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Five Easy Ways to Connect with Students

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In theory and rhetoric, the notion that teachers must build relationships with students is logical and well accepted. In my work in schools, I rarely, if ever, hear practitioners contest the idea that relationship building is a critical aspect to their success with students in any classroom or school.

The question, however, is how do teachers and other educators build those relationships? Further, how do educators sustain them—especially during times of conflict—in order to maximize learning opportunities?

At its root, building relationships with students is about meeting students where they are, attempting to understand them, and developing connections with them. From the outset, it requires that teachers are willing to find the good and the worth in students. All students possess positive characteristics and attributes, but these are sometimes overlooked and undervalued. To make these important connections, teachers may have to refocus and sharpen their lenses for thinking about students, especially when they have known students only in a negative light. Teachers have to ask themselves: “Am I prepared to recognize talent, potential talent, intellect, skill, excellence, and ability when they emerge in an unexpected social context or with an unexpected group of students?”

Teachers should feel empowered and poised to take advantage of the many micro- or classroom-level practices that can assist them in learning about and cultivating relationships with their students. Here are five that I recommend in particular:

1. Interview Your Students. Teachers sometimes spend infinite amounts of time talking about students to their colleagues or to students’ parents but minimal time actually talking to students themselves. This strategy suggests that teachers engage in conversations with students themselves to learn from and about them. Teachers can then incorporate this learning into the class curriculum and teaching. In my university classroom, I utilize this strategy. For instance, when I learn of a student’s interest in a particular aspect of education, I remain mindful of that area of interest. When I am reading journals and books, or when I am engaged in research projects, I often make copies of writing or related information that may be of interest to that student and share the materials with him or her.

2. Give assignments that allow students to share their experiences and interests. In language arts, assignments might include journal writing or essay writing. In social studies, assignments might include family history projects or local community-studies projects. In mathematics or science, assignments might include student-constructed word problems or community-based inquiry projects where students investigate the effects of environmental realities on health, crime, and/or poverty in their community.

3. Encourage classroom discussions that let students be the center of attention. Teachers should not always be at the center of discussions but should allow students to share events and experiences from home and their community. Students should be allowed to share whatever information they feel comfortable discussing. When I taught high school English, I used to facilitate what I came to call “rap sessions” that allowed students to have conversations with each other about what was happening in their lives inside and outside of school. The students developed topics that they wanted to discuss, and we selected a few that allowed them to debate issues or just to share their perspectives on a particular theme. The experience was inundated with learning opportunities: it allowed students to think about and construct a position; it allowed students to develop counter-positions; it helped students learn to substantiate their positions, listen to others, and build coherent narratives; and it provided students space for voice and authority in the classroom. These discussions gave students an opportunity to develop their own voice and perspective and allowed me to gain more knowledge about them.

4. Attend extracurricular activities featuring your students. It means something to students when teachers take time out of their schedules to visit an activity they are involved in. I shall never forget the time my third-grade teacher attended my football game at a city park. Needless to say, I played at my highest capacity that game, and I remember feeling a great sense of pride that my teacher had supported me in this way. In the third-grade classroom, I remember putting forth more effort after this experience and looking at my teacher with an intensified level of respect. It is important for teachers to attend students’ activities—such as their plays or sporting events—even when they are not on duty as coaches, chaperones, directors, or sponsors. Teachers from elementary through high school should feel a sense of responsibility to be present at events that help complete students’ educational experiences such as those connected to extra-curricular activities.

5. Visit a site in your students’ community. When teachers immerse themselves in a student’s community, they get a first-hand view

of the student's life outside the learning environment. I recall that my mother, who owned a beauty salon in my community, saw my second-grade teacher every other Thursday when my mother styled her hair. Moreover, other teachers who taught my sister, me, and many of my friends also received services from my mother's beauty salon. Of course, I am completely confident that there were conversations about me and my academic performance during those appointments when my mother styled my teacher's hair. My second-grade teacher was building knowledge about me, the community, and other students in the community because my friends' parents also visited my mother's shop for services.

These activities are not complicated but take time and planning. Yet they have great potential to help teachers deepen their knowledge about students, build important relationships with them, and develop curriculum and instructional practices that are meaningful to students.

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