

CHALK TALK: A Teacher's Voice: To be known, to tell stories

By ANDREA GRISWOLD

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I didn't realize the pig would be such a big hit. But, as each student passed the pink rubber toy to the next, and each squeezed the pig to make it snort, we all laughed.

This simple act of laughing together in our "circles" has become an important part of our eighth grade curriculum.

This year, the team of teachers I work with and I decided to do something different with our "Skillz" time. We had been using this weekly 25-minute period to teach cross-curricular academic skills. It wasn't a bad idea, but it was just piling more academics on academics without showing that it led to any gains.

Yes, teachers are supposed to teach students academic material. But, as any good teacher knows, before learning can happen, there needs to be a relationship. In fact, research shows that building relationships with students is one of the most important factors positively affecting students' academic achievement.

However, opportunities to forge relationships with students can be scarce. Teachers often have to rely on catching quick moments to talk with students in the hallways in between classes or in the minutes before school starts.

But a new approach to discipline in our school changed this situation. As we adopted a restorative justice approach to discipline, we learned about "circles" with students that are used to repair hurt relationships. This prompted us to consider using circles for pro-active relationship-building.

Understand, we are clear about our goals. We are not aiming to be friends or counselors to our students. We are aiming, however, to have our students feel known to us.

Students want to be known. They want to tell their stories — share their pride and pain and their daily ups and downs. They want us to know what's special about them and what's important to them.

And we teachers want this for our students because the more students feel known, the more they feel valued and comfortable at school, the better we can make meaningful connections between academics and their lives.

From the Daily Hampshire Gazette, Northampton, Mass. Used by permission.

We now have regular times where students sit in a circle with a teacher and talk. There are norms we follow, the most important of which is the use of a talking piece (hence the pink rubber pig). When you're holding the talking piece, you get to talk. When you're not, you get to listen.

In these circles, we ask different kinds of questions. Early on, they are low-stake — What's your favorite color? What animal would you be?

As trust builds, we ask deeper questions. We try to anticipate upcoming events that might be difficult for students and prepare related questions such as, "What might be stressful for you over the holidays?" "What do you do that helps you cope with stress?"

Students and teachers learn about each other and from each other. The child who hears that some people go for a walk or listen to music to cope with stress is learning valuable life skills.

Circle time (variations of which elementary teachers have used for decades) is new to us, but it's a practice we'll continue.

Sometimes it can get heavy — young people have always had challenges which can be significant. Sometimes, it's just a group of kids with an adult, laughing over the cuteness of a pink rubber pig that snorts when squeezed.

Either way, we're getting to know each other. Either way, we're making connections. And we have come to see this relationship building as a vital part of what we do with students every day.

Andrea Griswold is an eighth-grade ELA teacher at Mohawk Trail Regional School in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. She is a teacher-consultant with the Western Massachusetts Writing Project.