THE TEACHER CONNECTEDNESS PROJECT

“Well-being among European youth: the contribution of student-teacher relationships in the secondary-school population”

BRIEFING FOR TEACHERS

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WHY PAYING ATTENTION TO STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS IN ADOLESCENCE IS IMPORTANT?

We often hear that teachers matter and that they make a difference in a young person’s life. Research clearly supports this claim. Via their relationships with students, teachers can become important non-parental adults in their students’ lives (Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009).

Below are three main reasons why as a teacher it is worth paying attention to your relationships with students:

▪ Positive student-teacher relationships are significantly linked to learning and wellbeing (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Roorda et al., 2011).

▪ Student-teacher relationships tend to become less positive across secondary education, but the role of teachers in their students’ development is as important in adolescence as it was at earlier ages (García-Moya et al., 2015; Roorda et al., 2011).

▪ Connectedness, a term used to name that significant positive relationship with a teacher, is widely acknowledged as an essential aspect of a positive school climate (Wang & Degol, 2016; García-Moya et al., 2018).

WHAT DID WE FIND ABOUT THE NATURE OF STUDENT-TEACHER CONNECTEDNESS?

Adolescent students tended to single out a few teachers that they feel they connect with and importantly students associated connectedness with teachers with positive learning experiences.

Based on our research including students from England and Spain:

Connectedness with teachers can be characterized as resulting from a students’ perception that the teacher (1) notices and respects them as an individual and is interested in them at a personal level; (2) is sympathetic and can see things from the student’s perspective; and (3) acts as a supportive figure willing to help the student with any problem.

Barriers to teacher connectedness identified by the students included: a lack of commitment with the students’ learning on the part of the teacher, exclusive subject or grade focus with no attention to wellbeing aspects, perceived favouritism, labelling students and draconian authority.
WHAT CAN I DO AS A TEACHER?

First of all, understand that building relationships does not compete with delivering effective teaching and learning. Research actually says the opposite (e.g., Bonell et al., 2014). Building connectedness with your students will facilitate learning and foster wellbeing. It may also help with achieving teaching goals, without adding over burdensome extra tasks separated from teaching.

How do the three general principles in the figure above translate into practice? Here are 12 suggestions based on our research with students and teachers - please note these are meant as examples, not as an exhaustive list or a fixed unique recipe to follow!

✓ Learning your students’ names (or preferred names) and using them to address your students.
✓ Chatting informally with your students at the beginning or end of the lesson or during breaks when you have the chance.
✓ Paying attention to your students’ interests and the activities they are involved in or passionate about (arts, sports, music, drama, etc.).
✓ Try tailoring the way you interact with your students as you get to know them. You can use a train example if you know they are passionate about trains, be rewarding with that shy student that raised their hand for the first time, making a comment about a film you think they may like, etc.
✓ Making a conscious effort to reaching to the ‘invisible’ students. Just naturally there are some students who stand out more (they are more chatty or participative, they get easily distracted or can be disruptive...), so it is important to make an effort to make each student feel noticed at some points (e.g., by circulating around the class, looking at different students when you speak, having one-on-one conversations when students are doing work...).
✓ Creating a positive and respectful climate of relationships and avoiding a command-obedience dynamic in which teacher’s authority is imposed. Of course, setting limits is important (and greatly appreciated by students!) but rely on reason and dialogue rather than force to do so.
✓ Encouraging participation in the class and listening to and valuing your students’ contributions.
✓ Making your students know that you understand, for example by acknowledging that this part of the lesson is difficult or that you can see they are tired.
✓ Listening actively and showing empathy with what a student tells you and being sensitive with their feelings and emotions.
Being attentive to your students’ behaviour and facial expressions and checking whether everything is OK when you think something may be bothering them or they may be struggling. Even if it turns out they prefer not to tell you, they appreciate you interest.

Making yourself approachable by not being afraid of having a joke, sharing an anecdote, etc.

Telling your students explicitly that they can approach you for help or advice and if they do, showing an interest in how things are going after your chat.

KEEP YOURSELF POSTED AND TELL US WHAT YOU THINK

At the project website: https://teacherconnectedness.wordpress.com/

Following the project Twitter account: @TeachConProject

Or by e-mail: i.garcia-moya2@herts.ac.uk

REFERENCES


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