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What It Means to Be “In It Together” in Education

No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship.

—James Comer

It's August and advertisements for school supplies and clothing begin as a trickle and eventually floods over the radio, television, Internet, and print media. For some 4 million U.S. educators, a once seemingly far-off day draws near. The new school year looms ahead like a mountain: in some ways inspiring and thrilling, in other ways supremely challenging, and even—dare we say—daunting. As teachers, teacher educators who prepare future teachers, or professional developers who support continuous learning to strengthen our practice, we hope that we know just what it means to try to foster our students becoming effective thinkers and caring members of our society, and to dedicate our care and determination to help to make their lives better and to be part of making our world better. It's what we do throughout the school year—continuously reevaluating and making adjustments about how to help all of our students to be successful.

Teaching has never been a simple or easy day's work. Perhaps the soft-focus nostalgia for some earlier time makes it *appear* that there were moments in history when teachers could somehow sharpen

some pencils, close their doors, and magically meet all the needs of their students. Even if that myth was a realistic depiction of the past, we're well into an era where being an effective teacher is a complex and ever more complicated endeavor.

In this book, we explore how the work of teaching can be done so much more effectively and meaningfully when we are *in it together*, working collaboratively to help our students reach their academic potential and become active members of their learning community and beyond. We show how we can do this by drawing from the rich resources of our learning community (including teachers, students, families, the school community, and the community at large) to form a network of possibilities that can make the work of learning much more successful for all involved.

What we propose is that it is not possible for one teacher alone to meet the needs of a new era in contemporary education. Along with grappling with increasing mandates requiring that students meet specific learning standards (such as the Common Core State Standards); dramatic changes in socioeconomic, racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity among our nation's students coupled with poor outcomes and significant achievement gaps for many from these groups (commonly referred to as disproportionality); as well as budgetary constraints are affecting much of what we do. What constitutes a family is also evolving in our contemporary society—including children being raised by two parents, a single parent, blended family, grandparents, unrelated people who live cooperatively, and foster parents, and children being raised with significant support from extra familial individuals. Throughout our book, we use the terms *parent(s)*, *parent(s)/guardian(s)*, and *family(ies)* interchangeably to reflect the diverse family structures found within our communities. We are also living in an era when the Internet and digital technologies have radically changed our profession, from what we do in the classroom to what occurs outside of it. Authority no longer resides in a teacher's exclusive access to knowledge. Rather, it can be a keystroke or click away for students, their families, and all of us. For one thing, the omnipresence of Internet access has put instant information into everyone's hands. For another, this explosion of available information has made education a much more complex endeavor—too complex to master while working in isolation.

These dynamic changes call for a framework of teaching that allows for expertise and contributions to flow in multiple directions and from multiple sources to support all students. It requires a paradigm shift to partnerships in the learning enterprise.

Why Are Partnerships Important?

Our book is intended to provide a much-needed exploration and source for understanding how classroom, school, family, and community systems can have a powerful influence on student learning and achievement as well as on the accomplishment of school improvement goals. At the heart of our thinking is a regard for the critical importance of partnerships. What do we mean by the term *partnerships*? We use the words *partnership(s)* and *relationship(s)* interchangeably to define the positive possibilities that can and do occur when two or more people (including teachers, students, families, and members of the school community and the community at large) come together to collaborate on behalf of student learning.

Studies suggest a connection between a growing emphasis on relationships in education and powerful gains, including increased graduation rates, resources to support education, student engagement, more enduring learning, and a closer correlation of education with 21st century goals (Epstein, 2011). Throughout our book, we highlight ways in which teachers can draw on the diverse perspectives, energy, and shared interests of students, families, colleagues, and the community by cultivating relationships and inviting engagement. We also show how the cultivation of relationships in school communities has been known to cross over such important demographic differences (and often perceived barriers) as culture, ethnicity, income, education, age, and other variables and have a great influence on student outcomes. In addition, we describe how working together to connect students’ personal, social, cultural, language, and world experiences to the curriculum is a powerful tool for closing the achievement gap.

Our intent is to provide a comprehensive approach for building coalitions of support around student learning and engagement through interconnected classroom community-building efforts that involve teachers: (1) building strong relationships with students, (2) intentionally supporting students to build powerful relationships with their peers, (3) fostering strong reciprocal relationships with families, (4) building relationships with the school and community at large, and (5) empowering and creating purposeful intentional spaces for everyone to deepen their relationships with each other in support of student learning.

A special feature of our book is its case study format whereby we use many examples from across the United States and Canada in K–12 settings to illustrate the concepts. In one of these, we will meet Kristina Labadie, a fourth-grade classroom teacher from the state of Washington. Kristina sought a way to provide her students with a

higher volume of academic interactions and partnerships with caring adults in the community. We will also meet Maureen Penko, a speech and language pathologist from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, who works in partnership with teachers, students, and families to help children on the autism spectrum to develop and strengthen their social communication skills in the classroom setting and in nonstructured situations using as many functional environments as possible.

In addition, we also provide written reflection spaces within the body of each chapter for readers to reflect on the ideas that we present directly after reading them. These are meant to delve deeper in the ideas presented and, in most cases, connect them to a personal, social, cultural, or world experience. The reflection spaces are also intended for two types of audiences: (1) an individual reader and (2) a group of readers, including professional learning communities, book groups, and students in a college classroom. Thus, you can read the book on your own and write responses in the space provided, and you can read the book with others and write responses with the intent of having a group reflection discussion about it. In addition, we include *A Closer Look* features in some of the chapters to reflect the thought process of teachers as they build a community around a classroom. Each chapter generally opens with an authentic scenario from a classroom context and focuses on key elements for creating partnerships that work. Our intent is to provide a much-needed resource for teacher educators as they work with pre- and in-service teachers, professional developers as they seek new ways of improving student outcomes, coaches as they work with teachers, and teachers to strengthen their practice. Each of the following chapter descriptions is intended for these audiences.

In Chapter 2, “An Involved Classroom Community,” we introduce our sphere of influence framework for teacher-student, student-student, teacher-family, family-family, teacher-school community, and school community-community-at-large partnerships to more successfully meet the diverse needs of an ever-changing student and family population to support students’ investment in learning and engagement in their learning community and beyond.

Chapter 3, “Infusing the Assets of Students and Families Into Classroom Learning,” is devoted to seeing the cultural, linguistic, and personal assets of students and families as resources for the sociocultural, language/literacy, academic, and thinking-skills development of our students. We draw from Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) to take a closer look at the rich *funds of knowledge* of students and families. We also present three research-based principles about the importance of making connections; keeping students’ stress levels low; and valuing our student, family, and community assets within and beyond the classroom.

In Chapter 4, “Preparing for Classroom Community,” we lay the foundation for partnerships by providing ways to develop a preliminary communication strategy for teacher-student, student-student, teacher-family, family-family, teacher-school, and school-community-at-large building efforts. We describe ways to prepare avenues of communication that include beginning-of-the-year communication, interpersonal contact, and the creation of an online presence as well as a welcoming orientation to partnership-building efforts across each of these interactive spaces.

Chapter 5, “The Academic Learning Benefits of Being ‘In It Together,’” focuses on the curriculum. We provide an in-depth discussion of how to use each sphere of interaction to support student learning and give several examples of each sphere in practice.

Chapter 6, “Using Classroom Events to Empower Students and Families,” presents the importance of community-building events for social purposes, showcasing the curriculum for making learning transparent, drawing on the rich resources of families, and building a home-school shared culture of learning.

In Chapter 7, “Widening the Circle Beyond the Classroom: Service Learning,” we discuss the critical importance of service learning in education. We discuss how it provides students with an essential interactive space to express what they are learning and to be apprenticed supportively into being contributory citizens.

In Chapter 8, “Using Learning Partnerships in Professional Development: Applying the Ideas,” we discuss how our book can be used for professional growth purposes, including book study, professional learning communities, college study, and other initiatives intended for this purpose. We provide observational, interview, survey, and reflection tasks that are intended for individual and/or collaborative use for reading the book and applying the concepts.

Why Empowerment May Be Essential to Person and Group Success

Drawing on more than 50 years of research from the behavioral sciences, Daniel Pink (2009) cogently describes what drives the kind of activity that is involved in creating the type of partnerships that we are promoting. It requires motivation and engagement, or what he calls *drive* to support it to occur. Wisely, he does not confine the drive that is needed to any one person (e.g., teacher, student); rather, it applies to all that is human and includes

- having a voice in what we do with a degree of choice and autonomy to make decisions,

- constantly striving to improve what we do and getting accurate feedback about our progress, and
- being part of something that is meaningful.

If the goal of public education is to help maintain a citizenry of informed, confident, capable, cooperative people, we have to create institutions in which all participants contribute to practice and use the skills of expression, negotiation, authority, and cooperation. This means that everyone from preschoolers to administrators practices these skills. To paraphrase Carl Jung, “We are what we do, not what we say.” The first principle, having a voice, is critical. In education, our practice must show our respect for the values we want to transmit to young people. If we want them to care, the process of teaching must have care. If we want them to be open, inclusive, and respectful, we must be committed to showing these same qualities in all aspects of what we do because we are the models of what we would have them become. We also have to embrace the totality of a child’s experience between and among school, home, and the community and draw from the various participants to make education work. But just as important, if we want to improve education, we must show how vital improvements are to our own practice and celebrate our successes in making these improvements. These tenets hold true for what we wish for our students—to strive to strengthen what they do to learn and to celebrate their efforts. Finally, motivation requires that we all see purpose and meaning in what we are doing so that we and our students can commit to our work whole-heartedly. Our book is based on these three interdependent elements to create and deliver the type of partnerships that are needed.

In the next chapter, we discuss the urgency for this work and the type of partnerships that support equity, access, and engagement for a diverse learning community. We also outline our framework or the spheres of influence that operate across each and every aspect of it.

References

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