



A New Guy's Suggestion for Good Teachers

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I have heard and read numerous directions on how to be a good teacher: show care and compassion; manage the classroom effectively; be an empathetic communicator with students; know and organize the area content with compelling lesson plans and a flexible classroom approach; combine an understanding of cognitive constructs with personal connection.

There is a lot of research and literature on what makes a good teacher. Yet, as so many students, parents, and community members say, they know a good teacher when they see one. I have learned from some good teachers. And there is another characteristic I have seen in teachers that I want to share.

Be actively accessible.

Being a credential student, a substitute teacher, and recently a classroom teacher (not to mention a married parent of school-aged children), I see things from somewhat of a unique position. In the last year I have had the opportunity to talk openly with students and observe more teachers in their classrooms (over three dozen in several school districts) than many full-time teachers get to do.

I have seen good teachers be actively accessible; not just available, but seeking out the quiet, disconnected students, on their terms. I know, this does not sound like anything new. But consider these stories.

As a sub I spent some time in a continuation high school. During an art class, one girl was talking to her friends, and relayed that she got teased in middle school. Then, as she put it, she discovered that a good, effective way to get kids to stop teasing her was to punch them in the face. Of course this led to a downward path, but she finally made it back to high school, albeit a continuation high school. With help, she now controls her anger and is much better adjusted. What struck me was that she explicitly traced back the start of her issues to what she thought was a lack of concern by a particular teacher in middle school. Obviously her path was not the teacher's fault and there were many more issues, but the student's comments made me wonder. I happen to know this teacher, a person known rightfully as a

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very good teacher. What could have happened if this teacher, or even another teacher, had connected positively with this girl back then?

Students not only hang on to small things, they also internalize them. I had the opportunity to teach math in a high school summer school class of 28 students for four hours a day. In a first day survey, I asked a few basic things like preferred name and preferred pronouns, along with an open-ended question: "Anything else you would like me to know?" Two or three students specifically identified themselves as slow learners. I was a little surprised that these students had so internalized this label, and I wondered how it affected their actions.

As the class progressed, I ran into two beliefs in at least half the students: "I can't do this," and "I hate math." I jokingly pushed the comments aside, and slowly showed these students they could do the work in front of them. And lights came on.

In addition to being aware of the big impacts small actions can have, as teachers we also cannot assume that what we think we see and judge is the only reality. I had the chance to hear from an eighth grader who was upset about a fellow math teacher – by most accounts a good teacher liked by students and peers. In less than two weeks, this student developed a very negative opinion of her teacher. Her eyes were watering, so she had her head down. The teacher walked over and slapped her hand on the student's table and smirked, apparently thinking the student was asleep. The girl felt angry and hurt, but did not explain herself. In our conversation, the student explained, with some prompting, that she did not have glasses, so her eyes watered now and then. She had lost her glasses over the summer, during a move, and her mother's insurance did not allow for a new purchase for a few months. By chance, that school had a pretty good fund for things like glasses for students in need, but what this student really appreciated at that moment was someone who would listen. Now understand, this student has not been a model student, and it was easy to assume she was not paying attention. But could a kinder "wake up" have helped?

Being actively accessible allows for some surprising questions. One day, a student was feeling comfortable with the equations we were working on, but asked what the different types of parentheses were (the difference between regular parentheses, brackets, and so on). I told her that functionally they were all the same; interior parentheses had to be dealt with before outer ones, but the different styles were just that, styles, to help make them look different, so we do not confuse one for another. She understood and things jelled better for her. She then complained that she had tried to ask other teachers about that, but they did not have the time to answer such questions.

It surprised me that previous teachers would have had a problem with this. Being accessible means we have to be open to questions, especially if the students initiate them. In this particular math case, it was a simple yet important question. These symbols, just like the other terminology, need to be understood to be used, and the question was an easy one. I do not know how she asked in the past, but it is hard for me to image how such a question could have been phrased to warrant dismissal.

Teachers have taught me to be flexible. One day I worked at some length with a boy on a type of equation. After a while, he got it, and was pleased. The next day I wrote several similar problems on the board for the whole class during the nutrition break. As the kids came in, the boy saw one of the problems, smiled, and went to the board to solve the problem on his own. If I had wanted to stay on my

Allies for Education 2018, 1, 2

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David Lynn

plan, I would have asked him to stop so I could do it with the class, but I saw that it was more useful to let him reinforce his learning with his own, self-guided personal lesson, and then praise him.

Of course, to be actively accessible is more than being open to their questions. I have learned that teachers need to seek out and approach students in need. Recently I watched a teacher I know. There was a boy sitting in a shady corner of the building during lunch, on his computer, minding his own business. She went up to chat for a bit. Afterward I asked her about the exchange. She had noticed him sitting alone several times, and just wanted to ask about him and give some encouraging words. Could that have made a world of difference? I do not know, but it only took awareness and a couple of minutes on the teacher's part.

Good teachers have also taught me to let students go off-task at times and use those experiences to build connections. Subbing in a class, I noticed a couple of girls talking. When I went over to them (I rove a lot – I can't sit in a class), I found they had finished the assigned task and were working on a Farsi word game together. They looked like they had been caught at something. They had their work done, so I encouraged what they were doing, and asked if they could teach me a short, useful phrase. As I walked away, I noticed they both sat up a bit straighter.

Often we hear that a positive word, an open attitude of caring, with a professional distance, can be the most important thing we can do. This is not a new idea for good teaching. But I have found that small interactions can have big, long-term impacts, and that students internalize all sorts of things. It is rewarding when a student approaches me, but it is not enough to let them approach; I believe I need to find them and approach them.

It is so easy to let ourselves get focused on lessons and administration when we have 30-35 students coming in and out of our classrooms five times a day. What we need to ask ourselves is this: what am I going to do to be actively accessible to another student today?

About the Author

David Lynn is a graduate student in the School of Education at California State University, Channel Islands. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley with a double major in human geography and social science, and his MBA from Pepperdine University. A father of two school-aged children, he is a new teacher of mathematics at Oxnard High School.