



Every Connection Matters

SCHOOL

How to **Build, Maintain, and Restore**
Relationships Inside the Classroom and Out

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AND **NITA CREEKMORE**

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Every Connection Matters



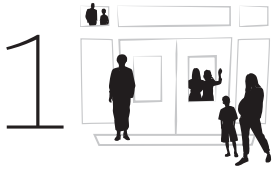
How to **Build, Maintain,**
and **Restore Relationships**
Inside the Classroom and Out

Preface	xi
1. The School of Relationships.....	1
2. Teacher-to-Self Relationships.....	15
3. Teacher-to-Student Relationships.....	34
4. Teacher-to-Family Relationships	48
5. Teacher-to-Teacher Relationships	65
6. Teacher-to-Administrator Relationships	78
7. Teacher-to-Staff Relationships	96
8. Virtual Relationships.....	107
9. Closing Thoughts.....	121
Acknowledgments	125
References.....	127
Index.....	130
About the Authors	134

Preface

A lot has been said about relationships in education—their power, the influence they may have among staff and students, and their effect on teacher retention. Relationships are multifaceted, however; good relationships are not the silver bullet that will fix everything in any or every school. At the same time, we can guarantee that relationships are an integral part of the solutions to many of the problems that schools face. Educators across the globe have discussed and expressed frustration with the suggestion that relationships are not the single cure for behavioral issues in the classroom or low morale within school buildings. However, we do suggest digging a little deeper into the quality of those relationships, including teachers’ relationships with students and families, administrators’ relationships with staff, and students’ relationships with fellow classmates.

When we talk about relationships, we are speaking from years of personal and professional experience, research, and interviews with educators. We are not speaking about relationships to promote a buzzword, fad, social media trend, or quick fix. As you read our book, we challenge you to reflect on the relationships in your school and how they affect your impact as an educator.



The School of Relationships

Dr. Yates is currently visiting schools in her district, where she has been the superintendent for the past four years. Every year, as she does her annual walk-throughs, she looks forward to visiting one particular school: BMR Middle School. As she and her administrative team enter the school, Dr. Yates reminds her team to observe the interactions and overall culture of the building. A small student leadership team is awaiting Dr. Yates and her colleagues in the main lobby. Without hesitation, all three students extend a warm welcome, and Mr. Smith, the school principal, makes small talk with the superintendent.

The walk-through, as always, is a notable success. Dr. Yates and her team meet with Mr. Smith to debrief and highlight observations. Dr. Yates opens by asking, “How do you do it? Every year I look forward to coming to BMR Middle because it seems like there is a certain magic going on here. What is it? And can you package it to give to a few other schools?” Mr. Smith smiles, says “Thank you,” and offers a one-word answer: “Relationships!” He suggests that every relationship in the building may not have the same priority but holds equal weight. He explains, “We go about the business of relationship building the same way we go about teaching—wholeheartedly.”

Why Relationships Are Important

Although a common belief asserts that each stakeholder in an education system and school is important, our daily tasks, duties, and responsibilities can sometimes lead us to forget about the importance of relationship building. Studies have long shown the impact of positive relationships on students' growth and overall development (Ed Trust & MDRC, 2021). However, recent studies suggest relationships also have an impact on the morale and effectiveness of educators (Greater Good in Education, n.d.). But here's the thing: relationships are not always easy. Some productive and positive relationships just come naturally, whereas others definitely require more work. Building, cultivating, and sustaining productive and positive relationships in a school building can be challenging. When you are working with a variety of educators, many factors help to develop a healthy school culture. Effective leadership, a supportive community, trust, and adaptability are contributors; however, none is more important than relationships (Greater Good in Education, n.d.).

Relationships are the foundation of the important work that we do. Without them, we cannot do our work as educators; it becomes null and void. But why do we think that is so? Human beings desire connection to each other because ultimately we are social beings. In his book *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*, Daniel Goleman (2007) writes, "Resonant relationships are like emotional vitamins, sustaining us through tough times and nourishing us daily" (p. 312).

That truth is no different within the walls of a school building; students and educators desire and need healthy relationships. Think of it like this: when you are building a house, or a school in our case, the first thing you want to do is set the foundation. That is what everything is built upon. Relationships are the foundation. The school has to withstand fierce storms and wild winds. When the foundation is firm and steady, amazing things can happen, making your job as an educator a little easier and allowing you to work in a more positive space, a happier place.

Relationships are the driving force in all we do. Most educators go into their respective fields not only because of the content they

are teaching but also because of the relationships that are built in the process. Wang and Haertel (2000) state that many studies reveal that teachers are often isolated from their peers and other school professionals. To lessen teachers' feeling of isolation, the school day must include opportunities to interact. It is human nature to want to interact and build relationships with others. We all need that. Educators thrive when they work in an environment with positive, authentic relationships as the basis of the work they do each day. If they are thriving, those feelings feed into their teaching, affecting students in a positive way.

A study by Le Cornu (2013) showed that for some teachers early in their careers, relationships “fostered a sense of belonging and social connectedness. For others, it provided emotional and professional support. They reported coping better and feeling more confident when they experienced support from other teachers in the school including being frequently asked about their welfare and being offered help” (p. 4). Obviously teachers benefit from these types of connections. Connections are the key to building authentic relationships.

What Is a Connection?

Irina Damascan (2019) says a connection is “something you maintain and work on every day,” whereas “being in a relationship is the result of that work and not a given.” You can use connections with someone to help build, maintain, or restore relationships. They can be as simple as saying hello every morning to a colleague or giving a student a high five when you pass them in the hallway. Saying hello each day can set the stage for a conversation—another connection. Creating spaces to build connections with others is key. So how do you do that?

One way is to find a commonality with others—even something as minor as agreeing on looking forward to an upcoming break. You might mention the break in conversation, the other person comments, and the two of you share a laugh. But a connection can also be a celebration of your differences, such as rooting for opposite football teams, which may mean taking yourself out of your comfort zone.

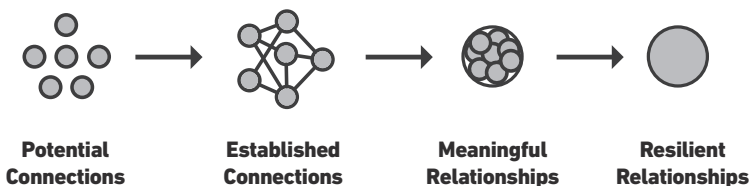
Although these may seem like surface-level interactions, they help to build deeper connections that can develop as time goes on. They require taking the time to get to know others, to learn about the experiences of “the person behind the mask.” We all know as we enter our school building that we show others the person we want them to see. Connections are about taking the time to create moments, to create meaning, and to get to know others in order to create relationships. Once that happens, a space opens for deeper-level connections, such as acknowledging a coworker who is experiencing burnout and attempting to help by discussing current workload and helping to identify ways to cope. On a more personal level, deeper-level connections might include being aware of the health of a colleague’s family member or helping to plan a coworker’s wedding or baby shower. Over time, cultivating and fostering surface-level connections can lead to these kinds of deeper-level connections.

From Connections to Relationships

Oxford Languages (n.d.) defines *relationship* as “the way in which two or more concepts, objects, or people are connected, or the state of being connected.” The key concept here, as previously noted, is connection. No meaningful relationship occurs without a connection first being made. In Figure 1.1, each “bubble” represents an established, consistent connection, either surface- or deeper-level, that has been made. Those established connections can lead to meaningful relationships, which in turn, over time, become resilient relationships that can withstand inevitable storms.

FIGURE 1.1

Moving from Connections to Relationships



The challenge is that it is difficult to know if your relationship with someone is resilient until you have actually weathered a storm together. A good example of this is a major difference in opinion that leads both parties to walk away upset and in need of some space. The resilience sets in when the two parties come back together to talk and work through their differences. In doing this, both parties enter a realm of vulnerability—allowing themselves to know each other on an even deeper level, which increases the meaningfulness of the relationship with its resilience now discovered.

In school, our relationships with students, colleagues, and coworkers can help sustain our careers as educators. When that collaborative lesson you created with your colleagues rides the latest wave and everyone is coming to your team for assistance, your rockstar performance is shining through, and that relationship you’ve formed with your colleagues is magical.

“Magic” doesn’t happen without relationships of one sort or another. Remember when you finally broke through to a student who had been struggling to understand a lesson, that feeling you experienced when the student finally understood? Magic! Years after you’ve taught little Johnny or little Kayla, you are walking through the grocery store, hear someone call your name, turn around, and see that same student, much older but with the same look of joy—that’s magic! The magic is seeing the seeds that you sowed grow; it’s the fruition of the meaningful work that you have poured into others and into yourself; it’s a feeling of impact, of meaning, of accomplishment.

The magic created through productive relationships is what keeps educators in the field. When that feeling happens, it is important to snap a mental picture of it, to hold onto it, to write it down in a journal so that when you have hard days, you can remember that it isn’t always hard.

During those difficult days that may include impromptu observations, defiant students, resistant parents, and low team morale, your relationships with your colleagues will help you pull through. Those remembered moments of magic will help you be resilient and build your strength as an educator. As you navigate your daily agenda, you have to remember that you can’t operate in isolation. Figuratively

speaking, if you're not connected to anyone, you could easily drift away and exist on your own island. Those relationships can keep you afloat and keep you from drowning.

Sometimes it may seem easier to stay on our islands because it's the land we can control; staying put seems easier and less stressful. But without relationships, no one wins. We cannot thrive as a community without making connections to establish relationships with others. We can't collectively become great if we stay in our individual silos. Connections transformed into relationships are what help us learn, grow, and be in community.

Whether you are new to the profession or simply new to the school, connections will make or break that honeymoon period you've been granted at the start. Most likely you became an educator because you care, you have a big heart, you love students, and you want to make an impact. But guess what? You will have no meaningful impact without making connections that lead to the building of relationships.

The Importance of Building, Maintaining, and Restoring Relationships

Building, maintaining, and restoring relationships—what we refer to as “BMR”—is what drives the work that educators do. It's that three-part combination that makes relationships strong.

Let's face it: we love to begin relationships on a high note, a positive note, one that gives everyone that happy, giddy feeling at the end of the day. However, as time goes on, disagreements with students, colleagues, leaders, or parents can be part of the relationship process and either strengthen or strain it. How can we achieve that strength? What can we plant into a relationship that needs to grow? How do we mend a relationship that needs to be repaired?

These are some of the questions that we will tackle in this book. We will provide answers to these tough questions, addressing relationships that seem hard to build and ones that seem unrepairable. An overarching theme of our approach is that it is never too late. There is always a space for a relationship to be cultivated. If we cannot see that space, we have to create it.

We all marvel at educators who can enter a room full of people they do not know yet and make connections—the ones who appear to have never met a stranger. They can walk into any situation and everyone loves them; it seems as though they have known everyone in the community forever. Sometimes you just want to pull them aside and ask, “How do you do that?” We observe these apparent “relationship gurus” in different settings to see if they have something or say something we don’t. We wonder, how does this automatically happen?

You may often ask yourself, what if I’m *not* that type of educator? Can I still create relationships that grow and thrive? Of course you can! But it will take some work. Building positive, productive relationships with other educators, parents, and students will take effort on your part and the other party’s as well. True, authentic relationships do not just happen; they are sown. The planting metaphor is apt: we know that when seeds are sown, it takes a while for them to germinate and grow. We just can’t give up hope in the midst of that growth. We have to keep watering and tending to our relationship gardens.

What many educators do not realize is that from the moment you enter the school building, you are constructing or deconstructing relationships. Every time you come in contact with others, you are either building, maintaining, or restoring relationships. This is not to say that you cannot have a bad day or that there aren’t some days when you just want to be alone and work through your own emotions and feelings. There is definitely a time for that. That is being human. However, when working with people, especially in the field of education, it is important to know that relationships matter each and every day.

Looking back at Figure 1.1, let’s elaborate on the four stages in the shift from connections to relationships: potential connections, established connections, meaningful relationships, and resilient relationships.

Potential connections are random. You have potential connections with colleagues whom you bump into every so often and speak to based on the convenience of the moment. Potential connections include times when you speak briefly to a person in a hallway, share a joke with a teacher on your team, discover something in common that you have with a staff member in the front office, or casually chat with

a colleague whom you just happened to sit beside when you arrived late to a meeting. Those are all ways that you can connect with others, ways that can lead to established connections. Potential connections fall into the “building” stage of a relationship.

Established connections are the daily and purposeful contacts you make with other individuals that allow you to know each other better. When you start a conversation with a colleague who just started serving on your same committee or speak to students who are not in your class, you are establishing connections. Like potential connections, established connections fall into the “building” stage of a relationship. They emerge from colleagues or students with whom you have regular conversations.

Meaningful relationships are the connections that stick. When you are aware of important details in colleagues’ and students’ lives, you probably have a meaningful relationship with them. They have chosen to share that information with you, and sometimes you share details of your lives with them. You talk to them regularly and have an emotional connection with them. Conversations are not always work related. During the good times and the hard times, you’re there for each other. Meaningful connections fall into the “maintaining” stage of a relationship development.

Resilient relationships emerge after you and the other person have encountered an obstacle, expressed strong disagreement, or experienced a parting of ways, but the two of you are able to return to the relationship in a way that shows appreciation for each other. The most interesting part of resilient relationships is that you’re never able to determine if your relationship is resilient until you have worked through any notable differences in opinion or belief, overcome drama, or resolved an argument. Resilient relationships fall into the “restoring” stage of a relationship that has been harmed.

Keys to a Successful Relationship

Relationships are complex, and, as we’ve noted, achieving successful relationships can seem like a daunting goal. It helps to have an understanding of four key components of successful relationships: trust, authenticity, respect, and communication.

Trust

Trust and relationships go hand and hand, and trust is something that is cultivated over time. There are occasions when we trust too soon and times when we don't trust soon enough. Past experiences play a significant role in the basic levels of trust. For example, if a new teacher comes into a school with different ideas and those ideas are shut down, the teacher may feel rejected and not as comfortable sharing ideas with teammates in the future. An initial feeling of trust has shifted into hesitancy.

As you begin a job at a new school, regardless of how many years you have been in the education profession, there are levels, or what we refer to figuratively as “rooms of trust,” that you have to enter to cultivate resilient relationships. Figure 1.2 describes the characteristics of these spaces, or levels.

Authenticity

What does the term *authenticity* mean to you? It is the ability to be your 100-percent true self at all times and in every space. For some, that could be an accurate description. For others, this kind of authenticity is not what actually happens from day to day. Think for a moment about your behaviors, mannerisms, and conversations at home or with friends versus at work. Any difference? If there is no difference, we are celebrating you. That is exactly how it should be. However, for some, especially those in the global majority, that may not be the case. Terms such as *assimilating* and *code-switching* are sometimes used to describe survival behaviors that those of the global majority do to feel safe in work environments. Feeling psychologically safe enough to bring your full self into your workspace—to be fully who you are—facilitates the building of authentic relationships. Psychological safety is essential in bringing your full self into any environment and any relationship. But what can that look like? What does that feel like? We believe there are levels of authenticity in different contexts, and throughout this book, we will offer tips, reminders, and strategies on ways to bring your full, authentic self into the school of relationships.

FIGURE 1.2

The “Rooms” of Trust

Room	Level	Description
Front Lobby (Surface-Level Trust)	Professional	<p>In a <i>literal</i> sense, the front lobby is where you greet someone at the door. You are showing your best self and are doing what is expected. In this <i>figurative</i> room, you are fulfilling your professional responsibility. Here you might have “surface-level trust”; you hold people accountable and assume that they will fulfill their professional responsibilities. For instance, if you as a teacher are required to complete lesson plans, the front lobby is where you believe other teachers will complete their lesson plans.</p>
Break Room (Four-Walls Trust)	Team	<p>The break room is where you and your colleagues have established rapport with each other; you are building community and supporting each other. You also are more open with your feelings about the ins and outs of the school. The break room often has a negative connotation; however, it is also where community building occurs.</p> <p>“Four-walls trust” refers to allowing yourself to be at your most vulnerable. At this level of trust, you share more than you would at the other levels. A high degree of psychological safety characterizes this space. For example, it is where you might learn that a colleague is having family problems, experiencing health issues, searching for a new job, or transferring to a different school. Four-walls trust often leads to friendship outside of the school.</p>
School (In This Together Trust)	Community	<p>Collectively, all the spaces within a school building can be considered one big room. Here is where the community comes together.</p> <p>Schoolwide trust is an “in this together” kind of trust. It can feel familial because most people are there for one another. Examples include helping someone new to your grade level or school, eating lunch with your team, or discussing grade-level or team plans. This is community-level trust that extends to everyone.</p>

Respect

The definition of *respect* is due regard for the feelings, wishes, rights, or traditions of others. Opposing viewpoints prevail regarding the giving and receiving of respect. Some believe that you should receive respect before you give it, whereas others feel giving should come before receiving. Respect is something that can be subjective and culturally nuanced, and what it looks and sounds like within your school culture should be a topic for discussion.

Communication

Communication is a way to express your needs and wants and to convey information to one another. Many people have preferences on the type of communication used. Some prefer verbal, written, or non-verbal. But regardless, most agree that communication is important in relationship building. Without communication, relationships can break down. Some are never formed, and others are never repaired.

What Relationships Mean for Thriving Schools

Many schools that thrive are based on a strong foundation of positive, resilient relationships. Although all relationships within the school may not be in the resilient phase, intentionality and authenticity are embedded in the school culture, allowing teachers and staff to thrive. We acknowledge that not everyone in the school building may be holding hands and singing “Kumbaya,” but strides are being made to build, maintain, and restore relationships in conjunction with educating students every day.

Are positive, productive relationships the answer to all the problems in a school? Absolutely not. But as you read, we believe you will see and come to agree that they are a strong component in the effort to create the changes we want to see in education.

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE:

Observations from Michael and Nita**Michael's Observations**

During my years as a community mental health provider, I could always decode a school's culture when I entered the building. I did not use rocket science, nor did I use telepathic powers on the faculty and staff. The culture was evident by the way in which the students, teachers, and administrative staff interacted with each other. Sometimes it was revealed in vocal inflections, body language, and other nonverbal cues. Other times, it was the facial expressions and side conversations I might overhear. The connections between the people in the building were obvious. Some schools I entered were like Broadway musicals: everyone seemed to know their line and scene, and they interacted harmoniously with their cast members (coworkers and students). Other schools were like mosh pits at a heavy metal concert: lots of loud noise, nonstop frantic movement, and people who seemed preoccupied with their own need to be seen or heard.

The front office of any school always seemed to provide a snapshot of the school's inner workings. Bad connections and good connections shared a common thread; both were quite remarkable. Moreover, I can easily recall my favorite and least favorite colleagues based on the connection we did or did not share.

For better or for worse, the quality of the established connection is the determining factor in the quality of the relationship. We all have our favorite colleagues and coworkers, but we have to establish good working relationships with everyone—yes, *everyone*, even the most difficult coworker who has a master's degree in plucking your last nerve! Just remember when you encounter that coworker that it may take a little extra effort on your part to push the relationship forward. Doing so could look like initiating pleasantries or giving a compliment or just saying something nice to that person. However, prepare yourself to give and possibly not receive in return.

When I became a professional school counselor, it was like entering a world I'd only seen from the outside. Of course, I've seen the inner workings of many schools, but nothing compares to being in the trenches.

Everything was going smoothly during my first year—or so I thought! I was making connections and helping students and families. I was doing all the right things to be successful. Then came my first unpleasant encounter, and it was a doozy. I was walking down the hallway during dismissal when a colleague angrily approached me about a district-mandated guideline. I wasn't even responsible for it! Needless to say, a reasonable de-escalation did not occur. We had been mutually pleasant before this encounter. A connection had been established previously but not a meaningful relationship. With that said, do you think we were able to work through it, or move past it? In short, we moved past it but never worked through it. As a result, we reverted back to that “before” stage of an established connection. Our interactions became superficial and limited.

Nita's Observations

When entering the building to begin teaching at a new school, I always knew that my encounter with the office staff would help me gauge the overall school culture. I knew that if the office staff was pleasant, the culture of the school would likely be the same. Well, I always hoped so, anyway.

In this particular case, I walked in with a smile on my face and was ready to meet the front office staff to begin that positive relationship. But when I walked in, it seemed as though no one was there. Wait. No one at the front desks? As I stood there waiting, I got a brief hello from a lady who seemed to be running around looking for something. Now, I am a new teacher in this building. I could have looked at this situation and totally taken it negatively. I could have said to myself, Is this how this year is going to go? But I did not. The staff was obviously busy. I didn't know what had occurred before I walked through those doors. I sat down and waited for a few seconds, and then I got up and said, “Hello. My name is Nita Creekmore. I am the new teacher on the

1st grade team. Do you need me to help with anything?” At once, the lady, who happened to be the receptionist, stopped in her tracks and welcomed me with open arms and congratulated me on my new position.

Here’s the thing. At that moment, I made a connection with the receptionist. At that moment, I chose to step out of my comfort zone of assumptions, and I made a connection. Part of making connections with people is stepping out of our comfort zones, releasing assumptions and how we think relationships *should* work, and instead doing what we feel is right.

Relationships aren’t scripted or forced upon us by others; they just happen. However, they happen when we put our pride aside and decide to create a connection—to be intentional about building relationships through those connections. Building relationships is about intentionality. When I decided to introduce myself and ask if help was needed, I showed the receptionist at my new school that I *saw* her. I showed her that I was willing to pull up my sleeves and help, and I showed her my compassion. A connection was made because I decided to step out and put down the first brick in the building—the building of relationships.

Reflective Questions

- What are some ways you create connections in your school community?
- How do you build relationships within your school?
- Who do you think bears the responsibility for relationship building at your school?
- What are some examples of relationships that you have fostered in your school community? What are some potential relationships that you have not fostered?

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About the Authors



Michael Creekmore is a licensed professional counselor with more than 15 years of experience and certified professional counselor supervisor, working as a professional school counselor, freelance writer, public speaker, and voiceover artist. He earned his bachelor's degree in experimental psychology from the University of South Carolina and his master's degree in counseling psychology from Clark Atlanta University. Michael has also served as clinical director and clinical supervisor to community mental health programs and has been an independent consultant for the past 15 years. Throughout that time, he has supervised, educated, and assisted in the development of younger clinicians. Michael has always promoted maximizing clinician opportunity through experience and leveraging expertise. In his free time, he enjoys spending time with his family and friends, attending his kids' extracurricular activities, writing, and purchasing sneakers. Michael is also a self-care advocate and enjoys traveling whenever he and Nita get an opportunity to do so.



Nita (E'Manita) Creekmore is an instructional coach, presenter, writer, and inclusive literacy advocate. She was in public education for 18 years, teaching elementary grades for 13 years before becoming an elementary school instructional coach for 5 years. Nita obtained her bachelor's degree in English and master's degree in elementary education from the University of South Carolina. She also received her educational specialist degree in educational leadership from the University of Virginia. Nita truly believes that in all aspects of the education field, relationships must always come first. She is passionate about being an advocate, support, and thought partner for teachers in order to give students what they need. In her free time, she loves spending time with her family and friends, attending her kids' extracurricular activities, practicing yoga, writing, and relaxing with a good book. Nita believes in maintaining a healthy work/life/personal flow.

Together, Michael and Nita own Creekmore Conversations, where they collaborate with schools to cultivate strategies to build, maintain, and restore relationships. They have four children, three daughters and a son, and live just outside Atlanta, Georgia.