(Re)Claim, (Re)Vitalize, (Re)Imagine, & (Re)Commit
Virtual Coffeehouse Session 4
Supporting Students with Making Healthy Connections
August 3, 2021

INDIANA UNIVERSITY
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TRANSCRIPTION

Je'Nobia Smith

Hello again, good afternoon and welcome to our fourth and final installment of our Virtual Coffeehouse series for season two. As we are allowing people a little bit more time to come into the room, we will go ahead and begin. So our theme for today is, Supporting Students with Making Healthy Connections, and thank you to those of you who I see some returning faces who joined us for our other sessions in our previous installments. Today we're going to be addressing various themes that pertain to students social and emotional connections as we are returning back to in-person schooling post COVID pandemic. So Session 4 of our second season of our Virtual Coffeehouse series is focused on advancing our community of care by sharing our stories, our approaches, and our lessons learned during this time.

This virtual experience aimed to acknowledge the need for us to come together as a virtual community in order to discuss some of the challenges, some of the things that we discovered, and also encourage ourselves, and think about what we've learned collectively as we attempted to meet the demands that were brought about during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an opportunity for us to learn and dialogue together and to fellowship and to provide additional support for each other. Please note that our conversation today will emphasize and centered those who have been historically and contemporarily marginalized, under-served, disenfranchised, as is our charge as a public institution.

So I would also like to take some time to introduce myself and my co-host today. So I am Je'Nobia. I'm a Doctoral Research Assistant with a Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center, the Map Center. I would also like to give Robin the chance to introduce herself.

Robin Jackson

Good afternoon. My name is Robin Jackson. I'm also a Doctoral Research Assistant with the MAP Center, and I'm also a Products Lead with the Center, and I'll be serving as your alternative host and Technical Director so if there are any technical issues, you can send me a private chat and I we have we will be happy to help you.

So one of our goals at the MAP center is to engage participants in well-defined, content rich technical assistance such that knowledge and expertise are shared in a way that results in a transformative systemic change, as well as personal reflection and growth. To this end we aim to make this unique learning available on our website via recording and transcription. Additionally, sharing photos of today's conversation on our social media platforms. We encourage participants to consider this disclaimer as they share and engage today. If you do not want your image on social media or in the recording, feel free to turn off your camera.

Note about access and interaction. This Virtual Coffeehouse is intended to be interactive. Participants are asked to interact in real time via our teleconferencing format. Also, to reduce noise we ask that all participants to mute their microphones when not speaking. Further, we will post additional resources to the chat bar. Lastly, the video camera function has been turned on; thus if you have a web camera you would like to join please feel free to do so by clicking the camera icon in the lower right of your screen. Again, please don't forget to mute your microphone when not speaking. Also, one more note we have a live captioner available today during this Coffeehouse if that is something that you may require.

Robin Jackson

I am so pleased to introduce two women who I respect highly. Today who will be joining us in this conversation and given us the expertise on what we'll be talking about today. First, I would like to introduce Madeline Mason, who currently serves as a Social Emotional Learning coach the MSD Washington Township Middle School. She is also a yoga and mindfulness instructor

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and a diversity, equity, and inclusion facilitator. She is pursuing her PhD in Urban Education Studies at IUPUI and Je'Nobia I'm going to ask if you would introduce Nickie please.

Je'Nobia Smith

Of course. Thank you, Robin. And I am pleased to introduce Nickie. Not only is she a former colleague of mine, but Dr. Nicki Coomer-- she's an Assistant Professor of Education at Colorado College. Her research focuses on the social construction of emotional and behavioral disturbances as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in schools and the impact of relational pedagogies on the construction of disability--of this disability category. Thank you both for joining us.

Dr. Nickie Coomer

Thank you so much. Thanks for having us.

Robin Jackson

So we're going to jump right into the conversation then. Madeline, we are going to tap into your expertise for this first question. What have students been reporting regarding their social development and sense of connection over this past year?

Madeline Mason

Yeah. Hi everybody. Thanks Robin and Je'Nobia for inviting me. So when I think about this question, I kinda jotted down some notes. Three points really come to mind. But I'm actually going to start with a positive. I think that's kind of my theme for this whole conversation is like, how can we actually enter this conversation from an asset-based lens while, of course, recognizing some of the realities that might not be so positive, but one thing that I've heard from students that I work with, a lot of middle school students that I work with. So that is a disclaimer, but I do get to work with some high school students-- is just how they notice, they have noticed their teachers and adults taking their social emotional and mental wellness more seriously than

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before. Just kind of across the board hearing that from students that, you know, things are kind of slowing down a little bit in the classroom or they were last the school year, teachers are taking that time to really check in and that more kind of open, honest conversations are happening. I've heard a few students, I was having this particular conversation with saying words like, it's not such a big deal anymore to like say that I'm not feeling well or to ask to talk to the counselor like I don't feel as embarrassed to do that. Like those safer spaces are being created for students.

I think that's definitely a positive to maybe on the other spectrum on things that have come out in conversations with students is students really realizing and like being able to name how stressful school actually is, and how challenging it is to find a work-life balance. I've sat with students and like watch them look at their Canvas page; that's our learning management system that we use in Washington Township. And like just the sheer optics of looking at your page and seeing like eight different classes with like three different assignments. And like I worked with some students who were having some particular struggles during virtual learning, and I was very stressed out, like very, very overwhelmed just thinking about like, oh my gosh, where do we start? And so I think we're learning some things regarding quality over quantity. And I think students, I've really seen them being able to name that.

And then the last one, although it may not necessarily be positive, I think we could maybe find a positive spin to it. But you know we have seen our students in-- in this time of maybe more extreme disconnection. How they are, kind of as they always have, finding creative ways to connect with each other. I'll call it creative. An example would be, you know, maybe some of you in this room remember when we used to pass handwritten notes. I don't know if anybody remembers those days. So, you know, if students are missing that, that like physical connection with each other. So one thing that we've seen our students do, which I think is very creative again, they're using Google Docs and sharing them with each other and writing notes that way. And so I think we can look at that as like, how can we stop those behaviors, right?

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Which I think like snap judgment for a lot of teachers is maybe like, Oh, I got to -- I got to stop that, I gotta get that, but I actually think we can look at that as a call out from our students. Like they need to connect to each other, and now that we're going back into school how could we more intentionally create those spaces for our students.

Robin Jackson

Thank you, Madeline. Nickie did you have anything to add? I really--I really want to hear what you have to say because what I've seen a lot of, especially on social media, I have a lot of Facebook friends with young children who have not even ever been in school because of the pandemic. And now they're having to go and be around all these kids, and all these-- and I know you have young ones, so I'm wondering what your thoughts are.

Dr. Nickie Coomer

Thank you so much, Robin, and thanks so much, Madeline, as you're talking. I I had so many thoughts going about some of the points that you're making. And I'll just start, like Robin said I have three young kids they're 5, 6, and 7. And so when, you know, that when we realized that we were going to be in a situation that included an extended school closure. I like probably many parents panicked about what balance is going to look like, what-- what school will look like. Because with, with kids that young, you know, as Madeline said you're looking at a Canvas site that has 8 different courses, eventually even in the primary grades that began to happen as well.

And so something that I had struggled with as a parent, but also, you know, as a researcher and also as, as a former educator, is that the idea that we would try to take a six our school day and recreate that through a computer. Never really made a lot of sense to me because as Madeline was saying, trying to-- there's no way to include the spontaneous physical interaction that happens between-- not only students with each other, but students and teachers. So my kids being that they're really young and that they're all about the same age, they didn't really report

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their own feelings necessarily about school closures. But what I saw is that they would almost try to bring in some of the structures of schooling like into our home. And I do think they missed that part. Right. I think that my kids really, I, you know-- understood even at it-- and kids always make meaning at every age of, of what they're experiencing, their environments, their relationships, their ecologies, but really I think that they were kind of craving those moments that they would be --that they could have with their peers in school. And--and because I think the home, our homeschool situation was so chaotic, that those-- the structures that had been provided that they were missing was the thing that I saw come through the most from them.

But I--I wanted to add a couple of things as well. I know that Latasha Rowley had mentioned in that chat that some students are sending TikToks to each other, and the Google Doc note sending they like to me that is genius. And I think the other part of this too is that-- and something that I've really had to come to terms with it actually Je'Nobia, based on Je'Nobia research experience, Je'Nobia and I have had some conversations about this, but about how for a generation that is growing up as-- and the term I've heard in sociological spaces is a generation growing up as digital natives, right? So students that have grown up in a world that is so intertwined with digital spaces as their norm is something that I've had to grow accustomed to because I passed the handwritten notes, I did not save mine like Robin, I'm pretty sure I burned them. I hope I did. I hope so.

But I think that they're-- are getting used to the fact that communication, relationship, interaction, all of these things happen, can happen across different venues and in different ways. And that kids, you know, our students are making meaning of those interactions and being able to understand and as educators, not just how to prevent those types of interactions like Madison was saying, or excuse me that Madeline was saying. But also really, I would say foster and honor the ways in which students find ways to relate to each other. So, yeah, those are just some things that I was thinking, and thanks for the toss Robin. I appreciate an opportunity to build on what Madeline was saying. So and thanks Madeline for insight as well.

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Robin Jackson

Of course. Thank you, Nickie, Did anyone in the audience have thoughts around this, any insights?

[Pause]

Unidentified

If I could? Just centered, jack the question, because we did put out a survey on the student's readiness to come back to school. Especially we've been really worried about the students that have chosen to be the at home learners. So this will be the first time they're coming back in over a year. And so we know we wanted to test the level of their anxiety in coming back. And now one of the top concerns is exactly this very first question. *How to get them reconnected to the building, to the students, to their teacher?* And so the schools providing opportunities for them. It's going to be amazing, but some of the parents even said though the opportunities are there, but how do you get my kid to take advantage of them because they're having such social anxiety. Like where do you start off? How do you start all over again with providing them with, I don't know, social skills or how to reconnect, or how to take advantage of those or get them to take advantage of those opportunities? I think I'm asking more of a question. I'm not providing any kind of information, so I apologize.

Madeline Mason

You want us to answer, or do you?

Robin Jackson

Have if you have any insight Madeline?

Madeline Mason

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Yea I think obviously, it's different for every child, but I think in general, you know, easing kids back in, and like, what does that involvement and that connection look like? It's not going to look like an extracurricular activity for every kid or a sport or performance type event. They might not be ready for that, so I'm really, I'm really an advocate for, especially as an Instructional Coach, for like how we can organically embed this into--into our day. So like I do a lot of work with the brain states, and the first step in the first region of our brain, I reptilian brain, our brainstem is-- is really connected to that sense of safety.

And so, you know, that sense of predictability and feeling safe and welcome, and we movement through our limbic region and we feel loved and connected and I think we kind of have to take it slow and educators and school based staff need to really-- we do a lot of work with this in my district so I feel pretty good about that, but we need to be really mindful of kind of building that, and be really aware of how the brain works and how we're going to get to that, this prefrontal cortex region where our students can really be in that maximum thinking, critical thinking space taking risks, right? Joining new activities like going maybe back to their-- their pre-COVID personality, where they might have been more willing to do those things, but we have to really be mindful of those brain states and just where students may be.

Robin Jackson

So what I hear Madeline, is that there isn't necessarily a catch-all for all students, which is true for a lot of things, right? But to really kind of take the temperature of your classroom to see what may work for them so you can kind of meet them where they are in order to get them in a space where they felt comfortable to begin to re-integrate socially into the environment.

Dr. Nickie Coomer

Can I add something as well? I just building on the conversation. So I know that in, you know, in schooling spaces there is, I would say it's structural and it's systemic, but there is an adherence

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to the social preferences of the white middle-class. And so I'm for students, you know, as we all but for students who are living at the intersection of multiple historically marginalized identities, part of me is wondering how schools can create a space, and then also honor the ways in which students communicate-- and their experiences and their lived experiences outside of school. You know, really kind of adjust the environment in ways that get at that, right? that can kind of shift away from privileging one way of relating to each other, and one set of behavioral norms and expectations into something that looks, I guess, maybe more respectful of what life is like outside of school.

For, I mean, for everybody, you know, schools are really, it's a very engineered environment. And there's a reason for that. As an elementary teacher, I remember thinking the logistics of elementary schooling are absolutely incredible. You get hundreds of kids off of the bus into the school, breakfast, learning, lunch, back home safely. Time for you-- like I mean, there's a reason that school is structured, and I don't want to take away from that, but also at the same time, really maybe push into a space that says we know that students have now experienced a shift in the ways in which we teach and the ways in which they learn, and the ways in which they access they have to different environments. So just honoring the ones that are at home and maybe make school a less anxiety provoking or maybe like a less rigid space to be. So.

Robin Jackson

Thank you, Nikki. We gonna move to the next question if that's okay with everyone. Again, for you, Madeline. *What considerations are school districts making for supporting students social development as we return to in-person classes?*

Madeline Mason

Yeah, I'll share a couple things for my own school district, from school districts I know of. Then I'll also share a little bit about like what I hope we're making or might be thinking about. I'll kinda go back to where I started and just, you know, this idea of learning loss, which that term causes

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a sort of a visceral reaction in-- in me, similar to what--what Nicki just interjected into the conversation. like, what's our measuring stick for this so-called learning loss? I think it tends to be that idea of like white dominant cultural norms and expectations. And I think we have to be really mindful of that term. I've heard some administrators use that term with-- with our staff. I think we need to see our students from an asset base lens. How important that is when we're centering as Je'Nobia started us off with our historically marginalized students that can and oftentimes are and have been looked at in our education system through that deficit lens. So again, goes back to that measuring stick. I think you need to acknowledge the academic reality that, you know, maybe gains, academically speaking because we know that there's a lot of ways that our students actually grew through, through this experience, and you know, that measuring stick is that test again, maybe those gains weren't made us as we would've liked. But I think we do need to be mindful, putting too much emphasis on learning loss further stressing out our students who are sharing that they're already stressed about school. Students enter the classroom at the deficit mindset; both be projected on them and from their own self-perception which of course, the reality is our students of Color. or students language learners, students with special needs, were underserved before the pandemic so we don't need to double, double hit with this idea of learning lost. So I think we need to be really mindful of that. And then a couple just like more tangible things.

I'm seeing SEL, social-emotional learning as more of a priority, including teacher wellness. Because I think it's really important that we start with the adults. I'm seeing in my district, more emphasis on quality over quantity, and slowing down a little bit. So we're looking at priority standards and not needing to like rush through pacing guides. And,--and you know, further just perpetuates that-- that dominant culture showing up in our school systems. And then finally, I'm seeing a lot more and again, I'll speak for my district and a few others that I'm familiar with, more discussion regarding culturally responsive teaching, racial justice, gender inclusion, kind of some of our big topics and how those identity elements come into play when we're talking about social development, SEL, well-being. Whereas typically before, I'd say like 2 - 3 years before all

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of this, our current times, we would tend to see those things more in silos like DEI racial equity work is like different from like social, emotional well-being. So now and I think we're seeing them combined a little bit more. And what does it mean for our students to feel their identity you like, fully welcome and valued, affirmed in, in the classroom space and how that impacts their their wellness and their social development.

Robin Jackson

Thank you, Madeline. Nickie, did you have anything to add? No pressure.

Dr. Nickie Coomer

I'm just short, Madeline, I really appreciate the phrase that you just use creating affirming spaces. So not just spaces are like maybe even superficially welcoming, but like, you know, to affirm something is to be intentional and to-- and to ensure something I would say so I just-- I really appreciate the term that you used and how it I find it striking, the idea.

Robin Jackson

I wanted to acknowledge the resource that Dr. Tiffany Kyser put it in the chat offered by Nickie called, *Deconstructing Summer Loss: Moving Away from Summer School and Toward Valuing and Informal Learning*. So really powerful read if anyone wants to grab that link and get into that. I also want to open this question to the floor the-- about considerations for student social development. For any of our participants who may want to weigh in or ask a question.

Latasha Rowley

I'd like to weigh in. I'm Latasha Rowley-- that informal learning teachers do need to be intentional. I was talking to one student and they actually learned how to cook during this pandemic because they had younger siblings. And so that whole informal piece, if a teacher doesn't ask any questions they wouldn't find probably that information out. And then you can connect it with math and you know, whatever you connected with the whole lot of things when

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you're talking about cooking in different cultures, different foods and all kinds of stuff. So teachers have to be intentional. So I like that you talked about the informal learning. And instead of the learning loss or the new term out there, that was is it? Learning slide or something like that? I don't know if that's any better, but is that you just, you just slid? You know like going down the slide so it's not like you lost it, but you know, you can get up and walk upstairs and go back and do it again. And I just thought that was just something I wanted to add

Je'Nobia Smith

Thank you, Latasha. I wanted to, um, actually, I'd like to really pick up on that learning loss piece, Madeline and I'm so glad that you elevated that and you may have heard me, and I know Nickie has heard me really look at that because my fear and that's why I think this question is so important, is that the slowdown that we saw during the pandemic where educators were being a bit more mindful about the enormous toll that the pandemic has taken on us, not just of displacing us, but we've lost individuals. Some of us have gotten sick. Some of us have lost our jobs, some of us have lost our homes, et cetera. Our students are feeling this, our teachers are feeling this, and so when you talk about learning loss, it's like in the context of all of these other losses that are literally invoking trauma on our students.

And so one of my biggest fears is that we go back and person and it's like, "Well math scores are down the largest percentage we've ever seen math course be down, let's focus on that." And unfortunately, those supports that we have been so careful to construct during this time, particularly around our students' mental health and our own mental health as educators, they'll start to take a backseat. And so I'm very glad that-- that concept of learning loss has been elevated here. And how that is a construct essentially that unfortunately could enable us to fall back into some not so good or not so favorite practices for our students. So I did want to just put that out there.

Je'Nobia Smith

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And just to add to that too, I think re-framing being-- students being home and not in school. In terms of opportunity for students to, like Latasha raised, learn to cook, but also have opportunities to interact with the community-- communities that they're a part of and opportunities for intergenerational learning right between students and then those folks that they-- that they perhaps remain in contact with. But thinking that there's so much learning that happens outside of school that-- that is valuable and worth be honored in school. Even-- even if you think about it in ways that are not necessarily specific, but even just sort of understanding that just because kids weren't learning in the school building or because--maybe they were, maybe they weren't learning through the digital learning platforms, but it doesn't mean they ever stop learning, right? Kids are constantly making meaning of what's happening around them. So.

Madeline Mason

Yeah, I think to add on to that we have to be really mindful like educator language is really important here. We have 85% of our teaching force is white. I think, I don't have the statistics in front of me, but I think 60 percent of our public school students are students of Color. That's similar to-- to my district. Student population does not match teacher population is what I'm trying to say. So I think when you have primarily white teaching force devaluing experiences and the education that our students have received that that can also be extremely problematic and imposing and an oppressive way.

Robin Jackson

I'm so grateful the two of you are here. Did anyone else have anything to add before we move on to the next question? Ok. Thank you all for your input so far, I want to turn it over to Je'Nobia now.

Je'Nobia Smith

Thank you, Robin, and thank you, everyone. So I did want to put this towards you, Nickie, but then of course, Madeline, any insight that you could offer, we are excited to hear: *What are*

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some approaches for supporting students social connections and social development outside of a physical school space? And so you all have talked about some of these things from the

Google doc note passing space to TikTok, but what are some other some other structures or features that parents or students are using in order to maintain that sense of social connection even when we can't be physically connected at school?

Nickie Coomer

Great. Thank you Je'Nobia. Thanks for this question. I mean, and I'll start with a few of the ways that my own children remain connected with others, and they were different than the ways that I had expected. I kind of anticipated that my kids would want to face time with their friends. I know that the Facebook Messenger app got really big for a while. Even though my kids are not at a reading level yet. So my kids aren't able to like text, let's say like they're not there. But one of the things that I thought was really cool that I watched them do, and kind of do on their own. Is that like through Facebook Messenger One content-- one-- one way, my son, with his other kindergarten friends would play games on Facebook Messenger. And I-- don't I mean, I if you asked me right now to pull them up, I couldn't because I had no idea how they did it. But they were games that were like-- like drawing games almost, you know, like almost like Pictionary. And they would create little videos that would have moving backgrounds on him with like an animated character. And so they found these ways to interact that from my perspective, even though I feel like I've been watching kids interact for a long, long time, were still really surprising to me.

And I think-- I think that maybe being aware of these types of, in this case, technology is one ways that I think is valuable to support students social connections in ways that are unsurveilled and unregulated. You know what I mean by school, so it's not like here's your laptop we're monitoring what you do on this, right? But instead, like these-- these tools are meant for social communication, and when inappropriate things happen because they do, here's how we teach

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through those things, right? So I think that's one way to support students social connections and social development. And then on the flip side of that, you know, I think that there in situations where technology is hard to come by, where internet access is hard to come by. I think getting Into-- or being able to understand as well like how-- I guess what I'm trying to say is that there are-- there are students through the pandemic, through COVID-19 through 2020, and it sounds to me like the future is-- is pretty unknown but might be quite precedented, you know, as--as new variance of the virus surface. But just understanding that for those students whose parents have, were, and have been and are and will be essential workers the option to avoid face-to-face contact with other people through the pandemic was never really an option, right? That those interactions were going to happen but understanding those spaces as communal spaces and community spaces. And that being a part of a student's very personal and very insular relational ecology. I'm sorry that's like a lot of words to say. Understanding that student's interactions with other people outside of school are important to who they are and what they bring to school even when it's not as we've been talking about readily trackable, readily, like something we can take data on or something that we might even include into a curriculum. But to ensure that the curriculum is, as Madeline said earlier, affirming of these types of interactions and these types of relationships across a broad spectrum of what they might look like.

Je'Nobia Smith

Thank you, Nickie. You elevated a lot, and, um, what you described from the innovation and ingenuity that students have just naturally on their own to take a technology and do what they need to do in order to form that connection and form that bond with other students in their classes like or what your son did. But also us as educators or as parents or caregivers, recognizing that stu-- like kids need space to be kids and be themselves and express and use and communicate with technology or whatever on their own. And that regulating those may not necessarily be the answer but giving them the tools instead in classroom spaces to be able to navigate when things go wrong or when things unusual may happen. That--that is where a lot of

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learning can occur and a lot of social development can occur. That's what I'm hearing from you. And I think that's really powerful. Madeline did you have anything that you would like to add to that? And of course, anyone else in the audience please feel free to let us know your thoughts.

Madeline Mason

Yeah, I couldn't agree more with the technology piece. I think and I might like, I might kick myself in ten years for saying this, but I think we need to embrace technology and learn how to like build on it. I have 14-year-old twin brothers that live a distance from me, and I buy it to a spend little bit of time with them and watching them, and the way that they engage with their video game platforms. It's like sort of brilliant in the way that they are being social and the skills that they are developing. Like it's a whole different world. And I think like in my generation, which I think is similar to some of your generation as well, maybe a little different in some ways to like, you know, we are kind of in that weird like middle place of like didn't grow up with technology that way, but then like kind of hit it around like our college, maybe late high school years. And so we're just trying to figure it out. I think there's so much good that can come from it. Like if that's what our kids are going for. Like how can we use it to our benefit?

And then the other thing, this is like very specific, and I didn't have this written down I was just thinking about it as Nickie was talking, but I'm thinking about something that's kind of always bothered me, which is college admissions criteria. And I'm thinking a lot about—you know I remember asking about extra-curricular, volunteer opportunities, unpaid internships, and I just remember like being a student in that like had to work during high school, being like who can do these things? Like who has time to do these things? And thinking about students who have those extra responsibilities at home can't do an unpaid internship right? Had-- for whatever reason, doesn't have transportation access to that extra curricular activities. Maybe playing sports to Valerie's point earlier, isn't arguing something competitive isn't narrow their wheelhouse, so how can we actually be more inclusive to that? I think that's being elevated throughout this whole experience because social activities and extra curriculars and all of that

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will look a little bit different for our students who are going to be applying to college in the next year or two.

Je'Nobia Smith

Thank you so much Madeline. Anyone else from our audience who would like to weigh in on this question or anything that's been said so far?

Latasha Rowley

I'd like to way in. I was waiting for it. Waiting my turn, but it didn't seem like anyone else was gonna jump in yet, so I'll take a moment. I have a 16 year-old son, so the pandemic, of course during the social connection with peers was limited, but they did have hybrids. So we do get a chance to go to school and he is in sports, so that's been a lifesaver for us because if we didn't have that, I don't know what his mental state would have been during that time. But while he was doing some technology, you guys talked about that, he's-- he plays percussions or art. What is it? Drum, different-- different percussion instruments, so he got with a group on-- they were on their phones. I don't know how they do it and I don't know where it was. They kind of wrote this song and they were doing their drumming and stuff together. And I was like that is so neat. I mean, when you were talking about the creativity and all that stuff, and they came up with that. No teacher had to guide them on doing that. They just did it. And I said that's much healthier for 16-year-old boys to do that than some other things. So just wanted to share.

Je'Nobia Smith

Thank you so much Latasha and we've seen that innovation in a lot of spaces. I know we talked about TikTok, a lot of students, for example, who've been this show choirs and things of that nature in the high school, they've been getting together and using TikTok to sing different parts of an entire song in a stream it together at the end and send it as an entire, like an entire piece,

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a singular piece. And they just start a bit by bit as building blocks and put it altogether into this amazing tapestry. So they're finding ways to recreate these experiences. They gave them so much meaning in their social lives from school and are using technology to be really innovative. And it's just been really interesting to see. And like you said Latasha they don't need a teacher to guide them through that--that process. But this is something they're-- they're coming up with they're being you know, creators in their own way. All right. I'll move us on to our next question which is directed for you, Nickie. *What additional supports should be in place in order to center students needs regarding social connection?* And of course, Madeline, you may already have some things that you're thinking about-- about this, but just in terms of additional structures that schools need to be thinking about, especially as we're going back to in-person for many of us, what are--what are some of those so we could still a facilitate the social learning and development of students?

Nickie Coomer

Great, thanks Je'Nobia. So before I returned to school to pursue my doctorate I taught kids with who had been labeled as having serious emotional disturbances for ten years. And I taught Pre-K through sixth grade. So I taught in a variety of different schools, so like second through sixth grade at one school and then strictly pre-k at another school, and first through third at a different school. But what I, one of the key characteristics of the federal definition of emotional disturbance as --as a disability category that is protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. One of like, the bullet pointed components of this definition is an inability to maintain appropriate relationships. So I taught-- I started my teaching career and rural Ohio. Then I went to suburban Ohio. I spent some time in New York City. I taught in Houston, Texas, and then I ended my time in the classroom at Indianapolis, Indianapolis Public Schools. And I spent a lot of time thinking about what is an appropriate relationship, like, what does that mean? And appropriate for whom? And so as a teacher with--with my students, I felt like a lot of my role was kind of decoding what appropriate meant for whatever contexts we were in.

And I realized that relationship it involves communication, but a lot of times can-- the way a student communicates becomes a proxy for the value of the relationships they have, right? In other words, the way a student communicates is going to be the determining factor as to whether it's going to be considered appropriate, an appropriate relationship or not. So that means try that meant talking to students in terms of like vocabulary, volume, messaging. And most of the time it was with teachers and then sometimes it was with other kids. I had at one point I had a Nintendo--Nintendo Wii, I don't know. But a Nintendo Wii in my classroom, I felt I was very popular as a teacher because I had the Wii in my classroom. But part of that was because I knew that recess was stressful. And it can be for some kids. And I thought, well, if I have this like fun thing in my classroom then the students with whom I work can bring friends into the classroom and it'll give me an opportunity to like, do some social coaching if I need to. But also, like kind of observe and then get-- and then just provide this like less stressful but still fun place, right? Where students could be social. Have fun and I wasn't like surveilling them. I wasn't correcting. I was just providing this opportunity for them to have these positive interactions with each other.

And when I read this question, I, you know, I thought of that time. And I also tried to think of like, you know, tangible supports, like what would be a tangible support be? And I think that that's one of them. Even though-- even though it's not tangible. It's not like a thing you can hold but offering the opportunity and the space for students to practice relating authentically with other kids and teachers, right? And then also surfacing and maybe even sometimes disrupting what the term approp-- quote unquote appropriate means-- wherever the space may be. So, and I'll just give this last example and then I'll, I'll stop talking. But in the same classroom where I have the Nintendo Wii, I worked with a variety of different people. And one of my coworkers had a very different social norming than I did. There was some-- there was some like age difference maybe. So the way of relating with kids was different between the two of us. But also, I remember one time we were playing a game, and one of my-- one of the second-graders that

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we were working with had brought up a song by Niki Minaj, who was a rapper and the teacher right away said, "That's not appropriate. You shouldn't be listening to that."

And so later we had a conversation, and I was like, it just first of all, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. Right? What he listens to. Secondly, like, what we're doing right now, it's like we're creating blueprints for--for solid relationships. Like here in the school, like that's kind of our aim here. So you don't have to use this time to correct, you know, behaviors that you one have no control over and two, really don't have a right to have control over. But instead, just use this opportunity to like to make sure that--that-- that this child knows that you are a safe and kind and non-judgmental person in this in-- this room with him. But I would say that, you know, and it was an important conversation for us to have. And I think that it was also an important strategy for us to remember that throughout our time in the classroom, right? What we're working on here are making room and building blueprints for these authentic relationships in a space that is very stressful. You know, in a space that can be very, very rigid. So in terms of support and--and-- and I--I appreciate this question and I appreciate the opportunity to answer that is I think what I would have to offer. And I think honestly it probably goes into teacher wellness too, right?

Giving-- giving yourself a break to-- to be a human in your classroom and not to have to be an authoritarian in the classroom. I don't mean to make broad assumption. I know that--that's not every teachers an authoritarian, but I think giving teachers opportunities to participate and to be authentic in their classroom and not have to be a surveillor, you know, somebody who's surveilling kids, but instead to be somebody who is in it with them and in an authentic relationship with them.

Je'Nobia Smith

Thank you so much Nikki. Yes. The au-- the-- the need for authenticity in that relationship structure, absolutely. Especially when considering, like teachers hold often this position of power over students, and how it's difficult to form an authentic and appropriate whatever that means,

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relationship with people when you feel maybe a sense of disadvantage or a sense of that imbalance of power, which you can say, which you can express for fear of being shot down like in the case, an example that you gave. So thank you so much for that. Did you have anything that you'd like to add Madeline or anyone else in the chat space?

Madeline Mason

I was going to leave space if anyone else wanted to jump in.

Robin Jackson

I just wanted to say that all these conversations around how we, as educators, parents, et cetera, feel would be the best way for our kids, students to integrate and be the best selves-- be their best selves in schools that we should also take a couple steps back and actually ask what they need. What is it that you need from us as educators, and parents, caregivers? And how is it that we can best support them? I appreciate the person who spoke earlier who said they sent out a survey to actually get those responses from families. And I think that one of the things that we could do is have those conversations be ongoing throughout the year. So it doesn't seem like that this is just another thing or check it off our list of things to do in the classroom. But we are constantly checking in and making those touch points with our students in the classroom.

Madeline Mason

Yea. I'm glad you said that Robin, because when I looked at this question, I actually use the question to write my answers. Like, what are the students' needs? You know, I'm not making those assumptions like centering their students' needs. And for teachers like we love to plan. We love to plan months and months and months in advance, and we love rightfully so right. Like the job is no joke. We have a lot on our plates and were like, going, going, going all the time, but I think we need to take some of those lessons like you talked about Je'Nobia, slow down a little

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bit, leave some space in our grand plans and ideas to build and be responsive to what our-- the feedback that our students are giving us, and, again, just like slowing down. I also agree with Nickie in this part of the work that I do also with the social emotional learning piece is starting with the adults and the leaders. Are we creating spaces that support adult connection and wellness? Are we creating those cultures of disconnect? The cultures of being a surveillor, you know, compliance, checking the boxes because that will filter right down into our classrooms and it's going to put this in a chat, but I didn't want it to come off as the wrong way regarding my own district. But to your point, Latasha, teachers, being human, having fun with students. I will say like I-- I think that my district does this very well, but like teachers do need to feel supported by their leaders to do that, because in some places I will hear, you know, I feel like I have to stick to the pacing guide and that curriculum. And if I come in, I'm going to get docked this because I'm not exactly where I need to be or it's too loose in here, so just leaders making sure that they're pushing back against that go, go, go like quantity over quality culture too.

Nickie Coomer

Can I share something? At one of the schools that I worked at, in terms of like teacher well-being and fostering a sense of community, I call myself a No Child Left Behind era teacher because I graduated with my undergrad in 2005 and it was signed in 2001, so it was like we were you know, I entered the classroom and it was accounted, like quote unquote accountability focused right away. You know test scores, test scores, test scores, value added was a big experiment at the time. So teachers were getting scores. There were different experiments, but like merit pay and teacher being based on teachers value-added scores in that type of thing. So it was--it was almost like there was this sort of adopted business culture into the--into the schools. That was really like around competition and in increasing scores, as I'm sure we know, as educating community or that community of educators.

Okay, So my point. One of the schools I worked at we had a program called Shooting Stars. So it wasn't our mascot was a rocket. And they, the administrators opted not to do like any type of a

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teacher of the month, type of honor you know, honorary thing. Because they were, they did not want teachers to compete with each other. They did not want teachers to feel left out. They didn't want to ever miss somebody. So inside they created this program called Shooting Stars and anybody, any--any faculty can write a shooting star for someone. And so you write it on this little dicot star and you put it in a box. And then at every faculty meeting-- every faculty meeting, the administrators would read all of the shooting stars. Sometimes this took like 20 minutes, which is a lot of time in the teaching world. But I look back on that I mean, it was 10 years ago and I still remember not only like receiving that, I actually don't remember receiving it, but I do remember having an opportunity to write them to my colleagues, right? Just to say thank you and to honor them. And it did help us create this community. Yes. Collectivists over individual. Yes. Thank you, Madeline. So it was a nice I mean, it seems so simple, but it was a really nice way to feel more together.

Je'Nobia Smith

I love that because we don't take enough time to stop in the moment to acknowledge those things. But even social connection amongst colleagues in the school that matters and that sets the tone and that establishes school culture and students will notice that, and students will feel that. And so I think that that's a really important example Nickie, thank you so much. Anyone else before we begin to move to close? I can't believe we're almost at time already. This has been such a great and robust conversation. Any other thoughts?

Okay. Well, I would like to take this time to thank you both Madeline and Dr. Nickie Coomer again for your great shares and your excellent insight on our various questions as we're thinking through what our return is going to look like, not only for ourselves, but as we all try from our various positions to support students in-- in our in-person classroom environments. And so thank you so much for weighing in. Thank you to all the participants who have come and offered your ideas and your thoughts as well.

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Thank you so much for coming again. And I believe that Robin has linked our PSQ in the chat box. So feel free to take a post question I post survey questions, excuse me, post-session questionnaire. So that we can use this to be responsive and as we start to plan for our next season, this is the last episode of our second season. So as we plan for next season, we do take your feedback in mind.

Also. Let me go right back to sharing my screen one more time.

Robin Jackson

…today by hashtagging, equity is: *How are you going to use what you learned here today?* Please follow us on social media so you can get all the updates for other events just like this one.

Je'Nobia Smith

All right. Thank you so much, Robyn, thank you again to our conversation starters and everyone who has been here with us today. We hope to see you soon at some more other events. Take care.