

Knowing your students' passions helps to engage them in learning

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Getting to know your students is key to engaging them, the SBS Insight program "A Teacher Changed My Life" illustrated last week.

The program featured three people who had at one point been disinterested in school and revealed how a teacher's approach had re-engaged them in learning.

There was a point when **Donna Loughran** felt disconnected from learning at high school — she didn't see the relevance of what was being taught, so chose to skip classes and go to her part-time job instead.

At a new school for year 11, Cambridge Park High School, Donna had teacher Steve Duclos for legal studies. "I thought he was a great teacher. He brought the content alive: it was of great interest, it was real world for me," Donna said.

Conversations with him made her start thinking about going to university.



Steve said: "When you have that passion as a teacher, you don't want to give up on any student. You want them to have the opportunity [to learn], so you have to find a way of getting to them."

Donna said not everyone fits in the traditional school: "When I was going through [school as a student] it was standard for everyone. With changes that are happening in the system at the moment, it's really about working out personalised pathways. There are different pathways available for kids...and there are a thousand ways to get a kid from A to B and you've got to get creative. Sometimes it's getting the parents to understand what those pathways look like, getting the student to understand what those pathways look like and I'm really passionate about every kid finding what success looks like for them."

Donna is now principal at Doonside Technology High. Earlier this week she was at Federation's head office to assist with a course: Unpacking your experiences: Highly Accomplished / Lead Accreditation.

Omar Sawan admitted he could be angry in his early years, but the influence of a new principal at Punchbowl boys High School made a mark on Omar. He recalls Jihad Dib was the first teacher to invite him to tell him what had happened following an incident in class. "From that we started to build a rapport," Omar said.

Mr Dib said: "I think the really important thing that I saw in that rage and in that anger was a person who I thought had just never been listened to — a person who hadn't been given the time to explain why he did what he did."

"You need to come back to the why people do what they do. Behind every action there's a reason for it," Mr Dib, now Lakemba MP, said.

At one point Omar challenged Mr Dib to suspend him, but the principal refused. Mr Dib recalls he told Omar he would not be expelled because "if I expel you, then that's giving up on you and I'm not going to give up on you".

"I needed to show him that there were a lot of people who love him and care about him. As tempting as it was [to expel him] it was a line that I wasn't going to cross," Mr Dib said.

Omar said: "The way [Mr Dib] would speak with me wasn't just as another student, just another number — he would speak to me as an individual...more like how a father would speak to his son when he's done something wrong, where you don't straight away hammer them, you try to guide them into the right way. You make them try and understand how the world works, that it's not how you want it to work."

Omar recalls Mr Dib told him that his anger was childish and that "the loudest one in the room is the weakest one in the room". "That's always been with me since then," Omar said.

He said Mr Dib's approach slowly changed his attitude until he "decided to wake up".

Denzyl Moncrieff was feeling completely disengaged from education when science teacher Suzy Urbaniak made a big impression on him — she made him feel good about himself despite the fact he got about 32 per cent for a test. Suzy let him know he was the only person in the class to get 100 per cent in the most difficult section of the exam. She does not remember the conversation, but it made Denzyl feel good about himself and he subsequently changed his attitude to school and learning: he wanted to get 100 per cent more often, so he applied himself more to his school work.

Suzy said education is about the journey of learning, how the student feels and the confidences they gain.

"Any point of improved confidence or improved self-esteem needs to be noted and given positive feedback — that's what makes the difference. It's about building those relationships and then finding their passions and then working their passions, like I did with him," Suzy said.

"It's not about prescriptive learning...it's about authentic learning experiences, learning theory in context, it's about applying it to real-world scenarios...it all stems from... developing their self-confidence, their enterprising skills, their intra-personal skills, their inter-personal skills and then they acquire the knowledge. It's not about us delivering knowledge to them," she also said.

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