Eighteen Ways to Improve Teacher Rapport
By Russell Glines

You are an education major. You have earned your teaching certificate and have years of teaching experience. Students score well on your tests. Your administrator always gives your teaching skills positive evaluations, and even parents respect you. But something is wrong. You have not conversed with a student outside of class for weeks. Your students, in fact, seem to avoid you. More often than not, they laugh at, and not with, you. Could it be that you lack rapport?

What Is Rapport?

Rapport, according to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, is a “relationship; especially, one of mutual trust or emotional affinity.” Traced all the way back to the Latin apportare, the word means “to carry” (1969). In short, rapport is the carrying back and forth—or exchange—of trust, respect, communication, emotions, and concern.

Establishing rapport means much more than doing certain activities to win your students’ favor and respect. It actually involves a teacher’s being the Spirit-filled professional God has placed teachers in the classroom to love, nurture, and shepherd students under their care. The being must always precede the doing, or rapport will not exist.

Beyond the 7:30-3:00 hours, the mid-term and report card comments, the daily and weekly preparations and corrections, and parent-teacher meetings, rapport is an investment the teacher makes in lives amidst the routine of school life. A godly rapport never just happens; rather, it is a by-product of a life committed to successful teaching, ministry, and proper relationships. Like a reputation, rapport takes time to develop, but can be shattered in an instant.

Jesus’ Rapport

Willis (1985), states, “[Jesus’] disciples lived with Him, learned from Him, and became like Him. The character and commitment of Jesus had a transforming effect on eleven of His twelve followers.”

This unique character and commitment of our Lord created a rapport with His disciples and provided Him access to all kinds of people He encountered. None were denied the opportunity of establishing a relationship with Jesus. According to Lowrie, “This does not mean that you condone sin. It means that you follow the example of Jesus Who was free in His spirit to talk to even vile sinners, and they felt free to talk to Him, a remarkable combination” (1978).

Notice the evidences of a relationship in the following Gospel accounts:

- He sought out His disciples in John 1:38-51 and especially Peter in John 21.
- He took the time to bless the little children in Mark 10:13-16.
- He broke cultural barriers to speak to a Samaritan adulteress in John 4.
- He had compassion on the needy and on the multitudes in Mark 1:41, 5:19, 6:34, and 8:2.
- He served as a role model of humility by washing His disciples’ feet in John 13.
- He expressed emotion as He considered Judas’s imminent betrayal in John 13:21.
- He reached out to defend and forgive an adulteress in John 8:1-11.
- He cried over the heartache of Lazarus’s sisters and friends in John 11:33-36.
• He loved His disciples in John 13:34, and 15:9.
• He comforted His fearful disciples in John 14:1-3.
• He called his closest followers “friends” in John 15:14-15.
• He prayed for His present and future disciples in John 17.
• He poured out His life to meet man’s deepest need in John 19:30.

Rapport Tips
How many of the verbs in the above list do you recognize in your teaching?

In the same way that both partners in the marriage relationship must establish a rapport—a relationship of mutual trust and emotional affinity—to make the marriage flourish, teachers must place a priority on rapport with students, colleagues, and parents to succeed in their mission.

These eighteen suggestions are practical ways that you can improve your rapport—and increase your ministry. Which can you implement today?

1. Love your students.
   Before you walk into school at the beginning of the year, dedicate yourself to looking at, dealing with, and working with your students as Jesus would. As Paul taught in I Corinthians 13:1, love must be preeminent, or your speech will resemble a “clanging cymbal.” If you do not have agape love for people, you are a) not walking with the Lord as you should, b) in the wrong business, and c) incapable of establishing rapport with others.
   Love manifests itself in putting the needs of others first, even when others do not realize the benefits immediately. Love means seeing others as God sees them. It means that there is a “genuine interest from the teacher in what [students] have to say” (www.geocities.com). It means putting up with immaturity—but dealing with it—because you see the big picture, and you see the end from the beginning.
   Love God first, and then your neighbor (i.e. students, colleagues, and parents) as yourself (Mark 12:30-31).

2. Show concern for your students.
   Closely related to the need to love your students is the need to show your concern for them. Live out your love. You may begin by using ice breakers to reveal your interest in students. Garlett (1985, pp. 181-182), writes that teachers must “find the person in each one of them. Sharing names is a good way to begin doing this. Find out how your students acquired their names and tell them how you acquired yours. Questioning may be a helpful beginning. Is it a family name? If so, which person in your family did it first belong to? Does your last name have a meaning? From which nationality did it originate?”
   As the Apostle Paul expressed a “fond affection” for believers in Thessalonica (I Thessalonians 2:8), so must the Christian educator. Write encouraging notes on papers and tests. Call students’ homes to find out how an ill parent is progressing. Sit with a student or students at lunch, and do more listening than talking. Take students out to eat or have them over to the house for dinner. Be creative in your attempts to show your concern.
   Shortly after high school graduation, I felt led by God to write extended letters of encouragement to our graduating seniors. I poured out my heart to the recipients expressing my heartfelt desire to see them develop their God-given strengths and continue a true walk with the Lord. Recently, a parent of one of these seniors went out of her way to thank me for the encouraging letter to her daughter and let me know that my words gave her daughter the courage to make godly decisions in her private life.
3. Be available with your time.
   I know you only have twenty-four hours in each day, but how do you use your time?
   Be available before, during, and after school to address minor and major crises in your students’ lives. Be available on weekends and vacations. Give out your email address and phone number. Ministry demands commitment in deed as well as in word.
   If you are on your way to a teachers’ meeting and a usually even-tempered student is crying and requesting a word with you, take the time to address the concern in a tactfully brief, but compassionate way. Chat with students before and after classes. Attend athletic contests and cheer for your students. Attend plays, school banquets, science fairs, musical performances, and other school functions if at all possible. Your presence sends a clear message about your priorities.

4. Respect your students.
   Do not confuse respect with mollycoddling your students. Too often, teachers demean, disparage, and scoff at students under the guise of maintaining their authority in their precinct, or...class room. If you want to use the iron fist, you must balance it with the velvet glove. “Students appreciate teachers who...are approachable and enthusiastic, and who show an interest in them. In short, students are no different from everyone else: they enjoy being treated with respect. This is the Golden Rule for establishing a productive relationship with students and should not be broken” (www.usask.ca). Respect is a two-way street and is better earned than forced. Remember that God has allowed your students to be under your care. They are His property. They are not yours to abuse verbally or psychologically. Showing respect is not a sign of weakness, but rather a token of your respect for God’s authority.

5. Listen.
   When students speak, look them in the eye, lean slightly towards them; do not be distracted by desktop papers, and repeat–in your own words–what was spoken to you. As James writes, “Be swift to hear, slow to speak” (1:19). Avoid the temptation to always have the last word in conversations with students or to put students in their place by lecturing to them. Who in his right mind would ever desire to have a mature relationship with a party who speaks patronizingly towards him? Real listening happens with the ears and the heart. Elve states, “A good teacher has a sensitivity to the reactions of children. He or she can read a child’s signals and sense immediately when there is understanding, desire, despair, or resentment” (1982, p. 53). Effective listening allows the teacher to improve his capacity for reaching out to the needs of his students, and to set an example that they, in turn, will more readily follow. When you stop to listen, you will be amazed by what you hear.

6. Use humor.
   Kept in its proper sphere, humor is one of the most effective tools in the teacher’s toolbox. Humor relaxes the class and teacher, serves as a universal language connecting generations, and melts resistant hearts. Proverbs 17:22 states that a “merry heart doeth good like a medicine.” Humor can heal more than a couple of classroom ailments. Laugh at yourself, and watch your students laugh at their own idiosyncrasies and gaffes. Break up a tense atmosphere with a quick one-liner, and students will eventually learn to depressurize with out your help. Laugh at an oddity of history, English, or mathematics, and the relaxed atmosphere will help students refocus with a new perspective on the subject. Rarely do students feel completely comfortable with a peer or authority figure who cannot laugh. Lowrie (1978, pp. 98-99) states, “A good, hearty, sense of humor goes a long way in Christian school teaching. It is wholesome for the teacher and for the students. It helps make education fun. It brightens the day and makes time go faster.”

7. Be professional.
   In your effort to establish rapport with your students, be sure to maintain your professionalism. Remember, you are the authority figure–God’s representative in the classroom–and the students are
not your peers. Dress like an adult. Speak like an adult. (“Dudes” live on ranches; “cool” is an atmo-
spheric condition.) It is up to you to discipline–or, train–your students. If you wait for them to take
the initiative to begin class, assign homework, control talking, settle disputes, interject spiritual
truths into the lesson, or stress the academic essentials, it simply will not get done.

8. Be fair.
   Nothing ruins a teacher’s relationship with his students more than favoritism. If you have ever
known a teacher who has been accused of favoring girls over boys, the intelligent student over the
mediocre, sons or daughters over others, or the well-dressed over the slovenly, you have seen an
almost irreparable breach of rapport. Perception is tantamount to reality to the teens and pre-teens
who are watching. Be careful.
   Students expect–and deserve–consistency, because consistency gives them a sense of security and
trust. Praise and rebuke without respect of persons.
   Consider this: Once you have established rapport with your students, they will respond much more
readily to your correction and advice.

9. Read student body language.
   Rapport–or a lack thereof–can be read in the non-verbal communication in your classroom.
   Do students arrive to class as late as possible and leave as soon as the bell rings? Do they avoid eye
contact with you? Do they slouch in their seats? Do they refuse to participate in classroom
discussions or ignore your suggestions? Do you spend an inordinate amount of class time “putting
out fires” instead of holding to your agenda?
   Body language, read properly, is more accurate than speech. Keep your eyes open, and you can
read volumes.

10. Share personal insights.
    Sharing valuable, constructive insights and is one thing; hanging out your dirty laundry is quite
another.
    Are you transparent? Is your life an ongoing learning experience? Open up to your students and
incorporate relevant personal incidents and lessons into your teaching. Learning will come to life for
your students when you do.
    William Cottringer, Ph.D., writes, “Use your own personal insights and experiences to help bring
the training alive and relate it to real-time. The more ‘real’ and practical you are, the more people
trust you. Collect good life experiences that are useful in explaining important point....”
    (www.ostd.ca)

11. Be enthusiastic about your subject.
    People universally are attracted to passionate, purposeful, and driven people. Also, enthusiasm is
contagious.
    Immerse yourself in your subject matter, no matter what your innate level of love for it is. Your
interest in any subject will rarely be surpassed by your students’ interest. (Remember, water never
naturally rises above its source.) Study. Consider teaching the subject from a different angle. Take a
summer course. Ask peers and colleagues for ideas. Pray for God’s help.
    Concerning your demeanor, as you live for the Lord daily, you should (super)naturally exude an
enthusiasm for life and a zeal for the things of God. Every corner of your life should be affected by
this passion, whether it be private or public. Your passion for God will impact your home life and
your school life, including the classes you teach.
    Enthusiasm, appropriately enough, literally means “god within.” Is God your motivation in life?
12. Use students’ names.
   Even in smaller Christian school classes, students feel more accepted when teachers use their names, their personal form of identification. What’s in a name? Respect, worth, and dignity.
   Often, when I observe a student on the verge of inattentiveness, sleep, or misbehavior, I use that student’s name in a chalkboard example, an illustration, or humorous anecdote. At least for the short term, the student perks up his ears and listens to what is said.
   Along with the use of names, do not forget to include—if possible—the use of birthdays, accepted nicknames, personal feats and accomplishments, and common knowledge about interesting family facts, used with discretion.

13. Be flexible.
   Rigidly sticking to your lesson plans may allow you to complete your textbooks and feel a sense of academic accomplishment, but at what cost?
   Be flexible in the event of a personal, school, or student emergency, tragedy, or celebration. Be flexible when scheduling is altered unexpectedly. Be flexible when you see a need to step outside the book and challenge the class on a spiritual level. Be flexible when you suddenly become aware of a unique opportunity to teach a lesson because of a current event (e.g. 9-11-01), a meteorological occurrence, or a brainstorm.
   Rapport wanes when one party unyieldingly and unreasonably refuses to budge from a predetermined course of action for the sake of his own benefit without considering the welfare or advantage of another party.

14. Share your foibles.
   Are you aware of idiosyncrasies you bring to your classroom?
   You may laugh, sneeze, or cough in a unique way. You may pronounce a word awkwardly. You may be in the habit of leaning against the board and covering your back with chalk. You may habitually adjust the angle of the lectern or readjust your tie. You may have a one-of-a-kind gait.
   Do not downplay or ignore your foibles. Instead, deal with them by either laughing at them, working on them, or tactfully overlooking them. As a human being, you have a right to have a foible or two. We all have them.

15. Vary your teaching methods.
   Creatively varying teaching methods allows you to see your students in a different light, and it allows your students to see you in a different light. Because lecturing offers primarily a one-way exchange of ideas, it should be mixed with a variety of other methods including role playing, group discussions, current events analyses, academic games, field trips, question and answer sessions, oral presentations, and hands-on workshops. Students will enjoy the change of pace, learn more, and learn to relate to you, the teacher, on a different level. A one-dimensional class, person, or relationship is doomed to failure.

16. Be willing to admit your ignorance.
   Students have difficulty forgiving a know-it-all teacher who does not know it all, but they respect a teacher who pleads ignorance when the occasion calls for such a confession.
   How can a teacher expect his students to be honest and forthright if he himself continually erects a facade to cover his imperfections?
   Be willing to say, “I don’t know the answer to that question, but I’ll have it for you tomorrow,” or “That is a good question. Does anyone here know the answer to it? If you cannot answer a question, be frank with the class. Ask for help; maybe one of the students can give an example to help you out” (www.dal.ca).
17. Respond to student comments appropriately.

Students look to their teacher to set the tone in the classroom. Respond in a professional way to the following three classroom occurrences.

First, when a student tries to rile you up and requires a disciplinary response, deal with him. Hoping the misbehavior will cease will likely encourage other malfeasance. Handle the incident, if possible, privately and avoid making a public spectacle of the student. Otherwise, a positive relationship with this student and the possibility for edification may become a very difficult issue. Also, remember that students do not respect a pushover. If you draw a line, do not budge. If you see that the line is unreasonable or is needlessly provoking, admit your error and clearly draw a better line.

Second, never laugh at incorrect responses. Sarcasm and deprecation go a long way toward losing the confidence of involved parties. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

Third, praise success. Write an encouraging note on a better-than-usual test. Praise students orally as you return tests and papers, always considering the possible responses. Write good responses on the blackboard. Call home and inform parents of a job well done. Proverbs 15:23b states, “...a word spoken in due season, how good it is!”

18. Be a role model.

Godly rapport requires the inclusion of the pursuit of righteousness in the relationship. You, as the teacher, must guide conversations so that honoring Christ is the goal. Your actions—public and private—must be exemplary, honoring the Lord. The fruits of the Holy Spirit, in short, must be clearly evident on your life’s vine. Nothing can compare with a transparent Christian life observed by your students.

John Dewey once noted, “Everything the teacher does, as well as the manner in which he does it, incites the child to respond in some way or another, and each response tends to set the child’s attitude in some way or another” (Garlett, 1985).

Jacquot stresses the importance of example: “When a teacher incorporates principles in his instruction, he must put these principles into practice before he can expect his students to do so. His example, then, becomes an important key in developing his students’ character. The example of godly teachers is indeed the most important influence at the disposal of the school…” (1984, p. 39).

**Rapport’s Benefits**

Establishing rapport with students brings with it three benefits. First, it gives you, the teacher, an atmosphere more conducive to learning. Students turn off cold, heartless, rude, sarcastic, smug, dry, unloving, preoccupied teachers faster than a child rejects an offer of Brussels sprouts. A teacher who has established rapport with his students will communicate more effectively and in a variety of ways and settings. Students will be receptive, eager to learn, and desirous of pleasing their teacher.

Second, rapport opens up opportunities to minister. Billings writes, “Children need spiritual leadership. This is not possible unless the teacher is a spiritually minded individual” (1978, p. 19). Students will approach you between periods, during lunch, after school, or via the telephone to discuss personal, social, and family matters. Are you ready to meet the spiritual needs of the children God has placed under your authority? Before you step into the classroom each day, dedicate yourself to the propagation of the Gospel to your students by your words and actions.

Third, rapport initiates long-term relationships with students. When you treat students with respect, they will view you as more than a teacher. You may be considered a counselor, mentor, trusted friend, surrogate parent, or confidante. Today, I still keep in contact with, and help mentor, students I had ten or fifteen years ago. Your life as a Christian school teacher does not end each year in June. Ministry is a lifelong pursuit.
Final Considerations

As you work to establish rapport with your students, beware of obstacles on your road to success. Avoid role-playing and hypocrisy. Sooner or later, the truth will be apparent to any interested observer, and you will suffer the consequences of such duplicity. Avoid establishing a “buddy-buddy” relationship with students. Rookie teachers are especially susceptible in this area and need to maintain their professional distance and authority. Rapport is not tantamount to breaking down the walls of position and power. Act your age. Finally, remember it is up to you, not your students, to steer behavior and speech toward Christlikeness. Rapport does not mean compromising your role as teacher or your walk with the Lord.

Conversely, an investment in establishing godly relationships with your students pays dividends for both the short and the long term. God will bless your desire to serve Him by your reaching out beyond the textbook and the four walls of the school. Eternity is at stake. May this be said of us one day: “For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints and do minister” (Hebrews 6:10). Russell Glines is a teacher at Fellowship Christian Academy, Methuen, MA.

References


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What does rapport in education mean? When it comes to learning, rapport refers to a close, harmonious relationship between the teacher and the students. It is the result of being able to “click” with your students— you connect, interact, and understand each other in a positive way. Rapport-building, however, is not just about finding common interests and values. It goes as far as creating trust and respect between you and your students, no matter how big your age gap, or where you’re from. A student of author, Krzl, an online teacher in Chile. Why is it important to build relationships with your students? When newly qualified teachers start their first teaching job, there is a lot to take in: understanding new administrative procedures and lesson material, lesson planning, working in front of a group of learners who have high expectations, and possibly living in a new place. Rapport is the relationship that the learners have with the teachers and vice versa—a class where there is a positive, enjoyable and respectful relationship between teacher and learners and between learners themselves, according to Jeremy Harmer in The Practice of English Language Teaching (2007) Pearson Longman. In my experience, showing a bit of your life outside of the classroom goes a long way to building rapport. Respect your learners. 8 Methods Teachers Can Use to Improve Professionalism. 1. Improve Punctuality. Being on time may seem basic, but often the basics get forgotten. One basic is punctuality. Along with being on time goes meeting deadlines. If you make an effort to turn your attendance and other reports in on or before the deadline, this will get noticed and increase rapport with the administrative staff. It creates a certain amount of pride to hear, “Oh, yes, Mr. Rodriguez is always on top of things!” Also, the staff will then in turn support you on the days you need help because you are running late and need copies made and so forth. 3. Pay Attention to and Meet Objectives. Teaching a random group of students for just one day or one hour is one of the hardest aspects of public speaking. In my classroom, I know I can patiently build rapport, learn from mistakes, and adjust the next day. As a speaker though, I won’t get second chances, nor can I rely on familiarity especially with at-risk students who don’t trust easily. Thankfully, what I’ve learned about quickly building relationships as a speaker has helped me better connect with students in my classroom especially reluctant and disengaged students.