

What do great classrooms look like?

*“The core of education is the relationship between the teacher and the student, and the extent to which that relationship nurtures the longing of the child to matter in the world, and the longing of the teacher to nurture and fulfill that desire.”*

–Timothy Shriver and Jennifer Buffet

Does it matter if your students like you? Ask any teacher, anywhere, and you will most likely get answers split down the middle. Do I want my students to like me? Yes. I do. If they like you because you genuinely like them and show a real interest in their growth, then they will also respect you and work hard for you. Students do not learn because of teachers; they learn for teachers. Improving students’ relationships with their teachers have not only academic implications, but social implications as well. But what does that look like? What do I look like? What do they look like?

Students who are in classrooms with teachers that they like and have a close relationship with learn more. For me, teaching students who like me makes my job easier. I have close relationships with my students, and it results in students who cooperate more, are more engaged and are more self-directed. These little things make a big difference.

When students have positive relationships with their teachers, it affects how they view school and how engaged they are. Students who have these kinds of relationships have more positive feelings about school, are more engaged, and in turn, are often higher achievers. I think about my classes where students are performing well above expected milestones in Music and Physical Education. These students enjoy school; they like it. They come to class bright eyed and happy. Their eyes focus on me, and their ears listen to me. Now, as in many international schools, but especially in Early Childhood, language can be a barrier. I have completed HSK Unit 1 and am well into Unit 2. My Mandarin is good enough

to translate important verbs and body parts. I also role model and demonstrate everything. Again, because I work in Early Childhood, breaking a skill down to its minute parts is desperately important. And I mean really breaking something down. And don't rush it. It might take two weeks to arrive at the conclusion of a skill, where most can do it, and a few are still learning.

Let me give you an example. Last week I taught an African Rock Game called Obwisana (it's Ghanaian). The first thing you do with the 3-year-olds is make a circle. Making a circle takes 3-year old's quite a bit of time. You start with everybody stand up! And practice that a few times (everybody sit down. Everybody stand up! Everybody sit down. Everybody stand up!) Now, everybody take one step back. Just one! (Mandarin: Yi). Assess student placement. Organize different students to take a step. Hannah, take one more step back! Good girl. Now, everybody hold hands! Everybody drop hands! Everybody hold hands! No pulling, we have to hold hands gently. (Sing a song. Make a circle round and round, round and round, round and round!) Gently move into a lovely circle. Now, everybody sit down. Adjust the circle as necessary. Jayden, scootch in a little bit. Season, scootch out a little bit. (Role model scootching. Mandarin: Ee dian de). During this process every eye and ear should be on you, and students try hard to make the circle. I have excellent relationships with my students, so even if they don't understand me, they will copy me.

The game then needs to have rocks. I get my Teacher Assistant to pass out one rock each. I talk about the rock. Look at the rock! What do you see? Put the rock on the floor. Pick the rock up. Put the rock back on the floor. If the students are engaged, they will do exactly this. Timing is imperative. If you're too slow, the students get bored and mess around with the rock. But taught at the right speed, the students do exactly what they are supposed to.

Make a mistake. Instead of placing the rock on the floor, drop it. AUGH! Did Mrs Fletcher make a mistake? What did I do wrong. Normally this results in gales of laughter. Mrs Fletcher! Do this! And somebody will mimic putting the rock on the floor. I say Silly Mrs

Fletcher! I made a mistake! Show me what I should do. And they do. It opens the door for them to make mistakes in a safe environment.

The same happens often with my Mandarin. The word for 'lion' and 'blind' is almost the same. I was doing a book called 'Giraffes can't dance.' First, I messed up the word for giraffe. To be honest, it is a difficult Mandarin word which directly translated means 'long neck deer'. Somehow, I said long neck dog. Everybody just rolls on the floor laughing, and they correct me. This is them as teacher and me as learner, and they love it. Back to lion. When I said 'blind,' instead of 'lion' they absolutely spun out. They could barely stop laughing. But I love it, because our roles are reversed, and they know I'm trying, and success takes time. It's an important, and valuable, lesson.

Back to Obwisana. Now, teach the beat of the song. Model the beat by hitting the rock against your other hand. 1-2-3-4, again 1-2-3-4. Praise constantly. Look at Ian! He knows the beat! Good job Ian. Who else can do the beat? Oh look, David and George can do it too! Excellent! Can you say Obwisana? Let's try. Oh-Bwee-Sar-na. Who can say it? The kids start to try. Praise praise praise. Oh yes Felicity, can you say that again? I'm sure you got it right! Good girl! By this time, they're ready for the next step, so now we introduce the song to the beat. It's an easy song, simply; Obwisana-sa-nana Obwisana-sa. That's it. That's the whole song. Combine beat with song. If the children are singing, laughing, engaging you know you've got them.

The most difficult bit happens now. I want you to touch the rock on the floor on the final 'sa'. Role model. Do this very slowly. It takes a while, but with more praise and pointing out kids who are doing it correctly, everyone gets the feel. Now you challenge them by singing slightly faster. When they succeed make a huge gesture, like WOW! And fall backwards or something. My goodness, you are my best class! You learned that song!

This is a great game because you can take it to a whole new level (which I would not try with my 3-year-olds). You can have 2 rocks (PK and K). You can pass rocks. You can pass rocks on certain beats. You can teach left and right hand and go in different directions (K). And so on.

Students who have positive relationships with their teachers tend to be more engaged. Students who are more engaged typically are more likely to succeed. Being successful in school leads to positive educational experiences which in turn, creates a positive perception of school. Of course, there are exceptions and limitations to this logic and not all students, teachers, and schools are the same – but the research suggests it's worth paying attention to. Teachers play a huge role because they can very well shift the climate of their school by building stronger relationships with their students.

How would my students describe me? Fun, friendly, caring, interested, respectful and honest. Have a look at some of my classes: <https://suefletcher.me/3DKfthH>