The Power of Personal Relationships

Teachers and administrators are often directed to distance themselves from the children in their charge. Despite the land mines that accompany personal relationships with students, Mr. Mawhinney and Ms. Sagan argue that educators can still learn to build warm and loving communities of learners.

BY THOMAS S. MAWHINNEY AND LAURA L. SAGAN

DONTA stayed after class a few minutes to ask her teacher for help. As she hurried to get to her next class on time, her boyfriend cornered her and questioned her about a rumor he had heard involving Donta and his best friend. She could not get away. She was torn, because she had been late for this class several times before and did not want to disappoint her teacher again.

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When Donta finally got to her class, she was obviously nervous. Her teacher simply said, "Donta, how nice to see you. Come on in and take a seat." Donta smiled and felt relieved. She loved this class because the teacher made her feel important. "Why couldn't all teachers treat kids this way?" she thought.

Donta had just experienced the power of personal-relationship building. Her teacher could have demanded a pass, interrogated her in front of the class, greeted her with a sarcastic remark, or embarrassed her in some other way. Instead, she made her feel welcome. Donta was in a frame of mind ready to learn.

There are many children who make up their minds on the first day of class whether they are going to suc-

ceed or fail — sometimes consciously and sometimes not. How can this be, one might ask? Simply put, the initial student/teacher encounter often determines how well or poorly a child will perform throughout the school year. Likewise, a positive teacher/student relationship creates the classroom atmosphere necessary to maximize a student's mental state of readiness.

Picture the teacher who, in an attempt to establish control from the beginning, spends the first day describing classroom rules and routines and emphasizes what will happen if they are not followed. Coercive classrooms are not conducive to learning, yet many teachers continue to believe that a dominating relationship such as that between a parent and child ensures student compliance. How often have instructional leaders advised the first-year teacher to be tough in the beginning and loosen up later — that one can never do it in reverse? Well, after that first day of toughness, many students have "downshifted" into a fight-or-flight mode. In doing so they have bypassed much of their capacity for higher-order thinking or creative thought, and it is hard to learn when your bodily functions are focused on survival. We now understand that higher-level thinking is more likely to occur in the brain of a student who is emotionally secure than in the brain of a student who is scared, upset, anxious, or stressed.

Researchers continue to report that the teacher has a significant impact on student achievement. Based on an extensive analysis of research, Robert and Jana Marzano claim that "the quality of teacher-student relationships is the keystone for all other aspects of classroom management."[1] As former secondary school principals, we feel that personal-relationship building is one of the most important skills a teacher can possess and continue to refine. In this article, we intend to describe the many dimensions of this skill.

PERSONAL-RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

We first encountered the term "personal-relationship building" as the title of the shortest chapter in *The Skillful Teacher*, by Jon Saphier and Robert Gower.[2] The authors classify this skill under the broader category of motivation and supply a two-part definition: "the variety of ways teachers have of contacting students' personal worlds and the traits of teachers that seem to engender affection and regard in a relationship."[3]

We will use this framework in an attempt to paint a clear picture of this powerful tool in a teacher's pedagogical "bag of tricks." We do not expect even great teachers to have all the skills and characteristics we will describe. Adding one or two to one's repertoire each year will put the self-renewing teacher on a path to canonization.

WAYS OF CONTACTING STUDENTS' PERSONAL WORLDS

A beginning teacher gets only one chance to make a first impression. As we noted above, despite the advice commonly given to new teachers to be tough in the beginning, one does not want to scare off the marginal students or those students who need a caring and nurturing environment to survive and prosper. Teachers can create such an environment by consciously engaging in particular practices and behaviors.

Knowing your students and allowing them to know you. Differentiating instruction — planning varied lessons according to students' interests — is an important skill. Therefore we recommend that teachers spend the first few days of the school year or new semester getting to know their students by using interest surveys or other activities to discover the ways in which each one of them is unique.

We also support those teachers who allow their students to know them. Teachers who offer their students "genuineness and self-disclosure"[4] reveal "aspects of themselves that allow [the] image of authority figure to be tempered by images of teacher-as-a-real-person."[5] Steven Wolk believes that "teachers need to allow students to see them as complete people with emotions, opinions, and lives outside of school. A good way for a teacher to get students to treat him or her as a human being is to act like one."[6]

Two of our most beloved teachers are women who, when faced with child-care problems, bring their young children to school for short periods of time. Whenever this happens, secondary and middle school students flock to them. While some schools frown on teachers' using the workplace as a backup day-care facility, we find that the practice allows students to get a peek at the other side of a teacher's life. Not only does it improve relationships, it forms a long-lasting bond between the students and the teacher's own children.

Reestablishing contact and high expectations. Reestablishing contact with a student with whom one has had a negative interaction is one of the most difficult things a teacher can do. Yet if that student is ever to feel a sense of belonging again, the teacher must somehow have a positive interaction with the student around some other

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issue. No apology is needed, but the message that the negative incident is in the past and that it is time to move on must be clear. How often have you heard students claim that they are doing poorly in a class because the teacher "hates" them? We believe that students have an innate sense that adults hold grudges and it is not clear to them when an incident of misbehavior has been forgotten. Therefore, we feel that teachers — and schools, for that matter — need to consciously apply techniques to bring closure to discipline problems, so that students understand that "everyone makes mistakes. You need to learn from it, and move on."

There is an abundance of research on the academic benefits of high expectations for students. High expectations are a crucial ingredient in personal-relationship building. In our years of administrative experience, we have seen the damage that low expectations can do even before a student walks through the classroom door for the first time. We fought in our respective schools for heterogeneous grouping, yet many days we were butting up against a wall of long-held teacher beliefs in the efficiency of sorting and separating students. We encountered one teacher who had special education students coloring rather than participating in a writing assignment with the rest of the class. You can imagine how demeaned those children felt. We will leave it at this: a student — especially a young person who has experienced the negative effects of low expectations over time — can sense when a teacher has high expectations for all students.

Active and empathetic listening. Active listening not only helps build personal relationships but is a powerful teaching strategy as well. James Stronge places this practice under the more general category of caring.[7] We feel that it deserves special mention, having observed its effect on student participation in the classroom as well as the expressions on the faces of those students who are the recipients of this potent form of attention from the teacher.

Active listening serves to:

- reaffirm to the speaker the content of his or her remark;
- confirm to the students that they have been heard in a nonjudgmental way;
- restate or infer the feeling state of the speaker; and, most important,
- send a message to the students that their comments or responses are important to the teacher.[8]

You can imagine the look on an insecure student's face when the teacher refers to an answer he or she gave earlier in the class — "as Jimmy said at the beginning of class, one of the main causes of the Civil War was. . . ." Even using students' names when repeating or rephrasing a comment is a powerful teaching and personal-relationship-building move. We cannot encourage teachers enough to use active listening in their classrooms.

Involvement. For more than 30 years, first as teachers and then as administrators, we have enjoyed being involved with students, whether chaperoning a dance, overseeing a field trip, or watching a school sporting or other extracurricular event. School staff members who appear at activities taking place outside the normal school day are those with whom students most easily connect. Many veteran teachers feel that they have paid their dues with respect to this aspect of school life and pass on such duties to their younger colleagues. Yet we find that students appreciate the fact that *any* teacher attends an event or chaperones an activity. We ourselves showed up at so many events that students began to ask why we were not at every activity — too much of a good thing, perhaps?

TEACHER TRAITS THAT ENGENDER AFFECTION AND REGARD

In addition to using particular practices, teachers who successfully build personal relationships with students exhibit certain attitudes and qualities.

Respect, courtesy, and fairness. One of the most respected teachers that we have observed was a traditional, veteran teacher. Year after year, students would affirm that he was one of the best teachers they had ever had. In his classroom, you had to pay particular attention to understand why. He was courteous, always saying please and thank you. He frequently gave students one last chance to increase their grades on a quiz or exam. He insisted that those who did not do well see him for help. He never got mad or raised his voice. He used humor but was never sarcastic. He was loyal to the absent, never speaking of other students in front of their peers or with his fellow teachers. He disciplined students privately; he never did so publicly. He is our "poster child" for

the category of respect, courtesy, and fairness.

We believe that these basic human qualities are often lost in secondary schools. As adults, we bring to school scripts that we learned, not from teacher training, but from our experiences as parents and as children being parented. Under pressure, we often revert to these scripts. Take the example of a teacher we overheard when one of her students walked out of her class in anger. The teacher followed the student into the hall, asking, "Who do you think you are?" How is the student supposed to answer that question?

Respect, courtesy, and fairness cover a wide variety of teacher behaviors. A teacher can demonstrate respect by:

- using students' interests in class activities,
- allowing students to express ideas without criticism,
- correcting errors without putdowns,
- balancing corrective feedback with recognition of strengths,
- displaying student products, and
- using specific praise.[9]

According to students, fairness on the part of the teacher includes:

- treating students as people,
- refraining from ridicule and from creating situations that cause students to lose the respect of their peers,
- being consistent and giving students opportunities to have input into the classroom, and
- providing opportunities for all students to participate and succeed.[10]

A teacher displays courtesy by:

- smiling often,
- being polite,
- not interrupting,
- exhibiting simple kindnesses such as picking up a dropped item or holding a door, and
- greeting students when they arrive and wishing them well when they leave.

Caring and understanding. Caring too much can be dangerous for teachers. We all have heard stories of teachers who have blurred the line between their professional and personal lives. It is possible to develop unhealthy relationships that are damaging to both the teacher and the child. Yet not caring can be equally debilitating. How often do youths who drop out of school complain that no one cares about them or even cares if they exist? We believe that the right kind of caring is the secret to developing students' motivation to achieve.

Nancy Hoffman asserts, "There is a great deal to be done to make the caring work of teachers less elusive, to name it among our expectations, to study how it works, and to reward it as a substantial component of excellence in teaching."[11] While teachers cannot possibly involve themselves completely in the lives of all their students, they can exhibit a burning interest in student achievement by using effective praise and by showing an almost parental pride in exceptional student work. Hoffman uses the term "pedagogic caring," which she defines as a passion for learning that emanates from the teacher. It is easy to gauge the level of this type of caring by observing the display of student work in and around a teacher's room or office.

We think Peter Senge sums it up well: "When people genuinely care, they are actively committed. They are doing what they truly want to do. They are full of energy and enthusiasm. They persevere, even in the face of frustration and setbacks, because what they are doing is what they must do. It is their work."[12]

When we speak of "understanding" on the part of teachers, we are referring primarily to empathy, defined as "the ability to vicariously feel what another person is feeling, to understand and connect where that person is."[13] We agree with Arnold Goldstein that this capacity to understand/empathize is positively associated with a broad range of prosocial behaviors, such as cooperation, sociability, and interpersonal compe-

tence, and negatively associated with aggressive behavior.[14] It is so important for the teacher to know that each of her students is walking through the door with a myriad of social experiences from neglect to overindulgence. While we do not advocate for the lessening of standards or expectations for students who may not be having a good day, we do think that getting inside a child's head and empathizing with what is there will go a long way toward fostering the kinds of relationships that promote higher achievement.

Humor. According to Rita Dunn, students who are global processors — those who see the big picture and learn better through anecdotes — need humor to function more effectively.[15] Roland Barth states that his personal vision of a great school is one that is characterized by humor, and we concur.[16] But teachers need to be aware that there is a fine line between appropriate and inappropriate humor. Poking fun at someone in an attempt to win students' favor is inappropriate. The ability to see humor in situations and to laugh at oneself is key. Appropriate humor makes people smile, it creates warmth in a classroom, it relaxes students, and it reverses the "fight-or-flight" response that many troubled students take with them into every class they enter.

Love of children. It would seem obvious that all teachers must possess this quality to work in education. Unfortunately, we have encountered teachers and other staff members who leave us scratching our heads, wondering how and why these individuals ever chose — and were hired — to work with children. There are adults in our schools who do not like "other people's children" and do not like being around them. We absolutely have to prevent these individuals from entering the profession, or, if we mistakenly hire them, we must have the courage to weed them out.

RISKING CLOSENESS

Andy Hargreaves refers to the "emotional geographies of teaching" — the patterns of closeness and distance that shape the emotions we experience.[17] In his discussion of professional distance, he observes, "School teaching has become an occupation with a feminine caring ethic that is trapped within a rationalized and bureaucratic structure." This is the problem for educators working in politically sensitive environments. Teachers and administrators are often directed to distance themselves from children in order to avoid the risks of personal relationships. As Hargreaves notes, "The dilemma for teachers is that although they are supposed to care for their students, they are expected to do so in a clinical and detached way — to mask their emotions."[18] We know there is validity in establishing closeness, yet there are land mines all about the countryside. We can be safe and sterile or take a chance and create a warm, loving community of learners.

We wrote this article because we deeply believe in the concept of personal-relationship building. We wanted to add to the knowledge base regarding this valuable skill and to describe it in a way that makes it real — something you can see and feel, something that is coachable, and, above all, something that plays a key role in the teaching act. There used to be a myth that good teachers are born, not made, and that there is nothing one can do to help the unfortunate who do not have this natural ability. We disagree and believe that "being skillful means you can do something that can be seen; it means different levels of skill may be displayed by different individuals; and it means, above all, that you can learn how to do it and continue to improve at it."[19]

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