



The Five Things Master Teachers Know and Do

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

What is the difference between a great teacher and a master teacher? After years of hiring and working with teachers, along with decades of experience in the classroom, I am convinced there are a few tangible things that set these groups apart. Here are the five things I have learned from being a teacher and watching master teachers in action.

1. Relationships comes first

Master teachers know it is the relationship they have with their students that opens their minds to learning. They know their degree of influence in a classroom is attributable to the strength of their relationship with their students. Kids instinctively look up to, follow, obey, are loyal to, try to measure up to, seek to please, listen to, defer to, and share the same values of teachers they are attached to. These characteristics are not about a child's character but indicative of the connection they have with their teachers.

Strong attachments to one's teacher enhances school success, is related to higher grades, better emotional regulation, and a student's willingness to take on challenges. To build this attachment each child needs to be collected. Collecting and building a connection can be as simple as saying hello, having a small conversation, or checking in about a shared interest. For students who are harder to reach it might require a consistent effort to find a way to come to their side and engage them in things that they will talk about.

One mother told me her son had been sent to the principal's office three times in September despite having a successful kindergarten experience the prior year. When I asked her if he liked his teacher she said, "No, he hates her." I told her the problem wasn't with her son but with his relationship he had with his teacher – she didn't have his heart.

When a student has a connection with their teacher they will trust in their care and readily follow them. This is how a master teacher influences a child's attitude to learning and school overall. When we look back to the teachers we remember most, they were the ones we gave our hearts to for safe keeping.

2. Injecting play into learning enhances engagement

Play is a natural way to help kids learn. When the pressure comes off producing outcomes, kids are more willing to experiment, be curious, and creative. I would often tell my students I wished I didn't have to grade them because I felt it detracted from their overall engagement in learning.

I have watched master teachers inject play into their lectures – science teachers who wheeled carts of chemicals outside to experiment with – to teachers who sang their lesson plans with a guitar in hand. I sorted my students into groups by putting them into families such as the Simpsons or Ozbournes, or gave them crayons and paper to draw out their academic work, or used yarn balls to turn the classroom into a web of connections. For more mature students, it was the stories their teachers told about their subject area that made learning more engaging.

Master teachers inject play and fun into their teaching methods, engaging their student's interest and easing the pressure that comes with being focused on outcomes. When we look back to where we learned the most it was usually when we got to play at figuring things out, at making connections, and through trial and error. When a teacher makes work feel like play, they will engage students attention and create a natural learning environment.

3. An invitation to learn goes a lot farther than coercion

Master teachers know that you can't make anyone learn but you do need to invite them to. Engaging a student means taking time to ask about their questions on a subject, what they already know about it, and why they might be interested in learning more? Master teachers know learning is about asking a student to step forward to be an active participant rather than a passive bystander. A student will feel invited to learn by a teacher's generosity, warmth, and their desire to know and understand who someone is as a learner.

Master teachers know that coming alongside a child's effort and their intentions are more important than focusing on the outcome. They encourage persistence, make room for resistance, and ensure a child knows they are not alone in their struggle to learn. When I was involved in hiring teachers I always looked through their academic transcript to see whether they had struggled as a student. I would ask those who had to tell me the story of how they had found their way through. It was these teachers that often spoke most about how learning can be frustrating and that what every kid needed was to look at a teacher who believed they could succeed. What a student sees in their teacher's eyes shapes how they see oneself as a learner.

4. How you treat one student is applied to all

Master teacher's know that what is good for one student is automatically applied to everyone else in a class. Students learn vicariously through watching how a teacher leads through impasses in the class, deals with breaches to rules and limits, and manages learning and behavioural challenges. When a master teacher handles these things in a way that maintains a firm caring stance while preserving a student's dignity, everyone in a class will feel more secure as a result.

A student will only feel as safe in a class room as it is safe for the struggling student. It is a master teacher's ability to lead this student that will give other students a sense of rest and help to quell anxiety and alarm. Research suggests that when a teacher yells or is unable to handle difficult situations in a classroom, it can take a child's body hours to release the tension and stress stirred up in these situations.

Students can't learn if they are worried and are unsure about whether a teacher can lead through situations that arise. Students judge how other's are treated and automatically apply the same criteria to oneself.

5. The most difficult kids to manage are the ones that need you the most

Master teachers know that the hardest students to teach and build relationships with are the ones that need adults most of all. Not all students are ready to learn when they come to school. Learning requires a luxury in attention that not all students have – there are other distressing issues and events that have hijacked their focus.

Every student has a story to tell and a lack of learning isn't always about the relationship with a teacher but indicative of a child's overall life situation. Master teachers are often moved to reach out to these students and see past the behaviour and learning problems. They yearn to give these students an adult relationship that will work for them, to invite them to learn, and to lean on them. What they offer these kids is a lifeline. They work to help the students see they are still holding onto them, that they are still welcome to be in relationship with them, and that they are confident there is a way through.

Kids who need adults most of all often reveal it in the most unusual of ways and master teachers know this. They are developmentalists at heart and believe all things grow with time, patience, and good caretaking.

What master teachers know is that neither their curriculum, nor educational technology, nor credentials will assure them of success in a classroom. They know that what their students need most of all is an invitation for relationship where they feel a sense of belonging, of mattering, of being seen, heard, and of being valued. The teachers who start from this place will take their students far. It is surest way to know that they will be following close behind.

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