

Relational Education

What It Is, What It Does

Editor's Introduction: About a year ago, Emanuel Pariser, a member of our editorial board, and Mary Leue, our Editor Emerita, began discussing the idea of our publishing a cluster of articles on the concept of "relational education." The concept, in its various manifestations, is central to the work of most, if not all, good-faith educators, whether or not they use or are familiar with the term "relational education." To help showcase this approach to teaching and learning—an approach that focuses on honoring the relational dynamics in the

student-teacher partnership—we present, below, three articles on relational education, written by three veteran teachers of this practice. We invite you, our readers, to send us your own stories involving relational education—whether or not you yourself use this term, and whether or not your stories have to do with school experiences per se. Like relations themselves, relational educational experiences are many and varied. We'd like to hear about yours.

An Open Letter to An Educator

by Emanuel Pariser

12/12/00

Dear Educator,

I am writing you as a teacher/counselor who has worked with students for the past 27 years. The Community School in Camden, Maine, founded in 1973, is an "alternative" high school that only accepts students who have left conventional schools and have chosen to come and learn with us. We now run three programs - Residential, Passages, and Outreach. The Residential program accepts eight students twice a year for a five and a half month term during which they can complete high school regardless of prior academic performance. The Outreach program serves graduates, their families, and students who dropped out of the residential program, as well as teacher/interns. Begun in 1994, Passages, is the nation's only home-based "Walkabout" program for 26 teen parents, bringing high school to their homes.

Our students at the CsSchool (as we refer to it), despite all they have experienced, haven't given in to cynicism, or rage or despair. At the Community School they have found a place where they have chosen to be, where they fit, and where they can achieve their goal of completing high school. After many students and many years since we began, we have come to call the focus of our work "Relational Education."

What is Relational Education?

To practice "Relational Education," a school or learning community puts a primary emphasis on creating an environment where all members of the community develop healthy, reciprocal relationships. These relationships strive to be authentic, and to be embedded with trust, intimacy, curiosi-

ty, and nurturance. We have identified some of the core elements of relationally focused programs: Creating a sense of trust, paying respectful attention, developing strong advisor/advisee relationships, creating a sense of belonging, allowing for informal time between all members of the community, working to develop the co-creation of knowledge, and creating student centered curricula. Although this is not an exhaustive list, it is a fairly good start. In any event, the guiding principle behind this practice is that if one honors the heart, the mind will follow.

Why Do We Need Relational Education?

We are all human beings with the same fundamental needs to be engaged in meaningful activity, to be connected to others we respect, to be learning about who we are, to be cherished, and to cherish others. I will let Ron Miller, author and educator, describe the importance of this in the following quote from the May 1999 conference on Relational Education we held in Camden, Maine:

"What has always struck me about the Community School is that it is doing education the way human beings should be learning. It brings us back to what education really should be. We are told in the national media that the tragedy of Columbine High School is a wake-up call but there is not much agreement about what it is we are supposed to wake up to. Is it that we need more metal detectors or should we be censoring videos or that there is evil in the world that we forgot about. And I believe that what we are being asked to wake up to is that we have forgotten what it means to be a human being. For many thousands of years we have evolved into creatures who learn through community, through partic-

Emanuel Pariser co-founded and co-directs the Community School with Dora Lievow. Emanuel has been writing and thinking about Relational Education since 1973 when the CsSchool was started. The Community School is a learning community for nontraditional students and unconventional teachers.

icipation in things that matter to the people around us and in the last 100 or 200 years we have developed a culture that is technocratic and mechanical and reductionistic and we have lost the human connection between the learner and the community, between the learner and the natural world.”¹

At the turn of the twentieth century we live in a social flux that has never been more fragmented. Since the 1960s the nuclear family has been changing dramatically. More than 50% of children in schools today have experienced the divorce of their parents. A large percentage of students have always lived with a single parent. Many students now live in blended or mixed families, where each member of the family can have a different last name, and no two children may have the same biological parents. The extended family has also weakened: In 1900, 96% of us lived in walking distance of a relative; in 1999, 4% of us do. There are few aunts, uncles or grandparents to fill in when relationships at home get strained or stop working.

“yeah I have attention deficit, I never got enough attention when I was growing up, I crave it now!”

For many teenagers, informal time with adults is almost non-existent – in school they are in classes only with age mates and teachers have little time for informal, personal interactions. For students undergoing cataclysmic personal changes, the relevance of the curriculum to their lives takes on a heightened importance. They need an anchor; something “to grasp”, to hold on to, in Jeanne Bamberger’s words. Any curriculum that does not engage them, that does not allow for the adults present to truly pay attention to them will be resisted and rejected. Curriculum must be connected to their world in order to be worth studying and this study must include both the tremendous suffering they are encountering and the interests and passions they have developed.²

We need to look at how education can work for the majority of students who, unsettled from a home life in flux, without serious responsibilities in any of their living environments (school, home, community), without real connections to powerful, fulfilled adults, are drifting through life under a barrage of “identity creating” advertising that tells them that to be “real” is to own a fancy car and wear clothes with the

right names on them; to be known is to be seen on T.V., and to be happy is to have a lot of money and products. Relational education is an antithetical challenge to all of this.

Let’s begin, then, with some of the basic elements of a relationally focused education.

Core Elements of Relational Education

Trust

How does one build a sense of trust and intimacy within a learning community? In a relationship between adult and adolescent, student and teacher?

Due to the betrayals and dysfunctions that many Cscool students have experienced they have good cause to be distrustful of adults. They have good cause to expect that the future will bring nothing worth working for because “things never work out.” So, how do we build trusting relationships at the Community School? Key program elements that develop trust at the Cscool are: Choice - students have chosen to come to us of their own free will, they have

applied to the School, gone through an extensive interview process, and have had the courage to continue their education despite being shamed for being pregnant or having a baby; Sensible structure - day to day life in residence at the Cscool makes sense - students work at jobs in the community during the day, are responsible for daily household chores, and study at night; for Passages students who get taught at home, day to day life is a constant challenge, but it makes sense for them to learn in an environment in which they can be close to their children. Finally, paying attention to who our students are is a critical aspect of building trust. Below, I will elaborate on how we do this:

Paying Respectful Attention

In 1962 Paul Goodman wrote that “adolescents (in America) are spiritually abandoned. They are insulated by not being taken seriously...Disregarded by adults, they have in turn excluded adult guidance.”³ “Terry” (not her real name), a graduate of the Cscool, recently commented that as a teenager she often felt that her life had no meaning.



When she saw the world this way she wondered what she could possibly gain from positive efforts. Why not find pleasure wherever and whenever available? Fortunately, she also had a sense that finishing school was worth doing and that perhaps if she completed something she would find meaning in her life, and/or that her life had meaning.

As Terry reflected on her experience at the Community School, she said that it was at the school that she began to take herself seriously, because other people were paying attention and listening to her. For the first time she experienced adults who took her seriously, who wanted to know what she thought and felt, and who also expected her to manage a wide range of tasks and responsibilities. Her life began to have meaning to her because she saw that it had meaning to others.

Deborah Meier, who also spoke at the May conference on Relational Education, describes the importance of this kind of attention:

“One reason we need to keep our schools small and close and know our young people well is because it is only those of us who love them for who they are right now who can really protect their interest in who they could become tomorrow. This is enormously important in the culture we are currently in because decisions are being made about our kids that are increasingly removed from the people who cherish the children themselves for who they are right now. And I remember when I think about that, that it isn't only a need of children, it is a need of all of us as human beings to be in an environment where we are respected and the phrase that comes to mind is respectful affection or affectionate respect.”⁴

Advisor/Advisee Relationships

At the Community School we have an advisor-advisee system that brings students together with a teacher/counselor on a weekly basis for what we call a “one-to-one meeting”. In these meetings that last anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour, the teacher/counselor becomes active listener, coach, cheerleader, manager, and empathic audience. The student is given the space to share the most immediate issues in his/her life.

“... the guiding principle behind this practice is that if one honors the heart, the mind will follow.”

When a one-to-one pair works, the teacher/counselor focuses caring, respectful attention on the student, subtly encouraging the student to focus the same attention on herself. The student has a chance to get to know her teacher/counselor in a more complete way as well. Expectations of support and acceptance get built between the pair. A successful one-to-one process elegantly encourages students to open up to other members of the school community, as well as to themselves, by giving them a sense of themselves as persons who are worth paying attention to, and by giving them a successful experience trusting and being trusted by an adult.

Advisor/advisee relationships can be problematic. Relationships between one-to-ones can get too exclusive - the bond can become an alliance - a separation from the community instead of a bridge to it. The relationship may never really develop into a trusting resource for the student. Issues may arise that require a deeper level of counseling and therapy, and the advisor may feel overwhelmed by them. Or a relationship may not weather a “betrayal” of the developing



trust. In this instance, if our learning community is functioning well, relationships with other adults and peers will informally take the place of a non-functioning one-to-one.

The increasing national interest in mentoring relationships stems precisely from the identified need for every young person to be connected in a positive fashion to at least one adult. Advisorial systems have been successfully incorporated into public high schools - The Jefferson County Open School, in Evergreen, Colorado started by Arnie Langberg,⁵ has a very strong advisorial system (for an in depth discussion see Tom Gregory's book *Making High School Work*) and I am sure many other schools have found this an incredibly effective tool for building the trust needed to sustain a meaningful educational enterprise.

To become effective “one-to-ones”, teachers have to go beyond the blackboard, and past the field of multiple choice questions into the messy, entangled curriculum of the student's life. We have rarely been trained for this work by our schools of education or through professional development. In fact we may have been led to believe that this is what guidance counselors and social workers are for, and that we should not be getting “close” with students because we do not have sufficient “counseling” training! (This is wonderfully circular reasoning - the institution won't provide you with the training to do a job that it won't hire people to do, and that you can't do because you haven't had the training to do it.)

As with any skill some people are naturals and others find it a challenge. Not everyone has an empathic supportive presence conducive to helping others become more open - but this quality is not necessary for a one-to-one to work. Ultimately, and here is a leap of faith, it is the actual human encounter, the being together, the connection that can be or that can lead to transformative experiences for the one-to-one dyad. Formalizing a structured advisorial system in which student and teacher can really listen and speak creates a crucial foundation for the development of trusting relationships.

Brenda Wentworth, a 1979 Community School graduate, who is now a social worker writes of this experience: “Meanwhile back at the Community School some staff person was deciding to make me her social cause of the year, or so I thought. Yes, I was a bit jaded for such a young one. Anyway whatever the reason, she took to focusing her love on me. I didn't trust her, pushed her away with words and behaviors, but she wouldn't budge.

She just stayed in my face with that stupid smile on hers and her arms opened wide...at a distance of course, which is all I would allow. Under the gates of my resistance, she slith-

ered. I couldn't seem to defend myself from her insidious persistence. No judgments, no scorn, just gentleness and persistence.....

No matter what asinine behavior I exhibited, she always took the time to comfort me BEFORE asking "what had happened, why, and what could I do differently next time"...I found myself wanting to please her...to get her attention and win her approval.... She had succeeded where many others had failed; she loved me unconditionally, just because I was alive and in her mind deserved a chance. With that she began to crack my solid steel fortress of rage and despair."⁶

Twenty two years later Brenda clearly remembers the impact this relationship had on her. When schools do not make this kind of opportunity available they create situations such as those that Deborah Meier describes below:

"My son went to a large New York City high school. He realized there wasn't a single teacher who could write him a letter of reference. Not because he had a bad record in that school, it was because there wasn't a single adult in that school who knew him. As a result there was no particular reason for me to have any relationship with that high school because there was no one there I could have an alliance with because the odds were there was no one in that high school that knew my son well enough for me to go in and consult with.

So we have created schools in which not only young people are powerless but adults are powerless. More and more not only are young people not known by these adults, but these adults are not adults who could help them learn to be grownups. You can't learn to be a tennis player without having tennis players around you. You can't learn to play basketball without having basketball players around you. We have asked our young people to grow up into grownups in the absence of grownups, in the absence of people around who are powerful models of what it could be like to be a grownup, both school people and people in their communities. And, in fact, the most common thing that young people experience in school aside from teaching is grownups who will say to them 'well that is just the way it has to be'."⁷

"Attention Deficit", An Alternative Definition

As relational educators we understand that we can no longer sacrifice our students to the kind of inattention Meier speaks of. Doctors, psychologists and the pharmaceutical industrial complex have banded together to identify attention deficit as a chemically treatable biochemical disorder affecting thousands of children. Another definition for this disorder was given to me by a student of mine who once noted that, "yeah I have attention deficit, I never got enough attention when I was growing up, I crave it now!" Never



underestimate the profound power that paying attention individually to your students has for them, for your own practice as a teacher, and for the sense of community that it engenders in your school or program.

Developing a Sense of Belonging

With the rapid fragmentation of society and the changing structures of many of the institutions we used to belong to—i.e., neighborhoods, organized religions, families, political parties, work places—the basic human need to feel a sense of connection, or belonging has been increasingly harder to meet. Learning communities can create a sense of belonging for their students and faculty. Detailed below are some strategies that encourage the development of a sense of belonging: Student involvement in behavioral issues and upkeep of the physical plant, and providing time when all members of the community can meet informally.

Giving Students Responsibility

We need to give our students opportunities to take responsibility for structuring their own learning environments. Students need to have choices within the curriculum, choices that allow them to follow a train of thought that intrigues or disturbs them, opportunities to co-create the physical environment they learn in, and serious involvement in developing and enforcing the environment's "code" of conduct.

Responsibility for Behavior

In her interview for the book *Changing Lives: Voices From a School That Works*, Patty, a Cschool graduate talks about the interpersonal responsibility she learned at the

Cschool: "I had much more freedom at the School than I did at home. But learning that with freedom comes a certain responsibility, and what you do not only affects yourself but other people - that's the big thing I learned. It's okay to make choices. But how do you make those choices? What has carried through until now is the thing of including others in your choices. How is it going to affect other people - the people I love, the people I work with?"⁸

At the Community School we use a quasi-legal system in which the rule offender brings his/her misdeed to a panel made up of a current student, current faculty member, and "judge" (usually a Cschool graduate). This group decides whether or not to accept the misdeeders' or an alternate proposal, and the judge announces the verdict to the student. Other schools following the model established at Summerhill utilize a full school meeting that can be called at any time to deal with behavioral issues.

In his book, *Making it Up as We go Along: The Story of the Albany Free School*, Chris Mercogliano describes how this elementary school, started in the late 60's by free school pioneer Mary Leue, established a process called the council meeting:

"The mechanics of a council meeting, where many a future conflict is prevented and many a current one resolved, are as follows: Anybody can call a meeting at any time. By general agreement...when a meeting is called, we all drop what we are doing and go to the largest room on the first floor of the building where we sit in a large circle on the carpet. Three nominations are forwarded, and a chairperson is elected. It is the chair's responsibility to recognize speakers, keep the discussion on track, and maintain order....The general rule of thumb is that meetings are called only for urgent matters, and only after other alternatives have been exhausted...."⁹

Running the Physical Plant

When students run necessary school functions they feel needed, useful and engaged, all of which contribute to a sense of belonging. At the Community School, students do a lot of the daily work necessary for the upkeep of the building as well as cooking the major meal each night. They also work in the community, earning a portion of their room and board costs. Engaged students bring a much broader array of strengths to the educational enterprise than simply their current abilities to compute and read. They bring their whole selves. In addition, they learn how the school runs, and become "co-workers" with the faculty. Conventional schools ARE often impoverished environments for kinesthetic learners because these kinds of opportunities have not been made available to them.

What happens when schools and educators increase the number and kinds of opportunities available for students as a part of their day and this work is considered as important as the development of academic skills? Students who have found no success in school and have created the equation that school = learning = failure, will finally find themselves succeeding at something that the institution deems important. Valued success subtly works on the aforementioned equation, loosens the connections between learning and failure, and counteracts the sense that school has to be a place where one suffers and feels bad about oneself. Success breeds success, and hope. Students may once again be willing to risk effort in areas where they had previously failed once they have tasted the possibility of success. With the support of the interpersonal environment and the experi-

ence of their own successes - students' self-confidence grows, and their energies become more organized and focused.

Carol came to the Cschool unimpressed with her own intellectual abilities and talents. She wanted to be done with school, and get on with her life. However, she had no idea of what she would or could do for her next step into the "real world." After she interviewed for the position of teacher's aide at a local Montessori school and was subsequently offered the job, a light began to shine in her eyes. She became the only teacher in the program truly able to connect with a young hyperactive boy. By the end of the term she was a valued member of the Montessori school which offered her continued work. She also had become an incredible resource to the family of the young boy. Carol left the School having found her passion, and continues to this day working with and running programs for young children in pre-school and day-care settings.

Informal Time

In *High Schools As Communities* Gregory and Smith discuss the community building importance of informal time being available to student and teacher:

"A major problem for teachers or students in any school is finding time to talk informally to each other. When a school is structured to fill every minute of the day, it eliminates most of the possibilities for students and teachers to "just talk"...when the daily schedule of a school is relaxed, time for spontaneous discussions begins to appear. Some small high



schools have adopted a scheduling format where teachers and students both have large blocks of free time.... During "free" time, students have the opportunity to engage in conversations with teachers.... Both teachers and students, have the opportunity to really get to know each other as people."¹⁰

Time is of the essence in modern schooling. When students and teachers choose to affiliate with one another in their informal "free" time, we know we have taken a big step towards building the interpersonal fabric of our learning community.

Co-Creation of Knowledge and Resistance to Authority, Working With Your Students

Student mastery of basic cognitive skills such as reading, critical thinking, and computation is the central overt purpose of schooling. The system assumes that the mastery of these skills will "prepare" students for successful functioning

in the “real world,” where they will have to compete with others to get into college or training programs, and eventually hold a job and support themselves.

“Paying attention to your students as learners and human beings. Have them teach you how to best teach them.”

When students and families resist this one-dimensional, future-oriented, lock-step thinking - they challenge us to make the actual experience of school immediate, relevant, and engaging. And, as Cschool graduate Pat asked after being told by a visiting adult that “things will be different in the real world,” “If I’m not in the real world, then where am I? And why would they take me out of the real world and put me in school if school is supposed to prepare me for the real world?”

The learning we do in school should have intrinsic value to both teacher and student. In the relational model learning is founded on a reciprocal relationship between student and teacher. The student instructs how best s/he can be taught, how best she can learn, and what her primary interests are. At the Cschool, we try to get an oral history from each student covering his/her schooling that addresses traumatic and positive schooling experiences, learning preferences, anxieties, interests, strengths, and weaknesses.

The teacher/counselor’s function in this relationship is to bring their love of the subject matter, their ability to pay attention to the student’s learning process, and their desire to facilitate the student’s success. Teacher and student function as equals creating a dialogue out of which learning and new directions for research arise.

Speaking from her own experience, Cschool graduate Brenda Wentworth describes a common dynamic between teacher and student in a conventional school that stratifies teacher above student:

“So what about the traditional educational process, why didn’t it work for me? I say this, externalization of power... [T]he need to exert power over a person I believe is the nemesis of the traditional education process. When a student feels less than and the teacher feels more than there can be no real helpful educational exchange.....Anyway, there is a time in all of our lives when we discover that truth and reality are very relative concepts. It is at this time that we need the most guidance but it is too often at this time that many people perceive this to be the most threatening. When a student realizes that a teacher’s beliefs are just that, beliefs, the student often begins to challenge the teacher and here is where the traditional educational process often takes a major nose dive. Instead of perceiving this as a perfect educational juncture,

the teacher, fearing exposure, often perceives it as a personal attack and attempts to hide behind his or her armor of adult status. The student seeing through the teacher’s defensive maneuver steps up the intensity of his or her offensive tactics which often causes the teacher to impose punitive measures.

Students are often left feeling overwhelmed and confused asking themselves, “Isn’t this teacher supposed to be teaching me about life? Why am I being punished for asking questions?” After repeated encounters like the ones above, students often retreat into despair. Sometimes this despair turns into depression, sometimes rage. Behavioral implications become quite obvious and it is sad to say we don’t have to look too far for concrete examples of what despair and rage can actually do in an adolescent.”¹¹

A Glance at Curriculum, Don’t be Mesmerized by the Mandates

In high school, the curriculum becomes a holy thing, and credits are critical. By forcing knowledge of no intrinsic interest upon students, conventional schooling may create many of the learning disabilities that it then tries to remediate. We are doing harm when we forget the person in our determination to focus on the subject matter. Our high school students are entering a period of their lives that is tumultuous and they are extremely vulnerable physically, emotionally, and socially. In secondary education we lose sight of the person too often. It is a primary goal of relational education to reverse this trend.

If you are teaching in a conventional setting, do not be hypnotized by mandated curricula. They are usually a loose amalgam of information amassed by someone in a text book company, a legislatively mandated state committee, a “curriculum development office” at the state level, or by a college professor somewhere who has determined what “one needs to know” about a particular subject at a particular grade level. The principle underlying this process assumes that some distant expert knows what your students should know and therefore what you should teach them. It also assumes that you don’t have the time or knowledge to figure out an appropriate curriculum.

For relational educators, this assumption raises questions: How does this expert know what our students need to know if s/he doesn’t know my students personally? Can a body of knowledge stand outside of our lives - and be relevant to all of us simultaneously? Why can’t we have the time to fashion an authentic curriculum relevant to both our students’ and our own interests?

Arnie Langberg proposes a helpful definition of how to focus curriculum so that it is relevant. He proposes that there are four kinds of experiences students encounter in and out of school—in school planned experiences which are what most teachers and students think of as curriculum, in school unplanned experiences, out of school planned experiences—trips/seminars with family, groups etc., and out of school unplanned experiences. The most powerful experiences for students are usually the unplanned out of school and in school experiences because they involve their social life and often the most traumatic events that they encounter. Langberg suggests that teachers and schools consider all four of these kinds of experiences as “the curriculum” because they deal with the heart of the student’s experience as an individual.

In co-designing the curricula with your students, ask yourself the following kinds of guiding questions: Where are the



most important, life shaping experiences going on for teenagers and adults? How can our curricula both reflect and respond to the needs of our students? How can we help our students to reclaim those parts of themselves that yet remain at the core of their being active, engaged, and curious learners? If you do not have the time to develop these curricula outcomes, then how can you help your students to achieve them?

How the Relational Approach Leads to Success

As a relational educator, you will need to have faith that your support of students' emotional and intellectual functioning and your encouragement of their interests and aptitudes will do far more to prepare them for success than will your and their simply getting "through" the required curriculum. If you have helped your students to find their confidence and autonomy as learners when they need to know something they might have missed in your class, they will be able and willing to go back and pick it up when they see the need for doing so. The following story demonstrates this principle:

Martha came to the Cschool when she was 15; she graduated at 16. She was bright, rebellious, and nobody was going to tell her how to do anything! Despite her resistance she had chosen to come to the School because traditional school was completely boring and unsuccessful for her and she wanted to finish high school. For six years after she was graduated, Martha traveled across the country- holding part time jobs and returned home to Camden, Maine, to rest every few months. She got involved in working on the Schooner Boats that provide summer excursions for tourists in Camden and fell in love with the ocean and sailing. She decided that she wanted to become a captain of a small vessel.

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To get her license she had to apply to a maritime academy that told her that she needed more math to get into the program. What Martha remembered of math included some algebra, percents, and fractions, but many pieces were missing. Martha had eight weeks to cover algebra 1, 2, and trigonometry. She was panicked but determined. She arranged tutoring for herself, and an independent study course, and kept in touch with the Cschool's Outreach program that supports former students.

Martha worked six hours a day for most days of those eight weeks, and scored very highly in her course work. She had found her math sense, and pulled together three years of math in 40 days of intensive study. Although Martha had missed important segments of high school math, she was able to recoup them quickly and effectively when she had the necessary self-confidence and a specific goal in mind.

What are Essential Qualities of a Relational Educator?

Anyone who engages the principles below is working as a "Relational Educator." The outcomes of this approach for members of the learning community will be: A love of learning, an engagement with the social and natural world, and a positive sense of self. You are teaching relationally when you are:

1. Cherishing the children you work with for who they are right now, as Deborah Meier put it so well. There is no substitute for this kind of nurturing acceptance which is especially needed when students become teenagers and are moving headlong towards the unknowns of adulthood.
2. Being honest and self-reflective in your teaching practice. Let students know how their behaviors make you feel as a person - both the good and the bad. The courage you display in your honesty and self-reflection is one of the most fundamental gifts you can offer. Be real, it will help students feel real in turn.
3. Understanding that you are a co-worker, co-facilitator, co-creator of students' knowledge. Everything that they learn will be governed by how ready they are to learn, and your primary function is to create the environment that sponsors readiness, and then to be there with resources when the moment arrives.
4. Paying attention to your students as learners and human beings. Have them teach you how best to teach them.
5. Understanding that students need informal time with you in order to discover who you are as a person, and to be able to identify with you on a deeper level than your role as teacher may permit. Be aware that authentic conversation is not a "waste of time" or a sidetrack from the important curriculum. It is absolutely critical in laying the foundation of your relationship with students, it is itself a major component of the curriculum.
6. Filling your teaching with choices so that students feel ownership of what they are studying.
7. Including your students' lives as part of the curriculum.
8. Being respectful of your students, and in Brenda Wentworth's words, "open to their 'truth' while holding your own center."
9. Paying close attention to your reactions to your students; do not be afraid of negative emotions!
10. Never putting in more than 50% of the effort on a project with them otherwise you will become a barrier to their autonomy rather than a support.
11. Taking Care of Yourself. Be aware that relational education is transformative work, and as such it is risky. If you are doing your job properly you will come into contact with unexamined aspects of yourself that you have avoided or ignored until a student illuminates them for you by his/her behavior or response to you. Getting in touch with and working with your own emotional baggage is the reciprocal product of helping your students to confront their behaviors.

Outcomes of a Relationally Based Approach, 26 Years at the Community School

If you teach in a conventional situation you probably will have to defend the time needed to follow this approach. The following are a few arguments that you might find helpful in your attempts to convince your colleagues and supervisors

that adopting this perspective is ultimately in the best interests of the students, teachers, and school as a whole.

First, think of the amount of time lost in the classroom to “behavior management” - at an extreme how many tens of thousands of hours of schooling were lost to the students at Columbine High? If schools made Relational Education a primary focus of their efforts, it would take less time than is now being expended on the “management” of students who are not engaged and would significantly lower the chances of another Columbine because there could be no unattached students in any effective relationally based school.

Second, our experience at the Cschool with some of the most unsuccessful students, has been so positive once they have recovered their sense of confidence and hope. They have found goals worth working for and their limited time working on academics at the Cschool did not seem to impede them, but rather set the stage for a re-opening to learning in general.

Over 350 students have arrived at the Cschool since 1973. To start with they were often demoralized, angry, and resistant. Yet they were also hopeful and willing to give this new form of schooling a chance. 80% of these students have completed high school; 40% have gone on to post-secondary programs; 75% who had previously been incarcerated have not recidivated; 70% have been in contact after leaving the program (with well over 600 contacts from former students each year); and many have created successful families.

In 1995, the University Press of America published a book by Jane Day about the Community School called *Changing Lives: Voices from a School that Works*, that documents stories of students who have been graduated from the Cschool since 1973. Since in this article I have been able to mention only a few of these stories, I would like to direct your attention to this superb book, in which you will find an inspiring collection of individual student outcomes – fashioned and told one life at a time.

Conclusion

Many of us are teachers because we ourselves love to learn, because we want to help our students find a love of learning for themselves, and because we want to do something useful and productive with our working lives. We find ourselves working more and more with children wounded by our culture, who are neglected, scapegoated, disenfranchised.

To get intellectual skills and “habits of mind” these students need reciprocal relationships with caring, empowered adults. When they feel connected, when they have a sense of belonging and a revived confidence in themselves, their cognitive abilities can bloom. The relational focus sets the stage for students to want to think, to want to create, to want to succeed at learning new things. They have re-found reasons to be connected to their own futures and to the future of the world around them.

I hope that writing this letter to you has supported your best impulses as a person and a teacher. I hope that you can go back into your school or learning community and carve out time for students who need it. I hope that you can use the material in this essay to validate your attempts to change things on whatever level is possible, but most importantly at

the level of your work with individual students. Take care of yourself and give me a call if I can help.

Good Luck

I have enclosed below a reading list and email addresses of books and people who are resources on many aspects of relational education.

Notes

- ¹ Miller, Ron. Addressing the May 8 Conference on Relational Education, Camden, Maine, May 1999.
- ² Ibid, 1.
- ³ Goodman, Paul. *Compulsory Miseducation*, New York: Vintage, 1962, p.74.
- ⁴ Meier, Deborah. Addressing the May 8 Conference on Relational Education, Camden, Maine, May 1999.
- ⁵ Formerly with the highly successful Mountain Open High School, in Jefferson County, Colorado, Dr. Arnie Langberg has been a leader in developing educational alternatives in public schools for many years, helping innovative educators share their ideas and form national econtacts, particularly those working in alternative settings for nontraditional learners in the public schools.
- ⁶ Wentworth, Brenda. Addressing the May 8 Conference on Relational Education, Camden, Maine, May 1999.
- ⁷ Ibid, 5.
- ⁸ Day, Jane. *Changing Lives: Voices from a School that Works*, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994.
- ⁹ Mercogliano, Chris. *Making It Up As We go Along: The Story of the Albany Free School*, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1998, p.30.
- ¹⁰ Gregory, Thomas B. and Smith, Gerald R. *High Schools as Communities: The Small School Reconsidered*, Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1983, p.45.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 6.

Other Important Books

- Gibbons, Maurice. *The Walkabout Papers*, Vancouver: EduServ Inc., 1990.
- Gregory, Thomas B. *Making High School Work: Lessons from the Open School*, New York: Teacher's College Press, 1993.
- Henry, Jules. *Culture Against Man*, New York: Random House, 1977.
- Holt, John. *How Children Fail*, New York: Dell, 1964, p.12.
- Meier, Deborah. *The Power Of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- Postman, Neil and Weingartner, Charles. *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, New York: Delacorte Press, 1979.

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