



Getting to know you

Friendship skills support diversity in the schools

Dyson with a big thank-you card from some elementary school friends

By Leah Pence

Colourful hand-drawn cards hang on the walls of Dr. Lily Dyson's office at UVic. In crayon, felt pen and pencil crayon in the cursive handwriting of Grade 4 and 6 students is written "Thank you for teaching me about friendship" and "Thank you for teaching me how to be kinder."

From the cards it is clear that Dyson, an education professor who specializes in applied development psychology and special education, has made a host of new friends. But what she really hopes is that those students who sent the cards made some too.

"I'm hoping that by teaching the concept of friendship it will help all children to be integrated and involved in peer groups in class and on the playground," says Dyson.

Dyson has just completed the first part of a research project aimed at teaching Grade 4 to 7 students the friendship skills they need to enjoy learning in diverse, inclusive classrooms. It is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This year, the program was delivered to about 600 students in five Victoria schools.

British Columbia's classrooms are more ethnically, racially and linguistically diverse than ever before, says Dyson. And the inclusion of students with a diversity of needs presents

both opportunities and challenges that can benefit all students.

For Dyson, learning about friendship is just as important as learning math, science or French, especially at the elementary level. "In elementary school there should be an equal emphasis on intellectual and social development," she says.

Placing emphasis on friendship building recognizes that children can learn as much from each other as they can from teachers or parents. "Children learn thinking, behaviour, social skills, language, and other competencies from each other," says Dyson. "When they don't have any friends, they are cut off from a very major source of learning."

Dyson's project involves a team of graduate and undergraduate students who visit intermediate elementary classrooms once a week for eight weeks to lead friendship workshops. They introduce students to the concepts and skills of good friendship, conflict resolution, dealing with bullying, developing self-esteem and positive attitudes towards differences and understanding disabilities.

Students are placed in situations where they discuss concepts and issues related to friendship and practice the skills they learned in the workshop to solve a variety of problems. For ex-

ample, students show how to prevent bullying and to resist pressure from friends to do something they know is not right.

Dyson's team observes the children in the classroom and on the playground to assess their progress.

After the eight-week program is finished, Dyson measures its success by testing the children's understanding of the concepts of friendship and comparing their general acceptance of peers and differences from before and after the workshops. Her research team is currently compiling and evaluating the results of these tests.

So far, her program has received rave reviews from teachers and students. Class discussions and the reports of individual children suggest that the program helps develop increased kindness, friendship and empathy. But Dyson remains modest. "Developmental concepts such as friendships and acceptance take time to develop and nurture," says Dyson. "I can't claim that this program is a cure for loneliness and poor integration, but it's a start."



Leah Pence wrote this as a participant in the SPARK program (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge), funded by UVic, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

facts from the **EDGE**

- Six to ten per cent of all elementary-aged children spend recesses and lunch hours alone and say that they have no friends. Because these children often have normal intelligence, they do not attract special attention from their teachers. Dyson hopes that by teaching friendship skills to children, she will be able to help reduce the number of children who feel isolated.
- Ideally, teaching friendship skills and other elements of proper social development should happen when children are young. Preschool and the primary grades are the times when children are starting to develop and solidify friendships on their own, says Dyson, who has done previous peer relationship research with children in primary grades.
- Because their concepts of difference are developing, younger children are generally more accepting of difference than are older children, says Dyson.

sharpen your know**EDGE**

- The BC Ministry of Education establishes the curriculum for the kindergarten through Grade 12 education system. Their SafeTogether Web site has a wealth of anti-bullying information.

www.safetogether.ca

- The ministry of education Web site on special education programs contains links to many policy documents and resource guides for teachers and parents: www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/docs.htm

- The introduction to the Career and Personal Planning program for Grades K to 7 states that "emotional and social development are as important as academic achievement and intellectual and physical skills." To find out more about the program see: www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/pp/pptoc.htm

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PUBLIC EVENTS AT UVIC

Shades of Difference: Meanings of Diversity for Those Who Teach Music and/or Children

Lansdowne Lecture by Dr. Patricia Shehan Campbell, University of Washington School of Music

July 17, 7:00 p.m., MacLaurin Bldg., room A168
Presented by the Department of Curriculum & Instruction. Info: 721-7808

What's Happening to Teachers' Work?

Lansdowne Lecture by Dr. John Smith, School of Education, Flinders University of South Australia

July 18, 7:30-9:30 p.m., MacLaurin Bldg., room D288
Presented by the Department of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies. Info: 721-7799