

Finding My Place & My Role Across Contexts

(September and October)

“Being in a group is more complicated than most of us realize. For neurotypical students, these abilities evolve from birth. However, our students with social cognitive learning challenges do not experience a natural development of the skills needed to co-exist easily in a group.”

-Michelle Garcia Winner

“..the awkward social behavior of people with autism is not caused by a lack of knowledge of social conventions and mental states as much as it is by an inability to apply that knowledge to a given context.”

- Peter Vermeulen

The beginning of the school year is a big transition that holds excitement, uncertainty and new hidden social ‘rules’ for students. Whether new to middle school and the ASD program or simply returning to the next grade, each student will be a part of a new environment, new hallways, new routines and schedules, and interactions with new peers and educators. Transition can be particularly challenging for students with ASD, therefore it is important that educators are mindful of the demands that change, transition and novelty place on their students. In the Nest we start the year by providing clear structures that allow for flexibility and we revisit these structures for our students as much as needed to build comfort. Once students are tuned-in to the expectations of each classroom and various environments, they can depend on these structures in order to focus on flexible thinking and group learning.

Many of our Nest students are strong independent thinkers and therefore may learn more easily alone. The reality of the school day however, is about collaborative learning and sharing space. The social demands of middle school require this ability to share space and an understanding that your role in each group changes across contexts. There is not just one rule for sharing space. It looks different in science, in ELA, in the lunchroom and in the hallways between classes. Awareness of what one’s place and role is in various groups supports the use of context when engaging with others. While the school day demands group learning, educators must be aware that this constant demand on Nest students can be quite draining. Therefore, the demand of *collaborative learning* should be balanced with individual work and breaks when necessary.

The first way that we support our students’ understanding and awareness of their place in

each new group of which they will be a part, is through the **identification of roles**. In SDI we also build an understanding of what others may expect of us as a member of a group. Equally important is for educators to discover from the students’ point of view, what *they* need to comfortably engage with others. Understanding our place and our role in each group is a foundation for managing change and transitions as the year progresses.

It is essential when learning with peers to recognize the make-up of each group in order to find one’s place in that group. Therefore through SDI we investigate students’ roles in partnerships, in their smaller social groups, in small collaborative groups within classrooms and in the larger core academic classes. This encourages flexibility in taking on roles as opposed to a rigid understanding of a role that may not translate across contexts.

The second key component to finding one’s place in a group is to **identify personal strengths**. The use of strengths can support collaboration and contribute to positive social interactions. Understanding one’s strengths and then building an awareness of one’s challenges is the basis for self-advocacy. We begin our self-advocacy work in UNIT 1 with a focus on strengths. In SDI this is an investigation of personal strengths through shared stories, equating interests with strengths, and then discussing how these strengths can help us in both academic thinking and social thinking.

Finding one’s place in a group and building self-awareness is the first SDI unit as these abilities are essential to sharing an imagination (shared learning), developing social cognition and having access to academics within today’s public school classroom. Additionally, each student’s place in groups outside of school (such as family and community) should be considered in order to flex the concepts of role, group, and that expectations may change from one group to the next.

In September the team of teachers and providers begin to establish a collaborative dynamic with each student. We approach this interaction through the framework of the

Middle-ground¹. Nest educators support students by taking on the role of guides to the middle school environment. **Educators have the additional role of listener (guest)** of students' unique way of thinking and processing the world. This developing relationship can serve as a reference and grounding for the students' access to the curriculum and to the complicated social world of middle school.

In the role as guide, the educator must be aware that expectations and structures vary across classrooms for each student. At the start of the school year, rules and routines are established and are vital to the success of any classroom. There will be both similarities and differences across classes that educators should highlight so students can build this awareness and develop the cognitive flexibility that is needed to adapt to different structures. The Nest team should brainstorm the programmatic structures similar to all classes as well as the rules that are unique to each classroom. These structures can then serve as a guidepost for group functioning and also as touchstones for students to understand classroom expectations. While rules are important to the classroom, rules are not what promote interaction and engagement between students.

Therefore, the additional focus of this SDI unit is to support the development of **flexibility within the structure** necessary for students to learn collaboratively with their peers. Educators encourage engagement and active problem solving in the classroom. The use of SDI strategies such as declarative comments, observation, establishing roles and the use of SDI language encourages this dynamic interaction. For the educator, this unit is about building your own awareness of the group/s that are formed in your classroom, collaborating with providers on individual strengths of students and to identify the optimal way to support active engagement within each group.

From a relational point of view, experience sharing (actually experiencing a moment or a thought *together*) is a primary motivator for successfully being a part of a group. Therefore in SDI focus time, we actively explore concepts and topics that encourage natural engagement. To support this goal of social development, we label moments of shared enjoyment,

incorporate individual strengths and areas of interest into sessions/lessons, set up partnerships and teams, and we build an awareness of what it means to listen with your whole body (both what others' expectations of you are as a listener *and* what you need to actively listen, which may look different). Teachers and providers highlight shared experiences by noting successes, connected thinking and collaborative outcomes throughout the school day. This will promote an awareness of both our connection to others and the social expectation that we are active participants in group learning.

To support social development, educators utilize each student's strengths when considering roles and then facilitate engagement to promote shared learning. If we integrate our students in this way, we are following a key component of IDEA 1997, upheld by IDEA 2004, which is to ensure access to and participation in the general education curriculum. As we weave and highlight favorable social experiences into the student's day, we establish a necessary prerequisite for gathering information from people and from the world. While social communication may be a core challenge for students with ASD, recognizing one's place in a group is both learnable and vital to success in school, as well as throughout life.

Expected/ Unexpected™ (awareness & choice)
Listening with Your Whole Body™
My Role, My Place in a Group
Thinking Alone vs. Thinking Together
Size of a Problem

Social Clues (Gathering Information)
Your Body Sends a Message↵
(Your face/body/tone is telling me...)
Body & Brain in the Group™

Flexibility (highlighting)
It Depends.... (Context Highlighting)
**Rules Change Across Environment/
People** (context!)

Downloading vs. Uploading
Teamwork and Collaboration
Brain Match, Connected Thoughts
"Thinking the same thing"

CORE CONCEPTS IN BOLD
™ Michelle G Winner
↵ © social underground

¹ Middle-ground © S.Brennan 2012