Building Strong Relationships to Create Inviting Schools: Tips and Techniques

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Introduction

The theme for the fall 2023 International Alliance for Invitational Education conference was, "Invitational Education: A Relationships-Based Framework for Healthy and Connected Schools." Strong relationships are important. According to Purkey et al. (2016), "All the professional success in the universe will not make up for lack of success with significant others" (p. 31). As teachers, we are powerful role models for our students. They will learn to be personally inviting with others and build strong relationships by watching the way we are personally inviting and build strong relationships with others in the school and with them. We can use intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust as we are building these relationships (Purkey et al., 2020; Anderson, 2021).

I recently had a powerful experience related to the importance of being with people. In October 2023, I walked between 9 and 16 miles a day on the last 100 kilometers of the Camino de Santiago. I invited friends to go with me; however, they could not imagine walking that far in one day.

I thought I would be fine walking by myself. Fortunately, I ran into a group of women who invited me to walk with them. It was a lot more fun walking with them than by myself, and I learned even more powerfully the importance of relationships and being with others.

This paper includes four sections. The first section includes the research behind the importance of building relationships with adults, and the second section includes strategies for doing so. The third section contains research on the importance of building relationships with students, and the fourth section includes strategies for building those relationships. Many of the ideas for adults can be applied to students and vice versa. We are all doing these things. The purpose of this paper is to celebrate the many things we are consciously or unconsciously doing as we are building strong relationships. When we have positive relationships with both adults and students, we will have healthy and connected schools.

The Importance of Building Strong Relationships with Adults

Why build strong relationships with adults? We feel better when we are relating to others. Numerous research studies confirm the importance of relationships. These are just a few of them.

Relationships were associated with longevity and health in a study of four longitudinal samples from the United States (Yang et al., 2016). When people were more socially integrated, they had less inflammation. On the other hand, when they were less socially integrated, they had as much elevated inflammation as they would have with being physically inactive. Hypertension and obesity were also related to social isolation. The authors concluded that, "Social integration protects health and promotes longevity" (p. 582).

In a study by Teo et al. (2013), 4,642 adults between the ages of 25 and 75 completed surveys in 1995-1996 and 10 years later. The researchers assessed the quality of the participants' relationships as well as the degree to which they were socially isolated. Those who did not have social support, did not have quality relationships, and were strained socially "had more than double the risk of depression . . . than those with the highest quality" (p. 1). The researchers concluded that "quality of social relationships is a major risk factor for major depression" (p. 1).

Nguyen et al. (2022) asked two groups of participants ($N = 268$ and $N = 216$) about their :perceived social support, self-disclosure, social safeness, and mental well-being" (p. 1211). They found that when people perceived that they had support from other people, they had high levels of well-being. The researchers concluded that "relationships allow people to self-disclose information and feel socially safe" (p. 1219).

High-quality relationships at work with both supervisors and colleagues can also lead to positive outcomes for employees. In Study 1, Schermuly and Meyer (2016) gathered data from 318 participants in a variety of industries. They measured psychological empowerment, emotional exhaustion, and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), which is "unique dyadic relationships between supervisors and subordinates that develop through interactions and exchanges" (p. 674). In a second study, they invited workers in a variety of organizations to fill out surveys 12 weeks apart. Although 541 participants completed the surveys the first time it was administered, only 144 completed the survey the second time. They filled out instruments on LMX, Team-Member Exchange (TMX), and depression. In the first study, the researchers found that when the participants had high-quality relationships at work with their supervisors, they were more

empowered, and they had less emotional exhaustion (Study 1) and less depression (Study 2). Their relationships with their colleagues (TMX) were as important as their relationships with their supervisor "for preventing psychological health issues" (Schermuly & Meyer, 2016, p. 673).

Trusting relationships among adults are also critical in schools. Bryk and Schneider (2002) conducted a 3-year longitudinal study of 12 schools in the Chicago Public Schools to discover what factors enabled schools to bring about changes. The research teams "conducted more than 200 interviews, attended 150 school activities . . . , spent 24 days observing in classrooms in each school, and held 9 focus groups, 3 each with principals, teachers, and parents" (p. 145). They discovered the importance of relational trust in bringing about improvements in schools. They concluded that in schools in which teachers had high levels of relational trust, teachers collaborated more to make changes because they were willing to take risks. In addition, students made major gains in their learning. On the other hand, in schools with low relational trust, the educators brought about few changes, and student reading and math scores remained the same.

Goddard et al. (2007) studied the relationship between teacher collaboration and student achievement. The study included 452 teachers and 2,546 students in fourth grade in 47 public elementary schools. They found that when the teachers had higher levels of collaboration to improve the schools, student test scores in reading and mathematics were higher. The researchers concluded that, "The explanation for our results is that teacher collaboration fostered learning that improved instruction" (p. 892).

Strategies for Building Strong Relationships with Adults

I would invite you to think of a strong relationship you have with someone. What are some of the characteristics of it? What benefits do you gain from being in that relationship?

Now, think back to the beginning of that relationship. How did you begin it? How did you help it to grow? What were some of the things you did, either consciously or unconsciously, as you were developing the relationship?

When I started teaching time management, I found a Garfield cartoon that conveyed what I wanted to share. Nermal, the gullible dog, was standing on the table. "Jump into the pillow, Nermal," said Garfield. As he jumped, Garfield pulled the pillow out, and Nermal fell on the floor. "Splat!" Nermal said, "You did that on purpose!" Garfield replied, "I do everything on purpose!" Doing everything on purpose also applies to building relationships.

Canevello and Crocker (2010) studied 180 college roommate dyads in which one person in the dyad had the specific goal of creating a high-quality relationship with the roommate. They did two studies, one lasting a semester with 115 roommate dyads and the other lasting for three weeks with 65 roommate dyads. By one person having that goal, the relationships were extremely responsive and of high quality. According to the researchers,

> Our findings suggest that people's interpersonal goals (to either support others or construct and maintain desired images of the self) can initiate or inhibit responsiveness and its projection and reciprocation in relationships, which predicts relationship quality and reinforces interpersonal goals for both relationship partners. In light of these data, we suggest that people not only can create the types of relationships that they want—those characterized by high responsiveness, and consequently, higher quality— but can also create responsive, high-quality relationships for others. (p. 104)

We can consciously focus on building strong relationships with every person with whom we interact. According to Maya Angelou, "People will not remember what you said; however, they will always remember how you made them feel." In the morning and throughout the day, we can ask ourselves key questions such as,

"How can I help each person with whom I interact today to feel affirmed and uplifted?"

"How can I build a lasting relationship with everyone with whom I speak today?"

"How can I build up each person with whom I speak today?"

"How can I help each person have new insights today?"

"How can I truly listen to each person today?"

"How can I be a blessing to each person I meet today?"

"How can I talk with people today with the intention of building a lasting relationship?"

Presuming Positive Intentions and Avoiding Labels

Part of building strong relationships involves presuming positive intentions and avoid using labels. People will not always do what we think they should do. People generally have positive intentions for doing what they do, even though we might not realize their positive intentions at the time.

Once I co-presented a Cognitive Coaching training with a colleague, Bruce Wellman. The participants were in a million-dollar grant that three of us had written and involved training over

three years. We had approximately 100 people in the room at round tables. It was around 10:00 in the morning. The teachers at one of the back tables were making a lot of noise. I told Bruce, "They are being rude (a label)." Bruce wisely said, "I avoid making a judgment until I have brainstormed at least 30 reasons that people are doing what they are doing." This goes along with presuming that people have positive intentions. He said, "Let's have some fun with it." Since they were doing an exercise, we brainstormed numerous reasons for the way they were acting, such as "a mouse ran under their table." Then he said, "Let's go back and talk with them." What was happening? One of the women in the training was pregnant with her first baby and needed to go to the hospital that day to give birth. She had been so committed to attending the training that she had come to the training rather than going to the hospital. The women at her table were timing her contractions so that she could stay as long as possible. What a lesson! Since then, I have resisted giving labels and presumed that people had positive intentions for doing what they were doing.

Remembering Past Conversations

Dr. Judith Arin-Krupp, who presented for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), taught me a valuable lesson about remembering past conversations. Every summer, ASCD would have a conference in Vail, Colorado, which was an hour and 20 minutes from my home. As a member of Colorado ASCD, I would go to Vail and volunteer to assist one of the speakers. I would make sure the speaker had what he/she needed, go to lunch with the speaker if that was what the speaker wanted to do, and serve as a hostess for the session.

For several years in a row, I introduced Dr. Arin-Krupp. Every time I saw her, she would remember our conversation from the previous summer and ask me about it. I could not believe that she cared enough to remember what I had said the previous summer when I could barely remember it.

Listening Deeply

We can listen deeply to what other people are saying in order to build strong relationships. I am a Cognitive Coaching trainer, and we teach people to listen below the surface to what others are saying and then to paraphrase and ask invitational questions to help expand or focus their thinking. I often ask people in training how many people they have in their life who truly listen to them. They respond, "Not many."

Kluger and Zaidel (2013) asked 238 employees from various organizations to rate their supervisor's skills in listening and leadership. They found that "constructive listening is the sole

predictor, and a strong one, of considerate leadership" (p. 80). According to the authors, "One can conclude with a high confidence that, at the very least, people who are perceived to be good listeners in a group or work setting are also likely to be perceived as having desirable leadership qualities" (p. 81).

Paraphrasing

We can offer paraphrases to people to show we understood what they said such as, "You are feeling X," "You are upset about Y," "You are considering two alternatives, A and B," and "You highly value C." Seehausen et al. (2014) conducted a study to determine the effects of cognitive paraphrasing as opposed to unempathetic responses. They invited 22 participants to talk about a situation in which they were experiencing social conflict. The researchers asked the participants 12 questions. After some of the responses to the questions, the researchers gave cognitive paraphrases in which they repeated back what the person had said without agreeing or disagreeing. For other responses, they gave unempathetic responses in which they indicated that they did not understand what the person was saying. The researchers used measures such as fMRI and skin conductance response. They found that the participants felt understood and felt better after they were paraphrased. In contrast, the participants did not feel understood and felt worse after hearing the unempathetic responses. They also found differences in the fMRI and skin conductance responses.

Sharing Feelings

Purkey and Siegel (2013) talked about the importance of sharing our feelings with others. We can also gain insights into ourselves by sharing with others. As previously discussed, Nguyen et al. (2022) conducted a study to determine whether a relationship existed between participants' perception of social support and their self-assessed well-being. They found that when people were interacting in in-person relationships, "self-disclosure and social safeness both indirectly influenced the relationship between perceived social support and well-being" (p. 1217). They suggested that "in-person relationships may allow people to improve their mental well-being by increasing their ability to self-disclose and feel socially safe" (p. 1217).

Spending Time Together

To build lasting relationships, we need to spend time together. We can go to lunch, breakfast, coffee, or dinner together. We can also intentionally celebrate happy events. We never know when the last time will be we are with someone.

The Power of Words

We can consciously choose the words we use with others to help them feel good. When we say words such as "downer," "stress," "negative," "put-downs," and "horrible," how might people feel? How might people feel when they hear words such as "fun," "excitement," "uplifting," "wonderful," "encouraging," and "positive?" We can choose words to help people feel uplifted and affirmed.

Using Positive Presuppositions

As we are talking, we can use words to imply that the person is self-directed, capable, and can accomplish anything he/she wants to accomplish. We can embed words into what we say that lift the person up. "As a highly skilled professional, what might be some of the strategies you have thought about to use in this situation?" "How will you feel after you have accomplished this?" "How might you be using the skills you are gaining in the days, weeks, months, and years to come?"

Encouraging People

When I was training to walk the Camino, I decided to climb a nearby 10,000 -foot mountain. A lot of people ride bicycles up that mountain. When I was about 1/3 of the way up, a woman went by me on a bike and yelled back, "See you at the top!" I laughed and said somewhat sarcastically, "Right! Maybe, maybe not!" She yelled back, "You will make it! I bet money on it!" Often on that hike, I was tempted to give up and turn back. It was a steep climb; however, I kept her words in my mind. "You will make it! I bet money on it!" When I was almost to the top, I saw her coming down. She said, "I told you that you would make it!" I told her how much her words of encouragement had meant to me, and I made it to the top!

Tell People How Much You Appreciate Them and Give Them Specific Reasons

Debra Coffey, the Chair of the IE Board of Trustees, is a master at this. She tells us how much she appreciates us on the Board and gives specific instances of how we assisted.

In addition to telling people in our lives how much we appreciate them; we can search out people from the past and let them know how much we appreciated their influence in our lives. I love learning to speak other languages as a result of my high school French teacher, Marvin Moody. After a lengthy search, I found him at Indiana University. When my husband was attending

a conference in Indianapolis, Indiana, I went with him and drove to Bloomington, Indiana to take Mr. Moody to lunch at a French restaurant. I told him how much his teaching had meant to me.

Recently, a student whom I had spent a great deal of time helping with her writing several terms ago sent me glowing feedback that she had received on her writing from a faculty whose course she was currently taking. She said she could only have received that positive feedback because of the time I had spent helping her with her writing. I cherish her letter.

Remembering Important Dates

I am trained to do life coaching as well as to coach people who are grieving or dying. In that training, I learned the importance of remembering anniversaries such as when people pass away, as well as people's birthdays and anniversaries. I know how much I appreciate it when people remember the date when my husband passed away five years ago and send me a text or call on that day. I keep a list and write new dates as I learn about them. I subscribe to Jacquie Lawson cards for $35 a year. Once or twice a month, I go through my list, select greeting cards, and write messages to go out on a particular day. It seems to mean a lot to my friends that I would remember their special days. We can also send cards when people are ill. If they are out for a long time, we can send a card to welcome them back.

What ideas might you like to start doing or continue doing? What additional ideas might you have for building strong relationships?

Building Strong Relationships with Students

It is also important for us to build strong relationships with students. We can use many of the ideas for adults with students. According to Purkey (2000), "Students . . . tend to see themselves as the teacher sees them. A teacher cannot escape the fact that the self-talk of students is within his or her influence" (p. 57).

The Importance of Building Strong Relationships with Students

Numerous studies support the importance of building strong relationships with students. In a study of 18 high schools with 2,079 students, when students had more positive relationships with teachers, they were more engaged in learning (i.e., academic participation, enjoyment, and aspirations) (Martin & Collie, 2019)

In a systematic review of literature that included 46 published studies, 13 of which were longitudinal, on the relationships between the relationships between teachers and students and the degree to which students were engaged in learning, higher levels of student engagement "(i.e.,

psychological engagement, academic grades, school attendance, disruptive behaviors, suspension, and dropout)" were related to high quality teacher-student relationships (Quin, 2017, p. 345).

Relationships work both ways. Split et al. (2011) reviewed literature and suggested that "teachers have a basic need for relatedness with the students in their class" (p. 467). Relationships with students can impact teachers' self-esteem and wellbeing because they impact teachers' need to relate well with students. Furthermore, when students misbehave, it impacts teachers' need to have positive relationships with students.

In 1955, 698 infants in Kauai, Hawaii started participating in a 30-year study to determine how they fared throughout their lives in spite of conditions in their childhood. Werner (1989) focused on "high risk" children who, in spite of experiencing many difficulties growing up such as parents who were alcoholics and suffered from mental disturbances, poverty, and other situations, became healthy and productive adults with good relationships with others. What made the difference? Werner found that "The resilient children in the study had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally, regardless of temperamental idiosyncrasies or physical or mental handicaps" (p. 111). Werner went on to say that "All children can be helped to become more resilient if adults in their lives encourage their independence, teach them appropriate communication and self-help skills and model as well as reward acts of helpfulness and caring" (p. 111).

It is also important for educators to truly like their students and believe that they can achieve. Babad et al. (1991) conducted a study with 151 judges, including 4th grade students, 7th grade students, 10th grade students, teachers in training, and experienced elementary teachers. The researchers showed videotapes of a teacher talking about a student for whom she had high expectations and a student for whom she had low expectations. Then, they showed videotapes of the teacher talking with the student who was off camera for whom she had high expectations and the student for whom she had low expectations. The clips lasted 10 seconds. Some clips included only the audio, others included only the video, and others included both audio and video. The judges rated whether the teacher felt that the student was an excellent student or a weak student, and they determined whether the teacher liked or did not like the student. All of the judges were able to accurately assess how the teacher felt about the student in much less than 10 seconds. According to Purkey (2000), "Positive teacher self-talk about students involves viewing students as able, valuable, and responsible" (p. 59).

It is also important to help students to build relationships with each other. Dr. Isidro Rubi at the University of Colorado at Boulder was in charge of the Minority Freshman Engineering program. His program had a high level of dropout in the Freshman year. He increased the retention rate to approximately 80% by doing one thing. When a student would go to a faculty member for advice, the faculty member would say, "_____ (name of another student) has been working on that and might be able to provide you with assistance/advice (or whatever)." Of course, faculty would share with permission and seek to maintain confidences. By networking students with each other and enabling them to form relationships with each other, he was able to help students stay in the program because they were connected to each other.

Strategies for Building Strong Relationships with Students

Some of the ideas below might be helpful in building strong relationships with students. What could be some additional ideas that come to mind from reading this list?

- Getting to know what is important to students and talking with them about those topics

- Honoring students on their birthdays

- Expressing unconditional positive regard for students

- Avoiding saying "I" and "you." Instead, say, "we," "us," and "our." This will help students to feel like they are members of a group.

- Spending time at the beginning of the class asking students about things that are important to them…

- Teaching students to focus on growth mindset rather than fixed mindset through words and questions…

- Inviting students to own their successes: "Bet you feel good about that."

- Inviting students to attribute their success to working hard: "Tell me why you were successful." "I worked hard."

- Surprising the students with a snack or a movie from time to time

- Keeping up-to-date on what is important to students (i.e., sports teams, athletic activities, etc.)

- Pointing out specific tasks that students do well

- Calling parents to tell them things their students did well

- Passing on compliments to students that other people made about them ("Someone said . . . .")

- Using students' names when talking with them

- Saying, "You are the type of student who . . . ."

- Holding high expectations for students: "You can definitely do this."

- Giving students positive identities: "You are a mathematician, a fast reader, a good student, a good friend, etc."

- Truly listening to what students are saying

- Paraphrasing what students said. Use "you" rather than "I." You are feeling sad." You are considering two alternatives." You would like to do X." "You greatly value . . . ."

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to share some of the many studies that have been done on the importance of building strong relationships with adults and students. Some of the many ideas for building those relationships were also shared. What might you do as a result of reading this article?

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