

# The Art of Acknowledgement

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This chapter focuses on the power of acknowledging students and the author's experience with this in two separate school districts. The author focuses on how she forged relationships with three students by establishing a connection to their parents and working through the students' insecurities. Students need to feel valued and heard, and the author realizes the importance of this. By taking ownership for her own mistakes and taking the time to recognize her students, the author is able to see the value she adds to both their personal and home lives.*

## INTRODUCTION

*"In relationships, it is the process of knowing that makes the dynamic powerful. What counts in any relationship is that the involved parties continue to invest in each other. In this regard, understanding or knowing our students is not something that we achieve. It is something that we live. Continually."*  
Cornelius Minor- *We Got This*

When I first embarked on my teaching career in 1996, all new teachers proudly owned a colorful poster taped on our wall which read,

*30 years from now, it won't matter what shoes you wore, how your hair looked, or the jeans you bought. What will matter is what you learned and how you used it.*

As teachers, we wanted to make a statement, to impress the value of education over the trivial drama of middle school or high school popularity. It did and still does have an impact on some students, but what we failed to realize is how this philosophy also applied to us as teachers. *Shoes, hair and jeans* were replaced by the word, "content" and we realized that what students learned could also take the form of feelings and emotions, not just academics. As a pre-service teacher educator today, I often find myself reminding my new teacher students:

*They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.*

This quote has been attributed to many and perhaps the reason it resonates is that it holds truth and insight, even purpose to why we teach.

## **SAN DIEGO CITY SCHOOLS: URBAN SCHOOL**

San Diego Unified City Schools serves more than 121,000 students in preschool through grade 12 and is the second largest district in California. The student population is extremely diverse, representing more than 15 ethnic groups and more than 60 languages and dialects. I came to the district with one year's experience in teaching and two years' experience teaching English in Europe. Two completely different settings, and now this. This was my dream district to work, and though I knew this would be the place that could make or break me, I did not realize the impact the relationships between me and this diverse classroom of 8th graders would have.

"Welcome to the International Academy of Languages," were the final words I heard from the principal who had just hired me on the spot after a 15-minute interview. How was she able to make a decision so fast, where were the other teachers, why was Wilson Middle School an *International Academy of Languages*? I wondered. I would soon come to realize the dynamics of Wilson, as I was one of 10 newly hired teachers, all of us with minimal experience, but eager to do our best. Established as a junior high school in inner-city San Diego off El Cajon Blvd, Wilson transformed into a middle school serving 5th through 8th graders and was dubbed the "International Academy of Languages" to reflect its diverse population of students, who spoke more than 20 different languages. It was a two-story neighborhood school, protruding proudly on the busy street corner of Orange Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard, which allowed students to walk from a variety of ethnic pockets within the one- or two- mile radius. From my upstairs window, I could sometimes make out the mountainous horizon of Mexico on a clear day. At the time, it was a quick jaunt to the first border-town, Tijuana, and we had many students who went back and forth across the border each week for reasons like family and money. Sometimes we would not see them for months and then they would suddenly reappear on our rosters.

There were not many teachers excited about teaching 8th grade, but for me, these were the kids I knew and understood. I was familiar with middle school idiosyncrasies, but the 21 kids in my upstairs corner classroom were a new experience. They appeared to be just like many middle schoolers I had taught before, but the circumstances they faced were unlike anything I had ever experienced at that point of my career. In his book, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood*, Christopher Edmin (2016) argues "teaching to who students are requires a recognition of their realities." Many of my kids spent their afternoons taking care of brothers, sisters and even cousins, and putting in time on homework was just not feasible. Others were anxious and troubled by incarcerated family members. All would be first-generation college students- if they were able to make it that far. One particular program Wilson Middle School excelled in was a course called A.V.I.D. This elective course stood for Advancement Via Individual Determination, a program founded right there in San Diego to help support first-generation minority students gain access to and thrive in four-year universities through research-based strategies. One particular A.V.I.D. student in my English class stood out to me. I remember Alicia<sup>1</sup> clearly. She was a shy girl in my class, not meek, but shy and had a genuine smile. Alicia was often unnoticed, as she was one of four sisters, each with a different father. Life in her City Heights community was sometimes difficult for her.

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