

Creating Relationships Responsive to Students' Needs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the author's experiences in teaching and mentoring high school and college students. One experience shared identifies the challenges students from minoritized populations may have with teachers from the dominant majority and the effects this has on students. Another experience shared details the importance of strong teacher-student relationships and how many times they are forged during participation in extra- or co-curricular activities. The third experience shared focuses on working with students who have had trauma in their backgrounds or who have had adverse childhood experiences. The chapter concludes with some helpful tips for teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Room 205 was a safe space for students. When students walked through the door, they found themselves in a classroom with a teacher and peers who cared about them, championed their successes, and helped them through some of the roughest times they experienced in high school. Interestingly, Room 205 was not the classroom where I envisioned myself teaching while I was completing my undergraduate degree. I believed I would graduate college and get an English teaching position at one of the public schools in a rural part of Ohio. I was even open to returning to the high school I graduated from to teach. I never imagined teaching at a private school, but it turned out to be the best place for me to begin my teaching career, grow my love for education, and learn how to be the teacher each student needed. Throughout this chapter, I will share a few stories about experiences with student situations that helped me become a better teacher and helped me to build the emotionally responsive skills that educators must have.

I began my teaching career at a private, religiously-based high school in a small city in Ohio. The high school enrolled approximately 400 students during the time I taught there. While the school was not as diverse as the city's public high school, there were students of differing races and income levels.

The faculty's levels of experience were different, with many teachers being within their first five years of teaching and a larger group of faculty who had been in the profession for twenty years or more. I primarily taught the Freshman Honors English, Sophomore College Prep English, Basic Speech, and Yearbook classes. I also coached the Speech and Debate Team. I taught at the school for six years before leaving to complete a Ph.D. program and begin my career in higher education. Teaching high school provided me with the foundation for creating positive and caring relationships with students. Over the course of six years of teaching in the high school classroom and into my beginning years in higher education, I had a few specific instances that showed me how a caring teacher can be vitally important to students and the difference that teachers truly can make in students' lives.

When you coach sports, act as an advisor for extracurricular or co-curricular activities, or teach elective classes, you get to know students on a much different level than students who make up your core classes. I was extremely close with my Speech Team participants and Yearbook staff. I coached the Speech Team for all six years I taught, and I was the Yearbook advisor the last two years I taught high school. These particular groups were the students I could count on to provide some laughter and entertainment during the day. While I only saw my entire Speech Team group after school, I had my Yearbook staff in my room daily during the lunch period. I was able to see students I had in my English classes in a completely different way because Yearbook was a class they enjoyed coming to and wanted to be in. We created a unique community in Room 205 where students from several different groups came together with a shared goal. The creativity that flowed from these students amazed and inspired me, as I was new to advising a Yearbook staff. It was in this classroom that I also learned humility and honesty as a teacher. My students told me what worked and what did not while overseeing the staff and respectfully disagreed when our various visions did not match. I really bonded with the Yearbook staffs I had during my last two years in the classroom.

STUDENTS FROM MINORITIZED RACIAL BACKGROUNDS

One student on my Yearbook staff my final year teaching was Peter. He was a student the majority of the teachers did not like. He did not seem to care what anyone thought of him. He did not care about school or grades. He was a very smart young man, possibly one of the smartest students that I taught at the high school. However, Peter did not seem to care about showing his teachers how smart he was. He did not turn in homework regularly, but he always performed well on tests and in class discussions. He liked to play devil's advocate and introduce new ideas the other students did not think of.

I first met Peter when he was a sophomore in my college prep English class. I was quickly on a first-name basis with his parents, who were not happy with his lack of effort in school. His parents did not want him to pull straight A's; they just wanted him to put effort into his studies to ensure he was learning everything that he needed to. At parent-teacher conferences during the second quarter of the year, I spoke with his mom who was at her wits' end. She did not know what she could do to make him care about school, be successful, and show that he was the student that she knew he could be. After watching his mother relentlessly question him about why he wasn't taking part in the classroom the way she thought he should, I asked his mother if she would mind stepping out for a minute while I spoke to Peter. I was unsure if she would step out or if me speaking to him would actually do any good, especially since I had been speaking to him over the course of twelve weeks in the class. His mother did leave the room, and after she walked into the hallway, I leaned over the desk and looked at Peter. I waited for him to

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