

Interrogating the “Self:” A Tool for Building Respectful Relationships

Today in the U.S., classrooms are increasingly racially, linguistically, socioeconomically, ethnically and culturally diverse — yet the teaching force remains largely White, female and middle class. It is critical, therefore, that teachers learn to (a) name and interrogate their identities, beliefs, and normative cultural and linguistic practices and (b) understand how those practices show up in their daily relational work with children.

It is impossible for teachers to successfully enact the practice of *building respectful relationships with students* without first considering how their own identities and socialization impact their beliefs. Teachers’ affiliations, cultural practices and experiences shape how they see and understand children in ways that may be positive and negative, conscious and unconscious. For example, teachers’ identities and socialization can inform their understanding of what counts as “normal” or “appropriate” behaviors, attitudes, and work, as well as their views of what is *not* acceptable or appropriate in the classroom.

This activity provides a space for teachers to think about what their own identities and socializing experiences are. It also offers a launching point for teachers to consider how these identities and experiences influence their beliefs about children and teachers’ relational work.

Part A: “Self” Inventory¹

This activity is designed to help name the identities, values and experiences that impact your beliefs and your interactions with children.

Section 1. Home and family	
1.	Who did you live with when you were growing up and why?
2.	Whom did you seek to please (and avoid displeasing) when you were a child?
3.	What was acceptable and unacceptable growing up? What did discipline look like at home?
4.	How was caring communicated at home? How did you convey love?
5.	What were some of the everyday practices in your household growing up, and what did they look like? (e.g., related to literacy, food, shared relaxation time, etc.)
5.	Did religion play a role growing up? How?
6.	Did language play a role growing up? How?
7.	What did your community look like growing up in terms of race, class, language and ethnicity? Did the people in your community look like you?

¹ Questions adapted from Grant, C. A. and Sleeter, C. E. (2007). *Doing multicultural education for achievement and equity*, 2nd edition. New York: Routledge

Section 2. School	
1.	What was the racial and class composition of your school(s) growing up? Did other students look like you and/or share similar experiences?
2.	How were labels used at your school(s)? (For example, who was considered “smart”? Who was seen as a “troublemaker”? Who “struggled”?)
3.	How do you think others (teachers, students) saw/labeled you at school?
4.	How diverse was the teaching staff (by race, gender, sexuality, etc.)? Did you have teachers that shared identity affiliations with you?
5.	Did you read/learn about people with similar identities or experiences through the school curriculum? Who was and was not represented in the curricular offerings?
Section 3. Current experiences and values	
1.	What does it mean to be responsible? What behaviors indicate responsibility?
2.	What is polite and impolite when interacting with others? What does it look like?
3.	What does it mean to listen? What does this look/sound like?
4.	What resources or assets (e.g., phone, car, etc.) is it “normal” to have in your view? What do you want? What would be difficult to do without?
5.	What does your community of friends look like in terms of their affiliation group(s) (e.g., race, religion, etc.)?

Part B: Connecting to Teaching Practice

1.	What beliefs, identities and experiences would you say have been especially instrumental in shaping who you are and what you value in others?
2.	How might your beliefs, identities and experiences shape what you value and/or expect from students?

3. Given patterns of beliefs, identities and experiences, what might be your “blind spots”?
What do you still need to learn about and practice in order to build respectful relationships with all children?