



LET’S BE CAREFUL OUT THERE

By Rafael Heller | Jan 24, 2022 | Editor's Note

Every job comes with its own set of interpersonal challenges. As a magazine editor, for instance, I work closely with authors to help them revise and polish the articles they’ve submitted for publication. If you’ve ever been asked to give people feedback on their writing, then I’m sure you understand how delicate and uncertain this work can be — delicate because most writers feel deeply invested in and sensitive about their writing; uncertain because no two writers are sensitive in the same way. Some crave feedback and others dread it. Some want friendly encouragement and others prefer firm guidance. In short, there’s no single best way to interact with writers. You have to build a different relationship with each one, trying your best to gauge their sensitivities, gain their trust, and find a good way to work together.

Yet, as complex as the relationship between writers and editors can be, it pales in comparison to the interpersonal drama of everyday life in classrooms and schools. At *Kappan*, I work with just 10 or 11 writers at a time, most of them for only a couple of weeks, interacting mainly by email. Teachers, though, are constantly “on,” wearing their teacher face for hours at a time and building and maintaining individual relationships over many months, with *dozens* of children at once — each with their own personality, cultural background, family history, social and emotional needs, fears, hopes, and random quirks. I can’t think of another profession that requires anything close to this amount of intense and extraordinarily complex relational work.

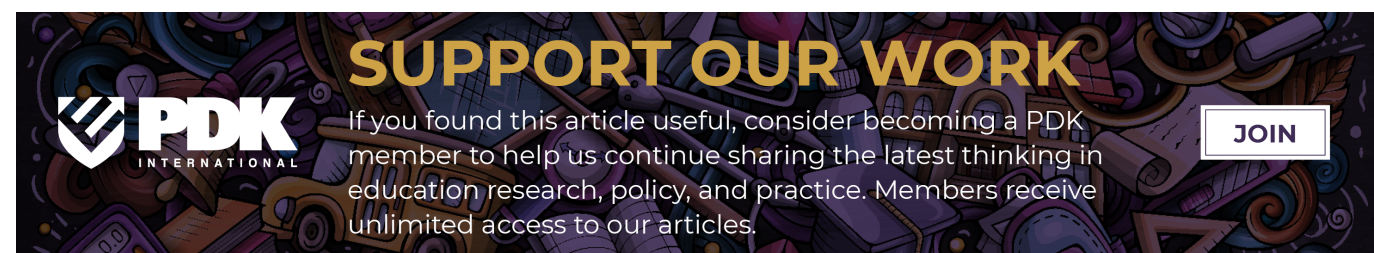
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The opportunity to build relationships with students is precisely what draws so many educators to the profession and gives them a sense of joy and purpose in their chosen field. And many educators are highly skilled at connecting with children, reading their social cues, responding to their emotional needs, and figuring out how to motivate and engage them in their schoolwork. But while some teachers make it look easy, that doesn’t make the work any less remarkable.

Moreover, teachers don’t just build relationships with students. They must also keep a close eye on those students’ relationships with *each other*, helping them to create positive social norms, communicate effectively, and resolve conflicts. And, of course, teachers also interact constantly with parents and family members, as well as other teachers, staff, and administrators, even while coping with organizational conditions — top-down decision making, scarce resources, limited professional autonomy, and so on — that tend to put enormous stress on relationships.

In the face of such challenges, educators must respond with care, argue this month’s *Kappan* authors. Theirs is not the syrupy care of Hallmark cards and Care Bears, though. Rather, they speak to the imperative to take *careful* measure of the interpersonal dynamics at play in preK-12 education. At a time of COVID-induced mental health crises, escalating violence among students, and angry threats against school board members, we must take special care to think about the words we use in the classroom, the ways we behave toward our colleagues, and the working conditions we create in our schools and districts.

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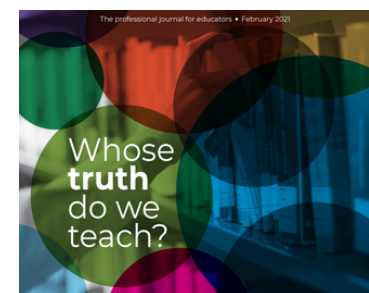
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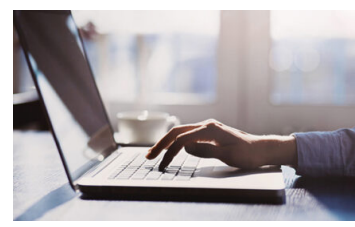
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