



Greg Wolcott

Teacher-Student Relationships: A little thing with a big impact

Yes, it's that time...March Madness is here! Like many, this time of year is one of my favorites. I love every aspect of the NCAA Basketball Tournament, from the intense level of play, guessing which teams will step up (dark horse), what teams will fold and of course, seeing which teams will turn out to be this year's underdog, all making a run to the final four and an NCAA Championship!

March Madness has become so popular the annual tournament is now woven into the fabric of our country's DNA. However, many could argue that March Madness wouldn't be what it is without the help of one man: John Wooden. Wooden, a basketball pioneer and coaching savant, is often considered the greatest coach in NCAA basketball history.

After 18 years of coaching, Wooden and his teams at UCLA went on an amazing 12-year run. During this time in the 1960's and 70's, his teams won the NCAA championship ten times, an amazing feat which has never been replicated in men's basketball. Although known for his success and for coaching such great players as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Bill Walton, Wooden is known for paying attention to even the smallest of detail in order to reach success. He strongly believed that it was the little things, the things many overlook, done day in and day out that lead to championships.

One example of Wooden's attention to detail was his annual teaching of his players how to put on their socks and shoes. Each year, on the first day of practice, Coach Wooden would call his

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players into the locker room, instruct them to take off the socks and shoes, and then reteach them how to put these items back on their feet. Wooden was meticulous about teaching players how to put on each sock, ensuring a snug fit, being positive there was no extra fabric bunched up in any places. Then, once the socks were in place, he would show each how to put on their shoes, carefully tightening laces in a specific way, again with the goal of the proper fit.

So why was this process made so complicated? Simple, Wooden knew loose socks and poorly fitted shoes led to blisters. Blisters led to pain and discomfort, which led to missed practices. Missed practices led to poor play. Poor play led to poor performance, and poor performance meant letting teammates down and limit their chance of success, i.e. championships, Champions pay attention to the little things the things that will enhance and prepare them for success that others overlook.

In teaching, as in basketball, champion teachers pay attention to the little things that many take for granted.

One such area, often overlooked in classrooms across the country, is the daily act of developing positive teacher-student relationships. Sure, if you ask teachers whether or not they develop such relationships, almost all will say yes. I am sure most basketball players say they pay attention to putting their shoes on each day, too. But do they? Do they really pay attention to the details that will enable their students to truly achieve success? Let's take a look at the five key tenants champion teachers use to build strong relationships in their classrooms:

1. Champion teachers realize every student who walks into their classroom comes with his/her own **STORY (Strengths, Tendencies, Opportunities, Resources, and Yearnings)**. These educators make it their job to get to know each student as a child first and a student second. Making it a point to know each student on a personal level is crucial to achievement. They acknowledge that having a deep understanding of each learner's background enhances student engagement and accomplishment.

A little more (cont.)

Further, their personal mantra for success is... “to know them well, is to teach them well.”

TIP: “People like people who are like themselves; or who are like who they would like to be,” Tony Robbins. Identifying similarities between one another quickly enhances any relationship. Activities such as **Panorama Education’s web-based ‘Get to Know You’ survey** assist teachers and students to learn about one another.

2. Champion teachers understand students learn best in a safe, caring environment. As Theodore Roosevelt said, **“people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”** This statement is has never been more meaningful than in today’s classrooms. The human brain is hard-wired to give and receive care. Feelings of care lead to feelings of safety and security- skills that must be attained before students are able to think at higher levels. John Hattie, renown educational expert, wrote in his book ***Visible Learning for Teachers*** (2014), “The positive teacher-student relationship is thus important not so much, because this is worthwhile in itself, but because it helps build the trust to make mistakes, to ask for help,

to build confidence to try again, and for students to know they will not look silly when they don’t get it the first time.”

TIP: Become a “Hallway Hero”- spend time at the start of the day and between passing periods in the hallway getting to know each student. Greet each student by looking them straight in the eye and give them one of the 4 H’s: Hello, Hug, Handshake, or High Five.

3. Champion teachers realize creating incredible relationships with students **isn’t a one and done experience** - it must be cultivated daily in order to flourish. As Coach Wooden says, “It takes time to create excellence. If it could be done quickly, more people would do it.” Relationships in the classroom are like relationships outside of school and need to be fostered and continually developed throughout the school year. The key is consistently setting aside time to allow for teachers to get to know their students and for students to get to know the teacher (and other students).

TIP: John Hattie, in his landmark book, *Visible Learning* (2008), showed teacher-student relationships have an effect size of .72 on student achievement, almost twice a year’s

student growth in one year's time. WOW! That could be the world's cheapest intervention. Based on this research, Woodridge School District 68 implemented a program called the "Significant 72." This program, now adopted in over 100 schools around the world, starts with spending the first three days of school (72 hours) putting connection before curriculum. Then, periodically, throughout each day, week, and month throughout the year, fostering these relationships. See <https://www.smore.com/ddc84-significant-72> for more information.

that the single most important school based predictor of academic growth in mathematics- from 8th through 12th grades was a student's perception of "connectedness" with his teachers" (Gregory and Weinstein). These studies provide further evidence for teachers really knowing their students and knowing them well.

TIP: Educational expert, Robert John Meehan, once said, "It's the little conversations that build the relationships and make an impact on each student." My experience has shown no one intervention has been proven more successful than the "3 x 3." The "3x3" is a deliberate attempt by teacher's to connect with students. The teacher first identifies three children with who them will focus upon. Then for three minutes each day, the teacher talks with each student about life outside of school. Many teachers decide to focus on specified students for a set period of time (up to ten days) others, rotate and spend time with different students each day.

4. Champion teachers understand that **it takes a little more for some students to become successful than others.** Important research shows that the impact of teacher-student relationships varies. Although strong teacher-student relationships impact all students, ethnic and minority students benefit most (Meehan, et al 2003). Strong relationships with teachers are proven to have a greater impact on the achievement of low income students (Sabol and Pianta, 2012). Further, positive relationships were particularly beneficial to older students and overall "stronger effects were found in higher grades" (Roorda et al 2011). An a surprising piece of research from one study indicated

5. Champion teachers realize **every child needs a champion.** Dr. Robert Brooks, a Harvard professor, has done extensive research on the impact of having a charismatic adult mentor in

A little more (cont.)

one's life. For me, that person was my high school basketball coach, Alan Hale. One day after a long, hard three-hour practice, Coach Hale pulled me aside. While sitting on the first row of

student pictures once a significant connection has been made. I will never forget the day I attended a late fall faculty meeting when a teacher leader walked in threw the remaining

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the bleachers, Coach Hale put his arm around me and said, "You know, God didn't give ordinary people names like "Wolcott". That's a special name. God only gives names like that to people who are capable of great things."

Now, I know that seems kind of hokey and I know he probably said the same thing to my teammate, John Smith, but I can't tell you how many times in my life, when I was down, or lacked confidence that I heard Coach Hale's words in my head. I seem to pull those words out when I need a confidence boost- and it works. See, a great teacher never knows where or when his influence will end.

30 some id pictures on a table and said, "come on guys, we are better than this. We have 30 kids here we are leaving behind."

When positive teacher-student relationships are present in a classroom, other things fall into place. Like all great coaches, great teachers realize that their number one job is to put students in a position to succeed, developing strong relationships is the first step. Coach Wooden was proud to say, "he" didn't win all those championships, his teams did. Great teachers don't take credit for the success, they position their students for success and get out of the way and let it happen. Without strong, positive teacher student relationships, no championships, individual or team, can be accomplished.

TIP: Jefferson Junior High in Woodridge, IL every year takes a copy of each student's ID photo and places them on a wall near their office. Teachers are asked to pull down

ECRA Curriculum Leadership 360° Appraisal

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Wolcott consults throughout the United States and in Canada on a variety of topics including adult learning, developing innovative practices in the classroom, formative assessment to drive instruction, response to intervention and data usage for school improvement. @GregJWolcott
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