

# Chapter 24

## Student Well-Being: Teaching with Empathy and Staff Collaboration



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**Abstract** During a recent student placement, I observed a teacher criticize a student for being late, with the result that the student left the class in tears. This teacher had not realized that the students' grandfather had been ill and had just passed away the day before. This reminded me of a time in my own schooling when I was summoned to the Principal's office for standing up to bullying, and one of my teachers went out of her way to come with me and explain my situation to the Principal. The present chapter discusses my research into student well-being and how teachers and students might work together to achieve the best academic and social outcomes. I do this in terms of four key concepts that relate to working for the betterment of student well-being, namely understanding diversity, empathy, professional development and staff collaboration.

Journal entry:

In my most recent student placement, I was confronted with a situation that took me by surprise. As a mature aged student, I have had much experience out in the work force and especially in school settings, as sports coordinator at two different schools for seven years. However, this experience was quickly put to the side when a situation occurred that I had never confronted before.

A Year 6 student walked into class a little late, only for the teacher to express their disappointment to the young child; the boy walked out of class in tears. The child in question had been a little disruptive throughout my first two weeks; however, I had built a bond with him as he was a talented young soccer player, a sport of interest to me. In building this relationship he had mentioned to me that his grandfather had been sick and was in hospital. He was from a European background and very close to his extended family.

Unfortunately, the morning the student was late to school and received an angry response from the teacher was the morning after his grandfather had passed away. His teacher was unaware of that fact; however, the teacher was also unaware his grandfather was even sick, which may have assisted the teacher in the first instance.

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## Introduction

Personally, teaching has long been a passion of mine; even during my studies at high school, I always thought I would be a Physical Education (PE) teacher. Later in my high school years, my ability to transfer my passion for teaching into a discipline with study began to wane and, unfortunately, I completed my Year 12 certificate with minimal effort, and I was not eligible to attend tertiary education. The drive was lost in amongst many other commitments and general teenage life.

The fascination with teaching fell upon me during quite a tumultuous primary schooling life. I moved from Victoria to South Australia when I was six and went to a new school as an outcast of sorts. I was constantly bullied, verbally and physically, and really battled to establish myself amongst other children.

It was not until Year 5 when I clearly remember a teacher, Mrs. Johnson, taking an interest in me and my situation. I had by this stage established some friendship groups and was going well academically and athletically. On one occasion, where I finally decided to stand up for myself, I was noticed by another teacher and marched straight to the Principal's office to await my fate.

Before I even got into the office, Mrs Johnson came running down the hall and quickly put her arm around me and asked what had happened. 'I stood up to them, Mrs. Johnson. I think I did the wrong thing', I said sheepishly. Mrs. Johnson could not have been more proud of me. She entered the Principal's office with me and explained everything that had happened over the past three years of my primary school life.

Mrs. Johnson, out of all the teachers in the school, took an interest in me and helped me through some really tough times, whilst still assisting my academically development. She was the key reason for me wanting to become a teacher because she cared, and she was empathetic and understanding. She knew me outside of the classroom.

I am a great believer in positive education through positive psychology, whether this is about engaging in professional learning in certain areas or based upon my willingness to apply these principles to help my students build relationships and develop grit, growth mindsets and resilience.

I have had diverse professional experiences, and my pedagogical approach, whilst malleable, is beginning to centre on relationships—care and empathy as the cornerstones of my approach to all situations. I have seen school settings in so many different lights and have advanced knowledge and vast experiences that have given me a great set of interpersonal and organizational skills that lend themselves to engaging in meaningful relationships that do not blur the personal and professional boundaries that teachers must abide by, such as duty of care, ethics and mandatory reporting.

## My Investigative Journey

I will be discussing my research into student well-being in relation to my personal–professional practice. The question I will ask is, ‘How do teachers and students best work together for the best academic and social outcomes’?

The investigation I conducted helped me understand real-life experiences and concepts related to the topic of student well-being in relation to my professional practice. This allowed me to clarify my opinions based upon my personal investigation and experience. Throughout my journey, which included reading books, face-to-face meetings and personal experience, I have found four key concepts that continue to arise in regard to teaching with empathy and working collaboratively with staff for the betterment of student well-being. Below I have gone into more depth about each of the following concepts: understanding diversity, empathy, professional development and staff collaboration.

## Understanding Diversity

Teacher and student relationships are often a very awkward conversation and discussion point. However, to effectively teach students, I am a believer in the importance of understanding them prior to assessing or questioning them. Much like pre-assessment in a classroom, a teacher getting an understanding of a student’s knowledge of a topic is a way of understanding how to teach a unit of work, so why not do the same for understanding a student’s background?

Milner suggests that teachers need to take into account the geographical location of their school, whilst also taking into account students’ backgrounds. Rowe (2013, p. 2) describes Milner as saying,

Many teachers do not consider the community where the school is located a relevant factor. They feel that teaching science, for example, should be the same no matter where the school is located. By ignoring the community aspect of students’ backgrounds, they are missing out on a valuable resource. Teaching should not look the same in all schools. The communities where the students live should be a relevant factor in the teacher’s planning process.

This allows a student to feel comfortable in their environment and have the ability to succeed socially and academically. Students feel a sense of justice and that they are being judged fairly, as confirmed by Adams et al. (2007), who stated that diversity and social justice are intimately involved and interrelated. If teachers do not value diversity, how can teachers effectively address issues for certain students? Without addressing social justice, teachers cannot effectively engage with the issue of diversity.

## Empathy

For Dewey and Findlay (1907), the complexity of our society requires us, as people, let alone as teachers, to attempt to be sympathetic. Education is a key means for in portraying this to the next generation. However, not only should we teach the methods and processes to empathize, and the knowledge of why humans empathize metabolically, we should also be central to their understanding. Jewell et al. (2011, p. 8) suggest that:

Whilst good intentions are necessary for ethical actions, they are not sufficient in themselves. If people want to do the right thing, they need to know how to decide what the right thing is.

This goes hand in hand with the requirement for people to not only feel like they are empathetic but brings it to the next level, to understand why they are empathetic and what ethics should be held close to ensure we are making good choices when situations confront us.

If we, as educators, can be empathetic in our approach to teaching, then students will want to strive to succeed and be more engaged in lessons. In the classroom, motivation drives many behaviours, and it is important to understand the importance of motivation in an educational environment. Motivation is described as a state that energizes, directs and sustains behaviour (McDevitt and Ormrod 2006).

## Professional Development

Professional development was a common theme throughout my interview process. Teachers are required to commit a certain amount of time a year during which they must engage in professional development. Staff and school leaders were collective in their thoughts. All agreed to develop school policy based upon professional development and collaboratively work towards making their school the best it can be.

At the core of most definitions of leadership are two functions: providing direction and exercising influence (Leithwood et al. 2004). Potentially, staff has differing opinions on differing topics, and it takes the school leadership to provide direction for the legacy a school wants to leave behind.

A willingness to learn and continue to improve is paramount to teachers, students and others becoming the best they possibly can. A study suggests that teachers need to integrate theory with classroom practice. They need time and opportunities for exploring knowledge about the nature of (new) learning and how it might be implemented in different domains. There should also be opportunities for teacher inquiry and collaboration, strategies to reflect teachers' questions and concerns and access to successful models of (new) practice (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 2011).

## Staff Collaboration

Staff collaboration must be driven by the leadership teams at schools. Leadership is second only to classroom instruction amongst all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (Leithwood et al. 2004).

School leaders can communicate effectively with their staff to improve outcomes for staff and students. School leaders combine the school values, beliefs and ethos to create a passionate, enthusiastic and vibrant learning environment. They promote the concept of transformative pedagogy, which is defined as an activist pedagogy combining the elements of constructivist and critical pedagogy that empowers students to examine critically their beliefs, values and knowledge with the goal of developing a reflective knowledge base, and an appreciation for multiple perspectives (Smyth and McInerney 2007).

Working together and engaging as a collective allows for many varied opinions to be heard, listened to and discussed. Allowing people to be heard can increase the opportunities for development. Listening to the stories of students and novice teachers can improve our understanding of the processes these teachers will undergo when they begin teaching and constructing their own professional identities (Schatz-Oppenheimer and Dvir 2014).

## Conclusion

From my investigation and the evaluations made above, it would be easy to get bogged down in trying to reinvent the wheel. However, as mentioned, I am a true believer that relationships can be the cornerstone of good education and allow for empathy and collaboration to be imparted for the benefit of schools, staff and students.

Using relationships in alignment with targeted pre-assessment to differentiate the classroom environment and tasks for students ensures their best chance for success. I also believe that the future of education is about providing holistic teaching of the student and does not necessarily mean that students have to fit the mould but that they need to be given opportunities to flourish, and opportunities to 'fail' and learn from mistakes but explore as well. School leadership can be the driving force behind change, and professional development is at the forefront of that change.

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