A child’s life is like a piece of paper on which every passer-by writes their name on it … (Anonymous author)

Developing positive student-teacher relationships is the cornerstone of my teaching. Reflecting on the deeply held principles that shape my teaching always brings me back to those relationships. They provide me with rich insights into the professional knowledge I have, and continue to develop, as a teacher.

My teaching has been informed by the quote (above) which was displayed on the school office wall in my first year of teaching. That quote has shaped my deeply held principles but now reads more like:

A teacher’s life is like a piece of paper on which every student writes their name …

For me, focusing on positive student–teacher relationships helps to highlight the extent to which relationships with students need to be developed, what it takes to nurture them and how crucial they are in creating positive learning experiences for all students. Not surprisingly, across the educational literature, empowerment through positive student-teacher relationships has been well recognized as important (see for example, Carter et al., 2014), not least because the positive interactions students have with their teachers contributes to their overall wellbeing and success.

My experiences of teaching and collaborating with peers and colleagues throughout my career has reinforced the view that relationships matter and impact student learning. This chapter explores the issue of focusing on and developing positive teacher-student relationships from the perspective of a primary school teacher with 24 years teaching experience.

THE POWER OF STORY

Trusting relationships seem to naturally develop through sharing experiences through stories. It never ceases to surprise me how, as a teacher, having discussions with students that stem from childhood memories, or telling stories about taking risks, and doing so using a ‘student voice’ engages children. As a consequence, relationships tend to develop through the sharing of such experiences, and one
outcome I have observed over the years is the development of a positive learning environment because personal experience often resonates with students.

Whenever I share my own story about the day I was hit by a book that was flung toward me and given the strap because I didn’t know how to draw a margin, students understand my situation as a learner. Although the story is sad (and painful) in many respects, I use it to highlight the importance of ‘speaking up’ when it comes to not understanding the requirements of a task. It makes real what it feels like to be unsure as a learner, and how not ‘speaking up’ can lead to unforeseen outcomes that, in my case, were less than helpful. The point being that in my classes I want students to be confident to talk about their learning and to build their confidence. That requires trusting relationships and I see myself (the teacher) as key to those relationships being actively and explicitly developed.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

Recently I was made aware that I was soon to be working with a student who had diverse learning needs. As I walked past the Principal’s office I noticed the student sitting with the principal. I wondered what had happened and how things would unfold. I knew the student would soon be coming in to my year level but I was taken by the fact that, as I passed the office, the discussion floating out toward me was about football teams.

Later, I engaged in a conversation about ‘favourite football players’ and it certainly caught the child’s attention. I consciously made a note of the conversation and took it away with me, purposefully storing it in my mind, thinking that it could be really handy at some time when he became a part of my class.

When the time came that the student was about to join my class, I approached the principal and said, “I know this student is really into Australian Rules Football, do you think it would be ok if I decorated my classroom with Sports Memorabilia?” Having in mind the school’s vision:

At St Joseph’s School we aspire to live the values of Jesus within a welcoming Catholic community that celebrates and integrates faith, life, learning and culture; empowering all to live with integrity and to contribute to an ever changing world. (Staff Handbook, 2016)

I could see possibilities of linking how I might work in class in interesting ways with this student. Fortunately, our curriculum processes are based on the Multi Domain approach (Walsh, 2011) and an upcoming topic was ‘Relationships’; one I was certain would create opportunities for the children to connect with me as well as one another. Addressing the theme of ‘Relationships’ proved powerful in setting up a nurturing and inclusive environment for all our class members. With my new student in mind, I introduced some posters, flags and ‘pop up’ books across a variety of sports and favourite children’s authors. The theme, our school vision and my concern to build relationships combined in ways where I found myself thinking