

# KEEPING IT REAL AND RELEVANT

## BUILDING AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUR DIVERSE CLASSROOM

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# Introduction

According to the Center for Public Education, U.S. classrooms consist more and more of black and Latino students (2007). By contrast, teacher demographics have remained overwhelmingly white (84 percent) and female (76 percent; the National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). These figures have hardly changed in the last 15 years. Educators must challenge themselves and their students to share personal and cultural information with one another, and must work to address learning gaps and resource inequities among different subgroups.

## **The Pursuit of Equity in Education**

I once asked students in my 9th grade English class to reflect on and write about some memories from elementary school. Expecting them to write about academic or extracurricular achievements, I was taken aback to read the following response from one student:

When I was in the 4th grade, my family was kicked out of the apartment we were living in after moving here from Mexico. I remember my mom leaving us. I remember needing to go live with abuela [grandma]. I remember my older brother would always stay out late. He'd then come home and beat me up for no reason. I was afraid of my brother. The 4th grade is when I started to sleep in the attic so my brother would no longer beat me up. I'd also hide up there from all my family drama. We were supposed to move to this country for a better life. . . .

This story reminds us that every single day children go to school struggling from family, economic, or social conditions that profoundly affect their ability to learn. Educators who focus solely on students' academic development without taking into account their lived reality outside of school are guilty of perpetuating a dehumanizing system with unwanted repercussions. The greatest threat to future generations—indeed, to the very foundations of democracy—is found in our too-often callous disregard for educational inequities. When schools don't treat students from different backgrounds fairly, neither does society at large.

Equity exists when teachers provide students with the tools they need to be successful not just academically, but also culturally and psychologically. If all students were alike, equity would simply be a matter of distributing resources equally to all students. Of course, every teacher knows that this is not the case. Individual students have vastly disparate needs that can radically affect the quality of their learning.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching as a Means Toward Equity**

To facilitate learning in multicultural classrooms, teachers must relate the content they teach to their students' cultural backgrounds. Before they can do this, however, they must first understand who their students really are. Geneva Gay (2000) teaches us that culturally responsive teaching connects students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles to academic knowledge and intellectual tools in ways that legitimize what students already know. And to address students' sociocultural realities through curriculum content, culturally responsive teachers must transcend their own inherent biases first.

Culturally responsive classrooms require careful planning and explicit teaching around social interactions so that students learn to assume responsibility for their learning, feel comfortable exploring differences of opinion, and accept that they may need help from their classmates to be successful. Teachers in these classrooms help to bridge different ways of knowing and engage students from nondominant cultures as they develop proficiency with unfamiliar skills. Along the way, students learn to see the world from different perspectives and identify the risks of assuming priv-

ilege or power (or lack of either) in others—vital skills for success in the world beyond school.

To properly understand human development, we must consider it in a much broader context than that which can be immediately observed (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Very often, the experiences our students have had at home or in their communities will indirectly manifest themselves in the classroom. Consider the following real-life example. One morning, I was visiting a 2nd grade classroom as children began to file in for the day. The teacher was counting heads, saying hello, and moving about the room. As she approached the coatroom, she noticed a group of girls giggling and squirming. Brandon, a skinny little boy in the class, had caught their attention by lifting his shirt to expose his belly. When the teacher noticed what Brandon was doing, she immediately reprimanded him.

“Excuse me! What do you think you’re doing?” she yelled.

At that moment, every little head in the room turned to look at Brandon, who, without missing a beat, lifted his shirt and announced, “Check out my tight abs! No bullet could ever make its way through me!” The girls by the coatroom giggled again before scattering back to their seats.

Where does a 2nd grader learn to show off his body and discuss surviving a gunshot? Clearly, what Brandon has learned at home or in the community has made its way into the classroom space.

As classroom teachers, we can do our part, one classroom at a time, to ensure our students have equitable learning experiences. We can do our part to build authentic relationships with our students. The strategies presented in this text are meant to support teachers as they look for ideas to engage all students in real and relevant ways.

Now, reflect on the following questions:

- Where specifically would you assume that Brandon learned the behavior he exhibited in class?
- Why did Brandon’s behavior make its way into the classroom?
- How might the teacher equitably intervene in this situation?
- What are some examples of students’ outside lives manifesting themselves in your classroom or school?

# Self-Awareness: Relationship-Building in Diverse Classrooms

Every teacher understands that building positive relationships with students is essential to ensuring their success in school. Unfortunately, too many student-teacher relationships today are based on false pretenses or faulty assumptions; what a disservice we do to our students' potential when our perceptions of them are based only on rumor or asides from other teachers ("Oh, you've got *him* this year. Good luck!"). Creating successful and equitable learning environments for our students means committing to the fact that every learner has a compelling life story worth getting to know. Our role as teachers is to help students uncover, for themselves, how personal identities and learning habits developed outside of school might inform their success in the classroom.

### **Student Assumptions About Teachers: The Case of Ms. H**

Just as teachers make assumptions about students, students, too, make assumptions about teachers. Building relationships in the classroom is a two-way street.

Consider the following example. A few years ago, during my time as a school administrator, a young teacher approached me in the hallway.

"Dr. Lopez," she said, "you wouldn't believe what just happened in my class! One of my students thought I was *rich*! We were discussing *The Great Gatsby*, and Miguel mentioned how white people have a lot of money—'Just like you, right Ms. H?,' he said. I told him the truth—that I live in my parents' basement and don't have any hot water!"

Ms. H was a white woman teaching in a predominately Latino school. Clearly, some students in her class associated her identity with wealth. I applauded Ms. H for her effort to continue the conversation with her students and to break down stereotypes. Though she wasn't entirely comfortable, Ms. H engaged her class in a dialogue about the dangers of making assumptions. At the same time, it occurred to me that it was April—why were her students only now discovering that she lived with her parents and had no hot water? To create an honest learning space, we need to begin unpacking assumptions and realities with students in our classrooms sooner rather than later.

What assumptions do you think students make of you? How have you engaged students in honest conversations regarding their assumptions about you versus the reality?

### **Self-Awareness Strategies: Unpacking Assumptions, Discovering Realities**

Self-awareness is the ability to accurately judge one's own performance and behavior and to respond appropriately to different social situations—a skill vital to student success. The following activities for instilling self-awareness can help both students and teachers distinguish assumptions from realities in the classroom, and can lay the foundation for courageous conversations about race, socioeconomic status, and other such sensitive issues as the year goes on. I encourage teachers to conduct these activities alongside their students and to be the first to share their work.

#### **Assumptions About My Teacher**

Prior to meeting with your students, make a list of 8 to 10 questions about yourself that they will answer as a whole group. You may create a slideshow out of your questions or simply write them on the board. Some sample questions:

- Where do you think I was born?
- What's my favorite color?

- What's my favorite cartoon?
- What do you think I like to do for fun?
- What kind of car do you think I drive?

Have students respond to your questions and list all their responses on the board. After all the questions are answered, reveal the true answers to each of them one by one. Ask your students to reflect on their assumptions versus the realities. If students' assumptions were correct, ask them why they felt this was so.

### **Two Masks**

Students create two different masks: one showing how others perceive them, and one showing how they feel on the inside. As the teacher, you should begin by sharing your masks with the whole group. (I have seen teachers draw witch-like features on the mask, showing how they're perceived, and music notes, pets, or children on the other mask.) Discuss with students how we often get so hung up on how we want others to "see us" that we fail to share our real selves. Students then break into pairs to discuss why they drew their masks the way they did. As you walk around, pay special attention to students who exhibit courage by sharing deep and perhaps uncomfortable feelings.

### **The Johari Window**

Developed by U.S. psychologists Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in the 1950s, the Johari Window is a simple strategy that teachers can use for understanding self-awareness and personal development, improving classroom communication, building interpersonal relationships, and fostering positive group dynamics. The idea is to have students fill in the four quadrants in Figure 1.1 and discuss in a small group or one-on-one with the teacher:

1. *The Public Self*. What is widely known both to us and to others (e.g., name, height, race, neighborhood).
2. *The Blind Self*. What others know about us, but that we don't know about ourselves (e.g., when a teacher sees in a student his ability to

**FIGURE 1.1**  
**The Johari Window**

	What Others See in Me	What Others Do Not See in Me
What I See in Me	<i>The Public Self:</i>	<i>The Private Self:</i>
What I Do Not See in Me	<i>The Blind Self:</i>	<i>The Undiscovered Self:</i>

be a great leader or communicator, although the student does not see it in himself).

3. *The Private Self.* What we keep hidden from others (e.g., unpleasant feelings, insecurities, not-so-great experiences).
4. *The Undiscovered Self.* What neither we nor others know or recognize (e.g., undiscovered skills or potential).

Distribute a handout of the Johari Window to all students and talk them through each of the four quadrants as they fill them in. In discussing each of the quadrants, both you and your students gain a better appreciation for what other people do and don't see in them. Though students may initially be wary about sharing, collaborative discussion usually leads to more and more opening up. As students provide one another with feedback, they start to see themselves through one another's eyes. Moving from one quadrant to the next together allows students to develop mutual trust, share hopes and dreams, and find things in common.