Classroom management explainer
Positive teacher–student relationships

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Effective classroom management creates safe and supportive learning environments for all students. This explainer is part of a suite of foundational resources for beginning teachers, teachers working in new environments, or experienced teachers who want to refine or refresh specific elements of their classroom management practice. They can be used to individually reflect on and refine one's own practice, or as shared resources to support mentoring and other collaborative and whole-school approaches to improving classroom management.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s guidance is based on a synthesis of the most rigorous and relevant research evidence and guidance on classroom management from a wide range of research experts and expert practitioners across Australia and internationally.

This explainer describes how creating connections with students over time can help develop trust and positive relationships to support learning. Related explainers focus on high expectations for student behaviour, teaching routines and establishing and maintaining rules.

Positive teacher–student relationships are supportive and fair, and develop in learning environments where students feel safe, understood and appreciated. Teachers build connections with students when they demonstrate respect and trust, and have empathy for their needs (McDonald, 2019). Trust grows over time through multiple positive verbal and non-verbal interactions (Bennett, 2020; McDonald, 2019), however, building trust with some students is not easy (McDonald, 2019). In these circumstances, teachers can invest more time to build connections and show they are trustworthy. Trust and positive teacher–student relationships are built on the structure, predictability, reliability and dependability provided by routines and consistency (Bennett, 2020). Teachers affirm the belief that all students can experience learning success by maintaining high expectations, modelling expected behaviours and responding to students' needs. This approach to building and sustaining high expectations fosters belonging, positive relationships and effective teaching and learning (AERO, 2023; Cobb & Krownapple, 2019; Healey & Stroman, 2021; Miller & Steele, 2021).

Cultural safety within the learning environment is essential to develop positive teacher–student relationships and provides a foundation upon which all learners can succeed. Cultural safety is experienced when an environment is created that is psychologically, spiritually, socially, physically and emotionally safe for students, their families and their communities (Moodie et al., 2019; Williams, 1999). To create culturally safe environments, teachers need to be culturally responsive. Cultural responsiveness maintains high expectations while providing commensurate support, and can provide a solid foundation for learning success (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Sarra et al., 2018).

Fundamental to this is the implementation of critically reflexive practices where teachers examine their own identities, cultures, histories, biases, values and knowledge, and how these impact the development of relationships with the students in their classes and their families. Getting to know and understand their students, families and the wider community can help teachers be more reflexive. Being reflexive enables teachers to understand how the context and situations that influence their thinking impact their decision-making and reactions, and, importantly, how these impact their students.

To build positive relationships with students:

- Model expectations for behaviours and routines to create a safe and predictable learning environment that builds trust.

- Greet students warmly, and consistently use their names in interactions.

- Acknowledge and praise students for their behaviour and efforts.

- Understand and meet students' learning needs.

- Be aware of how your values, beliefs and knowledge about learning and student behaviour impact how you engage with your students.

- Demonstrate that you're trustworthy, consistent and reliable over time.

Adapted from Bennett (2020) & McDonald (2019)

The importance of building positive relationships with students

Relationships are an important element of effective classroom management (AITSL, 2021). Students who have positive connections with their teachers are more likely to have positive attitudes towards school, perceive themselves as part of their school community, attain higher academic results and place a high value on regular attendance (Commissioner for Children and Young People [CCYP], 2018).

The positive interactions between teachers and students, which help build relationships, act as a safeguard for some students who may have difficult relationships in their personal lives (CCYP, 2018). These interactions enable them to have better engagement outcomes at school (CCYP, 2018).

An emotionally safe school environment allows students to feel secure and confident to attend and be assured they will receive support if they face any difficulties (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020).

Students are more likely to feel comfortable and engaged in learning when their teacher is welcoming, interested, encouraging, caring and kind (CCYP, 2018). Positive teacher–student relationships also enable teachers to intervene more effectively and efficiently to meet the learning and behavioural needs of students when problems arise (Epstein et al., 2008; Marzano et al., 2003; Goss et al., 2017).

A foundation of safety and predictability enables peer and teacher–student relationships to flourish (McDonald, 2019). Prioritising relationships allows teachers to demonstrate credibility through growing connections and care for students, which can lead to greater effort and trust from students in return, creating a calmer and more productive classroom (AITSL, 2021).

Developing positive relationships with students

Developing positive relationships with students is facilitated by planning, explicitly teaching and modelling established expectations for behaviour, routines and rules to create a safe and predictable classroom for all students (Bennett, 2020). Teachers should use students' preferred names, and discuss class expectations, rules and responsibilities (De Nobile, 2021). A simple practical strategy to positively connect with students, for example, is by greeting students warmly, and consistently using their names in interactions (Evidence for Learning, 2023).

Teachers can get to know students through informal chats, which help to build trust. This enhances the teacher's approachability and encourages more open communication between students and the teacher (De Nobile, 2021). Teachers can also greet students individually at the classroom door every day, interact with students outside the classroom, inquire about students' interests, communicate positively, deliver constructive feedback wisely, and communicate positive messages home (AITSL, 2021; Hepburn & Beamish, 2020; Ulmanen et al., 2016). Teachers should also regularly and intentionally 'check in' with every student, listen when students raise concerns, and assure and uphold confidentiality (CCYP, 2018; Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

Teachers also cultivate relationships by noticing student effort and responding supportively when they struggle, helping students see that they can be successful, and thanking them so they feel their effort was worth it (Bennett, 2020; Lemov, 2021). This can include teachers speaking to a student privately and reassuring them of their appreciation of them and their belief in the student's ability to handle any of the classroom expectations (Lemov, 2021).

Praise needs to be thoughtfully given if it is to support a positive teacher–student relationship. Praise that is timely, genuine, informative and specific reinforces positive student behaviours, helps establish a positive and encouraging learning environment, and can strengthen teacher–student relationships (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Frequent acknowledgement of students meeting expectations also helps to build positive teacher–student relationships (Lemov, 2021).

Students are often motivated by status and maintaining their dignity, and, understandably, want to avoid being embarrassed in front of their peers (Bennett, 2020). Whenever practical, teachers should give students a chance to change the direction of their behaviour without embarrassment (Bennett, 2020).

To improve practice, teachers can observe colleagues with effective classroom management, and watch them when they take on a new class to observe their interpersonal skills as they interact with students to build relationships (Bennett, 2020).

Scenario

This scenario provides a practical example of the evidence summarised in this explainer. It provides insight into one teacher's approach to establish, maintain and continuously develop relationships with a class to create a safe and supportive learning environment.

Mr D. makes a special effort at the beginning of the school year to learn his students' names as quickly as possible. He creates a seating plan and individual name cards that sit on each student's desk for the first week of term. He also adopts a new routine of standing at the door and greeting each student by name as they enter the classroom. Students respond positively to his greetings and engage in small talk, helping to build positive student–teacher connections.

Mr D. tries to ensure that he has positive interactions with his students in lessons, on playground and bus duty and moving around the school. He frequently acknowledges students meeting behaviour expectations, individually and as a class. When students are unsure of concepts or tasks, he supports them by checking where they are having trouble and helping them. His positive and predictable approach has seen encouraging results over the course of the year, fostering a sense of trust and openness with most students, and making them feel comfortable seeking help when needed.

Despite the positive connection Mr D. builds with most of his students, there are 2 individuals who have consistently disrupted the class since the beginning of the school year. Expressing his frustration to a colleague at how these 2 students often interrupt learning for themselves and others, his colleague suggests that he try informal one-on-one conversations with each student away from the classroom environment.

While he's on playground and bus duty, Mr D. was able to talk to each student in a more relaxed way about what the student thought was happening during a lesson, what Mr D. thought was happening, why it was happening and how they could work together to overcome this so the student was able to demonstrate the expected behaviours and focus on their learning.

After their informal conversations, both students have begun to show more effort to follow the classroom routines and rules, even if they sometimes appear reluctant. It was an initial positive interaction for Mr D. to build on. He knows there is a lot more work required but he reminds himself that his goal is to establish a safe and predictable environment for all students where they can all interact positively with their teacher and each other, and learn.

For more practical guidance

AERO has developed a suite of resources to support teachers and school leaders to refine or refresh their foundational practices in creating safe and supportive learning environments through effective classroom management. You can read the Classroom Management Resources: User Guide for an overview of these resources and suggestions for their use.

Further reading

Bennett, T. (2020). *Running the room: The teacher's guide to behaviour*. John Catt Educational. (pp. 205–211)

De Nobile, J., Lyons, G., & Arthur-Kelly, M. (2021). *Positive learning environments: Creating and maintaining productive classrooms*. Cengage. (pp. 280–287)

Lemov, D. (2021). *Teach like a champion 3.0: 63 techniques that put students on the path to college*. Jossey-Bass. (pp. 26–33)

McDonald, T. (2019). *Classroom management: Engaging students in learning*. Oxford University Press. (pp. 118–122)

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