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How Can We Support More Empowering Teacher-Student Relationships?

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This post is by Victoria Theisen-Homer, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Arizona State University's School of Social Transformation and former LAUSD Teacher of the Year.

We often focus on whether all children have access to the same quality of academic content and instruction, but what about the same quality of teacher-student relationships?

I recently studied two different teacher training programs, looking at how new teachers were trained to form meaningful human relationships, and especially across cultural differences. One of the programs trained teachers to form instrumental relationships with students, connecting with them through the use of discrete moves, in a unidirectional fashion, purely as a means of improving their behavior and effort on teacher directed tasks. The other trained teachers to form more holistic and reciprocal relationships with students, in which they acquired complex information about the students and invited them to co-construct content with them. The graduates from the first program went on to serve students of color from low-income backgrounds. The graduates from the second program chose to enter schools serving an affluent, mostly white population. So why does this matter?

In this case, students from historically marginalized backgrounds were getting shortchanged yet again. Their affluent white counterparts benefitted from meaningful holistic relationships with adults in schools, which emphasized their inherent value as human beings and their agency over their educational (and life) experiences. These students not only learned to think for themselves, but also had adults who affirmed and responded to their thoughts and experiences. Such interactions prepared them to engage with authority figures, and to someday hold positions of authority themselves. Meanwhile, the instrumental relationships imposed upon the students of color from low-income backgrounds were structured as a controlled means to a particular end: student compliance. Teachers took in just enough information about students to use in class to motivate them to keep working and behaving, while providing discrete positive reinforcement and punishment to ensure no one strayed. Students learned that their value was tied to the degree to which they worked hard and behaved in line with what mostly white authority figures demanded, not in their own right. These interactions essentially conditioned them for positions of subservience.

I found this both disappointing and ironic. For while many teacher training programs have yet to integrate coursework that explicitly tackles the relational side of teaching (perhaps in part because literature around this is sorely lacking), both the programs in my study accepted the idea that relationships with teachers were critical to student success, and their broader social justice missions. And they both systematically approached the development of such relationships, albeit in vastly different ways. But the first program was limited by its vision of relationships, and the second by the fact that the graduates did not feel comfortable teaching in schools that served a historically marginalized population. By (unintentionally) replicating established social structures through teacher-student relationships, these programs missed an opportunity to train teachers to help build a better, stronger, more integrated society.

This might sound like hyperbole, but meaningful teacher-student relationships really are important. [Research](#) links these to a range of positive academic outcomes for students, and anecdotal evidence reaffirms their importance to life outcomes. Just take a moment to think of your favorite teacher. I doubt you remember the one who exercised outstanding pedagogical content knowledge or lesson plan sequencing. Instead, we usually remember the teacher who saw and connected with us, the one who took a special interest in our work, identified our potential in a particular area, helped counsel us through a personal issue, made a novel relevant to our lives, attended our Quinceañera, Bar Mitzvah, choral performance, sports game, etc. Sometimes, we even credit these teachers for influencing the course of our lives. On the other hand, many have painful memories of the teacher who misrecognized, punished, or ignored them. And the ripple effects of these early interactions could be quite consequential, especially since certain students have greater access to real teacher-student relationships than others.

Part of the problem is what Christine Sleeter calls a "cultural mismatch," which impedes the development of meaningful relationships with students. It is much easier for us relate to those who come from similar backgrounds (in terms of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, language, gender-identity, etc.). It takes work to learn to connect across lines of difference, to avoid harboring a deficit lens toward what seems unfamiliar. Because the overwhelming majority of teachers are white women from middle class backgrounds, and most school

children are not, meaningful teacher-student relationships are far from guaranteed.

However, I know that it is possible for training programs to support meaningful relationships across cultural differences. And that it's worth the work. Because I was trained to teach at a program that did just that. In UCLA's urban Teacher Education Program, I learned to "see" students and examine myself. I learned about the need to understand local histories, as well as the historical legacies that continue to impact the students I would serve. I learned to design curricula and instruction that responded to students, with authors that reflected their cultures, subject matters that piqued their interest, and active and varied lessons that elicited their own expertise. I learned to recognize students not as pupils who must acquire a pre-determined set of skills, but as multifaceted human beings capable of teaching quite a bit to themselves, each other, and me. And when I entered my high school classroom, I was ready to connect with students of color, despite the fact that we came from very different backgrounds.

I could tell so many stories about the way **UCLA** shaped my interactions with students, but I will limit myself to a few examples. From the beginning, I asked all my students to write me monthly letters sharing with me as much as they wanted to about their experiences in and out of school; I responded to them all, even though I taught around 100 students at a time, because I had learned that interacting with my students as human beings enriched their experiences and my own. When students found the district-provided curriculum uninspiring and irrelevant, **I drew upon what I knew of them to design new curricular units** because I had been trained in Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. And when the school did not have money for certain culturally relevant books, fieldtrips, speakers, or even graduation regalia for my students, I wrote grants and fundraised because I had learned to advocate for students when larger structures did not favor their interests.

Schools and training programs can promote meaningful holistic relationships between teachers and students. And they should, because such relationships teach us to work across lines of difference, to see the human being behind the façade. Forming meaningful relationships in schools may even help us begin healing the deep rifts that are tearing our country apart. But in order to support this work, there are a few questions that educational institutions--both training programs and schools--must ask themselves:

First, what is our vision for teacher-student relationships? If you haven't even thought about it, or are hesitant to address this potentially messy and subjective aspect of practice, you are essentially devaluing such relationships. If you think that instrumental relationships are sufficient for academic progress, you might be missing the bigger picture. Our society still has much to do to overcome the deep inequalities that persist. And connecting with students only as a means of advancing their academic output is not going to cut it. We all deserve meaningful human connections, connections that reaffirm our unique human value, expand our opportunities, and advance our society.

And second, how are we supporting teachers for this complex work? Are programs providing teachers with opportunities to self-reflect, learn about broader social structures, and work with students of color while in the program? One of the reasons students from the second program in my study ultimately chose to work at schools serving affluent white students is because they simply did not have much experience working in other spaces with students who did not look like them. Experience is an important teacher when it comes to forming relationships. And once in schools, are teachers so overloaded with students that they don't have time to get to know them all? Are discipline and efficiency prioritized over human connections? Intentional structures can help facilitate the development of holistic teacher-student relationships.

All students deserve access to high quality content, instruction, and relationships. We simply need to focus more on the latter to make it a reality. Because at the end of the day, human connections are really all that matters.

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