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# Ethnography: Building a Thriving Classroom Community in the Face of a Pandemic

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**Ethnography: Building a Thriving Classroom Community in the Face of a Pandemic**

Joshua Timothy Jackson

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Teacher Education Program

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## **Abstract**

A dive into the ride of a first-year teacher, which was also taught an entire year virtually. An extremely intensive look into the skills needed to grow as a secondary school teacher, in a situation that has never been experienced before. This paper also explores the foundations and scaffolds a teacher needs in order to become both a, critical and socially just educator for all students within their classroom. The aspect of community is felt heavily throughout this journey, and the idea that communities are the very keystone of every single classroom; student-to-teacher community, student-to-student community, and classroom-to-household community are all discussed and analyzed. As the work on this ethnography and the work at becoming an even stronger socially just educator continues, the one constant is that communities stay standing as long as they are built strong, regardless of the circumstances.

Keywords: Ethnography, Distance Learning, Education, Teaching, Community

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## **Laying Down the Foundations**

*“some people when they hear your story. contract. others upon hearing your story. expand. and this is how you know.” – Nayyirah Waheed*

Storytelling is an art form that predates writing, and can be found in every culture and society. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the common use of storytelling is to try and sell something or to try and entertain a group of people. With this work, I am not trying to sell you anything. I am trying to keep you entertained, but only so by the time you are through reading you will have learned something. This story will follow the experiences of my first-year as a teacher, teaching virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teaching is already filled with a plethora of different pedagogies and best practices, which during the first few years of teaching can result in burnout due to the sheer amount of information bombarding any new teacher. This year all of this information came blaring out like usual, but with the added bonus of staring at a computer screen for eight hours daily. Even as I am writing this, my blue-light filter is still turned on my computer, and I am wearing the wrist stints that I bought to reduce the numbing sensation in my hands due to the carpal tunnel.

I wanted to share my story in the form of an ethnography, as I believe it purposefully and meaningfully gets the emotions and required scaffolding across in order to achieve the result I want. In a similar fashion to how I ran my classroom this past school year, my ethnography is set up into three parts: 1) Getting to know me, the teacher, 2) Getting to know my students, and 3) Getting to know the local community and households of my students. As my readers, I believe it is important that you know why I wanted to become a teacher in the first place; spoiler alert, it was not because of the pay. What drove me to want to step back into the classroom, but this time as the individual creating the lesson plans and fostering the learning? This seemed like an important place to start, and also serves as a great opportunity for me to perform some

self-reflection. We each took part in the education system in some way, shape, or form during our K-12 experience. These experiences shape how each of us individually views the education system.

Secondly, I took a deep look into three students within one of my classes. These students were picked because they represented the range of students I saw in all of my periods, and within the community surrounding the school; one student is an EL learner, another is a GATE student who has her roots in Mexico, and the last student is a cancer patient who has gone through significant life experiences. As Margaret LeCompte and Jean Schensul put it, “ethnographers must become intimately involved with members of the community or participants in the natural settings where they do research” (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010, p. 10). Knowing this, I dove into the community of each of these students, both in regards to their home life and their school life. I conducted virtual home visits, one-on-one visits, and after school discussions with each of the students to learn more about them and their households.

Lastly, I discuss the ecological setup within the entirety of my class, and share information about more than just my three focus students. Each classroom is going to act and function differently, but to me the classroom and the households of my student are an important cornerstone to the bigger community we makeup. We are a community of learners, which means that we are going to encourage question asking and mistake making as these are required in order for growth to occur; I also introduce the idea of a growth mindset to the students, and share how this is the mindset they should have within every one of their classes, as practicing does equate to becoming better at a subject or skill.

Throughout this story, there may be some terms that you may be less familiar with. As an educator with a Bachelor’s of Science in Biology, a lot of these terms and ideas were also foreign



to me when I first started my educational journey. I may have already shared some terms in this introduction that may have left you scratching your head or running to Google to look up the definition. In order to combat this, I would like to create a list which includes my common definitions of these more technical words, which should help alleviate you throughout this story.

**Classroom Ecology:** All interactions between teachers, students, curriculum, and the classroom environment which contribute to students' learning experiences. These interactions create an environment that affects both attitudes and achievement of students (Talton & Simpson, 1987).

**Critical Social Justice:** Recognizing that schools are not neutral, society is stratified along social group lines and inequality is deeply and structurally embedded, then actively seeking to change this (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

**Funds of Knowledge:** Important knowledge, activities, and strategies that individuals have acquired through household practices, ideologies, and labor history, as well as social networks and exchanges, which teachers can recognize and utilize to help students learn and achieve (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992).

**Pedagogy:** The theory and practice of learning, and how this process influences, and is influenced by, the social, political and psychological development of learners (Li, 2012).

In the future, I hope this work serves as a way to highlight the struggles and difficulties of the 2020-2021 school year, and the effect it had on communities. The teacher community was impacted, the student community was impacted, and every single community within every single city was also impacted. But regardless of the impact, I hope that we can see through stories like this, that communities stayed strong in the face of a global pandemic, and that they continue to thrive and survive regardless of the situation they find themselves in.

## **Communities that Taught Me**

*“Play the game, but don’t believe in it – that much you owe yourself ... Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates, learn how you operate.” – Ralph Ellison (1952), Invisible Man.*

It’s strange to think that as a teacher in training, I have had that title for all of my childhood without even knowing it. Sitting down for naptime during kindergarten, wondering why some students had to stay inside the classroom during recess, questioning why my friend Chris got expelled in eighth grade, confused by seeing the difference in student behavior between a college prep level class versus an advanced placement level class. All of these things that I have witnessed and gone through during my own K-12 schooling and even into my undergraduate schooling have all been valuable learning opportunities for me, even though I was not consciously thinking about them at the time. But now I sit here and laugh, thinking “What other job gives you 15+ years of experience before you even start working?”

Not everyone has the ability to say they knew what they wanted to do for a career during high school, let alone their freshman year of high school. I still vividly remember my College and Career Planning teacher, Mr. Smith, asking our class to write a letter to our future selves detailing which college we wanted to attend and what career path we wanted to pursue. When I opened that same letter up senior year I was amazed to find that the future I thought I would have back in freshman year was coming true: I was going to be attending Cal Poly Pomona in the Fall working towards a Bachelor’s of Science in Biology, with aspirations to become a high school Biology teacher.

I did not wake up the morning I wrote that letter to my future self just thinking “being a teacher could be fun.” Thanks to some help, I already knew what I wanted to become. I had two wonderful science teachers up to that point in my K-12 schooling: Mr. Osborne and Mr. Okamoto. Both of them taught science (see a trend here?) and were so fascinated with their subject. I remember after doing a squid dissection, Mr. Osborne cooked calamari for the entire class. And Mr. Okamoto always came up with phrases/lyrics to songs that he would interchange with Biology facts; one time he changed the words to the song *O.P.P* by Naughty by Nature to “You down with ATP? Yeah you know me!” Both of these teachers were a textbook definition of a warm demander, someone who “communicates personal warmth toward students while at the same time demands they work toward high standards” (Hammond, 2015, p. 160). I always felt welcome and a part of their classes, but I never felt overly comfortable, where it felt like I did not have to try anymore to achieve good grades.

At the time good grades were everything to me, which the same could be said about a lot of students in the K-12 school system. Good grades means a better chance of getting into college, and getting into college means a better chance of obtaining a higher paying job. As a teacher, I am aware that it is important for the students in my class to be obtaining good grades, but it is not the end all be all. Similarly the state mandated curriculum is great, as it gives a general outline of which topics should be discussed during the course of the year, but that is all it should be used for. As odd as it is to say, I aim to teach my students how to properly perform school; I will make hidden curriculum visible to all students, not just cater to those select students that have been taught how to properly do school. If I do not present this hidden curriculum to my students, it creates an unequal environment for them (Kentli, 2009). On the same note, I aim to help both school dependent children as well as home dependent children. It is crucial that I meet

each of my students exactly where they are, in every aspect of their life. Similarly to how 30 different people in real life could not all fit into the same size pair of pants, a teacher cannot provide a singular lesson to 30 different students and expect them all to understand it. Lisa Delpit explains that, “students need focused instructional strategies throughout their school years that are designed specifically for their cultural and academic backgrounds” (Delpit, 2012, p. 63). Delpit further explains that middle-class children come to school with background knowledge on how to perform school, which lower-class children do not have access to; likewise, lower-class children come to school with knowledge of real-life skills, which middle-class children do not have access to. What Delpit is alluding to is the idea of critical social justice

Paulo Freire is known as the creator of critical pedagogy, and believed that knowledge is never politically neutral and argued that teaching is an inherently political act, whether the teacher acknowledges this or not. He is not saying that teachers should outright share with their students what their political opinions are, but that teachers should be aware that their actions can never be neutral. Critical social justice aims to open students’ eyes to the injustices they face, showing them that they are being oppressed. Freire’s states that, “there’s no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom” (Freire, 2000, p. 58). I do not want to be a teacher that herds more players into the game, I want to be a teacher that aids players into breaking it. The norms and values that are praised in schools are those of the middle-class; if a student does not abide by these values and norms, they are encouraged to change themselves to become more like a middle-class citizen. This is not critical social justice, this is not upping the ante. And while my norms and values align closely to those of the middle-class, this just means that my teachings can be that much more impactful. I aim to be a teacher that can show my students that they are being oppressed, and encourage them to

fight their oppressors. “Nobody liberates anybody else, and nobody liberates themselves all alone. People liberate themselves in fellowship with each other” (Freire, 2000, p. 14).

### **Growing Accomplishments and Pains**

*Ignoring our implicit biases guarantees that we further impoverish the already poor or marginalized student. Melissa Garcia (2018) – Why Teachers Must Fight Their Own Implicit Biases*

It would be false of me to say that I have the same athletic ability as Usain Bolt, because I cannot run 100 meters in under 10 seconds. But if I were to guess, I probably can play Super Smash Brothers a lot better than Usain Bolt can. All people have strengths and weaknesses, and as a teacher it is important that I highlight my own so I can determine in which areas I need more support. For example, one of my strengths is the ability to make connections with my students. I enjoy talking with people, and I love listening to what they have to say. Because of this, I love being able to use downtime during school hours to talk with students. And by talking with my students, I am able to tap into their funds of knowledge, which will allow me to incorporate those funds into future lessons. These funds of knowledge are so incredibly helpful in the classroom since they, “[highlight] and [value] the resources embedded in students, families, and communities, thus countering deficit perspectives” (Rios-Aguilar et al, 2011, p. 170). For this reason, I enjoy talking with all of my students, as time permits, because it allows me to validate their experiences through my lessons. Another strength I possess is the ability to get a feel of an individual or an entire room. Are my students confused about what I just said? Did the football teams win excite the students, making it hard for them to concentrate? Being able to quickly and accurately assess an individual, or the entire classroom, will give me the ability to keep students focused and engaged; it also allows me to better understand my students’ socio-emotional levels.

As I've said before, my job is not to just teach my students the curriculum, I also want to teach them useful skills. A skill that comes into play frequently is the ability to respond to certain situations; a student should know how to react when they are feeling happy, sad, angry, frustrated, or stressed. Dominique Smith, Douglas Fisher, and Nancy Frey state that, "problematic behaviors signal a student's lack of skills for responding appropriately to difficult situations" (Smith et al, 2015 p. 3). By being able to read an individual, I tend to have a heightened awareness of how my students are processing experiences in their lives. I can use that to access their socio-emotional levels, which means I can create more appropriate lessons for them in the future. As well as creating appropriate socio-emotional lessons, I excel in creating diversified lessons, which provide students multiple ways to access content. I personally enjoy learning more if the lesson is: active and includes lots of examples. However, I know some people prefer to be seated for the entirety of a lesson, quietly writing down notes in a notebook. In order for students to truly connect and understand material, I will need to be able to "[provide] a good deal of instructional support" (Rosenshine, 2012, p. 12). For example, in a previous lesson on DNA replication I provided my students with: a video, direct instruction, images, as well as paired and whole class discussion. This allowed students to access material in multiple ways, and creates pathways for all students to arrive at similar levels of understanding. And then supplementing this with future diverse lessons amplifies the effects even more.

On the other hand, I need to be aware of my weaknesses, which areas in my life do I struggle with? As stated before, being a warm demander for my students is something that I want to practice when I enter the classroom. Lisa Delpit describes teachers who are warm demanders as those teachers who "demonstrate care and concern while maintaining high expectations of student performance" (Delpit, 2012, p. 71). I struggle greatly with the latter half of that

definition, I struggle holding my students to those high expectations; I sometimes struggle to even set those high expectations. I have no issue with being a warm demander, but right now I am more of a warm un-demander; I show care and concern towards my students, but don't hold them to high standards even though I know they could reach them. Another struggle that I aim to hone in on, is being able to fill as much instructional time up as possible. I notice while I prepare my lesson plans, I give students more time than they need to complete an assignment; for this reason, students usually end up going on their phones, wasting time where they instead could be learning. Allowing students' time in class to essentially do nothing, is a disservice to them and resonates poorly with me. It ties back into me not being a demander quite yet, I am not challenging my students well enough. While planning lessons in the future, I want to strive to include more content than will be needed, just so I can have a fall back plan if activities take a shorter amount of time than expected.

Identifying my strengths and needs can be a powerful tool when stepping into a classroom, it can reveal to me where I perform well and can also expose to me areas where I need to be careful. In a similar fashion, identifying my explicit and implicit biases is crucial when I enter into a classroom, as unchecked biases can lead to harming those students who are already at risk. Explicit biases are those biases that I am consciously aware of, while implicit biases are ones that I am not actively aware of, but can still seep out from what I say and do. One bias that I know I struggle with is the idea that a student who is habitually late to my class will never be successful inside my classroom. One of my previous students, Smokey, fit this profile perfectly. It seemed that no matter how many talks I had with him, or how many detentions the school gave him, he would be late to my first period every morning. Because of this, his grade in my classroom kept slipping; he was not bothered by the fact that he was late every day, he was

not bothered by the fact that he now had an “F” in my classroom, and because of this I was not bothered by it either. However, this approach did not sit well with me. How can I claim to be a caring and effective teacher for all of my students if I knowingly ignore assisting one of my struggling students? Implicit biases are harder to identify, as it is more of subconscious association as opposed to a direct one. How students dress can be a type of expression to their peers and classmates, but I have noticed that I have associated a certain way of dressing, as an indicator of which students I think will do poorly in my class. Male students who wear baggy clothing and constantly have their hoods on make me feel like they are not ready to learn; likewise, a female student who wears revealing clothing and short skirts/dresses gives me a similar vibe. I know that clothing and appearance play no role in learning, but it is something I do on an unconscious level which could be detrimental to my future students.

By being open and vulnerable about my strengths, needs, and biases I will be able to take an active role in trying to combat my needs and biases. My strength of talking and listening with my students will allow me to overcome my biases of students who are constantly tardy or dress in different fashion than I’m used to. To continue my story about Smokey, I made an effort to truly talk and listen to what he had to say about being late to my class. We decided to make a Pact, similar to those that Zaretta Hammond proposes, where we agreed that if Smokey showed up on time to my class his grade in my class would go up (Hammond, 2015). We set up benchmarks, so we could track his progress along the way: after our first assignment, after our first quiz, and during multiple review sessions we met to discuss his understanding and mastery over the material. By the end of the unit, Smokey’s grade in my class had risen two whole letter grades, and his enjoyment and engagement in the classroom had never been higher. Nel Noddings, who has done wonderful work on the study of caring pedagogy, says that teachers will



need to “engage in dialogue with the students about matters other than [their subject area]” (Noddings, 2012, p. 774). By having meaningful and open conversations with each of my students who I may have a conscious or unconscious bias towards, I can mitigate any harmful or damaging effects the biases may have on them.

### **Community Goals**

*When it is obvious that the goals cannot be reached, don't adjust the goals, adjust the action steps – Confucius*

As a teacher who is going to be entering into a classroom for the very first time, it is important to me that I lay out goals for myself; even as a veteran teacher, I plan on creating reasonable goals at the beginning of every school year. I want to create a few larger goals that will span the entirety of the school year, because it makes me feel more accomplished if I am able to tackle a really large task. For my first year of teaching, one of my goals is to create and maintain an organized and welcoming classroom for all of my students. I want to create a classroom where all students feel free to be themselves, and are able to say what they want without fear of retaliation or bullying. Nel Noddings says that a teacher should aim to create a climate of care and trust so that people will be free to do the right thing (Noddings, 2012). Having a classroom built with a climate of care will lead to a classroom that requires less discipline and will also allow for more classroom discussion and engagement. A second goal I aim to accomplish is to provide meaningful feedback to both my students and their households. Feedback is something that I enjoy, I love knowing what I did well on an assignment or project and what I can do to improve upon it. Similarly students and households enjoy feedback, so they can know how they are doing inside of my classroom. On top of that, providing meaningful feedback has been proven to close the achievement gap between students, which is useful when I

am trying to be a critical social justice teacher (Hattie & Clarke, 2008). By meaningful feedback, I mean providing more surface level feedback to allow students to build a deeper understanding as well as feedback on the self-regulatory aspects of a students' learning. As I enter my first year of teaching, I don't want to overwhelm myself, so these two goals are the goals I want to strive to hit by the end of the school year.

I am not expecting things to go perfect, and I am aware that I may not hit these goals exactly as I would hope. For example, I could fail to maintain that feeling of a welcoming classroom as the year goes on; at the beginning of the year I may initially set it up well, but may start to become lax on my classroom norms and may lose that sense of welcoming. Being a new teacher will be overwhelming, and I do not want all of the stress and anxiousness to drag me away from tending to the needs of my students. In anticipation of this, I want to keep a copy of the *SEL 3 Signature Practices Handbook* on me at all times, as it provides plenty of ways to keep students in a positive place, both socially and emotionally. Similar to how I want to provide meaningful feedback to my students and their households, another way to keep myself on track with a welcoming classroom is to ask students for their feedback. I aim to create a classroom ecology that the students feel safe in, so who better to ask than the students? And by having them provide me feedback, I am breaking down that barrier of power between myself and the students, showing them that they have power inside the classroom as well. On that note, providing meaningful feedback is something that will require more effort, due to the fact that it is easy to fall back into that rhythm of providing meaningless feedback. A huge resource when it comes to how to provide meaningful feedback will be other teachers, especially those that also practice critical social justice. John Hattie and Shirley Clarke give multiple examples where collaboration amongst students lead to better classroom ecology and student learning/engagement, so I hope to

be led by example and show my students that I collaborate with other teachers (Hattie & Clarke, 2008). These other teachers that I will be collaborating with have been working with students for longer periods of time, and have learned which feedback strategies work to increase students' understanding and knowledge and which ones do not. On top of this, I aim to keep a journal with each of my students' names in it, where I can document: questions the student asked, positive behavior, negative behavior, areas for improvement, and areas where they are doing well. This way, I always have something to refer to, and I can see how much the student has progressed from the beginning of the school year.

As I enter into the classroom as a full time teacher, I am prepared to face: hardships, triumphs, defeats, and successes. And moving forward, as I continue to grow in my teaching abilities I expect to face the same challenges as I will in my very first year. However, I will have a plethora of experience and knowledge behind me, which will make each consecutive school year a new and exciting nine months. Thinking about myself in this critical fashion, I have found the areas I will need to work on and focus on more during my first year, or years, as a teacher. I have also discovered and highlighted the areas where I excel, the areas I already excel in that will allow me to advance my students' learning, not just in biology, but in areas related to social justice. I have laid out two goals for myself, two goals that I want to achieve by the end of my first year as a teacher. In order for me to truly know if I have accomplished these goals, I need to have some way to measure how well I have done. And in both cases, student to teacher feedback will be how I can assess myself, and how I am doing in meeting these goals. By giving the students the ability to submit feedback, I will be able to see: if I am organizing my classroom well, have I created a classroom ecology where all students feel welcome and included, and have I been providing meaningful feedback to my students. I can also look around the classroom, to

see if everything is in order; I can always look at students' grades, and see if they improve after I have provided them with what I believe is meaningful feedback. But the strongest tool for me to use is my own students' feedback, as they are the ones I am doing all of this for. If they are not satisfied with any part of my teaching, then I need to correct myself to make it better for them. And now, I wait in anticipation till that first day of school, so I can begin a long journey of building up student self-efficacy and knowledge. Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo put it well, "we [will] have to take risks, make mistakes, and act" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 216). I am ready to take those risks, and I am willing to make those mistakes. And I am ready to act in ways that will promote the learning of all my students, in order for me to become a better teacher for those young minds who are eager to learn.

### **Diving Deep into Community**

*"We rarely do things because they are easy. We commit to things and do those things because we think they are important."* Sapon-Shevin (2007) - *Widening the Circle: The Power of Inclusive Classrooms.*

Grace, heroes, guardians. These are the words we have been hearing all year long, when talking about our frontline health workers, scientists creating vaccines, grocery store workers, and anyone in education. "By risking their lives every day for the strangers who arrived at their workplace, they made a conspicuous a foundational principle of both medicine and democracy: equality" (Kluger & Park, 2020). In my mind, the flow of the word strangers into the word equality resonates well with me, as I have embarked onto my journey of becoming a critical and socially just teacher. Strangers is a word we can use to describe the first day of class, as 30 + students spread out across six or more different periods enter my classroom. Stranger is a word we can use to describe those first couple of weeks, as the teacher and students begin to build

relationships with one another. What do you like to do after school? Who are your best friends on campus? Why is a 16-year-old sophomore in high school working at Jack-In-The Box during school hours? But as the year progresses, these strangers slowly build up a relationship with one another; the teacher attends school events, the students bump into the teacher while eating out at a restaurant, and the teacher even meets with students inside their own homes. On the same note, equality is a word I can use to describe the kind of classroom ecology I aim to build within each of my own classrooms. The world is not an equal and fair place, and in the year 2020 we have more evidence of this than any person should ever need. Why did George Floyd die at the hands of police, even after telling them multiple times he could not breathe? Why was Breonna Taylor shot and killed while sleeping in her own apartment, and no charges given out to the police who murdered her? And why is COVID proportional killing more African-American and Mexican-American individuals than Caucasians? Equality is a word we have heard a lot this year as well, but we are not truly equal, and will not be truly equal until fruitful discussions take place. Creating a classroom ecology where these kinds of fruitful discussions can take place is one of my main goals as a critically socially just teacher.

But given the year that 2020 has been, this process takes extra time. Remote learning is not the ideal way to teach students. Remote learning is not the ideal way to build relationships with students. Remote learning is not the ideal way to be a critical and socially just teacher. While on one hand, this guarantees job security for years to come, it also sheds light onto the deep structures of schooling, as well as shining light on all of the disparity gaps faced between teachers and students alike. Which students have strong Wi-Fi? Which students have computers with a lot of RAM? Which students have a quiet place to study? How many students have a camera that they can use to upload work to the electronic classroom website? On top of this, not

every student is receiving a similar type of instruction, or instruction at all. One report done this year found that Black and Hispanic students are twice as likely as white students to have received no live contact with teachers (Dorn et al, 2020). On top of all of these factors, there is also the factor of mental health and well-being, whose effects are still a bit unknown. However I have discussed and received feedback from students that it is hard to concentrate and it is hard to find motivation given these COVID situations. Lack of support and funding in the areas of mental health have really slipped through the cracks now, and I can only hope that after this pandemic, funding can be allocated to these services in order to lead to an improved educational experience for all. Of course, the biggest change can start from within my classroom, and I believe the 2020 school year will be a great jumping off point into my journey of equality and justice.

### **Scaffolding a Sense of Community**

*“It takes time to visit, to really sit down and be present” – Elder Lakota (2017) – Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, getting to know anyone who is an ally to your classroom has proven to be more difficult than in the face-to-face setting. A simple trip to your neighboring teacher’s classroom has become a long process of figuring out when to meet on Zoom. One-on-one conversations with students to learn about their likes, interests, funds of knowledge, and areas of improvement have all but been eradicated due to state and country laws forbidding faculty from being alone with a student virtually. Hell, you can’t even address a student during class without speaking out loud for the entire class to hear. And for some students, this concept is wonderful to them, because they can slip out of a Zoom meeting much easier than they could in the brick and mortar classroom; by turning off their camera with a push of a button,

a lot of students can disengage from the lesson with no repercussions from the teacher. However, what kind of critical socially just teacher would I be if I let these students just slip away and disengage?

In order to keep these students engaged within my class and within our ecology as a community of learners, I set up meetings with students who I knew were becoming disengaged from my classroom; meetings were held with another certified teacher present in the Zoom meeting, to guarantee that I was never having a one-on-one meeting with any students. Pablo Freire (1998) explains that teachers need to have *humility*, which involves, “listening to all that come to us, regardless of their intellectual level because it is a human duty that helps us identify with democracy and not with elitism” (Freire, 1998). I asked students to join me for a Zoom meeting either before school or after school, and I promised I would not take too much of their time. For the students who agreed to meet with me, I began by sharing *my story*: A brief overview of who I am, what my background is, where I come from, and where I am going. I opened up to the students, I got vulnerable. Was it comfortable? Not at all. Was it necessary? Absolutely. My vulnerability broke down any feeling of uneasiness the students had about meeting their teacher, and paved the way for students to be more open and honest with me. Once I shared *my story*, I asked students for theirs, fully knowing that I would be catching my students off-guard. I encouraged students to share, “just enough.” Some students would share their life story from birth, and some would only share bits and pieces. No matter how much they shared, I confided in them, and gave them my 100% virtual attention. Afterwards, I asked all students the same three questions:

- 1) What do you enjoy doing when you have free time?

- 2) How has distance learning been for you, easier than face-to-face learning or more difficult?
- 3) What are your favorite kinds of activities to do in class? What are your least favorite kinds of activities to do in class?

Again I encouraged students to share, “just enough,” and I let them know I would be keeping a record of what they shared in order to become a better teacher for them. I also promised that practice of *humility* that Freire wrote about; I truly listened to what the students had to say while answering the questions, and I listened to their feedback and took steps to re-engage them into our classroom ecology.

The students who I interviewed enjoyed our time together, and our conversations would sometimes turn into opportunities for each of us to present pets, action figures, video games, vinyl records, paintings, and other objects to one another. Some students who were hesitant at first in even planning a meeting with their teacher, ended up talking with me for an hour or so. As Sonia Nieto states, “believing in students, showing an interest in their well-being... always [benefits them] academically” (Nieto, 2013). These students could feel the care, even though the computer; one student even asked me, “*do you do this with all of the students?*” as if this was the first time a teacher had taken an interest in him as an individual.

Interviewing the students was a fantastic way for me to gain insight into their specific funds of knowledge, but I did not want to stop there; I also wanted to incorporate the students’ households into our community of learning as well. Normally, a house visit would be the action of choice, but due to COVID-19 pandemic, this option was off the table. So in a similar fashion, I set up after school meetings with the parents/guardians of my three case study students (amongst other students). The structure of these meetings was very similar to the meetings I had



with my students, but opened up an entire new wealth of information to me. Again, I would begin by sharing *my story* with the parents/guardians, and then also paraphrase the story their student had shared with me. I then asked them to highlight anything that their child might have missed when sharing their story with me, to gain even more insight into who my student is. Then I asked the same three questions I asked the students during their interviews, as the parents/guardians would usually have different answers than the students did. And just like with the student interviews, the parent interviews tended to run longer than anticipated; a majority of the parents/guardians had never felt so sought after in any of their student's previous classes, and they were grateful to become a part of our classroom ecology.

In order to achieve my goal of being a critical and socially just teacher, not that this is a goal that can ever be truly met, getting to know my students on a deeper level was a great first step. As a way to dip my feet into the water, I have picked three students from my fourth period to write full-length case study profiles on. These students range in academic achievement, English language development, socioeconomic status, and behavioral activities. But most importantly, they each play a critical-role in what makes my fourth period Biology class, the class that it is.

### **Student 1: Giorno Giovanna**

*“This term [English language learners] has also been criticized because it does not recognize the value in being multilingual and focuses instead on what students cannot do.” – Jennifer J.*

*Huber, Alfredo J. Artiles, and David Hernandez-Saca (2012) – Special Education and Students of Color*

Looking over my roster before the first day of school, Giorno Giovanna stood out to me because he was one of the three Chinese students I had across all six of my periods. At my

school site that is 90% Hispanic, coming across a student who comes from a Chinese background was very exciting; thinking about the different perspectives and ideas that he could bring to our classroom got my brain buzzing. As we started the school year, I found out that Giorno is a very introverted individual. This was a very surface level observation that I gathered from our first few days of class, as I noticed that he tended to use the chat as a way to respond to questions or engage with classmates, when he decided to participate. What I did not realize is that this was his first year at this school site, and none of his friends he made during his time at middle school were attending this school; I also had no idea that Giorno migrated from China when he was in elementary school, leaving behind plenty of friends he had made back at home. One thing that I did know is that he was an English language learner, but since this term only focuses on what students cannot do I am going to be referencing Giorno as a multilingual student instead (Huber et al., 2012, p. 2066). The school provided me with one of the languages spoken at home, Mandarin, but Giorno is not bilingual, and in actuality he is trilingual. This misrepresentation from the school is what encouraged me to pick Giorno as my first case study student, as it would allow me to be a better culturally relevant teacher for him.

### ***Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity***

I have to make this distinction early on, there are almost two different Giornos that I have seen: the in-class Giorno and the out of class/small group Giorno. In class, Giorno tries his best to stay under the radar, doing his best to not stand out and hopes that he is not called upon during class. Out of class or in small groups, Giorno steps out of the shadows and enjoys jumping into the conversation, whatever is being talked about. This struck me as pretty strange at first, because he seems so engaged in a setting outside of the classroom, but becomes very reserved inside the classroom. Releah Cossett Lent states that as teachers we must, “push students beyond

superficial facts to deeper understanding through immersion in reading, writing, thinking, and social practices” (Lent, R., 2016, p. 8). I want to push all of my students, I want to become the type of “warm demander” that Lisa Delpit describes as teachers who “expect a great deal of their students, convince them of their own brilliance, and help them to reach their potential in a disciplined and structured environment” (Delpit, L., 2008, p. 77). But how could I do either of these, if Giorno is trying to stay under cover of darkness during my class?

If I were to answer this question, I knew that I would need to stop and talk with Giorno, in an environment where he would feel more comfortable talking. For this reason, I invited him to an after school meeting with just myself where I set the stakes really low, to try and lower any anxiety that he might have been feeling. I proposed that we meet at my office hours after school, so that I could get the opportunity to hear more from him and about him, since I rarely got the chance to talk with him during class. He agreed to meet, although a little hesitant at first, but when the day of our meeting arrived, he was there in the waiting room. As the meeting started, I could still tell that Giorno was hesitant to talk, even though I was the only one there with him in the meeting. I started off by asking him about his story, what were the moments that really stuck out to him as important. I could tell that this question really struck him, as maybe no one had ever asked him a question like this before, or maybe it just felt weird coming from a teacher. He let me know that he lives with his mother in an apartment complex, and that his grandma also lives nearby; his grandmother actually convinced his mom to move from China to America, because she enjoyed it so much. When he left China he was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, which meant that he left behind all of his childhood friends. He seemed a bit sad when he mentioned his friends, as they seemed to still keep in contact, but he has not seen them in person since he immigrated to the States. I pushed him a bit on this, and asked him if he made any friends here in America. He

said he had made some friends here, but his answer was not very confident so I was hesitant to believe that statement. The reason I was not very confident in this answer, is because he told me that he uses apps like WECHAT, Line, QQ, and Discord to stay in contact with his friends back in China and friends he has never even met in real life. He also said that it is hard to meet with friends in America, because you need a car to go anywhere. So for this reason, he likes to stay at home and look at his computer most days; he likes to play computer games, read manga, and watch anime. The reason I used the alias names within this paper is because they are all characters from Giorno's favorite anime: JoJo's Bizarre Adventure. Lastly he mentioned how he likes China better in terms of everyday life; he said it was easier to meet up with friends on a daily basis, and his favorite thing to do was go out and eat at restaurants in China with friends. Oddly enough, he actually prefers the American education system, saying that in China they give too much homework. "*Even during summer break they gave assignments,*" he said with a sigh.

I quickly noticed how open Giorno was during that conversation. From just one question, we talked for about 15 minutes, which if I tried to talk with him during class I would probably only get to hear him talk for about a minute. I questioned him about this, why he is so reserved in class, but he is more talkative and open right now during our chat. He told me how he is self-conscious about his English speaking skills as well as his accent. At home, he speaks Mandarin and Cantonese with his mother, which means he already knows two languages, and is actively learning a third language. So even though our classroom community was one of a positive and uplifting nature, Giorno still felt nervous talking in front of his classmates, in fear of being made fun of. In his mind, Giorno did not speak Standard English which left him feeling like he has a "broader linguistic repertoire than White children who are said to be speakers of standardized English" (Garcia & Otheguy, 2017, p. 63). He also mentioned how he struggled

more with the reading and writing aspect of the English language, which was a bit surprising to hear since he also mentioned how he was nervous speaking in front of others. But this does align with his ELPAC scores from 2019: overall he scored a 3 on the test, but in the specific categories he scored “*Well-Developed*” in the speaking category while he scored “*Somewhat/Moderately*” developed in the listening, reading, and writing categories. Giorno told me that having pictures next to vocabulary words does not help him that much, but adding definitions to some of the harder words on documents or slideshows does help. On top of those accommodations, he also mentioned using an app called NetEase to help him translate some of the more difficult words from English to Mandarin. Learning about these accommodations I could make for Giorno allowed me to make updates to my PowerPoints and future assignments. I also familiarized myself with the NetEase app that Giorno was using so that I could stand in his shoes and see what he was dealing with.

After meeting with Giorno, I wanted to set up a meeting with his mother as well, to bring his household into my community and also gain some more funds of knowledge that he may not have brought to our one-on-one meeting. His mother agreed to a meeting, and I was happy to see that on the day of the meeting, both Giorno and his mother were there. I quickly realized that the reason for this is because Giorno’s mother had trouble communicating in English; I felt bad, because Giorno had to be the mediator between us, which meant that his mother would tell him something in Cantonese and then he would translate it into English for me. As we were discussing, it appeared to me that Giorno’s mother did not think her son needed any special assistance as an EL learner. She even told me that she was happy with where his grades were, which did strike me as odd because at the time of our meeting, his grade in our class was a very low C. One thing she did mention to me which was an extremely important insight, is that their

internet at their apartment usually does not work after 5 P.M. Giorno chimed in, and said that this really hurts him academically and physically since this means he cannot take a break after the end of the school day since he only has a two-hour gap to finish homework. In a study done in 2005, Robert Fairlie found that for each education level, black and Latinos have lower rates of technology access, and a similar pattern emerged in regards to income (Fairlie, 2005, p. 11). Giorno is living in a city where families need a high income in order to pay rent, but looking at the apartment that he and his mother were living in, I could tell it was on the lower end of the financial scale. With this new information, I knew that I would have to make some changes for Giorno, in order to give him extra time to turn in assignments as well as reduce the stress he may have felt as assignments began to pile up for all of his classes.

### **Academic Standing**

Academically, Giorno was in a pretty weird spot. During his time at middle school, he got straight A's pretty easily. But as he began his time in high school, he began to see these grades drop from A's to C's or sometimes D's. It was difficult to exactly pinpoint why this sudden drop in grades was occurring, just due to the sheer amount of new changes happening in his life. Firstly, transitioning to a new school, a new high school where he had no friends. Secondly, participating in virtual/distance learning for the entirety of the school year. Thirdly, the everyday life of quarantine left everyone feeling lethargic; Dr. William Orme, a psychologist and behavioral health expert, says that you can, "easily enter a self-perpetuating spiral where you disengage to avoid the stressors altogether" (McCallum, 2020). And when I would talk with Giorno, this is the kind of spiral he was falling into. But as a teacher who was also living through the quarantine and pandemic life, I sometimes felt the same way.

When I first began noticing this trend of decreasing grades, I thought it might have been due to lack of confidence in his English writing ability. I thought that he might think I would mark him down based on his writing skills. He hinted at previous teachers doing something similar in the past, so I thought maybe it was still a concern in the subconscious of his mind. But after discussing this idea with him, I realized that this was not the case. Giorno was not completing assignments because he was already overwhelmed and tired of being on the computer all day. Giorno was experiencing Zoom fatigue, what Carolyn Wolf describes as: the tiredness, anxiety, or worry resulting from overusing virtual platforms (Wolf, 2020). Giorno and all of his classmates were on the computer for six hours a day, five days a week. At the end of the day, the last thing these kids want to do is spend more time on the computer working on assignments. When the final virtual bell rings, most students would take some time to step away from the computer, eat a snack, go outside, or maybe do some chores. But Giorno had to continue to work on the computer for two more hours before his internet would go out for the evening; this meant he was working off his computer for eight hours straight, every weekday. At the start of the school year, this was the schedule Giorno had set for himself, and he stuck with it for the first month and a half. But as the assignments began to pile up, and as the fatigue began to set in stronger, this routine he set for himself became less and less feasible. He was not able to stare at the screen for those long periods of time, and he needed time after school to disengage and recuperate. But if he decided to take these after school breaks, he was not able to complete assignments due to his internet going out around five or six PM. This left Giorno at an impasse: take a break after school to help with his mental health while letting assignments for the week build up, or keep on working after the last period of the day while ultimately hurting his mental health.

Most of the time, Giorno would push off my classroom assignments till the last minute, due to the changes I made with due dates because of the pandemic. I could always tell when Giorno was working on my assignments, because he would always reach out to me with questions or clarifications. From his assignments, I noticed that he needed help when it came to writing; his vocabulary was strong, but his grammar is where he struggled the most. Taking a look at Figure A1, you can see his understanding of the concept of osmosis, but he struggles to get his point across due to his moderately developed writing skills. With this observation, I worked on adding sentence starters to all major assignments to assist Giorno and other ELs in my classroom. During one of our meetings, I asked Giorno if he found the sentence starters useful, or if he prefers to create his own sentences. He told me that it depends on how he is feeling, sometimes he relies on the sentence starters, and sometimes he likes to be adventurous and write his own sentences. In Figure A2, you can see Giorno using one of the provided sentence starters in his response, and the difference in writing between Figure A1 and A2 is night and day. Even if Giorno does not always use the sentence starters, I wanted to provide them regardless, because they provide an example of proper grammar whether used or not.

On top of his moderate skills in writing, Giorno also scored at the moderate level for listening and reading. With this in mind, and all of my other bilingual learners in my class, my first culminating task was designed to give all students an opportunity to tackle all major parts of the English language: speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Our first culminating task focused on picking a human caused environmental issue, and required students to research the problem and implement some kind of action plan (i.e. beach clean-up, writing to a congressperson). At the end of all of this, each student needed to create a PowerPoint that included all of their findings and the result of their action plan. Giorno decided to tackle plastic



pollution, specifically plastic pollution and how it harms ocean life. On top of the presentation, each student in the class needed to take notes on the other students' presentations, highlighting three different factors: the human caused environmental issue, some of the causes of said issue, and potential solutions to the issue. Within this first culminating task, Giorno and his classmates were being asked to speak, read, write, and listen. In Figure A3, you can see one slide of Giorno's presentation, where he included a bit of his own storytelling; a seal that had choked on some plastic was being taken away by an emergency worker, and really served to highlight the urgency and importance of keeping plastic out of our oceans. During his presentation, it was very clear that his speaking skills are much more advanced than his reading and writing. Giorno was able to articulate his points better with his voice, in a clearer manner than what was written on his slide. Like David Connor and Subini Annamma wrote, "it is imperative to always begin by recognizing what students can do before identifying their areas of need" (Connor & Annamma, 2013, p. 135). Giorno had excellent speaking skills, but required extra help in the areas of writing, reading, and listening.

The biggest hurdle that Giorno faces academically is his writing skills. When given the task of writing a couple of sentences, Giorno has no problem doing so, but the problem that arises is his poor grammar. Even with his translation app, writing first in Cantonese and then translating it to English is not always a clean translation. I also want to honor the fact that he is multilingual, and I want to show him that knowing Cantonese and Mandarin is a benefit, and not a drawback. I think the most amazing work that I saw from Giorno was a FlipGrid assignment where students had to list their favorite food, the ingredients in it, and the macromolecules found within that dish. Giorno took this assignment, and decided to introduce us to his favorite dish back in China, hotpot, as well as describing the ingredients in Cantonese; in this sense, I

provided a marginalized multilingual learner the opportunity to act as a literate multilingual learner (García & Kleifgen, 2020, p. 559). It was a beautiful moment when I watched that 35 second FlipGrid, because Giorno not only knew the science behind what he was saying, he was also able to use both English and Cantonese to introduce us to the concept of Hotpot. He was performing what Ofelia García and Jo Anne Kleifgen call “translanguaging.” Using two of the languages he knew to share the required information with his class. After seeing this FlipGrid, I knew I had to add more opportunities for translanguaging into my classroom.

### **Action Plan**

As we enter into the next semester, my main goal is to provide Giorno and my other bilingual students the opportunity to practice more reading, writing, speaking, and listening. I want to also provide them with variants of all of these tasks: group readings and individual readings, free writes and more structured writing, speaking in front of the class and speaking to a small group, and lastly listening to me talk and listening to classmates talk. “Varied activities that accompanied all lectures so that students [are] actively engaged,” is a goal that I have for all students, but specifically my bilingual learners (Connor & Annamma, 2013, p. 135). I want Giorno to feel like a part of our community of learning, regardless of the language he is using to demonstrate his point. My hope is that Giorno embraces his multilingual side of himself, and brings it to the virtual classroom every day.

I also want to teach Giorno how to take care of his mental health, and not feel overburdened by the assignments he has piling up. I understand that he was a straight A student back in middle school, but due to the pandemic, distance learning, and poor internet providers, he has a whole new ball game to play with this year. Even though he may see his grade drop in my class, I want him to feel comfortable taking a break from the computer at the end of the

school day. In one of our future meetings, I want to introduce Giorno to the six different types of self-care, and ask that Giorno practice using them daily. I must also remind myself that not all learning done in my class needs to pertain to Biology, and mental health care may end up being more beneficial in the long run for some of my students.

**Student 2: Jolyne Joestar**

*“Familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security, and with the memory of sounds and smells of communal activities and homely pleasures accumulated over time.” –*

*Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) – Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*

As the grandson of an immigrant, I have seen first-hand how it feels to belong to two places at once. My grandmother is from Guadalajara, and moved to the States when she met my grandfather. My grandfather ran a television store in Santa Ana, and my grandmother spent most of her time as a cashier there. Although she became a United States citizen, she still felt a connection to Mexico. Jolyne has a similar story to my grandmother, except Jolyne has lived in America all of her life, but she still feels a connection to Mexico. Jolyne’s mother is from Salvador and her dad is from Bolivia. They met in Mexico, and her mother was pregnant with Jolyne as they immigrated into America. They live very close to the American/Mexican border, which meant that they would frequently travel back and forth between the two countries. However, Jolyne’s dad did not stay a part of their family for very long, and at this point in her life is not even considered a part of it. In one of our meetings, she joked that her family treats her father like how Miguel’s family treats Hector in the Disney movie *Coco*, going as far as removing his picture from the ofrenda (altar made around the Day of the Dead); I think she was joking, but this was an interview conducted over Zoom so it is hard to tell. Because of her origins from Mexico, her mother raised her to speak Spanish, and on top of this, she is also learning how

to speak Mandarin through school courses. When she told me this, I was taken aback, because at the age of 14, the only language I knew was English; my Spanish was all of 20 words, which did not help me form any sentences. But since she was actively learning a third language, I understood why she was in the GATE program, and that she would require extra challenges in my class. How could I best challenge Jolyne in my classroom? And at what point have I made the class too challenging? I always tend to teach the lowest common denominator, since this allows me to guarantee that all students are learning the information, but if I did not think of my GATE students, they might become disengaged. With this fear of disengagement looming over me, I decided to take a more in-depth look at Jolyne, her gift as a student, and her Mexican heritage.

### ***Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity***

Out of the three focus students I decided to do in-depth case studies on, Jolyne was the most hesitant to respond to my emails asking to have some one-on-one interviews. I had to send her multiple reminders via our class text messaging system, as well as a few private messages during Zoom class, before she finally agreed to meet. During our very first meeting, even though it was a one-on-one interview, Jolyne still kept her camera off. Whether this was in fear of me seeing the inside of her house, or just afraid of me seeing her in her pajamas, I am not sure; even with her camera off, this first meeting was still great because it was the most I have ever heard Jolyne speak. It was during this meeting that I learned about her connection to Mexico, and the feelings she still has for that country. I also learned during this meeting that she feels a lot of pressure from her mother to be successful in school. As Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor put it, “the long-standing image of the USA as a land of milk and honey has drawn immigrants from all over the world” (Adelman & Taylor, 2015, p. 326). This is the exact sentiment that Jolyne’s

mother felt as she immigrated to the states; her mother wanted a better life for her children, and since Jolyne is the oldest, she feels the most pressure on herself to succeed. She mentioned how she has one younger brother who just turned two last year. Because of this, her younger brother is not at the age yet where he feels any pressure to prove that his mother's choice to come to America was justified. But what does this mean for Jolyne? It means she is carrying all of that weight on her shoulders alone.

Jolyne's life was affected pretty substantially by the COVID-19 pandemic. All of the activities she enjoyed doing pre-pandemic came to a halt as soon as the quarantine orders were enacted. Prior to the pandemic, Jolyne enjoyed playing on her club soccer team, as well as running on days they did not have practice with her friends from the team. But as the cases began to rise, her mother and step-father advised her that she should not continue going to practice or running with her teammates. Roberto Gonzales mentions how, "through relationships forged with friends and peers, [immigrant children] become insiders included in the social and physical worlds of others" (Gonzales, 2016, p. 67). Jolyne is doing her best to become an insider, but the pandemic put a damper on her ability to do so. Jolyne did mention that she was now running with her step-dad during the evenings; while this does not give her a lot of time to build relations with individuals of her age, it still gives her opportunities to be included in the physical world of her step-father.

After our first interview, Jolyne was quicker to respond to my messages about setting up appointments to meet. Could this be because she was excited to finally have a teacher who was taking interest in her? Or maybe she was tired of my constant nagging? A bit of both? All I know is I was excited for our second meeting, because this means that I would get to pull the curtain back a little more and reveal more of who Jolyne actually is. Just like our first meeting, she came

into the Zoom with her camera off, but seemed eager to talk. She actually was the one who initiated the greetings, and was excited to tell me about some friends she had made at the school site. She had mentioned previously that she went to a school far away, which meant that her middle school friends were not at her high school, so I was excited to hear who she made friends with. She happily told me how she had made friends with Erina and Anne; Erina was in my period four biology class, the same class as Jolyne, while Anne was in my period eight. I questioned Jolyne, and asked her how she became friends with two people over Zoom. She told me that Erina was in a lot of her other classes, so they shared their social media accounts with one another and began talking like that. As for Anne, it was a very similar story, except that they were put into a breakout room together, and then basically forced to talk to one another.

I use the word forced in jest, because Jolyne is actually quite a big talker when it comes to engaging in small talk with people her age. She mentioned to me how she enjoys taking charge when put in a breakout room, especially when there is a task at hand. She said that, *“I don't know what happens, but when there is work to do I just want to do things my own way. I take charge.”* She also mentioned how when there is no work to do in the breakout rooms, she will get off topic and just start talking about whatever. This was such a stark difference to me, because during whole group conversations she was so shy, and did her best to not stand out. In a study done in 1995, it was found that gifted children excessively criticize themselves, avoid risk-taking, experience higher levels of emotional intensity, and are more sensitive to rejection by peers (Silverman, 1995). I believe this is the reason that Jolyne acts differently depending on the situation she finds herself in: during whole group conversations she stays quiet in fear of being rejected or bullied by her peers for being too smart, but in small groups she is excited and willing to talk with anyone. I again pushed her on this, as I was curious to see how she would

respond. She mentions that she is not as much afraid at being made fun of or rejected by her peers, but more so afraid that her teachers will think she is dumb if she gets a question wrong. I asked her if I had ever made her feel like that, and she said “*No, not you Mr. But like my geometry teacher has.*” Pushing even further, I asked her if she told her geometry teacher how they made her feel, but she went quiet. I decided to drop that conversation.

As we were wrapping up this interview, Jolyne asked me if I wanted to see her pet bird. This was an odd request as we did not even talk about her pets at any point during the meeting, but I knew it was an opportunity to finally see her on camera. I obliged, and told her I would love to see her bird. She muted her mic for a minute to grab her bird, and when she came back I saw not only a beautiful yellow bird, but also a short black-haired student I had never seen before; I also noticed that the same black-haired student was also glistening with sweat. I asked Jolyne if she has A/C wherever she was at, and she said no just fans. I also asked her if her bird could talk or repeat anything, but she also said no. With her camera on, I decided now would be a great time to just talk about interests and dig deeper into her funds of knowledge. We discussed different things she does after school, and other things she has done since the start of the quarantine. It was a great moment of peace, where I was able to just talk one-on-one with a student like I would in the traditional classroom.

### ***Academic Standing***

The first time I heard Jolyne talk was when I cold-called on her in class. However, even though I did not hear her speak a lot, I knew that she was incredibly talented when it came to her knowledge of how to be successful in school. During one of our meetings, she told me that she chose this specific high school due to the fact that they had these three things: a Law magnet program, an IB Program, and a debate team. I was so surprised to hear this come out of the

mouth of a freshman in high school, especially since when I was her age I was not that aware of what was going on. More research shows that gifted children think and behave differently than their peers (Gross, 1993). I was curious as to whether she was being influenced by her mother or step-father, or if this was just the drive and mindset that Jolyne had, but I did not feel comfortable asking. But regardless, her ambition and passion to do well in class was apparent in the work that she submitted.

Every time we as a class completed a new assignment, I could almost always guarantee that Jolyne would be the first name on Schoology with a blue “Submission” next to her name. Figure B1 shows a slide from her first culminating task, in which Jolyne was focused on colony collapse disorder in bees as a human caused environmental issue. Each slide had a similar theme and look to them, and she did a great job at incorporating the information we went over on how to make a good PowerPoint; as a side note, I gave each student some “Glows” and “Grows” in regards to their presentations, and for Jolyne’s presentation, I struggled to find a “Grow.” You can see her work ethic through all of her assignments as well. For example, in Figures B2 and B3, you can see the attention to detail that Jolyne would add to her models. Figure B2 is a food web, where all that was given was a list of animals and what they ate. Jolyne took the extra step, and color coordinated each different trophic level to help her better visualize this concept. And for Figure B3, Jolyne took extra care to color coordinate and label every single piece of Transcription. This care and love that she added to her assignments is what allowed her to succeed in not only my class, but all of her classes.

The biggest struggle that Jolyne has is in working collaboratively with her peers. In secondary school, this type of group collaboration costs nothing more than one grade in the gradebook. However, in future endeavors or careers, group collaboration could be more costly;



during her time in high school, it is important that she learns the tools and *hidden curriculum* of working in a group with peers. This term hidden curriculum can be defined as the unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, procedures, and norms that exist in the educational setting (Alsubaie, 2015, p. 125). Jolyne herself mentioned how she likes to take control of the group when asked to do group work, because she wants it to be done her way. While most high school students would have no problem with handing the reins off to someone else, this does not teach the students how to work together with one another. In one instance, Jolyne privately reached out to me and asked if she could individually work on a recently introduced group project. I replied back to her and basically used her own words against her; let me tell you, she hated that. But as a warm demander, I was going to demand Jolyne to work together with her classmates, to learn these skills like open communication and listening to and respecting others' ideas and opinions.

### **Action Plan**

In terms of actions I need to take for Jolyne, most of them come in the form of increasing the rigor of some of my assignments. Not by giving her and the other gifted students more work to do, but rather giving them alternative work or bonus questions that challenge them to wrestle the concepts a bit further. Students like Jolyne will easily and quickly get distracted or disengaged if the material and rigor being presented is too surface level. I plan to add more challenge questions to my Warm-Ups, questions that are there to challenge those students who feel the original Warm-Up questions are too easy for them. I will let Jolyne be in control of her own learning: I will provide these bonus questions and extra challenges on the assignments, but she will need to choose whether she takes advantage of them or not.

On top of adding an extra optional challenge to my class, I will also be adding in more activities that will require students to collaborate with one another in order to arrive at a desired

outcome. This will help not only those students like Giorno who need assistance in bettering their English speaking skills, but also students like Jolyne that need help in increasing their exposure and level of comfort when asked to work in a group. I will also set aside some time for a metacognitive piece, where we as a class can determine a list of desired outcomes when working in a group. We will answer questions such as: What do you want out of a partner when asked to work together? How does it feel when your ideas or inputs are not taken seriously? This will allow everyone to be put on the same page, as well as unveil the hidden curriculum of working in a collaborative group amongst peers.

### **Student 3: Dio Brando**

*“The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom.”* – Bell

Hooks (1994) – *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*

Dio Brando instantly stuck out to me during our first day of classes, as a student who was going to take an active role inside of our classroom; during distance learning, students like Dio are so helpful in making the whole online learning situation feel and sound more like it does in a face-to-face setting. He is new to the Magnet program, as well as to the school, so he has not quite had the time or the opportunity to get involved with the clubs/sports on campus. Given the opportunity, I believe Dio would join the school's Robotic Club since he enjoys engineering and working with his hands. Even though Dio is very extroverted in class, and is never afraid to reach out for help when he has questions, he still struggles in a lot of his classes. Is this a fault of the teachers for not following his IEP accommodations? Perhaps it is his frequent visits to the hospital for chemotherapy? Either way, I wanted to pick Dio as one of my case studies in order

to be a better teacher for him, and guarantee that I was providing him with the scaffolds and support he needs in order to meet our learning objectives.

### ***Socio-Emotional Development & Social Identity***

In learning more about Dio, I learned that he lives with his mother and father in a house pretty far away from the school. His father owns a mechanic shop in the city, and Dio enjoys spending time with his father there learning all about cars; he has even shared with me that he knows how to change the oil and tires on a car. Because his father is an independent business owner, Dio has a very strong sense of community and to those around him. He has told me he often enjoys time where he can just enjoy the city he is in, the people he is around, because it makes him feel like this is where he belongs. Similar to what Robert Gonzales wrote, “they [first generation students] have time to explore their surroundings and to develop attachments to the blocks, parks, schoolyards, and neighborhoods” (Gonzales, 2016, p. 5). This sense of community is what led him to join the Firefighter Academy program at our school, and says he wants to become a firefighter solely because he, “*just looks up to them.*” Dio also uses his community resources when he visits the City of Hope to receive treatment for his tumor. Dio was born with a tumor in his lip, and has been consistently receiving treatment for it his entire life. He sometimes will be in the hospital for just a few days, or sometimes he can be in the hospital for over a week. Due to this treatment, Dio is frequently missing school due to being in the hospital; even once he is released from the hospital, it may take him a day or a few to recover and have the strength to join our Zoom meetings. Because of his recurrent absences some of his teachers have this mindset that Peter DeWitt calls the *Expectancy Effect*: “Self-reinforcement on students who are statistically not ‘supposed’ to do well – they tend not to” (DeWitt, 2020). Why have these teachers bought into the ideas of subtractive schooling? Perhaps their own waddling in the realm

of subtractive schooling has clouded their vision, because I see a totally different Dio. I see a Dio who shows up to class, willing to participate in any activity or lab assigned for that day. I see a Dio who messages to ask what assignments he will need to work on during his stay in the hospital. I see a Dio who takes precautionary steps to raise his grade, like attending after school tutoring and performing test corrections. The expectations I have for Dio are the same expectations I have for all of my students, he just needs extra scaffolds to reach those expectations.

As stated, Dio does have an IEP due to him being on the Autism spectrum. After meeting with Dio's mother, she really wanted to make it clear that he does have an IEP and that following it as closely as possible is one of the best ways to help him be successful. A few important points in his IEP are that he needs frequent restroom breaks due to his medication, needs frequent checks for understanding and praise when doing something correctly, and he needs a well-structured classroom and should be warned if that structure is going to change. I assured Dio's mother that I had read through his IEP, and that I was making all the appropriate accommodations in order to provide the scaffolds needed by Dio; later in the semester, his mother confided in my mentor teacher and I, praising us for adequately providing the necessary accommodations. In Dio's IEP, it also mentions how he needs to feel comfortable inside of the classroom in regards to student expectations; as a critically socially just teacher, students' well-being and displaying of care from myself to my students is essential. Privileging anything, "over the students' more basic need to feel that I [care] for them," is a great disservice to them (Maulucci, 2009, p. 628). I have often incorporated checks with the students into my lessons in order to see how their weekend was, how they are feeling, how their finals are going, because I know human interaction can be very limiting during COVID lockdowns. I also include a

summary slide that reviews information we discussed last class, as this benefits all students, but in particular it benefits Dio so he can orientate himself with where we have just been and where we are now going.

### ***Academic Standing***

When it comes to school work, Dio does an excellent job at using his resources in order to complete labs and other assignments we have given the class. Dio has reached out to myself multiple times just to ask if I could give him feedback on an assignment he was working on; after giving him actionable feedback, he goes back to the assignment and considerately uses the provided feedback to improve his work. These decisions Dio makes, to use the tools and feedback that have been provided to him in order to be successful, proves to me that he contains a growth mindset. Growth mindset, as defined by Hattie is, “the belief that one’s intelligence, skills, and qualities can be developed through effort, input and a range of learning strategies” (Hattie, p. 13). We discussed growth mindset as one of our first lessons of the year, and even had the students take a growth mindset quiz so students could see where they stand. Dio scored in the “Growth Mindset with some Fixed ideas” category, even though his hard work and practice both in school and when helping his dad fix cars, proves to me he has a strong growth mindset.

During this first semester, we have really taken a deep dive into the Science and Engineering Practices (SEP). This strategy models behaviors that scientists engage in as they investigate and build models. Dio enjoys working with his hands, and I think that this is a great support for him because it promotes more hands-on learning. In accordance with SEP 6, Constructing Explanations and Designing Solutions, we asked students to identify a human-caused environmental problem and create a solution to that problem; Dio created a presentation on pollution at Seal Beach and created multiple solutions to combat it (See Figure

C1). Another practice that we have scaffold this semester for our students is SEP 2, Developing and Using Models. With each concurrent model we asked students to create, I took away a scaffold I had given them previously, and the students still soared. Looking at Dio's first model (Figure C2) and comparing it to his final model of the semester (Figure C3) Dio has shown huge growth in this SEP.

Dio's biggest challenge academically is interactions with and among his peers. When sent to breakout rooms, Dio remains quiet when asked to work collaboratively with his classmates; in one of our household visits he told me, "*I prefer the other students to talk,*" and that "he wouldn't take charge." It is very ironic that he is so active in the main room, in front of the entire class, but as soon as he gets placed into a breakout room with three or less peers he gets shy. His Autism plays a role in this shyness, but as Richard Gargulio and Emily Bouck stated, "we must focus on the child, not the impairment" (Gargulio & Bouck, 2018, p. 6). I have noticed that Dio engages more in the breakout rooms when he is assigned a role or a task to complete during the breakout room. After interacting with a virtual simulation, his breakout room chose him to be the "Announcer" who shared their results with the entire class when we regrouped. When I visited his breakout room, his group and him decided on the roles as well as sharing their information with one another. Similar to how structure in class is going to help him be more successful, it appears that structure within the breakout rooms will also prove to be beneficial for him as well.

### ***Action Plan***

Looking forward to next semester, I want to create more opportunities for students to collaborate with one another; during the time of COVID, students are feeling separated and collaboration will help them feel less alone. The majority of my action plan for Dio is to teach him how to collaborate and engage with his classmates, to increase his socio-emotional learning.

For all my students, I want them to feel like they belong to a safe and caring community of learners (CASEL, 2019). But until Dio feels comfortable participating in our breakout rooms, I cannot stand behind the statement that all students feel like they belong to our community of learners. How can I achieve this? By including more structure when entering our breakout rooms; tell students what roles they need to assign themselves in those breakout rooms as well as providing them a document to collaborate on, to simulate face-to-face collaboration as much as possible. Over time, I hope that Dio will be able to recognize the role(s) he should be taking during a breakout room on his own without my prompting or reminding after a couple of times of scaffolding it for them.

I want to teach him how to use all of his resources before resorting to emailing/contacting the teacher. I think that this issue stems from his mother who becomes very anxious when his grades drop to a “C” or lower. Because of her anxiety and pressure on Dio to raise his grade, he sometimes overlooks the scaffolds that have already been provided to him, and heads straight to the teacher. As a teacher, I will never discourage a student from reaching out for help, but I want to encourage all students to utilize all of their resources first. Dio is a strong student who turns in all of his assignments, which means he is used to receiving good grades. However, as he is now completing his first semester of high school, it is time for him to become more independent and less reliant on the teacher automatically when he gets stuck. We, as teachers, pull him in for extra assistance when he requests it, but what would be more valuable for him as a learner would be to exhaust all his resources and only reach out to the teacher when he has done that.

## **Expanding my Reach**

*“A strong classroom community is one in which students feel empowered and valued, and one in which children will ultimately thrive.”* Kate Kane (2016) – *Back to School*

Throughout this look back at the 2020-2021 school year, I have taken an in depth focus at a few focus students, and highlighted their strengths and their areas of improvement. But this only gives insight into a fraction of my classroom, which leaves a majority of my classroom still in the dark. In this last section I want to bring into the light the rest of my classroom, the last pieces of the puzzle. How do you build up a culture of learning in a virtual environment? In an environment where you will never see the students’ faces, it seems like a daunting task. For me, the keystone of every school year is community. Even though this was the first year that all school districts were at one point virtual, this does not mean that no research has been done in building up communities in a digital space. In a study done by Alfred Rovai in 2002, he mentions how the, “interaction and involvement of learners in this course lessened psychological distance” (Rovai, 2002, p. 13). This was my goal coming into this year, to lessen the feeling the students might face of being psychically distanced from their classmates; I wanted to make our virtual class feel like an in-person class.

I first had to introduce myself to the location of my school site, since this was my first time working at this school. What are popular locations to eat around the school? Since many of my students will be freshmen, I also wanted to know where the closest middle schools were in relation to my school site. Where can students go to receive medical care in the area? What are some places near the school where students can meet outside of school hours? These were the questions I had at the front of my mind, as I took a trip down to the bustling metropolis area near my school site. At the time due to COVID-19, I was not able to step foot onto the campus. But



standing outside of the tall blue gates that the students would normally walk through every day, gave me a sense of what the students would feel on a traditional day of school. From those school gates, I traveled around, to find myself face-to-face with a giant hill that overlooked both the school and the city; a fantastic place to hike, jog, bike ride, skateboard, or get any sort of physical activity. After taking in the view, I decided to drive into the city and discover some places where students could eat. Once again, due to the COVID-19 pandemic I did not enter any of these restaurants, but I took note of what was around and what I thought I would order from each of these restaurants. Lastly, I took note of all there was to see just on the streets of this city. The huge gap in wealth distribution was painfully obvious: with new condos being built, with homeless encampments on the sidewalk in front of them. Would any of my students be living in those new condos? Would any of my students be living in one of those encampments?

After returning home, I wanted to check the demographics of the students I would be working with. I checked the website Greatschools.org to see the data that they had, which can be hit-or-miss with some of the information, but great with others. I was mainly focused on the ethnicities of the student body: 93% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 2% Black, 2% White, and less than 1% Native American, Filipino, and Pacific Islander (Greatschools.org). Reading this, I knew I had to brush up on my Spanish speaking and listening skills, especially if I was going to be writing and visiting the households of my students; Yo entiendo español pero no hablo muy bien. I also knew going into the school year that I would have some students frequently visiting Mexico to see family. Just like Jolyne, these students have a connection to the States, as well as hold a connection to Mexico; in some ways, this meant the students could be facing an identity crisis. “Presence, patterns, places, and relationships inscribed these young people in their

communities,” says Roberto Gonzales, and I needed to find out what was inscribed on my students. (Gonzales, 2016, p. 70).

In order to get this information from my students, I knew that I would need to create and foster a community of learning, but more importantly a community of belonging within my classroom. I also realized there was more to the story than just my students, I also knew that I would need to utilize the households of my students as well. With all of this in mind, and with distance learning due to the pandemic, I knew that this fostering of community would take longer than it would in a traditional school year. I was a bit frightened by this challenge, but I also knew that it would be important for the students to feel connected to something, in a year full of disconnections. The communities I was aiming to build up were: community between teacher and students, community between students and other students, and the community between my classroom and my students’ households.

### **Who Am I?**

*“All students need to know that you respect them and care for them. Fortunately, that is very easy. I try and make sure every so often that I have said something personal to each of them.”*

Ms. P (2011) - *She’s Strict for a Good Reason.*

The first day of school always contains a rush of different emotions for every single person on that campus. For the teachers and the students, there is an added emotion though: curiosity. This is the first time that this group of students is meeting this teacher, and this is the first time that this teacher is meeting this specific group of students. Everyone always wants to make a good first impression, which makes the first day of class that much direr. A lot of texts have come out detailing the “correct way” to set up your classroom ecology. You will hear some veteran teachers say to “review the syllabus day one, set up those norms right away so you can

get students in line early on.” This does not sit well at all with me, as it is playing right into the school-to-prison pipeline that is so prominent, especially in our underprivileged communities. In the year 2019, American Indian children were 1.5 times more likely to be arrested than white children and Black children were 2.4 times more likely to be arrested than white children (Children’s Defense Fund, 2021). As a critical social justice educator, I do not want to feed directly into this pipeline, so creating such a rigid classroom environment (not even ecology at this point) is something I do not feel comfortable doing. I think one of the stranger pieces of advice I have heard is, “Don’t smile until Christmas/December.” Angeles Pérez sums up my thoughts very nicely when she says, “Don’t smile until Christmas?! That means you never really made a connection with them until Christmas” (Nieto, 2013, p. 35)! A fantastic reminder that teaching is focused on relationships and the community built between the teacher and the student, not just on the first day of school, but every day until summer.

With the shift to distance learning, I knew that it would take a bit longer to build up that community between teacher and student. On the first day of class, I wanted to begin by introducing technology that we would be using throughout the year as well as introduce myself to the students. Using PearDeck, we played a game where students had to guess which hobby belonged to which teacher: either myself or my co-teacher. Starting from Day One I was aiming to build up the relationships between my students and myself, so that they would start to put their trust in me as we moved forward. I see each student as a “learner capable of great things,” but before the students can feel that energy coming from me, they have to know who I am (Nieto, 2013). But it is not just me that they have to learn about, I also have to learn about them. Because of this, on my second day of class I asked students to complete a questionnaire about themselves; due to distance learning my questionnaire looked and felt different than it does in the physical

classroom, but the reasoning for giving it to the students is still the same. How could I possibly expect to teach these students if I don't know who they are? In the same notion, how could I expect students to learn from me if they don't know who I am? In this activity I gave students a spreadsheet with seven different questions on it that introduced me to different hobbies and interests of each student. From this activity, I was able to find out that Dio enjoys working on cars, Giorno enjoys watching anime, and Jolyne embraces her Mexican heritage; I learned about all of my students in a similar capacity, which gave me amazing insight into my students' funds of knowledge.

After setting the foundation of a bond between myself and the students, my next steps were to continue building up this community between us. As a social justice educator, I knew that this year of distance learning was going to be difficult for my students; students would be facing hardships at an increasing rate, and this school year would be a mental health test for everyone involved. With this solid connection formed, I knew I needed to take the next steps into becoming a warm demander for all of my students. In order to personify the essence of a warm demander, my goal was to improve the lives of all members of the community, in school and out (Bondy et al, 2012, p. 422). Knowing that I would not be able to physically meet my students meant that I would have a difficult time assisting them in ways that needed me to be physically present, but I could help in other ways that did not require me to be in a physical location. As the school year progressed, I noticed that the students began to fall behind in their classes. In a traditional face-to-face school year, this could be remedied by a simple talk during class. However, since our in class time was so limited, and I was not guaranteed to see every student in class, I decided to host office hours for all students to come and join. These office hours were a safe place where all students could enter and engage in conversation with myself. I set the stakes

really low, and shared with the students that the office hours were there for the benefit of them; this meant students could join and just talk about recent TV shows they watched, or they could join and receive help on classroom assignments. I knew that I needed to earn the right to be demanding, and just like Zaretta Hammond states, “personal warmth and authentic concern exhibited by the teacher earns [them] the right to demand engagement and effort” (Hammond, 2006, p. 98). Even though I had already laid the foundation, I needed to continue building my relationship and community with all students; by hosting office hours I was able to listen to the students and hear their concerns and worries, while also deepening the relationship I had with my students which in turn grew the bond of our community.

After building up rapport with my students, and displaying to them that I am deserving of demanding them, I began to fully step into the shoes of a warm demander. Distance learning changed the ways in which I could be demanding of my students, and for this very reason I also changed alongside these new experiences. The biggest change I made was updating my syllabus and extending the period for turning in all assignments. Giving students a hard deadline is a way to be a warm demander, in what Delpit describes as, “demanded that they [students] perform, even when they thought that they could not” (Delpit, 2012, p. 72). By giving students a hard deadline for assignments, I am pushing them to use the scaffolds provided to them in class in order to expand their knowledge of previously learned phenomena. However in this year of distance learning, setting hard deadlines like this would have been too demanding; students are struggling with household issues, episodes of depression, and potentially health issues as well. For any naysayers who might disagree with that statement, I want to add a few direct quotes I received from students across my feedback sessions throughout the year:

- *“Please acknowledge that many students have stuff going on in their lives.”*

- *“That it was stressful for students because for me my parents acted like COVID-19 wouldn’t put any stress on me for school but in reality it was just stressful and it would make me mad how my parents acted like it was so easy to do school in the computer.”*

The students were also affected by the pandemic, and if I decided not to show grace to my students, I would have been adding an unnecessary stress on top of every other stressor in their lives already. In order to be a warm demander, while also acknowledging the students and their lives, I modified my hard deadlines to be more flexible, providing students with suggested due dates for specific assignments, but still accepting the assignments no matter the date.

The community that was built between teacher and student is a cornerstone inside the classroom; a teacher cannot expect to teach a student who does not feel recognized, just like a student cannot expect to learn from a teacher who they feel they have no connection with. Although distance learning altered the ways in which this community can be built up, this only meant that when the community was built it would be stronger than ever. One of my favorite pieces of feedback I received this year, which still makes my heart feel full, is the following: *“I really like this class, because Mr. Jiang (my co-teacher) and Mr. Jackson really make it feel like classes did when we are in person.”*

### **Who Are You?**

*“Our attitudes about language and culture and people flow through each other without us realizing the equivalency.”* Rebecca Wheeler (2017) – *Why America Needs Ebonics Now*

After setting up the community between teacher and student, and setting up those scaffolds on how to create a community, the focus now shifted on the relationships between the students. In a normal school year, ice breakers are a common way to get the students to start

discussing and conversing with one another; CASEL has an entire handbook that focuses on socio-emotional activities that can be used in the classroom, and also includes a section on “Welcoming” activities such as *What’s New* and *Mix and Mingle* which are two activities that I used this past year (CASEL 2019). In the online setting, most of these activities that I have gathered under my teacher tool belt over the years don’t really work. Knowing that the students needed a chance to warm-up to one another, I decided that an activity using both technology and Zoom breakout rooms would be my best chance to get the students talking.

During the first few weeks of school, I noticed that students were hesitant to turn on their cameras. My co-teacher and I would have our cameras on, which we had hoped would set up the expectations for the students to do the same; I think we were a bit naïve in this assumption, because instead of seeing students’ faces on camera, we just saw black screens. Originally, I thought it was due to the fact that my classes were mostly freshman, and they had all attended different middle schools, meaning the names in the participants list were all foreign to them. It would be wrong of me to expect the students to actively turn their cameras on and participate in conversation with individuals they have never met before. This virtual setting of distance learning also strips away those passing periods and before bell rings conversations that students naturally have when they are in the brick-and-mortar classroom. Being a socially just teacher, I knew that I had to give the students the platform and the opportunity to create these conversations with one another, while also scaffolding and encouraging active listening and acceptance and understanding of different viewpoints.

Our first dive into building up a student-to-student community was by taking the previous activity mentioned, the Google Sheets activity, and randomly pair students up into breakout rooms. My co-teacher and I started this activity by first asking students what they want from a

friend when they want to confide something with them; this was done purposefully in order to bring out the qualities of a good listener, without explicitly giving away the answers (not that there is an agreed upon list of answers). We heard a variety of answers, from maintaining eye contact, to not talking while the other person is talking, and pausing to think about what you're going to say before you respond. As the teachers, my co-teacher and I decided on setting a blanket definition of what a real listener acts, looks, and feels like: "the consciousness of the carer is characterized by receptive, non-selective attention and motivational displacement; that is, the carer hears the expressed needs of the cared-for and is moved to respond to them" (Noddings, 2006). To take it one step further, my co-teacher and I demonstrated what an active listener would act, look, and feel like in a mock breakout room. We both took turns being the listener, sharing our interests with one another and asking genuine questions of curiosity to each other. In Figure D1, you can see that there is a column for the students to add in the name of a classmate who "This Friend Likes it Too." I had students do multiple rounds of this activity in order to: 1) Meet a variety of classmates, not just one student and 2) potential find someone with similar interests so that they might become closer friends. With all of the scaffolds set, I sent the kids to their randomized breakout rooms, to give them their first opportunity into active listening and building up a student-to-student community.

As I rotated from breakout room to breakout room, I noticed that conversations were taking place, but behind turned off cameras. This struck me as odd, because I would not want to be meeting someone for the first time, and not be able to see them. However for the students, it did not seem to faze them in the slightest. They were participating in active communication, they were building connections, and they were identifying common points of interest. While I may have enjoyed seeing their faces, for the students, it did not seem to make a difference, as long as



they were communicating; some pairs even used the chat to build community with one another, using emojis or sending each other URLs of different memes or gifs. Why did the students prefer to keep their cameras off? How come some students enjoyed using the chat more than unmuting to talk? These were the questions I would need to answer and sit comfortably with if I wanted to build up the community between the students moving forward.

As the school year advanced, this trend I noticed in the first few weeks continued. Students preferred to keep their cameras off, and would much rather prefer to respond to questions via the chat as opposed to unmuting their microphones and speaking. Even though I had hoped this would change as the year progressed, I learned to roll with the punches, and engage students in the mode of communication that they felt most comfortable with. The chat became my best friend, and the way that students built up connections between themselves. Because I noticed the trend so early on in the year, I planned different activities around using the chat to communicate and share insights into the students' funds of knowledge; another definition of funds of knowledge I enjoy states that these funds are, "a positive and realistic view of households as containing ample cultural and cognitive resource with great potential utility for classroom instruction" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 134). As I tried to peer into the students' households, they were also building up community between themselves. Before class would start, I would ask students a welcoming question that I would want them to respond to in the chat. These questions would range from, "What did you do over the weekend that you enjoyed" all the way to, "What is something I can do to improve your enjoyment of the class?" Every time these questions were asked, the chat would always be blowing up; I always teased the students saying that I was like a Twitch streamer, with a chat that was always very active. I would also use my own emojis such as the flame emoji or high-five emoji when they said something fire or did something I really

enjoyed. In doing this, I was setting expectations for my students, displaying to them what using the chat should look like. And because of this, the chat remained my most used tool throughout the year.

One interesting thing I noted is that during our Fall semester feedback form, a majority of students wanted their classmates to turn on their cameras more as well as verbally participate more. I was surprised by this, because the whole first semester the students were hesitant to turn on their cameras and verbally participate. Even when given the opportunity to work in a breakout room with classmates, they would still participate via the chat. After viewing that feedback, I encouraged students to act on what their fellow students were asking of them; in some research done in 2011, a majority of students of a virtual classroom indicated that using “videoconferencing helped build trust and rapport with other students and helped develop a sense of identification with others” (Fallon, 2011, p. 207). Although as we moved forward further and further into the spring semester, the students continued to use the chat as the main method of communication, so I decided I did not want to tarnish the relationship and love we had built up with the chat box.

Lastly, the moment I realized that the student-to-student community was built up well was in a conversation I had with Jolyne. She told me that she had made friends with a student in our biology class, even though they had no prior interactions. They had exchanged information during a breakout room during our class, and then they exchanged Instagram handles and then started talking. From there, they built up a friendship and this became evident during class, as Jolyne or Erina would comment something in the chat, the other was also in the chat giving them praise like “Great answer;” it seemed like I was on an episode of Family Feud, and the family is cheering on the person who just gave Steve Harvey an answer. This interaction could also be

seen between classmates that were not friends outside of the class. But they knew that we were all working towards the same goal, and that goal was learning about the science all around us.

### **We Are Family**

*“Collaboration with culturally and linguistically diverse families in a culturally responsive manner whereby the parents feel welcome and heard, and that they can contribute necessary information about their child is necessary in order to help teachers and families work together.”*

– Paul Wenner Conroy

A great resource to utilize that some teachers often overlook is the students’ households. Parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, legal guardians, whatever the case may be, every single household brings something to the classroom. At my school site, 93% of the student body is Hispanic, which means a majority of the funds of knowledge and community being brought into my classroom was from the standpoint of a Hispanic household. Extending it even further, 91% of the student body comes from a low-income household and qualifies for free/reduced lunch (Greatschools.org). With such a significant portion of my student body sharing a similar demographic, I was expecting a lot of the funds of knowledge coming out of my households to be very similar, but that was an assumption I quickly learned to push out of my mind; students and their households each carry and bring a variety of funds of knowledge to the classroom, and each added a piece of the puzzle to our complete classroom. Tara Yosso defines family capita as, “the cultural knowledge natured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Bringing that community history and memory into my classroom would allow for my students to feel more connected to the information being shared with them.

In order to get the connection started between the classroom and households, I sent out a survey/questionnaire on the first day of school; this questionnaire was sent out to the households via Schoology (our electronic learning system). One thing to note, that this survey was not equitable due to the households' lack of technology. If we were in a traditional year, I would have also given the option to take the survey on a physical piece of paper, which would have allowed me to gather data from every single household in all of my periods. On the survey, I had a place for: Names, Pronouns, Phone Number, Email Address, Relation to student, and then some general questions about where they live, and where their student would be completing our online classes (physical space, distractions, siblings). The biggest questions to me were the phone number and email address question, because most of the information the school had on file was not updated; for the households I was not able to get take the survey, I saw a common theme that their school provided phone numbers were disconnected and their school provided email addresses were no longer in service.

However, I did not let the lack of technology literacy stop me from creating community between my households and my classroom. In the instances where I had an incomplete or disconnected phone number next to a student, the very next class I would privately message them to ask for a household phone number or email. When a student asked me why, and believe me, they asked, I would tell them that in an act of fairness and inclusiveness I wanted to add them to our weekly email list. Or sometimes I said that I wanted to call home and tell their parents or guardians something awesome that they did this week. I loved using this one, because it made students really stop and think: *Wait, Mr. Jackson wants to call home and give my parents good news?* The fact that research backs up the claim that there is a positive relationship between school-to-family communication and student outcomes, I was shocked to hear I was one of the

first teachers calling home consistently (Fan and Williams, 2010, p. 68). Obviously I was not always calling home with positive news, sometimes I would need to call home to check in with the students because they missed class, or had not yet logged into Schoology to begin taking their final. One student stated in our Fall Semester Feedback that I need to “*keep calling home because it makes our moms real mad.*” This flow of open and honest communication from teacher to households allowed me to build community between those two parties.

On top of phone calls home, I would also send out weekly letters via email to all households, detailing what had taken place during that week. I would share some highlights, some assignments that were assigned to their students, and some key dates coming up in our class, or school-wide key dates. In Figure D2 you can see a letter I sent out to households, and these letters served as a way for parents and guardians to feel more involved in our classroom, and more involved in their student’s learning as well. On top of being a great foot in the door, these letters also allowed an avenue of communication from the households back to me; once the households received the letter, they were able to reply back to the email with any questions or concerns that they had in a low-stress format. The replies I received back would range from very formal, elaborate emails, to very straight and to the point emails containing the one question that individual had. Regardless of the formatting, I was always excited with parent emails because it meant that they felt comfortable asking me a question, and were not intimidated at that thought.

One last, but extremely powerful tool that I used this year to bring my students’ households into my classroom was to invite them into the process of improving student grades. I have already touched on the fact that my students were hesitant to turn on their cameras, which gave some students the idea that their teacher was not able to notice when they were falling behind in regards to the class material. I had a student like this, Enrico Pucci, who consistently

attended class, but would rarely participate when he was present. Between the fall and spring semester, my school site gave students who were failing any class an opportunity to raise their grade by one letter, meaning they would get a D instead of an F; note, that a D gives them credit for that semester, but it will not be accepted by any university as a passing grade. Enrico was one of the students who signed up for this semester intervention. Something I noticed was that Enrico was much more participatory during these intervention sessions, and was much more willing to turn on his camera (I made it a requirement since I only had six students, and I wanted to make sure they were present and working). Enrico worked hard, and I believed he was deserving of the letter grade bump. With the fall semester behind us, and the great work ethic I saw out of Enrico during the intervention sessions, I felt confident that I would see a much more focused Enrico in my classes when we returned from winter break.

Returning from the break, I gave Enrico some time to settle into a groove, and see if he was going to continue with the high work ethic I saw during his time in intervention, or if he would slip back into the rhythm he had during the first semester. After our first unit test of the spring semester, I realized that Enrico was going to default back to the less participatory, less engaged Enrico I saw during the fall semester. As I saw this trend beginning to start again, I called home to see if I could set up an appointment with Enrico and his mother; his mother happily obliged, and we set up an evening meeting the same week.

I began the meeting welcoming the two of them, both Enrico and his mother on the same camera, which I must admit was pretty cute. Enrico's mother noted how she had noticed his grades slipping in a few of his classes, not just mine, and was confused because he always attends class. "*I always make sure he is logged into class,*" she exclaimed, "*and if he isn't I get on him until he does.*" I laughed, thanking her for her concern for Enrico's learning, telling her

that I was very invested in his learning as well. We talked a little bit more, before I brought up the reason I called the meeting.

“I noticed that during our fall semester intervention classes that Enrico was very engaged with what we were learning,” I said as both Enrico and his mother were silently focused on me. “Which is great, but also strange since it is the same information that we learned during the school year.” Both Enrico and his mother agreed that his focus during those intervention sessions was much higher than it traditionally was during our regular classes. “With Enrico’s grades falling a bit, I wanted to meet with both of you to discuss why there is a difference in focus between regular class versus the intervention classes, and what we could do to raise his focus?”

Enrico and his mother stopped looking into the camera, and took a moment to look at each other. No talking, just thinking. As they continued to think it over, Enrico’s mother said something about having his camera on; Enrico perked his head up a bit as she said this, as if what his mother had said was exactly what he was thinking. I pursued this idea a little further, by asking Enrico specifically, “Do you think your camera being on during the intervention sessions allowed you to have greater focus?”

Very shyly, Enrico said “*Yeah. It forced me to pay attention, because I knew Mr. could see me and what I was doing.*” I was a bit excited to hear this, as it meant to me that Enrico knew that I was invested in his learning, and was not going to let him slack; it also meant that we were one step closer to our solution. I asked a follow-up question to Enrico, asking him if he thought having his camera on during our traditional class would help with his focus. He hesitated, and I could tell he was a bit anxious to share his answer, but he also knew what the correct answer was. After a pause he responded with, “*Yeah, I think it would.*” His mother also agreed, as she said that he needs someone other than herself to watch him, to keep him engaged.

With that answer solidified, I proposed we create a contract. Normally when I am in person, we create a written contract that was made in collaboration with the household, the student, and myself that we each sign; due to distance learning we created a verbal contract, where we all agreed to the terms. The terms were agreed on is that Enrico would:

- 1) Have his camera for the entirety of our next classes up until our next unit test
- 2) Attend one office hour a week, so we could check-in with understanding and assignments
- 3) Join another follow-up meeting once the unit test was over, so we could review the effectiveness of our intervention

I told Enrico, “Normally I shake my students’ hand once we have agreed to all of the terms, but since we aren’t meeting in person, I need you to say ‘I agree.’” He stated he agreed, and our contract was formed. The following classes, I would always privately message Enrico in the chat reminding him that we formed a contract and he needed to turn his camera on. After the first week, I noticed that I did not even have to remind him anymore, he would just turn it on. One time he sent me a private message first asking:

*“Mr. I have to have my camera on, right?”*

To which I responded, “Yes you do!”

*“That’s what I thought,”* he typed, *“just wanted to make sure.”*

Enrico understood that I cared about him and his learning, and that I wanted to see him succeed. In a study done by Jason Teven and James McCroskey, they discovered that, “students will most certainly be more likely to attend class and listen more attentively to a teacher who is perceived to have their interests at heart” (Teven and McCroskey, 1996, p. 10). I can say that after this meeting with Enrico and his mother, that Enrico was more attentive in class; it could be



because he had his camera on, which means I was able to see him and what he was working on at all times, or it could be because he knew that I truly cared for his learning.

After the unit test, Enrico and his mother met with me again, to discuss the results of our contract. The results of his test were higher than our first unit test, and there was a noticeable difference in correct answers from material learned when he had his camera on versus material learned when he had his camera off. Because of this, we all agreed to keep having Enrico's camera on during the rest of the school year. As the spring semester came to a close, Enrico ended with a D in our class versus his first semester grade which was an F (prior to the intervention courses).

The households are an important asset to all classes, as long teachers know how to incorporate them into the classroom. Moving forward, I would love to add more households into my classrooms; I would start by having more meetings with more households, perform household visits, and even try to bring in parents/guardians into the learning process. I want to leave with a note written to me by one of my student's parents, which sheds some light into how their student is doing outside of the classroom. Figure D3 highlights the extent that this particular mother felt that I went for her son, and it just gives me a feeling of happiness and joy that I would not have otherwise received if I did not build up this area of community.

### **Glad I Took that Dive**

*"Learning is addictive... throwing ideas around in my mind and bouncing them off of other people. It's how we thrive."* Starr Sackstein (2019) – *All Educators Need to Keep Learning*

As this pandemic-fueled school year ended, I was left with a lot of questions of self-reflection. What did I do well this year? How did I fall short for my students? What techniques and practices did I use this year that will be a huge benefit to me when I enter back

into the classroom next year? In some ways, I felt a lot of guilt for my students, as I felt like I did not do everything I could have to help them feel successful in their learning. I know I did not give them enough wait time, I know I did not chunk my lessons well enough, and I know I did not reach the level of community that I aim for during an in-person school year. Hell, I do not even know what the faces of all my students look like. When would I ever say that during a traditional school year?

The main goal for me moving forward is to use the best practices I learned from this year, and implement them into my physical classroom. Tools such as Peardeck and Nearpod can keep students engaged, even in the physical classroom. Using Zoom or Google Meets to host virtual office hours for the students, when they are unable to make it after school. Taking it one further, using Zoom or Google Meets to meet with households when they are unable to meet in person. What I realized after this year is that communities come in all different forms, and even though this digital community was new to me (and a lot of other educators) this year, I embraced it. *“I would say that this was a very stressful year of my life, but made me even stronger”* – L.B. (9<sup>th</sup> grade).

### **Community No Matter What**

*“Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice resurrection.”* Wendell Berry (2008) – *The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*

Wow, what a year. During the school year, I felt as if summer could not come quick enough. Not because I disliked my students, not because I disliked my administration, and not because I disliked my district, but because I needed a break. I spent the full school year making sure I was doing everything I possibly could to create a culture of learning within my classroom that I forgot to care for myself. I extended grace to my students, and they of course extended

their grace to me as well, but I forgot to extend myself grace. And the crazy part is, after all of this reflection, I feel like I could have done even more for my students.

I am glad that I revisited my reasoning as to why I originally wanted to become a teacher. When I first set my mind on becoming a teacher, I did not have the term social justice included in my vocabulary; now, I would not want anyone to become a teacher until they have a firm grasp of that term. Teaching needs to be socially just, and if it is not, then you are performing a disservice to your students. Even now, as states all across the country are working as quickly as possible to ban critical race theory from all schools, critical social justice remains ever more a necessity; through these laws it is more apparent that “racism is part of the structure of legal institutions” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. xx). It is more necessary than ever to break down the deep structures of schooling that are so ingrained into everyone’s subconscious, and highlight just how it constantly benefits one class of people. At the beginning of this paper, I shared a quote from the book *The Invisible Man*, but now I want to share a similar quote from a song titled *I’ll Try Anything Once*, “Everybody plays the game, and if you don’t you’re called insane;” in my mind if this is where the bar is set, then maybe we need a few more insane teachers.

Taking the time to step into the communities and households of my students is something that I want to continue doing in the future. Even though within this paper, I only did in-depth case studies for three of my nearly 200 students, in future school years I want to expand this to more students. In no way could I ever get to all 200 of my students, but I can get close. From these case studies, I learned just how useful it can be to incorporate the households and their funds of knowledge into the classroom. For example, looking at the team that was built up between Dio’s mother and myself, we set her son up for success within my classroom; I was also able to weave in more opportunities for drawing/modeling during my lesson plans, which fed

directly into Dio's funds of knowledge. Imagine how much more I could accomplish if I did similar case studies for more of my students in the future?

Even within this first year of teaching, I can see the improvements I have made. Gaining more of a teacher presence, learning ways to build up classroom ecology instead of building up classroom management, and writing lesson plans focused on specific student needs. By far the area where I need the most improvement is incorporating opportunities to discuss issues of social justice. Even though in other areas of my teaching I exude an aura of critical social justice, such as building up students' socio-emotional learning, but in regards to highlighting areas of struggle in everyday life I lack these skills. As I move into a new role, a role of a teacher who is trying to clear their credential, I am going to be specifically looking for assistance in building up my toolkit of social justice issues found within the field of science. On top of this, I will be actively seeking out ways in which I can change my labs to be more engineered, focused, and less strict in their completion. During this year of distance learning, it was difficult for us to complete labs as a class, and most labs were done in the form of a demo or a pre-recorded video. But moving forward, I want to pass the torch to the students, and have them do the heavy lifting and lead the way to discovery.

A school year like the 2020-2021 school year will never be seen again. We as a nation have already seen the roles shifted: the essential employees that were praised all-throughout this pandemic are now being referred to as low-skill workers and the frontline workers who were praised as heroes received no extra pay. But what about the teachers? And what about the students? In no way do I want to call these groups heroes, because I know how shallow that term can be. But dare I say, that both of these groups are a community. This community is not a physical place, but more of a collective hive mind and wealth of information. A community that

wants to learn. A community that wants to thrive. A community that wants to grow. We are a community of learners. And I can strongly say that a global pandemic cannot stop this community, which leaves me wondering if there is anything that can? For all future students, stay strong in the face of advisory. For all future teachers, play the game but remember to keep raising the ante.

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## Appendix

### (c) Did water move into or out of the egg? Why?

**It move out of the egg cause it got dissolve.**

### 4. Was the egg larger after remaining in water or vinegar? Why?

**Vinegar because egg suck more vinegar in to it body.**

*Figure A1:* A sample of Giorno's writing from an assignment focused on the property of osmosis. In this assignment, I did not provide the students with any sentence starters (as this was still in the beginning of the year), and you can see the lack of complete sentences and incorrect grammar in his writing.

- 1) What other organism in nature do you see having the same type of ecological role in their environment?

**Describe** its ecological role.

I will say orca because orca whale is also an important organism without orca whale will be a decrease for food to other animal who eat him or who eat the same food with orca whale

- 2) Why do you think sea otters are important in the kelp forest?

Sea otters can help control the number of sea urchins

*Figure A2:* Another sample of Giorno's writing from an assignment focused on keystone species and ecological niches. This time around, I provided the students with sentence starters at the top of the assignment. The provided sample starter for question 1 was: "I think that (pick an animal or plant) is an important organism because..."



This is a photo I take from the beach, as you can see the sea otter die already. I ask the emergency worker on the beach they said this sea otter die because he choked by a piece of plastic.

*Figure A3:* A slide from Giorno's human caused environmental issue PowerPoint. I provided students with previous student samples, as well as performing a metacognitive opportunity in class where we discussed what makes a good PowerPoint. Giorno incorporated Storytelling into this slide, and also used a picture he took at the beach. While the grammar on the slide is not perfect, he was able to vocalize with greater detail the point he was trying to make with this slide.

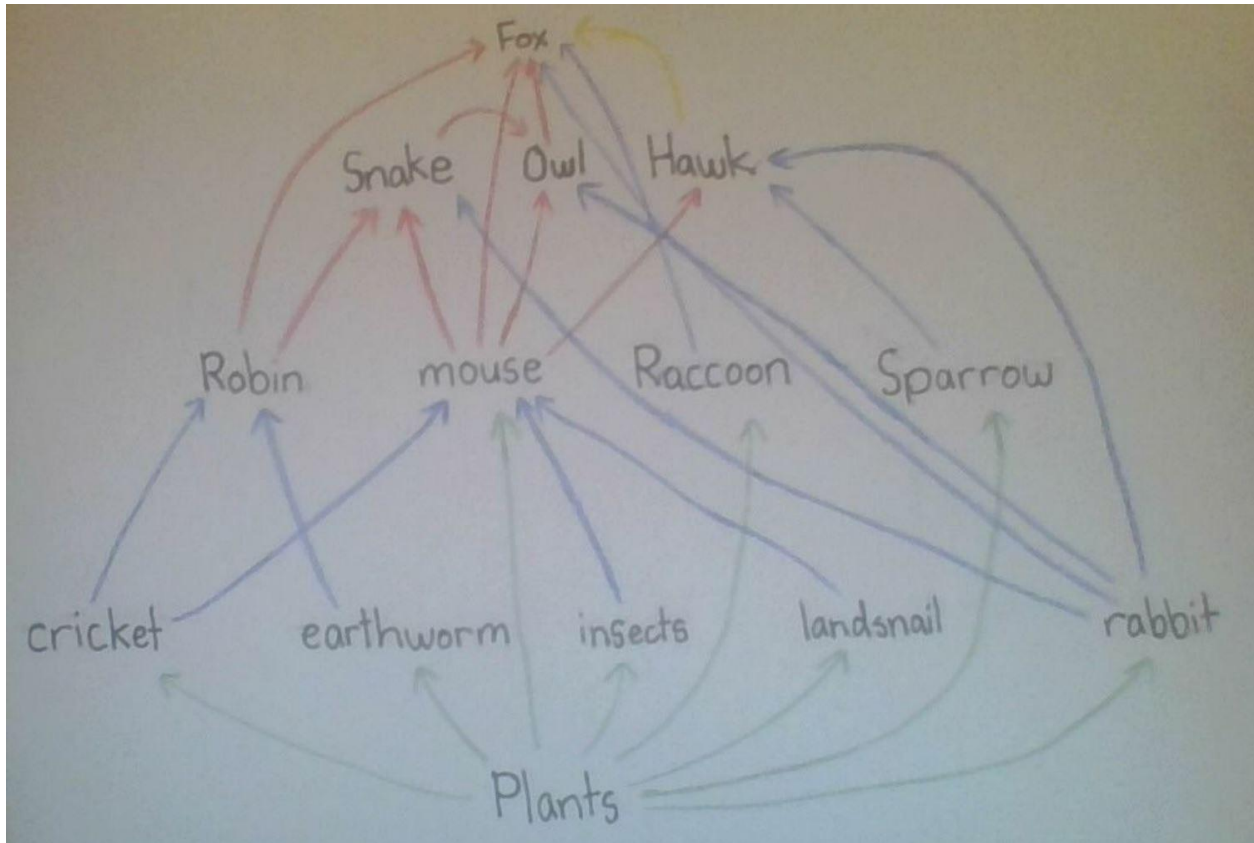


## Reasoning

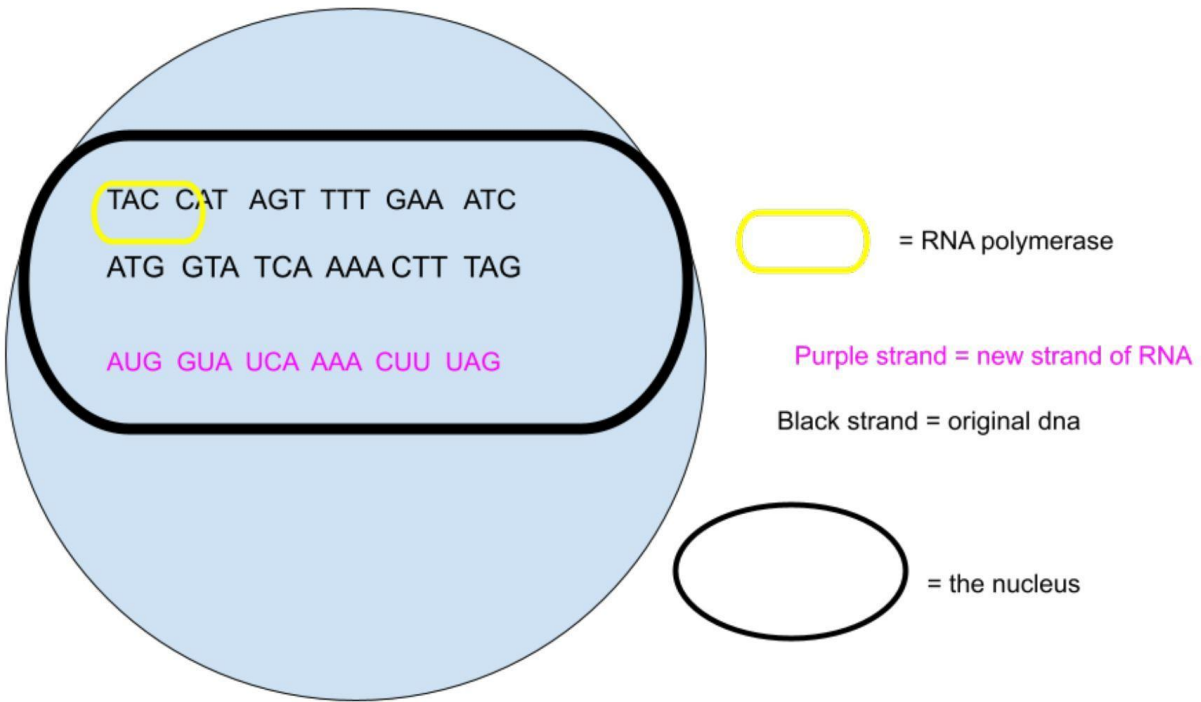
The 3 main reasons that are affecting bees.

- ★ Habitat Loss
  - we've lost 97% of our wildflower meadows causing less flowers for bees to forage and less safe places for nesting, leaving our bees with little natural habitat
- ★ Climate Change
  - may be causing this species to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, disrupting nesting behavior, and affecting the timing of the flowers bees rely on for food
- ★ PESTICIDES
  - are designed to kill unwanted pests, but their toxic properties and widespread use are harming bees tremendously

*Figure B1:* A slide taken from Jolyne's presentation. You can see how she used the information discussed in class to her advantage: bullet points instead of complete sentences, pictures, and not a ton of text. The rest of her PowerPoint looked like this, and kept this theme of cartoon bees.



*Figure B2:* An image of a food web made by Jolyne. Jolyne decided to color coordinate the different trophic levels, in this case there are four different levels, in order to make the web more understandable for herself while studying. This was not a required part of the assignment, but something Jolyne took upon herself to do.



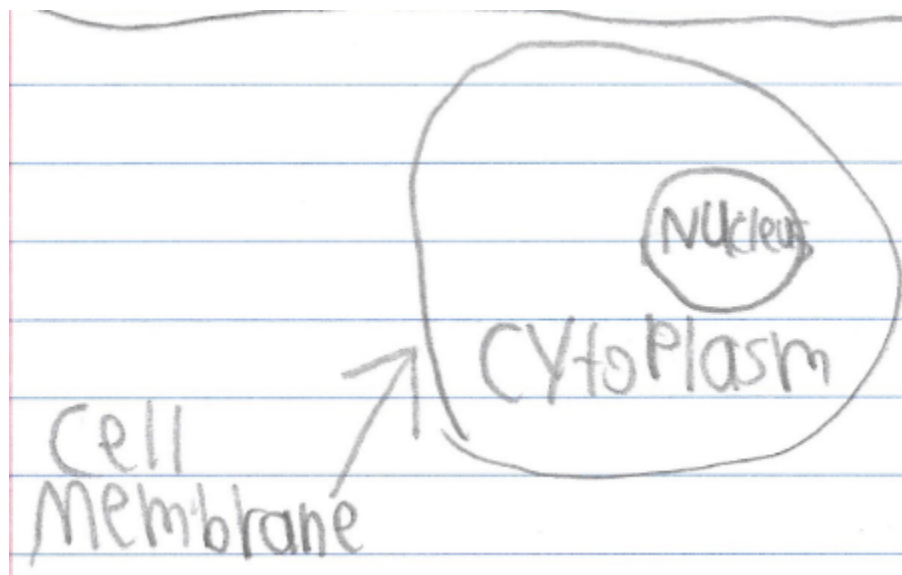
*Figure B3:* A scientific model made by Jolyne using Google Drawings. This model is illustrating the different components of Transcription, as well as showing the inputs and the outputs of the entire process. The DNA strand is written in black, the new strand of mRNA is written in pink, and she even labeled the enzyme that is used during the process. Just like figure B2, she is adding in this extra work to make it easier for herself when she comes back and studies her own models for the test.

## Solution to Human Littering Problem at Seal Beach

All beaches have regulations. Signs and trash cans are available and visible throughout the beach. The City should be more tougher on their laws and ticket people who illegally dump or leave trash behind. People can reach out to their City Mayor or Law Enforcement Office. Different volunteer programs come out to Seal Beach and clean it for beachgoers. Adding more trash cans can also help this problem.



*Figure C1:* A slide from Dio's culminating task PowerPoint. Contains a lot of text on the slide, but Dio also had extra information that he did not include on the slide that he vocalized during the presentation.



*Figure C2:* A cell structure model taken from one of Dio's Cornell Notes. This is a very barebones model, and does not include a lot of the usual requirements found on scientific models.

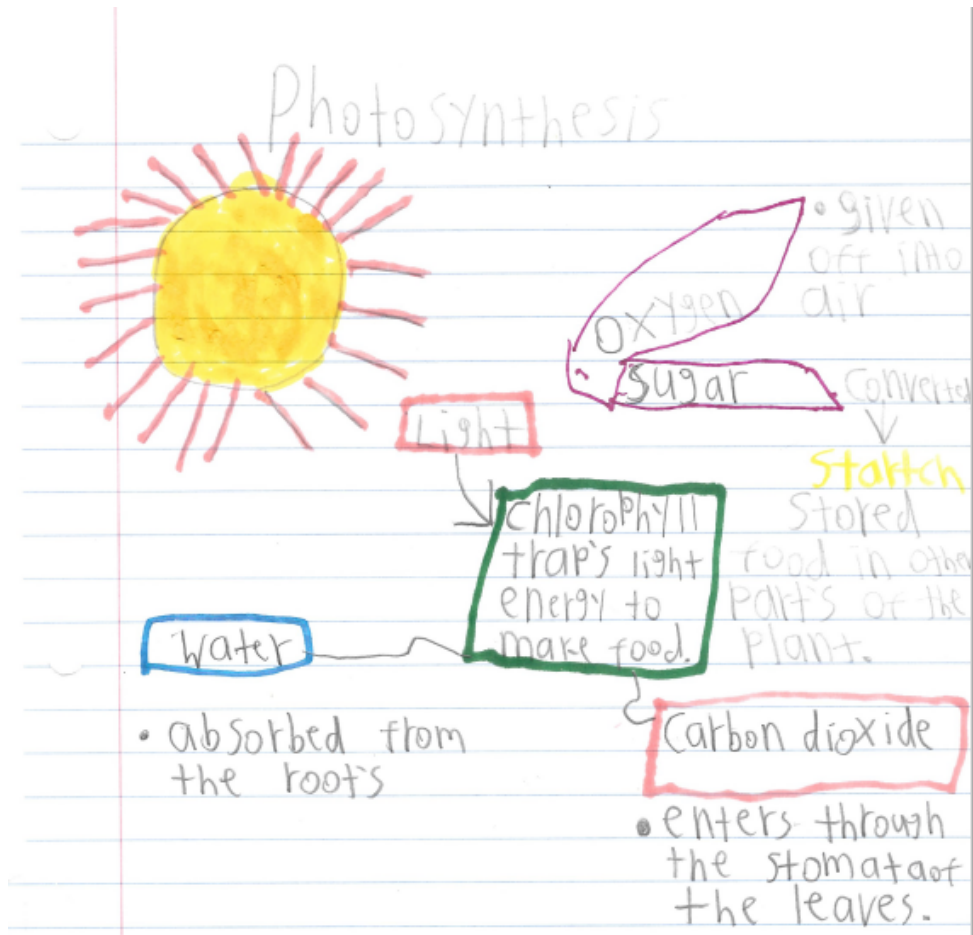


Figure C3: A model taken from another set of Dio's Cornell notes. This scientific model is much more detailed, and contains all of the required aspects of a scientific model. This model, and the model in Figure C2 were done within a span of three weeks.

K		This friend likes it too!
Favorite Type of Music:	Rap and Hip Hop	E
Favorite Color:	Blue	K
Show I like:	All American	
Favorite Animal:	Horse	E
Favorite Drink:	Water	K
Favorite Snack:	Cereal	E
Favorite Subject:	English	E

*Figure D1:* A Google Sheets activity used to help build up the teacher-to-student community and the student-to-student community. In the center column you can see the students' answers. And on the right column you can see which of their classmates also likes the same things.



Joshua Jackson Thu May 27, 2021 at 7:05 pm

Hi everyone,

As we close out this week and start heading into finals week, I wanted to send you one last list of assignments that you can still turn in. All assignments are due by Tuesday June 1st by 11:59PM.

- Warm-Up #32, #33, and #34
- BrainPOP Heredity Screenshot
- Genetics Vocabulary Graphic Organizer/Notes
- Gregor Mendel & Punnett Square Cornell Notes with Summary
- Genetics Practice Questions WS
- Single Gene Traits WS
- Beyond Dominant & Recessive Alleles Cornell Notes with Summary
- Genetics Review WS

All of these assignments can be found in the purple Unit 6 folder. Please reach out if you have any questions. Have a great weekend and a great Memorial Day, but please also remember to study for your finals.


Mr. Jackson

*Figure D2:* An example of the weekly notes/emails I would send home to my students. In this note, you can see a list of the assignments and the upcoming due date for all of them. Note, that this is the entire list of assignments for the entire unit, which means that they had over a month to work on these assignments.



Happy Teacher Appreciation Day!!! I want to thank you for going above and beyond. This has been one wild year. I want to thank you also for serving our community. I know many parents take you for granted and simply don't realize the dedication you put in to help their children and others. PLEASE KNOW THAT WE APPRECIATE EVERYTHING YOU DOO!!

Also, know that My husband and I are here if you need anything, I love to open doors. You let me know. "Parents voice make an impact at the District Level".

Thank you for supporting our son: 

*Figure D3:* A letter I received from one of my households. Attached was also a picture of one of my students holding a guitar, giving me further insight into the student's Funds of Knowledge.