

Why relationship-building is vital in schools - The Answer Sheet

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By Yvette Jackson

The [recent report](#) by a Chicago-based research group underscores what teachers, principals and student have told me for years: schools are defined by the relationships between staff and students.

While the report focused on how strong relationships can help students and staff feel safe and free of physical threats, we also know that strong relationships have another critical benefit: they make schools "intellectually safe" for students to learn and thrive.

I need to look no further for an example than my work several years ago leading model lessons in a high school at the former Cabrini-Green housing project, where teachers lamented about poor student attendance and lack of motivation.

Unfortunately — as is too often the case — the teachers did not make connections between what was happening with students in the classroom and on their world. For these students, that meant ever-present stress from the violence that surrounded them.

This lack of connection creates two problems in the classroom. First, understanding the students' personal frames of reference helps teachers establish the relevance of school work to students' lives. Second, the daily challenges deeply affect student psyches in ways that interfere with learning and must be recognized. Both interfere with student-teacher relationships.

Teachers understand that relationship-building is essential but say it is one of the most difficult parts of their jobs. One reason is that teachers and students often come from such different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds that they lack the language, confidence and strategies to address differences. Classroom relationships are especially challenging for these teachers.

But there are steps that can be taken to build relationships that make schools safer – physically, emotionally and intellectually.

First, teachers need to acknowledge when they feel unprepared to meet the needs of students of color or economically disadvantaged students. It will be much easier then to take the next step, which is to engage teachers with strategies to identify and overcome these barriers, identify stereotypes, and raise expectations for their students.

Next, design professional development in which teachers explore strategies that connect learning

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with the lives of the students. This will help students understand concepts and other classroom material and, just as importantly, allow them to demonstrate understanding and build their confidence.

Finally, schools need greater leadership in this area. Not enough principals are adequately involved in professional development, and the result is a gap between leadership, support and lasting momentum.

The report reminds me of how one of the model lessons ended in the Cabrini school.

To generate conversation about a book the students were reading, I decided to dive into one of the main themes, which was relationships. I prepped students by talking about the positive and negative aspects of relationships in their worlds before asking them to write similes that helped transition into discussions about the book.

The nimble thinking of the students and the connections they made were as telling then as they are now:

- Relationships are like fences. They can keep you together.
- Relationships are like school. You can learn from them.
- Relationships are like the stars, when they are out in the open.
- Relationships are like the subway, when you have to go underground.

The similes were the baby steps taken toward building relationships that connected students' lives to their classroom and their teachers. Students just need the right connections and an intellectually safe environment to take chances and share their potential.

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