Teacher Greetings: A Reflection

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The past three weeks of my Teach First New Zealand Summer Initial Intensive experience has taught me a lot. Spending time in classes at Wesley College allowed me to observe some excellent teaching practice, and learn from those who have been refining their skills for years.

While the most effective teachers at Wesley College employed a number of techniques to engage learners and build a safe, warm, learning environment. Building relationships in this way is very important because it makes students feel cared about, and in turn, makes students more willing to engage with the teacher and their activities (Boynton & Boynton, 2005). The technique that I found most interesting and, in some ways, most effective, was teachers greeting their students at the door.

In my experience of high school, I only ever had one teacher who greeted their students at the door. The teacher was bubbly and friendly, and someone who I have immensely missed since I left. Her positivity in the classroom was infectious. She greeted us at the door, every lesson without fail, and not only because the classroom was locked until she arrived to open the door. This teacher made an effort to connect with every student who walked into her classroom. As a result of this, her students, like myself, felt welcomed and safe in our shared learning space.

At Wesley College, there was one teacher in particular who greeted her students at the door. She was a Teach First United Kingdom graduate who had been teaching for the past twelve years. Her classroom atmosphere was very relaxed, and despite it being close to the end of term, the students were happy to participate in the classwork together. Her interactions with students were friendly from the moment she greeted them at the door.

The actions of this teacher got me thinking about ways of building professional relationships with students outside of the traditional "ask about their home life" solutions. I had always thought that positive relationships required a lot of hard work and time to be created, and that the only way that you could construct them was through spending lots of time outside class attending the extra-curricular activities of students, or spending an extensive period of time speaking to them individually about their lives. As I have since discovered from my time at the Summer Initial Intensive, building relationships in the classroom doesn't have to be work intensive or difficult, like attending outside activities that students are involved with (Connell, 2016) or holding a classroom "family meeting" each week (Shaw, 2016). Strong positive relationships can be contributed to in simpler and easier ways too, such as meeting students by the door every morning and speaking to students in respectful ways (Connell, 2016). While I think it still is important to get to know students on a deeper level, and attend events that are important to

them, I was surprised (and thankful) to learn that I could build relationships with students without having to go to such lengths on a weekly or daily basis.

Some teachers in the field, like CJ Reynolds, a high-school English teacher from the United States, swear by standing at the gates and greeting students on their way into the school in the morning. In addition to this, he greets students on their way into his classroom and says goodbye to students on their way out of the building at the end of the school day. He does this to build a sense of familiarity and respect (Reynolds, 2017). While I think that this is a fantastic way to get to know students and ensure that they do not go unnoticed, I think that it requires a large amount of time and commitment in order to sustain. Reynolds is in his eleventh year of teaching high school, and I think that this plays a large part in his ability to make commitments such as this. Speaking from her experience as a first-year teacher, Emma Howden told us about how setting up procedures and getting into the "groove" of teaching took a long time for her, and warned us against taking up too many commitments in our first year because of the amount of stress that already exists as first-year teachers (personal communication, November 23, 2017). I think that Emma's advice is crucial to my own practice in regards to taking on extra commitments such as greeting students at the school gate every morning, as it will take up valuable time that I could be better using to prepare myself for the day. I think that in the future Reynolds' suggestion will be useful, but in my first year, I think that I will be too busy to implement his idea.

While a number of researchers have looked into student-teacher interactions and greeting at the door, I found the statements of one researcher to be particularly interesting. R. Allan Allday, in his 2007 research paper in regards to teacher greetings, spoke about the difference in interactions between initial teacher greetings, and interactions during "do now" tasks. When the teacher does not greet students at the door, he claims that the first student-teacher interactions of the lesson tend to be negative and inadvertently encourage students to not focus on the task that has been provided to them. This is because administrative matters are usually taken care of at the beginning of the lesson while students complete an independent "do now" task. The teacher is often focussed on preparing the lesson and completing pre-lesson procedures, and during this time only addresses students who are off-task and disrupting others. In contrast, a teacher who greets their students at the door positively interacts with every student before the lesson begins, setting the tone with a focus on positive behaviour instead of negative. This is a perspective that I hadn't considered previously, and the more that I considered this idea, the more I realised that my personal experiences aligned with this. At Wesley, teachers who began the lesson by interacting positively with students, such as the teacher I mentioned earlier, tended to have a more behaviourally positive classroom. The teachers that I observed who began their lessons with little or no interaction before the "do now" tended to address negative behaviour before any positive interactions were had. These classrooms tended to be more unruly and unfocused on the set task. I think that Allday's research doesn't only have to relate to greeting students at the door, and I wonder if alternatives such as having a positive class discussion or leaving positive notes on students desks prior to the beginning of the lesson would

have a similar effect. It is definitely something that I intend to consider in my teaching practice, and something that I'd like to look into further in the future.

I think that positive interactions and relationships are even more important in my subject area than in others. A large amount of digital technology learning revolves around the use of computers and independent tasks. Because of this, sometimes teachers will put lesser importance on "soft skills" in favour of extending learning surrounding technical concepts. I experienced this in university, and while it was not an issue for me as I had a large number of opportunities that allowed me to improve my own soft skills, some of my classmates were left behind. Soft skills are growing in importance in the information technology industry, and as such, students need to develop soft skills in both university and high school (Brandel, 2012). As a result, I need to ensure that my teaching practice does not ignore the importance of soft skills development, and greeting students at the door is one way that I can ensure that they are taking part in face-to-face interactions on a regular basis and growing the skills needed to have positive interactions in the future.

I believe that starting a lesson with positive teacher-student interactions is incredibly important in building positive, professional relationships, as well as managing behaviour in the classroom.In the future, I'd like to further explore the implications of positive interaction before lessons, as well as ways of implementing positive interactions outside of teacher greetings.

References

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