

The parameter of Personal Relationship Building concerns the relationships that teachers forge between themselves and their students and the elements that go into making those relationships productive. Teachers have many good reasons for building relationships with students, and one of them is good classroom management. Students who like and respect their teachers are less likely to buck the program, less likely to be discipline problems, more likely to accept instruction and focusing moves. Students who dislike or have affectively neutral relationships with their teachers are less inhibited from misbehavior and more likely to resist instructional focusing moves. But there are other reasons teachers build relationships, such as making students feel as if they are worthwhile people, making the human environment of the classroom safe, pleasant, and healthy, and making teaching fun. All teachers build relationships of one sort or another with their students, and those relationships are an important variable in understanding what goes on in the complex society of a classroom and how students perform within it.

There are two ways to look qualitatively at the Personal Relationship Building that goes on between teachers and students: 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.

## Ways of Relating

In order to relate to you as a person, I have to attend to you, focusing on you as an individual. If I am teaching math, I may be focusing on the math and not on you, but if I am able also to focus on you, then I am alert to your responses and make moves to enable you, particularly you, to assimilate the concepts. I am then relating to you personally and in a particular way: as an information processor. If I relate to you as a feeling being with hopes, fears, dreams, and goals, then I am attending to those aspects of you, listening for cues to those states, thinking about you and your interior states—yet another way of relating to people at a personal, one-to-one level. If I play sports with you, I interact with you as a teammate or a competitor and relate to you around the game. Maybe I talk to you about current events, do craft projects with you, help you plan your work, talk over interesting personal experiences at home or outside school that are important to you. There are many possible ways in which I can relate to you.

There are also many possible ways in which teachers may relate to students: as information processors, as feeling beings, over current events, over shared interests in some activity or topic, and so on. Further, teachers may relate in different ways to different students, and in different ways at different times to any one student. It is useful to examine our own repertoires here and look for opportunities to match how we relate to the needs of students and the circumstances of classrooms. In this area of the Personal Relationship Building parameter, we can distinguish four levels of performance a teacher may exhibit:

1. *Does not relate to students as individuals at all.*
2. *Relates to students as individuals primarily in one way (e.g., as information processors, around sports, or chats during breaks).*
3. *Relates to students in a variety of ways.*
4. *Matches the way of relating to the student.*

The fourth level describes teachers who seek points of contact with students as individuals beyond what may be obvious or easy. They may go out of their way to identify, or create, opportunities or events during or outside the school day to contact particular students. Some teachers arrange conferences with each student each month (say, one a day). Others occasionally have lunch with individual students back in the classroom. Perhaps, for example, the first way to build a relationship with Chris will be around the piano where the teacher can play a duet with him, or just play a song he may want to learn.

Clearly the better a teacher can match ways of relating to individual students and to particular circumstances, the stronger and more productive relationships will be with all students.

## **Eight Key Teacher Traits**

Considering teacher characteristics or traits brings in a viewpoint generally foreign to our work and obsolete in the field of studies on teaching. However, we believe that it is necessary to highlight certain classes of teacher behavior that are repeatedly mentioned as important by students in interview studies when they are asked about their teachers (Johnson 1976). The traits and behaviors that seem most important are fairness, appearance, humor, courtesy, respect, realness, reestablishing contact, and active listening. It is reasonable to connect these traits with Personal Relationship Building because they foster more personal regard for a teacher, which can be a basis of good personal relationships.

## Fairness

This seems to be the *sine qua non* for personal regard. Unless students perceive teachers as being fair in making decisions that bear on them (e.g., making assignments, arbitrating disputes, giving help, choosing teams) they cannot begin to like them.

## Appearance

Appearance is mentioned more than one might have expected when students describe teachers for whom they have regard. Perhaps students take good grooming and neat, clean clothes as signs of respect or regard from the teacher—that the adult considers them important enough to look good for them.

## Humor

William Glasser, creator of “Reality Therapy,” says humor is a form of caring. Teachers need not be joke tellers, but those who respond openly to humorous moments or who can kid with students seem to strike particularly responsive chords.

## Courtesy

A courteous move, even though it might be quite formal and almost ritualistic, is still a direct gesture in recognition of, and often in behalf of, an individual. As such, it is a personal gesture, however remote, and connected with this parameter of Personal Relationship Building. Students tend to respond to courtesy in kind. No case needs to be made for courtesy as a desirable teacher behavior. It is included here as a trait related to Personal Relationship Building because students mention it and because it seems reasonable as a basis for relationships in the same way fairness is: a *sine qua non* for personal regard. A lack of courtesy blocks relationships and creates resentment. It would seem that an acceptable minimum of courteous consideration would be discernible in a yes-no sense. Discriminations beyond that would be very difficult.

## Respect

Teachers show respect to students as people in many ways (Moustakas 1966). They may honor student interests by making a place in the day for students to pursue them or attempt to integrate these interests into the meeting of standard curriculum objectives through learning activities. They may show respect for student ideas by allowing or encouraging students to express them without criticism (though not necessarily without correction). They show respect for students by correcting errors without using putdowns, or without making students feel dumb or as if they’ve walked into an ambush (Randolf and Howe 1966), or they may join corrective feedback with recognition of strengths. They may show they value students’ products by treating them with care, providing for their display, and giving feedback that

shows the teacher has truly examined the product, whether the feedback is positive or corrective (for instance, saying, "You really captured all the tiny parts of the spider in your drawing," rather than just saying, "Beautiful" or "Good work").

We don't argue that praise such as "good work" or "beautiful" is bad or meaningless, or even necessarily less good in certain circumstances than praise that specifies the attributes that are praiseworthy (Ginott 1965). It's just that to tie feedback to respect rather than just praise, the statement must show some real attention to the product. Conceivably, the teacher could show this attention and respect for the student's product nonverbally by looking long and carefully at the piece, and then perhaps sincerely saying, "Good work, Julia."

### Realness

Authority acts as a screen that obscures seeing the "boss" as a person—that is, as a thinking, feeling being with a life history of experience. Instead, we tend to see the boss as the boss, the teacher as the teacher—the authority role figure. Young children who address their teacher as "teacher" rather than by name are clearly in this mode. Children begin to see their teacher as real, as a person, only if the teacher lets them.

There are behaviors by which teachers reveal aspects of themselves that allow this image of authority figure to be tempered by images of teacher-as-real-person. Teachers share anecdotes with students from their own lives, integrating personal experiences into explanations and presentations. "I" messages as described by Thomas Gordon (1974) are direct verbal behaviors by which teachers explicitly state their feelings and the behavior or circumstance made them feel that way. (See Attention chapter.) Effectiveness Training Associates reports numerous cases of children who, when confronted by "I" messages, change disruptive behavior: children who had no idea their behavior was affecting their teacher adversely. When these statements are used, it is sometimes the first time students have been asked to see their teacher as a person with feelings.

### Reestablishing Contact

When a teacher strongly reprimands a student (e.g., sends the student out of the room) or shows anger by carrying out some high-voltage disciplinary move ("Stop that right now! You cannot destroy someone else's work. Then if you can't help him rebuild it, this area is closed to you for the day. Good-bye!"), their relationship may be under a cloud of tension (as it should be). After such incidents, the teacher who keeps good relationships looks to interact in a positive, personal way with the student around some other context. This is reestablishing contact: conveying the message that the teacher is not carrying a grudge, that the relationship is still intact. It removes the tension between the teacher and student and gives the student

an emotional entry back into the flow of activities. There is no apology in the teacher move or any implied backing down from the firmness of the previous move or from the anger. It's simply a way of saying, "Okay, let's get in touch again"—a return to normalcy.

To observe this type of behavior, one would simply have to see a personal move with a student close on the heels of a discipline or desist incident. We need not guess how far the teacher went out of the way to create the positive interaction; we just have to see the move in reasonable time proximity to the incident.

### Active Listening

Reflective listening feeds back to speakers the content of their remarks and thus confirms to them that they have been heard. Active listening adds a feeling component to the feedback, and the listener restates or infers the feeling state of the speaker aloud. For example, an active listener might say, "You're stuck on these problems [content] and getting really frustrated [feeling]." Teachers who use active listening are communicating concern for students' personal feeling states directly. Although it can be used manipulatively and insincerely, it is reasonable to argue that on-target and genuine active listening is a relationship-building behavior. It is the verbal behavioral embodiment of empathy. When combined with accuracy and respect (Egan 1975), active listening makes children feel understood and cared about (Aspy and Roebuck 1977). "She really listens to me" is a common statement students make about teachers they like and respect.

The quality of relationships between teachers and students is a deep and constant backdrop to all that is transpiring in classrooms, and one well worth examining. In analyzing your own teaching behavior (or observing another's teaching) for these traits, bear in mind that the appropriateness of moves from any trait may vary with the form of instruction or learning environment in operation at any given moment. For instance, moves that show respect for students as individuals may not surface when students are in a period of programmed instruction and interacting with the system rather than with the teacher as person. It might take the course of a whole day, or even many days, to see a teacher display the full range of his repertoire for the traits described in this section. Thus, checking on these behaviors requires an extended observation, or perhaps even several repeated observations, in order to see the full range of behavior. 🐼

# Checking on Personal Relationship Building

*Examine your own teaching, or that of another, and see which of the following apply. For each behavior or trait that you credit, see if you can cite an event or an exchange to back it up. For those you wish to develop, note a time or an opportunity for trying them out. Be as specific as you can.*

1. Ways of relating to students: Circle the level of performance.

no way

one way

variety of ways

matches the way to individuals

2. Traits: Check any that apply.

- fairness
- appearance
- humor
- courtesy
- respect
- realness
- reestablishing contact
- active listening

# Personal Relationship Building Quiz

1. Respect and fairness are two of the six traits in personal relationship building. Generate a list of events, arenas, or situations where students make up their minds about teachers regarding fairness and respect.
2. Pick two events, arenas, or situations in respect and two in fairness. Give three specific examples in each arena of how a teacher might act in order to be perceived by students as having respect or being fair.

## Source Materials on Personal Relationship Building

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