Inclusion Tools for After School Professionals

SPECIAL NEEDS INCLUSION PROJECT, SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES
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SNIPPET #8: BUILDING COMMUNITY BUILDS INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

When a child who is noticeably different is singled out by his peers and is being hassled, our natural response is to explain the child's situation - presumably so the students will have more empathy and understanding for one another. The child may have a disability, but more often than not, he is just the topic of the other children's interest or attention. We have found that **a conversation with children about why a particular student seems "different" is not enough to create an inclusive environment.** Instead, the best outcomes are achieved when programs are committed to building a community where individual's strengths are highlighted and celebrated, and accommodations are available for all so that every child, with and without a disability, can be welcomed and included.

Why is building community in our program important?

Research has shown that positive relationships with adults promotes healthy development for children and youth. When young people feel valued they thrive, at home, in the community and academically. Through collaboration and communication, Out of School Time (OST) program staff can be the catalyst for positive relationships for a young person. As adults we can provide leadership, knowledge, an open ear and resources for children and youth. According to the Search Institute, **"relationships with adults in school and community settings add valuable sources of protection from risk."** Children from K-5th grade are learning how to navigate their school environment, pushing boundaries and expectations. The best way to empower and support our children in their growth and development is by modeling appropriate relationships. Youth in grades 6 through 12 who have support systems in either the school, at home, or in the community are less likely to be in violent relationships, abuse drugs and or alcohol, and participate in risky sexual activity. "In a small (N=100) sample of racially/ ethnically diverse adolescents from low income families, it was found that **a positive school climate contributed to higher levels of self-esteem 2 years later, over and above the effects of family and friend support."** Fostering healthy relationships with children and youth does not take much time but it does require effort. The effort is worth it: the outcomes are substantial for all parties involved.

What is My Role in Building a Program Community?

Program directors and site coordinators are often the liaison between the school and the OST staff. OST staff are then the connection between the students, their families and the program. Each staff member plays a key role so it is important that every staff member knows the philosophy of the program and how they contribute to that philosophy. Program staff who understand the importance of community building are more likely to work toward developing a strong and supportive sense of community within the out-of-school time program. These are some ways you can begin to build community within your program:

- Set up regular team meetings to **specifically discuss community building** in your program (not just the regular logistical issues!) In these meetings discuss the common vision of the program, program philosophy, activities that have been used and worked, or ways to modify curriculum to best serve the needs of the youth. A subsequent issue of this SNIP newsletter will delve into ways to use staff meetings to building inclusive communities.

- Talk to the school's principal to **see what curriculum is already being used to help build community**. San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) currently recommends that Caring School Communities be used in schools. Other sites may be using different curriculums such as TRIBES or Second Step. It is important for OST staff to become familiar with practices already being used so that staff can use language and refer to concepts that children and youth are already familiar with. This promotes cohesiveness and continuity between the school day and OST.

- **Collaborate with school day teachers.** Respectful collaboration and communication between the programs provides continuity for children and models respectful cooperation.

How do I build a welcoming and inclusive program community?

A big part of building a community is making sure that everyone in the community feels valued, heard, safe, and able to participate. The book, 'Open Minds to Equality', describes "a trusting classroom community as the foundation for both opening minds to equality and for strong academic learning." Developing this can be a process in itself, so consistency and patience is key. Start by acknowledging that **each person has differences which are normal.** Believe that everyone benefits from different tools to encourage participation in the community. Becoming familiar with what empowers and enables each child, what impedes them, and how OST teachers can support all children is a crucial part of building a welcoming and inclusive program community. Strategies that help staff develop welcoming and inclusive classrooms include:

- Consulting with other staff members about children's strengths as well as developing strategies to maximize those strengths.

- Asking the question "what is the meaning behind an action?" rather than, "why?" can be a helpful way to reflect on the child's development and behavior.

- Encouraging dialogue with children, youth and families on what can help support them to be more successful.

- Encouraging staff and students to get to know each other as individuals. Select and structure activities to help children feel safe; for example, start sharing in pairs and move to small groups before encouraging children to participate in large group activities.

- Setting up community norms that are respectful to all points of view, consistent with the school day policies, and developmentally appropriate.

- Being open to non-conventional interventions. At times, we may need to provide more for one student than another. Individualization ensures inclusion and equality for all students.

What activities can I introduce to start building a program community?

Start building community right from the beginning of the year. When people are getting to know each other, use icebreaker- type activities to help students feel more relaxed and have fun. **Introducing these games at the beginning of the year** will allow children to become acquainted with each other and start developing positive and respectful relationships early.

Some activities taken from Open Minds to Equality that you can try are:

- **Name Game**: Children introduce themselves and say something they are good at or like to do. As they go around the circle, each person repeats the names and skills of the 3-5 people before them.

- **People Scavenger Hunt**: instead of searching for items, create a list of strengths, skills and interests that children need to identity amongst their peers, for example: Who is someone who likes to cook? Who has a good memory?

- **Listening-Checking:** Choose a discussion topic that could be controversial or something that students are likely to have an opinion about (e.g. should students receive detention for incomplete homework? Is it better to be a boy or a girl?) Ask a student to express their opinion; the next student needs to accurately rephrase the previous student's statement before making their own.

Be sure to dedicate time and space in your curriculum throughout the year for building community. There are many games used with children and youth can also be tools to help in establishing relationships and building community. **Choose co-operative games** that enable everyone to participate. Spending time together helps to foster community and understanding of one another.

Continuous dialogue between staff and with students on the topic of program community will ensure that growth within the staff, children, and youth continues. With a strong community of respect as a foundation, you can begin to discuss other topics in a safe and inclusive way.

Coming soon— Part 2 of this series: *Why Talk About Disability?*

Resources:

Fortunately with the internet resources are only a click away!

- Caring School Community Program: http://www.devstu.org/caring-school-community

- Tribes: www.tribes.com

- Second Step: http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/ssp/overview/

- Other icebreakers: Playworks has a free playbook which has icebreaker activities starting on page 39. www.playworks.org

References:

www.search-institute.org

Jeanne Gibbs. 2001. Tribes, A New Way of Learning and Being Together. Windsor, CA: Center Source Systems.

Nancy Schniedewind & Ellen Davidson. 1998. Open Minds to Equality. Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon.

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