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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Removing Labels, Grades K-12*, by Dominique Smith, Douglas Fisher, and Nancy Frey. Technique 13 explains the what, why, and how of using sociograms in the classroom.

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# TECHNIQUE 13

## Classroom Sociograms

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**What:** A sociogram is a visual map of the network of relationships among the students in your classroom. The relationships in the room may be an undercurrent for gender, racial, disability, economic, and language divides. Understanding these relationships can provide insight into ways to broaden the social and emotional skills of students. The creation of a social map of the interactions of students can assist you in identifying students who may be marginalized.

**Why:** Group dynamics are the product of myriad relationships among the people in them. The interplay between members of the group reveals issues of power, empathy, and communication. We witness these dynamics as students subdivide themselves along visible lines, such as socioeconomic status, and hidden ones, such as disposition. In some cases, a tight group of students form a clique that has outsize influence on the group as a whole.

Think of a great class you have had in the past. Chances are that part of the reason you immediately recalled the group was

because of the positive ways they interacted with one another. Perhaps they looked out for one another or rallied around a classmate dealing with a difficult event in their life. You may have witnessed a higher degree of acceptance within the group for each classmate than you had seen in other years. And while there were probably some memorable personalities, the group as a whole jelled. It just *worked*. That phenomenon has a name: social cohesion. The ability of a group to form positive relationships from within, while maintaining a sense of connection with the community, is fundamental to societies but also to much smaller long-term groups like classrooms.

Socially cohesive groups have a sense of solidarity. However, that affinity can be undermined by internal divisiveness. At times it is apparent, as when two students have ongoing conflict with one another. As teachers, we notice those adversarial relationships and attempt to facilitate repair. In the meantime, we do our best to keep these students out of each other's orbit. However, divisions occur more often because students don't know one another. We don't mean superficially knowing someone. Getting to know someone well means that you have had opportunities to solve problems with them, to be successful together, and to laugh together and commiserate.

Sociograms rely on the perceptions of students, not adults. Student reports of the dynamics between peers tend to be more accurate than teachers' or parents' perceptions as early as preschool (Guralnick, 1992). As measures of peer acceptance, sociograms can provide teachers with insight into the hidden web of relationships. We don't mean friendships, which are easier to spot, but rather the degree to which a student is liked by their classmates. The main factor for peer acceptance is a child's social competence, although attractiveness, disability, and personality traits such as shyness can also influence perceptions. Some children face peer rejection, often due to difficult behavior and aggressiveness. These students are especially vulnerable to experiencing a lower degree of academic achievement, isolation, and psychosocial maladjustment (Parker et al., 2006). Identifying the peer-acceptance and peer-rejection dynamics occurring right under the surface provides teachers with ways to dismantle labels children give to one another.

**How:** Administer a sociogram questionnaire a few weeks after the students in the class have had a chance to get to know one another. Explain to them that the questions are meant to help you get to know how they work best inside and outside the classroom. Ask students to confidentially answer the following questions:

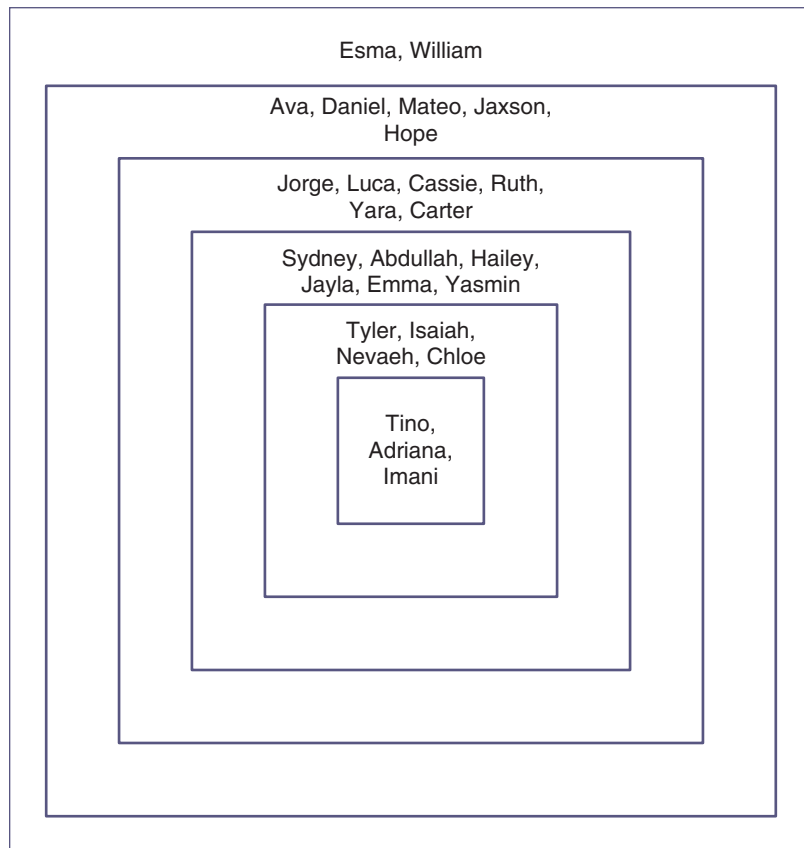
- Who are three people in this class you would most like to play with at recess? (For older students, ask who they would like to eat lunch with.)
- Who are three people in this class you would most like to work with on a collaborative learning task?
- Who are three people in this class you would most like to meet with for a fun weekend activity?

Remind students that they do not need to confine their responses to existing friendships. The purpose is to gain insights from students about peer acceptance in three realms: in-school social activities, in-school academic activities, and out-of-school social activities.

Once received, tally the number of times each student's name is cited, regardless of the type of interaction. For example, a student who is named twice for in-school social activities, once for academic tasks, and three times for out-of-school activities receives a score of 6. Organize the names in descending order from most frequently named to least frequently. Place the names on the map in Figure 2.3, with the students named most often in the center square. Keep adding names to the concentric squares based on the number of times they were cited.

The classroom profiled in the example shows that Tino, Adriana, and Imani were the most frequently named, while Esma and William were not named by anyone. This visual map of the relationships in your classroom allows you to identify possible patterns to disrupt.

- Is there an even distribution across gender?
- Are there troubling divisions based on race or ethnicity?
- Are students with disabilities accepted or marginalized?

**Figure 2.3** Sample Sociogram of Classroom Relationships

Available for download at [Resources.com/removinglabels](https://www.resources.com/removinglabels)

The next consideration is identifying students who are outside the social network altogether. These are students who are not named by anyone. In the example in Figure 2.3, William and Esma do not appear to be connected. Observe these students and their interactions with peers in order to better understand possible barriers. These students can benefit from positive attention from you, as many of the approaches in Section 1 outline. For instance, Banking Time is useful for getting to know a student better to build a relationship. Reflect on whether differential interactions from you may be unintentionally communicating your own avoidance of the student. Sometimes students who exist on the margins of your classroom may not possess the prosocial skills needed to be accepted by peers. In these cases, efforts to help them label emotions and solve problems in order to improve relationships with peers may be necessary.