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It's Not a Transaction—It's a Relationship

Rosalind's Classroom Conversations, December 2015



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By Rosalind Wiseman

Lately I've been thinking about the impact of the small, fleeting moments that happen between students and teachers countless times a day. It can be in the hallway, right before or after class, walking between buildings and in the cafeteria. Small moments between children and adults that seem to be insignificant but actually may be the foundation for maintaining the inclusive and respectful

environments, the “cultures of dignity,” we are trying to create in classrooms and schools.

The small moments matter. Because it’s the small moments that allow both young people and adults to see each other as actual people, not just someone you need something from.

A few weeks ago I was in a school and saw a student who had recently done poorly on a test walk up to her teacher and say, “How do I get an ‘A’ in your class?”

Would anyone fault this teacher for being really annoyed that the student asked this question? Of course not. It smacks of entitlement and grade grubbing, a combination most teachers intensely dislike. But, like it or not, educators are in relationship with their students. And research shows that better and more meaningful relationships between teachers and students lead to students’ reaching higher levels of academic achievement. We know this and it is often said. But sometimes, in the moment of interacting with our students, we can forget this especially when they are doing something irritating.

But we do it too.

Does this sound familiar?

Have you finished your assignment? Why are you wearing that? Where are you supposed to be right now?

Many of our conversations with young people are transactional. Not just from students to us but from us to our students. I think we need to admit that often when we talk to our students, our “requests” come across as demands. And if students respond in any other way than obvious compliance, their questions are perceived as a sign of disrespect.

I am highlighting this because it is in these small moments of relating to each other—before we ask for what we need—that build trust among teachers and students. That’s a critical way we can create an educational environment where students feel welcome. Watch good, responsive teachers and coaches as they walk down the school hallway. They connect, even briefly, so the child knows they are seen and acknowledged as a valued member of the community. “Nice shoes!” “I saw your drawing in the art class” or a warm hello makes a profound difference.

Young people have consistently told me that they dread disappointing an adult they care about. I’ll say it differently: the thought of disappointing someone who “sees” them and knows them is powerful. It’s this thought that can motivate them to take responsibility for their education, their community, their best effort, and towards you, their teacher.

It also makes teaching a lot more fun because you’re less likely to have power struggles with your students. Instead, if you have disagreements, the young person knows that while you may not agree with them, you aren’t going to disrespect them or embarrass them in front of their peers.

Not only does this help in the classroom but it also helps when young people are involved in a conflict or problem at school. A solid relationship with you will make it easier for a child to tell you when they hurt or face an overwhelming problem. Because trusting the school to do right by them *really* means trusting the adults within that school. And that comes down to young people believing that adults “see” them and respect their experience. If we do this better, I believe that much of the bullying and bias that students experience in school will be addressed more effectively because students will be more likely to confide in us instead of suffering in silence.

By the way, this doesn’t mean we let our students get away with being rude. The next time you have a student demand something, like getting an ‘A’ on the next test, suggest that they try again with “Hi! Can you help me understand how I

presented the information or why my answers weren't satisfactory so I can do it better next time?" Because often the most valuable skills young people will ever learn at school are how to work and connect with other people.

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