

## Middle Grades Musings

*I am dealing with people and not with things. And, because I am dealing with people, I cannot refuse my wholehearted and loving attention, even in personal matters, where I see that a student is in need of such attention.*

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*

### **Relationships Matter**

The quote at the top resonates with me because as educators, we are faced with teaching students who come to us with a great deal of social and emotional issues. In addition to those issues, middle school students are changing physically which oftentimes manifest itself through impulsive and inappropriate behaviors or choices. In order for us to achieve success in our classrooms, we must navigate through challenges and issues faced by our students. So, how do we do it? How do we teach students who come to us with emotional wounds or who are socially unskilled? Dr. James Comer, professor of Child Psychiatry at Yale University and creator of the School Development program, stated “no significant learning occurs without significant relationships.” Dr. Comer’s program is designed to promote a school environment where students feel valued, connected, and safe through positive emotional bonds with school staff. In other words, developing relationships with students is the first step towards positively impacting academic achievement.

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Currently, I am a third year lateral entry teacher. I remember my



first year being a bit overwhelming with trying to learn my content area as well as different engaging activities, participating in the Beginning Licensed Teacher program, developing classroom management skills, and let’s not forget learning all of the educational acronyms ... IEP, BIPs, SIT, ESSA and much more. As I was navigating my first year, I reflected and asked myself the following questions: How do I reach middle school students who are “in-between”? They are in-between wanting to be independent, yet they depend on our acceptance and affirmation. How do I reach students who come to me emotionally battered? How do I work with students who

have behavior challenges and simply have not been taught to handle their emotions? I watched the same students go to In-school suspension frequently and at the same time of the day, but they could manage to stay in other classrooms. Why would a student “act out” in one class and not another? It was clear to me that the answer to all of those questions boils down to developing relationships.... **relationships matter.**

## *Middle Grades Musings*

While it is important to have engaging strategies, a well-developed lesson plan as well as conducting formative and summative assessments, it is imperative to build student relationships. Students don't care how much you know but knowing how much you care will inspire them to do well in your class. It can be overwhelming as a novice or veteran teacher to develop those relationships along with all the other requirements within this profession. At the end of the day, Dr. Rita Pierson, a renowned educator, said "kids don't learn from people they don't like." Over the past three years, I have worked on developing relationships with my students. Below are my top three tips/reminders on my endeavor to build relationships.

1. **Greet students:** On most days, I stand at the door to greet students with a hello, fist bump or special handshakes. This allows me to look into their eyes and really see what is going on with them. If I notice a student is having an off day, I will pull the student aside and ask what is going on or is there something I can do to help? When you take the time to do this genuinely, over time, it can build trust and rapport with students.
2. **Seek first to understand:** I have learned that I must take the time to investigate and understand the nature of a problem. I learned this lesson the hard way. In my first year, I had a student who was not doing homework and simply was not making an effort to study. I later found out the student's mother was terminally ill and that was the root cause of her not doing well academically. I did not ask questions but made an assumption. After that experience, I try very hard to seek to understand. When we seek first to understand by asking questions, students recognize that you are taking the time to understand their situation and you respect them as a person.
3. **Share your story:** When you share a part of yourself with students, you become real to them. I have shared stories about my middle school experiences and other life experiences. I tell them some of my failures and what I have learned from them. I share my stories in class and when I pull them aside to seek to understand their situation. A genuine heart-to-heart connection can make a difference. I had a student who was completely disengaged. I did everything to encourage him but this student was not responding to my efforts. I asked the student what was going on and finally he shared a personal matter with me and how it had impacted him. After he opened up to me, I shared a similar challenge and how I overcame it. As a result of the connection, this student began to take interest in getting my work done and wanting to thrive in my classroom.

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As middle school educators, we have to recognize that our students will come to us with challenges, issues, concerns, and insecurities. We have to look into their eyes, seek first to understand, and share a part of ourselves to build genuine relationships. A by-product of relationship building is student achievement because no significant learning occurs without significant relationships.... **Relationships matter.**