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Promising Practices from the Field

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Creating a Positive Classroom Culture— *"Explaining the Why"*
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As teachers, we all want students to be empowered and responsible learners who understand that their actions impact their success in school and life. It can be frustrating when they make decisions that seem to undermine that very success. A powerful, "no prep" way to improve classroom teaching and learning is to explain the "why" to students … the why behind our directions, behind how we organize our teaching, and behind the content students are learning. "Explaining the why" behind what we are doing is a respectful stance that helps students be more engaged, reflective learners and active participants in their classroom communities.

Students' focus and responsibility increase when they understand how their actions impact their learning and that of others.

What it is…
Explaining the why means stating clear academic and behavioral expectations and communicating in student-friendly language why these are important for students' learning. It means being transparent with students about why lessons are organized the way they are and how students' participation supports their learning—and then holding them accountable so they see that their actions really do impact their learning and that of others. It includes giving students immediate positive feedback when you see them using strategies they should continue to practice.

What it looks and sounds like…
When we incorporate the why into our instruction, we consistently highlight what we expect to see and why it is important. Our language is clear and concise, and we include many opportunities to incorporate student voices and ideas. We use visual models and post expectations and directions. A positive, energetic tone conveys a belief in the students and focuses on expected behaviors, attitudes, or outcomes—we can't assume that students know what is expected of them… or why!

Establishing a positive classroom culture is one of the Key Instructional Principles in the math model *Achievement Inspired Mathematics for Scaffolding Student Success* (AIM4S³). Reflecting on my own teaching and visiting other teachers' classrooms during on-going development of the model has given me new insights into the need for positive classroom culture and the powerful context it creates for teaching and learning. Explaining the why is one concrete way to build and support that culture—enhancing students' learning, behaviors, and relationships. Some examples of what this might looks like are described in this article.

Setting up an activity for success
In the classroom, we often explain an activity to students, send them off to work, and then discover that we left out—or students missed— key information. Proactively

stating clear expectations, what students' work and actions should look like, and why this is important increases the likelihood of a successful learning experience. For example:

> "During this activity, you are going to be working in small groups and playing a game where you describe a quadrilateral—and then other group members guess which quadrilateral it is based on the attributes you describe. It's important that you can recognize the different attributes of quadrilaterals and also that you can describe them and explain them in your own words. This game is a fun way to work on that standard. If you are making good use of your time with the group, what can we expect to hear and see students doing? (Possible student responses include: using our chart and sentence stems as a resource, listening closely to our partner, using sketches or taking notes to help organize our thinking…)

By being proactive in explaining what the behavioral expectations are and why the information and skills are important, you can increase student engagement and decrease counter-productive behaviors.

Explaining the organization of information

Whether we are using the Promethean Board, chart paper, or a dry erase board, we are constantly organizing information or work in front of students. A simple strategy of saying out loud what we are doing helps students to transfer that thinking to their own work. For example:

> "On this chart I am listing the different units and tools for each type of measurement. Here we can see that for time, the units are seconds, minutes, days… and the tools we use are clocks, stopwatches, calendars… The next section of our chart talks about how we measure length. I'm switching to a blue marker because color helps our brain chunk information and makes it easier to remember. Here for length, we can see the units are… the tools are… Now as I'm writing the information about capacity I'm going to use an orange marker… Color coding could be a strategy you want to use in your own note-taking."

Another example of this is the four square strategy that many teachers have students use to explain their math work. We typically give directions to students to fold the paper in four parts, use one box to restate the question, another to show a visual, and so on. We need to be explicit in explaining that folding the paper in four parts helps us to organize the work neatly. By restating the question in the first box we make sure that we understand the question and can communicate it to others. By using a visual in the second box, we show the problem in another way

and this supports our understanding and the reader's, and so on. We also need to make sure we then provide opportunities for students to share their work with others so there is a purpose for organizing it in a way that's clearly understandable. This gives students first hand experience in the *why* behind this strategy.

Making learning relevant

When we introduce a lesson or unit, it's important that students see the relevance of what we are studying. For example:

> "Today we are starting a unit about probability—or the likelihood of something happening. When your mom buys a lottery ticket, you can use probability to know the likelihood that she is going to win. When you get a car and have to buy insurance, your insurance rate is determined by the probability of you being in an accident. Someone who has had accidents or tickets, is in a certain age range or drives a certain type of car will pay more for insurance. Probability, or the likelihood of something happening, impacts your life everyday. During this unit, we are not only going to learn about probability, we are going to watch for the different ways it impacts our daily lives."

Talking up front about why content is important and relevant to students increases engagement and helps them to see beyond the lesson to real life application.

Reflecting and processing as a community

An important follow-up to explaining the why is reflecting on our learning as a classroom community. What makes a lesson work well for all of us? What things negatively impact our learning? For example, when a lesson goes awry, it is important that the teacher and students can talk together about what happened. Was it that the directions weren't clear or the materials weren't well organized? How did students' choices impact their learning? Which were positive choices? Which kept them from learning? What else could I have done as a teacher to help student learning? Frank, open discussions with students about learning help them connect their actions to their learning— and the learning of others. Emotionally neutral conversations that focus on what is really happening in the classroom allow students to take ownership of their learning, the process, and the community.

Each of these strategies supports a positive classroom culture. Explaining the why pushes us to reflect on our own teaching, learning, and communication; but it also positively enhances students' learning, behaviors, and relationships—and gives them skills they can use far beyond our classroom doors.