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. ■