Building the teacher-student relationship:

A worked example

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Positive, respectful and safe teacher-student relationships have many benefits for students and their teachers.

Building and maintaining positive, respectful and safe relationships with students can be challenging. As a leader in inclusion, you can support teachers to create a safe, caring environment where they nurture, include and positively engage students.

This video will show you an example

of how a high school leader in inclusion supported a teacher experiencing some difficulties in maintaining positive and nurturing engagement with a student.

Through this example, you will learn:

how to support a teacher to share their understanding of the student;

identify what may be contributing to difficulties in the relationship; and

provide them with resources, support and mentoring.

Mariana works in a high school learning and support team. Recently, she met with a teacher who commented on difficulties that have been occurring between himself and Keely, a year 9 student, during lessons. Mariana has organised to meet with the teacher again to spend some time reflecting on the challenges, so they can together identify supports that may help create a more positive teacher-student relationship.

Mariana is aware that drawing from a range of perspectives and experiences will be helpful. Prior to meeting, Mariana meets with Keely, and observes a number of lessons. Mariana asks Keely about what she is enjoying at school, and what she is finding difficult or frustrating. Keely is on the autism spectrum, and also has an intellectual disability, so Mariana uses visual supports, simple questions, and real life examples. From this conversation, Mariana identifies that Keely finds some of her work difficult.

Mariana observes a number of lessons. From her observations, Mariana identifies that:

Keeley engaged well with group work

Keely sometimes left her seat or distracted her peers.

When her teacher asked her to return to her seat and work, she became increasingly agitated and loud, and refused to complete her work. The teacher appeared unsure how to handle this, became visibly frustrated, and directed the school learning support officer to step in. Keely did not complete further work during that lesson.

Off-task behaviour seemed to occur less frequently when Keely’s understanding of tasks was checked before she began.

Mariana meets with the teacher and asks him to share his understanding of Keely – starting with her strengths, and when she does engage well in class.

Mariana also shares her own observations and reflections so they can develop a shared understanding of Keely.

During this reflection, the teacher is able to give examples of Keely’s strengths, and topics and activities she has engaged well with.

Mariana then asks the teacher to share his understanding of autism and intellectual disability, and the learning and support plan put in place for Keely.

The teacher has completed a few hours of professional development on teaching students on the autism spectrum, but no professional development on intellectual disability.

He reports feeling uncertain about how to support Keely when she is agitated, and is not confident he is implementing strategies in her personalised learning and support plan effectively.

He reports finding differentiating the curriculum a challenge.

Overall, the teacher reports feeling underprepared and under supported. Mariana recognises that this may be contributing to the teacher feeling frustrated quickly, and also impacts Keely’s engagement in her learning.

Mariana asks the teacher to reflect on his understanding of disconnect between himself and Keely, including when and why this occurs, and what the teacher has previously trialled.

They identify that disconnect tends to occur when Keely is finding work too demanding or challenging, or when there is a transition.

From the observations and discussion, Mariana can see that:

The lesson materials may not be differentiated effectively for Keely

Keely may need her understanding of instructions checked at the beginning of a new learning activity.

Keely may need to be advised in advance when a transition is approaching.

Keely can experience challenges with communicating her needs, particularly when upset.

Calm and positive support and resolution of challenges has not typically occurred. This has led to a cycle where Keely regularly refuses to complete work in class.

Mariana asks the teacher if there is anything he is comfortable sharing with her about how he manages his workload, stressors, and wellbeing.

The teacher:

Runs regularly with other teachers

And Feels he can manage most stressors, such as report writing, effectively.

He reports that his wellbeing is most impacted by his feelings of being underprepared and under supported.

He is uncertain about what he is expected to know and implement without support, and how he can seek further support without burdening colleagues or asking for support on something he “should know”.

He reports feeling powerless to change things as he is “just getting by” some days.

From these discussions and input from Keely; Mariana, Keely and the teacher are able to identify some key ‘points of intervention’. Valuing student voice in these strategies may help build a more positive, respectful and safe relationship between Keely and her teacher.

These include:

Building the teacher’s ability to engage in effective differentiation and adjustments for students with disability;

Providing clear processes for the teacher to seek support and advice; and

Developing further strategies to support Keely’s communication and help seeking.

Keely, her parents, the teacher, and Mariana collaborate to set SMART goals based on these areas for intervention, and identify relevant strategies. Where needed, goals are broken down into smaller steps or stages.

The planned strategies are expected to be manageable and sustainable for the teacher, as Mariana has identified key supports for successful implementation, including mentoring and support from the learning and support team and experienced colleagues, and access to relevant evidence-based professional development.

While the new strategies and resources are being implemented, the teacher and Mariana will continue to meet, and make further adjustments to goals and strategies where needed.

The teacher will keep a brief ongoing record of observations related to strategy implementation and success to support this process.

By guiding the teacher through reflection on the teacher-student relationship, Mariana has been able to put into place strategies and resources that:

Help the teacher feel prepared and supported in their role

Promote effective learning adjustments and differentiation to support Keely’s learning and inclusion

Promote positive student self advocacy through opportunity for Keely to be involved in planning her supports.

Some of the areas for intervention, such as supports and mentoring with inclusive practices, are also being considered for implementation at a whole school level, to benefit all early career teachers.

So, to recap:

As a leader in inclusion, you can support teachers to create positive, respectful and safe teacher-student relationships by

Leading the teacher through reflection on their understanding of the student,

using these reflections and observations to identify what may be contributing to difficulties in the relationship,

and providing them with resources, support and mentoring that help them to create a safe, caring environment where they nurture students and promote the value of student voice and self advocacy skills.