

## CHAPTER 1

# Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

### What Is It?

Building a positive *public* relationship with students means teachers work at creating a connection where children feel that educators view them as more than just bodies in their class. Rather, they feel like their teachers care for them as human beings and are interested in their lives, dreams, and challenges, as well as being interested in how well they learn the curriculum. And, in a healthy classroom, students reciprocate that to the best of their ability.

This is a *public* relationship, not a *private* one. Public relationships (between students and teachers, teachers and administrators, etc.) have clear boundaries and are not unconditional while our private relationships (with friends and family) may not have those distinctions. In a public relationship, the “currency” can be reciprocity and accountability, while in a private relationship the “currency” is love. The dangers of a professional blurring those boundaries are obvious.

The teacher/student relationship is a public one—a caring one, a relationship that requires patience and understanding—but, nevertheless, a public one necessitating respect, communication, and boundaries, as this next story illustrates.

One year, Larry had a student (we can call him John) with an enormous number of challenges. Larry put a great deal of time and energy into supporting John, including purchasing books of John’s own choosing to read, working with him to develop alternative assignments that would be more fun and accessible, and providing occasional snacks between classes. John made great progress during the first six weeks of

the school year and was a delight to have in class. However, things suddenly began to go dramatically downhill. Larry made a routine request of Larry and John shouted back, “You don’t care about me and you just want to kick me out of class!” Larry asked him to step out in the hall.

This is what Larry said to him in a calm voice:

I felt hurt by what you said. I feel like I’ve bent over backward to support you and help you succeed (I then gave examples). I don’t need thanks, but I expect respect. And I haven’t been feeling very respected by you over the past few weeks. You’ve raised your voice at me, refused to do work, and distracted other students. I will be a helpful and supportive teacher to you, as I am with all the students in my class. But I don’t feel like continuing to go out of my way for someone who doesn’t show me respect. I want to emphasize that I will be a helpful and supportive teacher to you, but I’m just not going to continue to go the extra mile.

John began to react negatively, but Larry quickly ended the conversation and they returned to class. Afterward, however, John returned to being respectful and hardworking, and they were able to resume their healthy and public relationship. John ended up having a very successful year.

A private relationship is marked by unconditional, unwavering support. By not ignoring John’s behavior and clearly communicating his boundaries, Larry kept their relationship public. The bottom line, as educator author Rick Wormeli has put it, is we teachers can be very friendly with students, but need to stop at being friends—at least until after they graduate!<sup>1</sup>

Of course, as in most things in our world, it’s not always either/or, and there can be a great deal of nuance in a teacher/student relationship. Nevertheless, keeping the idea of public/private relationships in mind has helped us both maintain more of a personal/professional “equilibrium.”

In addition to the public/private dynamic, there is another choice about the kind of relationship teachers need to make about our relationship with the young people in our classrooms. Arizona State University researcher Victoria Theisen-Homer has characterized it as the difference between “instrumental” and “reciprocal.”<sup>2,3</sup> During Larry’s years as a community organizer, he would frame it similarly,

<sup>1</sup> Ferlazzo, L. (2011, October 25). Response: Can teachers be friends with students?—Part One. *Classroom Q & A with Larry Ferlazzo*.

<sup>2</sup> Theisen-Homer, V. (2021). Preparing teachers for relationships with students: Two visions, two approaches. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 72(3), 271–283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487120922223>

<sup>3</sup> Sparks, S. D. (2019, March 12). Why teacher-student relationships matter. *EducationWeek*.

though use the terms “transactional” versus “transformational.”<sup>4</sup> Larry (and we believe Professor Theisen-Homer) would say transactional teachers tend to look at the world through a lens of punishment, rewards, and or exchange (“horse trading”) for motivation, while transformational leaders focus on listening, collaboration, and leading by example.

Classroom dynamics, though, do not always allow for either/or approaches. Yes, having a better teacher-student relationship will likely improve compliance, and we all know that we need a lot of that in our classes. But do we really always just want to look at our students through the lens of how we can best get them to do what we want? That kind of viewpoint seems a bit soulless and empty and is not likely to lead to teacher-energizing stories that we can’t wait to tell our families that night.

Having a healthy emphasis on reciprocal/transformational relationships, where we demonstrate genuine curiosity about our students’ lives and what they know and think, and where we can often collaborate and learn together—now, those are the kinds of relationships that have powered the two of us in our decades of teaching.

We’re not trying to sell a pie-in-the-sky view of the classroom—sometimes you’ve just got to get students to sit down and do the assignment, and positive relationships help.

But don’t forget that at its heart, learning is transformational, not transactional, and genuine relationships can help. Our students are smart, and most of them will detect the difference.

## Why We Like It

We often use two quotations to explain why we value teacher-student relationships so highly.

One is from education researcher Robert Marzano, who wrote: *if the relationship between the teacher and the students is good, then everything else that occurs in the classroom seems to be enhanced.*<sup>5</sup>

In our experiences, and in the experiences of many teachers with whom we have been in contact, truer words have never been spoken.

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*Where those positive relationships exist, there are fewer class disruptions, more time focused on learning, a more joyful classroom atmosphere, and, not to mention but not to be ignored, far less teacher stress.*

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<sup>4</sup> Ferlazzo, L. (2010, November 8). Being “transactional” versus being “transformational” in schools. *Huffpost*.

<sup>5</sup> Marzano, R. (2007). *The Art and Science of Teaching: A Comprehensive Framework for Effective Instruction*. ASCD. Page 150.

The other quote, perhaps a more well-known one, is from the late, great teacher Rita Pierson, who said: *Kids don't learn from people they don't like.*<sup>6</sup>

Her observation has gotten pushback from people, some who we would suggest have difficulty seeing the forest for the trees (we might also suggest they spend more time in classrooms). Of course, *some* students can learn *some* things from *some* people they don't like *in certain circumstances*.

But we would bet dollars to donuts that most teachers would agree that the vast majority of students tend to learn far, far less from people they don't like. In fact, recent research, albeit done in the workplace, finds that employees who like their supervisors “will be happier at work, go above and beyond what is required of them, experience greater well-being, and perform at a higher level.”<sup>7</sup>

## Supporting Research

There's more research recognizing the importance of teacher-student relationships for learning than you can shake a stick at.

In a meta-analysis of 100 studies, educational researcher Robert Marzano found that the quality of a teacher-student relationship was the “keystone” of effective classroom management.<sup>8</sup> An even bigger, and more recent, study examining 70 years of research found that positive teacher-student relationships have “large significant relations with eight clusters of student outcomes: academic achievement, academic emotions, appropriate student behavior, behavior problems, executive functions and self-control, motivation, school belonging and engagement, and well-being.”<sup>9</sup> And yet another review of literature found that positive teacher-student relationships had significant impacts on student engagement, grade, attendance, behavior, and drop-out rates.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, some research has found that the teacher-student relationship can have an even greater influence on high school student success than parental

<sup>6</sup> Pierson, R. F. (2013, May). *Every kid needs a champion* [TedTalk].

<sup>7</sup> McAllister, C., Moss, S., Martinko, M. (2019, October 19.) *Why likable leaders seem more effective*. Harvard Business Review.

<sup>8</sup> Marzano, R. J., & Marzano, J. S. (2003). The key to classroom management. *Educational Leadership*, 61(1), 6–13.

<sup>9</sup> Emslander, V., Holzberger, D., Ofstad, S. B., Fischbach, A., & Scherer, R. (2025). Teacher-student relationships and student outcomes: A systematic second-order meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 151(3), 365–397. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000461>

<sup>10</sup> Quin, D. (2017). Longitudinal and contextual associations between teacher-student relationships and student engagement: A systematic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 87(2), 345–387. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654316669434>

relationships.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, this conclusion won't apply in all situations (though multiple researchers suggest that the influence of other adults increases in adolescence) but, nevertheless, it does reinforce the importance of the teacher-student relationship.

Though research shows that positive teacher-student relationships benefit all students, it appears that they may be particularly important for boys, who may experience more academic and behavioral challenges than girls.<sup>12</sup>

The student academic success from “looping” (teachers staying with the same students for more than one year) has been primarily attributed to positive teacher-student relationships.<sup>13</sup>

One important research finding that educators, particularly those of us who are white, should keep in mind is that teachers tend to have weaker relationships with immigrant youth and students of color (the study didn't appear to have enough teachers of color in the studied group to determine if this especially applied to white teachers, but it doesn't seem to us be a big stretch to reach that conclusion).<sup>14</sup> “Homophily” describes the research-backed perspective that people tend to feel more connected to others who are like themselves, and many of us teachers are obviously not immune from it.<sup>15</sup> But being aware of this shortcoming is the first step toward actively doing something about it!

More than one study has found that the extent that teachers enjoyed teaching their classes was directly connected to how much they enjoyed the relationships with their students.<sup>16</sup> The two of us can emphatically echo these findings!

The *2025 Report Card: Student Perspective on U.S. Schools*, a Gallup-Walton Family Foundation survey, found that students gave an average grade of a B for “quality of relationships with your teachers.” That isn't bad, but nearly a third of students gave it a C or below.<sup>17</sup> There's room for improvement available to all teachers.

<sup>11</sup> Sethi, J., & Scales, P. C. (2020). Developmental relationships and school success: How teachers, parents, and friends affect educational outcomes and what actions students say matter most. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101904>

<sup>12</sup> Reichert, M. C., & Hawley, R. (2014, May 6). What relationships mean in educating boys. *Education Week*.

<sup>13</sup> Barshay, J. (2018, May 21). Two studies point to the power of teacher-student relationships to boost learning. *The Hechinger Report*.

<sup>14</sup> Reichert and Hawley, R. (2014).

<sup>15</sup> Homophily. (n.d.). *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homophily>

<sup>16</sup> Sparks (March 12, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Walton Family Foundation Gen Z Research. (2025). Walton family foundation. [www.gallup.com/analytics/651674/gen-z-research.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/analytics/651674/gen-z-research.aspx)

## Application

In this section, we'll share 17 specific ways (not in order of any kind of priority) teachers can begin to develop positive relationships with students. In addition, since we think it's also important and can't think of a better place in this book to put it, we've added a short section on how to encourage students to develop positive relationships with their classmates—this type of environment can support the development of a classroom “community.”

Of course, we teachers are human, as are our students. Sometimes we can follow all the “right” steps, and relationships still go south. We offer some recommendations on how to get back on the right track in those situations in the “What Could Go Wrong” section of this chapter.

### MAKE STUDENTS LOOK GOOD

When your students do something well, ask if you can record a quick video on their phone for their family where you can praise their child and make sure other students hear you making the recording. Do this regularly and you will have an enormous amount of capital in your relationship banks to enhance what happens in your classroom. And you'll soon have students asking *you* to make recordings.

And when you see one of your students in the hallway talking to their friends, give them a shout out about what a great job they're doing. Larry likes to barge in when one of his students is walking with someone or a group, and says something like “Excuse me, did you know that Abigail wrote a great essay in our class today? She's a superstar!” They'll look embarrassed but, trust us, they love it—at least 99% of the time!

### USE PERSONAL GREETINGS

Studies point to the value of greeting students by the door and its value in creating a sense of belonging.<sup>18</sup> More power to teachers who can pull it off, but we think this finding is a good example of education researcher Dylan Wiliam's adage about education research: “Everything works somewhere; nothing works everywhere.”<sup>19</sup>

We agree that individually greeting students each day is important, and actually saying their name in the process is critical—some students may never hear their name said in a positive way during the school day otherwise. However, we'd rather be in the front ensuring that students start work on the warm-up as soon as they sit

<sup>18</sup> Terada, Y. (2018, September 11). Welcoming students with a smile. *Edutopia*.

<sup>19</sup> Wiliam, D. (2018, December 12). Dylan Wiliam's guide for clear education thinking. *Flypaper*.

down. We can still easily greet each student individually from the front in a cheerful and personalized manner.

### **CORRECTLY USE STUDENTS' NAMES**

Speaking of student names, try to memorize them as soon as possible. As part of that, be sure to ask them what they want to be called—some students have preferred nicknames (Larry once called a student “Prince” for an entire year because he was testing if Larry would actually call students whatever they wanted to be called) and some have preferred names because of their gender identity. We also make a point of inviting students, if they desire, to share their preferred pronouns.

Retrieval practice (see Chapter 7: Strategies for Maximizing Learning) works for students, and it works for us—during the first days of school we’ll go around the room saying each student’s name asking for corrections. Making it a priority communicates to students that we truly value them as people. And carry a clipboard with the seating chart everywhere for reference and as a reminder. Be sure to visit the Technology Connections for links to more strategies on learning students’ names, including having them record their own names for you.

Larry takes it a step further. After the first two weeks of school, he announces that if he forgets or mispronounces a student’s name, they will receive a fruit snack. After that announcement, students constantly ask him to tell them their names. It’s probably the only time in their lives they actually *want* to have their names mispronounced or forgotten, and it’s good practice for Larry.

### **USE HUMOR. CAREFULLY**

The use of appropriate humor can make a huge positive difference in teacher-student relationships.<sup>20</sup>

We want to emphasize the word *appropriate*.

Teacher self-deprecating comments are *in* (we love using this type of humor! Larry highlights his mediocre basketball skills often, especially the time he and two other faculty lost 12-to-0 in a three-on-three game against starters on the school team).

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*If you have issues with that last point, as we’ve said in our previous books, get over yourself and remember the Civil Rights refrain, “keep your eyes on the prize.” Which, in this case, is a positive teacher-student relationship.*

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<sup>20</sup> Cooper, K. M., Hendrix, T., Stephens, M. D., et al. (2018). To be funny or not to be funny: Gender differences in student perceptions of instructor humor in college science courses. *PLOS ONE*, 13(8), e0201258. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0201258>

Over-exaggerated reactions to minor student misbehavior instead of a direct reprimand are *in* (“Oh, noooooooo, say it ain’t so! You are not watching YouTube on your Chromebook!”). And, only *after* solid teacher-student relationships are built, gentle sarcasm done with a genuine smile can be *in* (“I will put that cellphone on the floor and do a dance on it if you don’t put it away”).

Weaponizing sarcasm, on the other hand, is definitely out, out, out! Put-downs and snide comments hurt teacher-student relationships and student learning.<sup>21</sup>

### BE GENEROUS WITH PRAISE

A number of studies have found that it’s not unusual to find that “reprimands”—pushing students to pay attention or get on-task—outnumber praise comments.

We certainly “get” why that is often the case, and we’re sure we have had many days where our negative comments have far outnumbered the positive ones. However, narrowing down this “praise-to-reprimand ratio” can lead to better teacher-student relationships and a better classroom environment.<sup>22</sup>

Be conscious of your ratio, make your positive comments specific (“I appreciated how focused everyone was during the lesson” or “That’s great to see everyone immediately picking up their book and starting to read”) as opposed to general (“You were a good class today”), and try to make reprimands private—no one likes to be embarrassed publicly (we try to bend down and whisper to students or pass them a sticky note). Moderation is the key—both in praise and in negative comments.

Researchers haven’t found any kind of ideal ratio as the best one.<sup>23</sup> Use a clipboard to keep track if you need one. We just periodically reflect on our actions and often invite students to weigh in on how we’re doing in this area with an anonymous Google Form survey.

### DEMONSTRATE PERSONAL VULNERABILITY

As odd as it may sound, it’s not unusual to find that some students have a difficult time viewing teachers as ordinary people. Every teacher who has encountered a student outside of school—at a store, restaurant, in a park—can attest to sometimes seeing a shocked expression on our students’ faces when they see that we have lives outside of the school context.

<sup>21</sup> Sparks, S. D. (2018, May 11). Students learn less when they sense teacher hostility. *Education Week*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Caldarella, P., Larsen, R. A. A., Williams, L., Downs, K. R., Wills, H. P., & Wehby, J. H. (2020). Effects of teachers’ praise-to-reprimand ratios on elementary students’ on-task behaviour. *Educational Psychology*, 40(10), 1306–1322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2020.1711872>

Though we need to avoid the oversharing that is not unusual among many on social media and maintain a public relationship, that does not mean we can't carefully share personal moments that humanize us at appropriate times individually or class-wide. When a student has been grieving the loss of a parent, in addition to listening and offering support, Larry has shared that he lost his father at an early age. And Larry telling his students that he was born with anosmia (the complete loss of smell) and that he has never smelled anything in his entire life has never failed to be a year-long source of fascination for every one of his classes. And telling deprecating stories about our mistakes and mishaps are always hits!

Listen, none of our lives are interesting enough that our students want to hear about every aspect of them (though we have known teachers who do, indeed, overshare, and are encouraged to do so by some students who want to avoid doing class-work). But demonstrating our personal vulnerabilities and sharing our many mistakes can build trust and perhaps help students feel more comfortable about risking making their own errors.<sup>24</sup>

### **PRACTICE COMMON COURTESY**

We are not royalty and students are not our subjects, notwithstanding one day when a student asked Larry why he had to do something and Larry jokingly responded, "Because I'm King." His principal happened to be walking by at the same moment and pointed out to Larry and his students, in the same joking manner, that Larry wasn't the King, the principal was.

Words and phrases like:

- Sorry
- Please
- Thank you
- What do you think?

should be some of the most frequent things your students hear you say. They cost you nothing and can gain you much, but they must be said sincerely.<sup>25</sup> No one likes hearing these comments in a sarcastic tone and no one likes a suck-up.

<sup>24</sup> Romney, A. C., & Holland, D. V. (2023). The vulnerability paradox: Strengthening trust in the classroom. *Management Teaching Review*, 8(1), 84–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2379298120978362> and (Reichert & Hawley, R., 2014)

<sup>25</sup> Ferlazzo, L. (2013, October 8). The best resources on the importance of saying "I'm Sorry." *Larry Ferlazzo's Website of the Day*; Ferlazzo, L. (2019, January 15). Saying "Thank you" so students. *Larry Ferlazzo's Website of the Day*.

These actions, as most of ours should be, are useful models for our students.

## **LISTEN AND RESPOND TO WHAT YOU HEAR**

Listening to students is a not-to-be-underestimated way of strengthening teacher-student relationships.<sup>26</sup> But equally important is *responding* to what you hear from them.

### **Introductory Letters**

Some years, depending on workload and class make-ups, we write introductory letters about ourselves, share them on the first day of school, and ask students to use them as models to write their own letters about themselves to us. That night, we write a short response on a sticky note and put it on each letter. It could be something like “the Warriors are my team, too” or a question like “Are you going to join the school soccer team?” We pass them out the next day and many students are surprised that we actually read what they wrote.

### **Weekly Google Form Survey**

We use a weekly Google Form survey to learn how students are doing. If students indicate they aren't feeling good about school or their personal life, we make a point of immediately checking in with them and asking if there is some way we can help or send students to see the counselor. When they make narrative comments on the survey about events in their lives, we mention it to them.

These are the questions on the survey, which ask students to rank their answers 1-5 for most, though not all, of their responses:

1. How are you feeling about our class today?
2. How are you feeling about school in general today?
3. How are you feeling about your personal life today?
4. Did you meet the goal you set for yourself in last week's survey?
5. What goal do you want to set for yourself this week?
6. Is there a specific change that could make this class a better one for you?
7. Is there anything else that you think would be helpful for Mr. Ferlazzo to know about how you or your family are doing?

<sup>26</sup> Kincade, L., Cook, C., & Goerdts, A. (2020). Meta-analysis and common practice elements of universal approaches to improving student-teacher relationships. *Review of Educational Research, 90*(5), 710–748. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654320946836>

Short anonymous Google Forms asking specific questions about lessons (“Rate one-to-five how helpful this graphic organizer was to you”) or anonymous sticky notes (“Rate one-to-five how well you think you understand this concept”) can be excellent formative assessment tools—if teachers act on the responses.

The same goes for anonymous class evaluations we try to do every quarter. If students say on them that your Google Classroom could be better organized, tell them you’ll make changes and actually *do it*.

Here are the questions Larry used on one of his recent class evaluations, again asking students to use a 1–5 ranking to respond to several of them<sup>27</sup>:

- How did you generally feel about this class?
- How interesting was the content of this class?
- How fair was the grading for this class?
- How did you feel about the quantity of work that was required for this class?
- How did you feel about Mr. Ferlazzo’s teaching ability?
- How much did you feel that Mr. Ferlazzo cared about you as a person?
- What was the most interesting thing you learned in this class?
- What was the best thing about this class?
- What was the worst thing about this class and how do you think it could be improved?

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*If you’re not going to take what students say seriously and act on their opinions, it’s better not to ask at all.*

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That doesn’t mean you have to agree with or to everything they say or want. But it does mean you need to acknowledge what they say and, if you are not going to act on their wants, explain your rationale.

Of course, there are also other important ways to listen to students besides surveys or sticky notes. Making time in class (or before-or-after-class) for short thirty second conversations where you ask how students are doing, check in with students who look “down” or distracted by asking “How are you doing?” or “Are you doing okay?,” or just give students compliments accompanied by questions. (Larry’s bald and has fun complimenting students on their hair after asking them if they recently got a haircut or their hair styled.) Remember the adage that it’s better to be *interested* instead of being *interesting*.

Finally, looking for opportunities in the moment for class feedback is another strategy. Whether it’s asking students how much time they need to complete an assignment, if they want their small groups to be two people or three, or if they

<sup>27</sup> *The ESL/ELL Teacher’s Survival Guide*, Ferlazzo & Hull Sypnieski, page 482. Used with permission.

prefer to do writing on their Chromebook or by hand—providing low-stakes choices where you can live with either one indicates you're openness to their ideas and your willingness to see them as people whose agency you value (see Chapter 2: Student Agency, NOT Student Empowerment).

### **START EARLY**

You've probably heard the old—and ridiculous—adage for teachers “don't smile until Christmas.”

Most teachers' experiences will tell you that's a recipe for disaster, and research confirms that this is the case.<sup>28</sup> People will respond better when you are positive early on in the year and, by the way, the same research supports the position that it's better to be more critical later in the year. We're all more likely to listen to critique after we've developed a level of trust with people and believe they know what they're doing and have our best interest at heart.

### **BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SAY OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM**

Never, ever, ever write negatively about students, their families, (or, for that matter, your colleagues) and only do it rarely verbally.

We get it—sometimes we have to blow off steam—we're just human. But nothing good will ever come from putting anything negative on social media or even in writing in private text chats. When Larry was a community organizer, his advice was always, “Never put anything in writing that you are not comfortable seeing on the front page of the local newspaper.”

When we are verbally venting to our spouse or to our closest friend, though, it's always important to try and remember the following mantra: “They're not bad students, they're good students who are having bad days (or weeks).”

Even when we have to write comments about a student for an office referral or for a counselor evaluation, we are like the old TV series *Dragnet*: “Just the facts.” But we still try to include positive comments also, even in a disciplinary referral adding a note like, “He's really been working hard lately.”

It's unlikely that students or their families will see or hear your comments, even if you ignore our advice. But odds are at least one will, and that may lead to an irreparable relationship. More importantly, we think it's a safe bet that teachers regularly talking negatively about their students will reinforce destructive beliefs, which will likely carry over to attitudes in the classroom.

<sup>28</sup> Lavitt, J., Coutifaris, C., & Green, P. (2025, April 25). Research: When leaders express positivity early on, employees perform better. *Harvard Business Review*.

### ATTEND STUDENT EVENTS

We get it—staying after-school or returning to school in the evening to watch a student participating in an athletic event, awards ceremony or theater production can feel like *a lot* after a day of teaching.

Nevertheless, the collateral that a teacher can build in the “relationship bank” with students by taking this time is incalculable.

It can be challenging if you have 160 students in your classes—you obviously can’t attend all their events. Truthfully, our goal is to go to five events a year—one every two months. With family and other commitments, we just can’t fit in more.

But even just attending those few events makes a difference.

### HAVE SUPPORTIVE “HARD” CONVERSATIONS

Part of our jobs, and part of any positive relationship, is having “hard” and candid conversations. Whether it’s because we suspect a student might have used Artificial Intelligence to write their essay, or because they’re way behind on their class work, or because they’re being disruptive in class—no teacher has any shortage of these conversations on their everyday list.

When we approach these conversations, we always try to keep this question from education writer Marvin Marshall in mind: Will what I am about to do or say bring me closer or will it push me away farther from the person with whom I am communicating?<sup>29</sup>

In order to increase the odds of the conversation bringing us closer, we try to implement the process to have honest and kind conversations that has been developed by Dr. Taya Cohen and Dr. Emma Levine.<sup>30</sup> It has four key elements:

1. Be specific. Don’t say, “You’re always disruptive.” Instead, say “Today you were disruptive when you poked Juan in the head.”
2. Explain how that behavior affects the entire class. “When you did that, Juan reacted and the whole lesson had to stop for five minutes. I wasn’t able to teach during that time, and students weren’t able to learn.”
3. Communicate respect for the student. “You’re one of the sharpest students in the class, and I appreciate that you generally take your work seriously.”
4. Develop a plan forward and necessary changes. “What can you do to make sure something like this doesn’t happen again and what can I do to support you?”

<sup>29</sup> Ferlazzo, L. (2009, November 20). The best piece of classroom management advice I’ve ever read. *Larry Ferlazzo’s Website of the Day*.

<sup>30</sup> Devlin, E., & Jenks, J. (2025, June 22). Gregg Popovich is a coaching legend. He’s also a master of tough conversations. *The New York Times*.

This strategy has generally worked well in our conversations, but not always. In the **What Could Go Wrong?** section we share some ideas of how to handle things when they don't.

### TRY YOUR BEST NOT TO HOLD GRUDGES

Some of our students can act in pretty annoying ways.

We teachers can also come across sometimes as pretty annoying, too. In fact, one year *The Washington Post* picked up a blog post Larry wrote summarizing one of his class's annual anonymous end-of-year evaluation. The headline? "NEWS BREAK (not breaking news): Teacher asks students to grade him. One wrote: 'I give Mr. Ferlazzo an A at being annoying.'"<sup>31</sup>

And, in fact, some of our students can sometimes act in cruel ways.

Our students are also kids.

As hard as it sometimes may be, we always try to greet students with a smile and say we're happy to see them, no matter what they might have said or done the previous day.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't "call them" on what they did and share how it made us feel.

But, as the saying goes, "You never know what someone is going through." We try to keep that in mind when interacting with our students and *try* to view each day as a new beginning.

### TEACH ENGAGING LESSONS

Positive teacher-student relationships are very important to the life of a classroom.

But the primary "business" of school is learning, so teachers want to make sure their classes are challenging and engaging and that students want to be there (most of the time, at least).

Teaching good lessons also demonstrates to students that you are competent, are interested in them growing and learning, and, ideally, trying to connect at least some topics to their hopes and dreams. All of those will only deepen teacher-student relationships.

Other chapters in this book discuss lesson plans in detail. It's important for us to remember education researcher Robert Marzano's point that positive teacher-student relationships can make everything go better in the classroom. However, they won't turn a bad lesson plan into a good one. Or, as the saying goes, good teacher-student relationships won't let you put lipstick on a pig lesson plan.

<sup>31</sup> Strauss, V. (2019, January 18). NEWS BREAK (not breaking news): Teacher asks students to grade him. One wrote: 'I give Mr. Ferlazzo an A at being annoying.' *Answer Sheet*.

**NOTICE WHEN STUDENTS ARE ABSENT**

Noticing when students aren't there can be as important as interacting with them when they are present.

At the beginning of class, we quickly ask students who have the phone numbers of missing students and ask them to send a text telling them he misses them and hopes they are okay. Students jump at the chance to do it—both because they think it's fun and because they get a moment to check their phone for other things!

If no one has a student's number, we'll just email the missing student later in the day.

It makes a difference!

**CONSIDER LOOPING**

“Looping” is a strategy where students stay with the same teacher for longer than one year, and research clearly shows relationships and student learning benefits from it.<sup>32</sup>

It's sometimes used in elementary schools, though it does create a burden on the teacher to learn an entirely new curriculum.

At Larry's high school, which had Small Learning Communities where approximately 300 students would stay with the same twenty-or-so teachers during their four-year career, they did a variation of looping where often teachers would have the same students every other year. He can attest to how much this kind consistency contributed to a strong sense of relationships and community.

**CREATE CONDITIONS FOR STUDENTS TO DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR CLASSMATES**

Positive teacher-student relationships are critical to any successful classroom. But it will only take a class so far if students are not in positive relationships with each other!

Here are a few ways to encourage those connections and build a sense of belonging:

- Find something you have in common with another person can help students feel connected.<sup>33</sup> A “Human Scavenger Hunt” is a common activity teachers do at the beginning of the school year to get acquainted. Just search it online and you'll find many examples.

<sup>32</sup> Will, M. (2022, June 21). Looping: Here's what happens when students have the same teacher more than once. *Education Week*.

<sup>33</sup> Markman, A. (2012, March 8). It is motivating to belong to a group. *Psychology Today*.

- Have students work together in small groups of two-or-three on assignments. We assign partners at the beginning of the year so that everyone has a chance to work with everybody else and then give students more freedom to choose in the second half.
- In “Warm-Ups,” we often will have a personal question (“What’s the time you were happiest in your life?”) along with an academic question or activity about what we’re learning. Students can then share their responses in small groups.
- Provide periodic opportunities at the beginning or ending of class for students to share positive news in their lives.<sup>34</sup>
- Once a week or so, create a few minutes at the end of class for students to compliment a classmate for something they did or said. In this situation, as in most, the teacher obviously will want to model examples.

## What Could Go Wrong

We think there are five primary challenges teachers may face in building positive relationships with students.

### 1. *Maintaining relationship-building as a priority.*

In the midst of all the other things that vie for our attention, and making sure we actually connect to *each* of our students. One of the tools we used at the beginning of our teaching careers was a clipboard with the seating chart and putting a checkmark next to the name of each student we did something with to strengthen our relationship.

### 2. *Handling students who want to connect with you on social media.*

Some districts have strict prohibitions against doing so, and we generally tell students we’ll be happy to connect with them there *after* they graduate. Larry makes exceptions for his Newcomer English Language Learner students, who have tended to like to communicate on Facebook—always for school-related questions. We are both pretty liberal with giving our personal cellphone numbers to students and their families (though that practice is not necessarily one we would recommend for everybody) and, of course, it’s easy to share messages on Google Classroom or Remind (or other similar apps). The main rule we have, however, is all personal communication through these avenues are either school-related or related to the student’s well-being (if a student has been in an accident, lost a loved one, etc.).

<sup>34</sup> Barker, E. (1999, August). What’s an easy way to strengthen your relationships? *Barking Up the Wrong Tree*.

3. *Knowing what to do when none of your attempts at building a positive relationship with a student are successful.*

Then what? We think a good framework of how to handle this can be found in a Harvard Business Review podcast titled “How to Repair a Broken Relationship at Work.”<sup>35</sup> We’ve generally used these strategies before we read the article, but here are some things to keep in mind that relate to the classroom:

- First, think about what you like about the student or, at least, focus on what you want from the relationship. Remember the adage—the student isn’t bad, they are just having a bad day or a series of them.
- Focus on empathy to ask yourself some questions about why the student is behaving that way—what do I not know, how could they be seeing things? How could they be seeing me and what I do in a negative way?
- Ask them questions, not just the surface level questions, but deeper ones—what gives them joy? Acknowledge things aren’t great and that you want to change things. Focus on what you have in common—whether it’s their passing the class or liking basketball.
- Give things to the student without overtly asking or expecting anything back—in effect, a gesture of goodwill. This can trigger reciprocation, where they feel they are obligated to return the favor or kindness. This could be giving the student extra time to complete an assignment, or if they’re missing a lot of them, tell them you’re giving them a break and not going to count several of them and they don’t have to make it up, or offering to purchase a book of their choice for them. Larry buys small gifts when he’s traveling internationally to specifically give them to students in this situation around holidays or their birthday.

In reflecting on both of our teaching careers, there has only been one student who we’ve had in class for the entire school year with whom we were not able to repair a relationship, and that was a student Larry had very early in his career. But fixing a broken relationship is not a linear experience—there are always many ups and downs along the way, and it takes a *lot* of energy.

Another strategy that can work in this situation is called “2 by 10.” Though we haven’t specifically used it, the strategy does make sense to us and research seems to back it up as a way to turn around a challenging teacher-student relationship.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Gallo, A. (2024, November 27). How to Repair a Broken Relationship at Work (No. 86). *HBR*. [Podcast].

<sup>36</sup> Kilkenny, P. (2008). Assuming the best. *Educational Leadership*, 66(1).

The strategy is simple in theory, though could be a bit challenging logistically. It's a matter of the teacher identifying a student with whom they have a challenging relationship and then have a two-minute conversation with them about anything for ten consecutive days.

It certainly can't hurt, as long as the conversation is not about the student's behavior or missing assignments. Using those times for inquiring about how their day went, complimenting them on their clothes or hair, asking what they like to do in their free time, etc., can only help.

Another option is to check with the student's other teachers to see if there is at least one who does have a good relationship with them. If that's the case, that teacher could possibly share "tips" on what has helped them develop a connection.

4. *Know when it's time to bring in more support.*

If teachers have solid positive relationships with their students, it's likely students will share some of their personal struggles. Avoid being a "trauma detective," and know when you need to bring in counseling or administrator support.<sup>37</sup>

5. *Accept your colleagues may not be supportive of your efforts.*

This challenge is probably not a huge one to you working with your students, but developing a school-wide emphasis on relationship building can only help everybody.

A study may point a way for how teachers can handle this issue. Basically, middle school math teachers spent a little more than an hour reading about research highlighting the value of thinking about—and listening to—students' perspectives and the importance of relationship-building, along with reading short essays by students sharing how individual teachers had made an impact on their lives. Then, teachers were asked to share ideas on how they now develop relationships with students and what they could do in the future.<sup>38</sup>

School suspensions substantially decreased after this professional development.

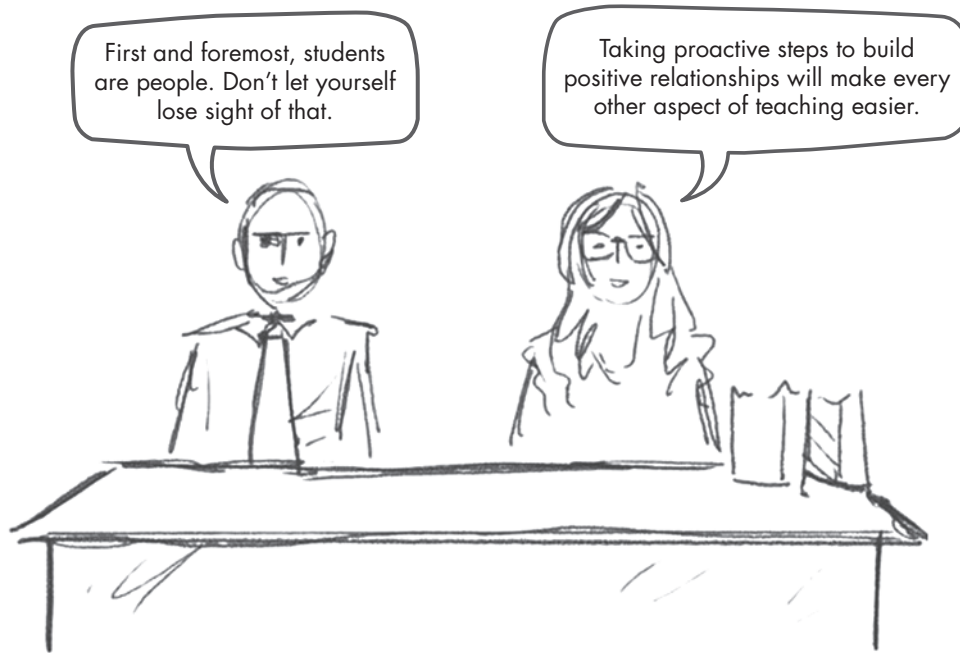
We can't see anything negative coming from a professional development session like this, and it certainly would be more valuable than what a lot of us have to deal with when it comes to district-dictated PD.

<sup>37</sup> Venet, A. S. (2023, October 9). Trauma-informed teachers need trauma-informed administrators. *Unconditional Learning*.

<sup>38</sup> Ferlazzo, L. (2022, April 8). Intriguing research suggests relatively simple exercise with teachers might reduce student suspensions. *Larry Ferlazzo's Website of the Day*.

## Chapter Summary

If we only had a few minutes to chat in the teacher faculty room, here's what we'd want you to remember about relationships:



## Technology Connections

We tend not to approach building positive teacher-student relationships methodically. With our years of experience, we generally just know when to use the different strategies discussed in this chapter.

However, we also recognize that this is not how everyone works and it took us a long time to get there.

If you feel that you'd be more comfortable with a more methodical approach to relationship-building—that still includes the use of many of the ideas discussed in this chapter, we'd encourage you to read more about the “Establish, Maintain, and Restore” approach.

There is substantial research demonstrating its success. You can read more at “The Best Resources For Learning About The ‘Establish-Maintain-Restore’ Classroom Management Approach” (<https://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2022/08/01/the-best-resources-for-learning-about-the-establish-maintain-restore-classroom-management-approach/>).

Learn more about relationship building in general at:

- *The Best Resources On The Importance Of Building Positive Relationships With Students* <https://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2011/03/08/the-best-resources-on-the-importance-of-building-positive-relationships-with-students/>
- *The Best Resources Exploring The Use Of Praise In The Classroom* <https://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2022/04/15/the-best-resources-exploring-the-use-of-praise-in-the-classroom/>
- *6 Teacher-Tested Tips for Getting Students' Names Right* <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/6-teacher-tested-tips-for-getting-students-names-right/2023/07>

