Designing Equitable Learning Environments: Getting to Know Your Class

"Not all students come to school with the same background, skills, learning styles, or prerequisite knowledge. Educational equity involves providing students with the supports that they individually need to succeed." — Dr. Nancy Sulla, *Students Taking Charge* (2nd Edition)

At the start of the school year, students are often engaged in activities in which they get to know one another as well as classroom rules and procedures. At this time, many teachers gather data through foundational assessments. At the start of the year, it is equally important to understand the background, interests, culture, and social interactions of each of your students. As stated above, educational equity means looking at each of your students individually and knowing what each needs to succeed.

As you design activities for the beginning of the year, reflect on each of the following categories and determine how you can gather information for each.

Student Background:
Design an activity, such as a writing prompt or artistic representation, that allows students to express illustrate their cultural or ethnic backgrounds. This could include a parent/family interview conducted by the students to gather information their can use for their products about themselves. Then, reflect on how you can use this information throughout the year so each student in your class feels represented. Also, reflect on additional information needed to better understand your students.

Emotional Intelligence:
Emotional intelligence has been defined as the ability to identify and manage your emotions and identify the emotions of those around you. As a teacher, you should be aware of how well your students express their emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, anxiety, etc.) so that you know how best to support them throughout the year. Students could use scenario cards or structured role-play to practice social and emotional interactions. Reflect on conversations you can have with your students about the impact of emotional intelligence on the learning environment. Review this blog post on how facilitation can support this.

Communication:
Communication is an important global skill that has evolved over the past couple of decades with the advancement of smartphones and social media. Understanding the nuances of how your students communicate with one another and the adults around them will give you further insights into each student. Reflect on the following questions:

- How do your students communicate with one another and with the adults around them?
- What are some words or phrases students use that are unfamiliar to you?
- What do you notice about the nonverbal cues that students use to communicate with one another and/or adults?
- How is conflict resolved? Review this blog post on consensus building for ideas on how to build this skill.

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Stereotypes and Biases:
Merriam-Webster defines *stereotype* as "a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment." Which stereotypes might exist in your classroom? How can you establish a dialogue to acknowledge and address stereotypes in your classroom environment, so students know stereotypes do not define them as individuals?

Each of us enters environments with biases based upon our learned experience. The key is to recognize what they are and work to reframe thinking. Reflect on what biases you may unconsciously bring into the classroom. How will you acknowledge these biases and work to overcome them for the benefit of each of your students?

Definition of Success:
Each of us defines success differently based upon our learned experiences and life goals. Your students will likely have differing points of view about success as well. In her blog post on *Teach Consensus Building*, Dr. Sulla shares an activity known as a "placemat discussion." Students can use this tool to write, discuss, and synthesize what success means and looks like. You might follow the placemat discussion with a planning and goal-setting activity.

Student Interests:
What do your students enjoy doing outside of school? What social media platforms do they use? What genre of movies, music, and TV do they enjoy?

Design a student interest survey with questions like the ones mentioned above to target your students' interests beyond school. Use the data throughout the year to create authentic problems and design activities tailored to their interests and academic content. Relevancy matters to students and will lead to retention.

Design and Implementation:
Consider how you might use the information from the previous activities to design authentic problems, differentiated learning activities, and more for your student-driven classroom. In planning for instruction, utilize academic and social data to cultivate an equitable classroom for your students. You may find the following resources helpful in continuing to learn about designing equitable learning environments.

- How to Develop an Equity-Based PBL Task Statement
- Designing Equitable Learning Environments: The Technology Lens
- Designing an Equitable #LATIC Learning Environment Through Empowerment

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