

Creating Healthy Learning Environments for Kids

A conversation with Julie Stein Brockway, founder and co-director of Life Lines

The power of the group

With Life Lines, it's not the improvisational musical theater that provides the magic. It's the social emotional context, the group, where everyone has something to contribute and everyone has something to gain.

The content is less important. It could be teaching English or Math, creative writing, playing a sport, doing art. What's important is the context. That's where the magic lies: creating a context where people are given an opportunity to be themselves, to be accepted for who they are, to find a sense of belonging—and where they are also expected to contribute and deliver. We tell the students that whatever is going on in their outside life, we're going to focus on the dynamics that happen within the group. We expect them to contribute to one another's growth, we tell them, and we expect that they'll see and learn things about themselves they may want to change—and that the group is there to help them.

So it doesn't have to be an all-consuming (and hopefully wonderful) Life Lines production to be transformative. If you create a group around something you care about and use the activities purposefully, getting students comfortable interacting in a group, the potential for a meaningful experience is there.

It can happen in an afterschool homework session in the way kids are grouped at a table and work with one another. It can happen in a collaborative interdisciplinary project where students pool their resources, see talents in each other they hadn't seen before, and give and receive feedback in ways that build capacity.

A cooking group becomes a meaningful social experience when it is purposeful: How are we selecting what we are cooking? What are the roles while we are cooking? What are we doing while we are eating? There needs to be a purpose, an intention, behind everything—and it needs to come at the right time. The more skillful we get at what is the intention we need to have now, based on the group's needs at a certain moment in time, the more you maximize all the moments where learning can happen.

Connectedness and struggle

In the end, we are all searching for human connectedness, whether we are fourteen years old or eighty. The group reinforces this drive for connection and helps us hang in there when we want to run away. Connectedness is something we all struggle with—adolescents maybe most of all.

Often after a Life Lines production, people will come up to me and say: "We see this beautiful show and we wonder, so the kids were always loving and hugging each other every minute?"

I say, if that were true, I don't think you would have seen the show you saw tonight. The real testament of a group is its ability to have disagreements, to weather conflict, to understand that conflict in a group is actually a sign of safety and a sign of a group's forward progress toward growth.

The work of the group is to struggle through these conflicts, to solve the problems that arise, to address the unique or unexpected things that happen with a particular member of the group—along with the unexpected things that are going to happen in the group's life.

You'll hear a new group leader say: "OMG, things are falling apart. The kids said they never want to come back again after this rehearsal or yesterday so and so were yelling at each other or so and so started dating and now they don't want to be in the group together." I tell them that's why we are doing this in a group, so that we have a context for looking at those social dynamics and working on them together. That's not what we should be afraid of, I remind them. What we should be afraid of is if none of that is happening.

Social-emotional learning grounded in experience

Creating healthy environments for learning, that's what we're about. As a student, I'm not going to be freed up to learn the cognitive aspects of math if I'm fundamentally uncomfortable sitting in this classroom. But I'm also not going to be comfortable sitting in this room if you're "teaching" me social-emotional learning. I'm going to need to experience social and emotional learning directly, doing things with others, being reflective, getting feedback, recovering from mistakes.

And then there's the matter of relationships. For me, one of the richest aspects of this work is the relationship building and the context we provide for nurturing these relationships, here and throughout the community—within and across families, kids, staff, teachers. Every time young people work on their relationships, whether it's with each other or with different adults, they're gaining new knowledge and insight about themselves, I'll hear our students say, "I've now been around new people enough so that when I go to college, I know how to start talking and connecting."