



THE KEY TO BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Surrendering the One-Up

Workshop

Building relationships through intentionality, shared voice, and partnership



SEE ME

VALUE ME

EMPOWER ME

PARTNER WITH ME

Surrendering the One-Up

Building relationships through intentionality, shared voice, and partnership

Every student enters school carrying a unique story. Some arrive excited to learn. Others arrive carrying anxiety, discouragement, trauma, loneliness, conflict, academic frustration, or the belief that school is simply a place where they do not belong.

As educators, we know relationships matter. We have seen students work harder, persevere longer, and accomplish difficult things because they believed an adult genuinely cared about them. We have also seen students withdraw, disengage, or resist when they did not feel understood or connected.

The challenge is rarely convincing educators that relationships are important. The challenge is becoming more intentional about building them.

Schools are busy places. Every day is filled with lessons to teach, behaviors to address, assessments to complete, meetings to attend, emails to answer, and countless responsibilities competing for our attention. Even when relationships are one of our highest priorities, it can be easy to assume they are happening naturally while the demands of the day pull our focus elsewhere.

This guide is an invitation to pause and ask one important question:

How am I intentionally helping students feel value and worth when they are with me?

That question is at the heart of **Surrendering the One-Up**.

From Good Intentions to Intentional Practice

Most educators are already doing many of the things described in this guide. You may have worked with classes or groups of students where relationships seemed to develop almost effortlessly. Students connected quickly, responded well, and the classroom developed a strong sense of trust and community. You have probably also worked with other groups where building those same relationships required more time, more patience, and a different approach.

That does not necessarily mean anything changed about you. Every group of students brings a different combination of personalities, experiences, strengths, interests, needs, and challenges. Every student arrives with a different story. Strategies that work beautifully with one class may not have the same effect with another.

Because every classroom and every group is different, relationship-building cannot rely on habit alone. It requires intentionality. A thoughtful game plan—and a range of practical strategies—helps us respond to the students who are actually in front of us rather than relying only on what has worked in the past.

Surrendering the One-Up provides that framework. It helps us move from simply believing relationships matter to intentionally creating experiences that help students feel seen, valued, empowered, and included as partners.

Instead of asking only, “**Do I care about my students?**” it invites us to ask, “**What did I intentionally do to help my students experience that care?**”

Understanding the One-Up Relationship

Schools naturally place educators and students in different roles. Educators carry important responsibilities. We create safe learning environments, teach, establish expectations, and provide guidance, accountability, and support. Those responsibilities are essential.

At the same time, students often spend much of their day in environments where adults make most of the decisions. Adults decide where they sit, what they learn, how they will be assessed, when they can leave the room, how the classroom operates, and what expectations they must meet.

Over time, some students may begin to feel that school is something being done **to them** rather than something they are helping create. They may think, “I do not get much of a say,” “Nobody really wants to know what I think,” “The adults have already decided who I am,” or “My role is simply to comply.”

This is what we mean by a **one-down experience**. A student may experience themselves as one-down when they feel they have little voice, little influence, or little ownership because someone else holds most of the decision-making power.

A one-up relationship becomes a barrier when differences in role, responsibility, or authority cause students to feel less important, less capable, or less valued. When students feel this way, they may become less willing to trust, participate, take risks, persist through difficulty, or accept influence from the adults trying to help them.

What Does It Mean to Surrender the One-Up?

Surrendering the One-Up does **not** mean giving up your authority as an educator, lowering expectations, or eliminating rules, boundaries, accountability, consequences, or structure. Students need caring adults who provide clarity, consistency, and support.

The opportunity is not to abandon authority. It is to become more intentional about **how we use it**.

There are many moments throughout the day when educators can loosen their grip on unnecessary control and create more space for student voice, choice, responsibility, influence, and ownership. Sometimes that means asking students for their ideas. Sometimes it means allowing them to make

meaningful choices, inviting them to lead, or allowing them to help shape classroom routines, projects, or culture. Sometimes it means acknowledging that students understand their own experiences better than we ever could. Sometimes it simply means listening before deciding.

Educators continue to carry responsibility for the classroom, but students begin to experience themselves as active contributors rather than passive recipients.

Surrendering the One-Up is not about giving away authority. It is about using our authority to create greater voice, ownership, and participation.

Students Are the Experts in Their Own Lives

One of the most powerful ways we surrender the One-Up is by recognizing something that can be easy to overlook: **students are the experts in their own lives.**

As educators, we bring professional knowledge, experience, perspective, and responsibility. Students bring another kind of expertise. They are the authorities on their own experiences, feelings, interests, identities, strengths, needs, hopes, fears, challenges, goals, sources of motivation, and sense of safety and belonging.

We may have more experience in education. We do not have more experience being them.

Surrendering the One-Up means approaching students with curiosity before assumption. We listen before we correct. We ask before we decide. We create choices where choices are possible. We invite students to contribute rather than simply comply.

We recognize that students are not passive recipients of education. They are active participants in their own learning and in the community we create together. When students experience that kind of relationship, they often begin to feel differently about school, about the adults around them, and about themselves. And when students feel different, they often respond differently.

Relationships Change Behavior by Changing Experience

One of the goals of Surrendering the One-Up is to change how students experience school. When students feel seen, valued, empowered, and included as partners, they often respond differently.

Many of the behaviors educators hope to see—engagement, motivation, perseverance, cooperation, resilience, responsibility, and ownership—can grow from these experiences.

Before we ask students to behave differently, it can be helpful to ask:

| How can we intentionally help them feel differently?

The Intentionality Test

At the end of the day, can we identify something we intentionally did to help our students feel seen, valued, empowered, or included as partners?

We will not accomplish this perfectly every day. The goal is not perfection. The goal is greater awareness, greater consistency, and greater intentionality.

Four Messages That Transform the Relationship

Surrendering the One-Up is not a single activity. It is a way of communicating. The strategies in this guide are organized around four important messages.

SEE ME

Creates Connection

“You notice me. You know who I am. You are interested in understanding my story.”

Students who feel seen begin to feel connected.

VALUE ME

Establishes Belonging and Dignity

“My worth is not determined by my behavior, grades, mistakes, or success.”

Students who feel valued begin to experience safety, dignity, and belonging.

EMPOWER ME

Gives Voice, Choice, Influence, and Agency

“My ideas matter. I can make choices, contribute, lead, and take responsibility.”

Students become more invested when they experience meaningful influence over their learning and environment.

PARTNER WITH ME

Creates Shared Ownership and Community

“We are building this classroom, learning experience, and community together.”

Students become active contributors when they are invited to collaborate, shape the culture, and work toward shared goals.

These messages often build on one another. Feeling seen can create connection. Feeling valued can create belonging. Experiencing meaningful voice and choice can develop agency. Over time, students and educators can begin working together with greater shared ownership.

These are not rigid stages. Educators may use strategies from all four categories at the same time, and many strategies can communicate more than one message. The categories are intended to help us think more intentionally about what students or groups of students may need to experience.

Introduction to the Strategies

The strategies in this guide are not intended to be a checklist or a collection of isolated activities. They are practical ways to communicate four important messages:

See Me - Value Me - Empower Me - Partner With Me

Some strategies can communicate more than one message. Their effectiveness depends less on the activity itself and more on the intention behind it, the way it is implemented, and the needs of the students or group.

As you review the strategies, consider what a class or group most needs to experience, whether individual students within that group may need something different, which message you are trying to communicate, and what you could intentionally do to make that message visible.

The goal is not to use every strategy. The goal is to develop a large enough relational repertoire that we can respond thoughtfully to different students, different groups, and different classroom dynamics.

This workshop edition includes five strategies in each area. These are intended as a starting point rather than a complete list.



SEE ME

Creates Connection

STRATEGIES 1–5

Strategies in this section help students feel noticed, known, understood, and remembered. They communicate that students are more than a name on a roster, a grade, a behavior, or another person in the room.

SEE ME

VALUE ME

EMPOWER ME

PARTNER WITH ME

1 Use Their Name—Every Time

WHAT IT IS

Make learning and consistently using every student's name a deliberate priority. Greet students by name as they enter or leave, use their names during conversations and class activities, and acknowledge them when you see them in other parts of the school.

Pay particular attention to students who are quiet, frequently absent, new to the school, or easy to overlook. Learn the correct pronunciation of each name and respectfully ask for help when you are unsure.

WHY IT WORKS

A student's name is closely connected to identity and belonging. Consistently using it communicates recognition and personal attention.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

"I know who you are. You are not just another student to me."

2**Check In with Intention****WHAT IT IS**

Use a simple paper or digital check-in to ask students how they are doing and what they may need. Questions might include a mood rating, current stress level, something going well, something making learning difficult, or whether they would like an adult to follow up.

Keep the check-in brief enough to use consistently. Explain how responses will be handled and create a dependable process for following up when students indicate that they need support.

WHY IT WORKS

Students who will not initiate a conversation may be willing to communicate privately in writing.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“How you are doing matters, and I am paying attention.”

3**Notice the Little Things****WHAT IT IS**

Deliberately pay attention to details about students—their interests, creative work, new haircut, favorite team, book, stickers, clothing, energy level, or changes in mood.

Mention those details naturally and respectfully. Keep informal notes when helpful so you can follow up later: “How did your game go?” or “Did you finish that drawing you were working on?”

WHY IT WORKS

Small observations demonstrate that the educator notices the student even when there is no problem to address.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“I pay attention to you because you matter.”

4

The Two-Minute Relationship Builder

WHAT IT IS

Choose a student or small group with whom connection has been limited and spend approximately two minutes each day for several days talking about something unrelated to grades, correction, behavior, or missing work.

Ask about interests, hobbies, sports, music, pets, family traditions, or future plans. Keep the interaction genuine and brief rather than forcing a deep conversation.

WHY IT WORKS

Consistent, low-pressure attention gradually builds familiarity and connection, particularly with students who are cautious around adults.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“You are worth my time even when I am not asking anything from you.”

5

Ask for Their Story

WHAT IT IS

In a private and appropriate setting, ask a student a question that invites them to help you understand them better.

Examples include:

- “What is something teachers sometimes misunderstand about you?”
- “What helps you do your best work?”
- “What should I know if I want to support you well?”

Listen without immediately correcting, explaining, defending, or solving.

WHY IT WORKS

It replaces assumption with curiosity and gives students authority over how their own experience is understood.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“You are the expert on your life, and your perspective matters.”



VALUE ME

Establishes Belonging and Dignity

STRATEGIES 6–10

Strategies in this section communicate that students have value regardless of their grades, behavior, struggles, mistakes, or accomplishments. They help students experience dignity, acceptance, encouragement, and belonging.

SEE ME

VALUE ME

EMPOWER ME

PARTNER WITH ME

6 Be Real About Imperfection

WHAT IT IS

Acknowledge appropriate mistakes, uncertainty, frustration, or learning moments from your own life. Explain what you did next, what you learned, or how you repaired the situation.

Avoid oversharing or asking students to take care of your emotions. The purpose is to model healthy vulnerability, accountability, and growth.

WHY IT WORKS

Students see that mistakes do not remove a person's dignity or potential.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“You do not have to be perfect to be respected or successful.”

7 Write Personal Notes That Matter

WHAT IT IS

Write every student a brief personal note at some point during the term. Identify something specific: a strength, contribution, effort, improvement, quality, or moment you appreciated.

Keep track of who has received a note so that every student is included, especially those who may receive little recognition elsewhere.

WHY IT WORKS

Specific written affirmation is memorable and can be revisited long after the moment has passed.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“I see something distinct and valuable in you.”

8 Narrate the Positive

WHAT IT IS

Verbally notice positive actions as they occur, using specific and credible language. Instead of saying only “Good job,” describe what you observed:

“You included someone who was left out.”

“You stayed with that problem even when it became frustrating.”

Distribute this attention broadly rather than focusing only on the most compliant or academically successful students.

WHY IT WORKS

Many students receive adult attention primarily when they make mistakes. Positive narration changes what is made visible.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“I notice the good choices, strengths, and effort that others may miss.”

9

The Reset Conversation

WHAT IT IS

After a conflict, correction, consequence, or difficult day, deliberately communicate that the relationship can begin again. Speak privately when possible.

Acknowledge what happened without pretending it did not matter, clarify any next steps, and say directly that you are not holding the incident against the student.

WHY IT WORKS

Students who expect adults to hold grudges may continue acting from defensiveness long after the original incident.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“What happened matters, but it does not define your place with me.”

10

I Saved You a Seat

WHAT IT IS

Use small, authentic gestures to communicate that a student’s presence was anticipated and wanted. Save a place in a group, prepare materials for an absent student, greet them with “I’m glad you’re here,” or mention that they were missed.

Use the strategy sincerely and avoid creating pressure for students to explain an absence publicly.

WHY IT WORKS

Students who feel disconnected often wonder whether anyone notices when they are gone.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“You belong here, and your presence makes a difference.”



EMPOWER ME

Gives Voice, Choice, Influence, and Agency

STRATEGIES 11–15

Strategies in this section invite students to make meaningful choices, contribute ideas, exercise responsibility, lead, and influence what happens in the classroom. They help students experience themselves as capable participants in their own learning.

SEE ME

VALUE ME

EMPOWER ME

PARTNER WITH ME

11 Put Students in Charge

WHAT IT IS

Create meaningful leadership roles connected to classroom routines, discussions, activities, projects, or instruction. Rotate opportunities and provide enough structure for students to succeed.

Leadership can be small—welcoming the class, selecting an opening question, or managing materials—or more substantial, such as facilitating a discussion, leading a review, or teaching part of a lesson.

WHY IT WORKS

Students become more invested when they have genuine responsibility rather than symbolic jobs.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“You are capable of leading and contributing.”

12 Co-Create the Classroom Environment

WHAT IT IS

Invite students to help make decisions about classroom layout, displays, themes, seating options, organization, visual design, routines, or welcoming features.

Present any nonnegotiable safety or instructional requirements, then give students genuine areas of influence. Use at least some of their ideas so the process is not merely advisory.

WHY IT WORKS

Students are more likely to respect and care for a space they helped shape.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“This environment belongs to you too.”

13 Students as Teachers

WHAT IT IS

Give students opportunities to teach a concept, demonstrate a skill, explain a process, lead a review, or share expertise with classmates and the educator.

Allow them to choose topics when possible and provide enough preparation and support for them to be successful. Recognize forms of expertise that extend beyond traditional academics.

WHY IT WORKS

Teaching positions students as knowledge-holders and deepens their understanding.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“You know things that are worth teaching to others.”

14 Offer Meaningful Choices

WHAT IT IS

Identify decisions that can genuinely belong to students: topic, format, partner, sequence, resource, location, pacing, example, or final product.

Offer a manageable number of worthwhile options rather than superficial choices. Clearly identify the learning goal so flexibility in method does not obscure the purpose.

WHY IT WORKS

Meaningful choice increases ownership and reduces unnecessary power struggles.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“You have a legitimate say in how you learn.”

15 Use Micro-Commitments

WHAT IT IS

When a student feels overwhelmed or resistant, reduce a large demand to a small, achievable first step.

Ask them to complete one problem, work for three minutes, open the document, write one sentence, or choose between two starting points. Once momentum develops, invite the next step rather than presenting the full task as an all-or-nothing demand.

WHY IT WORKS

Small successes lower resistance and help students experience agency instead of defeat.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“I will meet you where you are and help you begin.”



PARTNER WITH ME

Creates Shared Ownership and Community

STRATEGIES 16–20

Strategies in this section move beyond participation toward collaboration. They invite students and educators to create, solve problems, learn, and build community together.

SEE ME

VALUE ME

EMPOWER ME

PARTNER WITH ME

16 Create Something Together

WHAT IT IS

Develop a video, campaign, display, presentation, podcast, performance, service project, or classroom resource alongside students.

Invite them into planning, scripting, design, production, problem-solving, and decision-making. Participate as a collaborator rather than assigning the project and standing back only as the evaluator.

WHY IT WORKS

The shared product gives students a real stake in the work and allows different strengths to contribute.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“Your ideas and abilities can shape something meaningful that we create together.”

17**Build a Space They Want to Be In****WHAT IT IS**

Design the classroom with student comfort, belonging, learning, and identity in mind. Ask students what helps them feel welcome and focused, then incorporate realistic suggestions into seating, lighting, displays, organization, routines, or available materials.

Continue adjusting the environment as the group changes rather than assuming the same design will work equally well every year.

WHY IT WORKS

The physical setting communicates whether students are guests in the adult's room or members of a shared community.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

"We are creating a place where all of us can belong and learn."

18**Create a Class Identity****WHAT IT IS**

Invite students to develop a class motto, chant, cheer, symbol, name, set of values, or shared statement.

Generate ideas in groups, combine strong elements, and use a fair process to make the final decision. Refer back to the identity during challenges, celebrations, or shared goals so it becomes more than a one-time activity.

WHY IT WORKS

A co-created identity promotes belonging and a sense of collective responsibility.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

"We are building something that represents all of us."

19 Learn Something New Together

WHAT IT IS

Choose a skill, topic, activity, or challenge that is genuinely new to both you and the students.

Learn it together, invite students to research solutions, and allow different people to lead as expertise develops. Make your own uncertainty and learning process visible without turning the activity into a performance of incompetence.

WHY IT WORKS

The educator and students temporarily occupy a shared learning position, which makes curiosity, mistakes, and collaboration normal.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“We do not always need one person to have all the answers. We can learn together.”

20 Work Toward a Shared Class Goal

WHAT IT IS

Invite students to identify something they want the class community to improve or accomplish.

Facilitate a process for selecting the goal, establishing measures, assigning roles, tracking progress, and reflecting on results. The educator contributes alongside students rather than functioning only as the person who monitors compliance.

WHY IT WORKS

Shared goals give students influence over the direction of the community and make responsibility collective.

WHAT IT COMMUNICATES

“We all have a role in making this class successful.”

Planning My Strategies

From Intention to Action

The goal is not to try every strategy at once.

Begin by thinking about a class, group, or student you currently work with.

What does this class or group most need to experience?

- See Me 25
- Value Me
- Empower Me
- Partner With Me

Are there individual students within the group who may need a different message or approach?

Which strategy would help make that message visible?

What will I intentionally do?

When and where will I do it?

How will I know whether it is helping?

My First Strategy

The first strategy I would like to implement is:

The class, group, or student I have in mind is:

The message I want them to experience is:

What I will intentionally do:

When and where I will do it:

What I will look for afterward:

My Next Step

A second strategy I would like to explore is:

The class, group, or student I have in mind is:

The message I want them to experience is:

What I will intentionally do:

When and where I will do it:

What I will look for afterward:

Build Your Relational Repertoire

No single strategy will connect with every student or every class.

The goal is to develop enough intentional options that you can adapt your approach to different students, groups, needs, and classroom dynamics.

Do not simply choose the strategy that sounds most fun.

Ask:

What do these students most need to experience from me right now?

Then begin there.



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Notes: