Friendship in the Elementary Classroom

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HOW DOES FRIENDSHIP INFLUENCE A STUDENT’S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE?

Friendship brings social-emotional competence, the ability to experience different perspectives, and how to cooperate. As children get older they become “more confident, more altruistic, less aggressive, and demonstrate greater school involvement [with friendship]” (Crosnoe, R. 2000. p. 2). In addition, “friendship provides children a context for skill learning and development, emotional and cognitive resources, and models for later relationships” (Ladd, G.W. et al. 1996. p.1). Not only does friendship influence what is going on in the present classroom, social-emotional skills and relationships “have been shown to influence experiences and achievements in all spheres of people’s lives, whether it is academic achievement, job performance, occupational attainment, health and longevity, or personal and societal well-being” (OECD).

Social-emotional competence is important because it is “a child’s ability to interact in a positive way with others, communicate feelings positively and regulate behavior” (Innis, 2014). Furthermore, a child’s ability to experience different perspectives is hugely relied on in school, especially kindergarten through the primary grades as children are around more and more peers. It is clear to see that “children who see others’ perspectives may show more sensitivity towards others’ feelings as a result, they are more skilled in social interactions and tend to have more positive relationships with peers” (Berk 2012 as cited in Gallagher 2013).

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

It is defined as “the processes by which people acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage their emotions [self-management], to feel and show empathy towards others [social awareness], to establish and achieve positive goals [self-management], to develop and maintain positive relationships [relationship skill] and make responsible decisions [responsible decision making]” (Schorer-Reichl, 2017). This theory supports encouraging friendship in the classroom because friendship falls under the relationship skills component. In general, students who are in “SEL programs show improved classroom behavior, an increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school” (CASEL).

HOW DO TEACHERS PROMOTE FRIENDSHIP?

There are several ways teachers can promote friendship. One way is to build a classroom community. In order to have a healthy learning environment, creating a classroom community is very important and can lead to natural friendships being formed, “in a caring community of learners all members value one another, recognizing that everyone is different and all children have their own strengths, interests and perspectives” (NAEYC, 2009 as cited in Streckovic, M. et al. 2018). Connecting this to the positive influences of friendships, it’s important for children to experience different perspectives, and that can be accomplished through forming friendships. Another way teachers can promote friendship is through social interactions. In a study among different early-childhood educators, “teacher involvement and presence of peers were both related to children’s social competence outcomes” (Buyse, V. et al. 2003). Furthermore, while teachers often separate students who are friends in the classroom, it may be beneficial to place friends near each other to promote friendship. If that isn’t possible, psychologist, Janet Reohr suggests that “instead of giving assignments that must be done individually, the same tasks can be assigned to be done in pairs of friends or work can be organized into cooperative group activities” (Reohr, 1984).

4-TIER PYRAMID MODEL INTERVENTION

Dr. Kathleen Cranley Gallagher explains that one of the best ways to support friendships in the classroom is through a 4-tier pyramid model (see figure 1.1). At the bottom of the pyramid is “Nurturing and Responsive Relationships” and “High-Quality Supportive Environments” whereas the top two tiers are “Targeted Social-Emotional Supports” and “Intensive Intervention”. This model is structured similar to the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, where the bottom levels or tiers are for all students, and the farther you go up the pyramid, the more specific and intensive the intervention becomes.

Nurturing and Responsive Relationships: Teachers would have encouraging conversations about friendships with the class, as well as having good communication with families about their students.

High-Quality Supportive Environments: Setting up the classroom environment to support friendship, could be arranging seating charts for students of like interests to be next to each other to assign partners for different activities.

Targeted Social-Emotional Support: Using different SEL strategies for different students. With this type of support, elementary students “have a more sophisticated understanding of reality as opposed to fantasy and are developing an understanding of multiple perspectives, role-playing can be a particularly powerful strategy” (Gallagher, 2013).

Intensive Support: This level of support is “for children who are struggling with relationships and behavior” (Gallagher, 2013). At this level students have behavior support plans.

TPEP ALIGNMENT & DESCRIPTOR

The TPEP criteria that aligns with my research on friendship is Criterion 5: Fostering and managing a safe, positive learning environment. The teacher fosters and manages a safe and inclusive learning environment that takes into account: Physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being of students.

Figure 1- SEL Components

Figure 2- Classroom Desk Arrangement

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Figure 3- Four Tier Pyramid Model

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