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My education plan: A teaching mindset

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My Education Plan:
A Teaching Mindset
University Honors

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This is a Study by: Joseph Van Zante

Titled: My Education Plan: A Teaching Mindset

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Contents

Contents	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Part One: Purpose and Responsibilities	3
Purpose	3
Responsibilities	5
Part Two: Diversity and Inclusion	9
Awareness	10
Learning Partnerships	14
Community Building	16
Part Three: Assessment and Student Empowerment	20
Student Empowerment	20
Assessment	23
Summative	24
Formative	25
Conclusion	29
References	31

The reason that I became a teacher was to help students achieve their full potential. Other people become teachers because they have a passion for working with young kids and seeing them grow. No matter the person and why they became a teacher, they still need to have a plan for how they want to teach. They have to decide what type of teacher they are going to be, how they are going to grade papers, and how much homework to assign. Then over the course of their teaching career they develop and change as a teacher. They learn new things and discover what they think is best for their classroom. When a newly graduated teacher starts their first job, they have a lot of decisions to make about what kind of teacher they want to be. If a teacher wants to act on their passion and make a difference in education, they are going to need a plan for how to teach.

In order to discuss my teaching mindset, an overarching theme of “Education is focused on the three sub themes of “Purpose and Responsibilities”, “Diversity and Inclusion”, and “Assessment and Student Empowerment”. The goal in this project is to develop a plan for some of the categories of education where the teacher has more flexibility. Every teacher develops teaching strategies about how to educate their students. This work is a cumulation of four years of study at an institution that has an exemplary teacher education program. It will also be valuable as a guide for continued professional growth throughout my career.

Part One, the “Purpose and Responsibilities” section of this paper, discusses a teacher’s intrinsic drive. Many teachers have a reason that they want to teach and it is central to their teaching style. In many ways this could be seen as a mission statement, a short sentence or two that explains the vision for someone's career. This next section takes the idea of a mission statement and applies it to the career of teaching. Having a purpose as a teacher is very important because every day in the classroom presents new challenges and an educator has to have something to guide them forward. Part One of this thesis will dive deeper into developing a mission statement and discussing the essence of my teaching mindset.

Part Two of this project is about the student and how to make them feel welcome

in the classroom. Diversity of students is one of the most overlooked parts of education. Each person that walks into the classroom has a different culture and if a teacher wants their students to thrive, they need to bring to the surface each of the student's unique backgrounds in order to help them learn. This section is the compilation of several different strategies for helping students feel like they belong in the classroom and have the ability to learn there. Diversity and inclusion are very important in a classroom because if a student doesn't feel comfortable in their environment then learning is not going to happen. Part Two contains many strategies for becoming someone that students trust to be their teacher and using that unique connection to support student learning.

Part Three discusses another major component of education, classroom policies. This section takes a look at two of the biggest classroom policies with which a teacher has flexibility, student behavior and assessment. The "Student Empowerment" section is a compilation of different ideas that will help an educator empower their students to make the right decisions. This shouldn't be confused with discipline because the strategies discussed don't involve disciplining students. The strategies empower students to take control of their learning space and behave in ways that strengthen their learning. The other key policy that will be discussed is how to assess students in order to enhance their learning. When used correctly assessments can further a student's education, but they can also detract from education as well. This section digs deeper into this idea and discusses strategies to make sure that students are getting the most out of assessment.

Part One: Purpose and Responsibilities

It is very important for an educator to know what their purpose is in their career. This section looks at this idea in regard to being a teacher as well as the responsibilities that teachers have in the classroom. There are many resources that have talked about the purpose of a teacher, this thesis discusses a few of those resources. Teaching is a hard job, and a good idea to stay focused is to create a mission statement to work towards. The second half of Part One takes the purpose that was created and uses it to influence a set of responsibilities for educators. The responsibilities section goes deeper into the idea of what it means to be a teacher and what a teacher is responsible for in regard to their students. These two sections go hand in hand to provide a starting point for developing a professional mindset.

Purpose

There have been conversations regarding education that go back decades. People have developed countless strategies to help students learn effectively and ensure success in their education. One of these discussions started 40 years ago with the address written by the National Commission for Excellence in Education called *A Nation at Risk* (1983). This is a lengthy report by the Commission that outlined the ways in which the American education system falls short, but also provided many ways that it can be improved. The National Commission stated, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre professional performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war" (1983, p.1). The Commission was stating that we have created for ourselves a mediocre education system and that something needed to be done about it. *A Nation at Risk* introduced the idea of a Learning Society in order to enhance our educational system. The goal of the Learning Society was for people to have a desire to learn and to not stop learning even when they leave school, because an educated society is a healthy one. Since *A Nation at Risk* was written there have been several other specific pieces of legislation passed that have helped enhance our education system as well. The Improving America's Schools

Act was signed in 1994. This act held districts more accountable for student achievement with specific focuses on bilingual students, and at-risk students. There were other notable acts passed, such as the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 which had a specific focus on the achievement gap. Additionally, The Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 laid out laws regarding testing of students in an attempt to make sure every student does well in school (Sass, 2020). Since *A Nation at Risk* made its call to improve the education system in America, changes have been made. Each of these additions had something in common with *A Nation at Risk*. This commonality was the discussion of trying to create an environment where students can succeed. Even though these policies are national, it is the responsibility of an educator to be prepared to utilize them to create a classroom where every student succeeds.

The Commission described the Learning Society as a system that stretches the minds of its people to their fullest capacity. The Commission stated, "Such a society has as a basic foundation, the idea that education is important not only because of what it contributes to one's career goals but also because of the value it adds to the general quality of life" (1983, p.5). The National Commission was promoting that education is important for the sake of being educated. Teachers should try to instill this idea in their students as well. If a teacher can spark passion in their students, then the students will have a drive to succeed and learn for the sake of gaining knowledge, which is the idea behind the Learning Society. A teacher who fosters a sense of learning community in the classroom can be the starting point for a student's educational journey. The key components of a Learning Society are very important in an educator's professional plan and it will be important for students to share these same goals.

Kohn (2003) in his essay, *What Does It Mean to Be Well-Educated?*, dove into the nature of education and what the true purpose of school should be. Kohn (2003) separated the purpose of education into two different schools of thought, economic worth or social worth, suggesting that education is either used to sustain society or to fuel the economy. These overlap in certain areas, but they are different ideas at their cores. This article posed some compelling arguments in relation to educating students

for the purpose of bettering the lives of the students as opposed to educating them because it's what is good for the economy. Kohn said:

Knowing a lot of stuff may seem harmless, albeit insufficient, but the problem is that efforts to shape schooling around this goal... have the effect of taking time away from more meaningful objectives, such as knowing how to think or deriving pleasure from doing so (2003, p.3).

This relates back to *A Nation at Risk* and the idea of what it means to live in a Learning Society. Teachers need to focus on teaching kids how to think and not just teaching them core curriculum. In a math classroom, achieving higher order thinking is crucial for students to understand the material. The memorization of formulas is not enough to develop a deep understanding of the content that is being taught. That is why the best way to help students learn is to foster the skill of critical thinking with the students in order for them to be better equipped for real life applications (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2014).

Combining the ideas of these two articles, a purpose was constructed for myself as a teacher. Teaching kids to solve problems and think critically about the material that they are working with is going to be the central theme of the class. My purpose as an educator is to teach my students how to think and foster a desire to learn within each of them. With this mission statement, an educator will be able to help all of their students achieve their fullest potential and empower them to have a desire to learn inside and outside of the classroom.

Responsibilities

The purpose of this section is to analyze more specifically the major responsibilities of an educator. Many would agree that teachers are held to a higher standard than other jobs because students are depending on teachers to help them learn. This means that the responsibilities of being a teacher must be more rigorous than other jobs as well. Having a list of goals to achieve in the classroom will help to guide an educator in the way that they teach and help them be the best teacher they can be.

History is very important when it comes to understanding the school system in the United States. Horace Mann was the first person to put in place a common school system in the US and his goal was, “The common school would be commonly supported, commonly attended and commonly controlled...” (Cremin Ed., 1970, p.3). Mann started the common school system with the idea that education would be universal across the board and everyone would learn the same core concepts. He truly believed that the common school had the potential to be one of the most effective forces of civilization. Horace Mann had a vision of an education system that worked across the nation to provide the youth of America with the tools necessary to not only survive but to thrive (Cremin Ed., 1970). Since then, our educational system has expanded to become the center of our society. It is so important that some people go to school for the first quarter of their lives, sometimes even more (Cremin Ed., 1970). This makes the role of the teacher very special and crucial to society. The first part of the responsibilities of a teacher is to make sure that their students receive not only a quality education, but the drive to continue that education throughout their lives. A common education system was put in place to strengthen the youth of this country and the teacher has a pivotal role in this system.

In Sonia Nieto’s paper series, *Teaching as a Political Work: Learning from Courageous and Caring Teachers*, she discussed several topics related to education that provided some insight into the responsibilities of a teacher. Nieto (2006) stated that teaching is very political and because of the political nature of the job, teachers undergo a lot of scrutiny. It is the responsibility of the teacher to make sure that each student equitably receives an education. Nieto (2006) talked about the concept of social justice in education, which was the idea that each person deserves equal economic, political and social rights. Currently, the topic of social justice in education is a discussion point, and Nieto’s article is still relevant to that discussion. Nieto outlined four components of social justice that represent the responsibilities of a teacher, which are listed below:

1. Challenge and confront the stereotypes that lead to inequality in the classroom.
2. Make sure that all students have the resources they need to thrive in a school setting.

3. Draw out the students' talents and strengths.
4. Create a learning environment that promotes critical thinking for the students (Nieto, 2006).

These four responsibilities that Nieto outlined in her discussion of social justice encompassed what a teacher should strive to do in the classroom. The first thing that a teacher needs to know about their students is if they don't feel comfortable in the classroom, they won't be able to engage in learning and this will affect their education. This is why the first point in the list above is to confront any stereotypes in the classroom. The science behind this idea is outlined by Hammond (2015) in *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*. The human brain is programmed to be alert in high threat scenarios so when you feel out of place, that becomes the only thing you can think about. When a student is in a classroom where they feel like they don't belong, they think about what will make them fit in better or not be noticed. This takes away from the student focusing on their education, and no student should have to go through school like that.

The second component of Nieto's (2006) outline was to make sure the students have exactly what they need to thrive in the school environment. A teacher is the person that the students will come to if they need resources such as notebooks or pencils, but emotional resources cannot be overlooked as well. It is the responsibility of an educator to take care of each one of the students and make sure they have the tools to succeed, whether that is emotional support or simply some school supplies. Being there for a student is part of the teacher's job. They are not only instructors, but resources and role models for students. This is a very important role for teachers and should not be taken lightly.

The third thing that a teacher is responsible for is drawing out the students' talents and strengths (Nieto, 2006). Some students flourish in a classroom environment and others need a teacher to help show them their full potential. Helping all students understand their potential is a key part of the teaching process. A well-prepared teacher will be able to notice the strengths of their students and draw them out in a learning environment to help the student flourish. This responsibility fits really well with the first

component of Nieto's responsibilities because in order to draw out the strengths of the students, they need to feel comfortable in the classroom.

The third component leads well into the fourth and final responsibility for a teacher, creating a learning environment where students can thrive (Nieto, 2006). When a student realizes their strengths, they will be able to utilize them in the classroom. If the teacher develops the classroom into a place where the students can thrive, then the student's true potential is unlocked. In the "Purpose" subsection of this thesis, the idea of a Learning Society was discussed. The fourth responsibility for a teacher supports this idea well because creating a learning environment where students can thrive is the beginning of a learning community. If a teacher can develop a community where students feel comfortable and are ready and willing to learn, then they have fulfilled one of their responsibilities as a teacher.

These four major responsibilities are a great guide for a teacher to use in order to stay focused on what teaching is really about. A passion for social justice will fuel the teacher to really care about their students and make an impact in their lives. In this section on responsibility, Horace Mann's ideas on common education are discussed in order to establish the role of the teacher in regard to the American Education System (Cremin Ed., 1970). Seeing the role that the teacher plays in the bigger system helps to lay the groundwork for the responsibilities that they hold. This leads nicely into a modern perspective of a teacher's responsibilities, provided by Nieto (2006). She has a system of four responsibilities that a teacher should fulfill in the classroom in order to help students reach their full potential. Using the four different components of social justice in the classroom will help fulfill the responsibilities that a teacher has to their students.

Part Two: Diversity and Inclusion

Part Two focuses on an educator's purpose and responsibilities and their application to interactions with students. The first component of Nieto's (2006) social justice curriculum had to do with combating stereotypes in the classroom in order to protect the students. Some teachers would agree that this is the hardest of the four points because it is something that they can't entirely control. A teacher must not only be a role model for diversity and inclusion but must also foster a sense of respect in their students as well. Zaretta Hammond (2015) in her book titled, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, outlined the best way to become a culturally responsive teacher and to truly reach all students in the classroom. Hammond (2015) shared four practice areas of culturally responsive teaching that will help each teacher in their journey. The first practice area was Awareness which focused on understanding the students in the classroom. Hammond (2015) discussed the achievement gap and what role that has in education. She then talked about the significance of an educator understanding the factors influencing the development of personal culture and how science plays a role in the learning process in regard to how the brain responds to situations. Educators also need to understand their own culture because it can improve their teaching. All of these different components are things that educators need to be aware of in the classroom to be a culturally responsive teacher. The "Awareness" section of this thesis focuses on unequal opportunity and the achievement gap in relation to Hammond's idea of awareness.

Hammond's (2015) second practice area was Learning Partnerships. The idea of learning partnerships focuses on a balance between caring for students while pushing them to become independent learners. Having a learning partnership with a student can be a great tool in helping them with their education. There are several tools that contribute to developing a learning partnership, such as rapport, alliances and being a warm demander. The third practice area was Information Processing. Understanding the science behind information processing and how the brain actually stores information is very important to an educator. If a teacher can utilize strategies that make it easier for

the brain to process information then the learning process itself just became more natural for the student (Hammond, 2015). Having the skill of understanding how information processing works can change the way that an educator teaches their class. The fourth and final practice area of a culturally responsive teacher was Community Building. When a teacher establishes a learning space where students feel comfortable and welcome, the students are more likely to learn the essential concepts. Hammond (2015) laid out several tools that can help a teacher build a community in their classroom where students feel welcome. Nieto (2006) also brought in this idea of community in her social justice outline discussed in Part One. These two ideas both agreed that a community where students can participate openly is key to the learning process.

Awareness

The first practice area of Hammond's (2015) culturally responsive teaching framework was Awareness. Developing awareness and knowledge of the self and others is key in the classroom if you want to be a culturally responsive teacher. There were several big key points that Hammond discussed in her book about being aware. Hammond (2015) discussed in depth the different levels of culture, surface, shallow, and deep. Surface culture is cultural things that can be seen such as clothing and food, where shallow culture is social unspoken rules between people. Deep culture is unconscious and often not acknowledged on a daily basis. Hammond (2015) also discussed two archetypes of culture that are important for a teacher to know. Individualism is a cultural mindset where each member of the group contributes to themselves and is centered around their own success. Collectivism is different from individualism because while people are still focused on their own wellbeing, they have the group's success as their main goal (Hammond, 2015).

Hammond reviewed information about how the brain processes information because this plays a big role in teaching as well. Another theme in Hammond's (2015) book was teachers understanding their own culture. The more that a person reads about culture and tries to understand it, the more they reveal about their own cultural lens (Hammond, 2015). Understanding personal triggers and beliefs in regard to culture

is a great way to become more culturally responsive in the classroom. One of the best ways to learn about your cultural lens is to research culture and read about it. This can provide a person with different perspectives that they can reflect on as well as giving them information on culture that they can apply to the classroom. The Awareness section focused on specific applications of exploring a professional's cultural lens more deeply regarding equitable opportunities, achievement gap, and sociopolitical debt.

Linda Darling-Hammond (1998), in the article, *Unequal Opportunity*, argued that opportunity was all that students need to achieve the same potential. As late as the 1960's schools were still segregated by race. When legal segregation ended, minority test scores improved immensely and approached white test averages (Darling-Hammond, 1998). During this time, white student scores remained the same which showed that segregation in the classroom had a negative impact on minority education. But as late as 20 years ago, two-thirds of minority students were still in schools where the majority population was their own color, which showed that there was still segregation in school systems (Darling-Hammond, 1998). This is important for educators to understand because when classrooms become integrated, test scores for minority children should also raise. Even though the ruling on Brown v Board declared most of the education laws that segregate white and minority people unconstitutional, there were still policies left over from before Brown v Board that were not changed (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Being able to notice these unfair societal policies will help educators advocate for their students because teachers can work on a classroom level to integrate their students.

One of the major effects from segregation that is still impacting students is the achievement gap. Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2006) discussed this idea in her article, *From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in the U.S.* The achievement gap is a separation in performance levels between white and minority students. People have analyzed this gap in many ways, attributing factors to it such as socioeconomic status, ability, and the motivation of students to complete their work (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Ladson-Billings had a different idea on the topic, she stated, "I want to argue that all-out focus on the 'achievement gap' moves us toward short-term

solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.4). The problem that she discussed can be summarized in two words: education debt. Historically, the educational opportunities for students that are culturally and linguistically diverse have been underfunded resulting in poor facilities, outdated books, and lack of access to higher education (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This all added up to a poor education for students. This country had not been kind to its minority population, and this was the first factor that tacked on to the education debt that is owed to the students below the achievement gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The African American population is not the only group that is being mistreated, the Native American and Hispanic populations of the U.S. have been just as malnourished when it comes to proper education, which also contributes to our so called “gap.”

The economic debt of the past few decades has played a major role in the education of students. The funding discrepancies between white schools and schools with high minority populations is simply unfair and is not a new characteristic of the education system (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This all adds to the education debt that manifests itself as a gap in academic scores. Ladson-Billings (2006) also brought up the idea of a sociopolitical debt, and this reflected the degree to which culturally diverse students are excluded from the civic process in schools. An example that Ladson-Billings (2006) used is that oftentimes PTA meetings were in the middle of the day, which is when most people with lower income jobs were working. In a school system with varying degrees of socioeconomic status, this was going to provide a skew towards the upper-class students in that school. Underrepresentation was a major problem when it came to minority students within schools because if their voices cannot be heard then their education will suffer (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This underrepresentation of minorities in schools then led to a curriculum that wasn’t based around what they needed, because their needs were never heard. Ladson-Billings (2006) suggested this country has a debt that needs to be paid, and that looking at the achievement gap is like taking a snapshot of one moment of a problem that is older than the current generation.

Being aware of this debt in the classroom is the first step towards correcting it. The shared goal of educators is the equitable education of each student in the

classroom and helping those students succeed outside of the classroom. Ladson-Billings (2006) discussed the fact that many students that came into the classroom would be carrying the weight of this education debt and the role of the educator was to notice and fix this. One of the ways to do this is to establish a community where students feel comfortable.

The first step towards having a classroom where students are comfortable is to be aware of the reasons that they could potentially not feel welcome. One of the most important things that affects every classroom is the potential of discrimination, either intentionally or unintentionally. Teachers need to be extremely aware of their own cultural lens as well as their students' implicit biases in the classroom (Hammond, 2015). Joyce King (1991) in the article *Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and the Miseducation of Teachers* identified the prevalence of injustice in society. King (1991) discussed a case study where students were interviewed about their opinions on racism and their responses were analyzed. The responses by students were overwhelmingly similar and were grouped into two different categories. Category one put an emphasis on slavery as the origin of racism and category two put an emphasis on the denial of equal opportunity for black people in America. King (1991) pointed out that both groups of explanations weren't blatantly racist, but they did have underlying assumptions that should be drawn into the light. An overwhelming majority of the explanations didn't recognize the structural inequality that was built into the social order. Even today there are a range of different perspectives about race in the school system. One thing that can still be seen is that these perspectives often continue to still have blind spots regarding inequities in and out of the classroom.

The first step towards being a culturally responsive teacher is to be aware of unequal opportunities in the classroom (Hammond, 2015). These systemic flaws are still having an impact on the lives of minority students and it is the job of the educator to combat those ideas in the classroom. By becoming aware of what is happening in the classroom, the professional can begin to establish learning partnerships with students and ultimately create a community where all students can thrive (Hammond, 2015).

Keeping in line with Nieto's (2006) checklist, understanding and eliminating dysconscious racism in the classroom is going to be a big step towards making sure all students feel welcome and comfortable. Racism is a difficult subject for people to talk about, especially educators, because children are very impressionable, and the teacher is in charge of controlling the environment that influences them. This is why it is so important for educators to continue to grow and learn on the subject. This knowledge of systemic racism will also help to complete point number two on Nieto's (2006) list, making sure students all have the equipment that they need. Professional educators need to be aware of the students in their classes who don't have as many resources as others. Educators have a role to support their students, especially when it comes to providing resources for students in need. A teacher needs to be aware of the injustices that exist in order to combat them and give all students a fair learning experience.

After diving deeper into the ideas of dysconscious racism and understanding the achievement debt, a newfound awareness has been developed regarding the cultural inequalities happening in the classroom. With awareness of these ideas, an educator can work to abolish them in the classroom. It is also important to note that awareness is about understanding the cultures of the different students in the classroom and simply taking interest in the lives of students. Additionally, as a teacher it is important to constantly develop knowledge of all the different cultures in the classroom to support the growth and learning of the students.

Learning Partnerships

Hammond (2015) discussed a second practice area, learning partnerships, which focused on being a companion to students and building a sense of trust with them. This idea will help new educators develop relationships with their students to make them feel welcome in the classroom. Hammond (2015) discussed the need for a different type of relationship with students. In the classroom, some teachers struggle with being able to reach the kids effectively but by using the learning partnership strategy, they can gain the students' trust and make an impact in their lives. Hammond stated, "This relationship is anchored in affirmation, mutual respect, and validation that breeds an unshakable belief that marginalized students not only can but will improve their school

achievement” (2015, p.74). There were essentially three big steps to the learning partnership, starting with building rapport. The next steps were to build up an alliance with the student, and finally gain cognitive insight into the learning of the child. This is a slow process but is definitely effective and has great payoffs (Hammond, 2015).

Building rapport was the first step Hammond (2015) identified toward achieving a learning partnership with students. Most students expect teachers to keep the relationship between teacher and student instructional. To build up a sense of trust, the educator needs to first unravel the belief that they are simply a teacher. The best way to do this is to use affirmation. Acknowledging their personhood and their accomplishments will help the students grow to like the teacher and want to be around them (Hammond, 2015). One of the ways that mistrust is built is when a student doesn't feel acknowledged or cared for. It is unproductive when a teacher doesn't understand the feelings of one of their students and won't attempt to empathize with them. This can cause the student to become defensive, and they won't open up to the educator or the idea of learning. To avoid this, the teacher must listen and understand what their students are telling them. One of the biggest pitfalls of teachers trying to build rapport is not understanding culture in the classroom (Hammond, 2015). If a teacher focuses on making a classroom setting that is inclusive of all their students, then the educator will be able to establish a learning partnership with each learner. Empathizing with the student and attempting to understand their lives is the best way to earn their trust and build rapport.

After a teacher has established a sense of rapport with their student, the next level is to develop an alliance with them in order to show them that you share a common goal. Some students will have all but given up on their education because they have failed before in school (Hammond, 2015). Some teachers view this as lack of motivation or a lack of investment in their education, but often the student has simply lost hope that they can change the course of their education. One of the main strategies offered by Hammond (2015) to help an educator establish an alliance is the warm demander technique. This tool will help to reach every student in the classroom, especially the ones that have lost faith in themselves.

Reaching students is the mark of a good educator and it can be achieved with a strategy that Hammond called being a warm demander. According to Hammond (2015), the term warm demander was originally coined by Judith Kleinfeld and was used to describe teachers that were especially good at reaching closed off and minority students. The warm demander was a teacher that was an ally to the student, someone that they trust (building rapport) and a person that could motivate them in a positive way. A warm demander was kind and open with their students but also expected a lot from them and pushed them to achieve their goals. The main focus for a warm demander was to prepare the student to guide their own educational journey and give them the tools that they need to succeed inside and outside of the classroom (Hammond, 2015).

All of this ties back into the idea of creating a learning environment where students will be motivated to learn and have the drive to do well in all their classes. After building the trust of your students and developing an alliance with them, the educator can begin to use the partnership to further the student's learning. The student will begin to trust the teacher, and the educator will guide them towards the success that they are capable of achieving.

Community Building

The fourth part of Culturally Responsive Teaching is community building. Setting a good tone in the classroom is one of the best things that a teacher can do to captivate their students and help them participate in class. The idea of community building relates back to the fourth point in Nieto's (2006) social justice plan, creating an environment where students can thrive. Building a community in the classroom uses this fourth point as a foundation because a healthy classroom environment is what will help a student succeed. Hammond (2015) identified several different components that were key to making a successful community in the classroom. Aesthetics, routines, and talk structures were three of the big ideas that should be the focus of an effective classroom.

The first thing students notice in a classroom would be what the classroom looks like, which is why decor is a very important part of how you set up your environment.

Hammond (2015) suggested making it personal but also inclusive of all cultures represented. There are some general rules to decoration that include having representation of the various cultures yet nothing distracting from the learning process. Don't have clutter laying around or things that will draw the student's attention. Also, making the decorations culturally appropriate for the school demographics well as decorating with relevant bulletin boards and students' art is a good idea (Hammond, 2015). Whatever the decorations are, make sure that they are going to assist in creating a comfortable environment for the students (Hammond, 2015). It also helps to decorate the room with personal things that the students can relate to, such as appropriate movie or band posters and personal mementos. These can help students see what the teacher is interested in and provide a great conversation topic for the teacher and student.

Another key element that Hammond (2015) discussed regarding community building was the idea of setting a pattern of routines and rituals to start the classroom off every period. Having a set schedule of events that you stick to can help quite a bit with attentiveness because the students know what is going to happen next in class and they are ready for it (Hammond, 2015). Routines are important in a mathematics classroom as any other discipline. The first thing a teacher can do is some sort of icebreaker to get the students settled into class. Discussion of relevant news is always a valuable way to start the class off. After that, some sort of brain teasing problem to work on can get the students warmed up and ready for the day (NCTM, 2014). This is something that will be done at the start of every class, in order to make sure that the students are ready to learn. It is important not to work right up to the bell of class, because students will begin to focus more on the bell and not on the instruction that you are teaching them (Hammond, 2015). This routine will be very beneficial to students and also the classroom routine.

The final topic to discuss in regard to the classroom community is the talk structure of the class. Talk structure is key when it comes to building a place where students feel that their voices can be heard. One of the biggest struggles in the classroom for a teacher is getting all the students to participate. Each student in the classroom is going to be varied in how much they participate so the educator needs to

have an equitable system that allows for equal participation from all students (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Arao and Clemens (2013) provided a strategy for equitable classroom engagement. The article *From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces* discussed making the change from labeling your classroom a safe space to a brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013). This concept of safe space comes from the idea that if the educator reassures all of their participants that the classroom is a safe place, they won't feel anxious about sharing feelings regarding sensitive issues. What Arao and Clemens asked is what exactly does the safe space paradigm do for protecting students and how can we improve upon this idea? What a case study found was that a safe space puts implicit restrictions on minority groups that don't allow them to truly speak out the way that they want. The culturally diverse kids don't get to set the precedent for what classroom conversation looks like, which can be troublesome if you are trying to include all students. An example of this is the common ground rule "Don't take things personally". This rule seems effective on the surface but what it actually does is provides the speaker with an immunity from what they are saying, shifting the blame onto the person that gets offended. This can be troublesome in a classroom because students should be accountable for what they say. The brave space concept doesn't protect the students from any sort of outside harm by claiming to be "safe" (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Instead, it tells the speaker and the listener that they need to be brave and go out of their comfort zone, into a classroom that may make them uncomfortable but is regulated.

This idea of a brave space will be a very valuable tool because quite often math classrooms have discussions, and it is important for all students to get involved in them. Bringing to light the differences between students will shift the classroom from a sheltered place to a learning environment that truly considers all of the different perspectives in the class. Math classrooms are known to spark some heated debates about procedures and definitions, so having a brave space discussion format will help create a positive learning environment.

Part Two of this thesis was dedicated entirely to designing an inclusive learning environment that supported the learning of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Hammond's (2015) structure of culturally responsive teaching was a framework that

outlined steps towards creating an equitable classroom. In the “Awareness” subsection, it is discussed that there are still gaps in the education of our students and these gaps were created by systemic flaws and cultural inequalities. By using this knowledge of the inequities in society, an educator can work to correct them in the classroom and make a great learning environment for their students. After the students feel comfortable in the classroom, the teacher can develop learning partnerships in order to gain their trust. Working with the students to build their relationships will increase their comfort levels and give them the motivation to learn. The final part of Hammond's structure was to foster a sense of community in the classroom that would connect the students to each other. When students feel they are a part of a community, educators can use this to encourage the students to work together. Developing a space where students can equitably work together is the end goal of every classroom. Hammond’s culturally responsive teaching framework is a healthy way to inspire students to reach their full potential.

Part Three: Assessment and Student Empowerment

Part Three is centered on assessment and student empowerment. Two important things that a teacher needs to establish before teaching a class is a policy for influencing positive student behavior and identifying assessment methods that will be used. The goals of restorative justice are discussed in regard to discipline in the classroom. Restorative practices provide a process that helps students learn from their mistakes instead of being punished. A classroom management system that incorporates the voices of students is an important element of a welcoming classroom environment. Part Three discusses assessment of student learning by focusing on summative and formative assessment practices. Discussed here are some misconceptions about assessment for students and what a teacher can do in order to accurately assess their students.

Student Empowerment

Teachers are responsible for creating a brave space for students to work together and learn from each other. Helping the students learn from their mistakes and empower them to make the right choices in social settings helps to build a positive classroom environment. There are various strategies available to educators to empower student behavior in the classroom. Hammond (2015) described approaches that support students becoming independent learners who are responsible for their own behavior and make appropriate choices. By using positive practices such as restorative justice, an educator can empower students to change their behavior and learn from what they did wrong.

There are discipline policies in some schools that negatively affect student behavior and are not productive towards student learning (Noguera, 2003). Noguera supported this claim regarding school discipline when he stated that disruptive children often find it difficult to focus on school activities because of some issues in their lives beyond the school day (Noguera, 2003). These issues can be anything from a restless

night of sleep to stress about a loved one. Understanding the lives and cultures of each child would be a first step to helping the student become more involved in their education, rather than punishing them for their behavior. According to Noguera (2003), school systems often developed procedures to remove the disruptive students so the students who aren't acting out can stay focused on learning. This idea operated on the assumption that students can be either good or bad. Noguera (2003) argued that this thought process is flawed and that students make the choice to behave the way they feel is appropriate. Research has shown, "Throughout the United States, schools most frequently punish students who have the greatest academic, social, economic, and emotional needs" (Johnson, Boyden, & Pittz, 2001). Teachers need to be a source of support for students who are struggling in the classroom and the environment of the classroom should be a place where students can feel relief from any outside stress they may have. Student empowerment is possible if an educator makes the choice to support their students positively.

Pop culture reflects the idea that some students can be viewed in a poor light. A band called Black Lips, wrote a song titled "Bad Kids". The lyrics discussed several examples of bad home life and bad classroom behavior. The chorus of this song stated, "We do these things because all we are is bad kids" (Black Lips, 2007). The song reflects the idea that many students who get caught in a cycle of bad behavior can often feel like they are nothing more than a bad kid (Johnson, Boyden, & Pittz, 2001). If teachers treat all the students who don't pay attention in class like the bad kids, then the students may begin to believe that they are. An alternate strategy for an educator would be to use a restorative justice approach that builds the students up and helps them learn from their mistakes.

Simson (2018) discussed how some of the discipline policies found in schools today are inequitable for students of color and contribute to the school to prison pipeline. One major idea that is an alternative to a disciplinary system would be restorative justice. Restorative justice was a technique that takes the emphasis off of disciplining the students and relies more on making amends and creating a positive space after an incident has happened. A traditional approach to discipline tried to

establish guilt and focused on the violation of rules in the classroom (Simson, 2018). The restorative justice approach to discipline focused on remorse and the violation of relationships, which in turn let the offender see the full impact of what they did (Simson, 2018). Discussing what happened between the students can often start a positive relationship that will end the conflict that is happening.

The process of restorative justice looks at the classroom as a community that works together. In a math classroom, students would have a small mathematical community that they will work with and use on a daily basis. If anything happens in the classroom that could disrupt the community, one option for the teacher would be to send the student out of the classroom to the office. This can detach students from their learning community and harm their progress in the class. With the restorative justice approach, the teacher would pull the student aside to ask what is wrong. If further action is needed to resolve the conflict, the students can meet with the teacher after class. Community building is a major part of being a culturally responsive teacher and should be kept in mind when handling student behavior. The restorative justice system allows the instructor to handle situations that arise in the classroom without detaching the student from their learning community (Simson, 2018). Cole Middle School in West Oakland, California, reported that when they implemented the restorative justice program in their school, suspensions dropped drastically and students started acting better in the classroom (Erb, Erb, 2018). In this school, restorative justice strategies worked in tandem with school policies to set a positive classroom environment for the students.

The restorative justice system was effective in the classroom for many reasons. The first reason was that it replicates skills that can be used in the workforce (Simson, 2018). When students graduate from high school and either get a job or move on to post-secondary education, the expectations are different because the student is required to be more independent. Restorative justice sets students up to be more responsible and aware of their actions, which gives them an advantage in the workforce. Learning to talk to peers about conflict and problems is a valuable skill that may be used anywhere at any time. Restorative justice was useful for a second reason,

because it addressed the students' actions directly and handled the problem (Simson, 2018). If two students get into a conflict, restorative justice puts the emphasis on discussing what happened and using that as a teaching moment. When students discuss the conflict between them, often they can come to an understanding and learn from the experience. The final benefit of this system was that it offered the student a chance to fix their mistakes (Erb, Erb, 2018). Even though they did something wrong, the student will take actions to fix what they did and make things right. This starts students on a path of positive behavior from a young age and provides them with skills to deal with conflict in future interactions. Restorative justice was a useful strategy for positively impacting student behavior.

Restorative practices are less about managing students' actions and more about working with students to establish proper behavior and take responsibility for their actions. These practices involve collaborating with students to establish classroom rules and norms. While methods such as rewards and consequences can be effective in managing a classroom, these approaches don't teach students to intrinsically control their behavior. Restorative justice is a system that works with students to create a better learning environment. Discipline doesn't teach students how to behave, it only shows them what not to do. By using the restorative justice system, the educator can instill values in the students that will help them to be aware of their actions in the classroom.

Assessment

The teacher preparation program at University of Northern Iowa included the requirement that future educators complete several courses focused on the assessment of student learning. There were classes about how to write the ideal test and classes that explored the various options of assessment. What this reflected on the young educators in the UNI teaching program was that there is a fine line between effective assessment and overwhelming future students. Educators should find a happy medium when it comes to assessment in order to further their student's learning.

This section is divided into two parts, summative and formative assessment. Formative assessment is a process that takes place over a period of time, incorporating

a range of data points. Summative assessment takes place at the end of a major section in the classroom curriculum and is used to assess what the student knows regarding key concepts in the respective learning segment. The “Summative” section will discuss tests and break down the pros and cons of a testing system. The “Formative” section will provide alternative assessments to support the student’s learning and prepare students to monitor their own learning progress.

Summative

Summative assessment is one of the main forms of assessment in math classrooms. A student receives a test back with a grade at the top, or a pop quiz is completed to assess their knowledge on a specific concept. While these methods do provide immediate feedback for the students and the teachers, sometimes these methods provide an incomplete view of the actual learning process (NCTM, 2014). Students may begin to focus more on getting good grades rather than learning the material (Kohn, 2015).

One type of summative assessment is teacher developed tests. After teaching a section of lesson material, teachers often select a test as a way to wrap up the section. A teacher usually assesses how well a student understood the material in the section in order to guide further learning experiences. According to Louis Volante (2004), tests may be a little more destructive than we think. “Time spent on test taking often overemphasizes basic skill subjects and neglects higher order thinking skills” (Herman 1992, p. 2). Students tend to study in repetitive manners that involve a lot of memorization and cramming, which is often forgotten after the test. Testing may raise their performance levels in the short term, but most often will not raise their learning levels (Volante, 2004). Therefore, teaching to the test does not support the long term learning development of students. Students get caught in a cycle of cramming until the next test and don’t ever truly learn the important concepts (Kohn, 2015). To support the acquisition of mathematical concepts, assessments should provide students the opportunity to demonstrate skill development through projects, presentations, group

work or written reflections. Students should be able to explain themselves and their work to demonstrate their learning.

Formative

Using systemic formative assessment in a learning environment provides data to inform the process of helping students learn. NCTM (2014) stated that schools who put their instruction on hold to study for a test often result in lower test scores from their students. A better option would be to continue with regular instruction and assess in different ways such as exit tickets, group projects and written feedback. These methods are a quick way to collect informal feedback on the progress a student is making. Assessment is an opportunity to further student learning, not to be an obstacle placed in the way of student learning (NCTM, 2014). In a classroom that supports student learning, the teacher would use a variety of formative assessments to gather information on student progress towards learning goals.

Formative assessments also take pressure off of students in the classroom. According to Kohn (2015), grades can distract students from their education. Students become caught up with grades and this can cause problems such as stress, anxiety, and ultimately not concentrating on learning. By using formative assessment strategies, an educator can gather information on students in ways that won't be stressful to them. Based upon a simple exit task, a teacher can learn about whether the student is understanding the concept and assess what they need to improve. Students won't be penalized for getting the problem wrong which means the educator can accurately see how the student would respond to the question. The teacher can take the results of this activity and use it in the next lesson to improve student learning. The assessment becomes a learning experience as well as removing pressure from the students. NCTM stated, "Assessment is a process that should help students become better judges of their own work, assist them in recognizing high-quality work when they produce it, and support them in using evidence to advance their own learning." (2014, p.5) Assessments are an opportunity for growth and for students to take pride in their learning accomplishments.

Homework is a type of formative assessment that is useful for gathering information on student learning as well as helping students practice their math skills. If homework is assigned correctly, then it can be very valuable to students. Several studies that were reviewed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) found that homework doesn't have a bad effect on students, as long as it is productive (2014). According to Cooper (2008), students need to do no more than 90 to 150 minutes of homework a night, and the homework needs to be relevant to their studies. Practice is very important when it comes to math, but too much homework can be a burden on students' time and motivation. Homework overall needs to be a small valuable assignment that allows the students in the classroom to display what they know regarding the math content learned in the previous class. The true purpose of homework is to formatively assess the student's understanding without putting too much emphasis on grading the assignment.

Sometimes teachers fall into a cycle of grading homework and assigning a new set of problems without actually reflecting upon the assignments. This can cause homework to become busy work for the students and the homework goes from being formative to being summative which decreases its value. Kathy Dryr (2014) stated, "I believe that if you're grading homework, it is not formative assessment. Formative assessment is not for grading." When point values are added to assignments, it becomes less about evaluating the students' work and more about giving them a grade for what they have done and may be categorized as summative assessment. Homework should be an opportunity for the students to practice their skills as well as a way for the teacher to evaluate their progress in the class. Assignments shouldn't be evaluated for the sole purpose of points, but rather for the purpose of providing meaningful feedback.

Formative assessment often provides a broader range of data to show a more accurate portrayal of how well a student is performing. Kohn (2015) discussed a system of monthly meetings with students in order to talk with them and catch up on how they are doing. Face-to-face interactions were often a great way to assess someone in this system. This way the teacher gathered information on each of their students from the

interactions and gave them a course grade based on what they decided the student deserved (Kohn, 2015). The purpose of these face-to-face meetings was to give the students some form of formative assessment where they talked to the teacher about their progress in the class and reflect on how they are doing. Each student would need to be prepared to authentically reflect on their progress based on data collected from the specific units and be equipped to participate in every class. This meeting system is not a replacement for a summative assessment but simply another form of formative assessment that can be used in the classroom to contribute to a student's education.

One final tool to use in a classroom is self-assessment. This can be done with a worksheet that the students fill out that asks questions regarding their opinions on how well they understand the content. Students will self-assess at the end of each unit in order to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses. This assessment format gives the students a chance to explain what grade they think they have earned, because students provide a valuable perspective to how they are doing in a class. Kohn (2015) discussed a system of grading in a classroom where the teacher and the student sit down at the end of the semester and discuss what they think the student has earned in the class. After the student has been self-assessing during the semester, they should have a solid grasp over their understanding of where they are in regard to their learning. Kohn (2015) said that after a talk with the teacher and reflection over the semester, the teacher and the student agree on a grade almost every time. Teachers take the time to watch the student and understand how they do math, combine this with the student's perspective of their learning and you have an accurate assessment of the student. If a teacher expects a student to be involved in their learning process, then it makes sense that they should be involved in the assessment process.

Assessment in the classroom is one of the things that can be a great tool for learning and when done correctly, can have some major benefits. Homework is a good example of this. When homework is assigned in reasonable amounts and used to influence student learning, it can be very helpful (Cooper, 2008). But if the homework isn't reflected upon and incorporated into the class, it becomes a menial task. Another great formative assessment tool is self-assessment. It gives the student a chance to

speak on behalf of themselves and reflect on the work they are doing. The teacher is the expert when it comes to grading the students but gathering input from the students and their learning processes can help provide the student with a much more accurate grade. If the teacher can successfully implement a system of self-assessment in the classroom, then the student begins the process of independent learning (Hammond, 2015).

Conclusion

I have wanted to be a teacher since the eighth grade and that is when I began a pursuit of a career in education. This passion has continued strong into my student teaching semester. This thesis is a culmination of many years of educational experience from the student's perspective as well as numerous clinical experiences that represent my unique teaching mindset. As an educator, I have learned that teaching is not an easy job, so having a mission statement to guide me and understanding my purpose for wanting to teach will be very important. Educators also need to know what their responsibilities are in the classroom in order to help students acquire skills to be independent learners and critical thinkers. If a teacher can fulfill each of their responsibilities to the students in their classroom, then the students will feel more empowered outside of the classroom as well.

An educator should also understand culture and inclusion in the classroom. Whether that is their own culture or the culture of their students, it is important to have an understanding of what is happening in the classroom. Awareness of the diversity represented in the learning community is very important. When a teacher has become more aware of the students in their class, they can work on developing learning partnerships with them. Through these learning partnerships, the teacher can empower the students to take control of their education and thrive in a learning space. Lastly, a teacher should work towards building a positive classroom environment for the students to learn. Having a brave space where students can feel comfortable making mistakes and sharing their opinion is vital to the learning process.

Another set of major ideas for a teacher to think about is the educator's plan for student empowerment and assessment. These two big ideas take some thinking about because they are major areas that affect student learning. If a teacher can build trust with their students and establish a system of restorative practices that create a healthy environment, then they will be loved by their students. In addition, they will be able to empower the students to take responsibility for the way that they behave

and learn, making them more independent in their own lives. Assessment works the same way. If a teacher has a perfect balance between formative and summative assessments, the student's learning will be strengthened. Helping the students use assessment as a learning tool and not just as a source of stress is key for a student to become an independent learner. Educators should make a plan for these two big ideas before entering a classroom, because they are both ideas that require a lot of thought.

Teachers learn every single day alongside their students on what to do and what not to do. There are things in this thesis that may become irrelevant or may get changed. There are certainly also things that aren't included yet. An educational mindset is something that grows and changes over the years as the teacher gains experience and mentorship from other teachers. The important part is that a teacher continues to learn and change because how can a teacher expect their students to learn if they don't try to as well? I have grown alongside this project, and I will continue to add to my teaching mindset as I begin my career as a teacher.

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