Learning and the Teacher-Student Connection

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By developing trusting relationships with their students, teachers can increase their willingness to learn.

IN BRIEF
A critical element in effective teaching is establishing positive connections with students, particularly those at risk of failure. This article presents the findings and suggestions of researchers who have examined the practices and impact of caring teachers, and how their students perceive them.
ny principal—or anyone who has spent time with a good teacher—knows that content knowledge and classroom management skills are only two of the skills needed. Being able to connect with students is the critical third skill needed for effective teaching.

Relationship-building takes time—a scarce resource for most teachers—but Mendler (2001) stresses the need for positive teacher-student relationships, pointing out that “students will only care what we think when they think that we care.”

Caring classrooms can have an especially strong impact on students who are considered at risk by helping them develop the resilience they need to “beat the odds.” Benard (1998) describes turnaround teachers as “caring individuals who develop relationships with their students...Being interested in, actively listening to, and validating the feelings of struggling young people, as well as getting to know their strengths and gifts, conveys the message, ‘You matter.’”

The Student Perspective

In their study of student opinions about good teaching, Corbett and Wilson (2000) found their comments focused on a central theme—that of teacher caring: “Most important to students was that a teacher’s willingness and ability to help them with their work and with other problems showed them how much a teacher cared about them.”

Bosworth (1995) and her fellow researchers asked students to describe caring teachers and then grouped their comments into three categories:

- **Teaching practices**, such as helping with schoolwork, valuing individuality, showing respect, being tolerant, explaining work, checking for understanding, encouraging, and planning fun activities;
- **Non-classroom activities**, such as helping with personal problems, providing guidance, and going the extra mile; and
- **Personal attributes**, such as being nice/polite, liking to help students, being success-oriented, and being involved.

The most striking finding from these and other studies in which students were asked to describe caring teachers is the emphasis students place on academic support. Adler and Moulton (1998) conducted a year-long study of eighth-grade students to identify teacher behaviors that demonstrated caring. They found that students interpreted as caring “understanding, respecting academic confidentiality, encouragement, urging the completion of assignments, and making assignments fun, interesting, and adaptable to the style of the learner.”

On a less positive note, Bosworth (1995) notes “missed opportunities” for teachers to make caring connections with students that “need not detract from the pursuit of academic goals,” and cites observation of “too many classes in which teachers rarely smiled, said anything positive to a student, or used a student’s name for other than a reprimand.”

Making Personal Connections

Although comments from students make clear the importance of teaching in ways that demonstrate caring, teachers also can build personal connections with their students. These connections typically are most important for students having difficulty in their personal or academic life. Simply knowing a respected adult cares about their interests and concerns may provide such students with the emotional support needed to focus on learning.

However, this does not need to translate into being a “buddy.” McLeod *et al.* (2003) remind us that “students need and want teachers to be firm. The ability to blend firmness with warmth and caring is difficult, but certainly possible...”

Mendes (2003) talks about simple ways in which teachers can build connections with students:

- **Knowing students’ interests and concerns is one sure way to build rapport.** Being physically on the same level when talking with students—matching their rate of speech and their tone when it is positive—can help build rapport. Using students’ names during lectures and acknowledging all responses in some way during class discussions are also part of building rapport.

Working with Challenging Students

While much of this sounds like common sense, there will be times when special skills and lots of energy are...
needed to build connections—especially with difficult or hard-to-reach students. Mendler (2001) talks about strategies that may be helpful in such situations:

See your challenging students as having something to teach you. It is difficult for students to stay disconnected when caring, persistent adults reach out to them in ways that convey an eagerness to learn.

Stay optimistic and be persistent. Emotionally distant students who believe that anonymity will keep them safe from high expectations are unlikely to respond quickly to a teacher’s efforts to connect.

Build on strengths instead of trying to fix deficits.

The Role of the Principal

A key role for principals is to help teachers understand how important connecting with their students can be in maximizing possibilities for learning. In addition, principals should understand how their own behaviors demonstrate that school is a caring place.

Reitzug and Patterson (1998) shad-owed Debbie Pressley, regarded by other educators to be an excellent principal. They found that Pressley’s interactions with students contained five components that are also relevant for teachers:

Establishing a personal connection. Calling students by their first names and focusing on each student as a person rather than as a problem.

Honoring voice. Soliciting the perspec-
tives of others and “accepting their problems, concerns, and wishes as significant.”

Showing concern for the individual well-
being of students. Communicating expectations—especially academic expectations—for individual students.

Connecting individuals to their commu-
nities. Demonstrating that “caring does not mean that ‘anything goes’...[and that students need to be aware] that they are part of a broader community

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whose well-being they affect through their actions.”

Seeing alternative possibilities. Helping students leave problem situations “with a way of proceeding that had potential to resolve the situation.”

This brief overview of the teacher-student connection makes two points crystal clear: First, much of what both students and educators define as caring behaviors—those that help to create caring connections between teachers and students—is also simply good teaching. Second, many behaviors—such as calling students by name when they provide a correct answer or contribute to a class discussion—require little effort but make a large impact on students.

While the focus in today’s schools is rightfully on ensuring that students achieve academically, it is important not to lose sight of their need to feel their teachers care about them as individuals. By developing trusting relationships with their students, educators provide a key ingredient of the teaching-learning connection.

References


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WEB RESOURCES

Posted at this site is a chapter — “Bonding and Connecting”—from Winning Strategies for Classroom Management by Carol Cummings, that provides suggestions for ways to personalize the connection between teachers and students.

www.ascd.org/ed_topics/2000cummings/chapter2.html

An article by Samuel Perez discusses the role of caring in the teaching of culturally diverse students, with suggestions for school-wide and classroom practices.

www.parentsurf.com/p/articles/mi_qa3673/is_200010/ai_n8916696

Bonnie Benard talks about the things turnaround teachers do to build resilience in at-risk youth. A booklet from the Research Laboratory at Brown University provides an overview of a practice known as looping, in which teachers stay with the same students for more than a year.

www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/ic/looping/looping.pdf
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