

# Connecting Classrooms & Communities

## Identifying Student Needs & Assets Inside & Outside of School

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I now realize I am not alone in my field and there is so much outside support I can access. I know that if a student or family has a need I do not know how to meet, I now can access resources to help.

—L.T., *teacher-in-training*

### Introduction

As students and families struggle in a difficult economy, cope with demanding everyday responsibilities, and navigate socio-political obstacles, educators observe the toll on student learning and functioning. While student needs grow both inside and outside the classroom, educators are in a prime position to connect students with resources and help guide students through trying times.

Educators are finding that attending to students needs, while developing culturally responsive relationships, is no easy task. In addition, youth who come from culturally and linguistically diverse families are more likely to struggle with such problems as food, housing, employment, and health insecurity (Capps et al., 2004; Dinan, 2005).

At the same time, the workload and classroom size of most U.S. schools is increasingly large and overwhelming. The current average class size of 25 students is up from 15.8 in 2008 (Durko & Sparks, 2010; Sparks, 2010). The American School Counseling Association recommends a 250-1 ratio of students to counselors, but the latest data (<http://www.schoolsounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=133>) indicates that in 2011 the national average was 471 students per counselor.

Teachers and school counselors give their time and energy as best they can, and

are still not able to reach all students. Yet, because of the breadth of student interaction on any given day, teachers are usually the first point of contact to learn about the increasing needs and challenges facing diverse students. Teachers who collaborate with school counselors and community advocates can help by connecting students and their families to resources, solutions, and hope.

### **We Know The Problems, But What Can We Do About It?**

This article provides suggestions to tap cultural assets and establish links between school personnel and community resources in order to support low income and minority students. The authors are faculty members from different graduate programs who co-teach in order to model collaborative practice for pre-service teachers and school counselors.

The need for the class we co-teach arose from requests from graduate student for specific action-oriented learning to supplement the more theoretical and often pessimistic diversity coursework that is traditionally found in teacher training programs. Students often mentioned “we know the problems that impact schools, our students, and the achievement gap, but what can we do about?”

In short, future educators want to feel empowered to work with diverse and economically disadvantaged students inside and outside of school. They want to extend their role beyond the classroom and into the realm of advocacy.

In response, we developed training opportunities intended to promote introspection, learning, relationship building, community engagement, and collaboration across disciplines. We have used this professional development model with our graduate students, and they in turn have adapted these strategies in their K-12 settings in order to identify student needs and assets both inside and outside the school.

This training process relies on a two step approach:

1. Self reflection and building awareness of one’s own positionality; and
2. Gaining knowledge of community resources to develop supportive networks.

### **Self Reflection and Building Awareness of One’s Own Positionality**

With approximately 90% of public school teachers being of European-American descent (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004), it is important to become familiar with the unique characteristics and experiences of diverse students in order to have an impact on the educational success of those students.

Educators should be encouraged to explore their personal backgrounds, the meaningful experiences that influence their identity, their lack of experience that influences biases, and their personal perspectives of an educator’s role, all in order to avoid perpetuating practices and attitudes that may inadvertently contribute to racism, oppression, and inequity in schools.

The first step is to self-reflect on the personal experiences, biases, and blind-spots that may influence one’s position as an educator. The idea of building awareness of one’s own cultural *positionality*<sup>1</sup> in relation to students and community is critical in understanding one’s potential challenges and contributions. As teachers and school counselors, embracing the role of advocate is critical in order to respond to students’ increasingly complex lives.

An educator’s role includes more than the teaching of content. It should also include knowledge of the students in order to build genuine relationships, understand students’ needs and strengths, and work to enhance student well-being. It is also important for teachers to realize that during

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this process they do not have to have all the information themselves nor do they have to advocate for students all by themselves. Learning to network and collaborate are valuable skill sets for educators working as advocates for students and families.

In the class we provide various experiences through which educators can learn about their own and their students' cultures through the use of multicultural literature, interviews with culturally diverse community members, multicultural readings, activities, and presenting opportunities for sharing self-reflections and gaining new perspectives.

"The Name Activity" is a good start for building trust and background knowledge. This activity requires educators and their students to share about the origin and significance of their name and aspects of personal identity. Who chose your name? Does it have a special meaning? Do you like/dislike your name? Would you change it? Were you ever teased about your name? Often, stories of cultural significance, linguistic ties, family lore, and acculturation emerge. These insights into student identity are helpful building blocks for engaging in more in-depth conversations as time goes on.

We also ask that educators select and share three to five "Cultural Artifacts" that represent their personal cultural identity. Artifacts may include photos, diplomas, family heirlooms, recipes, musical instruments, awards, or other articles that highlight significant experiences, travels, family relationships, milestones, hobbies, hidden talents, or connections to a particular cultural group. Educators report feeling much more connected and appreciative of each other after sharing carefully selected articles that represent their individual and collective values.

This experience can lead educators to appreciate their own cultural heritage and investigate deeper aspects of their students' unique cultures in ways that go beyond stereotypical features related to "food, festivals, folklore, and fashion" (Meyer & Rhoades, 2006). This activity provides insight into students' lives and little-known assets, thus creating a springboard for relationship building and connecting.

I will devote more energy to getting to know my students and their families...to listen to and learn about the story of each student, and let those guide my relationship with them. (M.A.W., teacher-in-training)

Another activity dedicated to learning about diverse families needs and assets is the "Cultural Awareness Interview." This assignment requires students to conduct an interview with a community member from a different cultural and linguistic background, ideally with a first or second generation immigrant. Following the interview, educators write a reflection paper focusing on new insights, and ways this information will inform their work with diverse families.

The identity of the interviewee remains anonymous in the hope that a more honest and detailed experience is shared. Many of the suggested questions for the interview are related to acculturation and immigration history, such as number of years in the country of origin and the in the U.S.? Why did the interviewee or parents leave his/her country? What was the interviewee's experience with school? What, if any, racism, stereotyping, or prejudice was experienced in the U.S.?

Educators are expected to expand on these questions and demonstrate an understanding of the cultural, linguistic, and racial factors that impact the interviewee's experience and then articulate a commitment to professional growth based on insights gained through the interview. For many educators, this is their first experience giving such power to another's story and hearing of an individual's life experience first-hand. The stories shared are often arduous and painful, but also reveal surprising resiliency and hidden assets.

I acknowledge the importance of learning about who is in your community. Sometimes there are people that we do not consider as resources and professionals; we need to keep our eyes open. (A.B., school counselor-in-training)

### Gaining Knowledge of Community Resources and Developing Supportive Networks

The next step is to identify the local resources surrounding the school community. Some educators live in the same area as their students, but many who work in more diverse and low income schools tend to live outside of the school attendance boundaries, and thus may be less familiar with the community's challenges and strengths.

As educators learn more about the resources available in the community, they gain a greater understanding of the societal context that impact students, and also learn about potential assets and services

available to support those students. We recommend educators make an inventory of the needs and resources in the communities by conducting a "Community Resource Analysis" wherein educators map the resources and needs of the communities where they work. Community resource mapping builds on the community's strengths and is described by Crane and Mooney (2005) as "a strategy for promoting interagency collaboration by better aligning programs and services for youth and families."

As an educator, we can only do so much. That is why it is valuable to have knowledge of organizations that can provide extra support to students and families. (J.T., teacher-in-training)

First, educators provide a brief description of the community where they work. Basic information regarding population, demographics, home ownership rates and prices, employment sectors, crime rates, and public spaces can often be found through a city or town webpage. Next, educators take a closer look at the areas where their students live, making an effort to visit neighborhoods they are less familiar with. They can start by driving, but we encourage them to also walk, and take public transportation in order to experience the community from a variety of perspectives.

We also encourage educators to interview a cross-section of people who have lived in the community on a short and long term basis to get a sense of attitudes and connectedness and feelings about demographic changes and economic challenges that may have occurred. Suggested questions that can be used to gather a more nuanced view of the community appear in Table 1.

As educators gain a more detailed view of their school communities, we ask them to pay close attention to the strengths and weaknesses they observe. In particular, we ask educators to consider the positive aspects of the community that lend a sense of connectedness and well-being. We ask educators to think about populations who may be particularly vulnerable, such as undocumented immigrants, the homeless, the elderly, the poor, single parent households, and GLBTQ youth.

In seeking allies, educators are asked to consider resources beyond the school that may provide support, such as social services agencies, religious organizations, after-school programs, and business leaders. Often community organizations can be found through a city webpage or by calling

the 411 telephone service which typically lists various local services.

I observed that throughout the neighborhood, a host of community resources offer hope for a turnaround in the neighborhood, and hope for its youngest residents. (M.A.W., teacher-in-training)

Once educators have identified resources, we encourage them to make visits to at least two community resource organizations so they can gain a real sense of the work conducted there, and in order to establish personal contacts with members of the organization. During visits, educators document their observations regarding services and populations served, and then reflect on how this knowledge might benefit their work with students and their families.

Having the opportunity to go out in my community and see what resources are offered was a great experience. If it were not for this assignment, I would probably have not gone out to explore what is out there. Sometimes it is too easy to just look at a website or resource directory. I do not know if I will ever have to refer a family to any of these services, but would feel more comfortable sending them to services after visiting the facilities. (A.B., school counselor-in-training)

Educators find these visits to be very beneficial and share their findings with colleagues, increasing the potential for helping students exponentially, as more members of the school community become aware and are able to connect students with community resources and organizations.

I loved conducting the community resource visits and then sharing our findings

**Table 1**  
**Suggested Questions**  
**for Conducting Community Analysis**

What demographics shifts have occurred?  
What tensions or opportunities have resulted from these shifts?  
What are the primary businesses in the area?  
Who do these cater to?  
What languages and cultures are represented?  
Are there low income housing options?  
Where are these concentrated?  
Are there public transportation options?  
What services are available for homeless or unemployed residents?  
What are the primary sources of employment?  
Does the area appear safe, clean, well-kept?  
Are there sections that are more run down than others? If so, who lives in these areas?  
Are there green spaces?  
Who uses these?  
Where do people congregate to relax, shop, exchange information?

with our peers. It was wonderful to learn about all the amazing resources we found and to think about using this knowledge to support the children and families I work with. (L.T., teacher-in-training)

We also encourage educators to invite community experts from organizations and respected members of students' home cultures to present in classrooms and at school functions. This helps create networks between school and community personnel, identifies role models and allies to foster resiliency in students, and communicates respect for diverse cultures and worldviews, thus helping to bridge home and school cultures. It also makes the school space more inviting to community organizations and creates a sense that disconnected systems can give way to real partnerships in ways that put students first.

Once I find individuals that reflect the needs of my classroom, I need to invite them into my classroom so my students have someone from their culture they can relate to. This can be parents, family members, community members or anyone who genuinely wants to help. (C.S., teacher-in-training)

### Conclusion

An important part of supporting minority students is being able to admit that you can't do everything. Seeking outside help demonstrates both humility and collaboration—two traits we should try to model for our students. (R.C., school counselor-in-training)

The ideas presented above aim to provide practical suggestions that can be applied throughout an educator's career. This article is designed to help educators gain a greater understanding of the social and cultural context that impacts their students, and help them access important resources available to support underserved families. It is especially relevant to those who work with significant numbers of students of color, immigrants, and English learners, as well as families struggling with poverty.

It is critical that educators recognize how their experiences and worldviews impact their work in diverse schools. This article provides concrete examples of culturally responsive strategies that can help educators identify individual needs and assets so they can help foster resiliency amongst their most vulnerable students. Ideas are provided for helping educators learn about important community resources and allies that can support the families they serve.

Throughout their career, educators can build collaborative alliances and consider the following:

1. A perspective of positionality by asking am I identifying my own biases and power in my classroom and school?
2. Identify students' needs and assets by asking am I focusing only on students' needs and not their talents or strengths?
3. Examine how they teach and ask do I understand my role as an advocate for my students?

These three questions offer specific action oriented learning opportunities that will enable teachers to better empower both themselves and their students.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> "Positionality" refers to our *position* and resulting construction of knowledge in different contexts, often determined by different aspects of our identity such as gender, race, and class (see Alcoff, 1997; Maher & Tetreault, 1992).

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