

## Understanding Student Cultures and Identities

“How can I better understand my students’ cultures and identities?” is a guiding question that stays with me throughout the year. In middle school, students’ cultures and identities may change over the course of a school year. It is important to learn as much as I can about my students at the start of the school year and to establish positive relationships with each student. In order to create meaningful STEM lessons, teachers need to start from their students’ backgrounds. Students can also learn a lot from their peers cultural identities as well. Each student brings to the classroom a unique identity, culture, and learning history. The diversity among students should be recognized and celebrated in the classroom. In order for students to progress in their understanding of STEM concepts, teachers need to build on their current understandings and experiences. STEM lessons need to be based within students’ cultures and identities.

There are a variety of sources of information about the students. I have access to previous grades, basic home information (parent names, addresses, siblings, contact information, concerns such as health/medical alerts, custody information etc.) all through the online grading system, SchoolTool, that my school district uses. This basic information is just a starting point for me to learn about my students before they even enter the classroom.

Another source of information about my students is talking with their previous teachers as well as the guidance counselor and administrators. These conversations occur at the start of the school year during transition meetings. The team of teachers I work with meet with each of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. During these meetings, the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers share their thoughts and insights about their

previous students. I am always a little hesitant about this information though because students change greatly from 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 7<sup>th</sup> grade. At the same time, it is nice to know the perceptions of their previous teachers, especially if there are any significant concerns and/or family issues that I need to be aware of. My team of teachers also meets with the special education teacher/case manager assigned to students who have 504 plans and IEPs. These meetings typically involve us reading through the students' 504 plans and IEPs so that we are all aware of the students' needs and backgrounds. In addition to these opportunities to learn more about students' cultures, I can also talk to the special area teachers who have been working with these students for the past two years already. These educators have a great perspective in terms of how the students have grown and changed over the years at my school. Meetings with the guidance counselor and administrators continue throughout the school year. Occasionally there is an opportunity to meet with the district social worker, but this is pretty rare. The entire district has only one social worker. She is typically at the high school helping the older students most. Up until this point, all of these data sources occur prior to me even meeting the students for the first time.

The first assignment I give my students on the first day of school is to create a "Pennant about Me." I give the students a handout that has an outline of a blank rectangular pennant that they need to cut out. They then decided which information they would like to share about themselves on the pennant. These pennants are displayed around the classroom for the entire year. Students are required to give at least four pieces of information about themselves on their pennant. I share a pennant about myself on the first day of school so that the students get to know some information about me as a person too. This also gives

them a sense of what information they could share about themselves on their own pennants. The following are suggestions that students could include on their pennants, but they can share other information as well:

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|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Birthday                          | Family members                  |
| Pets                              | Hobbies/Interests               |
| Sports/Extracurricular activities | Something unique about yourself |
| Future job                        | Talents                         |
| Places lived                      | Favorite memory                 |
| Favorite place in the world       |                                 |

While this assignment seems simple in nature, I learn a lot about students with these pennants. Students share things such as if they are fluent in another language at home, if their parents are from another country, siblings (one student shared that he is already an uncle), what their family lives are like (one student shared she has two mothers), their interests and hobbies. I have found that what the students share with me is what is really important to them and their own identities.

Another assignment I give at the start of the school year is to have the students write “Three things I wish my teacher knew.” With this assignment, students can share information about how they learn best, if they have had any learning challenges or successes in the past, when and how they study, etc. I tell them that they can share any information that they believe will help me be a better teacher for them. Sometimes the students share that they have had difficulty

learning math in the past and that they need me to explain concepts in multiple ways. Sometimes students share if there is a peer that they have difficulty working with in the past. The wide open nature of this assignment provides students an opportunity to help me become a more effective teacher for themselves.

In addition to these initial sources of information about students' cultures and identities, I also establish relationships with students and have informal conversations with students regularly. These conversations may be brief discussions about their weekends, what they did to celebrate their birthdays, how their vacation was, etc. These conversations are brief, but again I am able to learn a lot about my students and what is important to them through these discussions.

Another source of information I have about students' cultures and identities are parents and community members. At the start of the year, I send home a Math 7 brochure instead of a syllabus. I invite parents to share any information they would like me to know about their child. They can either e-mail me or write a note to me, whichever they prefer. I have found that parents are incredibly open and honest in what they share with me after receiving this invitation. They will tell me their thoughts on how hard their child is willing or not willing to work, which other children may be distracting to their child, if there are any major observations that the family participates in (such as Ramadan), etc. Some parents have also shared information about learning strengths as well as learning challenges for their children. This invitation also helps open the communication pathways between home and school.

My school also hosts International Dessert Night at the start of the school year. This is a celebration of different student cultures. In addition to there being

traditional desserts from many cultures, students can share their cultural traditions such as singing and dancing to entertain everyone. At the end of the year, the school hosts a talent show. Some students choose to celebrate their cultures during the talent show by again showcasing their cultural traditions.

In order to prepare meaningful activities for students, teachers need to have a solid understanding of students' cultures and identities. Teachers need to know the perspective, backgrounds, and experiences that students bring to the classroom. There are many sources of information to learn about students. The best source is keeping an open and ongoing dialogue among teachers and students throughout the school year.

