

Let's get engaged: the importance of positive relationships for students with disabilities

Annie Facchinetti on how to foster equity with disabled students



Eighty percent of life's satisfaction comes from meaningful relationships.

Brian Tracy

There are many aspects of student learning that are difficult for teachers to have a direct impact on. A student's background, home life, core beliefs and preferences are all hard to influence in any significant way. How a teacher interacts with and responds to students, on the other hand, is an oft-overlooked but far more controllable element of the learning environment. It's usually fairly simple to effortlessly build positive relationships with the majority of students, especially those who are

engaged, compliant and personable. When students have behavioural or learning difficulties that make them harder to engage, more difficult to teach and even harder to like, teachers face a greater challenge in establishing relationships and need to intentionally manage their approach.

We've come a long way since the days when students with disabilities were segregated into separate special schools to be educated. The gradual shift towards inclusive education began in the seventies, when a confluence of research questioning the effectiveness of segregation, and changing attitudes towards people with disabilities, driven by principles of 'normalisation' that recognised for the first time the rights of all to have access to normal living and

learning conditions led many to begin to question the status quo. By 2006, the United Nations Convention on the Rights

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of Persons with Disabilities laid out expectations of equal opportunities to preserve the dignity and allow effective participation of students with disabilities. In Australia, Goal 1 of the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Curriculum Corporation, 2008) reinforces these principles, proclaiming that students with disabilities will have equity of access to education free from discrimination. The effect of these changes to policy and attitude has been an increase in the number of students with disabilities in mainstream schooling – an estimated 15% of students are now identified as needing program adjustments relating to a disability (State Government of Victoria, 2016).

Against this backdrop, there has also been a great deal of research into the importance of Teacher Student Relationships (TSRs) to the academic, motivational and social-emotional wellbeing of students. Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs suggests that it's only once students' safety and social belonging needs are met that they are in a position to work towards building esteem and self-actualisation and it is therefore fundamental that teachers make students feel safe and secure in the learning environment. Researchers have found that negative TSRs in the first years of school set the scene for academic and behavioural difficulties right through to

high school, and others concluded that negative TSR experiences have a greater influence on students than positive ones.

The impact of TSRs is particularly profound for students with disabilities.

That teachers are the role models for setting the tone in class. The way a teacher interacts with a particular student will influence the way that other students treat that child.

Students with learning disabilities attract more negative attention from teachers than other students and that this influences the way that they are

perceived by their peers. This means that if teachers are impatient or less engaged with students with disabilities, it will have ramifications for how they are treated by others in the class. Teachers are similarly affected by the way students interact with each other. More popular students receive increased levels of positive teacher attention, which nurtures more positive peer attention. If teachers were to focus on increasing the positive attention given to students with disabilities, it could make a significant difference to the way they perform and are accepted.

Despite this, we don't often intentionally manage TSRs, but there are many ways that better TSRs could be forged. One is connective instruction or connecting students with the what, who and how of learning. Substantive connectiveness or the what entails finding a range of meaningful tasks at what Vygotsky (1978) calls the student's zone of proximal development to engage the learner with the content. Interpersonal connectiveness or the who is nurtured by giving students agency in their learning, relating to each student as a unique individual and articulating achievable expectations. Lastly, instructional connectiveness or the how, looks at pedagogical elements such as feedback, instructional clarity and engaging methodology.

These three interconnected elements are therefore at work not only in the direct social and functional interactions between teachers and students, but also in the allocation, organisation and expectations around learning tasks for students with disabilities. For example, the provi-

sion of assessments that offer equity of access to students with disabilities identified that some assessments were "visually dense, procedurally difficult and linguistically challenging". It is easy to imagine that for a student struggling with behavioural, cognitive or emotional issues, being presented with an activity that they don't understand and feel they can't complete could potentially damage that student's view of and relationship with the teach-

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er unless appropriate accommodations are made. Such barriers can be 'designed out' by teachers who are mindful of their pro-

spective impact by making adjustments to the visual, procedural and linguistic aspects of the task. In other words, if the teacher makes sure the instructions and expectations are clear, that the task is at the appropriate level for the student and that appropriate feedback has given, not only will it benefit the student academically, but it will serve to reinforce the positive relationship between teacher and pupil. Although this applies equally to students with and without disabilities, it is certainly more critical to consider for those who are struggling.

To successfully transition students with disabilities into mainstream settings, in order to protect and foster school belonging, students need teachers on whom they can rely, who understand them, and who respect their opinions. Students also need teachers to actively reach out and cheer them up when they are sad or worried, and to have fun, laugh and joke with them. Many of these things happen naturally in the course of teaching and learning, but with research showing that students with disabilities are among the least likely to be the beneficiaries of these positive interactions, it is worth considering the value of putting effort into making sure that these aspects are nurtured with students most at risk. A kind word, humour or extra support can go a long way.

There are, however, some challenges to building positive TSRs. The gap between theory and practice in terms of what is known about building a sense of relatedness and what can practically be achieved by teachers. A lack of understanding that TSRs need to be consciously managed

Engaging the disabled



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has been identified as a potential stumbling block. To be successful, therefore, schools need to make a clear and visible plan for teachers. Teacher professional development as a critical component in enhancing TSR practices, and time and resources should be allocated to ensure teachers are adequately supported in this.

Building teacher student relationships is an area that teachers can have a discernible impact on, not just with the students who learn in spite of us, but also for those students who need our help the most. Often, establishing and maintaining positive relationships with the most difficult students can seem challenging and even initially thankless. However, these students allow us to show our mettle as teachers and by intentionally directing energy into positive TSRs we can also reap the greatest benefits.