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In this era of accountability and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), test scores are all that matter. Or are they? Could our preoccupation with test scores be producing classroom conditions that actually undermine student learning? When tests become high-stakes, teachers naturally focus their attention on the knowledge and skills the tests measure—leaving less time to engage students in conversation about personal issues or make them feel valued and supported. Feeling pressured to produce higher test scores, teachers become more controlling and less patient, particularly with students who lag behind.

Ironically, these effects of NCLB get in the way of achieving the very goals the law aims to promote. Learning requires effort, and one of the best predictors of students’ effort and engagement in school is the relationships they have with their teachers (Osterman, 2000). To promote high academic standards, teachers need to create supportive social contexts and develop positive relationships with students.

Being a caring and supportive teacher means holding students accountable while providing the support they need to succeed.

For 30 years, I have been conducting research on students’ motivation to learn. I have interviewed hundreds of students from preschool through high school to identify the classroom practices that engender effort in schoolwork. My observations confirm a broad body of research that has demonstrated that students function more effectively when they feel respected and valued and function poorly when they feel disrespected or marginalized (National Research Council, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When students have a secure relationship with their teachers, they are more comfortable taking risks that enhance learning—tackling challenging tasks, persisting when they run into difficulty, or asking questions when they are confused. Urban students claim that when a teacher shows genuine concern for them, they feel that they owe the teacher something in return. They don’t want to disappoint a teacher who cares about them (Davidson, 1999). Fortunately, research has revealed a great deal about the kinds of teacher behavior and the school structures that promote students’ feelings of belonging.

How Students Know Teachers Care

Young children share their feelings and information about themselves with teachers who are affectionate and nurturing. These close relationships with teachers lead to higher levels of student engagement and achievement (Pianta, 1999). Specific behaviors that promote positive relationships with young children include listening to their concerns, responding to transgressions gently and with explanations rather than sharply and with punishment, and showing positive emotions (smiling, being playful). When young children are asked how they know their teachers care about them, they refer to teachers being attentive (“She says hi to me when I come in the room”); addressing their nonacademic needs (“She saves a snack for me if I miss snack time”); and being fair (“She makes sure I get a turn”). The personal relationships that these behaviors engender are particularly valuable for children who come to school with poor social skills (Pianta, Stuhlman, & Hamre, 2002).

Adolescents report that they work harder for teachers who treat them as individuals and express interest in their personal lives outside school. Caring teachers, they report, are also honest, fair, and trusting (Davidson & Phelan, 1999). These teachers grant students some autonomy and opportunities for decision making—for example, by giving them choices in assignments, engaging them in developing classroom rules, and encouraging them to express their opinions in classroom discussions.
The key to raising achievement is connecting students with teachers who support them not just as learners, but also as people.

The social dimension of classrooms may be particularly important for at-risk youth. When researchers ask youths who have dropped out of high school why they left school, the young people frequently say it was because no one cared. Those who stay in school cite meaningful relationships with adults who show an interest in them as individuals (National Research Council, 2004). In a 1997 Public Agenda phone survey, 64 percent of students claimed that they would learn more if their teachers "personally cared about their students as people"; unfortunately, only 30 percent claimed that most of their teachers did care. According to a recent large survey of high school students, African American students were particularly responsive to teachers who showed that they cared about the students' learning (Ferguson, 2002). When asked why they worked hard when they did, 47 percent checked "My teachers encourage me to work hard"; only 15 percent checked "My teacher demanded it."

Nurturing Through High Expectations

Being a caring and supportive teacher does not mean coddling; rather, it means holding students accountable while providing the support they need to succeed. One adolescent in a low-income, high-crime community in California told me that he liked his high school because the teachers "sit on your face." He explained that when the teachers weren't sure that students really understood something, they stuck with them, got them help, or gave them some materials to help them figure it out. If students hadn't done their homework, teachers made them stay in at lunch or after school to finish it. If they didn't do their homework for several days in a row, teachers called their parents. Conversations with students in both urban and suburban schools have convinced me that as long as teachers are providing the support students need, the students interpret teachers' efforts to hold them accountable as evidence that they care.

Consistent with my own observations, research on adolescents finds that students in this age group define caring teachers as those who communicate directly and regularly with them about their academic progress and make sure they understand what has been taught (Wentzel, 2002). When researchers asked urban high school students what advice they would give a new teacher, one student replied, "If there's confusion on my face, I want you to see it. If there's disagreement, I want you to say, "You disagree? Why?"

Another student complained about a particularly uncaring teacher:

He's just writing things on the board . . . He doesn't look at the class like, "Do you understand?" He's just teaching it to us. He
sees that a couple of students understand it and he moves on. He doesn't make a space for us to ask. (Cushman, 2002, p. 8)

The press for learning that many adolescents view as evidence of a caring teacher differs from the pressure for learning created by NCLB. Teachers press students to learn by encouraging them, paying attention to their work and giving constructive feedback, refusing to accept halfhearted efforts, providing assistance when students need it, and refusing to give up on students. Holding students accountable without this support and encouragement is likely to discourage and alienate them rather than motivate them.

Supporting Positive Student-Teacher Relationships
What goes around comes around. The social context for adults affects the social context for students. Teachers who feel respected, trusted, and cared about as individuals are in a much better position to offer the same support to their students. School administrators can emphasize that relationships matter by devoting professional development time to the social context of classrooms. It's equally important, however, that administrators provide time and opportunities for teachers to develop common goals and to build close, collegial relationships with one another.

It is crucial to structure schools to allow for sustained contact between students and teachers. Small schools and class sizes help. Schools can also organize classes and teaching schedules to reduce the number of students a teacher sees each day. Middle and high schools, for example, have experimented with teams of teachers who work with 60–100 students.

Multiyear grouping is one scheduling option that enables teachers to develop sustained relationships with students. For example, a school may establish K–1, 2–3, and 4–5 classes so that students are with the same teacher or set of teachers for two years. Another option is looping, in which one teacher or a set of teachers moves up with a group of students for two or more years.

In secondary schools, block scheduling, involving classes at least 90 minutes long, gives teachers more opportunity to interact with students for sustained periods of time; classes are less rushed and thus more likely to encourage informal as well as academic interactions. Policies that facilitate one-on-one access to teachers, such as having teachers in their classrooms 30 minutes before or after school—or allocating some other specific time during the day when they are available for help or conversation—also help build strong student-teacher relationships.

Advisory groups are another common strategy that schools use to ensure that every student has a close personal relationship with at least one adult. Each adult in the school— including teachers and sometimes nonprofessional staff—serves as advisor for a small group of students (usually about 20) for the entire time the students are at the school. When I talk to students from low-income communities in high schools that have such a program, they invariably refer to their advisor as playing a crucial role in their persistence and commitment to finishing high school. Many refer to their advisor as a parent figure: "She's like a mom; she really knows me and keeps an eye on me." "He really wants me to go to college, and I don't want to disappoint him."

Schools should take particular care to promote good relationships with the students who are most at risk academically. Unfortunately, teachers often favor and develop more personal, supportive relationships with high-achieving students than with low-achieving students. Tracking magnifies this effect (Osterman, 2000). Eliminating tracking can go a long way toward reducing differential teacher treatment of students and giving more students an opportunity to feel supported and valued by
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their teachers. Even within individual classes, however, students who struggle academically typically have the worst relationships with their teacher. Teachers need to make special efforts to show a personal interest in and interact positively with the students whom they find most difficult to teach—by going out of their way to compliment positive behaviors, showing an interest in the students’ lives outside school, listening to the students’ perspectives on the problems they are having, and collaborating with them on developing strategies to address these problems.

Relationships Support Achievement

The spotlight on performance created by NCLB and other accountability policies must not distract us from attending to factors that substantially affect how well students perform. The most difficult-to-reach students will often go all out for a teacher who demonstrates caring for them as individuals and commitment to their success. School policies that support positive relationships between teachers and students can contribute significantly, not only to students’ social-emotional health and well-being, but also to their academic performance. That’s why paying attention to students’ nonacademic needs is a key ingredient in schools’ efforts to meet today’s high academic expectations.

References


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