



Learn the secret language of equity to build trust in school

A sense of ‘community,’ coupled with ‘regard’ for students, informs the how-to of cultivating genuine relationships with the students targeted in your equity initiatives.

As someone who has learned about building trust with students from every walk of life, I will begin by pointing to an extremely powerful but commonly under-used concept: Community.

When I speak of community here, I am not talking about the everyday use of that particular noun; rather, I am referring to a “vibrant reality” that such a word can convey. Specifically, what I am offering for your consideration is the wonderful spirit, rich human feelings and full-spectrum experiences the idea of community can mean in our lives.

It would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge that I understand, as education leaders and administrators, the concept of community is not at all new to you. And further, when you carry out your duties overseeing the welfare of your school, you do what you can so that your site operates as a community for the body of students and educational professionals you serve.

But the point I am making is something different; the seed of my message is in the following statement: “Community should function as an overarching tool for building trust.”

That may not be news. But what I believe is news you’ve been waiting for is clear instruction for the “how to” regarding growing relationships and building trust with your students – especially students of color, English language learners, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, foster students, and all of the students targeted in your equity initiatives.

My goal is to provide you with the beginnings of a roadmap that focuses on the golden keys that my work in this arena have uncovered. Also, because I enjoy switching things up a bit, here is a list of certain outcomes I’m excited to share even before I offer my roadmap:

- Greatly improved connection and rapport between students and educators.
- More respect being displayed across the board – leaders, teachers and youth.
- Students being more accountable for their performance and their attitudes.
- Students having a greater interest in becoming leaders and being responsible.
- The most vulnerable students feeling they are supported and can achieve.

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- A reduction in the need for punitive measures and disciplinary practices.
- A noticeable decrease in racial, cultural and gender-based violence.

Let me introduce something else to you, a key word that I feel is essential and appropriate in the creation of good human relations. It's the core message of what I call the "Secret Language." Although it's not tangible, what it delivers is still highly sought after. Simply put, the word is "regard."

This is what one online dictionary I consulted said about that word:

- To look upon or think of with a particular feeling.
- To have or show respect or concern for.
- To think highly of; to hold in esteem.
- To take into account; consider.
- To look at; to observe.
- To relate to; to be concerned about.
- To see, look at or conceive of in a specific and appropriate manner.

To get more explicit, when you choose to have regard for your students it means that you will become aware of who they are and what matters to them as a human being. It also means you will find as many ways as you can to show them you care. And it certainly means that you will make it a point to notice and support them around what brings them joy, as well as what might be stimulating the fears or doubts they are having.

Lastly, to utilize the Secret Language, it's imperative that you understand that expressing regard for your students is something you will have to grow in yourself, and that this is done by looking to young people for clues, then acting upon them.

I'd like to have you look at the two key words together, and really take in what they stand for, what they have the potential to represent. The word "regard" is a call for you to have a shift in your consciousness; specifically, for you to use that word as a standard of measure, one that will begin to guide interactions between you and your students.

Additionally, I want you to see that the concept of "community" serves as a directive for you to embrace and create action plans around. This is done by never being satisfied as a leader until the vibrant reality of community is a primary tool in carrying out your equity initiatives. That's it. Now for the out-

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line and roadmap.

I often use the following snapshot to introduce educators to the elements I wish to deliver to begin cultivating relationships, those things that also build trust and will promote genuine connection. This outline really constitutes a lesson at a glance.

Please notice that each item provides you with a single key word; a one-word theme for what you must focus on to arrive at the outcome of "genuinely relating" to your students. In addition, a short phrase is offered that gives you a directive and captures an intention for what you are to communicate about to deepen your interactions. Lastly, I briefly explain each item so that the "how to" will make sense to you by organizing the material into Insights and Practices.

Please keep in mind that this article, with limited space, can only give you so much. However, I believe once you explore any part of this material that may fit your needs, you'll be well on your way.

Key Practice 1 – Identity: Respect their personality

INSIGHT: Youth in today's world are letting us know it is very important for them to be proud of who they are and to feel that people are showing them respect.

PRACTICE: A student's identity is a kind of "signature" that represents who they are choosing to be. To show respect for a student, I suggest that you adjust your approach to create "resonance" with each student's personality, which means one size does not fit all.



Key Practice 2 – Environment: Know their circumstances

INSIGHT: One important thing to be aware of is that your students may be part of the statistics now coming to light regarding trauma, so it behooves you to be in touch with a student's circumstances at home because that plays a big role in how they see the world.

PRACTICE: Create ways for your students to "tell their story" and for them to celebrate their wins and/or receive empathy and support, if such is needed. This particular practice is where my suggestion that your school community become a vibrant reality fits right in.

Key Practice 3 – Meaning: Understand their values

INSIGHT: Every human being thrives when their life is full of meaning. This is especially true for young people because they are in the dynamic process of formulating their values.

PRACTICE: Look for "clues" from your students about what is important to them. And don't be surprised to find those clues everywhere, such as in the clothes they wear, in their manner of talking, in the fads they follow, in the symbols they use, in their chosen activities, in the way they express their ideas, who their friends are – all over the place!

Key Practice 4 – Choices: Explore their behavior

INSIGHT: If there could only be one life lesson we gave to young people, the wisdom



Gender safety builds success

As one of the most fundamental aspects of self, gender impacts everybody. Regardless of a student's age, gender impacts a child's experiences at school across the grades. There is abundant research about the relationship between students' sense of safety and their ability to succeed in school, and gender is one of the factors that greatly impacts perceptions of safety.

As a primary socializing agent, schools have a tremendous opportunity and responsibility to be inclusive of all students, regardless of their gender identity or expression. In this role, educational institutions and the professionals associated with them can significantly impact the degree to which gender diversity in children and teens is viewed – either positively or negatively.

Beyond supporting our young people as individuals, we cannot afford to have any of our students cut off from interests, talents or intellectual pursuits that may ultimately contribute to our society. School is the place where our children should be exploring ideas and discovering new skills. It is inexcusable that any child might be prevented from pursuing their passions simply based on others' perceptions of their gender.

By sending a message that certain pursuits are off limits simply because of a person's gender, we lose access to an incredible source of human potential. How many great discoveries, new inventions, cures for disease, or works of art have we lost simply because people believed they couldn't or shouldn't, do something because of their gender?

There are a number of schools today that have worked to intentionally establish gender inclusive environments for their students. Fortunately, there is a growing knowledge base about the steps necessary to create conditions in which the gender diversity of every child is accepted, valued and nourished. Resources from Gender Spectrum can help you build your capacity for gender equity work.

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of our experience would have us teach them this resounding and fundamental fact: "Our lives are made up of the choices we make, no matter what they may be."

PRACTICE: When you observe a student engaging in behavior you know will not produce a bright future for them, question them about how they arrived at that choice. Ask them questions like: "How does this relate to your goals?" "Did you realize that this may be on your record forever?" "Have you ever considered that there will be no way to take that back?" "How is this in keeping with who you say you are?" "What does this represent to you?" "How long did it take you to decide on that?" "Where do you think this will take you?"

Key Practice 5 – Inspiration: Celebrate their motivations

INSIGHT: It could be said that inspiration is what makes our life worth living. When a person is inspired a switch gets turned on – and this happens whether we are young or old.

PRACTICE: Almost every educator has watched the wonder of a motivated student; however, looking to see how that motivation happened, and making a conscious choice to celebrate with a student about what has inspired them is another matter. In other words, you can become a cheerleader for your students, and commit not only to being happy with them, but also finding new ways for them to become motivated – and watch it pay off.

Key Practice 6 – Gifts: Acknowledge their strengths

INSIGHT: Every single person has a "gift" to give, and being able to make a contribution because of our gifts and/or talents is one of life's most precious boons and greatest joys.

PRACTICE: The first step in this practice is to decide to notice what your students gifts may be. In some cases, if you merely pay attention to them you will discern a student's strengths, but in other cases you may need to use certain "tools" such as StrengthsQuest or the Myers Briggs Type Indicator to help both you and your students discover what their strengths are. Either way, once you learn a student's strengths you can best

acknowledge their gifts by allowing them – which means supporting them – to "showcase" their strengths as a part of what they do at school.

Key Practice 7 – Dreams: Encourage their aspirations

INSIGHT: One of the most well-known speeches ever delivered was Dr. Martin Luther King's historically cited "I Have a Dream," and it is a shining example that the first step to positive and worthwhile change is us having the capacity to dream about what's possible.

PRACTICE: There is an activity that people have been employing for some time now that is meant to capture their aspirations and dreams called a "Vision Board." It is a simple enough idea that anybody can create one. All you have to do is compile several images and symbols that represent your ideals and visions for the future. Something like this can be done in school, either as a classroom activity or maybe as a schoolwide project. It's a wonderful way to encourage young people to think about their future, and claim one.

To end, I wish to say that most young people are at a school site approximately 30 hours per week. Aside from their home, you can easily realize that your students spend more time with educators like you than almost any place else. This, of course, is by design. Their education is the most important endeavor in their young lives, and what happens to them at school literally determines the nature and quality of their future. I truly hope you are inspired to begin working with the Secret Language today.

Resources

- StrengthsQuest online assessment, Gallup Education Practice: www.strengthsquest.com/home.aspx.
- Myers Briggs Type Indicator: www.myersbriggs.org/type-use-for-everyday-life/type-and-learning.

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