



Foreword by Yvette Jackson

Culturally Responsive Teaching & THE BRAIN

Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor
Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students

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Life in the classroom is often so busy that we aren't always aware of the small interactions that chip away at trust and rapport. It's important to not assume everything is fine. Remember that we are trying to make "the familiar strange" in an effort to gain a deeper awareness of the quality of trust between you and your students. So, what is the current reality? Like Janice, you have to step back and get a better sense of the state of rapport and trust between you and students who are different linguistically and culturally.

How do you find out? Take an inquiry stance. Collect some data on a small group of students rather than trying to assess the class as a whole all at once. Focus in on one or two students we commonly call *focal students*, to get a more intimate view. Use the data to illuminate unconscious patterns in your interactions. Spend about a week or two tracking the quality of the interactions with your dependent learners, especially those that are culturally and linguistically diverse. I asked all members of the Instructional Leadership Team at Storybrook Elementary to track the quality of their interactions with students for two weeks with a simple tally sheet (Figure 5.3). At the end of two weeks, they were quite surprised that the assessment in their heads didn't match the data they collected. One teacher thought she had interacted with her dependent learners quite a bit when in reality she went through most days not even exchanging a word or glance with them. Another teacher realized that she was labeling an interaction as positive because she was using a nice tone of voice. In reality, it was a negative interaction because she was always pointing out to one particular student what he was doing wrong and how he was off-task, never highlighting when he was on task.

Here are some steps for assessing current reality in your classroom.

Identify a specific student you would like to have a better learning partnership with. That student should be representative of a similar group of students in the classroom. What you learn in building a better relationship with this one focal student can be easily applied to other students.

Assess the quality of your relationship with your focal student. Think about how you and your focal student currently interact with each other. Reflect on the following questions and be honest with yourself. Set an intention for what you would like to be true in the future.

Create a system to help you look closely at and listen carefully to your focal student. It seems almost impossible to pay attention to every student in the classroom all the time. That's why you need a system for gathering information about individual students so that you begin to feel you know them personally.

Try “kidwatching.” Literacy educator, Yetta Goodman popularized the term in the 1980s as part of a literacy strategy, but the practice has its roots in Montessori and multicultural education. Rather than try to notice every student everyday, you select 3–5 students to watch over the course of a week and make notes about each student. Choose a simple system to make note taking easy. Some teachers use index cards, with a card or two for each student. Others use sticky notes. You can plan your observations around social or academic tasks depending on what information you’d like to gather. Over the course of several weeks you should have a great deal of information about your focal students.

Keep track of student responses over time. In the activity of the classroom, it is easy to miss the small signals that trust is growing. Be sure to track your attempts to connect with your focal students and their responses. Think about what adjustments you want to make and track those as well. The goal is to pay attention to this blooming relationship in a new way. Keep a journal. Keep note cards in your desk. Record a voice memo on your smart phone. Whatever way is most convenient for you will work.

You can use a tally sheet like the one in Figure 5.4 to track the number of positive interactions, negative interactions, and neutral interactions. A positive interaction is when the reason you are talking with the student is to show care, affirm him, or simply say hello, while a negative interaction is when you are reprimanding or redirecting the student. Remember that, no matter how upbeat your tone of voice is, if the intention is to point out something the student is not doing, it is a negative interaction.

Crunch the numbers and analyze the data. Once you have tracked your student interactions for a given time period, review it to get a sense of the big picture. How many times did you have a positive interaction? How often did you redirect the student’s behavior, give him a verbal warning, or give him “the look”? When analyzing your data, ask yourself if it matches what you imagined was happening? There should be at the very least a 2:1 ratio of positive to neutral or negative interactions. Usually teachers find that they are not having as many positive interactions as they thought. Be sure to analyze the nature of the interactions: When did more positive interactions take place? Why were you having a negative interaction? What was the student’s reaction in either case?

Based on your findings, identify one small change you can make to build trust with your focal student. Think about one small change you would like to make that you believe would shift the nature

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of your interactions. Think about the elements of the learning partnership and building rapport. How might you generate more trust? How might you show up differently? Remember that the burden is on you to change the nature of the relationship and build trust between you and your students.

Track the impact of the one small change you made. Once you decide what changes you'd like to make, be sure to track the impact of those changes. If it seems to be leading to positive changes, then continue. If not, do more inquiry and figure out why. The important thing is to practice ongoing inquiry and reflection as you make small adjustments. The goal is to be deliberate and focused.

Operationalizing Rapport Strategies

Once you have assessed what needs to improve in terms of building trust with students, you will want to think about operationalize ways to make it happen organically as well as in more structured ways. Here are some suggestions.

Express care in nonverbal ways that shows your concern. Practice listening with grace—communicating nonverbally as a sense of warm concern, openness, attunement to the other, and nonjudgment. Give the student your attention. No multitasking. Look at him directly. Use body language, facial expressions, and hand gestures to convey your attention. Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting. Get down on their level when possible. Be selectively demonstrative. A pat on the back, a fist bump, or a high five goes a long way in communicating caring and encouragement.

Find time to play and have fun as a class. Practice creating time to just hang out in class—socializing with no other purpose but to connect and nurture relationships. It might be having students perform skits or tell jokes during a “brain break.” Laughing produces endorphins, those feel-good chemicals in our brain. It might be sharing a meal together as a class.

Commit to practicing affirmation. Make a commitment to finding something to affirm in each student related to his racial, culture, gender, or linguistic identity. It's common in our individualistic dominant culture to praise students mostly for what they do. On the other hand, in more communal cultures it is more important to recognize and appreciate who the child is and the unique contributions he makes to community life. The

important point here is to develop the intention to accentuate the positive in every student, even those that you have yet to develop a connection with or who behave in ways that feel challenging.

Find ways to routinely let each student know that you see who he is, including aspects of his cultural identity. As important as it is for students to be known by their teachers, it is equally important that they know that you know and value them. Recognize those characteristics, attributes, and behaviors that have been portrayed in the larger society as negative or bad, such as hairstyles, energetic and lively style. It can be simply noticing or complementing a new hairstyle. Stay away from stereotypical complements, such as what a good athlete the student is. This is a great place to remind ourselves of the greater sociopolitical context that students exist in tried to limit their possibilities and life options.

Show appreciation for students' native language, especially the proverbs, adages, and poetry that are passed from generation to generation. Use simple phrases or words in their native language as class words to signal transitions from one activity to another or get their attention for announcements. Put the proverbs and inspirational sayings on bulletin boards in the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING DEPENDENT LEARNERS AND BUILDING INTELLECTIVE CAPACITY

Building rapport with culturally and linguistically diverse students is essential if we want to improve their learning and guide them to do more rigorous work. Remember that we want to partner with students in a new way so that they eventually can take ownership of their learning. But it begins with being more authentic ourselves. Building trust is an important goal in culturally responsive teaching because it paves the way for us to lead students into their zone of proximal development. Still we have to be prepared for students to be skeptical and slow to embrace this new relationship. Practice, persistence, and patience. Trust builds slowly.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Because our safety-threat detection system is continuously scanning for potential social-emotional threats, it is the job of the culturally responsive teacher to build trust and rapport in order to reassure our students that they are safe and cared for.

- Culturally responsive teaching that supports dependent learners requires a learning partnership that includes both rapport and alliance.
- Relationships are the cornerstone of culturally responsive teaching.
- It requires a new type of relationship we call a learning partnership.

INVITATION TO INQUIRY

- How would you characterize your relationship with students of color, English learners, or other students who are different from you?
- How can you learn more about what would help your students feel safe and trusting from their perspective and experiences?
- How do you create a sense of trust and safety in your relationship with your students? Do you do this deliberately or randomly?
- See your students in a new light: Where do they excel? What are they expert in?
- Build an asset-based profile of your dependent learners.
- Find out what trust/rapport looks like in your students' respective cultures. Identify commonalities and differences.
- How would you manage potential cultural conflicts around respect and trust?

GOING DEEPER

- *Trust and School Life: The Role of Trust for Learning, Teaching, Leading, and Bridging* (2014) by Dimitri Van Maele, Patrick B. Forsyth and Mieke Van Houtte
- *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* (2004) by Peter H. Johnston
- *Fires in the Middle School Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from Middle Schoolers* (2009) by Kathleen Cushman and Laura Rogers
- *Click: The Forces Behind How We Fully Engage with People, Work, and Everything We Do* (2010) by Ori Brafman and Rom Brafman