

Personalizing Whole Class Learning

The challenge in every classroom is to keep every student moving steadily toward proficiency in his or her learning. We have seen how personalized learning with the teacher, alone, or in small groups can meet this challenge. But some learning is best accomplished with everyone working together. To meet certain needs that every child has—the needs for relationship, community, competence, autonomy, and play—we have to create a culturally responsive environment in which each child:

- experiences a supportive, inclusive community that is largely self-managed, where his or her voice is heard
- learns by analyzing and constructing knowledge, as well as by listening and remembering, in ways that are personally meaningful and enjoyable
- develops academic skills like observation, listening, memory, analysis, and reflection, and social skills like self-awareness, self-regulation, self-expression, and leadership.

To accomplish such a tall order, students need each other. They need to assemble frequently for the kind of learning that comes from expressing and hearing diverse points of view. They need to listen to one another carefully, and learn ways of thinking and knowing that include their own logic and point of view along with those of others. They need to hear from everyone in the group so they understand each other better and learn to respect and appreciate the diversity of their class, their country, and their world.

Although some of the curriculum, such as incremental skill development, is often best taught one-to-one or in small groups, much learning at the elementary level occurs best through whole-class lessons. Such lessons can be personalized: they can take into account, in content and instruction, the cultures, interests, and strengths of all the students, and they can offer many opportunities for students to talk and to work with partners. Relationships are nurtured in whole-group discussions that involve everyone. Attunement grows and thrives among the children and between the teacher and the children as the group discusses, agrees and disagrees, plans, celebrates, and plays together, enjoying the conversations, the activities, and each other.

Including families

Families can be invited into whole-class learning experiences, as guests who will share with the class or to enjoy an activity with them. Their role is crucial, of course, for student performances, portfolio days, and conferences. Such occasions create and nurture trusting, effective partnerships between school and home.

Tailoring teaching to students

The orchestrator of this great work needs to know each of the children personally, culturally, and developmentally to make sure that everyone participates and has opportunities for leadership and self-expression. The better we know our students, the better we can teach them. We can connect their learning to their cultures, their developmental stages, and their interests and personalities.

“Culture, environment, health, temperament, and personality all affect the makeup of every child at every age. It’s helpful that certain patterns have emerged and been documented, but they are never absolute.”¹

Learning Together in Community Circles

Use the whole-class circle for lessons that are just right and relevant for all students (as opposed to lessons for which some, but not all, are ready), and we can use the circle to spark learning and nurture relationships. The circle is a great equalizer in which everyone can see everyone, have a say, and be part of the whole. The circle invites us to be honest and to listen carefully to each other. We face each other with equality. The circle gives rise to insights from multiple points of view—360 degrees of understanding!

Power of the circle

Students can gather in the circle any time—not just at the start of the day—to connect with each other, learn together, plan a trip or celebration, or solve a problem. The circle is perfect for lively discussion and for critical thinking about complex issues. Its shape helps everyone think and behave democratically—it prepares children to become active citizens in our democracy. In the circle, students show appreciation for each other, celebrate accomplishments, and have fun.

The circle works especially well for whole-class lessons. Why sit looking at someone's back when you can sit face to face? The circle makes it much more likely that students will actively respond to *each other's* ideas, not just dialogue back and forth with the teacher. The objective is to increase student participation—thinking, talking, moving, leading—because the more active the learner, the better the learning.

I teach skip counting by walking around the circle in different ways for different types of counting while I tell the children a story with characters, such as the man with a cane. They become the character, thumping along: one, two, three, four.... (First grade teacher)

What follows are practices for academic and social learning enriched by community circles:

- Teaching effective mindsets for learning
- Starting the day, primed with a “morning challenge”
- Cultural conversations
- Power of play

- Closing the day
- Read-alouds and storytelling for reading, writing, and math
- Arts integration for reading, writing, and math
- Cognitive skill development
- Follow-ups
- Work-shares and performances

Community Circles for Healthy Learning Mindsets

Attitudes of mind have a huge effect on learning. A curious child is a better listener and observer than an incurious one, and a child who believes that s/he will learn if s/he works hard is probably headed for success. A child who follows up an idea with action has the can-do spirit to accomplish a lot every day in school. Students' mindsets strongly influence efficacy in learning. We can influence their mindsets positively, improving their odds for success.

“Currently, theorists who have proposed models of achievement motivation posit that individuals' achievement-related beliefs, values, and goals are among the most important determinants of these outcomes.”²

Curiosity mindset

Curiosity motivates students to engage in learning, and a good curriculum stimulates curiosity. For example, when a class gathers to read aloud or discuss a book, the teacher asks wondering questions: *Is there anything so far in this story that you wonder about? For example, I wonder why having a star on your belly was such a big deal for the Sneetches. Why do you think it was so important?*

I read a couple of pages from the book and stopped to ask if what we had read had them wondering about anything, and the hands went up. They started responding to each other's questions, and that was fun, too. It definitely got them thinking and engaged. It also helped them to see that the same picture or event could lead to many possibilities. What could it be? What could it mean? Imagine the possibilities. I told them that one of the great things about wondering is there are no wrong answers. They liked that. (First/second grade teacher)