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DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE

Nader I. Twal

WHAT I WISH I HAD KNOWN AS A NEW TEACHER

I remember my first year of teaching high school English language arts in northern California in fall 1997. I was hired three months before I finished my teaching credential program and only two months into student teaching. The school where I was hired had suddenly found itself with a large increase in enrollment and a need for more sections to balance class sizes. More sections meant more teachers, and that meant my first full year of teaching started sooner than I expected.

Not only was I underprepared, but my course load was incredibly difficult. To address the overflow situation, teachers who had too many students were asked to select a few students from their classes to build out my roster. That process resulted in me inheriting five different course preps in five different classrooms across the campus.

In most of the classes, the students selected to fill my roster were the ones with the highest needs, generally students of color, and mostly labeled “NP,” or noncollege prep

track. Even then, I knew that label didn't feel right. It undermined my desire to see all students learn and sent a message to those students that we had already written off their educational futures.

Mostly what I wanted to do at that time was to survive my first year, but I knew I wanted all students to achieve, especially those most marginalized or ostracized by the education system. What I didn't know was how to bridge from those intentions to actual impact. The rigorous teacher prep program in which I was enrolled didn't prepare me to teach in culturally relevant and responsive ways, and induction programs were not as developed as they are now.

These days, I often think about how much better I could have done for my students had I internalized an equity mindset and then acted on a few concrete strategies to put those values into action. And I think about how to help today's new teachers do that.

Now that the education field has come to a collective realization that equity is not a peripheral conversation, but the conversation we need to have, district induction and teacher preparation programs need to be part of that conversation. We need to reorient how we prepare our new teachers to meet students where they are and amplify their cultural wealth.

I wish that I had developed an equity mindset in my first years of teaching. Because I didn't know what strengths to mine, I underused the wealth of talent that I had in my classes. That's why today I maintain a deep passion for helping new teachers become equipped to meet the needs of all students. When I think about what I wish I had known and been coached to do

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that first year, five main ideas come to mind. I recommend that all new teachers engage in these strategies and that districts, universities, and everyone involved in new teacher support create opportunities and incentives for them.

Get to know your students deeply. Make an ongoing commitment to learning the students' stories and listen with the intent to mine their cultural and linguistic assets. Students come to us with rich experiences and cultural knowledge, and we can leverage that in service to their learning. Their stories and lives are not monolithic, so we need to create opportunities for them to share throughout the year and not just in the traditional "getting to know you" phase at the opening of the semester.

Create asset maps of their communities. Students' cultural and linguistic assets are often embedded deeply in their communities. Take time to study their neighborhoods, perhaps using Google Maps or a similar resource, to understand the resources accessible to them, and consider what you might be able to tap into to activate their learning. Also consider what resources their communities might lack because

of historical neglect and how you might work to bridge some of those opportunity gaps in your efforts. If possible, and in accord with your district protocols, visit their neighborhoods and learn what the community members value about them.

Invite members of the community into the classroom. Leverage the cultural wealth in the community to strengthen lessons and anchor new learning in students' current contexts and lives. Using the lived experience of community members as curriculum both honors the various forms of intellectual capital in the world and elevates traditionally minoritized perspectives that can deepen your students' understanding of the world around them.

Find an equity mindset mentor teacher. Principal Baruti Kafele, a friend and colleague who also writes for this journal (see his column on p. 15), often speaks of meeting students where they are, as they are. He advises educators to ensure that students' experiences, voices, and identities are centered in our work. His advice has been invaluable for me, and I recommend all educators find a teacher mentor who embodies this

equity mindset. Invite them into your classroom to observe and provide you with feedback. Watch them teach and debrief your observations to surface their instructional moves and how they planned their lessons to be culturally relevant and responsive.

Critically reflect on your practice, often and honestly. Perhaps most importantly, consistently and intentionally reflect on your practice and the impact of your teaching. You can use hard data (e.g. test scores), but also ask for data that taps into students' perspectives (e.g. student interviews, observations, and student written reflections) to determine if your intentions are translating into the desired impact. Our students deserve the best version of us.

Though I cannot go back and change the experience of those students I first taught in northern California, I can honor all that they taught me by sharing these lessons born from my experiences with them. And I can encourage today's new teachers to learn from their own students by approaching them with an equity mindset and a readiness to listen. ■



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