

RELATIONAL IMAGES



IMAGES

How Our Past Can Shape Our Teaching Presence



AT THE END OF A LONG SCHOOL DAY, Deborah, a young teacher, struggles to get her first-grade students to do their assigned classroom “jobs” so that she can settle them down and read aloud. She is looking forward to the quiet, the calm — to a few moments in which she can connect with the wriggly, sometimes feisty group. Job time seems like it is taking an eternity, and no one appears on task. Deborah shuts off the lights, the class signal to stop and pay attention. But when the children don’t respond, she finds herself shouting at the group with real anger. This reflexive action surprises her. In her tirade, she hears the tone of voice that her mother used when yelling at her about not helping to keep the house tidy. She is aghast by her own outburst.

Felipe, a seasoned high school English teacher, cannot look Sebastian in the eyes. This 17-year-old is a talented writer, quick-witted, and charming. Yet he barely completes his schoolwork, rarely reads the assigned reading, and often dozes during class. Felipe feels deeply disappointed in Sebastian but cannot find the words to express his concern. He was worried that, once he gets started, he won’t be able to contain his emotions, so he keeps his distance. Sebastian reminds Felipe of his daughter, a thirtysomething woman who has trouble holding down a job, but he knows she is talented and innovative.

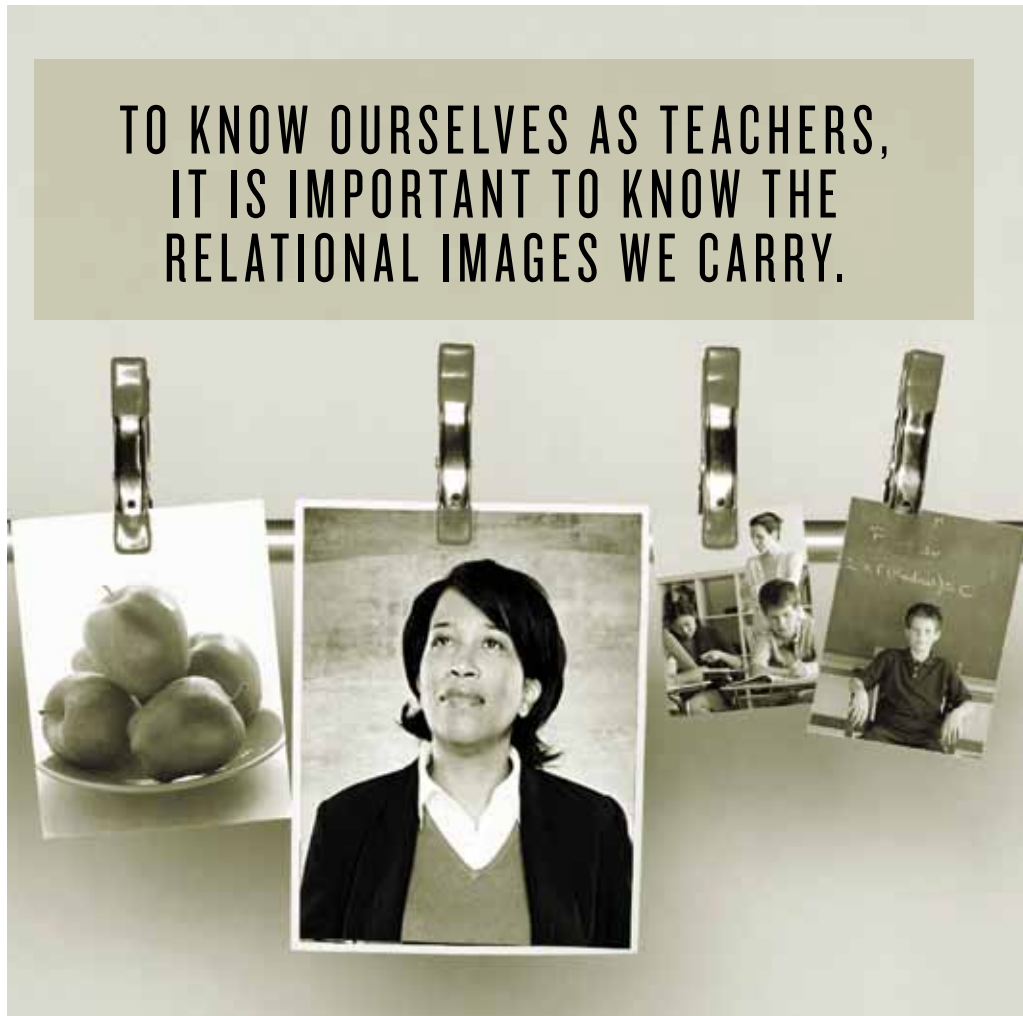
BY MIRIAM RAIDER-ROTH • PHOTOILLUSTRATION BY GEOFF GRAHAM

Deborah's and Felipe's stories remind us that when we walk into our classrooms, we are accompanied by our own lives. We carry with us what psychologist Carol Gilligan, in *In a Different Voice*, describes as "images of relationship," or what psychologists Jean Baker Miller and Irene Pierce Stiver, in *The Healing Connection*, call "relational images." Like the magical basin in Dumbledore's chambers, in which the past can be viewed and re-experienced, our classrooms can be evocative spaces in which our relational histories are awakened.

Our relational images, it turns out, are part of our stories, our histories. We carry them with us wherever we go. The good news, as educators, is that, when we are conscious of our relational images, they can also be part of our educator's toolkit.

In Search of Ghosts and Heroes

In relational psychology, the idea of relational images connotes the ways in which we bring dynamics of old relationships into the prism of current ones. In her enlightening book on parent-teacher conferences, *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other*, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot described these images as "ghosts in the classrooms," or the past relationships that often haunt us when we step back in the school building as parents or teachers. This is one form of the psychotherapeutic notion of transference in which dynamics of past relationships assert themselves into current ones. While some images stem from our own histories, others can loom large from culturally pervasive assumptions, such as the notion of "the good girl," "the strong boy," "the school marm," or "the supermodel body." Not all relational images are haunting, of course. Some are nurturing, loving, aspirational images — the ones we strive to emulate. As educators, this is often the image of the teacher who really made a difference in our own lives, our educational hero, and someone who inspired us to choose to teach.



Typically, relational images are not static. They evolve as our wealth of relationships grows. But difficult relational images often become deeply embedded — particularly in school. Inevitably there are times of disconnection between teachers and students, moments when they do not read each other's cues and intentions well or do not respond in ways that are needed or expected. If the relationships are not repaired through communication and efforts at adjusting responses in more mutually satisfying ways, then relational images can become difficult to change.

To know ourselves as teachers, it is important to know the relational images we carry. As Deborah and Felipe illustrate, we are not always conscious that we bring these images into our classrooms or that we are acting on them in our work with students.

Without awareness of these images, we risk being held captive by the emotional force embedded within. Without surfacing and understanding these images, we are in danger of unwittingly holding on to them — which can prevent us from fully engaging with our students or getting through difficult moments in the school day. Indeed, they can prevent the kind of professional growth we are seeking.

My research over the past decade has demonstrated that healthy teaching-learning relationships are the foundation for the construction of trustworthy knowledge — knowledge that can be accessed, used, articulated, and built upon. If the relational images we carry as teachers threaten our capacity to connect with our students, these images can jeopardize our teaching practice and our students' learning.

So what does it take to be able to make these images the "objects" of our attention, rather than us being held as "subject" to their forces? As Robert Kegan, a scholar of adult development, teaches us, it is in transitioning these images from subject to object that we grow and develop as adults, as teachers. The first step is to develop relational awareness.

Relational Awareness

Jean Baker Miller and Irene Pierce Stiver explain that relational awareness requires attention to the dynamics of relationship that occur in our own lives, personally and professionally. Such awareness requires that we take a curious, observational stance about how we act in relationships, and how we react (or re-act) to others' behaviors. In a sense, we become ethnographers of our relationships, keeping a consistent finger on our own pulse to help see patterns of thought, behavior, and action. As teachers, it requires us to observe our patterns of behavior in

relationship to our students. Which students can "push our buttons" with just a roll of their eyes?

Identifying Prevailing Relational Images

With enhanced relational awareness, we can improve our ability to identify the relational images that can accompany us into our teaching-learning relationships. Being able to identify, notice, and describe these relationships helps us learn to manage the images rather than being managed by them. When we are aware of them, we can become curious about them. Why is it that *those* relationships emerge time and again? Most important, we can begin the process of separating those images from the real relationships in the room, allowing the current connections to become more alive, activated, and present. This kind of work requires a relational context in which trusting relationships can help us see what would otherwise be invisible to us.

Relational Learning Communities

During the last decade, my research has demonstrated that, to develop relational awareness, it is essential to join (or build) a learning community in which such awareness can be developed and practiced. In these communities, participants pay close attention to the inter- and intrapersonal dynamics and the ways in which learning is supported and thwarted by how we connect with our learning partners. In relational learning communities, we can experience how knowing ourselves is to know ourselves in relationships.

The focus of a relational learning community (RLC) may be shared questions of practice. "How can we support boys' learning in our classrooms?" "How can looking at student work shape our work as teachers?" But attending to the ways that the group itself functions is also part of the communal work. By using practices such as observation, description, listening, questioning, challenging, supporting, and voicing, we can become better



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attuned to others' perspectives, ways of thinking, and cultural experiences that shape their ideas. At the same time, others become attuned to our ways of looking and thinking and can offer perspectives that we might not see at first. In so doing, our colleagues can help us see what we might not easily see on our own.

Relational learning communities can take many forms and have diverse foci. For example, I facilitated an RLC in a school that studied the ways that race expressed itself in the classroom. Using descriptive processes developed at the Prospect School and Center for Education and Research in North Bennington, Vermont, teachers collaboratively examined their own practice and ways that they encountered issues of race in their practice. Attending to the RLC members' relationships with themselves/their identities as well as with one another was foundational work for the group. In becoming aware of their own observations of race in their school, they also attended closely to each others' observations. In so doing, their relational awareness was deepened. In another RLC, a group of K–12 teachers gathered for an intensive summer seminar to deepen the group members' understanding of the teaching and learning of American Jewish history and culture. In building this RLC, we attended closely to the issues of identity and culture that emerged for the participants as they examined core themes of culture. Bringing their own relational and cultural images to the fore, teachers examined core Jewish texts, helping one another extend their understandings of this particular culture, and of the teaching of culture more broadly.

Past and Presence

By developing relational awareness, identifying prevailing relational images, and participating in relational learning communities, we can nurture our capacity to be present to ourselves and to our students' learning. My colleague Carol Rodgers and I defined presence as "a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step." In order to be present to our students, we must be able to be present to ourselves, in all our wholeness and all that we bring into the classroom. Attention to our internal ghosts and heroes — to the images of our family and friends that can unconsciously walk through the classroom doors with us and the cultural images that shape how and what we can see — is an essential dimension of presence. Such presence is vital to our ability to connect with our students and cultivate trusting relationships with them. Students' capacity to trust themselves as well as to construct, access, and articulate trustworthy knowledge depends upon healthy and trusting relationships with their teachers. Thus, our capacity to be present to our students is as essential as books, paper, and pencils (or laptops and tablets). It is the bedrock of learning and teaching.

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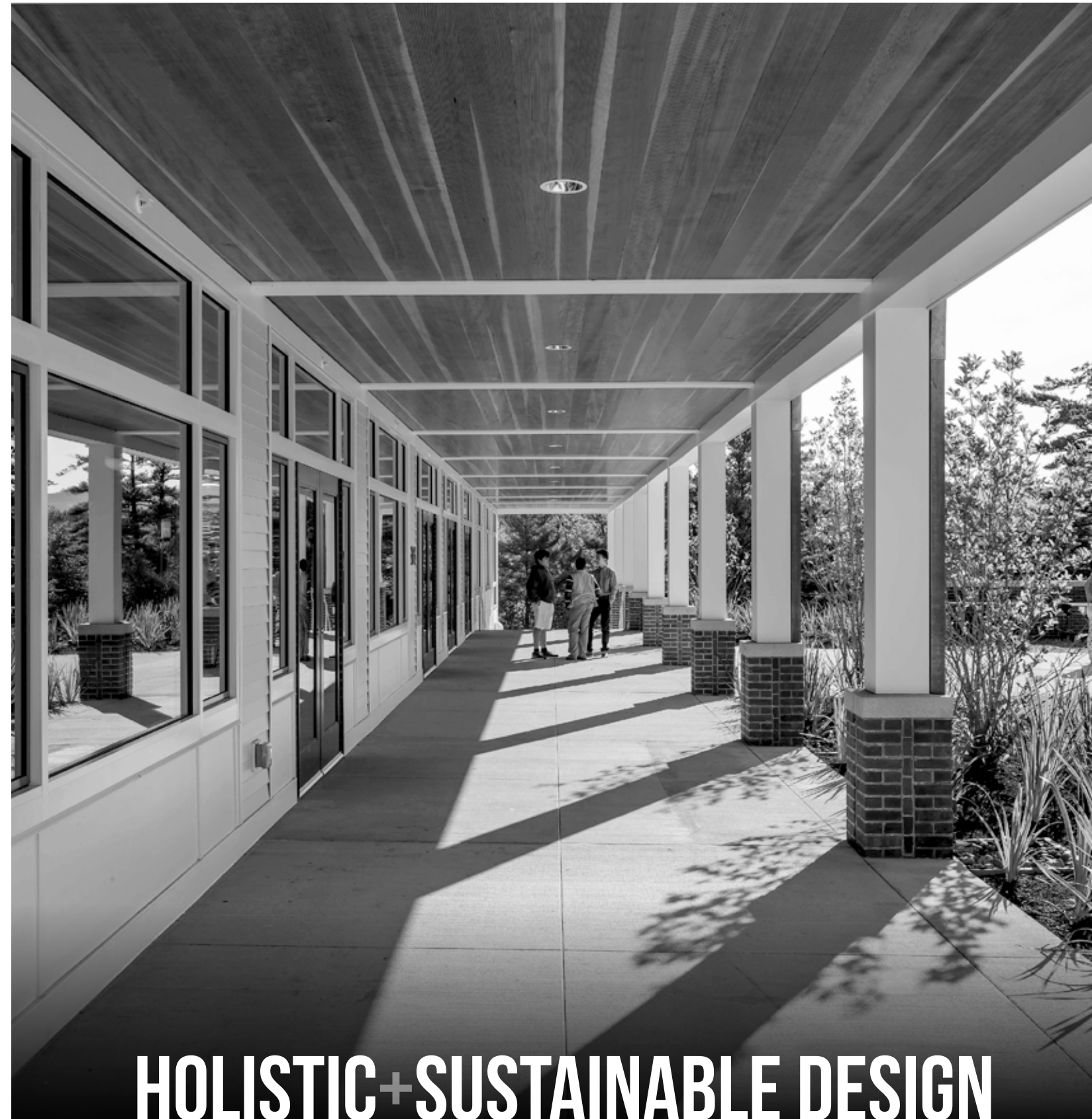
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