "quiet nature" was part of his personality and was probably influenced by his strong attachment to his deaf grandfather and placement in the family. She explained that he did not have neighbors to play with and his siblings' interests did not generally include Keith.

Throughout the year, Keith was consistently provided non-threatening social experiences, designed instructional activities, classroom discussions with friendship themes, and encouragement for his efforts to set and achieve small step interpersonal objectives. Since Miguel expressed concern about Keith, pairings of these two children were arranged as often as possible. As the school year evolved, Keith's personality remained intact. He continued to be quiet and shy; however, his tendency to withdraw socially decreased. He occasionally joined small social playgroups, joined Miguel in play activities, interacted and chatted in small workgroups, and showed pleasure when others joined him.

Consider the following. In what ways did teacher intervention encourage (or discourage) peer acceptance and friendship connections? How might Keith's pattern of isolation express itself in middle grades, junior high or high school if the social concerns are not addressed in elementary school? What can teachers do to minimize student's social isolation?

CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

Teachers can play a significant role in helping children develop the social skills necessary to achieve peer acceptance and to initiate and sustain friendships. Well-designed, appropriate interventions can help students adapt to social interactions in the classroom and in other school settings. The following suggestions are designed to promote positive social encounters. A way to assess students' social competence is to observe their interactions with others. The degree to which they are liked or disliked and their ability to make and keep friends can also serve as a barometer of social adjustment. Changes or lack of change in students' behavior can assist you in planning and modifying particular intervention strategies.

Acknowledging the Importance of Friendship

Use curriculum to acknowledge the importance of friendship to the social and cognitive development of students. For example:

1. Discuss the role of friends and what friendship means. Make a list of what friends do for each other. Share stories, read books, listen to music, and view videos with friendship themes. Have children draw themselves playing with friends, label, and display them or have them write essays and stories of incidents where friends' intervention and support helped them. Explore the continuum of enemy/bully to friend and discuss the intensity of the role, purpose and characteristics of these concepts in terms of personal label and behavior toward different individuals and groups.
2. Explore feelings associated with lack of friendship or with friendship loss. Discuss how it feels when personal friendship advances are rejected or when issues such as death, family moves, foster home changes, parental instructions, or disagreements, remove friends' proximity. Discuss how it feels not to have a close friend. Create going-away friendship books with pictures and autograph books with messages to give to students who are moving.
3. Examine friendship as an emotional and cognitive resource. Describe ways friends provide comfort and share resources. Prepare and present skits and role-plays in

which friends offer hugs, have fun together, translate from one language to another, help with seat work or homework, explain school norms, and involve you in school activities or functions.

Recognizing Harmful Behavior and Intervening

Recognize when discriminatory or exclusionary behavior is harmful and intervene by providing positive models for forging friendships. For example:

1. Observe how the diverse skills (motor, artistic, academic, musical) and attributes (ethnicity, language, race, socioeconomic status, class, and gender) that students possess influence their ability to select, make, and maintain friendships. Become aware of your students' social behavior, identify students without friends, and plan inclusive projects and activities. Balance racial, ethnic, socio-economic and gender segregation by providing opportunities for diverse friendships to develop while supporting student's self selection of friends.
2. Intervene and stop harassing or bullying attitudes and behaviors. Openly discuss how actions of this nature, while especially damaging to the victim, also hurt the perpetuator and witnesses as well. Encourage and expect all students to take an active role in stopping verbal insults and harmful actions toward others.
3. Give students multiple opportunities to practice choosing and maintaining friendships. Allow students to choose where to sit. Provide numerous classroom cooperative and collaborative group activities and allow students to self-select friends for these learning events.
4. Model inclusive social behaviors and develop social interventions. Adopt a classroom policy that provides all students with unlimited social access. Use puppets, stuffed animals, skits, videos, and interviews to model appropriate actions students might take to include others. Discourage expulsion from a group as a solution to group conflict by teaching and encouraging negotiation skills. Discuss ways for students to learn how to expect responsible group participation and how to stand up for themselves. Purchase games, books, and materials that encourage sharing, empathy, cooperation, and collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Parish (1996), in examining the basic principles of friendship, reminds us that *"friends are the ultimate form of social security*" and *"a friend is someone who helps you to like yourself."* Most schools implicitly promote positive peer relationships and expect cross-racial and cross-gender relationships to develop; however, often they do not strongly emphasize friendship development. Yet the fundamental role of friendship in the cultural, social, and academic lives of students suggests that teachers should acknowledge the benefits of friendship and consider adopting an up-front, proactive curricular approach to foster its development.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Bukowski, W. M., Newcomb, A. F., & Hartup, W. W. (1996). Friendship and its significance in childhood and adolescence: Introduction and comment. In W. M. Bukowski, A. F. Newcomb, & W. W. Hartup (Eds.), *The company they keep: Friendship in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 1-15). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hartup, W. W. (1996). The company they keep: Friendships and their developmental significance. *Child Development, 67,* 1-13.

Sheets, R. H. (2004). Multiracial adolescent perception: The role of friendship in identification and identity formation. In K. Wallace, *Working with mixed heritage students: Perspectives on research and practice*. Information Age Publishing.