



Chapter Two

Show Them How Much You Care

The students applauded and high-fived as LaToya slowly returned to her seat following her science presentation. A casual observer might have been perplexed, for there was nothing special about LaToya's performance. She stood in front of the classroom, barely made eye contact with her teachers and peers, and spoke so quietly that it was hard to hear the perfunctory information she presented. Then she sat. So why did her classmates spontaneously rise to their feet and cheer? Because LaToya had never spoken publicly to our team before that day.

At the beginning of the school year, LaToya did not make eye contact with anyone. When we called on her during class activities, she was completely nonresponsive. She rarely took out books or attempted her assignments. She did not join small- or large-group activities. She remained at her seat, staring at the top of her desk. At recess, she stood against the wall and looked at the ground. She did not have any friends nor did she seem to take interest in any part of her education.

As her teachers, of course, we did what we could to make connections with LaToya. We stood near her to build intimacy, talked to her, joked with her, assisted her with her assignments, and shared our dreams for her success. By the second week of school, however, we knew we needed a deeper understanding of LaToya's situation than we could uncover in her academic records. Kathryn contacted her mother and set up a conference. We discovered that LaToya's condition stemmed from an illness and that the medication she took caused her to withdraw. Years before, she had been as talkative as any other child.

We assured LaToya's mother that we had her daughter's best interests in mind, and we discussed possible action plans to assist LaToya socially and academically. We all left the conference with a common goal to help LaToya interact with others so that she might begin to achieve academically. In the

end, however, it was our students who were most responsible for LaToya's transformation.

Austin was the first classmate to reach out to her. He volunteered to help LaToya with her assignments, asked to sit by her in class, and made a point to talk to her during lunch and recess. Other students followed Austin's lead and began asking LaToya questions that only required a yes or no answer. When she failed to respond, they created a system of comments and cues:

"If you want to join us, give me five."

"If you like my new haircut, smile."

When LaToya wasn't interested in interacting, they would simply rattle on about their adolescent lives as though she really had answered their questions.

"I know what you're thinking; you're thinking that I should let my hair grow."

Eventually, LaToya stopped attempting to remove herself from these one-way conversations, but she never initiated them.

One day the principal was watching LaToya on the playground during recess. He noticed that as LaToya leaned against the school building, she was silently observing the other students instead of staring at the ground. This stunned the principal. He had been observing LaToya for years and had never seen her show any interest in her peers. He also noted that LaToya had begun smiling and making eye contact whenever people greeted her. The principal encouraged us to continue whatever we were doing to help LaToya emerge from her shell.

During the next few months, LaToya made progress in excruciatingly small increments. She completed a few math problems, read part of a book, took some notes, smiled when someone said hello, and stepped away from the wall at recess to stand among the children who were throwing balls. LaToya's classmates and teachers noted these improvements and celebrated each one.

Then big things started to happen. Our language arts curriculum required students to write poetry using various forms and techniques and to publish their poems using technology. To provide an authentic purpose for writing, Monique invited students to make their families the intended audience of their poems. Valentine's Day was coming up, so she asked students to create PowerPoint presentations they would send home to their parents via email. On the day we taped voice-over messages to greet parents when they opened their email messages, LaToya stood and walked to the recorder with minimal

prompting. Though she did not speak, she made the trip to the recorder three times. On the third attempt, she smiled while standing at the microphone.

Later that month, during a small-group discussion in language arts class, Austin asked LaToya to read a paragraph, and she did—every word—as naturally and spontaneously as if she responded this way every day. LaToya’s classmates congratulated her, Monique feigned a fainting spell brought on by extreme pride, Kathryn squealed with delight, and LaToya beamed.

Then, on the day scheduled for the science presentation, LaToya really broke through her reserve. Her classmates and teachers expected her to smile, make partial eye contact, and sit down. But to our delight, LaToya did much more, and her efforts earned her superstar status on the team. The students understood how far she had come, so LaToya’s accomplishments felt like their own. Our typically self-absorbed middle school students had made LaToya part of our team.

“Don’t Be Hatin’ on Me!”

LaToya’s story illustrates the significant achievements that are possible when teaching teams develop strong, positive relationships with students, parents, and administrators and set standards for behavior that go beyond “thou shalt not” rules. High-functioning teams are concerned about building up, not tearing down. They focus on belonging, making sure that all students—not just the easy ones—are valued and respected. When teams establish these bonds, they become an extended family whose members work together to ensure mutual success. Brittany, one of our students, shows how young adolescents take this message to heart: “Not only do you have to put forth your best effort, but you must walk into class with a great smile and tell each other that you love each other every day. That is what our team is all about.”

Our students have proven time and again that young adolescents are capable of demonstrating compassionate and loving concern for others. Middle school students are more than just “hormones on legs,” as one of our friends, a kindergarten teacher, jokingly refers to them. While some view young adolescents as miniadults and others see them as overgrown, hairy children, effective middle school teachers know that their students are unique. Middle school students are exuberant, erratic, exhausting, and entertaining—and this is what makes middle school teaching so challenging and so rewarding.

Middle school students are struggling to become independent of authority, yet they constantly seek approval from others. Among the developmental needs of middle school students identified by Scales (1991) are meaningful

school experiences, positive social interactions with adults and peers, and community involvement activities that enable them to define themselves. Interdisciplinary teams give young adolescents a comfortable place to try on new roles while providing supports that will enable them to maintain positive relationships, create an identity with a school community, learn how to accept responsibility for their actions, and contribute to their own educational experiences.

To teach middle school students effectively, educators must build rapport with them. We have repeatedly discovered that success with young adolescents stems from trust. When the relationships are genuine, students will do whatever is expected of them and are most willing to please. However, if students consider the relationships to be contrived or superficial, they will employ the most creative methods to undermine classroom activities. Quite simply, our students must know that we genuinely care about them.

“Building teacher-student relationships is, in fact, so important that it is arguably the most important factor contributing to the success of students, both behaviorally and academically. Students who experience respect and unconditional acceptance from their teacher are more likely to be compliant, respectful, and open to learning” (Dahlgren 2005, 103).

Although Madeline Hunter may have summarized these crucial connections most eloquently—“Kids don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” (Dahlgren 2005, 111)—a student named Markeith gave them authenticity every time he yelled out, “Don’t be hatin’ on me.” This admonition, uttered whenever Markeith noticed that we were becoming frustrated, caused us to step back and examine our behaviors and practices. “Don’t be hatin’ on me” became a team mantra that reminded us how much our attitudes affect students’ ability to learn.

“The truth is that you may not ‘like’ a student or ‘love’ a student, but as educators who are entrusted with learners in our charge we must learn to care for and accept students for their inherent value,” author and educator Rick Dahlgren (2005, 113) reminds us.

Let’s face it, some days it is extremely difficult to love all students. But we never stop trying. Markeith voiced the young adolescent’s continual search for validation. Middle school students want to know that their teachers care enough to challenge them intellectually, reprimand them when they misbehave, and praise them when they demonstrate progress.

Even after moving to high school, Markeith and LaToya would pop into our classrooms to visit, usually when they were struggling to adapt to their new surroundings. Like newly trained pilots, middle school students are eager

to fly solo as long as they can circle back to base when they need to refuel and confirm their destinations.

“We need a good fussin,’ Mrs. Mayeaux,” Markeith told Amanda one afternoon during his ninth-grade year.

All students want to know that they are worthy of our time, energy, and high expectations. When team members work together to reinforce this message, students should never feel that their teachers are hatin’ on them.

Welcome to the Team

To build positive relationships with our students, we try to become part of their lives before they enter our classrooms. We open the lines of communication when our future students least expect it, during the summer. Sometimes we send postcards from our vacation sites or “Welcome to the Team” flyers and include our email addresses and website. Some years we actually receive return postcards from our future students. For example, Dylan wrote to tell us about his summer travels and offered recommendations about sites to see during the field trip to the nation’s capital that we had foreshadowed in our welcoming postcards. By the time students arrive to start the fall term, they are full of anticipation about our team.

The first order of business when the new school year begins is to find out as much as possible about our students. We distribute interest inventories that ask for students’ perceptions about school and different subject areas and information about their personal and educational backgrounds. At our first team meeting during the school year, we review these surveys and note interesting facts about each student. We learned that LaToya hadn’t spoken aloud in a few years, that Regan loved to dance, and that Austin was a skateboard fanatic. During the first week of school, we make a point of referencing this data in conversations and classroom activities. Monique told Austin about a skateboard competition that would be shown on a cable television channel over the weekend. Kathryn mentioned that she would be attending every football game and keeping an eye on David, whose size made him a natural star on the team. Amanda mentioned to Justin that she had seen his father at Wal-Mart the night before. Through these exchanges, students begin to understand that our interest in them extends beyond the classroom.

In addition to surveys, we use dialogue journals to communicate with our students about a multitude of topics. Nancie Atwell (1998) pioneered this strategy for conducting authentic conversations in her middle school literature and language arts classes, in which she sought to simulate a dining room or drawing room discussion. In reflecting upon the noneducational

conversations about literature that she'd had with avid readers, Atwell found that there was an informal air about them akin to discussing a movie after leaving the theater. Atwell's book *In the Middle* reveals several ways she incorporated simulated kitchen-table conversations into her students' learning experiences—both in oral and written discussions.

We have adapted the journal approach she describes and have extended it to include students' families and school administrators. For example, our students write to their parents and point to evidence of their academic progress reflected in their portfolios. When working with students, we have three nonnegotiable rules for dialogue journals:

1. Students must write a full page of reflection, which encourages them to dig deeply into the topic presented.
2. Students must write to the assigned person. This may include one of their teachers, administrators, fellow students, or their families.
3. Journals are always answered promptly, most often within twenty-four hours so that students receive immediate feedback.

Although we use dialogue journals throughout the school year to check for understanding or challenge students to consider different interpretations, the goal of our initial communications is relationship building. We ask questions such as the following:

- What do you expect to learn this school year?
- What have you heard about our team that you want to know about?
- What do we need to know about you so that we can teach you effectively?

Dialogue journal topics addressing academic areas often focus on helping students make connections across the curriculum:

- In Mrs. Wild's room there is a banner with a quote by Margaret Meade: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." What does the quote mean to you? How does it relate to what we are learning? How does this quote relate to our team?
- It is ironic that Gregory Johnson (of *Texas v. Johnson*) was arrested for burning the American flag when the proper procedure for disposing of the flag, according to many sources, is to burn it. Explain how tone and symbolism played an important part in this case. Do you think Johnson had the right to burn the flag? Why, or why not?

Some journal topics are more reflective in nature: Describe your reading habits. How have they changed since the beginning of the school year? What do you notice about your reading habits? What caused you to change your habits or keep them the same?

Initially, Monique was the only one of us who used dialogue journals, and she did so to discuss literature, as described in Atwell's book. However, the rest of us quickly saw the benefits of using dialogue journals to reinforce teaming. Each time students write in dialogue journals we gain valuable information about who they are, what they know, what they require of us, and how we should plan instruction. Using dialogue journals as a team tool has enabled all of us to be part of the students' writing audience, regardless of the class period or subject matter in which the journal was assigned. The journals provide us with a clearer picture of the total student, and our students are able to see that we value learning in all disciplines. Monique uses dialogue journals to discuss science topics, Amanda shares information about interesting books, and Kathryn suggests better methods of solving math problems. In addition, because we share the responsibility of responding to the dialogue journals, we have time to offer more substantive feedback. Instead of having to write back to ninety students individually, we can respond to thirty each. The lightened load helps us reflect on our students' progress and design appropriate interventions instead of feeling burdened and eager to get done.

The morning after they have turned in their journal assignments, students can expect to find their notebooks with our detailed comments inside. They eagerly open the notebooks to find out what we have written in response to their entries. The cumulative written communications documented in our team dialogue journals serve as a reflective record of our discussions and our learning together throughout the school year.

Periodically our students address their journal entries to their parents. This helps strengthen home/school connections and can be an effective way of closing the communication gap between students and parents that tends to widen in middle school. Consider the following correspondence between Sarah and her mother:

Dear Mom,

I really enjoy being on the Flying Pigs team. I love all of my teachers. I think I'm really improving this year. I like doing the Love of Literacy Campaign and the Online Learning Café.

This year I'm reading more books than I've ever read. Since this summer I've read 25 books. It's a good thing Mrs. Wild has a huge library because I would run out of books if she didn't.

I think we both agree that I need to get to school on time. Let's leave the house by 6:45 every morning. I need help on one-step equations, but last time I asked you to help with equations, I ended up crying. Let's try again!

*Love,
Sarah*

Dear Sarah,

I am so proud of your accomplishments. You are a wonderful student. I think it is awesome that you love to read and learn.

I would love to help you with equations if you are willing to listen and not just say, "I don't understand." I hope that you listen before you decide if you understand. Don't give up on it!

I think your greatest accomplishment is who you are. . . . You are compassionate and fun loving . . . and you have a great sense of humor.

Keep it up!

*I love you,
Mom*

Journals are not the only written form of communication we use to build relationships with students. Like all teachers, we have students who enter our classrooms with notorious reputations. We make it a point to catch these students doing something good during the first week of school, when most are on their best behavior. As soon as we spot the superlatives, we write the first of our "love notes" and send them home. When Amanda wrote a love note praising Sean's leadership abilities, he was shocked and proud. His sense of accomplishment sustained him as he sought to live up to Amanda's assessment of his abilities. Throughout the year he used his leadership skills positively rather than disruptively. When he slipped, we only had to remind him of the first love note that Amanda had placed in his agenda planner, and his demeanor changed.

Sharing an Identity

Love notes don't resonate with every student, so we enlist all of the students' support in creating our team's identity and goals. Trusting your students to shape the team that you have worked so hard to develop is not easy. But without a real role in the team's formation or a sense of ownership, students won't respect the values their teachers want to share; nor will students feel that they belong to a family unit, which is our ultimate goal.

At the beginning of the school year, our students create their team name and motto, decorate the classrooms based on their chosen themes, and share their strengths and weaknesses in order to establish an effective organization of peer tutors. These are welcome changes for students who typically enter a classroom where the themes have been determined, all wall space has been covered with teacher-selected decor, and the peer groups already have been arranged.

Before our students decide on a team name and motto, we stress the importance of creating an identity based on qualities to which they should aspire. We ask students to submit only monikers and slogans that promote team spirit, respect, and great character. Previous years' names and slogans have included the following:

The Flying Pigs—"We do the impossible!"

The Asteroids—"Zooming through education!"

The Martians—"Learning is out of this world!"

Team Dynamite—"Get ready for a knowledge explosion!"

Setting the right tone for choosing an appropriate name and motto is important. We start by sending the memo shown in Figure 2.1.

Students compete to create the most appropriate team concept. As the company directors who have requested the advertising services, we select our five favorite designs. The finalists present their plans to the entire team, and the students select the concept that will define us as a team for the remainder of the year. However, we do not stop at selecting a name and a concept. We spend time during the next few weeks decorating and posting our motto in various locations within the team area and discussing how best to live up to its ideals. We do this in conjunction with team-building games that require students to work together to accomplish various tasks. These tasks may be

Sample Team Concept Memo

To: New Eighth-Grade Students

From: Management

The firm of MEW (Mayeaux, Edmonds, Wild) is searching for a group of experts to name their newly formed organization. We are happy that they have chosen our agency to represent them. They have promised a signing bonus (emergency fund credits) for the group that provides them with the best concept for their team organization.

The client, MEW, is looking for the following criteria in a team name and concept for their new classes:

1. **Originality**—No plagiarism of existing slogans, names, or ideas from any source. The concept must be totally original.
2. **Positive Image**—Only names and slogans that promote team spirit, respect, and great character will be considered.
3. **Neatness**—Logo should be pleasing to the eye and define the team's characteristics.
4. **Brevity**—Keep information short and loaded with “punch.”

When compiling your portfolios for the client, be sure to include the following:

1. A **brief description** of the most important qualities in the new eighth-grade team. These should include qualities possessed by individual members that are assets of the entire team and qualities to which the team should aspire.
2. A **theme** that will bind the name, slogan, and logo. **The theme must have historical significance!**
3. A **team name** written (or typed) in a font that is complimentary to the name.
4. A **slogan** that corresponds with the team name and incorporates the goals and qualities of the team.
5. A **logo** drawn neatly and consistent with the team name, slogan, and qualities.

Selection Process:

1. The clients reserve the right to select the five best concepts.
2. The creative teams for the five chosen concepts will present their concepts to all stockholders.
3. The stockholders of the MEW organization will then vote by secret ballot for their favorite concept.
4. The MEW Corporation will announce the chosen team concept after voting has taken place.

Compensation/Wages:

As usual your compensation depends upon the quality of your work. There are no “hourly wages” involved in this project. You will receive one grade for the concept. Grades will reflect individual contributions to the group's activities. You will not be compensated for someone else's labor. These grades will be recorded in your ELT class. The members of groups with concepts chosen by the client as finalists will receive three emergency fund credits. The members of the group with the concept chosen to represent this year's team will receive six emergency credits to be used as needed.

Figure 2.1 Sample Team Concept Memo

intricate, such as going on a scavenger hunt around the school to collect clues to solve a mystery, or as simple as lining up in alphabetical order by middle name without speaking.

Every year we include academic connections based on the team name and concept in our core classes. When we were the Wizards, for example, we studied the history and literature of King Arthur and students named our team area Camelot. When we were known as the Flying Pigs, we found news articles about florescent green pigs being bred in other countries, information that we integrated into our language arts study of science fiction and our science unit dealing with genetics. Because our students are responsible for developing the team's identity and we integrate the themes into daily practices, they have a stronger connection to learning and to each other.

The “all for one” attitude that builds from the students' vested interest in the team results in a unique bond. We have seen students from opposite worlds not only become friends but also pull each other up academically and socially. Usually by November, we begin to hear our students speaking to each other as if they were family, not just classmates. We have witnessed everything from students giving each other ten-second pep talks to full-blown lectures on how to improve grades and behavior. The depth in which our students build their relationships with one another and become more of a family becomes apparent every year in the days leading to Christmas.

It has been a long-standing tradition for our students to read “The Gift of the Magi” and share ideas about the importance of giving during the holiday season. A few years ago we added to the tradition by asking students to write to one another about a gift they would share if they had no money to spend. It is truly amazing that these sincere, heartfelt letters every year focus on classroom-related topics, as opposed to superficial middle school interests. Martin, who was severely struggling in school, received this holiday gift from Shawn:

Dear Martin,

If I could give you anything in the world it would be my confidence because I think you are scared to learn around your friends. You probably think if you do your work they will make fun of you. But if you had my confidence you wouldn't worry about what other people say about you. When you're in class you learn, when you're outside of class you associate. In order to be something in life you have to go through school.

Sincerely,

Shawn

Some might argue that these relationship-building and team-naming activities take precious time away from the curriculum. This is true; we do not blast off from the beginning of the school year at rocket speed. But year after year we have found that the time and effort we spend getting acquainted with students saves us time in the long run. Because students learn to trust us and develop a better understanding of the purpose of learning, they are more willing to engage in deeper educational inquiry. By December we have always caught up to the curriculum timeline, and students are still interested in school events even after the newness of the school year has worn off. The initial relationship-building activities enable us to spend the remainder of the year focused on meaningful, integrated academic endeavors.