



PRIORITIZE BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUR STUDENTS: WHAT SCIENCE SAYS.



Global Science of Learning
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Over one year into the COVID-19 global pandemic, the magnitude of the challenges in education has compelled a general reconsideration of where we should focus our collective efforts for the optimal benefit of our students. While terms such as “learning loss” are garnering significant attention, this is also a time when it may be helpful to step back and ask some foundational questions such as this: *What is most important to our students?*

Students want to be valued and to feel connected to their learning environment. For example, the Vista Unified School District (San Diego County, CA) conducted over sixty forums with students in 2013. Students clearly articulated a desire to be recognized for their strengths, have more choices, extend their learning beyond the classroom, and progress at their own rates. Students often expressed frustration about how much of their school experience is focused on individual achievement and that they craved social connectedness and peer interactions.¹ Six years later, the same themes emerged; in a series of forums in 2019, the XQ Institute asked high school students what they wanted from school. Students want teachers who care about them as individuals.²

When we listen to our students, they tell us that they want to be engaged in learning, connected to school, motivated to learn, and persist amidst challenges. They want to feel connected to their teachers, peers, and their learning environment. Unfortunately, our students have also been telling us that their experience does not match their aspirations. [Gallup has published data](#) from a massive set of student surveys demonstrating that students tend to be less engaged in their learning as they matriculate from elementary to middle to high school. In the highly-populated state of California, the [2019 California Healthy Kids Survey](#) reported that only 53% of 11th grade students reported feeling connected to their school, a decline from just 62% in 7th grade.

All of this data was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted schooling, compelled social distancing, and has led to a significant level of stress and trauma among our students and throughout society. While data is still being collected, it is almost certain that COVID has exacerbated challenges of engagement, belonging, and motivation with students and teachers feeling disconnected from peers, colleagues, and teachers amidst virtual learning. Many perceive a teacher’s

role, and the role of school in general, is to ensure students master academic content and skills. Yet, teaching and learning is, at its core, a relational endeavor. Humans are social beings who learn from and thrive through connections with others. Thus, prioritizing relationship building -- between teachers and students, students and peers, and teachers and colleagues -- will support a positive learning environment that benefits students, teachers, and the broader community. As a recent report by the National Academies of Sciences on teaching during a crisis notes, “The first priorities need to be equity and the health, well-being, and connections among students, families, and teachers.”³ This article focuses on the benefits of relationships for students.

How Relationships Benefit Students

High-quality relationships between students and teachers, and students and their peers, have academic and social benefits.⁴ Positive emotional states that spark interest, engagement, excitement, and positive emotional relationships, that involve trust, value, and empathy, allow for learning. Students of all ages flourish when their teachers are responsive to their needs, emotionally supportive, and set high expectations for all students.⁵ Students learn, perform best, and develop skills and confidence when their educational experiences provide high support to foster engagement, show them they belong and are valued, and are culturally sensitive to the students’ experiences and needs. Feeling connected, valued, and respected by peers is equally important for students’ sense of belonging and engagement in school.⁶ Being supported and valued engenders feelings of physical and emotional security, which benefits learning. Emotionally supportive and trustworthy relationships can buffer against the impacts of adversity and trauma (such as violence, crime, abuse, psychological trauma, homelessness, racism, food, and housing insecurity).⁷ Negative emotions, such as anxiety, lack of confidence, fear, and negative relationships, that involve coercion and punishment, reduce one’s capacity to learn.⁸

All students will, at some point, feel stressed and experience moments of challenge (academic or social) and failure. To help students develop capacities to successfully manage stress and academic and social setbacks, educators can foster relationships and create emotionally and physically safe environments for students. These include interacting with

each and every student, engaging in teaching practices that elevate student voice and creating a collaborative atmosphere between peers, teaching with a variety of diverse materials and strategies, and setting high expectations for all students. Teachers can teach social skills and coping strategies. These include modeling empathy, respect, and compassion, teaching students calming strategies and how to effectively manage emotions, resolve conflicts, and create effective routines. These strategies, combined with supportive relationships with peers and teachers, empower students to believe they can succeed, even in difficult situations.⁹

Illustrative Examples: How to Focus on Relationships

Below we provide several illustrative examples to showcase how individual teachers, instructional specialists, principals, and schools have focused on building relationships.

How One Teacher Sets Aside Time to Build Relationships with Students

In a 2018 Edutopia article entitled [Simple Relationship-Building Strategies](#), Sean Cassel shared several strategies to overcome barriers to building relationships with students. For example, Sean noted that teachers' time is often usurped by other professional duties that make it challenging to devote time to getting to know individual students. To overcome this, Sean sets aside time for one-on-one, get to know you, conferences. Sean notes that "students of all grade levels are more open to sharing individually and also better able to discover things about me." To make meeting each student feasible, Sean schedules two, 5-minute conferences per week, which means it can take weeks to meet with each student. During these meetings, Sean learns details about their academic and personal experiences. When appropriate, Sean shares details of their lives with the larger class, so that students can also get to know each other better.

Sean begins each school year with an "All About Me" presentation in which students share 10 facts about themselves and include pictures or videos. Sean does the same presentation first, to model what he is looking for and to allow students to better get to know him. Sean notes that this activity can work with any age and subject and that teachers can modify it by asking a personal question about their discipline like, "How do you think physics plays a role in your everyday life?" or "Why do you think we need to learn geometry?" An added benefit – this activity can be done in-person or virtually.

How to Build Relationships Across the School (during a pandemic!)

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the educational landscape changed dramatically. Schools shifted, almost overnight, to online instruction. As teachers, instructional specialists, principals, and schools rapidly prepared for academic instruction online, they were faced with an equally daunting task; how to prioritize relationships during distance learning? As outlined in the National Academies of Sciences 2020 Publication entitled [Teaching K-12 Science and Engineering During a Crisis](#), many rose to the occasion using inventive approaches.

For example, a K-5 science specialist (working in an East Coast urban school that primarily serves students from low-income families) responded to COVID-19 by providing weekly informal engineering engagement opportunities for students. During these engagements, students tried to identify real-life problems and possible solutions to them. Students' goal was to build the solution at home. To make this possible for these families, the science specialist partnered with local stores (such as Walmart, Costco, and Home Depot) that donated the building supplies. As noted in the report, these engagement hours were scheduled from 6 – 7 pm on Friday evenings, but students often requested to stay online chatting and sharing ideas and plans engineering designs until 9 pm! Students were so energized

Taking Action

All educators have an opportunity to reframe our responsibilities and promote positive peer relationships. There are several research-backed strategies that we recommend for developing social and emotional learning capacities to support skills, mindsets, and practices that support learning

1. Prioritize building a positive classroom environment in which students and teachers form positive, trusting relationships. Elevate student voice and promote their sense of belonging in the classroom community.
2. Foster positive student behaviors by teaching social and emotional skills, intrapersonal awareness, and conflict resolution. Model empathy and engage in instructional strategies that encourage self-directed learning and motivation.
3. Provide opportunities to practice social-emotional skills and mindsets inside and outside of the classroom. These skills include self-awareness of one's emotions and perceptions, self-management of stress and emotions, and social awareness such as empathy, cooperation, communication, and responsibility.
4. View disciplinary problems as an indicator of a developmental need or skillset that needs to be taught. Such educative and restorative approaches to classroom management and discipline help teach students how to manage conflicts and self-regulate.

and excited by these opportunities that about 90 percent of students who had originally expressed interest, returned weekly for these sessions.

The school's principal was so impressed by this and immediately recognized the need for building relationships with students, that the principal hosted a schoolwide virtual hangout every Friday. During these hangouts teachers and students danced and played guessing games, and the winner each week received a gift card for at least \$25.

How One School Changed Its Culture to Focus on Positive Peer Relationships

Design 39, a public, K-8 school in the Poway Unified School District (San Diego County), has made social-emotional learning, collaboration, and relationships a top priority.¹⁰ Collaborative group work is a cornerstone of instruction and helps students develop *relationship skills* to establish and maintain supportive relationships and to effectively navigate diverse individuals and groups and *social awareness skills* to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others. Every day students are randomly assigned a "table group" where they work with different students and each is assigned different roles in the group. This helps students learn to work together, each having a unique role to play in the collaboration. The goal of this table group is to foster experiences that help learners develop strong relationships, collaboration skills, and gain a deeper degree of self-awareness (an understanding of one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior).

Conclusion

Relationships are at the heart of meaningful learning. We can and must attend to the social dynamics of learning by providing opportunities for students to develop their emotional awareness and skills by providing a safe, secure environment that

promotes interaction in pursuit of creative problem-solving and conflict resolution. By shifting to learner-centered experiences, including the examples shared in this article, we can empower all students to know themselves, see themselves as full of possibilities, and shine as changemakers.

Want to Know More?

We hope you are inspired to take action! Here are some additional resources that might help.

- [Strengthening Relationships with Students from Diverse Backgrounds](#) by the Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest
- [Resources for Building Teacher-Student Relationships](#) by Education Northwest
- [Why you should care about how people are feeling](#) by Katie Martin
- [10 strategies to get to know your students and create an inclusive learner-centered culture](#) by Katie Martin

We encourage you to stay connected with the Global Science of Learning Network and to share your ideas on social media by using #GSOLN

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Photo by Jeswin Thomas

Endnotes

- 1 Vodicka, D. (2020). *Learner-Centered Leadership: A Blueprint for Transformational Change in Learning Communities*. IMPress.
- 2 <https://medium.com/xqamerica/highlighting-youth-and-student-voice-high-school-b49e1058ba4d>
- 3 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020. *Teaching K-12 Science and Engineering During a Crisis*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25909>.
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- 7 Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success*. Learning Policy Institute.; Cantor, P., Osher, D., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2019). Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context1. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(4), 307-337.
- 8 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2010). *Persistent Fear and Anxiety Can Affect Young Children's Learning and Development: Working Paper No. 9*. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.
- 9 See for review: Darling-Hammond, L., & Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success*. Learning Policy Institute.
- 10 Quidwai, S. (2020). *Defining and designing a new grammar of school with design thinking: A promising practice study*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Southern California