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I Learned That A Nail Can Go Through a Bottle Cap Easily: The Buddies Program at Bank Street

By **Greg David**, *9/10s humanities teacher* and **Emily Linsay**, *4/5s head teacher*

On a much-anticipated spring afternoon, a class of 9/10s students gathered in the Art and Shop rooms, awaiting the arrival of their 4/5s buddies. The younger students entered cautiously, taking in the novelty of the rooms. Each buddy pair or trio would spend the next thirty minutes building a vehicle out of wood, nails, glue, and bottle caps. They would draw on the younger buddies' recent study of vehicles and the older buddies' years of experience with woodworking.

The teams quickly got to work on race cars, fire trucks, and boats, largely following the younger buddies' interests and choice of materials. The older buddies bravely held each nail upright with pliers, or demonstrated how to grip full-sized hammers. The children talked as they worked: "How would you like to attach the wheels?" the older buddies asked, or "What color should we paint the race car?" The 9/10s asked questions that their own teachers might have asked them in their own classroom.

At the end of building time, the pairs displayed their vehicles with pride. While the experience had been more of a novelty for the 4/5s, they weren't the only ones learning something new. Back in the 9/10s classroom, one child shared what she had learned from the experience: "I never knew I could put a nail through a bottle cap so easily." Who did?

The Buddies program is at its core a reflection of Bank Street's developmental-interaction approach and an extension of the classroom experience. It encourages students to become curious about their community and fosters a love of learning, allowing them to interact with others and engage in ways that strengthen their own identity and voice. It offers opportunities for integration in ways that cut across grade divisions and the larger curriculum. Students learn from each other through shared experiences, which ultimately enriches personal growth.

Bank Street College founder Lucy Sprague Mitchell asked: "What potentialities in human beings—children, teachers, and ourselves—do we want to see develop?" She answered this question by creating a credo with seven main tenets. The Buddies program aligns beautifully with at least three. First, there is the potentiality of "gentleness combined with justice in passing judgments on other human beings." Second, we aim to develop "sensitivity, not only to the external formal rights of the 'other fellow,' but to him as another human being seeking a good life through his own standards." And third, the Buddies program fosters participation in a way that helps

students discover “lively intellectual curiosities that turn the world into an exciting laboratory and keep one ever a learner.” Studying alongside a diverse group of learners is vital; this is what builds community, and creates a foundation for change.

So how exactly did the Buddies program come to be? There was a thought over a decade ago that it would be beneficial for the Upper School Kids of Color (KOC) to visit Lower School classes in order to provide role models for children of color in the lower grades. This would also bring students of color and white students together. Later it was determined that all students could benefit from having buddies. So the administration, school leaders from each division, and teachers worked to develop the program.

In today’s Buddies program, each classroom pairs with a classroom in another grade for the full year. The 3/4s meet with children in the Family Center. The 4/5s meet with 9/10s, the 5/6s with 10/11s, the 6/7s with 11/12s, the 7/8s with 12/13s, and the 8/9s with 13/14s. Teachers plan a range of experiences in and out of the classroom



so that children have different ways to access the program and build relationships. There might be reading aloud, sketching, or art. Specialists are included in this work; children might have buddy gym, shop, Spanish, math, and science experiences together during the year. The younger buddies attend school performances by older buddies, such as Rock Band, the Egypt play, or Science Expo, an experiential science

fair. During Expo, many younger buddies visit their older buddies to see their projects. One often witnesses current and former buddy students conversing, holding hands, and learning from each other.

4/5s Perspective

Early in the school year, after the 4/5s students have become familiar with their new classroom, new teachers, and new classmates, they encounter another kind of new: buddies. Children’s feelings about having 9- and 10-year-old buddies vary from curiosity and excitement to shyness and nervousness. Through the buddy program, the 4/5s practice flexible thinking, gain a wider perspective on their school, and work explicitly on developing relationships with unfamiliar people.

A week before meeting our buddy class in November, we set about preparing the group. During a morning meeting, I ask, “What is a buddy?” In the fashion of 4/5s, the conversation ranges from “a friend” to “an animal that hops” to “someone you love” and “my mom calls me buddy!” After further exploring and clarifying the meaning of “buddy,” we shift the discussion to what children know about 9- and 10- year-olds. Their information includes size (“they’re big!”), abilities (“they can draw”), and personal interactions (“9- and 10-year-old brothers and sisters sometimes push their younger siblings and sometimes read to them”).



Once we've met our buddy class, excitement—and relief—ripples through the children. By mid-year, buddy relationships deepen. Each drawing from their buddy is a treasure. Children who were initially reticent about buddies have opened up. Our weekly buddy time becomes highly anticipated. At this point, the 4/5s comments about the 9/10s sound more like, "My buddy's name starts with S just like mine!" and a gleeful, "I just saw my buddy in the hallway!" Families regularly report that they hear a great deal about buddies. The younger children delight in the close relationships with their older buddies. Visiting their classroom up on the third floor is like going to another land. "They have big chairs and tables!" is a common observation.

At year's end, when reflecting on their buddy time, the 4/5s have said, "Buddies are so fun!" "I liked when they came to gym with us." "I liked when they did wood-working with us." "I want to see my buddy over the summer." With time, and in the care of their buddies, the 4/5s become quite taken by 9- and 10-year-olds. It always delights me to know that in a few years, these former 4/5s will take on the other side of the buddy relationship.

9/10s Perspective

Every year I am struck by how motivated the 9/10s students are by the Buddies program. There are many good reasons for this. First, the children are holding their own joyful, sweet memories of buddy experiences from their earlier years. Also, the 9/10s year is the first in which they are the older buddies, and that is just plain exciting. As one of my students this year put it, "The Buddies program teaches the older buddy how to take on more responsibility; you feel more grown up." The experience also helps children to develop trust, self-confidence, patience, and acceptance. And Buddies time regularly brings out different aspects of children's personalities that teachers may not see every day in the classroom. For instance, a child who typically is more reserved might be effusive with their buddy. A child who can be impulsive might display unusual forethought and patience with their younger buddy. By year end, it is abundantly clear how deeply the 9/10s have valued their buddy relationships and experiences.

At the end of this school year, I asked the 9/10s to reflect in whole group conversation and then in writing on their Buddies experience. There were many gems among the responses. One comment subtly reflected both deep acceptance and empathy: "I learned how to read aloud without covering the pictures." Another child wrote that the best part "is when you make the younger buddy happy." There was also repeated mention of the joy of anticipation: "I love the looks on their faces when they walk in looking for us." Many children also enjoyed teaching their younger buddies. They wrote: "You can help your buddy with mistakes," and "Taking care of someone younger is hard work but fun." Many students wrote about learning from

their younger buddies, as in the earlier example of a younger buddy teaching an older buddy how to bang a nail through a bottle cap. One 9/10 neatly summarized the program like this: “Little and bigger kids learn how to bond and make close friendships.”

Graduation Memories

On a much-anticipated early summer afternoon, the 13/14s, their families, teachers, and school community gathered in the auditorium for graduation. School for Children graduations are known for being decidedly child-centric: Every student gets to make a brief presentation. Sometimes there are songs, slideshows, art, or speeches. This year, one student chose to speak about his years as a Bank Street buddy. “The dictionary defines buddy as: a friend, pal, or compatriot,” Desta began, confidently. “Having a buddy is possibly the most enjoyable experience I’ve ever had.” Desta shared memories of buddy gym, lunch, and Science Expo. “I learned a lot from my younger buddies, too,” he continued. “My buddy in the 11/12s was Itai. He is very verbal and outspoken. I remember being surprised when he gave his opinion about math class with more knowledge and eloquence than I could ever muster.”

Then came the most extraordinary part of the presentation, the part that had many teachers buzzing the next day: Desta invited two of his younger buddies to come share the stage with him, on this, his final experience as a Bank Street student. He handed them the microphone, asking each of them to share a memory of being his buddy. When they finished, Desta thanked them and concluded by offering up this bit of advice: “You are about to become older buddies. I want you to be nice, patient, and encourage your buddies to do well in school.”

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