Redefining Success Through Relationships

A philosophy focused on the needs of the whole child has benefited a unique school-university partnership.

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No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship. —James Comer

It was late August 2003, the week before school would start, when Sally arrived at Boyd Elementary School. Her family had moved several times in the past few years, and she had been home-schooled—a term that, in some cases, means “received little schooling at home.” Sally’s mother was concerned about her daughter’s success in the third grade, so she asked the school to test Sally’s ability levels. Although tests of her reading and math skills showed Sally to be significantly behind her chronological peers, it was agreed that she should try third grade with differentiated instruction. Three years later, Sally completed fifth grade with state test scores showing her to be proficient or better in both mathematics and communications arts. Sally glowed when told that her math test scores were some of the highest in the school.

At Boyd Elementary School in Springfield, Missouri, this scenario has been repeated again and again during the past eight years—at-risk students finding the joy of success, thanks to an innovative partnership with Drury University and the Yale University School Development Program.

In 1997, the data showed Boyd Elementary to be a typical at-risk Title I school. Approximately two-thirds of students taking the state tests scored below the 40th percentile, teacher turnover was high, behavior incidents were frequent, and morale was low. The teachers averaged less than six years of experience and about 80 percent of the staff had no post-baccalaureate degrees. Free and reduced-price lunch rates were typically in the 85 percent range and mobility rates were also very high.

It was at this time that an existing informal partnership between Boyd Elementary and nearby Drury University was expanded, using the framework of Yale University’s Comer School Development Program. The Comer program added a whole-child focus based on the research of the Yale School of Medicine’s Child Study Center. Put simply, it created a lens of interacting relationships through which to understand and attempt to address individual child needs.

Success for participants in the Drury University/Boyd Elementary partnership is founded on building the relationships between a powerful vision, common philosophy and language, and ongoing professional development. This foundation generates the necessity of nurturing the whole community, the whole university, the whole school, the whole curriculum, and the whole teacher to meet the needs of the whole child.

Today, the data picture for Boyd Elementary is remarkably different. Although the same rates of poverty and mobility persist in the student population, every other indicator has improved. For example, the state communication arts test results for 2005 showed almost 40 percent of the tested students in the proficient or advanced categories, and the state math tests indicate 50 percent of the students scoring in those categories. Teacher turnover has dropped, and more than 70 percent of certified staff hold master’s degrees—including all of the classroom teachers. The average years of experience for teachers has risen to more than 11 years, and student discipline rates have dropped dramatically.

The Comer Effect
James Comer, the founder of the School Development Program at Yale University, developed the Comer Model of School Reform as a means of developing the whole child. The program is
designed to focus on the social as well as the developmental aspect of schooling. Comer identified six developmental pathways that are critical for student achievement (Comer, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 2004):

- Social;
- Ethical;
- Psychological;
- Language;
- Physical; and
- Cognitive.

These developmental pathways form the base of the teacher education program at Drury University, where preservice teachers start with a strong background in child development. Later in the program, students use the Comer pathways to plan lessons for their practicum experiences with Boyd students. For example, a pathways-based language arts lesson is expanded to include social and physical aspects.

During the past few years the Boyd Elementary staff have participated in district professional learning communities training with Richard Dufour and Robert Eaker. A key concept from this training is the focus on what schools can do when students do not initially succeed. Intervention planning uses a pyramid structure, with progressively more intense interventions applying to smaller percentages of the student population farther up the pyramid. (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The whole-child focus of Boyd Elementary uses a broader pyramid than usual, focusing not only on academic interventions, but on needs across the child development spectrum (see box on next page).

Benefits for Boyd Elementary
Courtney Becker, a teacher at Boyd Elementary for the past 13 years, attributes the positive changes at the school to the power of the collaborative vision. She says, “The partnership gave power and a sense of connection to the staff and the families in the community.” Most importantly, students have responded to the school’s efforts through increased achievement, motivation, and positive behavior. According to Daniel Beach, chair of the School of Education and Child Development at Drury University: “The students and families deserve most of the credit. Had there been no impact in measurable forms of academic gains, I am not sure the school would be as highly regarded in the community. Every Title I school needs a university partnership; every university needs a Title I partner.”

Benefits for Drury University
Drury University students have a unique opportunity to work with students from Boyd Elementary. The experience begins in the introductory education class and continues through classes in teaching methods for reading, mathematics, and science. Drury also hosts evening practicum experiences for Boyd Elementary students in addition to nontraditional university students.

When students at Drury were asked to write about their experiences with the Boyd Elementary students, many of them mentioned the importance of having worked with them. One of the students reflected on her experience:

I had a wonderful little girl, and although she struggled with reading when she started the semester, I could see much improvement by the time of our last meeting together. Obviously, the improvement was not just because of our Tuesday night reading program, but this along with the work that her teacher did made a remarkable difference in this little girl’s reading. I have had an invaluable experience that I don’t think I would have gotten any other way except being in the classroom.

The partnership with Boyd Elementary has provided Drury University with a foundation of practical experience for preservice teachers and formed lasting relationships between students and teachers. As a result, students who complete the Drury University teacher education program are well prepared for the whole-child-centered classroom.

**Signs of Success**
The latest neuroscience research provides hope for at-risk students and struggling learners by showing it is possible to enrich the brain and change the future for young students. Jensen (2006) has identified four ways to make a difference for at-risk learners:

- Hope;
- Head Start;
- Skill-building programs; and
- Changing the environment.

The Drury University/Boyd Elementary partnership endorses Jensen’s findings. The common philosophy and language of the program continue to change the environment for the better. Ongoing professional and community development build the skills and communication needed to make steady progress. Drury University undergraduate students are involved in community projects and write grants to provide extra books and materials for Boyd Elementary students. Boyd Elementary teachers help teach classes at Drury University and provide a valuable exchange of ideas with their university colleagues.

Is the partnership’s success based on relationships between an elementary school and a university? Yes.

Is the partnership’s success based on the relationships between teachers and students? Yes.

Is the partnership’s success based on relationships between schools and communities? Yes.

The Comer approach is a philosophy, not a proscriptive program. The best thing about it is that no one tells you what to
do. The worst thing about it is that no one tells you what to do. In the end, it really is all about relationships.

References


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On the Same Page
Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What does it mean to focus on education the whole child?
2. What is our school’s stance on the whole child?
3. How can we develop each student’s social, ethical, psychological, language, physical, and cognitive pathways for student achievement?
4. What types of partnerships will help our school develop the whole child?

A Pyramid of Pathways

**Physical pathway.** Many Boyd Elementary students were going without adequate nutrition on the weekends. This need led to the adoption of a free weekly take-home food backpack program called Food for Thought. Selected students return the empty backpacks on Monday, and they are refilled for the next week. Food is donated by a local charitable organization.

**Social pathway.** The high mobility of some students disconnects them from social development with their peers. To address this need, Boyd Elementary teachers implement a daily class meeting and team-building process. This allows highly mobile students to connect with peers and feel welcome.

**Psychological pathway.** The Comer pathways proved to be applicable to the Boyd Elementary staff as well as the students. Teachers of the month are recognized and celebrated through parent feedback on monthly newsletters and peer nominations. Selected teachers receive a free dinner from the school PTA.

**Cognitive pathway.** Boyd Elementary staff and selected Drury University students and faculty are involved in ongoing professional development through Yale University. Annual conferences at Yale improve their ability to meet student developmental needs, and visitors from Yale also visit Boyd Elementary and Drury University regularly to continue training and collaboration.

**Multiple pathways.** The Drury University Reading Clinic, team-taught by Boyd Elementary classroom teachers and Drury University professors, is an excellent example of the pathways in action. On Tuesday evenings, a district school bus travels through the community and transports students to and from Drury University for one hour (physical pathway). When the students arrive, a university student greets them (social pathway). Then the elementary students are fed a light snack (physical pathway). Students are immersed in one-on-one literacy activities with a Drury University student (cognitive and language pathways), and university students gain powerful experiences and long-term relationships with elementary students (psychological pathway).