Getting to know them

By: Kristi Johnson Smith

Demarcus told me I was “the bomb.” I told him to go to the principal’s office, and a look of complete and utter confusion covered his face.

It turned out that being “the bomb” is a good thing. I didn’t know that. I had apparently just received the highest compliment an eighth grader could give me, and I had punished him for it.

My mistake.

It was a mistake from which I learned, though. In fact, that moment made me rethink my classroom “discipline system” altogether. I began to wonder how many other times I had handed out consequences without understanding what had actually happened. Certainly my classroom needed structure — rules that were enforced and applied equally to all. But maybe I had admired the structure of the discipline system while neglecting the community foundation on which it needed to stand. Maybe instead of thinking exclusively about behavior — and the rewards and punishments it should elicit — I needed to think about my students.

Did I know them? I knew their names, had contacted their families and had reviewed their academic records. I had even distributed a Getting to Know You questionnaire at the beginning of the year. Of course, I hadn’t really had a lot of time to look at their responses. There were lessons to plan and “real” assignments to grade.

But that afternoon I found the completed “Getting to Know You” handouts and really began reading them. After three weeks as their teacher, I began meeting my kids.

I won’t pretend that the change in classroom culture was instantaneous, but the change in me was. I began listening to the hearts of my students, instead of simply challenging their minds. And over time, the classroom culture did shift. I continued to make relationships a priority. As a result, the foundation we needed for our “discipline system” and our academic work was built and preserved.

And I loved it. And I began to love them. And they sensed my investment, were encouraged to interact, and through those interactions we all learned. And we didn’t just learn more about each other. They realized I was interested in them, and they responded by paying more attention to me and to the material I was teaching. Things weren’t perfect, but the number of discipline issues I encountered significantly decreased. As they did, we had more time to focus on each other and on the material.
Getting to know your students is a reward in and of itself, but it also helps in other areas. It creates student investment in you and in history, math, science, English or whatever subject you teach.

**Strategies for getting to know your students**

How do you do it? It is actually remarkably simple. Start by asking them a few basic questions about what they do in their free time and who they are inside and outside the classroom. Then remember the answers, and follow up by inquiring about how those things are going for them. Pass a calendar around and ask students to put their birthdays on it. You don’t have to buy presents or sing to make an impression. Just say a quiet “happy birthday” when they come through your door.

Every six weeks, assign work that students can do silently at their desks while you call them up one at a time for a conference. You can talk about academic performance, but also ask them how things are going in other parts of their lives. Attend an extracurricular event in which they are going to participate. One colleague of mine — who entered the classroom after retiring from the business world, and taught every day in a bow tie — would ask his students to recommend movies so that he could see them, then have a common experience to discuss with them after class.

In other words, figure out some way to connect with your students. Listen not just to what they say, but to who they are. Demarcus might — for a moment — think you’re the bomb, and you don’t want to miss that moment because you’re not paying the right kind of attention. You also don’t want to miss the chance to tell him that you think he is pretty amazing too.