

Making Classroom Connections Through Silent Mentoring

5 keys for building relationships with 'hard to reach' students

By Michael McQueen



Having a meaningful connection with a significant adult is a critical factor in the mental health, identity formation and sense of overall wellbeing of young people. In many ways it doesn't matter who the adult is. They could be parent, school teacher, sports coach, scout master, youth group leader or even supervisor at work.

Whilst this may not seem revolutionary in principle, the challenge facing many educators and parents is exactly *how* to build these relationships when the young person in question seems closed, distant and removed. It's one thing to develop a strong, rapport-driven relationship with young people when they are confident, articulate and well adjusted. But what about when they are quiet and seem reticent to connect even though it was what they need and want most?

You know the young people I am talking about – the ones who sit on their own in the playground during lunch breaks, who will rarely give answers in class and who are, to all intents and purposes, loners. Every teacher has them in their class but most educators are not sure what to do in order to open the lines of communication and build relationships with these often very vulnerable young people.

Recently I have come across a simple but effective strategy for building relationships with the 'quiet' students that is being implemented and used effectively in a number of schools I have worked with.

“The challenge is to build relationships when the young person in question seems closed, distant and removed”

Known as Silent Mentoring, this simple approach to building strategic relationships can involve a single teacher or an entire staff. Unlike more formalized programs catering for students with behavioural or learning difficulties, Silent Mentoring is just that – silent. It involves identifying students who seem disconnected and disengaged from teachers, education, their peers and even life in general. Without the students being told they have been selected as a candidate, they are matched up with a silent mentor whose role it is to make intentional, deliberate and ideally informal 'reach out' efforts at least three times per week.

Leading American educationalists and authors Chick Moorman and Thomas Haller offer five tips and strategies for how Silent Mentoring can work in schools:

1. **Making “I noticed” statements.** Being deliberate in noticing specific but often inconsequential things can be a key part of acknowledging a student's existence and validating their worth ie I noticed your new shoes, I noticed you read a lot of cartoons, I noticed you put your chair in neatly at the end of the class. Moorman and Haller make the distinction that 'I noticed' statements are not designed to evaluate or even necessarily affirm, but rather communicate that 'you are not invisible'.
2. **Making eye contact.** Sustained eye contact is a powerful but simple way of saying 'you are important to me'.

3. **Engaging in proximity behaviour.** In laymen's terms, this means putting yourself physically nearby the student or young person you are aiming to influence. This may involve simple things like being deliberate in arranging or moving classroom furniture to put the student's desk near yours.
4. **Smiling.** A simple smile can make the world of difference and communicates more than words often can. It is vital however to ensure that an intentional smile comes across as sincere or it may appear patronizing or even manipulative.
5. **Using names.** As Dale Carnegie famously said in his classic book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, the sweetest sound in any language is the sound of your own name. Remembering your students' name is one thing, the power comes when you use it in conversations. Moorman and Haller gives some simple examples of how this could work:
 - "Good morning, Peter."
 - "Melinda, you look like you're in a hurry."
 - "Is this seat taken, Sean?"

As Moorman and Haller suggest, Silent Mentoring works best when students least expect it. Often the best silent mentors are ones who are not the student's regular classroom teacher. It is important that the silent mentors recognize that the ideal result is not necessarily a response from the student. Be careful not to measure your effectiveness in 'getting through' to the student candidate by their immediate response but rather remember that you are connecting with the student in a way that may not be clearly evident or measurable. It is the unconscious messages of worth, value and acknowledgement that will make a difference you may never see.

"The best silent mentors are ones who are not the student's regular classroom teacher."

Do you know a student who feels that no one likes or cares about them? Do you see the young person who doesn't really fit in or belong? If so, why not become a silent mentor? It's no big deal... and that is indeed the beauty of it.



Michael McQueen is a leading authority and sought-after presenter on the topic of understanding & engaging Generation Y.

To purchase a copy of Michael's bestselling book, *The 'New' Rules of Engagement* or to find out more, visit www.TheNexgenGroup.com.

© Michael McQueen 2010

