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A Call For Strength Based-Teaching

Molly Weinberg

May 2022

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Education
in the Art of Teaching Program
Sarah Lawrence College

Abstract

Teaching practices centering a deficit lens of the child do not provide the space needed for every child to thrive in the American public education system today. This is why I call for strength-based teaching. A strength-based approach to teaching calls for the decentering of deficits and the centering of strengths, knowing our students, the room to make mistakes, freedom from labeling, acceptance and value of all student differences while simultaneously honoring all student knowledge as official knowledge, and the centering of marginalized voices. Our school system today relies primarily on state standards and standardized testing to measure intelligence, forcing our students and teachers to learn and teach towards what a small group of people at the top of the totem pole have deemed official knowledge. This kind of practice teaches our student body what knowledge is valuable in society. By centering student strengths in the classroom we value them as individuals rather than humans to be filled with information that they are missing or don't know; therefore they can build upon the knowledge they already possess. Strength-based teaching values every student and places emphasis on their right to succeed.

Dedication

To the students, may your education be joyful.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my cohort; Corrine, Denise, Evangylen, Kate, Katie, and Malik, for your kindness, comfort, and love. Thank you to Rue Beckerman, who led me to the Art of Teaching program and whose guidance has brought me to this point in my education. To Denisha Jones, Patricia Virella, Emily Cullen, and Lorayne Carbon for leading us through the beginning of our journeys in early childhood education, journeys that will now last lifetimes. To the countless professors and educators who have taken their time to speak with my cohort over these past two years. To my family for supporting me in this endeavor. To my host teachers, Eric Lara of Mott Haven Academy, Jia Lee and Theresa Pulle of Earth School, and Taz Azad and Iaisha Carvallo of Ella Baker. And above all, to the children who opened up their classrooms with wide arms, pulled me in, and took my heart. I am forever indebted to you.

Annotated Outline

I. I Call For Strength Based Teaching Because...

- a. What is a Deficit Lens?
 - “First, it is any thinking, perspectives, or ideologies that are negative, false, incomplete, or destructive. It can also be defined as capturing someone’s story as a single narrative or starting someone’s story in false, damaging, or incomplete ways. Deficit thinking is a type of oppression and leads to racism or other forms of harm. Sadly, we have a history of misrepresentation of certain groups using ads, literature, and other media. This type of propagation has conditioned the minds and hearts of people to have deficit views. The conditioning is then perpetuated in homes, communities, and schools. The consequence of deficit thinking creates trauma and harms our young people.” (Muhammad, 2020)
 - Standardized Testing and Deficit Lens
- b. Time Spent On Testing
- c. The Dangers of Common Core and State Standards
- d. Andrew’s Leveled Book Choices in Fourth Grade: The Need to See Beyond Deficits
- e. “We must disrupt deficit ways of thinking and being. Our youths are genius. They are not all those things that systemic oppression has created. And young people deserve to be taught by geniuses, those who seek knowledge and deeply love the students in their classes.” (Muhammad, 2020)

II. Strength Based Teaching Calls For The Decentering of Deficits and Centering of Strengths

- a. What is a Strength-Based School?

- Neurodiversity in the Classroom with Thomas Armstrong
 - Includes students with and without disabilities in the general classroom
 - Celebrates and teaches about all types of diversity
 - Involves families of students with special needs in classroom planning and teaching
 - Top priority is to identify as many strengths as possible for every student with and without special needs.
- b. Culturally Relevant Teaching with Gloria Ladson-Billings
- Successful teaching focuses on students' academic achievement
 - Successful teaching supports students' cultural competence
 - Successful teaching promotes students' socio-political consciousness
- c. "...Culturally responsive teaching recognizes that students of color may learn differently from white students but does not see that as a deficit, and the importance of building relationships with both the child and the family rather than just sharing knowledge of and building on students' assets instead of pointing out their deficits." (Love, p.113, 2020)

III. Strength Based Teaching Calls for Knowing Our Students

- a. Getting to know Leo, "The Disruptive Student"
- b. Getting to know our students through Pat Carini's Descriptive Review of the Child
- c. Further Ways of Knowing Our Students
- Family Conferences
 - Active Listening in the Classroom and Paula Denton
 - Through student's creations (e.g. artwork, dramatic play, block building)
 - Confronting our bias, expand cultural knowledge

- “Teachers of all backgrounds walk into the classroom never studying the history or the culture of the children they are going to teach. So, how can teachers be culturally relevant when they have not studied culture? Culture does not simply fall from the sky. Traditions and ways of being are intentionally created and crafted because culture reflects the educational, social, economic, political, and spiritual conditions of people.” (Love, p.128, 2020)
 - Conversations with Students
 - “Ask the students themselves to describe their strengths. If there is a relationship of trust between teachers and students, and the students have at least some insight into their own abilities, then teachers can be assured that they are collecting pertinent information that can be helpful in the strengths assessment process.” (Armstrong, p.145 , 2012)
- d. Getting to Know Emi, “The Quiet Student”

IV. Strength Based Teaching Calls for the Room to Make Mistakes

- a. “I was easily frustrated, and it didn’t take a lot to make me doubt myself. When teachers would write ‘no’ or ‘awkward’ or ‘rewrite’ alongside the sentences I had worked so hard to produce, I would be peeved and disappointed. ‘Well, what the hell do they want?’ I’d grumble to no one in particular.” (Mike Rose, p.55, 2005)
- b. Carol Dweck and Growth Mindset
 - Growth mindset versus fixed mindset
 - Brain plasticity
 - Brain growth and malleable intelligence
 - Mistake making is the essence of learning

- c. Developmentally Appropriate Education
 - Developmental errors versus mistakes with Janet Emig
 - Meeting our students where they are with Sandra Wilde

V. Strength Based Teaching Calls for Freedom From Labeling

- a. “Research suggests that teacher expectations powerfully influence student outcomes - a phenomenon that has been variously described as “the pygmalion effect,” the Hawthorne effect, the halo effect, and the placebo effect. As laugh and Dudley marling note, deficit constructions of learners and learning continue to dominate how students are viewed, how school environments are organized, and how assessment and instruction are implemented.” (Armstrong, p.119, 2012)
- b. The Impact of Centering Deficits on Students: Grayson, “The Boy Who Can’t”
- c. The Beauty of Neurodiversity
 - “Instead of regarding ... students as suffering from deficit, disease, or dysfunction, neurodiversity suggests that we speak about their strengths.” (Armstrong, p.9, 2012)
 - “The neurodiversity-inspired educator will have a deep respect for each child’s unique brain and seek to create the best differentiated learning environment within which it can thrive.” (Armstrong, p.13, 2012)
 - No two people are alike
 - Everyone learns differently
 - Everyone is accepted as fully human

VI. Strength Based Teaching Calls For Acceptance and Value of All Differences: Honor All Student Knowledge As Official Knowledge

- a. “Whose knowledge is privileged- the students’ or the teacher’s?” (Souto-Manning & Martell, p.45, 2016)
- b. Official Knowledge in the Classroom
 - “It is naive to think of the school curriculum as neutral knowledge. Rather what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender, and religious groups” (Apple, p.46, 2014)
 - Name Stories Book in Ella Baker Kindergarten
 - Student’s drawing of the Subway Station
 - Photograph of two students working on matching bug game
 - Photograph of a group of student’s making a chart of numbers 1-100
 - Taking ownership of your learning: Unit on Birds
- c. “When we as educators do not address the multiplicity of language and language varieties in children’s worlds, we are teaching them that educated people do not sound like members of their own families and neighborhoods.” (Souto-Manning & Martell, p.33, 2016)
- d. Valuing Talk in the Classroom
 - Talk as essential to literacy and identity development
 - Making space for authentic talk
 - The harm of Standard English
 - Valuing ALL kinds of talk in the classroom
- e. Schemas: Every Child Tells a Different Story with Constance Weaver

- Schemas in the classroom
- The importance of recognizing diversity in schemas
- Schemas as strengths

VII. Strength Based Teaching Calls For the Decentering of Whiteness and The Centering of Marginalized Voices

- a. “In the early 21st century we seem stuck in a time warp in which children who embody certain kinds of diversity have become the problem, and standardization has become the ‘fix,’ though not a quick or workable one. You might think that the way to fix the ‘problem’ of breathtakingly diverse schoolchildren who may or may not meet the standards is to connect them with diverse curricula. However, as we’ve said, the opposite has happened.” (Genishi & Haas Dyson, p.10, 2009)
 - b. Books as Mirrors, Windows, and Doors
 - c. Multicultural Classrooms
- “The implications of this stance of cultural difference instead of deficit for educators is profound... Can we look at differences among children in the amount and type of written language experiences they have had before schooling in the same way, without assigning inherent deficit, or inability to learn, to children who do not have as much literary knowledge as other children? I believe so; I believe that if we claim to allow equal access to educational opportunity to all children in our schools then we must. But I also know that whether we interpret differences among children—or adults—as deficit or difference depends primarily on our preconceptions, attitudes toward and stereotypes we hold toward the individual children’s communities and cultures.” (Purcell Gates, p.128, 2002)

- “When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve. We can teach in ways that transform consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberated liberal arts education.” (hooks, p.44, 1994)

VIII. In Conclusion

- a. “To change the mindset, teachers must do their self-work or find another profession. Just as a person has to heal from abuse in order to be whole, happy, and productive, if teachers have deficit perspectives, they must recognize them, name them, and work toward disrupting and dissolving this type of thinking. That may come from proper education, therapy, or exercises that lead toward anti-racism, anti-bias, and anti-oppression.”
(Muhammad, 2020)

Process Paper

When it came time to officially choose my Master’s thesis topic, I was originally thinking about joy in the classroom. As I thought deeper, I began to question: what is it that prevents joy from thriving within America’s public education system? As Prof. Patricia Virella reminded us time and time again during our first year in the Art of Teaching program, keep everything you write, so when time comes to choose your thesis topic, you can go back and look at what you consistently wrote and wondered about. For me that consistency was the need to see and teach

students from a strength-based perspective. I might not have always had this catchy phrase to describe it, but from the time I've spent in schools, there has been something specific that leaves a nasty taste in my mouth. What was that something? The obsession with students' deficits: what you don't know, what you get wrong, and how to fix you. This focus on what students lack versus what they already possess causes toxic learning environments in our schools. Most importantly, the deficit lens upholds systematic racism in the way that it expects every student to learn and be the same, to conform to one kind of official knowledge- that of the white, wealthy man's opinion on what knowledge is. For students of color, students with special needs, English Language Learners, queer students, and anyone that diverse, our schools were not designed for these students to succeed. Our schools often view diversity as deficits, whether the community within is aware of it or not. Being anything other than white and wealthy in our public system is dangerous. You exist as a deficit. You are perceived as something that needs to be fixed, conformed. As Dr. Goldy Muhammad said, "deficit thinking is a type of oppression and leads to racism or other forms of harm. Sadly, we have a history of misrepresentation of certain groups using ads, literature, and other media. This type of propagation has conditioned the minds and hearts of people to have deficit views. The conditioning is then perpetuated in homes, communities, and schools. The consequence of deficit thinking creates trauma and harms our young people."

My presentation covers six needed practices educators can implement into our classrooms in order to teach from student strengths. We cannot teach with a strength-based perspective without actively working towards de-centering deficits, knowing our students, making room for mistakes, creating freedom from labeling, and honoring all students' knowledge as official knowledge while simultaneously accepting and valuing differences in the classroom.

With my thesis, “A Call For Strength-Based Teaching” I argue that in order to have joy in the classroom, in order to transform our public education system so that every student can thrive, our children’s strengths need to be at the core of their learning.

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A Call For Strength-Based Teaching

Molly Weinberg
Master's Thesis Presentation
April 2022

I call for strength based teaching because teaching practices centering a deficit lens of the student do not provide the space needed for every child to thrive in the American public education system today. Our school system today relies primarily on state standards and standardized testing to measure intelligence, forcing our students and teachers to learn and teach towards what a small group of people at the top of the totem pole have deemed official knowledge. This kind of practice teaches our student body what knowledge is valuable in society. By centering student strengths in the classroom we value them as individuals rather than humans to be filled with information that they are missing or don't know; therefore they can build upon the knowledge they already possess. Strength-based teaching values every student and places emphasis on their right to succeed.



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06 Center Marginalized Voices



A strength-based approach to teaching calls for the decentering of deficits and the centering of strengths, knowing our students, the room to make mistakes, freedom from labeling, acceptance and value of all student differences while simultaneously honoring all student knowledge as official knowledge, and the centering of marginalized voices.

What is a Deficit Lens?

"First, it is any thinking, perspectives, or ideologies that are negative, false, incomplete, or destructive. It can also be defined as capturing someone's story as a single narrative or starting one's story in false, damaging, or incomplete ways. Deficit thinking is a type of oppression and leads to racism or other forms of harm. Sadly, we have a history of misrepresentation of certain groups using ads, literature, and other media. This type of propagation has conditioned the minds and hearts of people to have deficit views. The conditioning is then perpetuated in homes, communities, and schools. The consequence of deficit thinking creates trauma and harms our young people."

~Dr. Goldy Muhammad, Author
Interview With Dr. Ghody Muhammad:
'Cultivating Genius'

Standardized Testing and Deficit Lens



Standardized testing values only two specific kinds of strengths: test taking strategies and knowing answers to the questions presented on the test. Standardized testing in its most negative is used to measure the overall success of a school and it's students in terms of academics by practically only evaluating test taking strategies and knowing answers to questions. This automatically values deficit lens as there will always be students that achieve on these tests and students that don't. They need student's to do poorly in order for these tests to work, these tests attempt to weed out the students with low scores and see who is most high achieving. The high achieving students will be praised and accomplished and low achieving students will be understood as having something wrong with them. When an expectation is not met, you must be fixed. But for those students that are expected to fail- what are we teaching them? We are teaching them that their own strengths outside of testing are not equally valued in our society.

Time Spent On Testing

Figure 1B - Testing Time Per Student Per Year, Eastern District

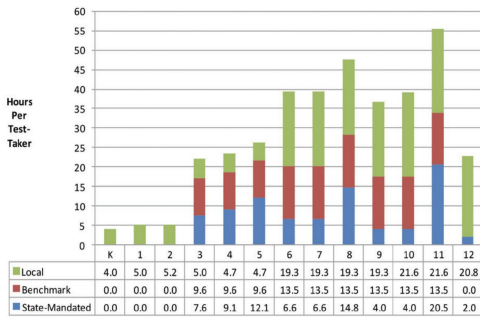
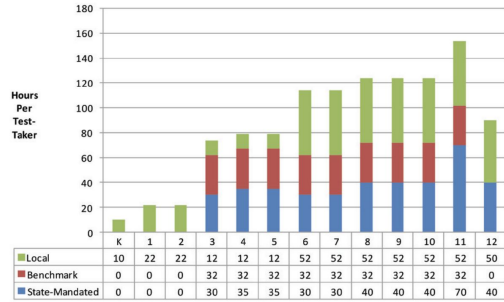
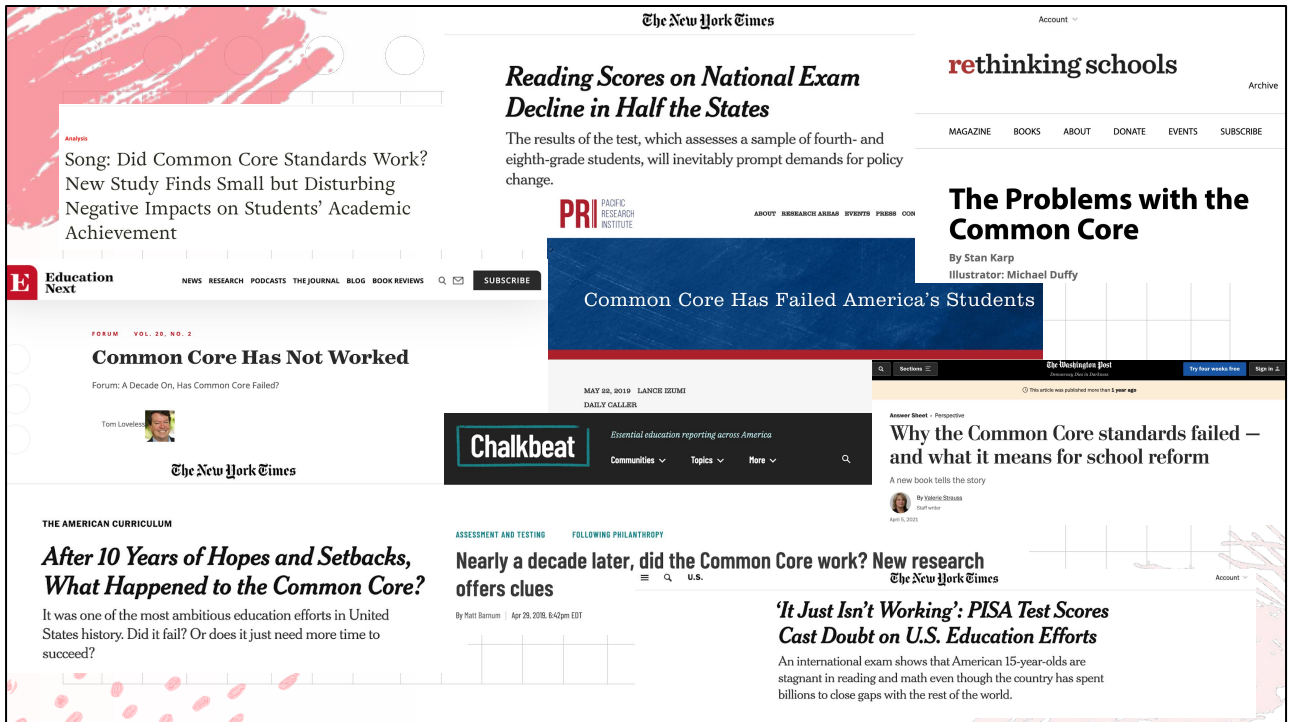


Figure 3B - Estimated Annual Test Preparation Time, Eastern District



Copyright © American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO (AFT 2013).

As you can see children as young as 8 can end up spending upwards of 90 hours preparing and taking tests. With such a large chunk of time in school devoted to this kind of testing what are we teaching our students about what we value in them? What are we teaching them it means to be smart? When we are expected to teach to the test, it becomes less about seeing children's strengths and more about seeing their deficits in order to fix them so they can do well on these tests that in the end, mean really nothing about our strengths and intelligences when as I already said, they only are measuring our ability to take tests and answer a specific set of questions.



Has common core failed America's students?

In 2010 Common core state standards were initiated in order to carefully detail the expectations of what students should know in English language arts and mathematics by the end of each grade level. Many people believed in its ability to rule out equity issues in our country and prepare all students for our increasingly competitive global workforce.

Unfortunately, after more than 10 years there is little to no evidence that common core has made a positive impact as it once intended to on America's public school's educational success. In fact An article from April of 2021 actually stated that "The CC had a large positive initial effect on economically advantaged students but no detectable initial effect on economically disadvantaged students. Raising state expectations without addressing the structural issues burdening economically disadvantaged students may result in unintended consequences."

Common core as well as some state standards, although not all intended for evil, have the negative ability to impact our students by attempting to conform all to one kind of intelligence, to one kind of official knowledge. Again I ask, what is this teaching our students to value in themselves, in their education? What does it teach them about their own strengths?

When strictly adhering to common core or state standards or standardized testing, how can we teach from a strength-based perspective? How can we know our students strengths when we are constantly obsessed with correcting their wrong answers?

Andrew's Book Choices



-Andrew started 4th grade this year with an F+P book reading instructional level of C. According to Fountas and Pinnell the benchmark for beginning 4th grade is a level P. Upon first hearing this you might think, oh boy, the kid is reading at a kindergarten/first grade level. He is so behind, we need to catch him up as fast as possible. But when we look at it this way we are immediately centering Andrews deficits.

Why don't we first start by getting to know Andrew, what he likes to do, and what he's good at. Andrew loves fashion. He draws detailed sketches of dresses during choice time, and during project time he drapes fabric around his friends, creating a beautifully flowing white dress he pins together at the ends. Andrew is kind. He knows how to care for friends, how to be fair, and how to show love. He can easily make new friends. is enthusiastic about his learning, working with him on math you can see the curiosity in his eyes. loves the Diary of A Wimpy Kid books. He can tell you why something in the story is funny. is interested in optical illusions and he drew one completely on his own during choice time once, he actually spent a few days working on it. can read sight words like "me, and, just, the, so, to, said, in mom, for hot, we like, on, and I"! He is excited to read and happy to read with someone. Genuinely Andrew has a very positive attitude towards life and learning.

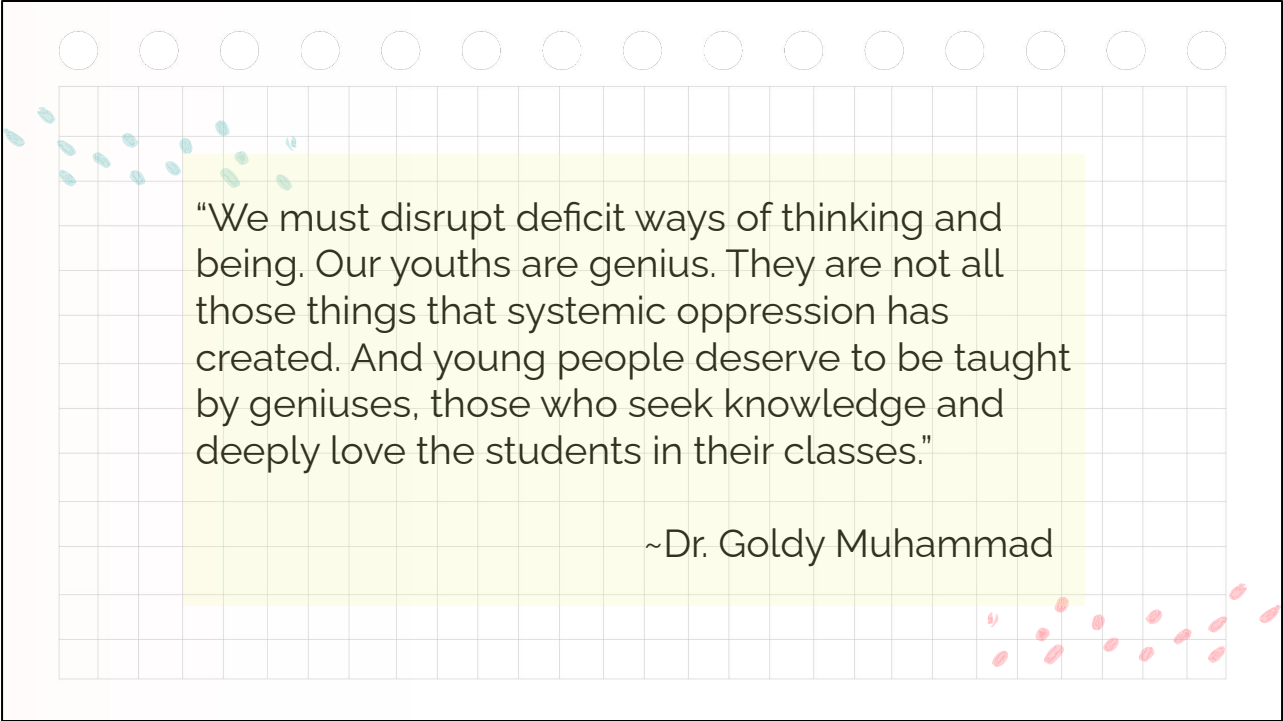
Now let's think about this. Will I be more successful teaching Andrew from the point of view that he is only at a reading level C and I need to catch him up to a reading level P so he can be on track with his peers?

Or will I be more successful teaching Andrew from the point of view of his many interests and strengths that can help inform his success in learning and becoming a stronger reader?

In his classroom, Andrew was given a certain letter level he must choose books from during reading time. Sometimes he can go down to another classroom where they have a shelf of easy readers he can choose from. But when he wants to read *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, it's not allowed. He needs to read his easy readers independently each reading period over and over again. What is this teaching Andrew? Is it confirming his strengths or his deficits? What does it teach Andrew that all his classmates have a choice of almost any book in the classroom but he is to only choose from a book shelf of easy readers?

When choice is limited and deficits are centered our children have the ability to lose confidence in themselves as learners. What a shame it would be for this bright, happy, positive student to lose confidence in himself in school.

How could we change this situation so Andrew doesn't run into this trouble? I believe we can transform education by demanding to meet students where they're at rather than demanding to catch students up to where they're supposed to be. Have all leveled books in your classroom to accommodate for such readers at various levels, we cannot expect all students to learn at such a similar pace. Invite Andrew to choose any book from the classroom, as choice is empowering in a learner's journey. BUt sit down with him and have an open and honest conversation about how to become a stronger reader, when to choose harder books and when to choose books that are "just right" for you. Do not limit a student's choices based on their ability. Let them learn why to choose certain things for themselves. Let them experience struggle, and let them experience success.



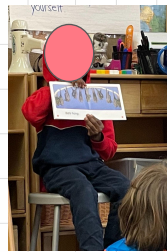
"We must disrupt deficit ways of thinking and being. Our youths are genius. They are not all those things that systemic oppression has created. And young people deserve to be taught by geniuses, those who seek knowledge and deeply love the students in their classes."

~Dr. Goldy Muhammad

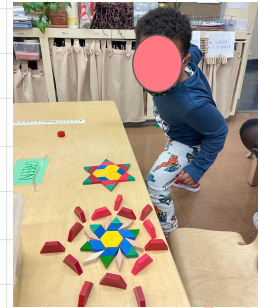


01

**Strength-based teaching
calls for
the decentering of deficits
and
the centering of strengths**



What is a Strength-Based School?



- Includes students with and without disabilities in the general classroom
- Celebrates and teaches about all types of diversity
- Involves families of students with special needs in classroom planning and teaching
- Top priority is to identify as many strengths as possible for every student with and without special needs.



Culturally Relevant Teaching

Gloria Ladson-Billings

1. Successful teaching focuses on students' academic achievement
2. Successful teaching supports students' cultural competence
3. Successful teaching promotes students' socio-political consciousness

A theoretical construct that rests on three propositions:

Successful teaching focuses on students' academic achievement (intellectual growth and the ability to produce knowledge)

Successful teaching supports students' cultural competence (the ability of students to grow in understanding and respect for their culture of origin)

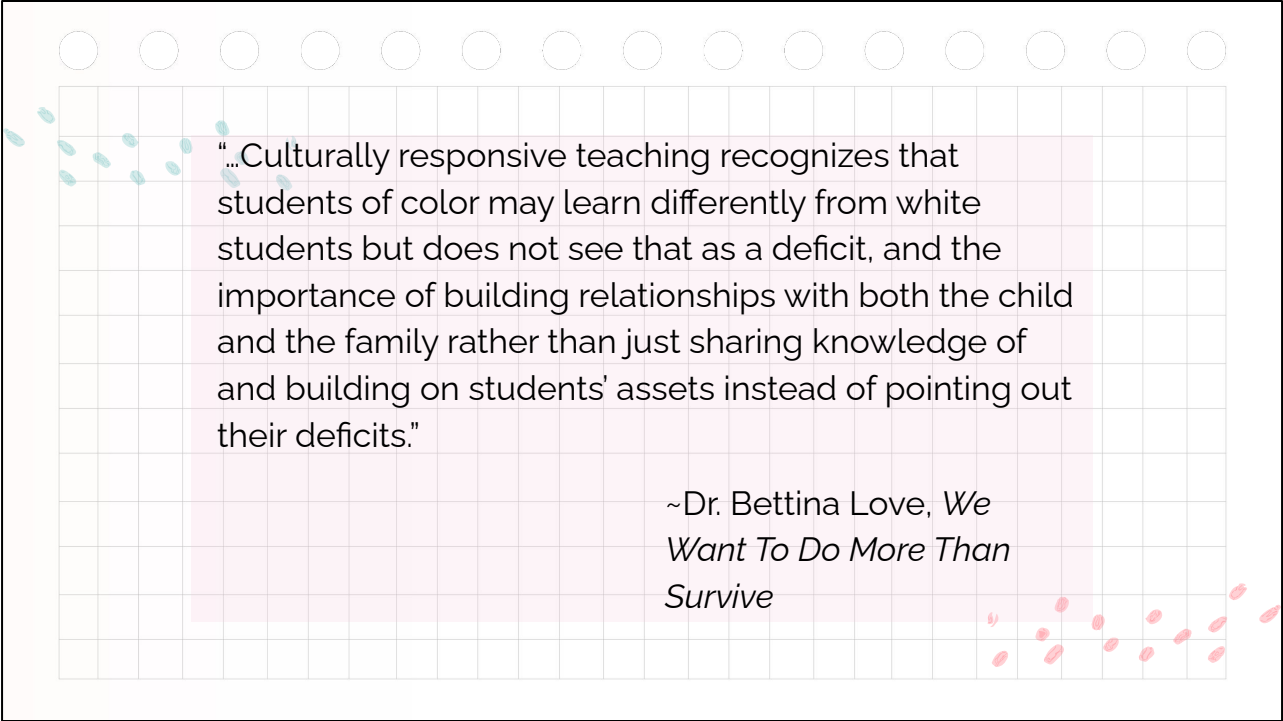
And Successful teaching promotes students' socio-political consciousness. (help students develop a sense of mutuality and reciprocity toward others with whom they share cultural solidarity)

Their identities, when valued and recognized and celebrated, become a strength in their own right

This kind of thinking produces students with confidence in themselves and in others

When we learn to value differences, we learn to value ourselves

As Ladson Billings wrote, we must demand success. Do not allow permission to fail.



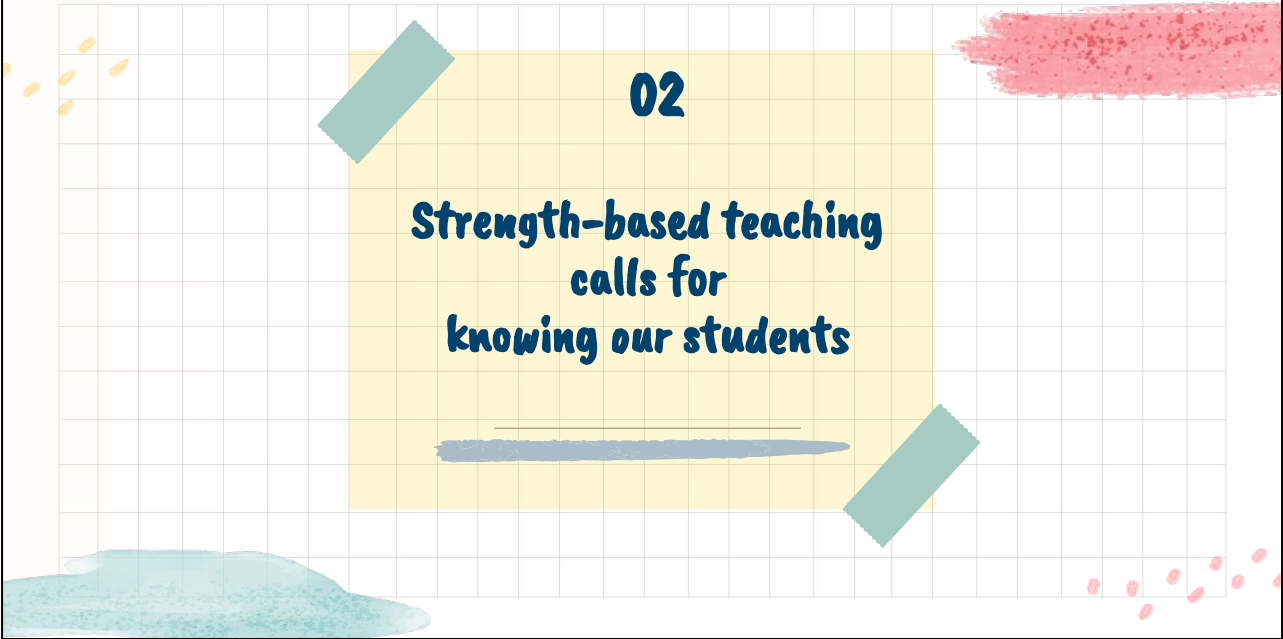
"...Culturally responsive teaching recognizes that students of color may learn differently from white students but does not see that as a deficit, and the importance of building relationships with both the child and the family rather than just sharing knowledge of and building on students' assets instead of pointing out their deficits."

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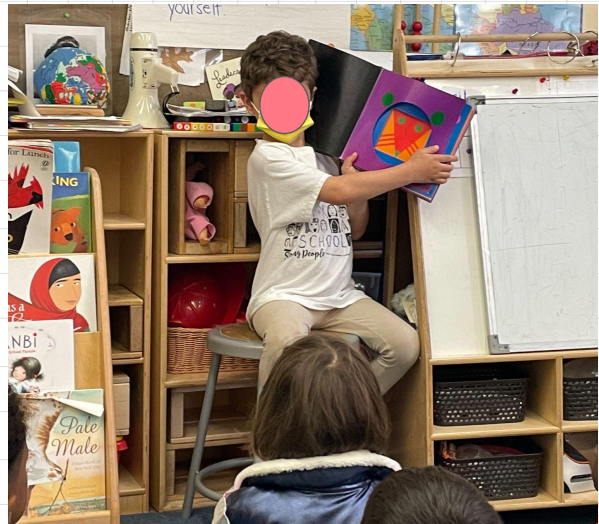


02

**Strength-based teaching
calls for
knowing our students**



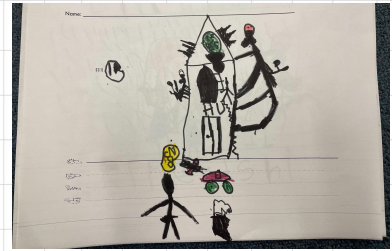
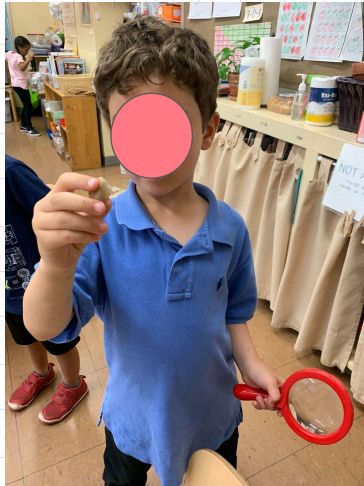
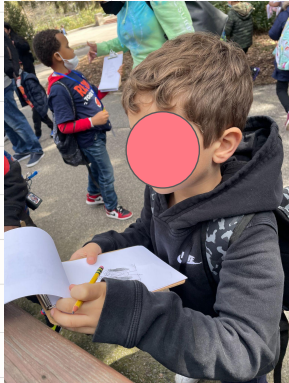
Getting to Know Leo, “the Disruptive Student”



At first glance when I joined Taz’s Kindergarten classroom at Ella Baker in January, Leo presence became aware to me through his disruptions.

His unwanted comments during read aloud, unwelcomed calling out during class discussions and morning meetings, side conversations, unable to control body movements, being generally one of the louder more chaotic energies in the classroom.

I latched on quickly to the habit of calling out his name in response to almost every one of his “disruptions” unintentionally bringing attention to his negative behavior and unintentionally and invisibly labeling his behaviors as deficits.



But as I started to get to know Leo as the spring semester progressed, I started to understand the behavior I had labeled as disruptive a little bit better.

I first got to know Leo through his interest in science. ON this day where he is holding this small skull, he had chosen science for work time, and I was sitting observing the classroom when he approached me to ask what animal that skull belonged too. I told him I had absolutely no idea, but maybe it could be some kind of rodent? He said, maybe it could be a bird? A fish? Being interested in animals myself, I opened up my notebook and we started to hypothesize together. Using google we compared and contrasted pictures of animal skulls to the one we had in the classroom until process of elimination brought us to the final answer- a small skunk! It was a revelation. This was my first of many very positive experiences with Leo. It was when I started to recognize curiosity as one of his greatest strengths. Leo is in love with the world, and I know it through his passion for science. Here he is at the zoo trying to draw a picture of some kind of bird of prey. He is so focused. Here he is after we discussed crystals and how I enjoy collecting them. He had asked me where I get them from, I tell him you can find them at crystal shops but you can really find anything anywhere if you look hard enough. The next day he opened up his pant pocket wide for me to show me the plethora of tiny little sparkly rocks, "look at all my crystals!!" Here he is with a crystal he also found at recess. He wanted to put it in the science bin in his classroom. I've also included one of Leo's drawings here to emphasize his immense focus to tiny details. I don't remember what the prompt for this artwork was, but I remember watching him draw, his face close to the page as he wrote his story, tiny details.

I have come to realize that Leo's curiosity and immense focus on the smaller details of life could be some of the reasoning behind his "disruptive behavior" Seeing Leo in a strength-based perspective has helped me view him from a new point of view that does not involve anger or frustration around his behaviors that stand out in the classroom. I can see now that he needs to be in constant engagement with curiosity focused conversations.

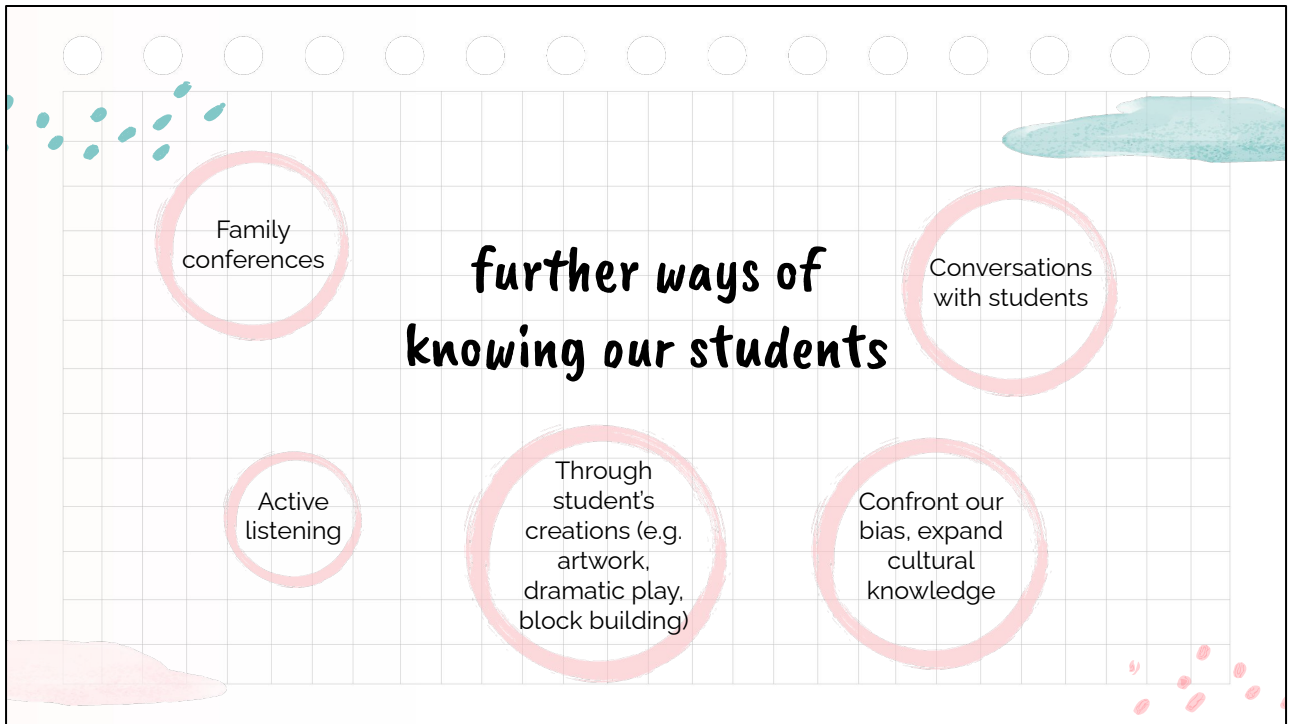
And I'm not saying this is an easy task, or even one that can be accomplished, especially in a classroom with 19 other students with their own needs strengths and interests

What I am saying is this is a way to approach Leo's learning and behavior without centering his deficits but rather, by centering his strengths.



Pat Carini's descriptive review process offers educators a way to know students as full human beings trying to make sense of this world. A Descriptive review includes physical presence and gesture, disposition, relationships with children and adults, activities and interests, and modes of teaching and learning with a final heading on implications for the classroom.

Because of its lengthy nature and the time it takes to complete one review, I'm not suggesting anyone has the ability to do this kind of practice consistently and for every child. What I'm suggesting is it could be a tool used when an educator is having a difficult time getting past viewing a child through a deficit lens. What the descriptive review does is sees the whole child, and offers a new strength based perspective in which to understand this child's needs, desires, and interests that can help inform how to teach them without automatically centering their deficits. It can also help you understand the things you see as deficits in a new light.



Family conferences: Especially in a time when parents are less permitted into the building and we get to spend less time chatting with them during pick up and drop off, family conferences is a seriously important time to not only spend updating families on their children in the classroom, but to listen to families speak about the child in the home. Families know their children in a different way than we know our students. It's important for us to gain insight from families into how our students best can learn from us.

It might seem obvious, but teachers don't always have the time to just sit down and talk with their students, it often has to be something we plan to make time for within a busy school day. Armstrong said, "Ask the students themselves to describe their strengths. If there is a relationship of trust between teachers and students, and the students have at least some insight into their own abilities, then teachers can be assured that they are collecting pertinent information that can be helpful in the strengths assessment process."

Students know themselves best, they know what they enjoy and find interest in, they know what they're good at. Students are experts in themselves, and they should be valued in this way. We might, through observing them, know things about them that they don't know, but in this same way, the student knows things about themselves that we don't yet know! Even after observing them every day for months!

ACTIVE LISTENING: as a way to know our students Denton writes of the two ways in which to utilize this skill; pausing and paraphrasing. By taking three to five seconds to pause and actively think about what a student has said provides the time to hear the full extent of what they mean. What they say may not always be what they mean. By paying attention to tone of voice, inflection, and context, one can truly come to know

what a student means, needs, wants, or feels. Denton notes, however, that if the pause is taken only to think of an immediate response it will feel inauthentic or “robotic.” Paraphrasing is used in this context to reflect back to the student what they have just said. By paraphrasing back to the student, they learn more about themselves and how to better communicate what they want to say in the future. By paraphrasing back to a whole group of students, they can learn about each other and create a strengthened community within the classroom.

“Teachers of all backgrounds walk into the classroom never studying the history or the culture of the children they are going to teach. So, how can teachers be culturally relevant when they have not studied culture? Culture does not simple fall from the sky. Traditions and ways of being are intentionally created and crafted because culture reflects the educational, social, economic, political, and spiritual conditions of people.” As a white teacher how can I know my students when I don’t have any knowledge, familiarity or understanding of their culture? Study, read, reflect do the work so our children and their families don’t have to do it for us. Through their work which leads to my next slides...

Getting to Know Emi, "the Quiet Student"



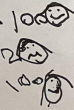
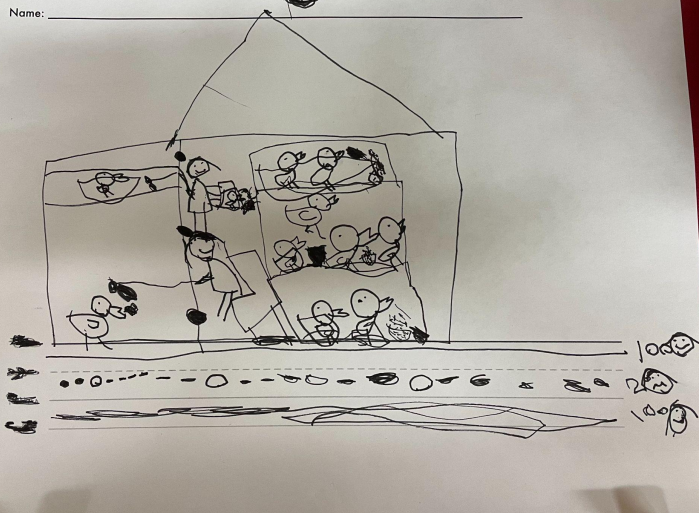
Emi is a quiet, English Language Learner who moved to new york city with her family from Japan this past year. She could be easily labeled as "the shy girl". But What happens when we do this is we are viewing her with a deficit lens. Shy, no matter how you use the word, implies that someone doesn't have the confidence to do whatever it is they aren't, make relationships, play with friends, speak up, etc.



Here are some photographs exemplifying how Emi prefers, or rather finds herself working on her own within the classroom. Here you see she is being excluded, or has excluded herself from the large group of children playing together on the rug. Here is a picture of her at recess where she is usually either playing alone, or playing with an adult. I wanted to get to know Emi beyond this quiet, shy label. How can we do this? One way is through her artwork. Let's take a look at some of her drawings.

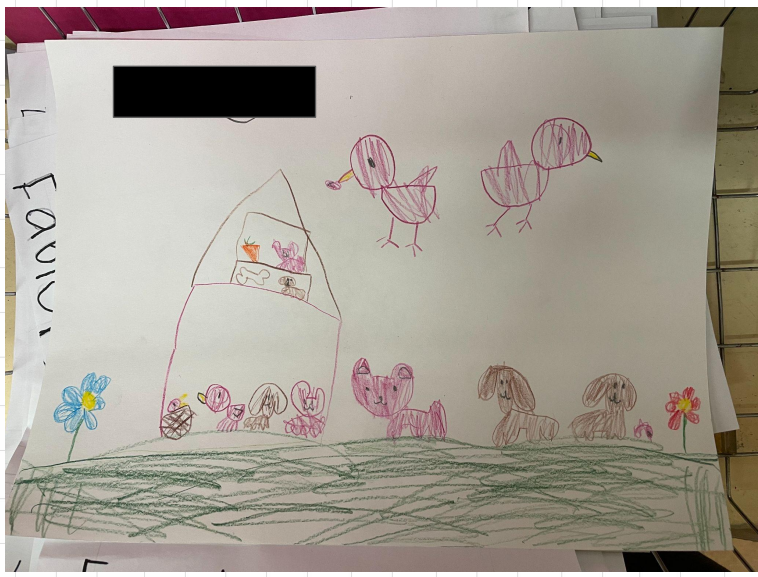


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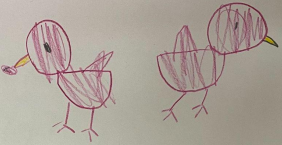


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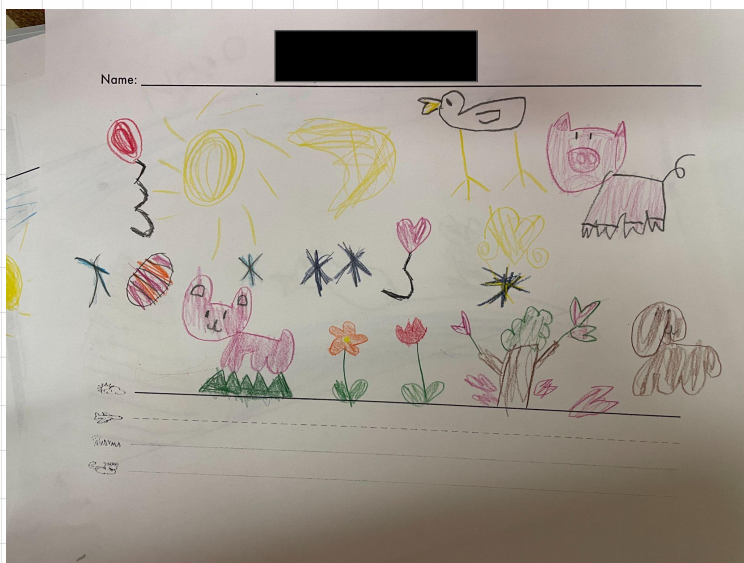


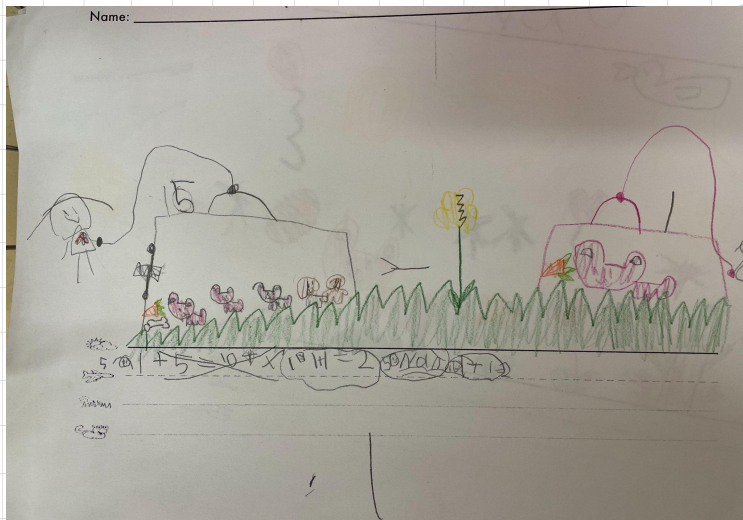


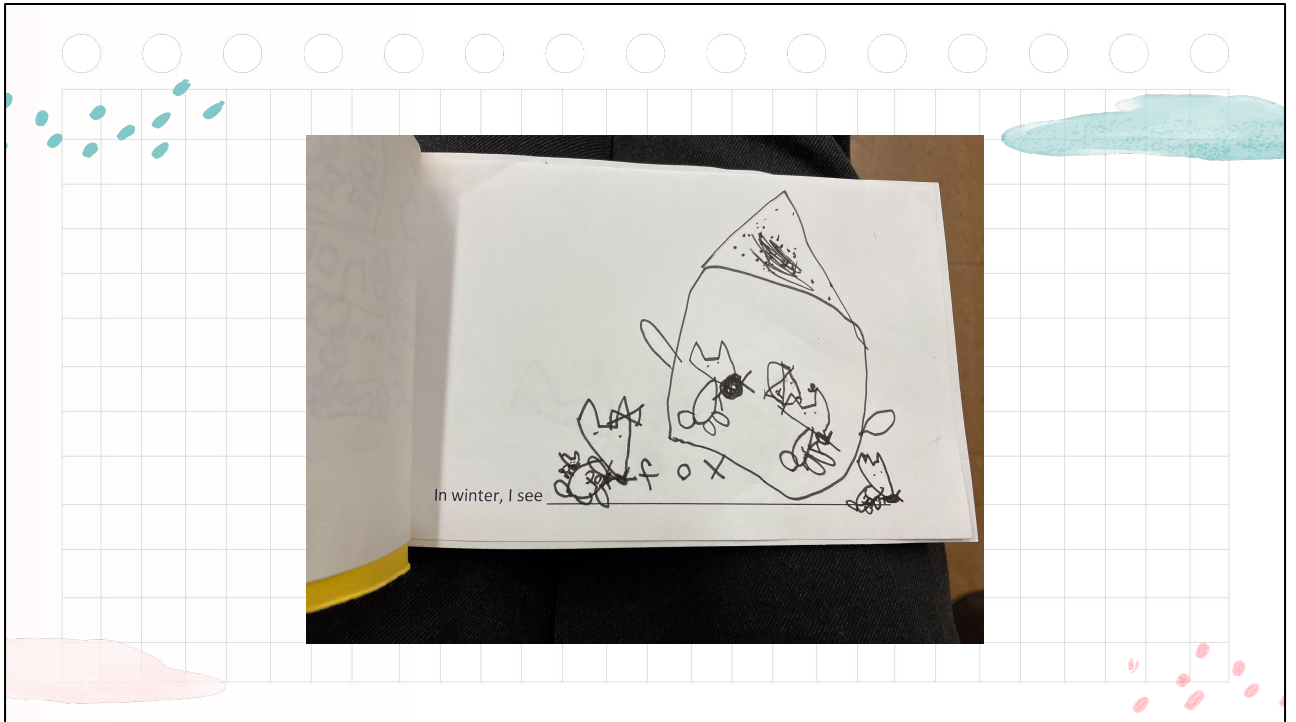
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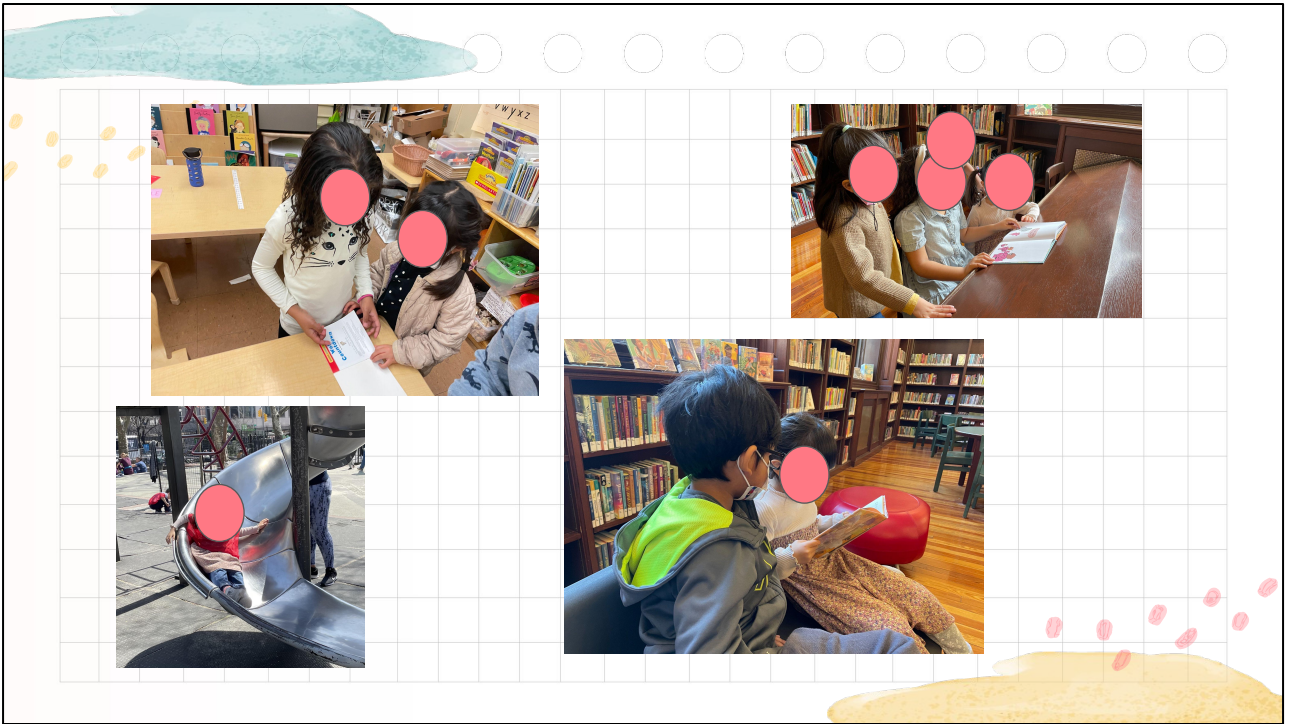




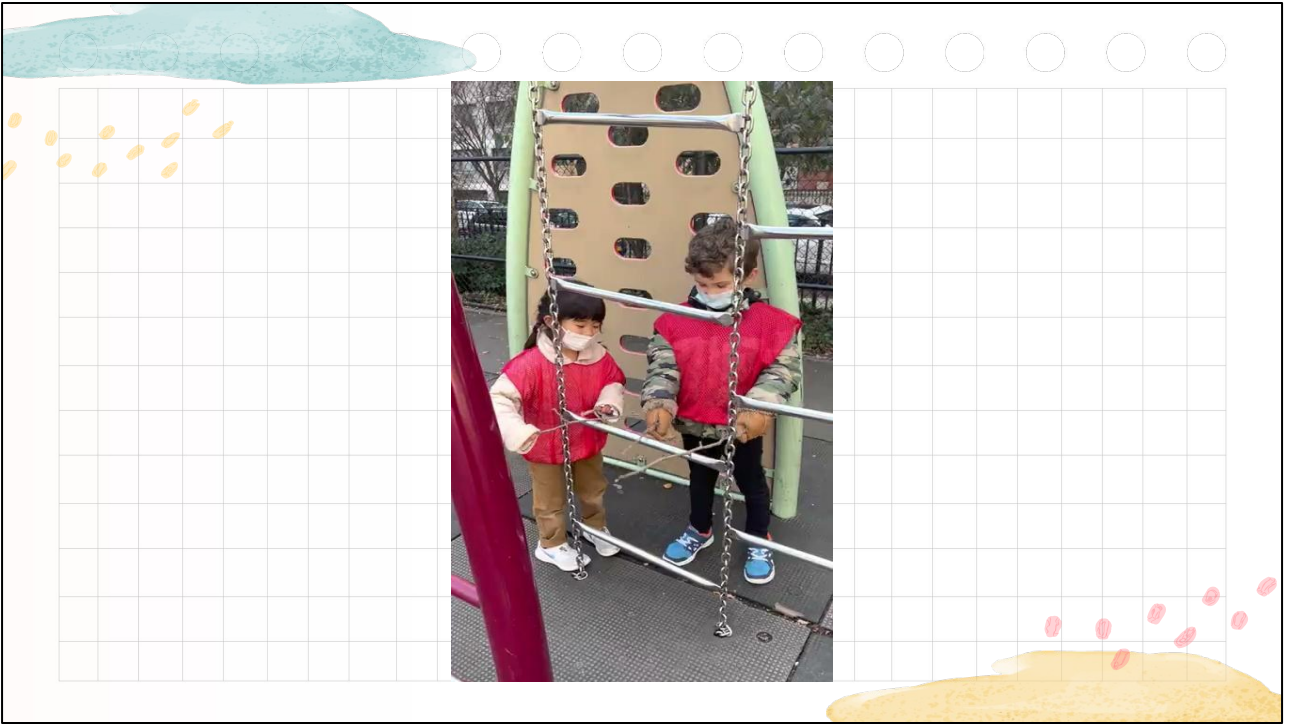


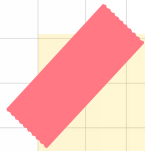


So we can we tell from her art? Emi has an interest in animals, that's for sure, but she also draws about the relationship between animals and humans. She has a strong connection to houses, home perhaps. She prefers to draw with bright colored pencils and to draw scenes happening both indoors and outdoors. Emi's interest in the relationship between animals and humans leads me to this next slide



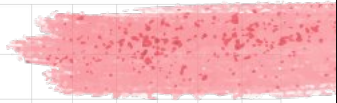
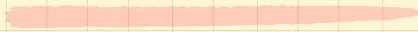
As the semester progressed, I began to see Emi emerge from her shell of shy and quiet girl. She began connecting with other students through books! Emi has a strong love of reading. I know this because she is enthusiastic to pick up any book. When we read together it is joyful, she smiles and laughs, she repeats every word I say mimicking the intonation and my tone of voice, even when the words are jumbled and incomprehensible she fully commits. In these moments spent with Emi shy is not a word that crosses my mind.

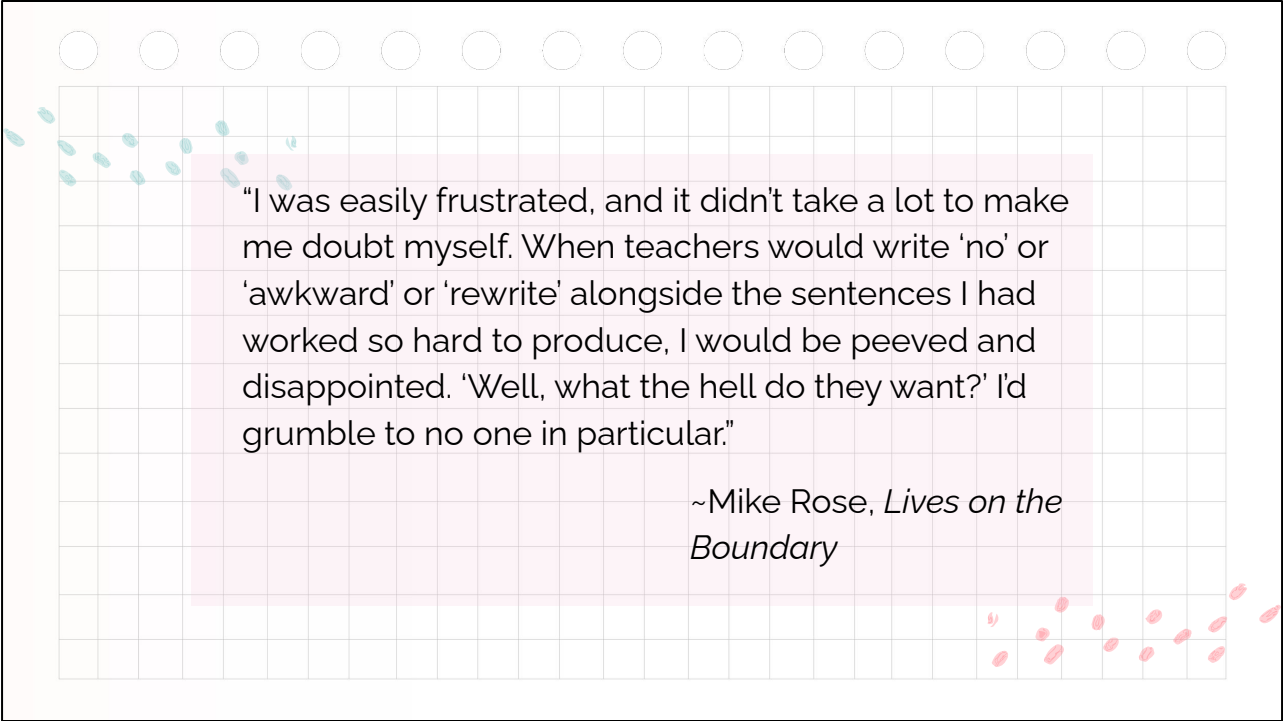




03

**Strength-based teaching
calls for
the room to make mistakes**



A decorative grid with a light gray background and a white grid pattern. At the top, there is a row of 15 white circles. On the left side, there are several blue dots of varying sizes. On the right side, there are several red dots of varying sizes. The text is centered within the grid.

"I was easily frustrated, and it didn't take a lot to make me doubt myself. When teachers would write 'no' or 'awkward' or 'rewrite' alongside the sentences I had worked so hard to produce, I would be peeved and disappointed. 'Well, what the hell do they want?' I'd grumble to no one in particular."

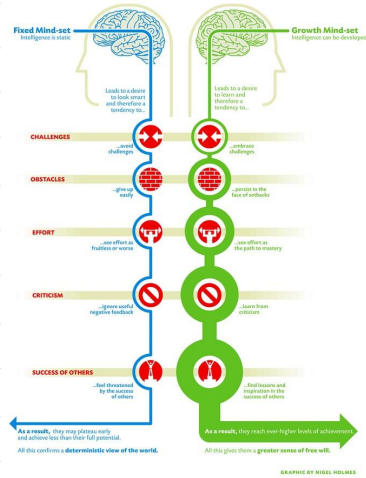
~Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary*

What are we teaching our students when we try to correct every mistake that they make? When getting the right answer leads to praise and acceptance? But getting it wrong leads to scolding or correction or a big red X from your teacher pen? What if we students understood that making mistakes actually shows that they're learning, if we stay in the comfort zone of always getting things right- we are never taking risks- we are never learning anything new- we are never trusting ourselves to TRY.

This leads me to my next slide, the importance of Growth Mindset in our schools.

What is a Growth Mindset?

- Growth mindset versus fixed mindset
- Brain plasticity
- Brain growth and malleable intelligence
- Mistake making is the essence of learning



Carol Dweck coined the term growth mindset to describe the mindset in which someone believes their intelligence can develop through persistent practice and hard work. The opposite, a fixed mindset, refers to someone that believes their intelligence is static and they cannot improve something no matter how much effort is involved. Jo Boaler writes on the way fixed mindset makes its way into our schools, especially in our mathematics classes. What we need to teach children in order to help them and ourselves to develop growth mindsets is that our brains can grow and intelligence is malleable. Brain plasticity refers to the ability for our neural networks to make an infinite amount of new connections at any moment. Most importantly for children to understand throughout their critical years of development is that mistake making is the essence of learning. That every time we make a mistake and learn something new as a result, our brain grows.

Developmentally Appropriate Education

- Recognizing developmental errors versus mistakes
- Meeting the student where they're at



Too often we hear of students being ‘behind’ grade level and there is this deep rush and need to ‘catch them up.’ During covid we hear the words “learning loss” over and over to describe our children’s intelligence.

What if we re-thought it and adjusted our expectations to meet the child where they are developmentally rather than teaching to ‘catch them up’?

Janet Emig wrote about the importance of distinguishing between mistakes and developmental errors. “Developmental errors contrast readily with mistakes in that developmental errors forward learning while mistakes impede it.”

Developmental errors have two characteristics that mistakes do not: 1) they are bold, chance-taking; 2) and they are rational, intelligent...

Mistakes on the other hand she explains are the result of fear and anxiety,

She wrote, “developmental errors represent a student's venturing out and taking chances as a writer, from trying a new spelling, or tying together two sentences with a fresh transition, to a first step into a mode previously unexplored...”

Sandra Wilde wrote in “A Speller’s Bill of Rights” : teachers are often too quick to focus on where a child should be in her development rather than where she is. Developmentally appropriate education involves asking ourselves where a

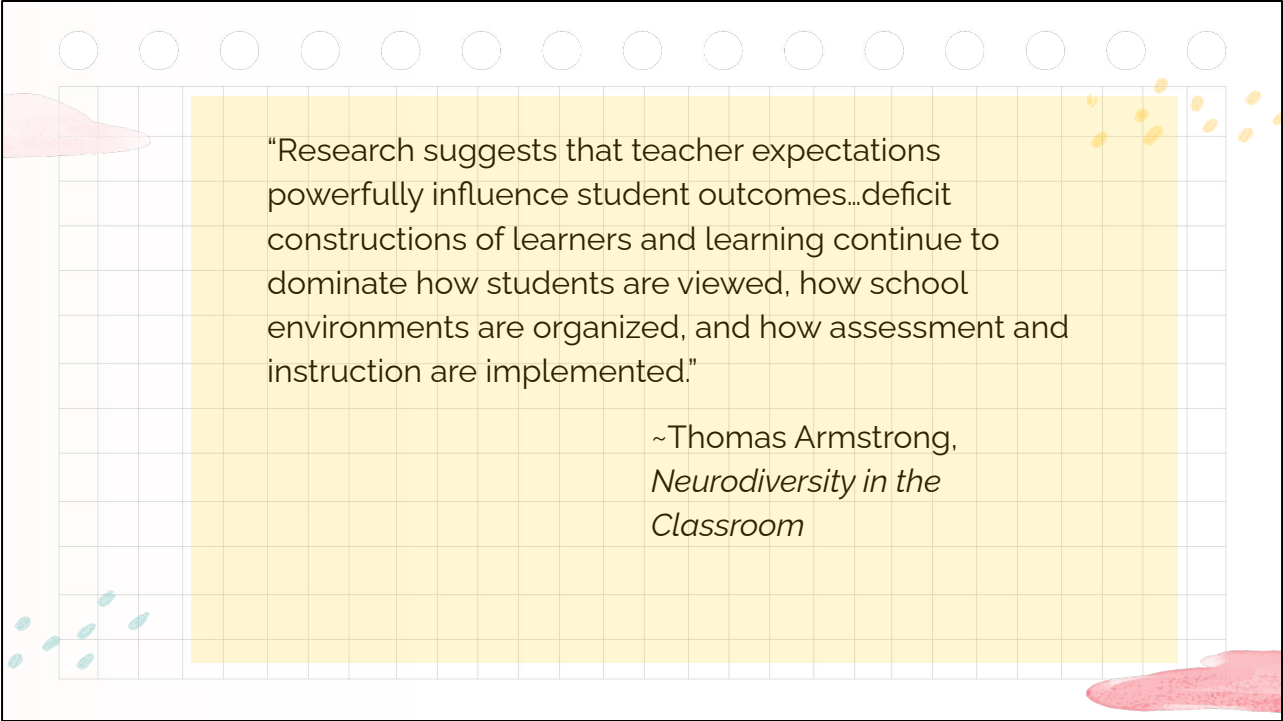
particular child is and what will help her most to develop from that point.

As teachers we have to adjust our expectations to match our students needs developmentally in order to provide them with a strength based approach to learning.



04

**Strength-based teaching
calls for
freedom from labeling**



"Research suggests that teacher expectations powerfully influence student outcomes...deficit constructions of learners and learning continue to dominate how students are viewed, how school environments are organized, and how assessment and instruction are implemented."

~Thomas Armstrong,
*Neurodiversity in the
Classroom*

Grayson, The Boy Who "Can't"



Grayson is a fifth grader I know who thinks he can't

can't do math, can't write, can't read well, can't even draw,

His teachers say he can't focus, he can't sit still, he can't stop interrupting

I started to wonder: where did all this negative self talk come from?

"He lost a lot of learning during the pandemic" "His mom did all his work for him" "he doesn't give any effort"

Grayson's "deficits" have been at the core center of his learning for such a long time now that he believes in it, he believes he "can't" or that he is "bad" at math or drawing or writing.

The way his teachers view him goes straight to how he views himself, and in this you find a child who is less motivated, less persistent, less eager to learn because he doesn't believe in himself.

This is a classic case of deficit lens creating a worst case scenario for a child. It shows exactly how negatively it can impact a child's view of themselves. How it can impact their identity and in turn impact their learning and development

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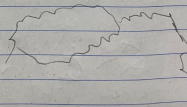
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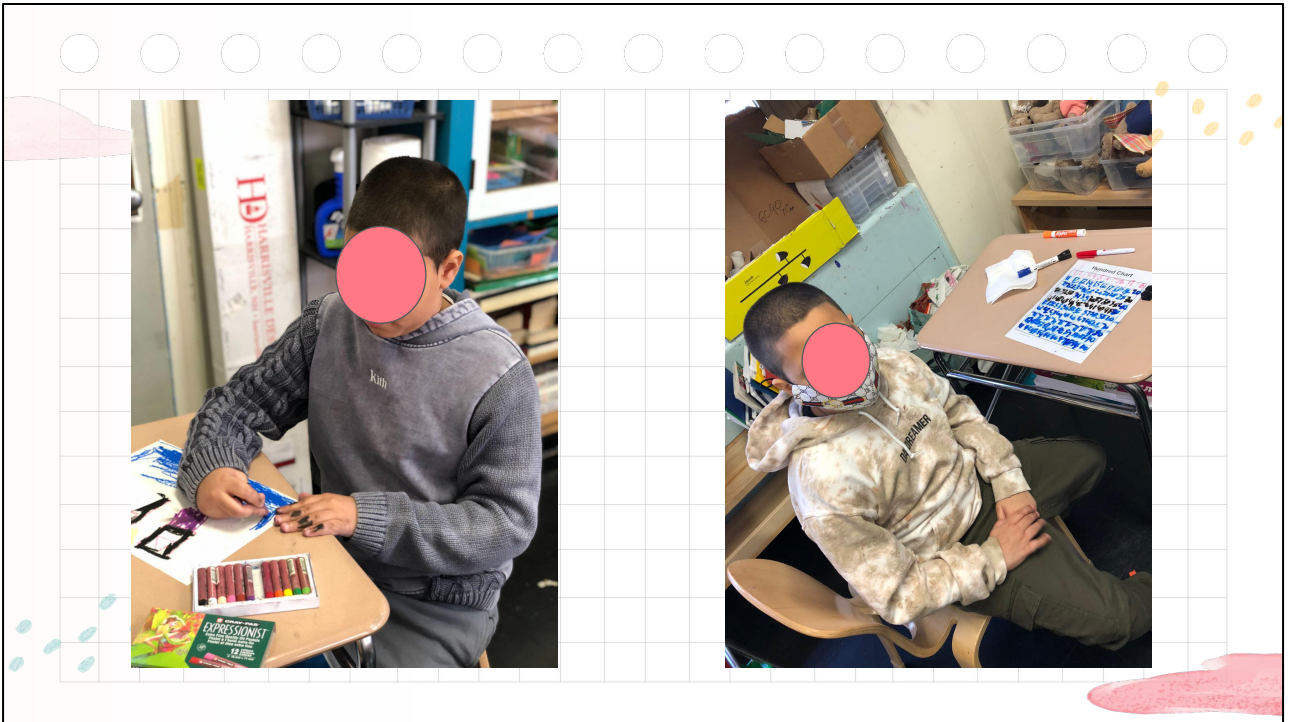
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Yet, despite all of this: Grayson DOES persist. In fact, he CAN do math, he CAN draw, he CAN write, he CAN read, he CAN learn. And in those moments when he tastes success, in those moments when he can feel he is believed in, he remembers this. Here is Grayson after completing one of his hundreds chart. “I did it!” I can hear him saying, giggly excitement in his throat.

Grayson is someone whose learning could benefit from a complete 360 change to a strength based perspective. What are Grayson’s strengths?

Grayson is kind. He is close friends in the classroom that he cares deeply about. He cares deeply about the people that care about him. After leaving the classroom in December, I’ve been receiving reports from my colleague who took the student teaching position in this class this spring semester about Grayson. I’ve received letters in which he writes to me “when will you come to visit us, I am sorry you are sick, I hope you are feeling better” and although he needs help finishing the letters, many you can see my colleague has written the ending for him, he CAN write because he has a REASON TO. He wants to be connected. He has a strength when it comes to connection and relationship.

Grayson is creative. Throughout the time I was there working with him on writing, he was writing a story about a zombie apocalypse. He spoke it into the

IPAD using speech to text feature which helped him get his ideas out. And once again I see his strong connection with his friends appear as he includes them as the main friendship group fighting the Zombies in his story.

Grayson is sporty. He is most serious when playing basketball. Shooting for that hoop. Doing his best. You can see real effort.

Grayson is funny. He has comedic timing like no other fifth grader I ever met. Why is humor not valued as a kind of intelligence in our classrooms?

Grayson is a builder, for project time he works with friends creating strong block structures on the tiled floor.

What could Grayson achieve if even just these few strengths were centered in his learning?

The Beauty of Neurodiversity

"Instead of regarding ... students as suffering from deficit, disease, or dysfunction, neurodiversity suggests that we speak about their strengths."

~Thomas Armstrong,
Neurodiversity in the Classroom

- No two people are alike
- Everyone learns differently
- Everyone is accepted as fully human

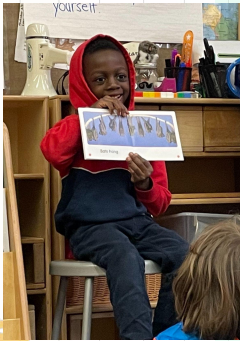
Armstrong "The neurodiversity-inspired educator will have a deep respect for each child's unique brain and seek to create the best differentiated learning environment within which it can thrive." P 13

Neurodiversity is an all encompassing term to describe people with cognitive functions that are considered atypical such as ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, or Dyspraxia, to name a few. But it can also be understood that there is a wide range of cognitive diversity in all people, and no two people are the same. Everyone's brain is unique, meaning that in school, everyone learns very differently. When neurodiversity is fully accepted in our classrooms, and not only accepted but seen as a strength, an asset in our humanness, then our students can begin to see themselves as worthy of their education. But it is not enough just to view neurodiversity as a strength, we need to implement practices where neurodiverse students can succeed in their classrooms. Whether it be differentiated instruction, UDL (universal design for learning), UbD (backward design), or RTI (response to intervention). We need to figure out what works best for our students both as individuals and as a whole class. This takes trial and error and re-thinking and re-structuring and I don't know if there is a right answer but as educators we must be putting our most fruitful effort into discovering what works best in order for our neurotypical AND neurodiverse students to succeed.




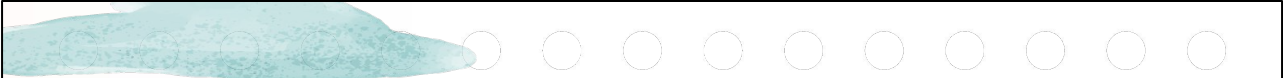
05

**Strength-based teaching
calls for
acceptance and value of all
differences: honor all
student knowledge as official
knowledge**

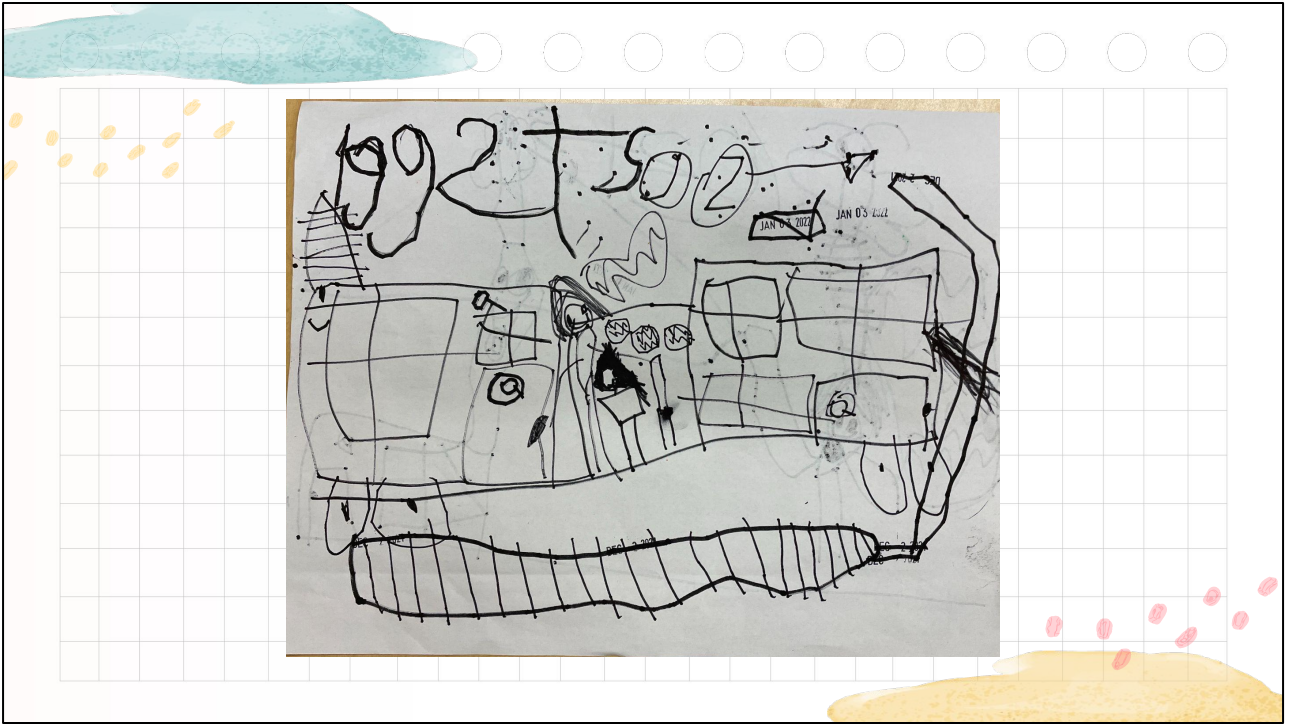


“Whose knowledge is privileged-
the students’ or the teachers’?”
~ Souto-Manning & Martell





**Official
Knowledge in the
Classroom**

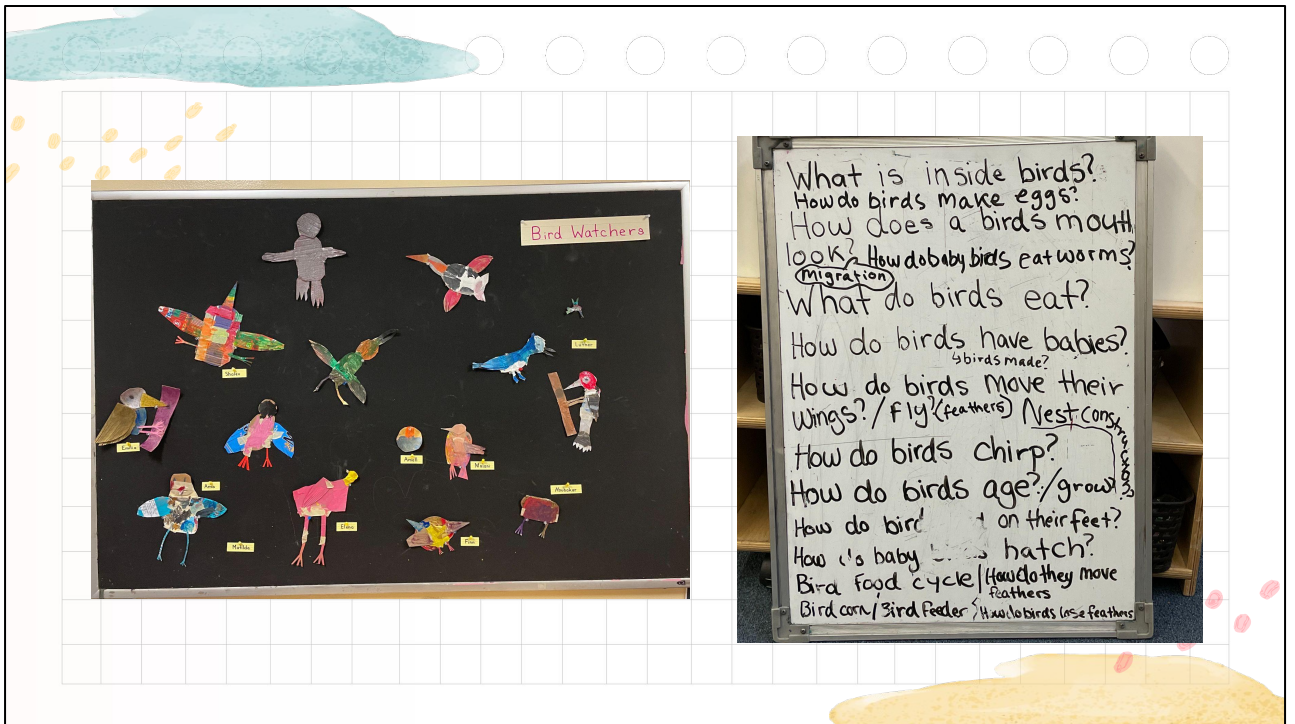




through collaboration they can learn to value their peer's knowledge as official knowledge too

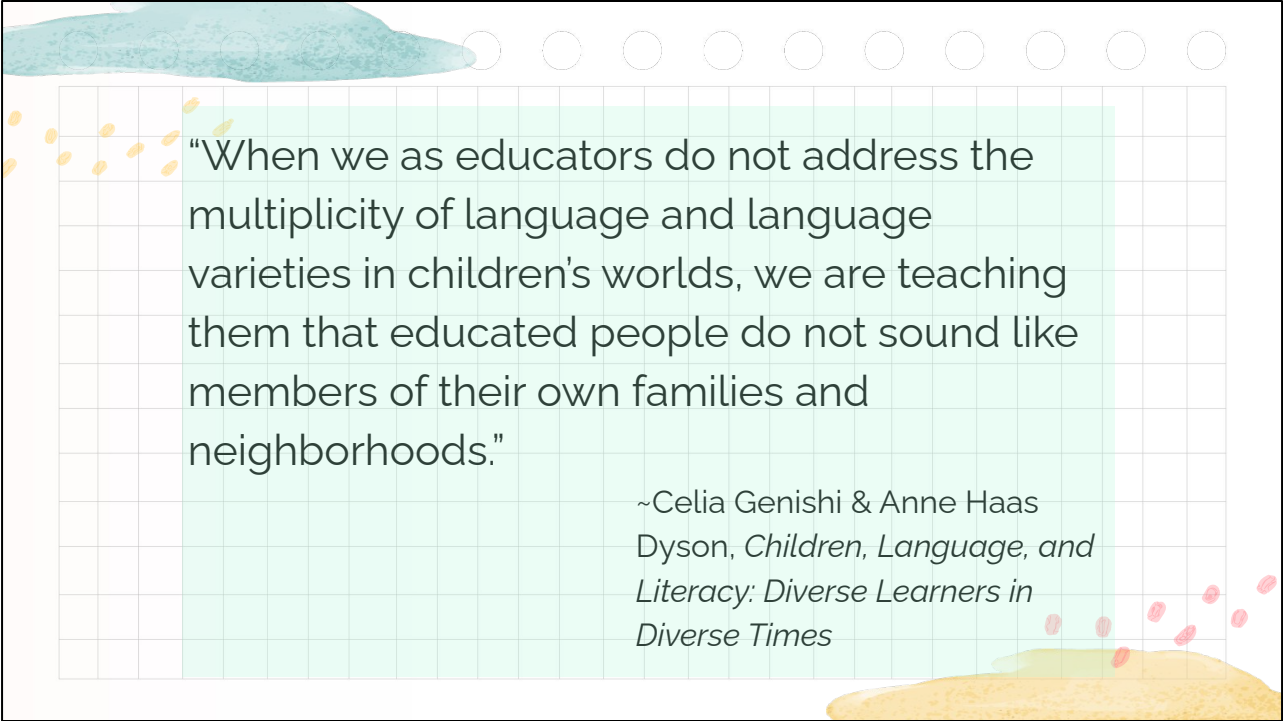


here a group of students work together to put numbers 1-100 into the chart. This kind of activity allows for the children's knowledge to be official, where they are using what they know to complete the number chart, they take ownership of this choice activity.



Owning their learning, asking the questions, deciding what they want to know/what they deem important.

All of these questions here in this photograph were posed by the students. There was no prompting other than giving them the subject of birds. We went in a circle in all but maybe one student I believe had at least 1 or 2 wonders about birds. When we open up learning as a choice for our children, they can take ownership of what knowledge is valuable to them. What they WANT to be learning about. And I don't know about you, but when I'm learning something I actually want to be learning or find interesting- I am much more excited by it. And here is a poster we put together of some birds the children made over a few weeks during work time. By putting up the childrens artwork it is valuing THEIR knowledge and THEIR creations during the unit on birds.



“When we as educators do not address the multiplicity of language and language varieties in children’s worlds, we are teaching them that educated people do not sound like members of their own families and neighborhoods.”

~Celia Genishi & Anne Haas
Dyson, *Children, Language, and Literacy: Diverse Learners in Diverse Times*



Valuing Talk in the Classroom



- Talk as essential to literacy and identity development
- Making space for authentic talk
- The harm of Standard English
- Valuing ALL kinds of talk in the classroom

Talk is an essential part of children's literacy development. What happens in classrooms that only allow talk when asked a question by the teacher? When the only talk permissible is that which provides an answer?

A strength based approach to teaching looks like a classroom which values children's talk as essential to not only their literacy development, but their development of identity. Valuing talk in the classroom looks like making time and space for children to speak, to discuss, to argue, to contemplate, alone, in groups, as a class. Valuing talk in the classroom looks like sometimes changing your lesson plan in order to allow for enriching classroom discussions led by the children's interests and curiosities. Valuing talk in the classroom creates a space in which children's knowledge is official knowledge, it is worth being said, and being heard, responded to, and discussed. Talk in the classroom helps children develop listening skills, learning how to listen to others is something we currently lack in America lol.

As Julie Diamond wrote, "talk... [is] what people do to make sense of things... the quintessential human exchange, beginning with babbles and ending with the mutterings of old age. If one of the primary functions of language is to make sense of experience, children's talk must be viewed as an essential aspect of their development."

But there's more to it than just valuing talk in the classroom, we need to ask ourselves as educators, whose and what talk is valued in the classroom? Which children are speaking up? Which children are quiet? What is similar about the children speaking, what kind of language do they use? Which language is valued?

More often than not in today's schools the answer will be white children speaking in what scholars refer to as standard English, which actually just refers to white people

existing in the economically advantaged world. How many times a day does a white teacher correct a black student for saying something in Black English. How many times a day do spanish speaking students get scolded for not speaking in English. How many times a day do English language learners feel isolated into their own thoughts unable to participate in the classroom discussions, how often are students who use assistive technology to communicate accepted into the general classroom as fully human, as fully capable of participating in the classroom Talk?

When I say we must value talk in the classroom, I am also saying we must value ALL talk in the classroom, no matter the language, the style, the accent, the intonation, the mode, We have to make space for ALL students to feel their talk is valued, and heard and official knowledge. We must decenter standard English as the standard. Read books centering all kinds of talk- not just books written in standard English. Invite students family members to speak to the class as experts, to show how student's families talk is considered official knowledge. Center the students. Center the students talk.

Schemas With Constance Weaver

Schema: an organized chunk of knowledge or experience, often accompanied by feelings. (Weaver, *Reading Process and Practice*)

- Schemas in the classroom
- The importance of recognizing diversity in schemas
- Schemas as strengths

Constance Weaver defines a schema as an organized chunk of knowledge or experience, often accompanied by feelings.

“Without knowledge in our heads, our schemas, we could not make use of the information provided by other kinds of context: grammatical, semantic, situational- and social too.”

Let’s talk about Schemas in standardized testing: no two people have the same experience in life, all of our schema’s differ, much of required curriculum and standardized testing is created to fit the schemas of our white, often rural, economically advantaged students, how does this affect our marginalized students whose schemas differ? How can we shift our curriculum’s to honor differences in schema instead of aiming to conform all to what the white economically advantaged consider to be official knowledge?

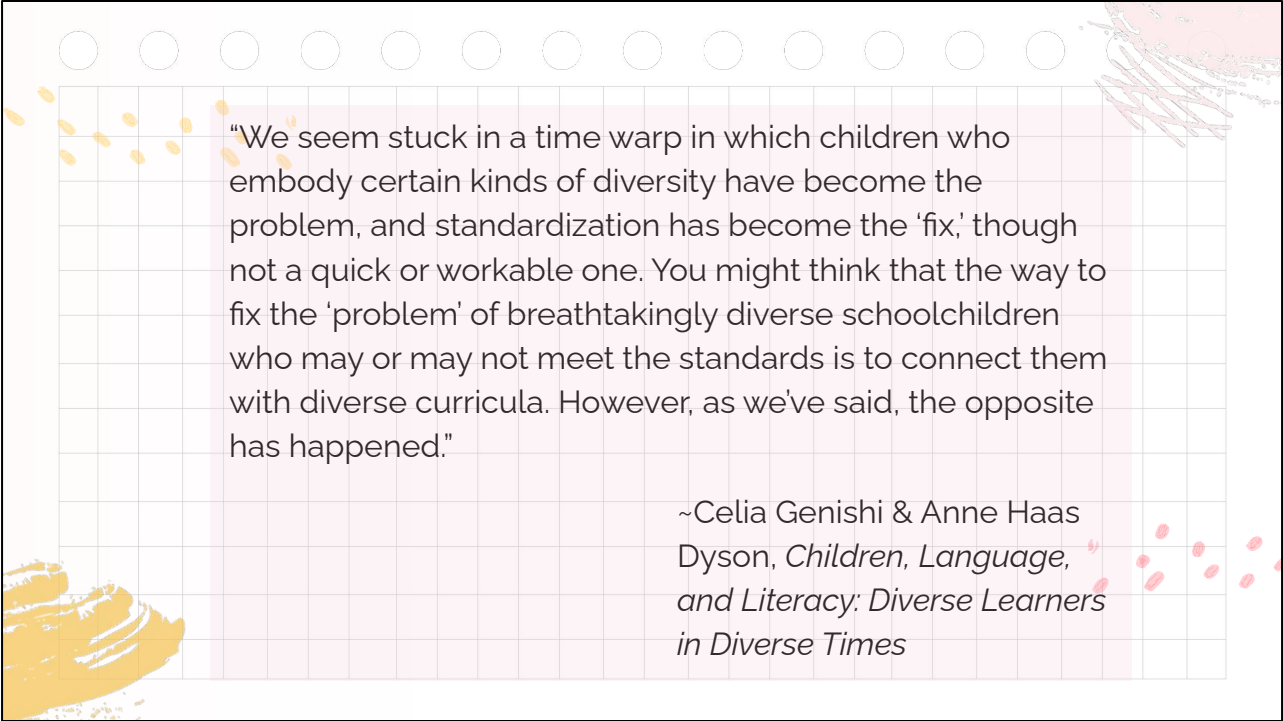
If we place value on the diversity of schemas in all people we can use them as strengths in the classroom, what you know is knowledge and it is official knowledge. When we use schemas in standardized testing we are limiting what kind of knowledge is official and worthy of being deemed intelligent. Diversity in schema’s is a positive strength in our classrooms.

“Our schemas depend in part on a variety of social factors: our cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic background; our age and educational attainment; our interests and values; and so forth.”



06

**Strength-based teaching
calls for
the centering of
marginalized voices**




"We seem stuck in a time warp in which children who embody certain kinds of diversity have become the problem, and standardization has become the 'fix,' though not a quick or workable one. You might think that the way to fix the 'problem' of breathtakingly diverse schoolchildren who may or may not meet the standards is to connect them with diverse curricula. However, as we've said, the opposite has happened."

~Celia Genishi & Anne Haas
Dyson, *Children, Language,
and Literacy: Diverse Learners
in Diverse Times*



As educators we must know children's strengths in order to teach in a strength based perspective but more importantly, the children must know their own strengths, own them, and be proud of who they are. One way to encourage children toward this mindset is through books. Books are mirrors windows and doors. They show us who we are, what we can be, and how we are different. They can teach us to be proud of who we are and how to be proud to be different. Books have the ability to help students know their strengths. And help them accept their peers strengths as just as valuable. Our classroom libraries are on of the most important aspects of our children's learning environments and we must take good long looks at the book's we choose to display for our children.



The Strengths of Multicultural Classrooms

At this point in my presentation I could not have stressed more how important it is to value difference as a strength rather than a deficit. But here we are and I will say it once more.

Multicultural classrooms where all students are honored and their strengths lead the way, create environments in which our students will thrive and learn how to exist in a world where everyone is different.

Cultural differences are not deficits and we must demand this to be understood. Purcell gates reflected, “ whether we interpret differences among children—or adults—as deficit or difference depends primarily on our preconceptions, attitudes toward and stereotypes we hold toward the individual children’s communities and cultures.”

And so it is worth mentioning as I did before in how to know our students- we as educators need to take responsibility in addressing our cultural, racial, religious, bias’s. We need to address all of our bias’s. We need to self reflect. We need to know about our student’s cultures in order to teach to their strengths.

Hooks wrote: “When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve. We can teach in ways that transform

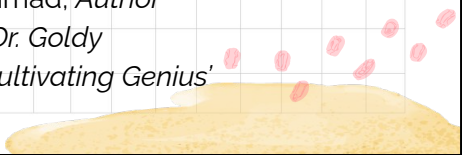
consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberated liberal arts education.”



To Conclude

"To change the mindset, teachers must do their self-work or find another profession. Just as a person has to heal from abuse in order to be whole, happy, and productive, if teachers have deficit perspectives, they must recognize them, name them, and work toward disrupting and dissolving this type of thinking. That may come from proper education, therapy, or exercises that lead toward anti-racism, anti-bias, and anti-oppression."

~Goldy Muhammad, *Author*
Interview With Dr. Goldy
Muhammad: 'Cultivating Genius'



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