

He aha te mea nui o te ao

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What is the most important thing in the world?

He tangata, he tangata, he tangata

It is the people, it is the people, it is the people



Without people, even in an ever-increasing automated society, many practices and things we rely on daily just wouldn't happen.

Therefore, establishing relationships at the beginning of the year is extremely important. This is nothing new, and most teachers will begin their new year developing and facilitating bonds with students. Many teachers explore the context of [te tiriti o Waitangi](#) as a springboard to establishing a class treaty of their own and allowing students to take ownership of their learning and environments.

As many teachers begin to plan their first term and organise their learning environments, I have begun to think about some key areas and elements that could be focused upon.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

It goes without saying that the most fundamentally important relationship for any teacher is that of the professional relationship with their students.

“Think about it for just a minute. Aren't you more apt to go out of your way to please a boss who you feel values you as an individual and treats you with dignity and respect, rather than a boss who communicates a lack of respect for you? When your boss asks about your family; gives you “slack” when there is a personal emergency; or praises you for work well done; don't you develop feelings of regard for this boss and want to do your best to please him or her? Students have the same feelings. So it makes sense that developing positive teacher-student relations is one of the most effective steps you can take to establish a positive discipline climate in the classroom.” (Boynton 2005)

Trust is at the very foundation of the relationship with students. For the student, the knowledge that their teacher trusts them as an individual can be both powerful and motivating. Furthermore, when they know they can trust their teacher to understand challenges and issues they are facing and support them, the student is less likely to give up. Trusting that collaboratively developed classroom boundaries will be enforced fairly, and with balance, promotes students taking responsibility for their actions and understanding consequences. Developing a climate of trust and respect establishes mutual appreciation and individualised relationships.

It is not, and never should it be, the responsibility of our learners to get into the head of the teacher. It is the responsibility of the teacher to supply a clear but adjustable road map for the students to follow. By this, I do not mean a dictatorial set of learning intentions that must be followed, more, a clear and established direction for students whereby they can choose their own path.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS

I have intentionally separated this from ‘relationships with students’, as the two are often interdependent and combined, but need to be addressed independently. As part of the development of the teacher-student relationship, there is an opportunity to model effective relationships between students and establish clear parameters early. Much of The New Zealand Curriculum and, in particular, the key competencies, focuses on relationships with others and interdependent learning through collaborative practices. Surely, it stands to reason that we focus on facilitating the development of relationships between our students?

Some students will arrive at your door with excellent social skills and immediately develop positive peer relationships. However, many will not. It therefore falls to the teacher not only to develop social skills in the students they teach, but also to facilitate the opportunity to use them.

“For many students, school can be a lonely place, and low classroom acceptance by peers can be linked with subsequent disengagement and lowered achievement.” (Hattie 2012)

A teacher needs to identify those students with limited social skills, establish strategies to overcome any underlying challenges, and then develop key areas of focus to promote positive interactions. Without a strong student/teacher relationship, failure is inevitable. Once again, it boils down to the level of trust between the student and the teacher. They must believe that their teacher has their well being and achievement (both academic and social) at the forefront of their mind.

“When students have opportunities to talk and listen to each other, provide emotional support, share learning experiences, and develop respect, they are more likely to feel that they belong and are understood and cared for by their peers.” (Furrer et al 2014)

We are once again reminded to ‘facilitate, not dictate.’

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Becoming involved in students’ lives remains a boundary that sits in different places for different teachers. However, one thing stays constant regardless of interpretation: we must never cross over the line into telling parents how to parent.

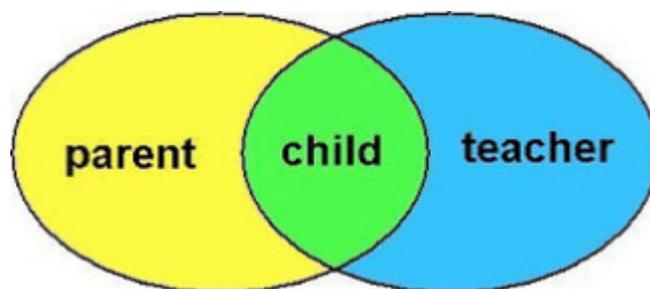


Image source: parentsandteachersinsped.weebly.com

The role of parents in educating their children cannot be predetermined by just the teacher or parent. It is yet another facet that needs to be collaboratively constructed, taking into account a student’s background, beliefs, and parent understandings of current learning practice. Most parents will automatically use their own experiences in education to foster relationships and boundaries between themselves, their child, and the teacher. However, with a carefully chosen construct and early intervention, a good teacher is able to establish a clear and shared understanding of their ethos and practice. It is, perhaps, fair to assume that at the core of any home-school relationship sits strong communication.

“A good time to contact your child’s teacher is during the first week of school. This gives you an opportunity to meet one another when neither has any complaints. Otherwise, the first teacher contact can be unpleasant. The teacher is usually calling to describe some unacceptable behavior or report a

child's lack of progress and her concern that a learning problem may exist.”
(Child Development Institute)

The 'positive phone calls home' movement has enabled many teachers to dispel the belief that they only ring home when there's a problem. However, the quote above shows that it is still firmly held and believed by many parents. While teaching, I made it my mission to ring every parent at least once a term and share something positive about his or her child's learning. It meant some calls lasted two minutes, and were simply an acknowledgement of student progress. Others could be 20-30 minutes, and gave parents a genuine opportunity to engage in a personal, unrestricted conversation about their child. It was often in these longer conversations that parents began to share on a much deeper level. I learned of bereavements, past experiences, and problems at home, establishing a connection to each parent, and deepening my understanding of the whole family.

Successful relationships depend on strong boundaries and the development of trust between parent and teacher. A parent needs to know that they are not being told how to raise their child; that when the phone rings it is not for a bad reason, and that the teacher is prepared to go that extra mile for their children.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROFESSIONAL COLLEAGUES

I make no secret of the fact that I believe wholeheartedly in connected education. Finding opportunities to connect outside of my classroom and school underpinned much of my collaborative teaching practice. But none of my connected education practice came before the establishment of strong team relationships within my school. Whether as a leader or member of a team, teachers have the opportunity to model good practice and behaviour to both their colleagues and students.

Developing a culture of trust and risk taking can have huge rewards at all levels, but it is not without its challenge. The establishment of a supportive team based on a culture of respect, enjoyment, and support is something that can have a meaningful and lasting effect on a teacher's practice. Something as simple as a MATEs (Mutually Agreed Team Expectation) agreement can develop a cohesive structure within which a team can flourish. But extending this into a bicultural and more diverse understanding of [Manaakitanga](#), [Aroha tetahi ke Tetahi](#), [tautoko](#) and [Eke Panuku, eke tangaroa](#) reinforces the concept of support across culture, creed, and diversity.

Effective communication strategies can help you build strong working relationships. Some tips for effective communication include:

- Respond to requests by emphasising what you can do to help meet them.
- Follow through and do what you say you'll do.
- Listen without passing judgment, and don't rush in to give advice.
- When you have concerns, work them out with the source, not with others.

- Communicate with respect in every interaction regardless of whether you like the person.
- When others give you assistance or support, express appreciation for it.
- Focus on issues, not personalities, when you discuss work matters and problems.
- When differences in views or ideas occur, work first to understand them from the other person's perspective.
- Be direct and sincere as normal practices.
- Use humour in good taste.

Source:

<http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/how-to-build-strong-working-relationships-with-eff.html>

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is time. Establishing trust and strong relationships is not something that happens quickly. It is a long process that needs to be worked at by all involved, sharing responsibility as well as successes and failures. I, like many teachers, focused my first two weeks of the term on creating a strong classroom culture. I also set aside time every week to continue to grow and explore it. There was no endpoint and no 'goal' to be reached. Relationships evolve and transform, so must our attitude and timetable.

Sources

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[Brounstein](#), M. How to Build Strong Working Relationships with Effective Communication

<http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/how-to-build-strong-working-relationships-with-eff.html>

Further Reading

Edutopia: Fostering Relationships in the Classroom:

<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/fostering-classroom-relationships-larry-ferlazzo-katie-hull-sypniski>



James Hopkins

[James Hopkins](#)'s passion lies in Modern Learning Practice. He helped in the development and planning of N4L's Pond, being invited to participate in thinking and learning with other Pioneer Educators, as well as writing several pieces for N4L about Pond. James developed Learning Network New Zealand's app for both iOS and Android, incorporating interactivity and communication within the app to compliment the business model used by the company. He also developed the online community associated with #primedchatnz on Twitter. As a result, he has interviewed and worked with Tony Ryan, Graham Watts, and several others, connecting them to the Twitter community, and organising an online chat directly associated to 45min interviews broadcast via YouTube/Google Plus.