

Special Connections: Finding Out Student and Adult Perceptions

One of the most important things that can be done to support children in school, academically as well as socially, is to make sure that each and every child *perceives* that he or she has a real adult champion in the school. One of the best ways to find out if children do have that special kind of connection is to ask them in an anonymous way that allows them to admit that they do not have such an adult connection and be embarrassed by that admission. It is also important to ask adults in school ***if they believe they have special connections with any children: It must work both ways!*** The following exercises are intended to do just this. Children must be able to write at a sufficient level to complete the exercise and have the cognitive understanding and maturity to be able to understand what would count as a special connection with an adult. The following description can be restated in simpler terms for them, if it works better for younger children.

Description for Students:

A special connection with an adult would mean that you would feel *entirely* comfortable seeking out that adult to share information, concerns, worries, achievements, problems, and so on about matters that may be personal or about school. Adults in school are not generally viewed as being your “friend” in the same sense that your peers/friends are, but when you have a special connection with an adult, you would feel that such a person(s) would help you if necessary, keep your conversations confidential, if appropriate, be caring, concerned and compassionate and “be there for you.” You would be supported by such an adult(s) and never made to feel disrespected for making mistakes, sharing your emotions freely, or any other perceived vulnerabilities. In other words, you would feel completely safe and supported, emotionally and physically in this adult(s) presence, and would feel comfortable sharing “who you are” without compromise.

Student Directions:

Each student is given a 3 x 5” card. On this card, *without* putting their names on the cards, they are asked to indicate if there is/are any adult(s) ***in the school*** for whom the student has a “special connection” by writing the name(s) of any such adult(s) that satisfies the description of someone with whom they have a “special connection.” When the cards are collected, it is perfectly OK to turn in a blank card (or write “NO ONE”) if the student believes that he or she cannot think of anyone who honestly satisfies the description.

Description for Adults:

A special connection with one or more students would mean that you know these individuals to a greater degree than “just having them in class.” You might know their interests, family, and other things that might not be known of most children you deal with at school. This is the kind of student with whom you might think that in future years, you will not only remember him or her but expect to keep in touch with at some level as they get older. Identify/name any child(ren) that ***you believe*** would feel *entirely* comfortable seeking you out to share information, concerns, worries, achievements, problems, and so on about matters that may be personal and/or about school. When you have a special connection with any child(ren), you would feel that such a individual(s) would seek your help when necessary, and would believe you would keep conversations confidential (if legally possible), would see you as being caring, concerned and compassionate and these individual(s) would view you as “being there for them.” You would be viewed by any identified/named child(ren) as being supportive and you would never make them feel disrespected for making mistakes, sharing emotions freely, or any other perceived vulnerabilities. In other words, they would perceive that they would feel completely safe and supported, emotionally and physically in your presence, and would feel comfortable sharing “who they are” without compromise.

Adult Directions:

Each adult is given a 3 x 5" card. On this card, *without* putting their names on the card, they are asked to indicate if there are any children *in the school* for whom they have a "special connection" by writing the first and last name(s) of any such child(ren) that satisfy the description of a "special connection." When the cards are collected, it is perfectly OK to turn in a blank card (or write "NO ONE") if the adult believes that he or she cannot think of anyone who honestly satisfies the description. It is generally a good idea to limit the number of children that any adult is allowed to mention to approximately five. Many adults initially believe that they "connect with every child." It is analogous to identifying best friends; no one can have as many best friends as people they know!

Once the Information is Collected:

It is useful to do this exercise with children and adults in school at virtually the same time in the school year. It is always interesting to see how perceptions align (or not). Class lists for children in the entire school and a complete roster of all adults in the school building (include all support staff and hourly employees with whom children come into contact) need to be acquired. One master copy of these class and faculty/staff lists need to be printed in a font size that is approximately 16 – 18 points. "Sticky Dots" need to be placed next to any name that is written on any card. In other words, all of the student 3 x 5" names need to be collated by placing one dot next to the mentioned name on the master list of school adults. The same process is accomplished in reverse for the students mentioned by the adults; every time a student is mentioned, a dot is placed next to that child's name.

How To Use the Information Collected in the Collated Lists:

Every child in the school should be able to identify at least one adult with whom they have a special connection. Typically, when these two exercises are done, only about 20 – 25% of children have the kind of special connection that is desired. Usually, children specifically name a relatively small number of adults. This indicates that the remaining adults are not perceived by students to be connected to them in any significant way. Often, many children will identify a small number of adults over and over who are perceived to "be there" for children.

Adults tend to connect with two kinds of children: those who are the "good kids" and have active parents and families who are well known throughout the school, and the kids who are at the other end of the spectrum and are overly needy. Both of these kinds of students generally have many dots next to their names. Usually the vast majority of children have no dots next to their names. Once all of this information is collated, the school faculty/staff needs to work together to create a plan of action for increasing both the number of children who have a special connection with an adult *and* increase the number of adults who are identified by children.

The single most important aspect that leads children to feel success in school (and this may or may not have anything to do with grading and evaluation) is whether or not the *child perceives that the teacher him or her*. And, very importantly: **Perception is reality**. Even if adults believe that they are connecting with individual children, in the end it is all about what the children believe and whether they act upon those beliefs in practice.

When adults in school sit down together and work collaboratively and figure out ways to increase the amount of time spent one-on-one with children and let them know that when they need and want to talk, that they will be listened to, that is when children will learn that in practice, there are adults with whom they truly have special connections.