Just Teaching

FEEDBACK, ENGAGEMENT & WELLBEING FOR EACH STUDENT

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Prologue

“We need to ‘decomplexify’ this for educators.”

A senior official at the U.S. Department of Education said this about her desire to make sensible policies for teachers. While I appreciated her sentiment, I could not miss the irony of the fact that in trying to communicate this notion in her own bureaucratic way, she chose the word “decomplexify”—a word that does not exist in standard dictionaries.

She could have just said “simplify.”

Teachers and administrators do not need bureaucrats to complicate their work with terms like “decomplexify.” Now more than ever, we need elegant solutions that address the complexity of the world in ways that do not overwhelm us. So many conversations begin, “There are no silver bullets, but…” What if there is a silver bullet? We can create silver bullets—but every mold just has to look a little different because each student we serve is uniquely gifted with skills, experiences, and opportunities. In other words, we don’t serve all students; we serve each student.

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This book is grounded in decades of research and experiences that demonstrate that there has never been a better time to be in education. We know more about how people learn, have more tools to support that learning, and more vehicles for educational delivery than at any point in the history of the world.

Teaching is the profession that makes all others possible, but sometimes, we make it overly complicated.

We need to stop performing, entertaining, judging, stressing, enabling, and dictating.

We need to become better learners—better listeners, readers, coaches, and truth-tellers.

To become better learners as educators and students, we need three things: feedback, engagement, and wellbeing. At its essence, learning is contingent upon these three components that conveniently form the acronym F.E.W. (FEW). In times of complexity, we need to focus on just a few ideas. Each student deserves educators who support their learning in these three ways.

The title of the book, “Just teaching,” has two purposes. First, teaching should not be overwhelming. Teaching is the most life-giving work that we do because it is essential for developing thriving human beings. Together, we will break down what is essential and can become more effortless. We do not have to respond to feeling overwhelmed by working even harder. Second, I am devastated when I hear teachers refer to themselves as “just teachers” as
if they are powerless and have no status. What if we could turn the meaning of that phrase upside-down and claim its redemptive power? “Just teachers” care for each student. Teachers who are just cultivate freedom and flourishing. “Just teaching” clarifies and elevates the essential work we do as educators.

**Figure 1: Just teaching “decomplexified”**

The solution is for *each* student. To get to the solution, we have to stop thinking about *all* students as if students are faceless components of an amorphous blob. We must move past thinking in sub-groups, categories, stereotypes, and caricatures. We need to see, hear, love, and respect each student.

**Wellbeing, Engagement, and Feedback**

To fully address the FEW ideas in the book, we have to reverse the acronym. We cannot get to feedback without first attending to wellbeing. Wellbeing can be part of a virtuous or vicious cycle. The virtuous cycle looks like this: if administrators are physically, psychologically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually well, they can serve teachers effectively. If teachers are well, they can serve students well. If students are well, they flourish, and the school flourishes
and supports the wellbeing of the community. Unfortunately, much of what we have seen in recent years has looked like the opposite of this, which is a vicious cycle.

Wellbeing is the foundation on which we build learning. Meaningful learning does not occur when a student is in a trauma-induced state of fight, flight, freeze, or appease. If the amygdala senses danger, those are the four options it gives students. This has always been true, but it becomes abundantly clear in times of significant disruption. The pandemic thrust most students and educators worldwide into completely new territory that was isolating and exhausting. If wellbeing is not supported, then we never get to meaningful engagement or assessment and feedback on student work.

Engagement has been missing as well. During significant disruptions caused by pandemics or natural disasters, many students cannot access online resources due to insufficient hardware, software, or instruction. That makes engagement impossible. Lack of engagement can be more subtle and insidious as well. As students have been forced to increasingly embrace screens, software engineers are constantly competing for their attention while they try to do our homework. This is a rigged game with billions of dollars pouring into the attention economy that is rapidly reducing students’ cognitive endurance.

Feedback flows from meaningful engagement because engagement should lead to deliberate practice. Deliberate practice requires feedback from others for improvement. This should be the objective for all educators because it is in fact how we create life-long learners. We come alongside students to help them become the best, most complete versions of themselves. We do that by providing scaffolding and challenging learning experiences that we assess with clear-eyed honesty and provide them feedback on how they can improve. We also need feedback for ourselves as educators because feedback is the cornerstone of deliberate practice. The FEW ideas described here are not linear but should reinforce each other. In other words, feedback should enhance engagement and support wellbeing so that continuous improvement occurs.

Who should use this book?

Don’t just read this book. Use this book. Although I wrote this book with aspiring and practicing classroom teachers in mind, administrators, policymakers, and parents may find this book useful to develop solutions that work for each student. This book is only about three things. If you are looking for simple, direct approaches to finding solutions to complex issues in education, this book is for you. In a world of ever-changing priorities, conditions, and strategies, you can use this book to return to the basics of what works for students. This book will simplify your approach to education in a way that will unleash your power for creative problem-solving.

Better than just unleashing your own creativity, use this with a team. If we do this creative work in teams of teachers, administrators, and parents, we can show policymakers how to solve seemingly intractable problems such as apathy, distraction, under-achievement, inequity, and lack of purpose. A single teacher cannot do this work alone. We need administrators and teachers to lead this work together in partnership with the families and communities they serve.
How will this book help us develop solutions?
This book is divided into four parts. Chapter 1 and Chapter 8 focus on each student and each educator. Focusing on each student makes teaching infinitely interesting and brings meaning to what we do. Given the tyranny of the urgent that educators face every day, each chapter will begin with key takeaways. This could help in three ways. First, by reading these boxes, you could “read” this entire book in about eight minutes. Obviously, you will miss a lot of nuance and practical application, but you will have a sense of the book. Second, you can use these boxes to identify areas of the chapter where you want to focus your time as they follow the order of the chapters. Third, you could use the box to review key ideas when you revisit a chapter after an initial read. Regardless of how you use these boxes or this book, I hope they are helpful.

At the end of each chapter, you will find one tool that will be a component of a solution to develop thriving students. The point of the tool is for you to do the hard work, preferably with others, of moving toward solutions—not talking about a possibility, considering an improvement, or perseverating on what a solution might be. At the end of each chapter, you will start doing the work. In the final chapter, you will bring all the tools together. You can also download each tool as fillable PDFs from the website (resources.corwin.com/justteaching) if you would prefer to use them that way.

Sandwiched between chapters 1 and 8 will be Part 1: Wellbeing, Part 2: Engagement, and Part 3: Feedback. Part 1 addresses how we connect with other human beings by focusing on their basic needs first. Simple strategies rooted in complex truths about students and educators animate this section. Part 2 tackles the four Cs of student engagement: content, consolidation, collaboration, and creation. Specifically, teachers look at themselves and move beyond content presentation to deeper levels of engagement through a laser focus on each student. Part 3 explores feedback based on authentic assessments and performance tasks. In this section, assessment becomes a celebration of learning, and feedback is life-giving for the giver and receiver.

If you are interested in the most effective ways to serve each student based on the best research on how students learn, the wisdom of thousands of educators, with the best tools available, in a way that focuses what we do as educators, let’s go. By the end of this book, you will be “just teaching” in the best sense of the phrase.
Chapter 1: Each before All

We can’t miss the tree for the forest.

Just Teaching | Chapter 1 “Decomplexified”

- Schools are better when educators move from serving some students to all students.
  Schools are great when they move from serving all students to seeing each student.
- To see each student well, we need honest, hard, respectful conversations about improvement grounded in relationships.
- To serve each student, educators must attend to a FEW ideas: feedback, engagement, and wellbeing.
- Personalized learning happens best through relationships. To build those relationships, we need to:
  - Be genuinely curious,
  - Elicit stories,
  - Make time, especially when it is not convenient (e.g., use the 2x10), and
  - Demonstrate love to cultivate joy.
- Like sequoia redwoods, we grow best when we grow in networks of rooted relationships.

Each Student
Anthony¹ was living in the homeless shelter with his mom and brother. He had changed schools six times in four years, and he entered my fifth-grade classroom in October. He was all of five feet tall and did not weigh 70 pounds. He was constantly hungry, and his pants were always a couple of inches too short. Although he was bright, there were significant holes in what he had learned because he had shifted schools so many times. These holes led to a lack of confidence and a tendency for him to withdraw. Maybe during the first or second school transition, Anthony had the energy to try to engage new classroom contexts and friends, but by move six, he was not interested in making new friends, taking new risks, or trusting anyone.

Sadly, his story of homelessness is the story of 1.36 million students in the United States (Meltzer et al., 2019). Situations such as Anthony’s become even more challenging when we throw in cascading and pervasive trauma—pandemics, fires, hurricanes, and racial injustice. These are the issues that students, families, teachers, and administrators face every day. These issues make educating students so challenging. Every context is different. Every community is different. Every school is different. Every classroom is different. Every child is different. If you have ever taught middle school students, you also know that every child can be different every hour of the day depending on which way the hormonal winds are blowing.

¹ All student names will be pseudonyms to protect privacy
This is not a bad thing. This is what makes teaching fascinating for educators—people who study students not just a subject. Any experienced educator can tell you that teaching is about so much more than content. The complexity of each individual and what is involved in communicating with them is what enthralls great teachers. In fact, there are six frames of interaction between just two people (Cooper & Simonds, 2007).

1) There is my version of me.
2) There is my version of you.
3) There is my version of how you see me.
4) There is your version of you.
5) There is your version of me.
6) There is your version of how I see you.

For some high school teachers, multiply that by 200 students and you get 1,200 frames of interaction daily.

\[
200 \text{ students} \times 6 \text{ frames} = 1,200 \text{ frames/day}
\]

As educators, we cannot think of an individual student as a faceless member of a class, race, ethnicity, or gender much less a number on a standardized test. Each student is uniquely gifted with talents, abilities, and interests. We have to give each student feedback on their engaged learning, which can only happen when we have addressed their wellbeing. Like Anthony, each student is burdened or blessed by particular formative experiences that create opportunities or obstacles. We can’t miss the tree for the forest of students that surround them.

**What we know: From some to all to each**

Through the Baylor Center for School Leadership, we have talked to thousands of educators around the world over the past few years to determine how they are serving students through some of the most significant education disruptions in history. Far from developing new approaches or designing innovative apps, we are seeing a return to fundamentals. As good coaches know, when adversity and complexity arise, take the team back to the fundamentals of what breeds success.

**Some to all: An outdated model**

Over the last few decades in education, we have moved from an emphasis on some students to all students. When I first started teaching, my students’ test scores were reported as an aggregated grade level average. Districts near mine were notorious for scheduling field trips on state testing days for students with special needs or other students who might bring down the average performance of their schools. In 2001, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act declared that as a nation we would focus on each student. Over two decades later, we know that this did not really happen. How did a law that seemingly no one would oppose based on its name, *No Child Left Behind*, fail to focus our attention on each child? How did the law literally and figuratively become a four-letter word, NCLB, with remarkably negative connotations for so many? Based on my experience as a teacher and at the U.S. Department of Education in both the Bush and Obama administrations, the emphasis on
standardizing accountability for complex outcomes fell victim to Campbell’s Law: “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor” or stated more simply, “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to become a good measure” (Hess, 2018).

While there were flaws in its design and implementation, NCLB did move our collective attention from an aggregated average of all students’ performance to reporting based on sub-categories, particularly race/ethnicity with requirements that we had to assess nearly every student. Schools could no longer hide behind the performance of most students, they had to account for the performance of each sub-group.

While NCLB might have moved us from the performance of some students to most students, NCLB never really moved us toward an emphasis on each student. In many places, students were reduced to reading and math test scores and graduation rates. We looked at students who were on the bubble of proficiency in math and reading, referring to them as “bubble kids,” to see if we could give them some additional support to push them over the proficiency standard to meet the 2013 goal of all students at grade-level proficiency in reading and math. The measure became the target and all that mattered. Our focus became myopic and distorted. When states dropped writing tests or reduced testing in science or social studies in grades 3-8, we stopped teaching those subjects as anything more than ways to improve reading and math scores. Instead of doing science in elementary and middle school, we began to use science to teach non-fiction reading strategies.

Just this past year, I studied a relatively high-performing PreK-8 urban school.

Pause a moment: when you hear the phrase “relatively high performing urban school” what comes to mind?

You are probably thinking of predominantly black and brown students who are scoring better than their peers in math and reading. Right? You would be right. Unfortunately, these kinds of labels reduce students to their race/ethnicity and test scores. In this school, kindergarteners sat at attention with their hands folded on top of their desks. In the kindergarten room, there were no spaces for centers, no carpet for morning meetings, just students sitting in rows trying to focus on their teacher. All the other K-8 classrooms looked the same. There were no art rooms, music rooms, or science labs. In fact, this was the first year that middle school students were receiving any significant instruction in science. The laser focus was entirely on raising math and reading scores as measured by standardized achievement tests.

The focus was not on each student. Each student’s test score as a component of the average test scores of the school seemed to be all that mattered. If that is the primary value of a student, then we miss the mark on our purpose as educators: to serve whole human beings so that each one can flourish. When we focus on test scores, even each student’s test scores, we disembody learning. We suck the soul from education.
All to each: Cultivating whole individuals

Life-giving teaching flows through relationships. These relationships should be grounded in truth and love because we have to meet each student where they are. We must have conversations that are:

1) honest
2) hard
3) respectful conversations
4) focused on improvement
5) grounded in relationship (Eckert, 2018).

We have to tell the truth well to each student. We do not love a student well when we sugarcoat truth, omit the truth, or even lie to make them feel better about performance that does not meet the mark or maximize their potential. Research shows that high school students whose teachers have higher expectations for them are three times more likely to graduate from college than students with similar grades whose teachers hold them to lower expectations (Boser et al., 2014). Love is having a hard conversation with a student about where they need to grow. Love is giving meaningful feedback on a piece of writing that is not where it needs to be. Love is telling a parent that a student is not ready to move on to the next unit or concept and will need more time at lunch or with additional support to achieve prerequisite skills or knowledge. Love requires us to be truthful—even and especially when it is hard.

Parents and students cannot hear truth if we do not ground that truth in love and relationships. Our relationships must be about more than just academics. At its core, the relationship between teacher and student is grounded in truth and love, which are expressed in three primary concepts: feedback, engagement, and wellbeing (FEW). To make this easy, we just need to remember a FEW things (see Figure 1.1).

- **Feedback** for improvement is the ultimate goal of deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993) which is how we get better.
- Feedback is only possible if there is deep, purposeful engagement (Dweck, 2006).
- Engagement only occurs if educator and student wellbeing are addressed (Harding et al., 2019).
These FEW ideas work best when each student is seen and known deeply by others. A quotation often attributed to Yale Professor, James Comer, states, “No significant learning can occur without significant relationship.” Some have questioned this. They cite examples like Khan Academy. Can’t technology mediate learning? Do we really need a relationship to learn? Listening to Sal Khan explain math makes me feel like I can achieve mathematical greatness, but I do not have a relationship, right? Khan Academy and many other learning platforms can facilitate learning, but having an effective educator who connects with each student is the only way to produce significant learning that addresses feedback, engagement, and wellbeing. Sal Khan can help me understand calculus, but he cannot attend to my wellbeing or give me meaningful feedback beyond whether I answered correctly through an automated process. Feedback, engagement, and wellbeing are job security for good educators and hope for society, as we do not learn to enact virtues from Khan Academy. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, “Intelligence plus character; that is the true goal of education.” We develop that character through meaningful feedback, engagement, and attention to wellbeing.

We cannot let this overwhelm us. In fact, by focusing on these three essential ideas, we make teaching “effortless.” James McKeown, in his book first book Essentialism (2014), helps us identify our big rocks. He uses the image of placing rocks in a jar. If we fill the jar up with all the tiny rocks—the inconsequential things in our lives—and then try to add our big rocks—those things that matter most—then we cannot make the big rocks fit (see Figure 1: Jar A). If we start with the big rocks and then add the small rocks, everything can fit (see Jar B). This makes a lot of intuitive and spatial sense. However, McKeown came to acknowledge that even if we eliminate all the small rocks, sometimes we cannot make the big rocks all fit (see Jar C).
To address the overwhelming number of big rocks, he wrote Effortless (2021). The basic premise is this: “What could happen in your life if the easy but pointless things became harder and the essential things became easier?” This is the whole idea of FEW (see boxed text). By focusing on these three big rocks, finding their life-giving qualities for teachers and students, we can energize and invigorate our work. The reality of the need to reach each student is what makes teaching infinitely interesting and why teaching is the profession that makes all others possible. This is why education will never be teacher-proofed.

Just teaching should not be exhausting. “Burnout is not a badge of honor” (McKeown, 2021, p. 7). Here are a few lessons we can apply from Effortless (2021) to Just Teaching. The graphic and table below represent what we think, do, and get when we move from exhausting teaching toward effortless teaching. We can apply these lessons to leadership as well.
**Think**  |  Anything worth doing takes tremendous effort
(leading, teaching, learning)  |  The most essential things can be the easiest ones
(FEW)

**Do**  |  Try too hard: complexify, micromanage, overthink
(alone)  |  Find the easier path
(care for self, engage others, eliminate steps, focus on joy)

**Get**  |  Burnout and none of the results you want
(no FEW)  |  The right results without burning out
(FEW)

In the left column, exhausting leadership and teaching are lonely, make everything hard, and result in burnout. The exhausting approach turns leading and teaching into micromanaging and overthinking because we are focused on ourselves and believe that somehow hard work is more meaningful. If we take the effortless approach, we focus on what matters most – feedback, engagement, and wellbeing. We simplify by eliminating anything that distracts us as we engage others in ways that bring us joy while we also care for ourselves. If we do this well, we are energized by the work and we get better results than what we might have even imagined on our own.

In 2008, along with a teacher from Tunisia, I was the keynote speaker on teacher quality at a G-7 (Group of 7 largest economies in the world) Broader Middle East-North African Summit in Muscat, Oman. During the summit, I had a conversation with a senior official from the Institute for Education Sciences, the research wing of the U.S. Department of Education, who told me that the topic of teacher quality would be irrelevant within a decade, because, in his words, “curriculum and instruction would be teacher-proofed.” He believed students would receive personalized learning through one-to-one digital technology interfaces by 2018. We have seen how woefully short his predictions fell when we were forced into versions of this digital interface for curriculum delivery in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part of the reason I teach is because I believe people like this senior official are wrong. Each educator matters because each student matters. A 2019 study of more than 3000 students and 1000 educators found that higher levels of teacher wellbeing is associated with higher levels of student wellbeing. Students have higher levels of connection and belonging at their schools when their teachers are well (Harding et al., 2019)—another reason education will never be teacher-proofed.

Education is one of, if not the most, human endeavors that we undertake. Anyone who has spent any time in a classroom knows that good teaching is living and learning from and with each other.

**Personalized learning through relationships**
Never has the need for personalized learning been greater. Even before the world shifted in response to a pandemic, organizations like Summit Learning have been attempting to personalize learning. With engineering and financial support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Summit has been working to find ways to focus on the needs of each student. Using the engineering expertise of Facebook and over $140,000,000 of support has engendered optimism about truly personalized learning (Mathewson, 2020). In many ways, there has never been a better time to be in education. We know more about how students learn, we have more instructional tools, and we are educating more students than we ever have.

However, that is not how it feels to most educators. Initiatives like Summit Learning also engender fear and concern over quality, student screen time, and data privacy (Mathewson, 2020). Additionally, 55% of teachers do not want their own children to follow them into the profession (Phi Delta Kappan, 2019), and teacher morale hit all-time lows in 2020-21 with nearly 85% of teachers reporting lower morale than before the pandemic (Will, 2021).

Chronic absenteeism is at 22% (Dorn et al., 2021). That rate is more than double pre-pandemic rates.

Health insurance claims for mental health doubled among teenagers from 13 to 18 years old during the pandemic according to an analysis of a database of 32 billion health insurance claims, researchers examined 2 billion claims filed on people from birth to 22 years old. The three primary conditions were anxiety, depression, and adjustment disorders. Drug overdoses among 13-18-year-olds also doubled (FAIR Health, 2021).

Students are lonely. As we age, loneliness increases risk for early mortality as much as smoking 15 cigarettes per day (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

In an August 26, 2021 column titled, "The real reason kids don’t like school" for The Atlantic, Arthur Brooks (2021) cited several studies that identify challenges with schools in general. In a study of more than 21,000 high school students, almost 80% report that they are “stressed,” almost 70% report they are “bored” and nearly 75% of their self-reported feeling were negative (Moeller et al., 2020). Brooks argues that the primary reason for this is that students are lonely and need a friend (see box).

Since 2009, the Gallup Student Poll has collected responses from over six million 5th-12th grade students from more than 8,000 schools across 1400 districts. The survey tracks hope, engagement, belonging, and social-emotional learning of students. The survey uses nine items to examine student engagement and compares them across grade levels. Below are findings from 2016 when the results were broken out by grade level and item. There are significant declines in every area from 5th to 8th grade, but having a “best friend at school” is the highest-rated area for engagement at school in both areas.
Figure 1.4: 2016 Gallup Student Poll Engagement Items (% Strongly agree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>5th</th>
<th>11th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At this school, I get to do what I do best every day.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers make me feel my schoolwork is important.</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel safe in this school.</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have fun at school.</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a best friend at school.</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the last seven days, someone has told me I have done good work at school.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the last seven days, I have learned something interesting at school.</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The adults at my school care about me.</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have at least one teacher who makes me excited about the future.</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If student engagement and satisfaction with schools are related, then more recent Gallup data are cause for concern. In surveys of the public, Gallup has found that satisfaction with schools in general has declined through the pandemic.

Figure 1.5: Gallup K-12 U.S. Satisfaction Survey 1999-2021

https://news.gallup.com/poll/1612/education.aspx

So, what is real? Is this the best time to be an educator or a student? Or is it this worst?

Through our work at the Baylor Center for School Leadership with over 600 schools over the last two years, my colleagues and I have come to realize that meeting the needs of each student remains challenging—may be more challenging than ever, but it is not impossible.
Holistic, personalized learning is best mediated through deep relationship. Education is more than accruing skills and knowledge for an economic outcome. Through significant educational disruption, we have learned that being present and in relationship matters for each student. Learning in-person increases student morale (Kurtz, 2021) and student achievement (Texas Education Agency, 2021). Having teachers who care improves student outcomes (Smylie et al., 2020), and this is true at all educational levels. In a study of intermediate grades, teachers who intentionally use techniques to establish, maintain, and restore relationships enhance student academic engagement by 33% and reduce disruptive behavior by 75% (Cook, Coco, et al., 2018). College graduates who strongly agreed that they have a professor who cared about them as a person were 1.9 times more likely to be engaged at work and 1.7 times more likely to be thriving in their wellbeing (Matson & Clark, 2020). This is the essence of personalized learning – being seen, known, and appreciated as an individual by people who attend to student wellbeing, student engagement, and provide meaningful feedback for growth.

**What works in real schools: Know each student**

Before we can address our FEW ideas, we have to know each student. This lies at the center of equitable, just teaching practice. At a Visible Learning Conference in 2018, Zaretta Hammond said, “Equity is reducing the predictability of who fails.” We should not be able to walk into a classroom, look at individual students or group of students and identify who is most likely to fail. We used to refer to these students as “at-risk”—a term that minimizes the cultural capital and assets each student brings to the classroom. Equity is giving each student what they need to be successful. This requires culturally responsive teaching as defined by Hammond:

> An educator’s ability to recognize students’ cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content to promote effective information processing. All the while, the educator understands the importance of being in a relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning (Hammond, 2015, p. 15).

To be culturally responsive, each student must be seen and known. This requires building, cultivating, and sustaining relationships with students. As educators, we are not just responding to culture, we are responding to individuals. For example, Jamal, an excellent high school student, began to struggle academically. His grades started dropping and he appeared increasingly tired and disengaged. A teacher asked him what was going on, and then problem-solved with a school administrator and the family during a home visit. The family trying to run all their electrical devices from one working outlet, and their water heater and stove were not working. The administrator who lived in the same neighborhood called in a few favors and personally installed a new stove, water heater, and addressed the electrical issues. Jamal’s performance at school improved dramatically.

Most instances are less dramatic than Jamal’s example. Daily, teachers see students’ needs and do what they can to meet them. Whether it is an email home, keeping a box of cereal in the
room for students who missed breakfast, or identifying a learning need, great teachers are continually seeing and responding to student needs.

Educators cannot solve every challenge that students face, but we can elicit students’ stories in ways that help us know how better to address their wellbeing, engage them in meaningful learning, and give them feedback. As a teacher and professor, that has looked different for me over the years as I have served elementary through doctoral students, but the principles are the same. The following three principles—and their associated warnings—frame my approach to knowing each student. I have also seen these principles demonstrated over and over again in the hundreds of schools I have studied. We need to be curious, make time, and demonstrate love.

**Be genuinely curious**

*Warning: people, especially kids, know when your curiosity is not genuine.*

A truly curious teacher is more interested in what students are saying than in what they themselves have to say. To help a student thrive, teachers have to build communities of learners who are genuinely interested in the perspectives of others. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) list empathy as the highest form of understanding. Genuine curiosity is essential for empathy and, therefore, for deep understanding.

Genuine curiosity can take multiple forms. In my elementary and middle school teaching days, for example, curiosity looked like eating lunch with students, going to their games, plays, and performances. Seeing students outside of class fed my curiosity and offered avenues within the classroom to build the curiosity of other students. As a teacher, I could genuinely say to the class, “Imani is an amazing ballerina did you all know that? I saw her perform last night.” “Did you know that Gus is an expert on Pluto? I learned so much about planets and dwarf planets at lunch yesterday.” When we model this as teachers and administrators, we become co-learners driven by curiosity.

Another way to show curiosity is by simply checking in on a student’s wellbeing, particularly when they’re absent from class. For instance, when a student misses one of my college classes, I email or text them, first, to check on their physical and mental health. I also let them know that we missed their perspective in class and that our class was poorer because they were not there. High school English teacher, Katie Kilpatrick, takes a similar approach. “When we record class when a students is absent for an extended period of time, we start class by waving at the recording iPad and greeting that student by name. When a student is out sick, we take the first 30 seconds of class to all email or text that student to let them know they're missed.” These simple practices change the dynamic of a classroom.

Demonstrating curiosity about a student nurtures a culture of curiosity in classrooms. We want students to be interested in each other. This curiosity enriches learning and allows each student to be seen and known—especially because this is not entirely contingent on the teacher. In other words, when students complete our classes, we do not want them to miss the teacher as
much as we want them to miss our class and the curiosity-driven community we have developed.

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One practice has transformed my teaching because of the curiosity it demonstrates and fosters. While I use this with graduate and undergraduate students, I have seen this stoke curiosity in kindergarten classrooms, too. In fact, many of the most effective teaching practices I use with adults I see demonstrated in kindergarten classrooms. The practice is a formalized version of Doug Lemov’s “show call” that involves taking students’ written work and displaying it to the class (Lemov, 2021). In my version, I require students to submit their learning responses on our learning management system (LMS) by 10:00 PM the night before class. This gives me time before class to read each response and structure class around the different perspectives each student brings to class. For K-12 teachers, the corollary would be to quickly review exit tickets and highlight some questions or learning the next day (see Box 1.1). This practice of stoking curiosity is beneficial in at least four ways. As educators:

1) We give timely feedback to students on our LMS or in class. When I first started teaching, grading would pile up for me. This is not the case when I have only a few hours before teaching the class.
2) Students’ responses take us out of our own heads and into theirs. Their insights can be powerful and often improve our teaching.
3) We pull quotes from various students’ responses and embed them in learning experiences in each class. When the slide appears, the student who has written the response immediately reads it to the class, and we discuss the perspective. In K-12 classrooms, having students explain their own work makes them the teachers.
4) The fact that students know that their perspectives will shape class and that anything they write could be elevated in this way significantly increases the effort they put into reading and writing which enhances the quality of their thinking.

1.1. Just Teaching Strategy: Stoking curiosity

1) Identify good thinking in a student work sample or exit slip.
2) Integrate two to three examples of student work into the following day’s lesson.
3) On a document camera or digital image capture of their work, display the students’ work at an appropriate point in the following day’s lesson.
4) Make the students teachers. Ask students to explain their thinking.

As educators, one of our jobs is to elicit our students’ stories. Building class around their responses is a form of eliciting their stories. Christopher Emdin (2016) takes this practice to a higher art form. He invites barbers into his college classroom to help teachers understand how to get students to share who they are. Emdin contends that barbers are successful because they are effective at eliciting the stories of their customers (in addition to being good at cutting hair of course). Master barber, Marcus Harvey, says, “Clients walk into my shop to get a haircut, but as a master of my craft, my responsibility is to ensure that the client leaves the barbershop
having had a personal experience with me that makes them want to come back. It’s bigger than just a haircut” (p. 57). Good educators, like good barbers, use stories and humor to break through negativity or anxiety. They understand the broader culture around a student. Emdin includes a key insight from Marcus Harvey who said that “cutting a white dude’s hair is different than cutting a black dude’s hair. I had to take time out to learn how to cut white hair. I need to get new tools to give haircuts to people who weren’t black because the texture of their hair was different. I really had to practice a new approach.” These insights are essential for us as educators as we seek new tools and approaches to give each student a “personal experience.”

Asking questions, listening, and telling brief stories about ourselves with appropriate levels of self-disclosure go a long way toward creating the types of classroom environments that breed curiosity and elicit stories. One of the most effective tools I use in professional learning conferences and have seen used in K-12 classrooms is to lead with a story of failure or struggle. The purpose of sharing these stories is to show how we can learn and grow together through vulnerability. We can then ask students to identify how willing they are to learn from failure or struggle and ask them to distribute themselves on a human continuum in the room from “least likely to learn from failure” to “most likely to learn from failure.” Students then have two minutes each to share with a partner near them on the continuum an example of how they have taken a risk, failed, and learned. Then we ask for a few volunteers to share with the whole group. This builds curiosity, creates connections between participants, connects me to them, and allows each person to be heard by at least one other person (see Box 1.2).

1.2. Just Teaching Strategy: Elevate struggle
1) Lead by example – share a story of your own struggle or failure. This does not have to end in success, just in learning that demonstrates your own growth through vulnerability.
2) On the wall or on a screen, designate one end of the room “least likely to learn from failure” and the other “most likely to learn from failure.”
3) Have students move to where they think they fall on the continuum.
4) Give students two minutes each to share a story of their own struggle or failure with the only requirement being that they had to learn something from the struggle/failure.
5) Ask for two to three volunteers to share their stories and what they learned.
6) Celebrate the vulnerability, learning, and story of growth.

Make time, especially when it is not convenient
Warning: Student needs are not contingent on your schedule. If you miss your window, you might not get another opportunity.

We have to build time into our schedules for the unpredictable needs of students. As educators, we can very easily become victims of the tyranny of the urgent. There will always be papers to grade, bureaucratic requirements, parents to contact, and lessons to plan. However,
we cannot lose sight of the very best part of teaching: our students. When I get to the end of
my career, I am not going to look back on a well-crafted rubric, amazing professional learning
community protocol, email, lesson plan, or even this book as my raison d’etre. Individual
students are the reason for my existence. I see students as immortal beings who have
immeasurable value. How I treat them each day matters far more than what I accomplish or
what institution I serve. My willingness to stop and listen might be the most important thing I
do each day.

My willingness to stop and listen might be the most important thing I do each day.

This means that I am always ready to talk before or after class and that I welcome meals with
students whenever we can make them work. With college students, this means I am also
inviting students into my home to discuss books, movies, or to join family game nights. This is
my favorite part of being a professor. My work is so much richer because of the time outside of
class with students. An ancillary benefit is that this time investment pays significant dividends in
class because attendance improves, I understand content more completely, and students are
more likely to learn because I am building on their prior knowledge and experiences.

Seeking students out in the hall, at lunch, before school, after school, coaching, or sponsoring a
club are all great ways to show them that you value them as individuals beyond the classroom.
As a classroom teacher, it was always important for me to spend time with students that they
knew I did not have to spend with them. I was a middle school basketball and tennis coach for
girls and boys. Sometimes I needed reminders of why I was doing this. If you have coached
middle school athletes, you probably understand. One particularly low moment where my very
talented group of soccer players who also played basketball for a couple of months a year lost a
basketball game 32-6. I called my brother who was a college basketball coach to ask him why I
was coaching middle school basketball. He reminded me, “Coaching middle school sports is not
about winning. You are doing this to build relationships.” Of course, he was right and this
reframed the rest of the season as his words—a simple echo of what I had told him in the past
about my “why”—were exactly what I needed to hear.

In The Novice Advantage (2016), I highlighted the “two-by-ten” strategy (Smith & Lambert,
2008). In one study, disruptive classroom behaviors decreased by 85% for students who were
the focus of the strategy (see Box 1.3). I have employed this strategy from elementary to
graduate school, and it works—especially when time is limited. For two minutes a day for ten
days, I engage a student who is particularly challenging in a conversation about anything. While
this can be awkward at first, simply by seeking the student out and engaging him or her, I begin
to learn more about this student. Engagement increases because the student begins to feel
seen and known, while I am simultaneously seeing and knowing in deeper ways.

1.3. Just Teaching Strategy: 2 x 10

1) For two minutes a day for 10 days, talk to one student who has been challenging to get
to know. Beware, the first few days will probably be tough so do some good
observation. Who does the student hang out with? What do they show interest in? What do they wear? Do they have any siblings? Another hack is to have students give you some basic information about themselves through a survey. I had an “11 weird things about me” survey that came complete with “Would you eat beef liver cat food, pork rinds, and strawberry Yoo-hoo for $50?” My older brother actually consumed all these items for free – long story. While these questions seem random, they are an opening for a conversation.

Based on your observations or survey find two to three things that you are genuinely curious about and formulate at least three questions. You might burn through all three the first day! Here are some optional starter questions but remember the more you can tailor the question to the student, the better:

 “When you are not in class, what do you like to do?”
 “Would you eat the cat food, pork rinds, and beef liver cat food for $50?”
 “What is one thing that would make our class better?” – Don’t get defensive!

2) Keep a small journal or digital file to help you keep track of who you’re meeting with and when.
3) Use what you know about the student to help individualize instruction and be responsive to their interests, talents, and needs.

In the United States, suicide is the second leading cause of death among 14-18-year-olds. In 2019, 18.8% of students reported having seriously considered suicide (Ivey-Stephenson et al., 2020). Now that I have taught long enough to have attended funerals of students, I am increasingly convinced that each minute I have spent seeing and knowing students has been the most valuable time I have spent. Burying a student is almost as unnatural as a parent burying a child. However, it provides perspective. While I hope this is not the case for you, if you have had a student take their own life, this changes you. It changed me as a teacher. We need to take the time to listen when students are ready to share. We might be the only lifeline they reach for. Not to be grandiose, but we might be the connection they need to get the help that will save them. As we build community in our schools and classrooms, we cannot be the only ones doing this work, because this will overwhelm us. Every adult and student in the building needs to be looking out for others and finding the people who need a two-by-ten. If we have 2,500 educators, staff, and students in a high school looking out for each other, school culture will improve and we are all more likely to thrive.

**Demonstrate love to cultivate joy**

*Warning: Our joy diminishes in direct proportion to our lack of love for each student.*

As teachers and administrators, we are only as strong as our weakest students. Our joy comes from seeing students grow. Our desire to see them grow flows from our love for them as
individuals. Some students are hard to love. In one of my all-time favorite TED talks, Rita Pierson speaks inspirational truth to educators and emphasizes that every kid needs a champion. I am inspired by almost all of what she says. However, I disagree with one point that she makes toward the end of her talk. Pierson says,

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Will you always like all your children? Of course not. And you know your toughest kids are never absent. You won’t like them all, and the tough ones show up for a reason. It is the connection. It is the relationship. And while you won’t like them all, the key is they can never ever know it. That is why teachers become great actors and great actresses...

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I have struggled to like some students, but I would caution against becoming an actor. Students see through acting. The toughest students for me to like have always been wealthy, entitled students who with one look communicate “you are just a teacher.” They can make me feel small and inconsequential. However, 26 years into teaching, I can honestly say that I have not had to be an actor and pretend to like them. The way forward for me was to demonstrate love for each of those students even when I did not feel that love. To do that, I would sit in the student’s seat in the early morning before school would start and pray for them and their wellbeing. Sitting in the seat and trying to understand where the student was coming from altered my perspective. I would force myself to find something good in that student every day and point it out or just write it down somewhere so that I could express gratitude. Over time, as I cultivated the practice of demonstrating love for that student, my attitude would change in a way that would not allow the student to steal my joy. My actions precipitated a change in my feelings (see Box 1.4). As my feelings toward the students changed, my joy increased. In some cases, the students who had originally been the most difficult for me to love became some of the markers of professional joy, as I saw them begin to thrive.

1.4. Just Teaching Strategy: Demonstrate love to cultivate joy

1) Identify a student you are struggling to love.
2) Sit in their seat before school and look at the classroom from their perspective.
3) Identify at least one good quality about the student while sitting in their seat.
4) Write the quality down in a private notebook or audio record the quality in a private digital file and return to it as frequently as needed until you are grateful for the student and working for their wellbeing.
5) At an appropriate time, share anything positive you have noticed with the student. Not only will this encourage the student, this affirmation will help cement these feelings for you as well.

The tool at the end of the chapter can also support you in this strategy.

Loving each student means we do not have to become actors. We can actively demonstrate love to each student in ways that feed the deep joy that comes from seeing others flourish (Brooks, 2019). This is good for students but even better for us! Putting on a mask or persona and pretending to be something that we are not is suffocating. Sociologist Brené Brown
explains why this is not a good idea. "The word persona is the Greek term for ‘stage mask.’ In my work masks and armor are perfect metaphors for how we protect ourselves from the discomfort of vulnerability. Masks make us feel safer even when they become suffocating” (Brown, 2012, p. 113).

Acting suffocates and steals joy. Finding ways to demonstrate love enhances how we feel about students and allows us to find joy. A pre-condition for meeting the needs of each student is our joy as teachers. While it is not sufficient to ensure that all students are learning, our joy is necessary. How do we tap curiosity, develop intellectual virtues, or expect our students to find joy in learning if we do not find it there ourselves?

A pre-condition for meeting the needs of each student is our joy as teachers. <end>

All of us for each of us
We started the chapter with the statement that we cannot “miss the tree for the forest.” We have to see each student. We have to see Anthony. That could be overwhelming and exhausting. However, what if the answer is in the forest?

A few years ago, I visited a sequoia redwood forest in California. That forest was one of the most awe-inspiring testaments to life I have ever experienced. The trees are over 2500 years old, can grow more than 300 feet high, and can weigh over 6,000 tons. Supporting that kind of life should require deep roots, right?

Wrong. Sequoia redwoods’ roots are only 6-12 feet below the soil. How is this possible? Sequoia redwoods function as a community. Each tree is dependent on the other trees as their roots are intertwined. Through these dense networks of roots, they share support and nutrients. Because of their root systems, sequoia redwoods can withstand wind, fire, earthquakes, and storms. They have been doing all that effectively since before our calendar started counting forward!

Our schools and classrooms should function like redwood forests. No individual teacher or administrator can meet all the needs of each student. However, we can create the conditions where each student can flourish by creating systems of intertwining roots. While we cannot control everything that enhances or diminishes each student’s ecosystem (e.g., poverty, family, culture, social media, etc.), we can build communities that support each student. The remainder of this book describes the nutrients and rootedness that we need to grow giants—not individual giants, but forests of giants who are interdependent and thrive most when they thrive together. Home, character, academics, and friends are to students as roots, soil, water, nutrients, and sun are to redwoods. We need to understand what assets our students bring to our schools if we are to care for them effectively by providing feedback, engaging hearts and minds, and tending to their wellbeing.

Home, character, academics, and friends are to students as roots, soil, water, nutrients, and sun are to redwoods. We need to understand what assets our students bring to our schools if we
are to care for them effectively by providing feedback, engaging hearts and minds, and tending to their wellbeing.

This is also true for how we should care for our colleagues because we cannot nourish students if educators are withering. We cannot be myopic and only focus on students. In my experience, I have seen many educators extend far more grace to students than they will to colleagues. This cannot continue.

This is the work we get to do every day as we develop giants. C.S. Lewis writes, “The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts” (Lewis, 2001). Feedback, engagement, and wellbeing are that irrigation. Our power lies in our attention to these three things and they are enhanced when they occur in community. Students can attend to all three of these areas that are the lifeblood of growth when we give them the tools and support to intertwine their roots. When we build thriving communities of learners, our collective impact can outlive even the redwoods and echo through eternity.

There is no big emotional payoff to Anthony’s story; at the end of his fifth-grade year in our classroom, Anthony’s family moved again, and we lost contact. But for a school year, our lives overlapped, and along with a school social worker, a school psychologist, a principal, a learning specialist, and a class of amazing fifth graders, we helped Anthony become the best version of himself. He made significant progress over the course of the year and was nearly at grade level in reading and math and was demonstrating genuine curiosity in science. When he first arrived, he was reticent to speak or play at recess, but he became a talkative kickballer. Because he was safe, fed, seen, and loved, he learned. Could he have learned more? Could we have done better? Absolutely. But we knew what Anthony needed. We attended to his wellbeing, engaged his mind, and showed him that he was growing through clear, honest feedback. His peers accepted him as part of our collective forest, and I was convinced that he could do well in middle school.

Redwoods are not meant to be transplanted, and they do not thrive when they are on their own. All we can do is care for those around us as our lives become interdependent in deepening community. I hope that in some way Anthony carries the influence of our community with him and that he has found a forest where he is now a thriving giant.

To not miss the tree in the forest, we need to be sure the forest is looking out for each tree.

**Just Teaching Tool #1 | Four lenses**

This first tool is designed to help you look at each student so you can create a forest that grows each student into a thriving giant. Feel free to do this with others especially if you are in upper grades and share students. You can download a fillable PDF from resources.corwin.com/justteaching

As the directions on the tool state:
1) Think of the student you are struggling to connect with the most. Write their name in the center box.

2) Look at the student through the four lenses to identify assets that could help your community (your forest) support and feed growth.

3) After including as many assets as possible, identify a next step for each of the four lenses that will allow the student to thrive and take action. What could you do to connect friends, your academic content, their own character development, or their home to your work together?

4) Repeat for as many students as you need to “see” better. This can be the focus of your 2x10.

Extend yourself grace. You will not get this right the first time. As the experts in improvement science write, “Our work is possibly wrong and definitely incomplete” (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 79). Don’t let perfection be the enemy of improvement.
TOOL #1 | FOUR LENSES
THE FOREST CAN HELP US SEE EACH TREE, SO WE CAN GROW GIANTS

THINK OF THE STUDENT YOU ARE STRUGGLING TO CONNECT WITH THE MOST

LENS 1

FRIENDS
“SUN”
What assets do the student’s friends add? How can we leverage positive peer influence? Extra-curricular involvement? What other friends does the student need?

NEXT STEP

LENS 2

ACADEMICS
“NUTRIENTS/WATER”
What assets does the student bring academically? What passions or interests do they have? Where is the greatest potential for growth?

NEXT STEP

LENS 3

CHARACTER
“SOIL”
What character traits are assets for this student? What Character traits need to develop? What are some vehicles for developing character that might serve the student well?

NEXT STEP

LENS 4

HOME
“ROOTS”
What assets does the student bring from home? Community? Culture? What else do you need to know? How might you deepen your understanding?

NEXT STEP

“REMEMBER OUR WORK IS POSSIBLY WRONG AND DEFINITELY INCOMPLETE.”
BRYK ET AL., 2015, P.79
Your Partner in Building Better Schools

There has never been a better time to invest in education. Thanks to decades of research and documented experiences, we know more than ever about how people learn, possess more tools than ever to support that learning, and have more ways to deliver the best education to students. Baylor’s Center for School Leadership understands this. It is uniquely positioned to identify and broadly disseminate the most effective school leadership practices to equip school leaders in a way that makes the most impact in education worldwide.

Just Teaching by Dr. Jon Eckert (a BCSL flagship resource) is written for teachers who want to develop the best ways to serve students based on research on how students learn. This book shows how to use appropriate tools, based on the wisdom of generations of educators, in a focused, sustainable way. It is also the first of a broad strategic Just Schools Project from the BCSL to provide resources and development that facilitate student flourishing, best-in-class education, and school sustainability.

Discover the value of working alongside Baylor’s Center for School Leadership, our fellows, scholars, and partnering school leaders. Join us as we elevate the essential work of educating our children.

BUILDING BETTER SCHOOLS BY DOING BETTER WORK, TOGETHER

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