

# Building Bridges, Not Walls

A Common Sense Guide for Relationship Building In the  
Urban and Inner-City Classroom



**Rann Miller**

Brought to you by the  
Urban Ed Mixtape

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# “Let’s build bridges, not walls.”

- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

*Dr. King understood that the best way for humanity to forge ahead towards progress was to come together and not retreat to our comfort zones.*

*Our nation is as diverse as it has ever been. The demographics of school students across the United States is changing and school leadership must be prepared to meet the needs of its students. The need for culturally competent teachers is an urgent one. Likewise, the need for compassionate and relationship building people is the strongest it has ever been. Building relationships is key for achieving success in any industry. Building relationships is key any classroom; a student will only allow a teacher to teach them, if they trust them. Trust comes from a relationship.*

*The intention of this text is to provide relationship building strategies to teachers of urban students. The strategies expressed in this text are faith-based tenets for developing ways to improve the urban classroom power dynamic. There are a host of variables that can and do impact the academic outcomes of urban students. Race, gender and socioeconomics play a role in urban student achievement. However, relationships between student and teacher has a life changing impact on urban students and their achievement. This information on how to effectively develop the relationships of teachers and low-income children of color can provide educational practitioners with insight for meeting the daily classroom management demands within an urban education context.*



## This Text Will Explore the Following Themes:

- Identifying the factor(s) that may hinder your ability to build relationships with your students
- Identifying the purpose and goals of student misbehavior
- Guiding principles for building strong student relationships
- Strategies for developing strong relationships with your students

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# Building Bridges, Not Walls

*A Common Sense Guide for Relationship Building In the Urban  
Education Classroom*

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# Background Information

## *INTRODUCTION*

There is dedicated scholarship on students of color and White teachers that has to do with culturally responsive classroom management and instruction (Ladson-Billings 1994; Delpit 1995; Weiner 2003; Weinstein, Curran and Tomlinson-Clarke 2003). There is a host of scholarship specific to Black male students and their over-discipline in schools (Cherng, 2016; Kenney, 2016; Lindsay & Hart, 2016; Noguera 2003; Singer 1996; Skiba 2000a and Skiba 2000b) at the hands of White educators. Attention to developing and improving these relationships is critical to addressing the academic and professional development needs of preservice and veteran teachers alike as educators to who seek to improve the academic performance of students of color within their classrooms. Current trends in public school enrollment and teacher characteristics indicate the overwhelming probability that students of color will experience mostly White teachers in their education, many of whom who are White and female (Saffold and Longwell-Grice 2007; Toldson, 2012).

White students are more concentrated in suburban schools; whereas students of color are more concentrated in urban schools (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). According to Reardon, Robinson, & Weathers (2015), in about half of the largest 100 cities, most African American and Latino students attend schools where at least 75 percent of all students qualify as poor or low-income under federal guidelines (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016). Although there are several definitions of what constitutes urban schools (Milner, 2012), They are typically classified by “highs” and “lows” (Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). The “highs” include high poverty, higher numbers of students from diverse racial and language backgrounds (Dancy & Horsford, 2010), higher numbers of students with special needs (White-Smith, 2012), higher numbers of disciplinary and violent incidents (Irby, 2013), and high teacher turnover (Siwatu, 2011). The “lows” tend to include low academic achievement, low teacher quality, low staff morale (Howard, 2014), and low parent involvement (Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). These “highs” and “lows” require in-coming teachers to have a set of skills that empower them to teach students in spite of the “highs” and “lows.”

## ***THE FACE OF AMERICAN TEACHERS***

Many graduates entering schools throughout America are young and White. Today, of the more than 6 million teachers in the United States, nearly 80 percent are White and 80 percent are women – 62% of all teachers are White and female (Toldson 2012). In schools where minority students are in the majority, two-thirds of the teachers are White (Saffold and Longwell-Grice 2007). This mismatching of teachers and students can and often do lead to issues of cultural conflict. Among the documented problems that arise from the mismatch between socio-cultural backgrounds of minority and low income students and their White, middle class teachers are: cultural value conflict, miscommunication, ineffective teaching of students which results in dismal academic achievement, lowered teacher expectations leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy of lowered student achievement, teacher's negative racial attitudes towards and beliefs about racially and socio-economically diverse students, and low motivations of both students and teachers (Bennett 1999; Hollins 1995; Ladson-Billings 1994; Nieto 2000). After novice teachers leave education programs in colleges and universities for jobs in urban classrooms, they rank classroom management as one of the main challenges (Weiner 2003; National Council on Teacher Quality 2013). According to Siwatu (2011), pre-service teachers felt more prepared to teach in suburban schools instead of urban ones. While there are a plethora of opportunities for post-graduate students to engage in teacher preparation within urban contexts (Berry, Montgomery, & Snyder, 2008; Veltri, 2008; Villegas & Clewell, 1998), few opportunities exist for undergraduates interested in urban education to explore the field, particularly those students enrolled at residential, liberal arts institutions located far from urban areas (Rinke, Arsnie, & Bell, 2012).

## ***TEACHER PERCEPTION***

Teacher perception of student behavior is a factor in school discipline; a reason why cultural mismatch cannot be ignored. Evidence suggest that white teachers struggle to understand the role that race plays in their interactions with students of color (Gere, Buehler, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009). White teachers often espouse a color-blind approach to teaching, failing to recognize the long-term effects of oppression and racism in the United States on student performance (Howard, 2010; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). The unfamiliarity of white teachers with the interactional patterns that characterize many African-American males may cause these teachers to interpret impassioned or emotive interactions as combative or argumentative (Townsend, 2000).



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In an urban elementary school, documented was a process whereby racial stereotypes may contribute to higher rates of school punishment for young African-American males (Ferguson, 2001). Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest found that students who engaged in a “stroll” style of walking, more often associated with African-American movement style, were more likely to be judged by teachers as being more aggressive or lower achieving academically, whether the student was African-American or white. The makeup of the student body also plays a role: Regardless of levels of misbehavior and delinquency, schools with higher Black enrollment have been found to be more likely to use higher rates of exclusionary discipline, court action, and zero tolerance policies, and to use fewer mild disciplinary practices (Payne & Welch, 2010; Welch & Payne, 2010). Plain and simple, where students of color attend school and who teaches them matters.

### **THE GOALS OF STUDENT MISBEHAVIOR**

<b>What's The Student's Message?</b>	<b>How Do I (the teacher) Feel?</b>	<b>What Do I (the teacher) Usually Do?</b>	<b>As A Result, What Does the Student Do?</b>	<b>The Student's Goal is...</b>
“Look at me!”	Irritated and annoyed	Remind, nag, scold, rescue	Stops temporarily	<b>Attention</b>
“Let's Fight.”	Angry and frustrated	Fight back and give in	Continues and stops only on own terms	<b>Power</b>
“I'll get even.”	Angry, hurt, disappointed and a sense of dislike	Retaliate: punish severely and withdraw	Continues and intensifies; stops on own terms	<b>Revenge</b>
“Leave me alone.”	Professional concern and frustration	Give up trying; refer student to support services	Continues avoiding tasks	<b>Avoidance -of-failure</b>



# Principles of Relationship Building

## *INTRODUCTION*

In order for teachers to establish a foundation for creating the conditions to be successful at managing the students within their classroom, teachers must (1) teach and educate all students in love with endurance and (2) become a model of professional and personal integrity. Teaching and educating in love with endurance means that as you instruct, admonish, and guide your students, every word and action is done with their personal well-being and potential to serve in mind despite the struggles and adversity you face when instructing, admonishing and guiding. Students who grow up in and around poverty understand that their communities are in need and they have a sincere desire to help. Teaching in love with endurance allows you to cultivate the skills and competencies of your students via content lessons to help them give back to their communities and society as a whole.

Becoming a model of professional and personal integrity means that you are aware that big brother (politicians, administrators and parents) and little brother (students) are always watching you. They are watching for your intentions, your motivations, your values, your beliefs and how all those things influence the way to teach and interact with your students and colleagues. Your students will naturally look to you as an example. It is your job to decide and assert what type of example your students have in you; either a positive one or negative. The same goes for your colleagues and superiors. Your faculty members and administrators are always looking to teachers for leadership and direction. Your conduct can give the message that you are someone that can be trusted and relied upon for leadership and direction or it can give the message that you cannot be trusted or relied upon.

The following principles can help you with becoming a teacher who educates students in love with endurance, while at the same time becoming an example of professional and personal integrity and accountability:



### ***#1 - DEDICATE YOURSELF TO THE MISSION***

Dedicate yourself to prepare students for life: in the way they ought to behave, ought to reason, and ought to live – as they grow older, they cannot turn the knowledge off. Your biological children are your students – your (as a parent) life’s work is to prepare them for life; the same is true for the students that you work with everyday. These are your non-biological children and education (teaching) should be your career’s work (if not you should consider moving out of the education field) and your obligation is to prepare your children (biological and non-biological) for life. The goal as a teacher is for your commitment to the children in the classroom to mirror your commitment to the children in your home when it comes to teaching and learning. A commitment means a dedicated period of time to the task at hand. Endurance is the key to maintaining this commitment. This is discipline.

### ***#2 - SPEAK LIFE INTO YOUR STUDENTS***

Speak life into your students through providing safe and healthy lessons in your content area. As a teacher you can do one of two things; you can either repeat or speak. A lot of teachers/instructors simply repeat information from textbooks and worksheets – this is not teaching. Speaking implies that you have a voice. Teaching involves speaking your voice. Your students need to hear your voice. Repetition doesn’t guarantee one’s attention because if you (the teacher) can repeat it, so can the student – however, that doesn’t mean that the student hasn’t internalized what was repeated by you or by them. Students internalize what you say. You can either speak life or death to your students (“you can do it” v. “you can’t do it”). Now the lessons you “speak” must be safe and healthy. I say that because not all of the voices they hear are healthy voices. So what you say must be healthy; it must speak life to students. It must encourage them and empower them. Consider how your content area lessons do this. How does learning Spanish empower your students? How does learning algebra empower your students? Speak with that question in mind and offer lessons that will lead to application of them that addresses the concerns and needs of your students and their communities.

### ***#3 - ENDURE TO FULFILL YOUR DUTY***

In all situations, remain level headed, endure adversity, do your job (as teacher); fulfill the duties of your labor. As a teacher, you will encounter many situations. Students will come to you with their problems. Students will display undesirable behaviors as a reaction to their problems. You will have encounters with your colleagues and superiors that are both friendly and combative. As a professional and a leader/cultivator of young minds, you will face a varying number of situations



that will require you to be your best self. You must keep a level head and not get too high when things go great or too low when things get bad. Endure adversity that comes along with the job – students who are not grasping concepts, students who have obstacles that impede their learning, administration’s failures with supporting teachers and students, politics getting in the way of education and parents who may or may not cooperate with you. Regardless what you encounter in your profession, do your job and leave no stone unturned. It doesn’t matter what anyone else says about the job you do, good or bad, when you yourself are aware of your commitment to the work and achieving of the goal.

### ***#4 - BE THE MODEL***

Continuously present yourself as a model/example/prototype of good character. When you teach, do so with integrity, seriousness and with a wholesome discourse/conversation that cannot come under suspicion or attack. In order to be effective as a teacher, you must be the example. In the classroom, it is you (not the student or administrator) that is on the stage whose performance, or lack thereof, will be judged. While there are a lot of constituencies that you answer to, the one that takes the greatest priority is your student constituency. Students are impressionable and inexperienced – whether they are 8 or 18. While it is okay to engage with them regarding life, you must remember that you are their model for academic & professional excellence and integrity. You must hold yourself to a higher standard. If your students do not see you as the model, you have lost them. If your students see you as someone without love in their heart for them, you have lost them. If students see you as a hypocrite, you have lost them. If students see you as disinterested and without passion, you have lost them. If your students see that you don’t care for their well being, you have lost them. Students will learn more from your example at times versus what you say – your behavior should be your voice, because whether or not you realize it, your students are listening to what your attitude and behaviors say.

### ***#5 - REPRESENT YOURSELF WELL***

Represent yourself well in the eyes of your superiors & stakeholders; being unashamed and skillfully maneuvering content and experiential knowledge. While the ultimate judge of your commitment to your craft is the man in the mirror, students, colleagues, parents and administrators are watching you. You are a representative of yourself and your place of employment. Always represent yourself well; at all times. This means to never compromise your character to where you would be ashamed of your words or your deeds. This also means that you are skillful when handling information and knowledge as it pertains to your content area, life experiences and teaching abilities. Study your content area; improve upon your practice; study your student population – grow as a professional daily. Add a new dimension to your teaching



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arsenal. Your reputation as a teacher and a professional is all that you have to represent you when you cannot speak for yourself. Let your reputation speak for itself.

### **#6 - ESTEEM ALL**

To esteem some and turn away from others is not right. A teacher is to provide students with equal access to opportunities for academic success. When we allow personal feelings get in the way of our obligation to provide equal access to all, we harm our students, our reputation and our ability to reach the students who need us most. Whether we favor certain students over others or we alienate specific students from the whole, no matter the reason, we prevent ourselves from achieving effectiveness in our work. Consider the parents of multiple children. Each of their children is a different and unique human being. Each child has a different personality, laced with specific strengths and weaknesses that impact them each of them in a way, triggering specific and unique behaviors. While these things must be accounted for when working with them, rules and relationships must be consistent amongst the group of children. All children should receive individual time with parents for conversation and activities – while those activities and conversation are determined by the personality and experiences of each child (differing for each child). The same is true with your students. You are to provide them with equal access to a quality education. Reaching them may entail employing different strategies, yet the quality of your work must not trail off, nor can the access afforded to them in your classroom. As a teacher, you are to account for the students within your classroom and in your building, but you are not to disregard any student for any reason.





# Relationship Building: Philosophical Tactics

## *TACTICS FOR YOUR MINDSET*

1. **TREAT ALL STUDENTS WITH RESPECT.** In order to teach you must have “respect capital.” In American society we respect individuals based on their titles and/or positions, but personally, they may be bad people. Students don’t value positions and titles in the same way. They value the individual over the position and title. Respect is earned by the person you are and not by what a title says you are.
2. **CHECK YOUR STEREOTYPES AND PRESUPPOSITIONS AT THE DOOR.** Do not make any generalizations (racial, cultural, gender, economic) about your students, specifically when it comes to negative or undesirable behavior. In the same way all White people are not racist, all Black and Latino students are not (Fill In The Blank).
3. **LEARN EVERY STUDENT’S NAME IMMEDIATELY.** Affirm the identity of your students by immediately; showing them you’ve learned who they are.
4. **BE FORGIVING.** Each day, every student starts with a clean slate.
5. **DO NOT PROVOKE YOUR STUDENTS.** Do not nag your students, attempt to intimidate them, antagonize them with smart-mouthed comments, do not whine, talk bad about or complain about students to other students or adults, do not threaten students and do not terrorize students.
6. **USE YOUR DISCRETION.** Sometimes you must treat all cases and/or students the same and at times you must judge things on a case by case or student by student basis.
7. **IN EVERYTHING THAT YOU DO, BE CONSISTENT.** What you do with one student, you should generally do with all students. If you allow for a concession or two with students, try to apply to all students, depending on the circumstances.
8. **PICK YOUR BATTLES, WISELY.** Not everything is worth fighting for or over.
9. **UNDERSTAND, DIFFERENT CULTURES HAVE DIFFERENT NORMS ON “APPROPRIATE” BEHAVIOR.** You may have to check your privilege or biases at the door.
10. **DON’T ARGUE WITH A STUDENT; EVER.** You will always lose, one way or another.

11. **MODEL THE BEHAVIOR YOU EXPECT FROM YOUR STUDENTS.** Students need to see from you how you expect them to act.

12. **BEING FRIENDLY DOES NOT MEAN BEING FRIENDS.** You are not friends or buddies with your students just because there may be some shared likes and dislikes between you. You are a teacher, authority figure and mentor... ALWAYS.

13. **TREAT STUDENTS LIKE (YOUNG) ADULTS — DO NOT BABY THEM.** While doing so requires responsibility and accountability on their part, you must facilitate this by not giving them too much.

14. **TREAT YOUR STUDENTS LIKE YOUR OWN CHILDREN.** Taking this stance increases your patience level and level of care. You **MUST** be matter of fact and **RELENTLESS**: “Can’t stop, won’t stop.” You cannot show your frustration.

15. **THROWING A STUDENT OUT YOUR ROOM SHOULD BE A LAST RESORT.** A child dismissed from a classroom should be for their own benefit, not the teacher’s and the absolute last option.

**10 TOP WAYS TO BUILD & DAMAGE RELATIONSHIPS**

**Relationships Matter**

- #1 GIVE BEFORE TAKING.** Establish trust & foster a connection with someone before asking for something from them. Your ask will be better received.
- #2 ASK MORE, ASSUME LESS.** Asking thoughtful & open questions won't make you look ignorant. In fact, it can help you avoid a miscommunication or mistake.
- #3 PREPARE PURPOSEFULLY.** Prepping before important conversations or meetings helps create meaningful & pertinent dialogue. Recap next steps, too.
- #4 SHARE YOUR PERSONALITY.** Bringing a human element to work—sharing what you're passionate about, skills you have outside of work, etc. can help others relate to you.
- #5 COLLABORATE COMPASSIONATELY.** Seek to understand co-workers' strengths, weaknesses & working styles to allow for a more seamless collaboration.
- #6 CONTRIBUTE TO NOISE.** Rather than engaging in gossip, confront a situation head-on. Try transforming the situation by being open, honest & constructive with the person you have an issue with.
- #7 WITHHOLD INFORMATION.** Transparency builds trust. Giving others honest information upfront, guides them to make informed decisions, setting them up for success.
- #8 DIGITALLY DISTRACT YOURSELF.** Being fully present at meetings can contribute to your success & the success of others. Putting away laptops & cell phones shows you're committed to being engaged & entirely *on the court*.
- #9 SET UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS.** Outline a plan that sets everyone up for success by setting achievable goals, adjusting priorities as you go & asking for consistent feedback.
- #10 SHOW UP LATE OR NOT AT ALL.** Showing up late indicates you don't value others' time. Be conscious of when & how you show up, even if it feels less important. At the least, give the person you're meeting with a heads up.

Visit [go/RM](http://go/RM) or email [RM@linkedin.com](mailto:RM@linkedin.com) for further information on the Relationships Matter initiative





# Relationship Building: Practical Tactics

## *TACTICS FOR YOUR PRACTICE*

1. BE PREPARED TO TEACH A WELL-DESIGNED AND ENGAGING LESSON AT ALL TIMES. There are no days off with respect to teaching.
2. PROVIDE YOUR STUDENTS WITH CHOICES/ OPTIONS REGARDING THEIR WORK. (1) Facilitate compliancy with a choice and (2) be a facilitator not a total dictator.
3. INCORPORATE YOUR STUDENTS WITHIN YOUR LESSON ARTICULATION. Use students as part of your examples, in the form of a skit, to illustrate a concept.
4. CHANGE YOUR CLASSROOM FORMAT. Students might struggle with lecture format, in any grade. Allow students to get up and stretch in between instruction, or rely on small group instruction. Also, remember, every student does not learn instruction in the same manner, you must vary instructional methods.
5. CALL STUDENTS BY THEIR LAST NAME. The impact will show itself immediately.
6. EMPLOY DIRECT EYE CONTACT. Look into the eyes of your students. It may make them uncomfortable – it will force your student’s thoughts on you, on themselves and their work.
7. STUDY YOUR STUDENTS. When you learn about your students, study the information you’ve gained. The insight will help with your ability to navigate the personalities
8. TAKE AUTHORITY BECAUSE YOU ARE THE AUTHORITY: USE AN AUTHORITATIVE VOICE. Do not be passive with your students. You must be confident and bold **IN LOVE**. When you are, you’ve owned it and can exercise your authority. Promote your presence throughout the room. Monitor your tone and change it according to the situation
9. GET AWKWARD WHEN YOUR STUDENTS AREN’T ON TRACK. Use proximity. Walk directly to them and stare at them, employ the Socratic method in class with consequences, walk around you classroom as you teach (close to kids), and employ non-verbal communication.







10. GIVE YOUR STUDENTS A CHANCE TO DO WHAT YOU ASKED OF THEM. Be reasonable; give them a chance to complete the task.
11. HANDLE THE MATTER IN ISOLATION. When a student becomes a disruption, if possible, address the matter with the student in isolation of everyone else – to take away their momentum while allowing them a chance to save face.
12. CONSIDER ASKING OR REQUESTING YOUR STUDENTS TO COMPLETE A TASK, RATHER THAN ALWAYS DEMANDING. You can catch more bees with honey than vinegar.
13. CONTACT PARENTS EARLY AND OFTEN ABOUT EVERYTHING. Tried and true method that works. If discipline problems arise, some parents will back up a teacher while others will take on the discipline themselves.
14. FORGIVE. When a student apologizes to you about anything, you should say, “I forgive you.”
15. BE WHO YOU ARE AT ALL TIMES. Real recognizes real and kids recognize the fake really quick.



# Case Study: The Teacher & The Social Worker

## BACKGROUND

Todd Lloyd is a 8th grade student full of potential to be a great student and a leader amongst his peers. However, due to the various circumstances in his life, Todd doesn't take his studies as seriously as he should. He is too focused with following the wrong crowd, obtaining the affections of the young female students, video games and sports. The problem is that his habit for following the wrong crowd has led him to failing a number of his tests in various courses. Just last year when he was in 7th grade, Todd did so poorly, he was almost retained. Thankfully, he was able to get his act together. His mother stayed on top of him to the point where her attention on Todd began taking away time and attention from her other children. This year, Todd, although he vowed he'd be different, is continuing the same behaviors and this time it could cost him his chance to get promoted.

## SCENARIO



Ms. Lloyd received Todd's progress report for the month of September and she notices that Todd is failing 4 of his 7 classes and is on pace to have a report card that was less than desirable. Ms. Lloyd notices that Todd has 1 A, and it is with his Physics teacher, Mr. Williams. Ms. Lloyd recently gave Mr. Williams a call and made a very heartfelt plea to him to help with her son.

*"Listen sir, I know that you may have just met my son, but something is going on in your classroom where he is listening. I don't know what you are doing... I don't even care. Keep doing it. But I just cannot for the life of me figure out why I cannot get him to study everything else. You have to help me. Could you please help me and just stay on top of him for me? I mean, his father and I have tried everything and we are at a loss. we have 2 other kids. We just can't deal with him anymore. I need an extra someone to just be on top of him. He needs someone who can reach him, can you be that someone?"*

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. How should Mr. Williams respond to Ms. Lloyd? Should he agree to do as she asks, should he not agree or should he agree with conditions? Please explain.

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2. Is Ms. Lloyd right or wrong for asking Mr. Williams to help in the way that she asked? Do you believe that she meant what she said literally or figuratively? How should have Mr. Williams interpreted her plea?

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3. How much of a responsibility is it for a teacher to help parent(s) parent their children? Can teachers effectively stay out of the parenting role? Is classroom teaching enough? Should teachers do more: should they be more?

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4. Whose fault is it that situations like this occur? Is it the school's responsibility for addressing these situations when they happen? Should schools be proactive or reactive when it comes to family issues that impact learning in the classroom?

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# Case Study: The Sleeper

## BACKGROUND

Kevin is a kid who makes good decisions. He is a student who has always performed well in his classes. He is a junior at Charles Brimm Elementary School. In school, Kevin is a loner; he is quiet, he stays out of trouble and doesn't have much of a reputation other than a student who keeps quiet and keeps to himself. The few friends that he does have don't hang with him much during school. Kevin has a younger sister who attends the school; she's in Kindergarten. Whenever he's not in school, he's always making sure that she is okay; properly dressed, doing her homework and doing the right things.

## SCENARIO

Ms. Jones, the specials teacher, understands that many students in school are either hungry or sleepy. Since the beginning of the school year, Kevin is always sleeping in her class. Because of this, she assumes that Kevin is one of the students who wants to always sleep. On September 30, Ms. Jones had enough of Kevin's sleeping. She had repeated given him warnings, but now the warnings had worn off. She couldn't understand why Kevin would sleep in her class. She reasoned that she tried to make her class fun, engaging and informative; Ms. Jones couldn't figure out what she was doing wrong. She would think about the problem before she went to sleep some nights. She finally called Kevin out in front of the class about his sleeping:

*Ms. Jones: Kevin, WAKE UP! You are always sleeping in my class. What is your problem?*

*Kevin: Nothing, this class is boring.*

*Ms. Jones: What is so boring about this class? Maybe it is because you are not applying yourself and doing the work for the class.*

*Kevin: Whatever.*

*Ms. Jones: If you are going to go to sleep in my class, you can just leave. It is unfair to the rest of you classmates who want to learn if I allow you to sleep.*

*Kevin: Fine, I'll go.*



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Ms. Jones wrote Kevin a detention; one he did not show up for after school. He was taking care of his little sister. The next day, Kevin stayed up in Ms. Jones class. Ms. Jones remarked at the end of class, “Kevin, nice to see that you finally stayed awake in my class. I must have done something right.” Kevin replied, “No, my mom’s boyfriend got arrested yesterday, so I finally got some sleep.”

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. You are the principal of the school. You inform Ms. Jones that Kevin’s mother suffered from domestic abuse from her live-in boyfriend and that Kevin and his sister had been subject to some abuse. You told Ms. Jones that Kevin and his sister have been removed from the home and placed with his grandmother. After hearing this, in addition to Kevin’s response, Ms. Jones is devastated. She doesn’t know how to move forward. What would you tell Ms. Jones to do in her class to help with her relationship with Kevin?

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2. Was Ms. Jones’s initial reaction correct? Was there anything that Ms. Jones did wrong? What would you have done if you were in that situation?

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3. What were your initial thoughts about Kevin? What were your thoughts about Kevin after learning about his home situation? Should teachers take under consideration the problems of their students when teaching and disciplining them and if so, how much?

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4. Do you believe that Kevin needs a mentor? If so, then who should it be: Ms. Jones? If not Ms. Jones than who? Should teachers enter the business of mentoring students they at least think is in need of some helpful guidance and direction?

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# Case Study: The Discipline of Mathematics

## BACKGROUND

Dr. Smith holds her doctorate in applied mathematics. A former university professor, Dr. Smith decided that she wanted to try teaching in middle school. Dr. Smith was inspired by her son, who is in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Her son Daniel came home one day and asked her to help with his math homework. Dr. Smith was not pleased with the level of mathematics being taught to Daniel at his own school; she wondered how much worse things were at the inner-city schools surrounding the university where she worked. She has been working with the local city school district for the last two years. Dr. Smith believes that students are more than capable of learning advanced mathematics. It was her strong belief that students needed to learn as much math as possible. In order to do that, she believed that she needed to be stern and no-nonsense, just as her teachers were growing up. She instituted a zero tolerance discipline policy in her classroom, she instructed her student to keep up when taking notes and listening to lectures because she would not slow down for any reason. Dr. Smith had a reputation for being strong in her content area, great with respect to pacing the curriculum and also assigning more detentions than any other teacher; more parents had complaints about Dr. Smith than any other teacher at her school.

## SCENARIO

One day at the end of class, Dr. Smith encountered a situation where she had to confront a student about talking in class. Her student, Jeremiah, was speaking to a classmate when Dr. Smith chided him due to his speaking out of term. Jeremiah explained that he wasn't grasping the material as fast as she was moving and simply asked for clarification from a classmate. Dr. Smith rebuked him for not asking her for help. The conversation continued as such:

*Jeremiah: You told us that we cannot ask you anything because we should be paying attention*

*Dr. Smith: You should be paying attention.*

*Jeremiah: I was, but you are moving too fast.*

*Dr. Smith: Then you were not paying attention, fully. You all are to keep up with me. Is this a classroom full of mentally challenged students? Certainly if you cannot keep up; I am already going slowly for you all as it is. I cannot pause.*

## Building Bridges, Not Walls

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Jeremiah looked to his classmate and said, “We have 1 mentally challenged teacher.” Dr. Smith heard Jeremiah speak but did not hear what he said. She informed Jeremiah that he unless he had another question, he needed to be quiet, to which he responded with “you need to make up your mind; either slow down or explain the material.” She then ordered him out of the classroom and informed him that he would receive an F for the day. She requested with the dean of students to have Jeremiah suspended for 1 day because of his disrespect. Jeremiah received his suspension letter and he told his mother what happened when he arrived home; his mother scheduled a conference with the Dr. Smith and an administrator for the next day.

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. You have been the administrator assigned to conference with Dr. Smith and Jeremiah’s mom today. You have spoken to both Dr. Smith, who feels disrespected and believes she was in the right, and Jeremiah’s mom, who is angry and cites the various encounters Dr. Smith has had with other students as grounds to “discipline” her. Name 3 outcomes you hope to achieve from this meeting and create 1 strategy for each outcome to ensure the outcomes happen.

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2. Do you have a problem with the way Dr. Smith runs her classroom? Why or why not?

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3. Do you believe that curriculum pacing correlates to discipline issues? Why or why not?

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4. What words or terms do you deem “disrespectful” in Jeremiah’s comments? How do you deal with confrontations with your students? Is your immediate reaction to throw them out of your class? Whose responsibility is it to discipline students more, teachers, administrators or parents? Was there a relationship here and if not, can one develop?

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# Conclusion

## *IN CLOSING...*

It was the intention of this document is to provide relationship building strategies to teachers of urban students. The strategies expressed in this document are faith-based tenets for developing ways to improve the urban classroom dynamic. While there are a host of variables that can and do impact the academic outcomes of urban students, the impact that teachers have in the classroom is awesome. Being a teacher affords you the opportunity to shape young minds; for better or for worse. Race, gender and socioeconomics play a role in urban student achievement. However, relationships between student and teacher has an impact on lives. When your students, and their parents, see that you have the desire to invest in that child's future, you'll will have earned a trust that will help you take that student to places he or she never thought possible. Hopefully, the information in this text on how to effectively develop the relationships necessary to teach urban students has helped you become a better communicator and teacher. Let us continue to press towards the mark!





# Notes

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1. Following federal guidelines, the National Equity Atlas defines low-income students as those eligible for the federal free- and reduced-lunch program. That includes students with incomes up to \$44,863 for a family of four, or 185 percent of the federal poverty line. Students from families with incomes up to the 130 percent of the poverty line, or \$31,525 for a family of four, are eligible for free lunch; the remainder can obtain reduced price lunches (Boschma & Brownstein, 2016). For more information on the National Equity Atlas, visit <http://nationalequityatlas.org/about-the-atlas/background>.
2. Where teacher turnover is concerned, attaining stability in staffing is especially important for low-income students, who, research suggests, are especially dependent on their teachers (Downey, Von Hippel, & Hughes, 2008). Consequently, problematic teacher turnover persists in public schools that serve low-income communities, making sustained improvement an extraordinary challenge (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001, 2004). Further, because of high turnover, these are the students most likely to be taught by inexperienced teachers who, on average, are less effective than their more experienced colleagues (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005; Grissom, 2011; Ost, 2014; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005).
3. Color-blindness is defined as a “belief that one should treat all persons equally, without regard to their race” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Without awareness of the history of oppression and institutional racism, white teachers may adopt a belief in meritocracy, that success is based solely on hard work (Howard, 2010). A belief as such is a disregard of the long-term impact of oppression and racism that maintain the status quo in schools (Howard, 2010).

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# About the Author

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*Rann Miller, Sr.* is an educator with a passion for urban education and a heart for empowering students, families and fellow educators. He is also a husband and a father who is devoted to his family. He has a Political Science and Masters in Public Administration degrees from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

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Rann is honored to be married to his wife of 7 years. Their union has yielded 4 beautiful children. He and his family currently reside in New Jersey.

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