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VIC GODDARD

NEW FACES

IF YOU DON'T MAKE THE EFFORT TO GET TO KNOW ALL THE YOUNG PEOPLE YOU SERVE, THEN YOU RISK LETTING THEM DOWN WHEN IT COUNTS, SAYS VIC GODDARD...

The start of a new year can feel very much much like a case of 'here we go again', if we are not careful, at least for the staff and older students. Of course, it's a different prospect for a young person joining year 7, and although I've always thought that I understood what our new arrivals might be feeling as they come through our doors for the first few weeks of term, it turns out that I was wrong. I know now that I was not fully aware of what it feels like to be a year 7 – even after over 20 years in the job – until this year, when I became the parent of a child starting secondary school.

My son achieved well whilst at his small primary school; he is confident and articulate and generally a considerate young man (I know, I'm biased). However he found his initial transition to a secondary setting difficult, and so did I. The experience has really reinforced in my mind the amazingly powerful position we are all in as teachers and role models for the young people we serve. When I ask my son about his day it is rarely his friends that he talks about first – it's the teachers. He can repeat back to me what has been said to him almost word for word and that's the same whether he has been praised or given some guidance on how he can improve in an aspect of his work or behaviour. What the adults say to him really matters, and he now has so many more to deal with than when he was at primary school, when he spent the vast majority of his time each year with just one or two teachers – enabling him to build strong relationships that really helped when he had challenges to face.

So what is my own impact on the new students at Passmores? Am I a scary man that only speaks to them at assembly time or when they are in trouble? Obviously different leaders operate in different ways but in my mind, rather than being a 'headteacher' I am a *headteacher*. I came into the job as I loved teaching and working with young people and that hasn't changed. I know I don't spend as much time in the classroom as I would like to, but every conversation I have with a young person fills me with the same joy and sense of purpose today as it did all those centuries ago when I was a NQT.

So how do I make sure that I am not just the slightly distant man that you only ever get hauled in front of when you are in trouble? Or is that actually my role and I should just accept that? The answer to this second



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“IF I AM NOT BOTHERED ABOUT LISTENING TO THEM, THEN WHAT SHOULD THEY FEEL ABOUT ME?”

question is a definite no for me.

I do everything in my power to be at the door saying good bye to our students at the end of every day. I get the chance to judge whether the smiles on the faces of the young people are just because they have made it to the end of the day or whether there's a grin that means that they really have had a good day. I work hard to learn names, to find out if they are into football/reading/dancing and to talk to them about how life is going. If I am not bothered about listening to them and investing in them by getting to know them, then what should they feel about me? Yes, I am their headteacher and an element of respect comes with the 'position'... but I would much prefer them to respect me as the person that they see striving to do my best for them.

The start of the year is busy and it is easy to get office bound. One day last week I went home really grumpy, and probably wasn't very nice to be around. I couldn't work out why initially – then I realised (when I checked my pedometer) that I had hardly got away from my computer that day. I had had almost no interaction with our students or staff and I felt like I had not had any of the 'good stuff' that comes with being a teacher!

What I have learned is that the little things really matter, especially in year 7 when everything is a bit strange. Knowing whose anniversary it is and saying 'happy birthday' is something I try to achieve every day; we even send students a card if their special day falls in the holidays as we can't congratulate them in person. A smile from a teacher, and probably even more so from the headteacher, is such a powerful force for good and can make a real difference, especially for a new student. Watch Merci! by Christine Rabette (tinyurl.com/vgmerci) for an illustration of the power of a smile/laugh.

So do me a favour and smile at a year 7 today (keep it relaxed, though – you're not Jack Nicholson and no one needs a 'Here's Johnny!' moment at school). Just to let them know that, although it may take us a little longer than at primary school, we do want to get to know them... and that they are more than merely a set of results that will help us either pass or fail our appraisal targets this year.