

Why We Must Invest in Relationships First

By Katie Martin

It's been 15 year since I opened the doors to my first group of 7th graders and I can remember it like it was yesterday. I moved across the Pacific Ocean from San Diego to Oahu, Hawaii to teach 7th graders. Many thought I was crazy and maybe I was. To this day I will never forget meeting a local kid who was running one of the activity booths at a luau I attended on one of my first few days on the island (so cliché, I know!). He asked where I was from and when I told him I had just moved to the island to teach, he looked at me and said, "YOU are going to teach at Ilima? They are going to kill you!" Based on the reaction on my face he quickly retracted and said, "you know, as long as they know you care, they will be good to you." Whether or not he was just backtracking to avoid the look on my face or he really meant it, he could not have been more accurate.

Although I was handed a book of policies and procedures to cover each day for the first week, I knew in my heart that I had to build relationships with my students. Even though I was a new teacher, I made the decision to minimize the policies and maximize the time I spent building relationships and I am so glad I did. I just got this message from a former student recently that reminded me of how powerful that investment was:



In addition to the message, this post, *They Have to Be Part of the Solution* by George Couros had me thinking all day about my classroom and how I chose to prioritize our classroom community. Learning names, seeing students as individuals, co-creating community guidelines, establishing jobs and greeting students daily were foundational to developing relationships and creating the classroom culture.

Learn (and use) names right away– Throughout life I have made it a point remember people's names because I appreciate when people remember mine. It makes me feel like they care and helps to establish a connection. In my teacher education program it was impressed upon even more so the importance of learning the names of students immediately. To build relationships, I challenged myself to learn names on the first day. As a middle school teacher learning almost 150 names presented quite a challenge, but I was committed. I took pictures of each student and

wrote out their names and studied them... a lot. The next day I knew and used them all it proved to be foundational to building the relationships that have lasted to this day.

Student interest & learning style inventory– While I was taking pictures, I had the students complete an interest inventory so I could get to know who they were. They shared about their family, their interests but I also asked questions about how they like to learn. I created cards for each student (with the picture I took) and put each class on a ring that I used all year to create group and reflect on how to best support them. The interest inventory helped students share who they were and allowed me to gain a better understanding of them as individuals. As the year went on and things changed or I learned more, I could add notes to the cards.

Co-create community guidelines- From day 1, it was important students felt that the classroom was ours, not mine. The process of co-creating the community guidelines was modeled in my teacher education program and so it was only natural to do the same for my students. I asked them to think about how they wanted to be treated and how they wanted to treat others in our community. First, students independently reflected, then they shared in small groups, and finally we put the big ideas into a list of 4-6 community guidelines. Each class made a poster and they varied across the 5 classes, just like the kids, but ultimately helped establish the culture for each group. We all signed the poster that each class made and hung it up on the wall to remind us of our agreements to one another.

Establish classroom jobs- Within the first week or two I had created a list of classroom jobs and had students apply for the ones they were interested in. I tried to match the kids and the jobs and they typically got one of their top 3 choices. This created a sense of ownership for the students and they were empowered to take on responsibilities that helped make the classroom learning community function. Students had jobs like classroom photographer, greeter (for guests), birthday celebrator, historian.. among many others.

Greet them at the door- No matter how much I needed to get done in that 5 minute break between classes, I prioritized greeting students at the door. Creating jobs for the students allowed me to do this because they could take care of the logistics of setting up class and I could focus on the learners and their disposition as they walked in the door. This investment helped to connect with my students and see who was having a particularly good or bad day. Greeting them each day, I believe, made our time together more productive because they knew they were cared about and therefore were (mostly) willing to try their best and work to meet our learning goals.

There is a lot written about leadership and developing the culture of schools and districts, and we tend to think about the administrators as “the leaders”. If you think about it though, teachers are leaders in the truest form. They are so pivotal in developing the culture in their classrooms. Although what happens in the rest of the school, district and world impacts our classrooms, so many teachers create an environment, in spite of it all, to ensure their students have a place in the world where they feel safe, valued and cared about. If we truly want to see different outcomes for learners in our education system and develop the whole child, we need to prioritize relationships with the individuals to allow for significant learning to occur.

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