6

What Teacher Behaviors Encourage One At-Risk African American Boy to Be a Productive Member of Our Classroom Community?

Barbara Williams

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In her study, Williams examines the ways in which Davonte, an African American boy new to the school, is affected by her efforts to incorporate him into the classroom community. In order to meet Davonte's educational and social needs, Williams uses a variety of teaching strategies, including differentiated instruction, consistent routines, and "sacred time," in which Davonte receives her undivided attention. Employing a unique narrative style, Williams examines her own philosophies of teaching, acknowledges the importance of knowing every student as an individual, and offers readers a glimpse into the realities of classroom life.

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DAVONTE: SEPTEMBER

He arrives at school several weeks after the school year has begun.

He is rather small for a seven-year-old second grader. His hair is braided and tied tight at the nape of his neck. His brown eyes are densely lashed and his expression is one of indifference. He is sullen but when he smiles those first weeks, his face lights up, his left eye focuses on that which pleases him, and his right eye, referred to by the school nurse as his lazy eye, drifts in a different direction. Sometimes when I look at him hard I am uncertain which is the focusing eye and which one is adrift.

His blue jeans are way too big. They fall off his waist and slip down his hips, often scooting to a resting place somewhere above his knees. There are times when the jeans take his underwear along with them on the ride down, and he's baring his bottom to his classmates. This appears to bother him not at all. He clumsily accommodates walking about in the ill-fitting pants even as they alter his gait and restrict his movements. The school nurse rigs up a pseudo-solution, using a piece of string to tie together two belt loops, which reduces the circumference of the waist so that the pants fit better on Davonte's narrow hips.

He does not sit quietly on the blue rug at instruction time. He sprawls and twists and turns. He sighs loudly and talks out frequently. When his restlessness becomes too much he walks away. What we do on the blue rug—read stories, have conversation, recite poems on the easel, and do math problems—interests Davonte not at all. He does not contribute, even when invited. His fuse is short and he is easily frustrated, dropping out of learning to wander, or worse, to leave the room.

The other kids keep their distance. Davonte is unpredictable and often uncommunicative. It seems the other students are not sure of him and do not trust his outbursts. He gives the impression that he is uninterested in them.

He does not have many academic skills just yet. He does not recognize all the letters in the alphabet and can do math problems only if adding two single-digit numbers with manipulatives. His social skills are unsophisticated. He is easily angered, expresses his feelings in the raw, and seems unmotivated to become an accepted member of our classroom community.

In many ways, he is much younger than his classmates. Strangely, however, his attitude is older; he shows the sort of negative resistance that I usually associate with upper elementary and middle school kids.

His father, whom I later learn is called Red (Davonte's brown skin has reddish hues, and I presume that is where the father's nickname came from), is allegedly serving a life sentence in prison. His mother, Kelly, has left Davonte with various relatives who live in the Allied Drive community. In September he is living at his auntie's apartment. His mom is

homeless and goes back and forth to Chicago. She is trying to find a job, but it is clear that her life is hard, and that she struggles.

These were my first impressions of Davonte and how he began his school year in Room 102.

THE QUESTION

I knew I had to significantly alter the curriculum and classroom rhythms, which had worked so well for the rest of the children, in order to make Davonte feel a member of the group, and I needed to "socially engineer" the way others were perceiving him. As I began to tweak and change my approach to Davonte, struggling to accommodate his academic, social, and emotional needs, I was invited to become a member of the Equity Action Research Group. I am not certain that being a member of this group of six inspiring, thoughtful, and intelligent educators changed my agenda. I do know that spending part of a day each month talking about this research with them cemented my commitment to altering my practices. My goal was to increase Davonte's success in my classroom.

The question that frames my efforts is: **What teacher behaviors encourage one at-risk African American boy to be a productive member of our classroom community?**

By teacher behaviors I mean verbal (the words I choose to use and the tone of voice in which I deliver them) and nonverbal (body language) communication. I also wanted to be more deliberate about the curricular choices I made and the expectations I have for Davonte. Not only did I hope for Davonte to become a productive member of the classroom, I also aimed to assure Davonte's general happiness and contentment in Room 102, his academic progress, and his relationships with his classmates.

To succeed with Davonte, I had to become a more deliberate teacher. My choices in teaching had to become more thoughtful. I needed to change what I chose to pay attention to, and I had to invest my energy and time in this little boy while still trying to meet, as best I could, the needs of the other children in the class.

PAYING ATTENTION

I rely heavily on my Daily Kidwatching Notes. I have for a time utilized these notes to force myself to reflect on my day and my students' learning. On most days, I carry a clipboard with a list of my students' names. I jot

down pertinent information regarding academic progress (e.g., Michael solved on his easel a two-digit addition problem involving carrying) and other relevant information (e.g., Meredith is sad because her aunt is seriously ill). These are my Daily Kidwatching Notes. I am also engaged in an ongoing quest for knowledge about closing the achievement gap, which led me to read books and articles and to watch the 4-hour PBS documentary *Beyond the Color Line* with Henry Louis Gates.

This description is based on my perceptions, observations, and reflections concerning one at-risk, seven-year-old, African American boy who lives in poverty and his experiences over the course of his second-grade year in Room 102. My purpose is to make public my efforts, successful and not so successful, and Davonte's progress, academic and social. It is more a portrait than a photograph, an interpretation in which I simply try to be faithful to the evidence I see, mindful always of trying simply to tell the truth.

THE CITY AND ITS SCHOOLS

Madison, Wisconsin, is both a capital city and home of the University of Wisconsin, a large research university. Our public schools are considered successful by nearly every measure but one. Our African American students' standardized test scores lag significantly behind the scores of their White peers. This problem is not unique to our state, but a recent study showed that Wisconsin ranks near the bottom, compared with other states, in the graduation rates of its African American students.

The Madison school district has begun to take the problem seriously enough to hire a consultant, Glenn Singleton, to study and facilitate changes in the way we do school so that more African American kids might have a better chance of success.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU ELEMENTARY

The school where I spend my days is about four miles from the Capitol and downtown. It is on the city's west side, situated in a grove of oaks on a busy street that runs through an upper-middle-class neighborhood, Nakoma. Nearly half our students come from Nakoma. About 10 percent come from the Monroe Street area, which has slightly more modest homes but still is solidly middle-class. We also have students who live on or near Doncaster Street, at the other end of Nakoma, a small neighborhood with apartments and homes that might be described as lower-middle-class. The

rest of our kids, nearly half, come from the Allied Drive neighborhood. This is described by many as a troubled community of subsidized housing, street drugs, and the unemployed and disenfranchised.

Our city's morning newspaper, the *Wisconsin State Journal*, did a series of articles about Allied Drive. The area was portrayed as a drug magnet, crime-ridden and isolated. The series noted that as other troubled areas in the city have improved, Allied Drive has slid deeper into despair as it absorbs the drug trafficking from other, now improved, areas. The city's mayor appears determined to help the neighborhood, in which the Boys and Girls Club recently has become active. It seemed pretty clear, after reading the series, that this neighborhood needs more opportunities and initiatives. It is packed with school-age children who are bused to many different schools, at which many of them struggle. The life experiences that each of these different socioeconomic groups brings to the classroom present a particular set of challenges to teachers at Thoreau School. Davonte is one of a group of children in my classroom who live in the Allied Drive neighborhood. The others have thrived with the rhythm in Room 102. They are full participants and are progressing academically. As in years past, I realize that most of the children from the Allied neighborhood do pretty well in elementary school even though it appears they have much less academic support at home than do their classmates. It is true, too, that every few years there is one child who seems much more troubled and for whom school is a much greater challenge.

ROOM 102

My classroom is a rectangle. One side is a strip of windows overlooking the spreading limbs of a big old oak. The other walls are lined with low shelves that hold books—lots and lots of books—and math manipulatives. On a sunny day, the room is filled with natural light. Because I have come to favor a simple and uncluttered work environment, the classroom is centered on the rectangular tables that take up most of the floor space in the center of the room. Near the door are a couple of computers and shelves for games and an old wood wardrobe, which holds construction paper and my jacket in winter. Nearer the window at the opposite end are the blue rug and an easel. On the windowsill are avocados, which we've been waiting for weeks to sprout, and an amaryllis in full flower. Both taught us patience. (In the spring, it is the hyacinths and tulips that we planted last autumn, and which wintered in a basement refrigerator, that are now blooming on the sill.) The walls are decorated with various maps and children's work, though there is not as much "stuff" on the walls and bulletin

boards as there is in most of the classrooms in the building. On the whiteboard, which stretches along one wall, is a number line that I put, for Davonte, at kid height. The room might be considered a bit sparse for an elementary classroom.

In his book *Being With Children,* Phillip Lopate writes about what he perceives as the happy consequences of an uncluttered and austere classroom. He gave me the courage to make my classroom simpler. Visually busy classrooms now strike me as too distracting.

THE TEACHER

I have taught for 20-some years, at levels ranging from second grade through graduate school. I have felt fairly successful in my efforts, and I take a good deal of pleasure from my work. I am pretty much myself with kids, I don't alter my voice, and I treat my students with respect. I have high academic expectations because I have come to realize that grownups, too, often underestimate kids. But I also think that adults often fail to provide kids with what they need to succeed.

I have a lot of energy and get into our studies with enthusiasm, but I have the tendency to be disorganized and I lose papers frequently. When I misplace my coffee mug, I announce a search. Someone invariably locates it, and amazingly the class goes straight back to the business at hand. Rather than keep a grade book, as other second- and third-grade teachers in my school tidily maintain, I have a fat file folder with work samples for each of my students. Instead of planning my year's units in advance, we often study a topic about which we have become spontaneously excited from a previous unit. For example, when we studied Thomas Jefferson the week of his birth, the kids became fascinated by Lewis and Clark. We then studied Lewis and Clark, and the kids became enamored of Sacagawea. And so it goes. This style has its advantages and disadvantages, but that's another subject.

I look at teaching as a profession that can foster social justice. I believe that teaching is full of moral and ethical opportunities and that the choices we make as teachers can go a long way toward helping children imagine their own possibilities. I am convinced that education is liberation and that it is the last best hope for children who live in poverty. As I have come around to these opinions, I have acquired a sense of urgency in teaching some of the kids in my classroom.

I expect good manners and civility, and most often the children are quite capable of meeting these expectations. When not, we problem-solve together. I am emphatic about kids getting playtime and outside recess time to balance classroom work.

The single attribute that is important and prevalent in my classroom is humor. We laugh together every day.

In agreeing to join the Action Research group, I knew that I had to examine an issue that had to do with the children I teach every day, an issue that is directly linked to their academic success and sense of belonging to our classroom community. I have, over the course of my teaching career, had several students with whom I felt unsuccessful. I wanted to become more deliberate in my choices of words, actions, expectations, and reactions, so that I might more positively affect one child's learning and sense of belonging.

INFLUENCES ON MY THINKING

The first time I taught a large group of African American kids was 10 years ago at Cherokee Middle School. A group of eighth graders refused to take a foreign language and so the school created a class, world literature, for them. There was some difficulty finding a teacher for the course. Someone working at the school knew I was in the process of completing a dissertation and asked if I'd be interested. I began teaching the class a few weeks after the school year had begun.

The students were resistant and not at all interested in the idea of world literature. They did not do well in school. Their attitude could be summed up as "Screw this!" I decided to turn the class into a study of African American literature. We read Walter Dean Myers (*The Young Landlords*) and Alice Childress (*Rainbow Jordan*) and the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. At first I read aloud to the students. After some time they began taking turns reading. We began to have spirited discussions. We ended the year with *There Are No Children Here* by Alex Kotlowitz. Many of the kids in the class were familiar with the Chicago gangs and projects that Kotlowitz describes in the book. This book, too, provoked animated discussion.

What I learned from the school year was how smart these kids were. Despite their refusal to take a foreign language class and despite their generally low academic performance, they were engaged in a whole lot of critical thinking and connection making and thoughtful articulation of ideas. The books had engaged many of them and prompted discussions that allowed the kids' intelligence to be seen despite their slouchy resistance to school.

My thinking also has been influenced by the book *The Envy of the World,* in which Ellis Cose describes the forces that shape the lives of young Black men. He mourns the number of Black men in prison and the impact of popular culture and the messages it sends. He points to programs that allow

young Black men to excel and become successful despite the odds against them. He worries that too many Black kids grow up without a supportive father in their lives and that gangs too often take on the role of family. I have also recently read and been deeply affected by *The Color of Water* (James McBride), *Growing Up Literate* (Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines), *Parallel Time* (Brent Staples), and the fiction of Toni Morrison, Ernest Gaines, Gloria Naylor, Dorothy West, and Z. Z. Packer.

In the PBS series *Beyond the Color Line,* Henry Louis Gates, like Cose, describes the forces working against Black kids growing up in poverty. He also points to programs that work. He interviewed people who, despite the odds, have carved out for themselves creative, purposeful lives. Years ago I read Gates's *Colored People,* a sort of coming-of-age story in which Gates details his childhood in a West Virginia mill town. He recalls thinking of himself as Colored, then Negro, then Black. He describes well the transformative power that reading had on him.

I listened to and then ordered the transcripts of a National Public Radio (NPR) show about the achievement gap and schools that have closed it. The show highlighted one district in Ohio that had high standards but also had a system in place to help students achieve their potential. For example, the district adjusts high school class times to students' work schedules, and teachers modify their curricula so that more kids succeed. The district tries to make up for the fact that some kids receive academic support at home while others do not. Tutoring programs and before- and afterschool study groups were emphasized. The adults in the school went to extraordinary efforts to reach students most at risk for failing.

In addition to Cose's book, Gates's program, and the series on NPR, I also have been influenced by *Other People's Children,* in which author Lisa Delpit bemoans that too many teachers come from mostly White, "progressive" university programs that fail to effectively confront the achievement gap. In her own first years of teaching, she moved quickly from learning centers and other more progressive methods to desks in rows and structured lessons. She observed that White kids from middle-class backgrounds do fine in the more progressive classrooms but that children of color fare far better with structure and clear expectations.

This brought to mind my student teacher, who, along with other student teachers from UW–Madison, visited a highly successful Milwaukee school in which about 90 percent of the African American children come from impoverished backgrounds. She described a classroom that sounded much like what Lisa Delpit promotes—lots of structure, clear expectations, and, though I don't know if Delpit would go this far, teachers who were nearly robotic in the delivery of the Direct Instruction curriculum. Every

child would be on "the same page," getting their pencils ready at the same time, or listening to a story with good posture and hands folded in their laps, all eyes on the book. My student teacher and her peers were impressed with the combination of the students' serious learning and the staff's firm friendliness. The school was one of the most successful in Milwaukee as measured by standardized test scores. I couldn't help but wonder if Davonte might be more successful in such an environment.

THE CHILDREN

Seventeen of us spend the morning together in Room 102. Because our school is a Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) school, a state program that allows for smaller class size for the teaching of language arts and math, each second-grade classroom at Thoreau has an average of 16 kids in the morning, and 24 kids in the afternoon for social studies and science. In the afternoon I teach language arts and math to third graders, whose schedule is opposite that of the second graders.

For the last several years I have taught all subjects and looped between second and third grade, which allowed me to be with the same children for two years. This school year, I am teaching language arts and math to a group of second graders in the morning and to a group of third graders in the afternoon.

The morning second graders are an especially bright group. Half of them read well above grade level. They are a particularly curious bunch, which has precipitated many spontaneous research questions. We have a Chinese American girl, a Chinese American boy, a boy who was born in Colombia, a girl whose mother is from Mexico, four African American children, and eight Caucasian children.

Though half the students are academically successful, the others struggle a bit to acquire skills. In this latter group are children from the Nakoma neighborhood as well as those from the Allied neighborhood. Some of the more critical thinkers are from the group that has the least sophisticated skills. The class divides itself neatly into two to three instructional groups—except Davonte. Davonte is just beginning to read consonant-vowel-consonant words, and he becomes frustrated when working in a group.

ADJUSTING THE CLASSROOM FOR DAVONTE

To try to better meet Davonte's social, emotional, and academic needs, I needed to change the kind of teacher I'd been. What follows is a description

of my attempts and Davonte's responses. Though I organize my observations into two sections—socioemotional and academics—really, the two were decidedly intertwined.

Davonte's Social and Emotional Life in Room 102

One of the first things I learned about Davonte was that he had a very, very low threshold for frustration. If he was asked to exert effort toward a goal that was not his own, he became frustrated. For Davonte, frustration was directly linked to anger. He expressed his anger loudly and frequently, turning his body away, and often stomping off from the instructional area. Sometimes, if left alone, he'd return and we'd adjust the task. Other times he'd keep going, right out of the room. On the worst days, he'd grab the door on his way out and slam it hard.

For example, one morning in November I introduced a writing idea to the kids. We had talked about and were learning how to add more detail to our writing. I told the kids they were going to use their new descriptive writing skills to describe a *National Geographic* magazine photograph. I explained how they would each receive a photograph, placed in a folder so that only the writer could see it. When the children had finished writing and editing the descriptions, each child would give his or her writing to a classmate to illustrate. The illustrator would not see the photograph until the artwork was complete. If the kids wrote with detail, we figured, the illustrations would resemble the photographs.

As with most assignments, the kids were anxious to get started. They left the blue rug with their photos tucked in folders and began writing in earnest. I approached Davonte, who was wandering around the room, and told him we'd do the project together. He grumbled and groaned but sat down at a table with me. When I asked him to describe with his words what he saw in the photograph I gave him, being certain that my tone was sincerely friendly and inviting, he pushed away from the table and walked out of the classroom, yelling, "I ain't doin' no stupid writing!" As he stormed out, the class collectively held its breath. Davonte didn't slam the door this time. The students sighed and resumed their work.

I had learned to let Davonte go rather than confront him when he was so full of anger. I had also learned not to blame myself. Something other than writing was deeply troubling him. I'd also learned, in our weeks together, how short-lived Davonte's anger could be, and how easily he came back to us even if the required apology was difficult.

As was the routine, I called the office to let whoever was "on discipline" know that Davonte had left the room. The staff member on

discipline knew well the drill. Davonte could return to Room 102 when he apologized to us and when he was ready to work with me.

The thing I had in my favor was that Davonte always wanted to come back, usually sooner rather than later. There were only a few times when I wasn't ready for his prompt return and needed more time. Most times Davonte made his apology. He knew he was required to look at his classmates and identify what he was sorry for. On this particular morning, about 16 minutes passed between Davonte's departure and his return. He made his apology, with some support. The kids accepted it ("We forgive you," they said sincerely before returning to their writing), and Davonte sat down next to me, took a few breaths, and began describing the photo. Thirty-five minutes later he'd written six sentences, which he'd copied from his dictation to me, about a striped fish he called "Nemo." It was descriptive and he was clearly proud of his work. He couldn't wait to find a classmate to illustrate his words.

This routine became fairly typical—Davonte's unprovoked anger, his leaving, his return and apology, his getting down to the business at hand, and finally and most important, the pride he felt after academic effort and work were completed. He was usually the first to share his work on the blue rug, and his classmates always showed their admiration for his effort.

When Davonte had joined us in September, he lacked social skills. He did not know how to be a polite listener when another child was speaking. He constantly blurted out and interrupted other children when we were on the blue rug. His classmates were clearly annoyed with his rude behavior, but this did not seem at first to affect Davonte. My admonitions also had little effect. ("Davonte, please show Rose respect. She's sharing now and I noticed she showed you respect yesterday when you shared.") We learned, as a group, to ignore the blurt-outs, or to invite Davonte to read with someone or to leave the blue rug to listen to a book tape. I tried to use a friendly tone when I'd say, for example, "Davonte, I notice it's really hard for you to be a polite listener on the blue rug just now. Would you like to listen to a book tape or choose a classmate to read with you?" I'd learned to delete from my voice any trace of annoyance or hint of punitive consequences. For example, I did not say, "Davonte, you are being rude, you are excused from the blue rug." The civility we were working so hard to establish would be further diminished if Davonte slammed the door or pushed over chairs on his way out. I learned that rather than asking Davonte to leave the blue rug when he'd lost his manners, a strategy that worked so well with the other children, it was better for all of us if I stopped instruction, looked at Davonte, and spoke with him slowly and deliberately but with kindness. I would ask him to choose something

different to do or to be more polite. This seemed to interrupt what I believe would have become a tantrum. We used these times as an opportunity for Davonte to read with a classmate. If I could stay calm and rational myself no matter how Davonte was acting, he had a better chance of saving face and making a choice that would be good for him and for our group.

As the weeks passed, I wanted to get a handle on what made Davonte mad. I paid closer attention to his moods. I suspected that much of his emotional life had less to do with school than with what was happening outside of school. Indeed, school may have been the most stable part of his life. I learned to be more sensitive to Davonte's mood when he came into our classroom in the morning. Making the effort to connect with him, to check in one on one, often helped me know how to adjust for his day.

Too often Davonte's day began badly. He frequently got into trouble a lot at breakfast. More than once the woman in charge of food service had him escorted to the principal's office before the school day had even begun because Davonte had been physically aggressive toward another child. At other times he'd get into a ruckus with another student in the hallway and come into class angry. His bad temper was clear when his jaw was set and he refused to meet my eye when I greeted him in the morning. This negative start began to occur much more frequently as Davonte got himself into trouble before school in the mornings. My job, no easy task, was to try to turn him around.

One tactic seemed to help. When I was at the classroom door greeting kids in the morning, I'd pull Davonte aside before he entered the room. I'd ask him to repeat, after me, positive affirming sentences such as, "I am smart," "I will write today and become a better writer," "I will do math today and become a better mathematician," and "I will respect this room and myself." As with most of my schemes, Davonte at first resisted but as I stayed with it he warmed to the idea and even became compliant.

By paying close attention to Davonte's anger, I found that when I expected too much of him, he'd react negatively. Whether in response to a dictated sentence that was a few words too long, a blue rug conversation that went beyond his attention span, or math problems that were bumped up too soon, Davonte, when frustrated, became angry. Over and over I was reminded of the critical importance of providing Davonte with lessons or activities that were finely calibrated to his level. Davonte's Vygotskian zone of proximal development was ringed by an invisible fence that zapped us when he bumped into it.

Despite what I thought was my sensitivity to what set off Davonte, I came to realize that I'd never know how to completely rig the morning to

avoid Davonte's unpredictable and seemingly unprovoked anger. So I decided that he and I might learn the best ways for us to handle the anger once it happened. I not only wanted him to learn ways to manage his emotions, but I wanted to prevent his anger from holding the rest of the class hostage or sabotaging our learning. I also wanted Davonte to know that just because he drew more attention to his angry emotions than the rest of us did to ours, he was not alone in experiencing them. The rest of us got angry too.

Davonte, in a calm mood after recovering from a tantrum, was receptive to his classmates describing what they did when they were angry. Davonte called on kids to tell him what they did when they got mad. He liked listening, and they seemed to like telling. Emily told him how she slowly counted backwards from the number 20. She confessed that she used to start at 10 but found that this didn't give her enough time to cool down. Jake told Davonte how he did the "lemon squeeze," and he then demonstrated with his fist and mock anger. Tyrone told Davonte that what worked for him was to walk away from anger. Desiray described how she would talk it out, beginning with the words, "I'm angry because . . ." I told Davonte that I thought it was important to name the emotion and try to understand its source. I gave him some examples I thought he could relate to.

When he was calm and anger-free, Davonte gave us the impression that he understood better the ways he might choose to relieve and express and use anger. But when he became angry, as he often did, his emotions ruled.

Sometime in the second quarter of the school year, I discovered a quieter way to derail Davonte's anger. If I gently put my finger under his chin or my arm around his shoulder or knelt so that we were eye to eye, Davonte would more likely listen to me and adjust his behavior. There was a very narrow window of opportunity from Davonte's initial show of frustration to his bailing out by leaving the room. I learned to exploit that window. As long as Davonte hadn't moved to full-blown rage, there was hope that I could turn him around. Along with the techniques described above, I also found it useful to change the task requirement, or even the subject. ("So, I see you don't want to write just yet. Would you like to solve those math problems on the board instead?") My goal was to keep him in academics, to keep those skills growing, to allow him the feeling of work well done. With other students, I'd take the attitude, "If you don't want to do it now, I'll help you with it at recess," because it was effective. With Davonte I took the approach that "If I can't adjust this task to your liking, let's try a different task altogether."

Academics

Davonte could not read well at the beginning of the school year, and I noticed that he was the only student who never raised his hand when we

talked about and read our weekly classroom poem, which also provided us a means for word study. Early in the year, I decided to ask Davonte if he'd like to come up to the poem (written in large letters on easel paper) and point to and read for us some of the words he knew. He reluctantly sounded out several consonant-vowel-consonant words. The rest of the class was clearly proud of him, and it turned out that he rather liked the attention. (I want to make clear that the rest of the class did not belittle, pander to, or patronize Davonte with their praise; they sincerely felt proud of him. I understand that difference.)

We began making a habit of having Davonte contribute to our poem. I was aware that this was one way he could be part of the group even when what we were doing seemed over his head. I noticed that Davonte paid attention a bit longer when he was involved than when he was not participating. Also, getting Davonte up in front of his classmates to demonstrate his growing knowledge and skills began to spill over into other areas of our curriculum. I appreciated Davonte's need to be recognized, not as the naughty kid with the temper tantrums, but as a student who was acquiring skills and whose progress the rest of us could celebrate. In short, Davonte could become someone different than who he had been in our classroom in September. Providing Davonte with opportunities to define himself differently was, I think, critically important.

Because Davonte was restless and could be expected to sit for only a very short time when working, I began to put his math on the whiteboard. I wrote problems that took up nearly half the length of the room and taped a number line at Davonte's eye level. He began to enjoy choosing a marker and using the number line to solve single-digit addition and subtraction problems. Soon we moved to single-digit and double-digit problems. Presently we're working on problems with a missing addend (e.g., _____ + 5 = 10). In this way, I get Davonte to do math, and another child can go over his answers with him. I was afraid that Davonte's classmates would claim that it was unfair that Davonte got to do his math on the marker board. I am reminded of how humane this group of children is. They forgive, are always ready to offer another chance, and seem to accept that Davonte needs something different from our classroom than the rest of them do.

I have worked to get Davonte to see himself as a capable learner and as someone whose intelligence his teacher and classmates believe in. I am adamant about pointing out to my students the difference between intelligence and skills—how children can be lacking skills but be quite bright. We have studied important people for whom school was hard, such as Thurgood Marshall, Thomas Edison, Langston Hughes, Marian Anderson, Jacob Lawrence, and many others. We talk about how each did something

important with their lives even though school was rough for them when they were young. I believe the discussions these studies provoke go a long way toward children rethinking their ideas of who is smart and to imagine possibilities for themselves. I can't be certain of the effect of our studies on Davonte. Sometimes he would choose to leave the blue rug at the very moment I thought he would relate to a topic. He did like our charades (when one of us acted out a person we'd studied for the rest to guess) and always chose Hank Aaron or Duke Ellington when it was his turn. Whether this was because those two men had inspiring stories or because they were easy to imitate (pretending to hit a baseball or pound on an imaginary piano) I couldn't tell.

We studied African Americans in American history. We read about George Washington Carver, Wilma Rudolph, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and many others. We wrote haikus to express our admiration of their lives. Sometimes Davonte seemed genuinely interested in the person we were reading about, but at other times he was disengaged from our work during this unit.

One strategy that I found worked well with Davonte was to focus on the positive, to find something to say that validated Davonte's learning. I admit that there were days when I felt beaten down by Davonte, when I didn't feel like trying once again to tweak the routine just for him, when I longed for him to be the one who would adjust a little. Those were my bad days, and my inflexibility did little to help Davonte or myself feel better. Fortunately, there were few days during which I'd insist he follow a routine that worked for the others but clearly not for him, because I learned that when I did, too much precious time was wasted.

Sacred Time

Davonte needed more than his classmates did. He needed more instruction, more individualization, more patience, more thoughtful responses to his behavior. He needed more time with me to trust me. Sometime during the first quarter, I began to use the last 15 minutes of the morning as a time for Davonte and I to read. Nearly every day at 11 a.m., as the other students were completing their math work and moving into free choice, Davonte and I would take two chairs, pull them to the side, and read together. I did not allow others to interrupt us. No other child had privilege to such an arrangement.

Davonte liked this time, even though he had to exert effort. I read every other page of whichever book we had chosen so that he'd feel as if the burden was shared. But the fact is that once Davonte warmed up to the

process, he liked reading to me. And the best part was when he would talk about a character or make predictions or comment on the story. He proved to be a thoughtful reader, and his decoding skills became stronger by the week. We progressed from Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* to Cynthia Rylant's *Henry and Mudge* by second semester.

In my view, reading brought out the best in Davonte. He was patient, he problem-solved without losing his temper, his voice was gentle and unaggressive, and he continually signaled his awareness of me, my ideas, and what I thought of the story as well as giving his own opinions. The time was sacred.

Two important things resulted from our sacred time. One was that Davonte was progressing at an incredible rate with his reading. I was told that he had become the top performer in his Title I group. The second was that Davonte was beginning to trust me. He became openly affectionate with me, throwing his arms around me when waiting for the bus after school. He continued to be moody and unpredictably angry, but there was another layer in our relationship that made all the difference, and I can only name it as trust. I began to trust Davonte, too. As I got to know him, I began to respect him more than I might otherwise have done if I hadn't carved out the time we spent together each morning.

My dad died in March, and I missed a week of school. I had told the kids stories about my dad, with whom I was very close, and the oldsters at the nursing home where he spent his final year. The stories were mostly funny ones, and the kids knew a little about my dad's life and our "wheelchair adventures."

When I returned after being away, my students carefully greeted me, telling me that they'd missed me and that they were glad that I was back. Most looked at the floor rather than at me. I was musing once again on our culture's weird attitude toward death, when I spotted Davonte out of the corner of my eye.

Davonte spotted me at my usual morning post, outside the classroom door greeting kids as they entered. He broke into a run and threw his arms around my waist tight. "Take me with you to the funeral!" he said.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Rakeem transferred to our classroom from another school at the end of the first semester. His former school had begun a building team on him because of behavior problems. Rakeem seemed to bring out the worst in Davonte and vice versa. It began with under-the-breath insults and

escalated to physical aggression. If one or the other of the boys was absent, the day was invariably more peaceful. The tension between them seemed to erode much of the progress that Davonte had made.

I decided to keep the boys apart from each other (whether on the blue rug or in an instructional group) whenever I could, while at the same time encouraging smart problem solving. I modeled for them ways to express anger and resolve conflict. We worked on tone of voice and looking each other in the eye respectfully.

All this, or just the passage of time, helped defuse the tensions between Rakeem and Davonte. Rakeem continued to wrangle with Davonte on occasion, but he also did so with Robert and Jasmine and several others. In many ways he was more aggressive and felt slighted more easily than did Davonte ("What you lookin' at?"). As a class, we became more skilled with problem solving, asserting ourselves respectfully, and resisting bullying. Though we certainly didn't become perfectly well-behaved, we were becoming more savvy in our reactions to discord. Mostly this was done through group discussions and modeling and acknowledging good choices. When someone had hurt feelings or a sense of injustice, we processed the feelings rather than dismissing them.

School was especially hard for Davonte after a break. When he'd seem to have made such good progress (more participation, fewer outbursts, and so on) a break would come and, with both winter and spring break, Davonte did not return for more than a week after school resumed. When he did return, it was as if we did a rewind back to the beginning of the year. Fortunately, the progress we'd made was more quickly gained than the first time around. Yet, as with Rakeem's arrival, it would seem that just as things were looking pretty good, with better established habits and patterns, there'd be something that would sabotage our progress.

One indication that Davonte had backpedaled from the progress we'd made before a break was his relationship with a volunteer, Mary. She was a gentle woman who brought Davonte books and treats, and they read together twice a week. Over the course of the first semester, Davonte learned to trust Mary and only after a time went with her to the library without protest. After winter and spring break, he refused to read with her. As I write this, nearly a month since he has returned from spring break, he still refuses to read with Mary.

SPRING

Most days now, Davonte joins us on the blue rug in the morning. He still interrupts, some days more than others, but he is also more likely to contribute,

whether to the poem or the conversation. He still has trouble remembering to raise his hand, but the other kids cut him slack on this. His attention span is longer than it used to be, but after a quarter hour or so, restlessness sets in. Davonte will need something different, just when the other kids are getting deeper into discussion of our poem or the date in history or a math problem.

This is when I tell him he may invite someone to read with him. Often he does, and Davonte and a classmate will go to his bin of books to select something to share. At other times Davonte will listen to a book on tape or he'll park himself in front of the computer to do a math or word game.

More recently, he has come to school exhausted. He will sit at a table, put his head down, and fall asleep. Some days I ask the office to send someone to help him down to the nurse's office, where he can lie down and get a proper nap. Other days we simply let him doze.

Davonte has become a stronger reader and a better mathematician, and he can write a few sentences. He participates more in discussions, and kids are more willing to work with him than they were in September. He is working significantly below grade level (according to assessments) but he has made more progress than perhaps any of his classmates. Equally important, he interacts a little more with his classmates as he has gotten to know and trust them better through his one-on-one work with them. They are no longer as intimidated by his anger, which is expressed much less frequently than it was at the beginning of the year.

Not long ago Davonte read an entire stanza of our most recent poem, *The Song of Hiawatha* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He raised his hand when we were dividing the long poem to read it aloud, and he read his part well. It was an important moment for us.

This is not to say there aren't still bad days; there are. Davonte still becomes angry when frustrated, and he continues to express his anger in destructive ways. Yet he is much more willing to process an incident with me and the class after he has calmed down, and he has not resorted to physical aggression in our classroom, as he sometimes does outside the classroom. He smiles more and stays with a task longer.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

I have learned how important it is to communicate daily to Davonte, in sincere ways, that I believe in his intelligence. It has been equally important to find positive things to say to him about his work or effort or himself. Corrections, I have learned, are best delivered gently, saving my most firm approach only when others' learning is disturbed. When correcting or redirecting Davonte in the group, I found it effective to stop, pause, get his attention gently, and tell him plainly why we don't like what he is doing

(e.g., interrupting, being rude to another child, disrespecting the classroom). After a time, he appeared to recognize when his behavior was unfair to his classmates, because he would make quick and seemingly sincere apologies. Perhaps this was more potent after he had slowly built a relationship, through reading and math, with so many of the students in Room 102.

Spending one-on-one time with Davonte nearly every day for 15 to 20 minutes seemed to be the single effort that made the most difference in Davonte's academic progress and in his relationship with me.

I learned to not give up when Davonte was giving me all the messages that he was not interested in learning. While the class is working on a writing assignment, I will escort Davonte to the easel with markers and ask him about his day. He may turn away from me or grump at me, but when I make as if to go ahead anyway with the writing and ask him to help me spell a word, Davonte, body still turned away, head lost in his sweatshirt hood, will begin spelling the word. If I stay with it long enough, Davonte will rotate his body, his hood will come down, and he and I will be writing about his weekend.

I became better at knowing when enough is enough. For example, when the lower-skilled group and I sit around a table and practice the week's dictated sentences, Davonte can often do some but not all of the words. I praise him for what he's done, knowing he's at the end of his effort, and give him the rest to copy so he'll stay with us. Another way to keep him with us, I learned, was to give him the dictated sentence to read slowly for the group to write. Because this was a teacher role, the kids would, with amusement, call him "Mr. Davonte." "Mr. Davonte, would you repeat that please?" "Mr. Davonte, would you slow down some?" Davonte enjoyed this role immensely, and the group he was with seemed untroubled by the fact that Davonte was giving them their dictated sentence. Even Rakeem was okay with it, something I didn't expect.

Sometimes before school, after a bad day especially, having Davonte repeat a mantra seemed to have good effect. I'd say, "I'm here to learn. I will do math and become a better mathematician. I will read and become a stronger reader. I will write and become a better writer. I will respect this room and the people in it. I will do my best. I am smart. I will learn." Sentence by sentence, Davonte will half smile and repeat these sentences, and it seems to have a positive effect on the mood with which he approached his morning work.

Shortly before this writing, at the end of April, I decided that Davonte needed an incentive to accomplish more work in writing and math. He was doing well in reading but had made less progress in the other two areas.

Overcoming my own stubborn opposition to overt bribery, a brown bag with some reward inside that Davonte earns if he's completed his

math and writing, as well as reading, has served the purpose to motivate him to accomplish more work. The more problems he has solved or sentences he has written, the better his work habits have become. If he has a bad day, the bag is there, with his name on it, for the next day he completes his daily work.

The apologies that I have required of Davonte over the course of the school year were not meant to humiliate him; rather they were meant to help him begin to own his own behavior. The apologies also helped Davonte's classmates know that he is trying, even as he messes up, and that when he is rude he takes responsibility for his behavior. They tell him, after every apology, that they forgive him, and I sense his apology helps them do that.

Preserving the dignity of this small boy in the classroom was paramount. I've long subscribed to the notion that the humanity of a classroom can be measured by how the least powerful are treated. I was mindful of this in the way our class embraced Davonte, but also held him accountable.

But it is also true that, as much as I tried to remain calm with Davonte, there were several times over the school year where I was just plain angry and I let Davonte know. For example, one morning in late March when Davonte returned to the classroom after being at Title I reading, he slumped over the table of an instructional group. We politely asked him to join us or go somewhere else, at which point he began angrily barking and growling at us. The kids repeated their pleas for him to stop. At this point, I decided to intervene. I picked him up and carried him down the hall. There, I met with the school counselor, who had been alerted by another teacher to help with a fight she'd witnessed between Davonte and another student in the hallway. Davonte had come to our classroom fresh from that "fight," which explained his aggression. My anger seemed to surprise him, and perhaps had the effect that he learned to recognize he had stepped over a boundary.

In the area of academics, it was important for me to know the sensible next step instructionally and to be always mindful of how easily Davonte became discouraged with schoolwork.

I learned that it also was helpful to offer Davonte many opportunities to share with the class what he'd learned. Though he got more attention than any of the other students, they seemed to understand his need, and they celebrated his accomplishments. He often read his writing (which he would dictate to me, I would write, and he would copy) to his classmates. The pride he took in sharing in such ways convinced me that he believed in himself as a learner, in his worth to our group. This was what was important to me, this was what I worked to have come about. This change from the beginning of the year was what pleased me most.

A student teacher, Ms. K., joined Room 102 for the second semester. Davonte avoided working with her and sometimes was disrespectful toward her (not following her directions, subverting her attempts to work with his group). He did not begin to trust her until well into second semester. I remember clearly the day we took the kids to the arboretum, pretending we were all Lewis and Clark recording unknown plants and animals west of the Mississippi River. That day, Davonte worked with Ms. K without resistance. She helped him draw a plant, measure it with a tape measure, and look at it through a magnifying glass. She recorded his words describing it as the two hunched over the plant together in the morning sun in the arboretum. It was near the end of April, and Ms. K had been with our class since the middle of January. Finally Davonte had begun to trust her.

CONCLUSIONS

From my school year with Davonte, carefully observing and reflecting on what I could do to best help him learn, I concluded that:

1. Davonte's needs required that our classroom allow him more latitude. He had privileges that the other children did not, but they knew and I knew that he needed something different from the rest of them.
2. Davonte excelled when he could make his efforts public to the rest of the class, whether it was reading words from the poem we were studying or reading his story that he dictated to me and then copied.
3. Davonte viewed himself as a part of the group when he was given a role that empowered him in reference to his classmates. Allowing him to choose someone to read with or selecting a classmate with whom to go over his whiteboard math problems were particularly effective techniques. Later in the year, I found that asking Davonte to read the dictated sentences for his group made him feel academically powerful. The more academic power he felt, the less he seemed to need to get his power by tantrums or sabotage.
4. As the year progressed, I found that if I could set apart a time every day to spend alone with Davonte, our relationship became more successful. I grew to admire his intellect as he grew to trust me. When he did have his messy expressions of frustration-turned-to-anger, he was, as the year went on, more likely to want to rejoin the classroom sooner and apologize to our group more appropriately.

5. It helped to have Davonte repeat positive, affirming sentences before entering the classroom in the morning. At other times I reminded him of the purpose of school and of why we were here, hoping to catch him before he completely withdrew from an academic effort.
6. Requiring Davonte to take some responsibility for his choices was helpful. He could then bask in the glow of his classmates admiring and appreciating his work or accept their forgiveness if he had made the classroom feel unsafe.
7. I am quite sure that I would not have been able to work as I did with Davonte if I had 20 some kids in a classroom, rather than the 17-member SAGE group. I am familiar with working in a classroom of 25 or so kids, and have had much trouble finding the time to individualize for one, or creating the sort of community our class of 17 was able to make.
8. I have come to believe even more deeply in a kind of teaching that might be best called "relentless teaching." Relentless teaching is described as just that: teaching that is relentless (Borsuk, 2004). It works best, I think, for those who truly believe that every child is capable of learning and that learning is ultimately liberating.

EPILOGUE

Looking back on my year with Davonte and considering how that year and my research shaped my teaching convinced me once again that each child is an individual and that my responses to my students should have more to do with their particular academic and social needs than with my general agenda. If there is one thing that Davonte taught me, a lesson relearned every time I pay close attention, it is this notion of each child having his own particular needs. In education we are so earnest to generalize from past experience to make our teaching lives better informed and more successful. The danger, for me, is that taking what I have learned with one child and applying it to another seemingly similar child does not give the next child the room to show me his or her particular needs.

That said, there are ways in which my year with Davonte has affected the way I teach. I am ever more aware of my power to redefine children's perceptions of themselves and their classmates. Making public a child's clear thinking or admiring aloud a student's work truly can alter the way a child sees himself as a learner. Acknowledging the thought that went into a response, even if—or especially when—the response did not accurately answer the question, also goes a long way to preserve the child's

pride and show a child and his classmates that he is indeed an intelligent, competent learner. I have found this to be especially true for students who have been reluctant learners or not particularly successful in school. As important as this is for the child, it is equally important for the child's peers. When they begin to see their classmate in a way that causes them to respect him more, the old roles that kids assign to themselves and one another are rearranged and even upended. I saw how this deliberate approach gradually changed Davonte's belief in himself as a learner and his investment in our classroom community, and I have since seen how it has a similar effect on others.

I also have become more diligent about making certain that all my students are participating in their learning. If we are on the blue rug (in whole-group instruction, when it is easier for kids to tune out if they are so inclined), talking about a topic we have been studying, I am sure to call on those who might not be paying attention. I used to allow students with raised hands to carry the discussion forward. Now I tell my students that "checking out" is not an option. If they choose not to pay attention, then I will teach them individually at recess. And I follow up on this. After several recess tutorials with students who tended not to involve themselves in our class conversations, I now have much better participation and involvement. They know I will call on them even if they are not raising their hands. No longer am I the polite teacher who avoids inflicting discomfort on a child by calling on her when she doesn't know the answer. If she doesn't know, I find another way to teach or explain. Students become involved in this, often doing better than I in getting at an idea from another angle. Not knowing is not something to feel bad about, but not paying attention is. I like how this approach has transformed learning in my classroom, and I am aware that Davonte was the one who caused me to rethink the pattern of my instructional approach with reluctant learners.

The way in which I invest time in my students' learning has altered. If a child needs more time for learning place value or writing a sentence or reading a book, I am more likely to find that time. During silent reading, game time, or when a busy lull has settled in the classroom, I will make it my business to sidle up to a child who needs extra support on a skill or piece of work and give my time and attention. This is like the idea of relentless teaching that I refer to in my study, and it can be exhausting, because as a result there is less "downtime" for me in my classroom. The upside is that the students I am likely to spend the extra time with know that I believe in their capacity to learn. It is likely exhausting for them, too, but the effect has been that more of my students seem to be completing projects they are proud of or acquiring the skills they need to know.

Reading novels is one of the more important experiences in my life. To better appreciate the circumstances and forces that affect those with lives

very different from my own, I have been reading more books by authors who I believe may help me better understand another view of the world. Recently I finished *The Known World* by Edward Jones, which examines the life of a former slave. Because Jones's book examines the life of a Black slaveholder in the Antebellum South, the story offered me yet another fascinating prism from which to view race and power. Presently I am reading Zadie Smith's books *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*. Her novels, particularly *On Beauty*, take on the culture wars from the perspective of those whose lives are directly influenced by them. I have recently read Geoffrey Canada's *Fist Stick Knife Gun*, which reveals the escalation of urban violence and offers a hopeful response to it. *The Fortress of Solitude* by Jonathan Letham explores a friendship across race, and the course two boys' lives play out, in part because of the color of their skin. Letham's book gave me yet another opportunity to question the ways in which people are assigned roles and to consider the possibilities of interrupting the patterns and habits that help create those roles. Books like *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night* by Mark Haddon and *The Discovery of Slowness* by Stan Nadolny have allowed me to consider the world from the point of view of a child who seems out of step with his peers.

Finally, I have been thinking more and more about the effects of poverty on the lives of my students. *The American Dream* by Jason DeParle speaks forcefully on this topic. I am frustrated that a parent can work full time yet still not significantly improve the circumstances of his or her life due to the disgrace of minimum wage and lack of opportunity. I am angry that we have neighborhoods in our city where children's lives are hemmed in by drugs and crime. I am ever more aware how difficult lives can be and how unfair it is to judge those who struggle daily with finances, transportation, health, and family challenges.

I am reminded again and again that the battle of the achievement gap ought to be fought on many fronts: housing, jobs, training opportunities, child care, living wage . . . I have recently read an article in *The New York Times* that describes a study that concludes that a child in a dysfunctional family living in a healthy neighborhood has a better chance of success than does a child in a functional family living in an unwholesome neighborhood. I am once again reminded that as we try to counter the effects of poverty on children's learning in the classroom, we are fighting for a civil right on but one front of a battle that needs so many advocates on so many fronts.

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