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## Section 1: Exploring Relationships

Positive relationships between teachers and students—and among students—form the bedrock of learning. Child psychiatrist James Comer noted that “no significant learning occurs outside of a significant relationship.” It creates a supportive and trusting environment where students feel safe to take risks, ask questions, and make mistakes. When students have positive relationships with their teachers and peers, they are more engaged and motivated to learn. These connections foster a sense of **belonging** and community, which can significantly enhance a student’s academic and social-emotional development.

Trusting relationships allow teachers to better understand their students’ needs, strengths, and challenges, enabling them to tailor instruction to meet individual needs effectively. This personalized approach can lead to increased student achievement and a more inclusive classroom atmosphere.

### In this section, we focus on these items:

- The use of student names and greetings
- How proximity is used proactively to lead and manage classrooms
- Respectful and productive student interactions
- Fostering academic risk-taking
- How student ideas are valued and explored

## Reflective Discussion Questions for the Relationship Component

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Discuss these guiding questions in advance of the RIGOR Walk. Then, revisit the questions after the RIGOR Walk is completed.

1. How consistently do adults make positive use of student names and greetings beyond the first week of the school year or semester?
2. Is **proximity** used proactively to engage and reengage students? Do teachers regularly circulate through the classroom?
3. Are we teaching students how to have productive interactions with peers? These skills include team organization and roles, techniques for monitoring and repairing shared understanding, taking action on tasks, and evaluating their success in solving the problem.
4. In what ways is the **classroom climate** constructed to encourage **academic risk-taking** (ART)? How are we using language to foster ART?
5. How are we using language and classroom structures to signal that our students' ideas are valued?

## Universal Discussion Questions for Continuous Improvement

Use these universal questions to reflect upon your findings, summarize your results, and define your plan of action.

- What are our strengths?
- Where do we need more work?
- How does this impact our multilingual learners?
- How does this impact our students with disabilities?
- How does this impact our high-achieving students?
- How and with whom will we share our findings and decisions?



## Relationship 1. Students' names are used in positive and productive ways.

### What It Is

Students' names are an important part of their **identity**. Students expect their teachers to know their names and correctly pronounce them. Unfortunately, students often report that their teachers do not know their names. **Positive, growth-producing relationships** begin when we know each other's names and use them in positive, productive ways. Students should not hear their names only as a correction when they have done something wrong. Instead, they should hear their names when they enter the classroom and regularly during instruction.

### Where It Came From

Knowing and using student names is one aspect of an inclusive approach to teaching. Greeting students at the door is one way that teachers can use student names. In addition to fostering a sense of **belonging**, greeting students at the door increased **engagement** by 20 percentage points and decreased problematic behavior by 9 percentage points (Cook et al., 2018). In addition, students need to hear their names throughout the lesson to as invitations into discussions, when receiving **feedback**, and in interactions with the teacher (O'Brien et al., 2014).

### Why It Matters

Knowing and using students' names is crucial in building a positive **classroom climate**. It fosters a sense of belonging and respect, making students feel valued and recognized as individuals. This simple act can significantly enhance student engagement, participation, and overall classroom dynamics, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive learning atmosphere.



**Guiding Question: Is the positive use of student names and greetings a habit among adults beyond the first week of the school year or semester?**

### Spot It Happening

- Observe the start of classes. Do teachers greet students by name as they enter? Do teachers greet students if they arrive late?
- Note the use students' names during the lesson. Are they pronounced correctly? Which names are said more often? Are there students whose names are never used?
- Ask students if they believe that their teacher knows their names.
- Are names used for correction of problematic behavior? If so, are those students' names also used in productive, positive ways?
- Are student names displayed in the classroom? If so, where and how?


**Relationship 1. Students' names are used in positive and productive ways.**

My Rating	My Evidence	My Next Steps
<p><b>4</b> All students are greeted by name upon arrival and most of their names are used throughout the lesson. The reactions of students when they hear their names suggests the teacher has a strong relationship with students.</p>	<p style="text-align: center; opacity: 0.5; font-size: 2em;">© Corwin, 2025</p>	
<p><b>3</b> All students are greeted by name upon arrival. Many students hear their names in positive ways throughout the lesson. Students generally report that the teacher knows their names.</p>		
<p><b>2</b> Students are greeted at the beginning of class, but not by name. A small group of students have their names used during the lesson.</p>		
<p><b>1</b> Students are not greeted when they arrive. Student names are not used during the lesson. Names are used to address problematic behavior.</p>		

**Relationship 1. Students' names are used in positive and productive ways.**



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## Relationship 2. Proximity is used to foster connections with students and ensure their learning.



### What It Is

**Proximity** is the physical distance between the teacher and students. It is one of the ways that teachers can proactively lead and manage the class as they move around the room, getting closer to students who might be at risk for disengaging in the lesson (Lampi et al., 2005). But proximity is also good for learning and **engagement** (Dong et al., 2021). Teachers can more directly observe the learning in progress and monitor the impact of the lessons when they are close to students at work.

### Where It Came From

Proximity as a teaching tool has been recommended for decades (Good & Brophy, 1987). The evidence suggests that teachers should move within three feet of a student for it to be effective (Etscheidt et al., 1984). However, the teacher does not have to remain in close proximity to specific students to have an effect (Van Houten et al., 1982). Rather, teachers should circulate around the room in somewhat unpredictable patterns to interact with students, verbally or nonverbally, as part of the lesson (Gunter et al., 1995).

### Why It Matters

Students may be distracted or temporarily disengaged, resulting in compromised learning. Proximity is a low-cost technique to monitor students' engagement in the learning and to collect evidence of the impact of lessons for possible adjustments to the learning. One challenge with the integration of technology is that teachers must be more creative in moving around the room when the technology is being used to support instruction.

**Guiding Question: Is proximity used respectfully and proactively to engage and reengage students? Do teachers regularly circulate through the classroom?**

### Spot It Happening

- Using a seating map, track the movement of the teacher around their room. How many places and students are accessible to the teacher?
- Select three students at random and observe a lesson to determine if the teacher moved within three feet of the selected students.
- Notice the pattern of movement around the room. Is it highly predictable to students?
- When students appear to be distracted or beginning to disengage, does the teacher move to that general area and offer redirections?


**Relationship 2. Proximity is used to foster connections with students and ensure their learning.**

My Rating		My Evidence	My Next Steps
<b>4</b>	The teacher moves around the room and gets within three feet of every student in the room, interacting with students as the lesson progresses.		
<b>3</b>	The teacher circulates around the room, interacting with students and offering feedback and support.		
<b>2</b>	The teacher moves around the front of the classroom and mostly attends to students in the front of the class.		
<b>1</b>	The teacher remains fixed in one part of the classroom (e.g., desk, lectern, board).		

**Relationship 2. Proximity is used to foster connections with students and ensure their learning.**



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## Relationship 3. Students' interactions with peers are respectful and productive.



### What It Is

Respectful and positive **peer interactions** are an indicator of a safe learning environment. These peer interactions can be aligned with specific learning activities as well as general ways in which students interact in the classroom. The teacher establishes the **classroom climate** and can foster positive peer interactions (Nasi, 2022). In these cases, bullying is reduced, students share their ideas freely, and students learn more.

### Where It Came From

Students who feel they belong in the class and school, including the feeling they are needed, befriended, and supported, are more likely to participate in lessons and learn more (e.g., Smith et al., 2024). As Johnson (1981) noted, "Experiences with peers are not a superficial luxury to be enjoyed during lunch and after school. Constructive student-student relationships are a necessity for maximal achievement, socialization, and healthy development" (p. 5).

### Why It Matters

Students are more likely to be motivated to learn, to enjoy learning more, to feel more positive about the content being studied, and to be more accepting of one another when they work together with peers, as opposed to working competitively or individually (Johnson & Johnson, 2013). In terms of rigor, when the learning environment is emotionally, psychologically, and physically safe, students are more likely to engage in meaningful interactions, ask questions, and engage in **academic risk-taking** without fear of embarrassment or failure. This fosters deeper understanding, critical thinking, and the ability to collaborate effectively with peers, which are essential components of a rigorous educational experience.

**Guiding Question: Are we teaching students how to have productive interactions with peers? These skills include team organization and roles, techniques for monitoring and repairing shared understanding, taking action on tasks, and evaluating their success in solving the problem.**

### Spot It Happening

- ❑ Listen to student conversations. Are students comfortable sharing ideas? Do the conversations build on ideas and extend the thinking of the group?
- ❑ Look for classroom artifacts to support healthy student conversation, such as table tents with language frames, or use accountable talk procedures.
- ❑ Observe the physical and procedural classroom structures in place that encourage or discourage idea generation, the validation of ideas, and the thoughtful consideration of ideas.
- ❑ Watch how the teacher monitors small-group student discussion to redirect less productive dialogue and reinforce respectful interactions.

### Relationship 3. Students' interactions with peers are respectful and productive.

My Rating	My Evidence	My Next Steps
<p><b>4</b> Students seek out peers for interactions in both formal and informal groups. The interactions are respectful and represent a give-and-take conversation in which students build on the ideas of others.</p>	<p>© Corwin, 2025</p>	
<p><b>3</b> Students interact with one another in both formal and informal groups. The interactions are productive and respectful.</p>		
<p><b>2</b> Students interact with a small group of peers, and these interactions are mainly confined to formal learning experiences in the class.</p>		
<p><b>1</b> Students are not encouraged or required to interact with peers during the lesson.</p>		

**Relationship 3. Students' interactions with peers are respectful and productive.**



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## Relationship 4. Academic risk-taking is encouraged and celebrated.

### What It Is

Learning requires a willingness to engage in tasks that may result in errors or failures. Tolerance for possible error or failure requires students to be willing to revise and persist when first attempts are not fully successful. This **academic risk-taking** (ART) is undermined by teacher expectations of error-free work coupled with praise and reward systems that cause students to associate teacher approval with flawless execution. ART is fostered in an environment that values the development of a **growth mindset** (Dweck, 2006) and is paired with a **productive failure** (sometimes called productive struggle) instructional approach that values long-term learning over proximal success (Kapur, 2016).

### Where It Came From

Clifford (1988) described ART as a student's willingness to choose more challenging and difficult tasks. Observable demonstrations of ART include "sharing tentative ideas, asking questions during learning, and a willingness to learn new things" (Abercrombie et al., 2022, p. 2). Students who exhibit ART are not only willing to persist when struggle does occur, but they also possess a positive emotional outlook to engage in a challenging task to begin with.

### Why It Matters

ART is understood to be an important component of **motivation** theory. It is also situational, in that a classroom environment that is not perceived as physiologically and emotionally safe by the student may cause the student to choose tasks that are below their current level but are safe from error. ART is necessary for students to engage in deep learning and is discouraged in classrooms that value reproduction of knowledge over critical thinking and co-construction of knowledge (Hübner & Pfof, 2024).



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**Guiding Question: In what ways is the classroom climate constructed to encourage academic risk-taking? How are we using language to foster ART?**

### Spot It Happening

- ❑ Observe how academic tasks are presented. Listen for language that encourages students to try new tasks in a way that sets the stakes low.
- ❑ Listen for teacher language that encourages speculation, especially in refraining from identifying student responses as correct or incorrect. Offering neutral responses to students, such as, "Interesting idea. Who can add to this?" keeps the discussion going.
- ❑ Watch for use of wait time, which allows all learners to cognitively engage and provides students with additional time to add ideas and questions.
- ❑ Examine classroom artifacts that convey grading and assessment practices that reward attempts, not just outcomes.
- ❑ Listen for regularly spaced intervals when students can pose questions and discuss concepts or procedures with each other and their teachers.
- ❑ Watch for spontaneous celebration when academic risk-taking is spotted.

## Relationship 4. Academic risk-taking is encouraged and celebrated.

My Rating	My Evidence	My Next Steps
<p><b>4</b></p> <p>Students have multiple opportunities to ask questions and think critically and speculatively about concepts being taught. They are encouraged to take on new tasks while lowering risk. Their efforts are praised rather than correctness of the work. Wait time is used regularly to foster thinking among all students. The grading system is similarly aligned to foster ART.</p>	<p>© Corwin, 2025</p>	
<p><b>3</b></p> <p>There are more limited opportunities for students to ask questions and engage in critical discussion about the concepts being taught. There is some variance in what is praised or valued, either through teacher statements or the grading system. Wait time is used most of the time to foster thinking among all students.</p>		
<p><b>2</b></p> <p>A more limited array of students participates in question formation and discussion, with most others left to passively observe. Tasks may be geared more to reproduction of knowledge rather than deep learning. Teacher praise is more commonly about the accuracy of the student response. Wait time is used more sporadically. The grading system may be oriented toward error-free learning but not to attempts.</p>		
<p><b>1</b></p> <p>Teaching is primarily a one-way transmission model of knowledge reproduction at the expense of deep learning. Students have few opportunities to ask questions. Discussion is limited. Student responses are confirmed to a few, and wait time use is limited. Teacher praise is based on whether the answer is correct. The grading system does not allow for revision and additional attempts.</p>		

### Relationship 4. Academic risk-taking is encouraged and celebrated.

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## Relationship 5. Student ideas are valued and explored as bridges to learning.



### What It Is

In some classrooms, students feel comfortable sharing their ideas. But in others, students are reserved and only respond when directly asked a question by the teacher. Listening to students' ideas demonstrates respect for students and allows teachers to consider what students already know and where the learning needs to go next. There are also more formal ways to solicit information from students, such as **empathy interviews** (e.g., Lewis et al., 2023), but regular classroom interactions demonstrate for students that their ideas are valued.

### Where It Came From

Feeling accepted and believing that you have ideas to contribute are indicators of **belonging**, which is widely recognized as contributing to student achievement and well-being (e.g., Smith et al., 2024). In part, this relates to the research on **student voice** (e.g., Quaglia et al., 2020), which requires that students have opportunities to express their values, opinions, beliefs, and perspectives.

### Why It Matters

Listening to, and acting upon, students' preferences, interests, and perspectives helps students feel invested in their own learning and fosters positive relationships between teachers and students (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). When students have a vested interest in their relationship with the teacher and their own learning, they are more likely to act in prosocial ways and to learn more as a result.

**Guiding Question: How are we using language and classroom structures to signal that our students' ideas are valued?**

### Spot It Happening

- Observe the reaction of the teacher and students when ideas are shared. Do ideas seem to be valued?
- Listen to student discussions. Are ideas validated and challenged in ways that communicate the value of idea generation?
- Watch for opportunities for students' ideas to be explored in more depth. Listen for language from the teacher that encourages student speculation—for example, "That's an interesting thought. Tell us more about it."

## Relationship 5. Student ideas are accepted and explored as bridges to learning.

My Rating		My Evidence	My Next Steps
4	The teacher has systemic ways for encouraging students to share their ideas. Students engage in discussions, and their ideas are validated, explored, and respectfully challenged.		
3	During class discussions, there is a free exchange of ideas, and many students contribute their thoughts. The conversations move forward, with students adding their ideas and offering constructive feedback to the ideas of others.		
2	Students share ideas with friends and the teacher when encouraged but rarely volunteer. Their ideas are considered, and others build on ideas.		
1	Students are criticized for their ideas and opinions by teachers or peers.		

**Relationship 5. Student ideas are valued and explored as bridges to learning.**

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