

AN EQUAL CHANCE *at* SUCCESS

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING PRACTICES ADDRESS STUDENTS' DIFFERING NEEDS

By Vicki Vescio

The Outcomes standard of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) emphasizes professional learning that impacts teacher practice in a way that supports high levels of achievement for all children.

Educators at all levels need to be asking, "What are the teaching practices that support equitable contexts and help students feel comfortable in taking the risks to learn?" One way to address this is to focus on relationships, relevance, and responsibility.

If educators are to support the learning of students who have traditionally struggled for success in school, administrators and teachers must understand the difference between equity and equality and engage in classroom practices that support the former.

In simple terms, *equality* reflects the idea that every student should get the same thing. In contrast, *equity* is defined by the idea that every student should have an equal opportunity to be successful.

Embedded in this definition is the understanding that

an equal opportunity to be successful means students' differing needs are met in differing ways. In my work with teachers, I have found that the most effective way to promote equity for students is through enacting culturally responsive practices that focus on relationships, relevance, and responsibility. Here are examples of everyday practices teachers can engage in that will support their efforts to move toward greater levels of equity in their classrooms.

RELATIONSHIPS:

The importance of knowing children, families, and community

Much of the literature on culturally responsive teaching practices supports the idea that a teacher's relationships with her or his students are critical to creating a classroom culture where children feel safe and cared for (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

This is important because it is only after these basic needs are met that children will be able to take the risks to learn. However, one should not assume that all teachers, by virtue of their tendency to care about children, have the





STUDENT ASSETS TEMPLATE

Family/cultural assets	How you can use this to increase student engagement and learning
Interests/personal assets	How you can use this to increase student engagement and learning
Learning strategies	How you can use this to increase student engagement and learning
Home responsibilities and after-school activities	How you can use this to increase student engagement and learning

STUDENT PROFILE TEMPLATE

STUDENT INITIALS: _____

FAMILY AND CULTURAL CONTEXT
 (e.g., number of family members, home responsibilities, travel to school, cultural background, language(s) spoken at home, parent or guardian order sibling/other adults available to provide assistance after-school care)

PERSONAL INTERESTS AND ASSETS

PROVIDE ANY OTHER ASSESSMENT DATA YOU DEEM RELEVANT

Reading: _____
 Math: _____
 Other: _____

LEARNING STRATEGIES: In what learning situations have you observed this child to be most engaged? Mark all where you have observed high engagement:

- Test-based visual: overhead, first worksheet
- Graphic-based visual: teacher pictures, diagrams, PowerPoint
- Auditory active: rts, rhyme, song, rhythm, chanting, call and response
- Interpersonal: cooperative activity, incorporate student talk, partner work
- Model: demonstrate, provide model to follow
- Sensory motor: manipulate, act out, incorporate movement, use gestures, incorporate food
- Metacognitive: performance, multimodal, lesson with high emotional content
- Grouped: in student interest in _____
- Other: _____

What is the best access size for this student? _____ (1) partner _____ small group _____ large group

How would you rate this child's distractibility? _____ low _____ moderate _____ high

What is the optimum lesson length for this student? _____ 5-10 minutes _____ 15-20 minutes _____ 25-30 minutes _____ more than 30 minutes

How does your current practice consider the cultural and personal assets of this child? _____

How can you use what you know about this student to teach him or her? _____

Are there any additional special considerations for enhancing the engagement and learning of this child? _____

and support positive outcomes. For example, I ask teachers to identify six students who come from a background that is different from their own relative to race, ethnicity, or social class. Once these students are identified, teachers complete a profile template for each child. See the sample profile template on p. 20.

Completing this profile template for a sample of their students accomplishes two key goals. First, teachers engage in activities with their students that push them to understand the lives of the children in their classroom in a manner that moves to a much deeper level. Second, developing a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of a representative sample of the students typically encourages teachers to get to know all of their students at a deeper level. The ultimate goal is that the understanding teachers develop from this activity impacts their approach to teaching in a way that more deeply considers the needs of the diverse students in their classroom.

In addition to completing these profile templates, it is important that teachers engage in professional learning that helps them acquire a greater understanding of their students' families. To help achieve this, I ask teachers to attend one community event that does not occur at their school and where at least some of their students' families will be present.

skills to develop these types of classroom cultures.

In my work with teachers, I start with the basic premise that teacher learning must be centered on how to build the types of relationships with students that will foster community

STUDENT PROFILE TEMPLATE

STUDENT INITIALS:	
FAMILY AND CULTURAL CONTEXT (e.g. number of family members, home responsibilities, travel to school, cultural background, language(s) spoken at home, parent or guardian/order sibling/other adults available to provide assistance, after-school care)	
PERSONAL INTERESTS AND ASSETS	
PROVIDE ANY OTHER ASSESSMENT DATA YOU DEEM RELEVANT	
<p>Reading:</p> <p>Math:</p> <p>Other:</p>	
<p>LEARNING STRATEGIES: In what learning situations have you observed this child to be most engaged? Mark all where you have observed high engagement:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Text-based visual: overhead, text, worksheet</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Graphic-based visual: pictures, diagrams, PowerPoint</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Auditory passive: teacher lecture/student listen</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Auditory active: rap, rhyme, song, rhythm, chanting, call and response</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Interpersonal: cooperative activity, incorporate student talk, partner work</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Model: demonstrate, provide model to follow</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Sensory motor: manipulate, act out, incorporate movement, use gestures, incorporate food</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Multisensory: performance, multimedia, lesson with high emotional content</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Grounded in student interest in _____</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other _____</p>	
What is the best group size for this student?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1/1 <input type="checkbox"/> partners <input type="checkbox"/> small group <input type="checkbox"/> large group
What is this child's need for movement?	<input type="checkbox"/> low <input type="checkbox"/> moderate <input type="checkbox"/> high
How would you rate this child's distractibility?	<input type="checkbox"/> low <input type="checkbox"/> moderate <input type="checkbox"/> high
What is the optimum lesson length for this student?	<input type="checkbox"/> 5-10 minutes <input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 minutes <input type="checkbox"/> 25-30 minutes <input type="checkbox"/> more than 30 minutes
How does your current practice consider the cultural and personal assets of this child?	
How can you use what you know about this student to teach him or her?	
Are there any additional special considerations for enhancing the engagement and learning of this child?	

STUDENT ASSETS TEMPLATE

Family/cultural assets	How you can use this to increase student engagement and learning
Interests/personal assets	How you can use this to increase student engagement and learning
Learning strategies	How you can use this to increase student engagement and learning
Home responsibilities and after-school activities	How you can use this to increase student engagement and learning

I let them know that the goal of this activity is to have a one-on-one conversation with at least one caregiver to see how their classroom rules, policies, procedures, and teaching strategies are congruent or incongruent with what is expected at home. Almost without exception, teachers report how the anxiety of doing this activity gives way to a sense of connection and greater understanding of a child and his/her family.

For example, in a written reflection, one teacher said, “I see what a huge difference it can make when you build strong relationships with your students’ families. First of all, families are windows into children’s lives outside of school. It is clear that if the school life is drastically different from the child’s home life, it will make it difficult to keep them engaged and learning.”

RELEVANCE:

Connecting learning to lives

Once teachers have spent the time to get to know their students on a deeper level, I will typically work with them to incorporate this information and use it in their daily teaching practices. This is where relevance becomes an important piece in working toward greater equity in the classroom.

Delpit (2006) reminds us that, when working with racially and economically diverse students, it is imperative to connect the curriculum to their lives and create lessons that target students’ assets. This is the rationale behind an activity in which

teachers take the information they learned from the profile templates and the community event to create a chart of each child’s assets.

Framing this activity from the perspective of students’ assets pushes teachers to think about how their current pedagogy considers students’ strengths. See the student assets template above.

After teachers develop a chart for each of the six original students, I ask them to look across the charts to plan and implement a lesson based on assets that are common to two or more of the students. A typical example of this is when a teacher notices that students have kinesthetic learning styles and, as a result, works to develop a lesson that incorporates greater levels of movement for the children.

A second example is to have teachers plan lessons in which students work collaboratively with a partner or small group of peers. The idea is that teachers plan a lesson based on students’ assets, implement it, and reflect on evidence of the success of the lesson based on student learning and engagement.

One teacher implemented a spelling game that targeted her students’ needs for movement. “The Sparkle strategy is a sure winner,” the teacher noted in reflection. “Students are improving academically and behaviorally. The game has increased the excitement around spelling.”

If I am working with groups of teachers over several weeks, I ask them to engage in this cycle of planning, implementing,

and reflecting at least three times. This reinforces the process of using practices that are relevant to students' lives and demonstrates to the teachers that doing so is a relatively simple way to engage students in learning activities that lead to positive learning outcomes.

The premise behind getting teachers to try to use what they have learned about their students is an important step in getting them to really "see" the significance of making the curriculum relevant to children's lives. In addition, the practice of making the curriculum relevant supports greater equity because it helps to reframe classroom practices in a way that more effectively meets the learning needs of racially and economically diverse children.

RESPONSIBILITY:

An imperative to enact socially just practices

Responsibility means developing a sense of obligation to using practices that foster an equitable classroom culture. To accomplish this, I ask teachers to reflect on their experiences with developing relationships and using relevant curriculum and make three commitments to how they will continue these efforts in their daily practices.

The intention is that the commitments serve as a reminder of the responsibility educators have to be persistent in their efforts to support the success of all students. Typically, the commitments teachers make connect to the concepts of relationships and relevance.

For example, one teacher wrote, "A commitment I am making is to modify curricular materials to reflect the cultural and familial lives of my students. This means creating big books, math problems, science experiments, and other instructional materials that are meaningful to their lives. A commonality that

I discovered among my target students was the fact that their cultural and personal assets are rarely reflected in the curriculum. I believe relevant lessons will help them to make connections beyond simple understanding."

This reflection demonstrates how one teacher has reframed her thinking as it relates to her day-to-day practices and how they need to shift to connect more successfully with her students. In my own work leading professional learning, my next steps are to find a way that I can reconnect with teachers to discuss how their efforts to enact their commitments have progressed. This will allow me to take the next step in fulfilling my own responsibilities to foster the reframing of teaching practices that promote greater equity.

Teachers, administrators, and teacher educators must work consistently to find ways to meet the needs of all students in a manner that will help them to be academically and socially successful. Following an axiom of relationship, relevance, and responsibility will focus educators' efforts to create more equitable schooling environments that support success for all students.

REFERENCES

- Delpit, L. (2006).** *Lessons from teachers.* *Journal of Teacher Education* 57(3), 220-231.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009).** *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Learning Forward. (2011).** *Standards for Professional Learning.* Oxford, OH: Author.
-
- Vicki Vescio (vescio@coe.ufl.edu) is a clinical assistant professor at the University of Florida. ■**

How we can bridge the culture gap

Continued from p.16

- Engage the wider community — including students — to determine urgent priorities, risks, and actions to consider.
- Include policymakers in the school's transformation work; make the process and practices public and shared.
- Reconceptualize support and evaluation systems so progress and change are valued variables.

CONTINUOUS AND CONSTANT WORK

This article is an introduction to a framework that is much more complex and responsive than a simple program or set of activities. The work of transformation — and in particular, transformation for social justice — must remain continuous and constant. As such, for as long as inequities remain and interruption is needed, we must create and sustain conditions in schools where this cycle of awareness, interruption, meaning

making, and radical action for improvement can occur.

REFERENCES

- Center for Public Education. (2007).** *The United States of education: The changing demographics of the United States and their schools.* Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Hilliard, A.G., III. (1995).** *The maroon within us: Essays on African American community socialization.* Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press.
- Peters, G. (2012).** *Teacher transformation: Transcending hegemonic roots* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Department of Educational Leadership, California State University, East Bay, CA.
-
- Gregory Peters (gpeter@sfcoss.org) is executive director of the San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools. ■**