

Pedagogy of Connection

by Patricia C. Heindel, Ph.D.

During this time of social distancing we have all been made aware of the need for connection. As teachers, school counselors, and administrators, we have developed strategies for connecting that we use in the normal worlds and routines that we are familiar with. Now we have all been thrown into a new “normal” – and so have our students, parenting adults, and other members of our school communities.

As teachers, we have been trained in pedagogy and we have been used to using familiar teaching/learning strategies. The new normal is requiring us to critically examine our pedagogy – to deeply reflect on what was successful in helping those with whom we interacted in order to thrive. We are all struggling to identify what needs to change. What needs to be happening? What is most critical right now? The answer coming through loud and clear is that connection, compassion, support, and flexibility are most critical right now.

The social-emotional well-being of students, staff, and parents is so important and is threatened on so many levels right now. Anxiety about the COVID-19 virus, unhealthy home environments, not having our usual support systems, and not having regular contact with others has impacted so many of us. And many of us have experienced grief and loss – not only grief from loved ones, but grief at losing what is normal, losing the ability to experience a normal graduation ceremony or enjoy other school community celebrations we look forward to each year.

And what has come from this deep reflection is a fabulous pivot to creating connections in really creative ways – creative pedagogies of connection. Out of this new normal has come an even more urgent focus on social-emotional learning and skills practice, on creating positive climates in whatever the teaching/learning environment looks like – Google classroom, Zoom, or 1-to-1 phone calls and forming positive climates in all those interactions and in all relationships – student-to-student, teacher-to-student, staff-to-parent, and staff-to-staff.

What is happening at the same time is an incredible amount of collaboration and sharing amongst educators. Fabulous ways of connecting with students, staff, and parents are being shared widely and being replicated all across the country. While many of us know that this is the way educators normally ‘roll,’ the country is really seeing the incredibly collaborative spirit, creativity, skills, and character of educators.

But we also need to be strategic as we develop pedagogies of connection. We need to create ways of connecting that work best for each of the different constituencies in our school communities. We need to be cognizant of equity gaps which are widening during the pandemic and identify, and remove communication barriers for marginalized students and families. We need to recognize that the situation has caused all of us to change how we think, feel, behave, and respond to each other.

But we also don’t want to have ‘jumbled up’ connection efforts. A systematic plan for connecting would help prevent overtaxing the system and draining staff and administrator resources while still creating regular, supportive connections for students with students, teachers with students, staff with staff, and staff with parents.