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EDUCATION

Get to Know Your Teachers, Kids

A new study suggests that a simple acquaintance exercise might improve classroom relationships and even close the achievement gap.



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The teacher-student relationship impacts every aspect of the educational experience. When students don't feel safe, respected, or truly known by their teacher, they are less likely to invest and engage in their education. Conversely, when teachers feel distanced from or distrusted by their students, it's nearly impossible to muster the enthusiasm to walk into the classroom each day, let alone instill motivation or investment in our students.

During my own teaching career I've been fortunate enough to have the time and opportunity to get to know my students and their educational needs well. I taught English, Latin, and writing in middle school over three successive years, and given this

much time, I was able to get to know my students well and respond to their particular emotional and educational needs.

However, I recently began teaching high school writing in an inpatient drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, where students come and go as insurance and treatment dictates, and due to the strict confidentiality guidelines, I am not allowed to share any personal information with them. I can't ask about their lives, and they are not allowed to know anything about mine. I sensed when I signed the confidentiality agreement that this restriction would affect my teaching, but I had no idea just how much. I have struggled to find ways to connect with my students within the rules, but I still feel as if I am teaching in a hermetically sealed bubble. For the first time in my life, my teaching just isn't connecting with my students.

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And then I met Hunter Gehlbach, associate professor of education at Harvard's Graduate School of Education and director of research at Panorama Education. During an education conference lunch break, I overheard Gehlbach discussing his new study, "Creating Birds of Similar Feathers: Leveraging Similarity to Improve Teacher-Student Relationships and Academic Achievement." I couldn't help it; I jumped in and hijacked his conversation.

Gehlbach explained that his research is primarily concerned with social perspective-taking, or the ability to understand the what drives the people around us. As he explained, "My focus is classrooms and so social perspective taking—figuring out the thoughts and feelings of others seems key. We want teachers to be able to engage in this process and figure out the thought processes of students as much as possible, in order to understand where and why they are making mistakes." At the prompting of his colleague, Maureen Brinkworth, Gehlbach resolved to find out how, and to what extent, student teacher-relationships influence learning and educational outcomes.

Gehlbach and his colleagues gave 315 ninth grade students and 25 teachers in a large, diverse high school a "get-to-know-you" survey of 30 items at the beginning of a school

year. The researchers matched and cherry-picked similarities in the teacher and student responses, then revealed those similarities to the teachers and students. Five weeks later, the researchers returned to administer a more in-depth survey of both students and teachers, and measure students' and teachers' perceptions of their relationships and the classroom experience as a whole.

This second survey revealed that when teachers and students know they have five things in common, relationships and educational outcomes both improve. Teachers and students who had been informed about five things they had in common with each other perceived themselves as being more similar; teachers reported that they interacted more frequently with the students who shared certain qualities or interests, and teachers who knew about similarities with students rated their relationships with those students as being more positive. Finally, the investigators found that when teachers knew they shared similarities with a particular student, those students finished the quarter with higher grades.

Perhaps most interestingly, this study highlights the power of student-teacher relationships in reducing the achievement gap between underserved (primarily Latino and Black) and well-served (White and Asian) students. The researchers found that establishing similarities between teacher and student reduced the achievement gap between these populations by 65 percent. In other words, knowledge of interpersonal similarities helped teachers connect with their underserved students, and that translated into a significant increase in academic success.

Playing devil's advocate, I asked Gehlbach about the well-publicized dangers that can flow from an inappropriate degree of social familiarity between teachers and students. Gehlbach explained that the similarities he and his colleagues established were not rooted in personal information, but in shared preferences. Gehlbach explained:

One of the biggest surprises in reading the similarity research was how trivial some of the similarities were that invoked positive sentiments towards others. We tried to find similarities that might spark conversations between teachers and students without getting into any information that either party would feel uncomfortable sharing. Our survey presented items such as, "The most

important quality in a friend is: a) being there when you need him/her, b) listens to you and understands you, or c) always has your back.

Gehlbach is quick to point out that the study has limitations. Its sample size was small and therefore lacked the statistical power he and his colleagues desired. However, Gehlbach is encouraged by the results and eager to explore the phenomenon further. “Learning is a fundamentally social process,” he told me. “So if we can figure out how to improve the social relationship that is at the heart of much of students’ learning, we should be able to improve a vast constellation of student outcomes in schools.”

As we pursue ways to improve education, we tend to measure its easily quantifiable aspects—test scores, grades, and attendance. But we tend to ignore the intangible elements of success, such as relationships, empathy, and trust. Gehlbach believes this is short-sighted. “People need social relationships as much as they need basics like food and water. So, in the same way that better nutrition improves a broad range of youth outcomes, I think it makes all the sense in the world to look at improving relationships as a promising way to improve educational outcomes.”

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