



Commentary: Get to Know Your Students

17

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Abstract

This is a commentary to the case narrative, “*Joseph Has No Money for Groceries!*” Alexis Riley and Felicia Moore Mensah.

Ms. Nelson had good intentions when she created the food lesson for her 4th-grade class. She was excited and believed that her lesson would be educational, fun, and engaging to her students. In her zeal to try out this new lesson, Ms. Nelson forgot an essential part of her teaching. She did not know enough about her students. The *Danielson Framework for Teaching (FFT)* suggests that a proficient teacher purposefully acquires knowledge from several sources about students’ varied approaches to learning, their knowledge, skills, special needs as well as interests and cultural heritages (Danielson, 2013). Therefore, Ms. Nelson had some serious work to learn more about her students and increase her cultural competency so that she could educate her students effectively.

Getting to know students is a crucial part of culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching. It cannot be left out of planning for quality instruction. Teachers of culturally and linguistically diverse students should never assume anything about them and their home cultures. To plan lessons that appeal to her students’ interests and backgrounds, Ms. Nelson needed to have information about her students, their families, and the communities in which they lived. Ms. Nelson’s active inquiries of her students’ likes and dislikes, needs, and home lives should be something that is ongoing. Strategies like morning meetings, circle time, or individual student lunch meetings could be done regularly to obtain this important information about students. Completing activities of this kind regularly would help to build

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trust between Ms. Nelson and her students. It would also allow a space for student voices to be heard, giving them the chance to share their perspectives about relevant topics inside and outside of the classroom. Interest inventories, learning style assessments, and personality surveys are also good ways to obtain information on student preferences, which can all be used to inform instruction.

Communicating with parents is also an important part of getting to know students. Regular conversations with parents can provide information about their child's likes and dislikes and reveal how their child learns best. These conversations can also give teachers specifics on familial and community resources that are accessible to them. In our technology age, teacher-parent conversations can occur through emails, Zoom meetings, or via specific apps designed for this purpose, like Remind, Class Dojo, Google Classroom, ClassTag, and PhotoCircle to list a few. Several of Ms. Nelson's parents told her (unfortunately after she gave the assignment) that buying foods, especially certain mainstream "healthy" foods, was difficult for them because they lived in neighborhoods where access to those foods was scarce. What if she shared her idea about the assignment with them beforehand? Doing this might have saved her students from an embarrassing situation.

Cultural competence is another essential trait for teachers of diverse students. All teachers should be responsible for properly educating students from different cultural backgrounds, and at their core, they should have a genuine respect for all cultures represented in their classroom. They should possess a strong cultural curiosity such that they can move beyond celebrating "food and festivals" of diverse cultures to securing an authentic knowledge of diverse groups, which includes a deep understanding of institutional structures that create and perpetuate inequity and bias, specifically within education. Teachers need an unbiased lens when learning about the practices and beliefs associated with the cultures of students in their classrooms. Viewing culture simply as a collection of ways that a group of individuals make sense of the world and use available resources is a good place to start. Using information gleaned from getting to know their students, teachers can work to bring elements of students' cultures into their instructional practice. For example, cooperative group work can be an effective learning strategy to use with students from collectivist cultures of many Latin and African countries (Hammond, 2018). In another example, a chemistry teacher gave students the option to create a game to illustrate their conceptual knowledge about the periodic table instead of the standard paper and pencil assessment. Being willing to try new strategies and approaches in teaching, and maintaining a reflective stance, is key to becoming a culturally responsive teacher.

Ms. Nelson has a few things working for her. First, she is a reflective teacher and appears open to learning more about how she can improve her science pedagogy. Second, Ms. Nelson has a close relationship with an experienced mentor teacher, Ms. Wright, who can support her growth and development into a teacher skilled in culturally responsive teaching practices. Ms. Wright asked Ms. Nelson to think critically about who did not complete the assignment and what those students had in common. She challenged Ms. Nelson to be more reflective and to ask questions

in her instructional practice when it does not meet the needs of all her students. Ms. Wright is someone whom Ms. Nelson can bounce ideas off, obtain constructive feedback, and learn from a more experienced teacher. Because of these qualities, Ms. Nelson is in a position to grow in her capacity as a culturally relevant and culturally responsive teacher.

References

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