Relationship-Based Teaching:
How to Enable the Secret Superpowers of High School Bilingual Students

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The Scenario

"Señor Y, you have beautiful blue eyes!" This, from two young men who had just joined my bilingual Algebra I class this first week of 2020. How to react? "Bueno, ¡gracias!" I reply. The day before, at an after-school AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) training, our facilitating assistant principal had remarked: "Ninth graders, you gotta love 'em!" It strikes us over and over — we are building relationships with our students from day one, even as we endeavor to teach our designated content areas.

Life is hard. And it just might be harder for our students than it was for us. Theirs is an anxiety- and depression-prone busy-ness, distracted by social media, television, and the ever-present smartphone. Families are more fractured than ever and a large number of our high school students feel the need to work 20+ hours per week while they study. It is a wonder that students function at all.

"We're all in this together." This is the message students read when they enter class.

But students need to learn and cope no matter what their circumstances. Even as they face heavier sociocultural challenges, bilingual students in particular also have superpowers at their disposal that can give them an edge.

We happen to teach math, which requires deep learning. The beauty of this discipline is that it encourages empathy. We use different perspectives to solve problems. Approach a math problem the right way, and its solution is almost trivial. Bilingual students are already experts at looking at matters from at least two cultural perspectives. As we invite them to solve a problem, it is not a big leap to let them know they are already used to looking at things from different points of view.

We teach at Atrisco Heritage Academy High School, where the student body is 91% Hispanic. Our diversity comes from students' all-over-the-spectrum levels of academic achievement and executive function development; e.g., the ability to make good decisions. We have students who struggle with 7 times 9, but we also have ninth graders who will eat up visual series summation proofs. We have students who struggle with anxiety and depression and we have others who are already working in the family business and know exactly what they will do for the next years of their lives.

Our approximately 250-person faculty and staff is also diverse, but in a more traditional way. We're from everywhere, with different life experiences, and different perspectives. What we share is a high level of empathy. We take our care of students role seriously and we network with each other to serve our students. Otherwise, we wouldn't survive.

So, what are we supposed to do? We understand that students come first. It is no surprise that when we feel appreciated and supported, then — especially then — we are able to put students and their needs first. We have a strong supportive environment where formal channels of communication resonate with informal teacher talk. Again: Otherwise, we wouldn't survive.

But, "what if the teacher and my classmates discover I don't know my multiplication tables, or even worse, that I'm slow?" It is important that we make it abundantly clear that ours is a classroom that not only allows mistakes but where we invite them and analyze them. Mistakes show risk-taking, which are necessary to solve problems and develop executive function. The key is to model, model, model. Students need to practice over and over how to take chances and work from areas of comfort into unknown spaces where they can succeed by applying what they know beforehand.

As important as it is to have a sense of what we think are the right ways to teach bilingual students, it is critical that we not come to them with a prescribed mindset. We should observe and think descriptively first — just as linguists do when they favor descriptive over prescriptive grammar, considering the rules speakers use rather than the rules considered proper to use. Watching and listening to how our students interact and behave is invaluable. As teachers, we often get overly attached to our methods and grading systems. Don't! Instead, focus on getting and giving lots of feedback.

Remind yourself that students don't need you as a friend. You may well come to be their friend, but this is not the goal. They need you as the adult that holds them accountable while showing them love and compassion. Sometimes a student in emotional turmoil will ask permission to step outside to talk with a classmate. If students can't calm down or have life troubles on their minds, the solution is connection and comfort, not criticism and control.

Assumptions

As any math teacher will tell you, the place to begin is with our assumptions. Here are a few of ours, fed by persistent mulling on "How do I get my students to engage?" Consider these as talking points for generating teaching and learning ideas to share.

> "It's all about relationships! The way we make our students feel is so much greater than any content we teach them." –Ginger Burk

> "A person who feels appreciated will always do more than expected."

"Students are NOT adults. They need help with time management, study skills, prioritizing tasks, social skills, character development, etc. Instead of assuming immaturity or irresponsibility, assume they need help." –Brad Weinstein

"Best thing we can do for kids … Instead of teaching them how to always be successful ... Teach them how to respond when they are not successful!" – @principal_el

"If a child can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn." –Ignacio Estrada

"The planet does not need more 'successful people.' The planet desperately needs more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers ..." –David Orr

Strategies

What strategies work to engage bilingual students? The same ones that work for all students, much the same as how ramps help not just those with wheelchairs, but also help the rest of us to not trip on the curb. Here are a few strategies that work for us:

Build strong relationships quickly to drive student learning

⊙ Pronounce and write student names correctly. Ask: "How would you like me to say your name? How do you write it?" Some Spanish names carry written accents, like José; some may not, like Marin. Students will thank you for caring. If your relationship with them is good, they will also correct you.

⊙ Greet students by name at the door and walk with a few from the classroom after class, discussing just about anything.

⊙ Notice and respect personal spaces. Students with Latin American roots can have smaller personal spaces and perceive larger authority distances. Notice these and appeal to their sense of responsibility to engage them more quickly.

⊙ In a one-on-one with a student, stand side by side or talk as you walk together to avoid being too aggressive.

⊙ Tell stories. Playact! In math class, tell stories

about mathematicians to highlight their humanity, persistence, and flaws. Reenact the Renaissance drama between mathematicians at equation-solving tournaments and throughout history when who discovered what first was contested. Newton vs. Liebnitz, Edison vs. Tesla. Don't be afraid to inject comedy. Does a Tesla car become an Edison if it gets stolen?

Advertise clearly for assignments and behavior consequences

⊙ Give the topic and assignment up front; write it on a portable whiteboard so that students can see it when they walk in.

⊙ "Work on this assignment for no more than 40 minutes. Get a good night's rest rather than staying up late to finish it."

⊙ "Want to go to the bathroom, get a drink, or buy a snack? Say so. Just don't say one thing and do another if you want to keep your pass privileges."

⊙ "Tardy? Call your parents on your smartphone so I can tell them."

⊙ On your phone when it's supposed to be away? "Let me put it in the cell phone charging station and you can pick it up on your way out." Repeat offender? "You can pick it up after school from the office."

⊙ Talking instead of working? New seat location. Still? Work alone in a neighboring classroom, where prior arrangement has been made.

Use visuals to grow school culture

⊙ Display posters inspired by students.

⊙ Put motivational phrases on stair steps. During standardized test times, these can include formulas and key concepts.

⊙ Design an attractive t-shirt on top-quality fabric. Here's a design from our 2019 summer Jaguar Jumpstart and Big Future Enrichment Camps that gets worn often by students.

The messages on this poster were inspired by the students.

Share daily quotes, memes, and puns. These encourage a playful, but thoughtful and relaxed learning atmosphere.

⊙ "Take chances. Make mistakes. Get messy." – Ms. Frizzle

⊙ "Educate the children and it will not be necessary to punish the men." –Pythagoras
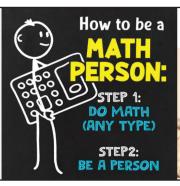
I will last you how you take care of me, I will talk to you as you treat me, and I will believe you as you show me.

Frida Kahlo

How to be a
MATH PERSON:
STEP 1:
DO MATH
(ANY TYPE)
STEP2:
BE A PERSON

Guess who is made out of stardust.

Memes and word games motivate students and create a fun and relaxed environment in the classroom.

Share visuals or quotes that speak to your students

⦿ "Don't take anything seriously that doesn't make you laugh." –Eduardo Galeano

⦿ "The secret, dear Alice, is to surround yourself with people who make your heart smile. It is then, only then, that you will find Wonderland." (The Mad Hatter, Alice in Wonderland).

How to Measure Success

Success happens when students comment "Where did our time go?" or when they forget to take their phones from the charging station at the end of the period. Capture their imagination and attention, and learning happens. Have a strong relationship with them, and you will be amazed at the depth and breadth of their learning. The difficulty is with creating exciting lessons and still finding time to assess and differentiate student performance. But that is another story.

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