

## **Estee Nsek - Building Community by Celebrating Culture and Diversity Transcript**

- Hi, my name is Estee Nsek and today I want to talk to you about building community in your classroom through celebrating culture and diversity. I have been working in the field of education for well over 10 years. I've worked with various communities and I've seen challenging as well as not so challenging student groups. In my time in the classroom, I have discovered that my most effective experiences have been the ones where my students feel connected to what we are learning about. In this session, we are going to talk about ways you can create a community in your classroom that celebrates your students' cultures and identities. I will give you some concrete ways to help you strengthen your relationship with your students. No matter what grade or content you teach, what we discuss in this session will give you something to consider. There has been a lot of talk about culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy over these past few years. Studies have shown when it is implemented effectively, it has a great rate of success in closing the achievement gap amongst communities of marginalized students. There are many factors to consider when creating a culturally responsive classroom environment and today I want to discuss two of the four major pieces that I believe must be considered to be on your way to a classroom that is equitable for all students to learn. The four pieces are strong relationships, educational equity, understanding culture, and increased learning capacities. Today, I want us to take a deep dive into building strong relationships and briefly discuss increasing learning capacities. So often we hear you have to build relationships with your students, but before you can cultivate those relationships it takes doing some internal work if you want to be effective. We have to be willing to acknowledge our own personal biases and then we must release those biases in order to create a space for students that is welcoming and nurtures the whole child as opposed to excluding parts of who they are. Last year, there was an incident that took place in a California classroom that was far from culturally responsive. But I want us to take a look not from a place of judgment. While I do not condone or agree with what was done here, I like us to use it as a moment for reflection. One of the biggest ways our learners feel valued is when they see and hear their culture being displayed in the classroom. Culture is king. It is our responsibility as educators to have some level of understanding of who is in our classrooms and what their cultural background is. Am I saying you need to be experts in all the diverse cultures that are represented? Of course not. But what I am saying is we need to be aware and we need to honor and respect all cultures. Unfortunately, this teacher missed out on the opportunity to make a connection with her Native American students in this class and was not able to introduce a marginalized community to the rest of the class in a way that was uplifting and accepting of cultural differences. Her personal bias was very loud, and we never want our biases to take the forefront of any lesson. We also don't want our bias to hinder us from making beyond the surface connections with our students. Not saying all of your students are gonna invite you to their quinze or ask you to show up to their games, but you will get those kiddos along the way as you nurture a

classroom environment that recognizes and affirms their cultural identity. A good self check for anyone in education, to see where they fall on the The Conage Continuum of Educational Equity. Take a moment and consider where you are currently on this continuum. At the top of your handout there is a breakdown for each phase of the continuum. Read each section and circle the one that resonates with of you the most where you are right now. Of course the goal is to be at systemic transformation, but we know that will take some time. Please don't beat yourself up if you are still in the beginning stages. Another key component of culturally responsive teaching is increasing students' learning capacities. When I think of this piece of the culturally responsive puzzle, I think of teachers like Jaime Escalante. "Stand and Deliver" is a movie I show my students every year. When I think about those students in that East Los Angeles high school, I ask myself what was it about Mr. Escalante that was so different than the other teachers at that school? He had the same group of kids who had been there. He didn't bring a new group of students with a love for mathematics into his classroom. He shifted their thinking and challenged their minds. He believed in those students and increased their learning capacity. One of the most important people to believe in students, many times before they even believe in themselves, is their teacher. Assessing personal biases also ties into this piece of the puzzle, because you have to believe wholeheartedly that your students are capable of learning. There's a scene in the movie where teachers are in a meeting and there's a person in particular who is using the students' socioeconomic status as an excuse for why the students can't be taught. In that meeting, Mr. Escalante says something that touched my soul, and I hope it resonates with you today as well.

- You can't teach algorithms to illiterates. Look, these kids come to us with barely a seventh grade education. Now there isn't a teacher in this room who isn't doing everything he possibly can.

- I'm not. I could teach more.

- I'm sure Mr. Escalante has good intentions but he's only been here a few months.

- Students will rise to the level of expectations, Seniors Molina.

- He said, "Students will rise to the level of expectation given to them." If you don't believe your students can learn, you won't challenge them to think. If you are not challenging them to think, how are you developing their brains to increase their learning capacity? I highly recommend that movie if you've never seen it. How can you bring relevance to your lessons and routines that encourage your students in meaningful ways? While multicultural education is important and representation is extremely necessary, it does not equate to being culturally responsive. Making students aware of social injustices are again important and necessary, but do not equate to cultural responsiveness. This chart made by Zaretta Hammond helps us to see where the lines are drawn with these topics that are oftentimes spoken of interchangeably when they are not the same thing. The goal is to do more than celebrate diversity or bring

awareness to social injustices brought on by institutions, but to go a step further and build your students' learning capacity, helping students become independent learners. As teachers, we need to eventually shift to the facilitator role and let students do the heavy lifting. Building students' brain power is what will close the achievement gap we tend to see in marginalized populations. Plutarch said, "The mind is not a vessel that needs filling, but wood that needs igniting. How do we then ignite this wood in our students? How can we ignite student interest in learning? This is where understanding popular culture will help you make discussions relevant for students. For example, what connections can be made between street dance and call and response traditions in African culture? Are there any community partnerships that can be fostered to celebrate diverse cultures? During Black History Month, I was able to bring in a professional dancer to workshop with students and discuss topics of communication and making connection with popular dance moves of today with their African roots. On Dia de Los Muertos, we had a local artist come in and do sugar skull of face paintings for the kids. Have you considered doing a learning forum where students present what they have learned to leaders in the community and parents? Culture is deeper than ethnic background. There's a culture within the age group of as well. So gaining some awareness for what your students have interest in is important. How do you know what your students are interested in? Just ask them. A great way to keep students connected is to involve them in the creation of the class culture. This amplifies student voice and gives them the opportunity to share thoughts you may not otherwise find out. Surveying your students easily can happen using a Google Form and you can find out what students are feeling and thinking. Giving students projects centered around identity is another great way to understand who is in your room so you can build relationships with students. Once you have found out what their interests are, you can gauge what type of community partnerships you can establish that will enhance student learning. As you survey your students, please be sure to actually use the data from the surveys to drive your instruction and to direct the flow of the class. This way, students can see that their voices are in fact important to the community you are creating in your classroom. Let's briefly talk about how to make a survey on Google Forms. So making a Google Form is very easy. You just need to go to [you docs.google.com/forms](https://docs.google.com/forms) and you will be brought here. You can click Blank and it will open up a new form for you. And on this form, you can go ahead and title it Student Survey. And with this, you can begin to ask your students whatever questions you have. You can survey them about anything. Let's say... Ask.... Do you... And you can add yes, you can add no. If you want to make it a question they can't skip, you just go ahead and hit required and it will not let them submit without answering the question. You can go ahead and add another question. Here you can change the type of question it is. It could be a short response where they actually type in an answer, a paragraph where it gives them more room to write more text, or you can stick to multiple choice which you just saw me do. You can also do check boxes where they can select multiple answers for different things. Maybe you want to ask them or give students options of different things that they may be interested in. And you can just create and ask. Let's see. You can give options for a longer response. How has your experience been at school? And again, you can make it a required question so they can't skip, and whatever the questions are that you want to ask your students, you go ahead and you create as many questions as you

would like. Then you're gonna go ahead and get the link. And you can take this link. You can either email it to your students directly, collect emails from them, or you can, if you use Google Classroom, shorten the link and you can add the link to your Google Classroom for your students to utilize. So that is a very simple and easy way to get information from your students, find out what it is that they are interested in, and be able to gather some feedback from them. I want you to think about your current group of students. What do you know about their culture? Does your classroom validate and affirm their cultural identity? Or subconsciously are you telling them it doesn't matter because it's never spoken of or represented? If you want to create a sense of community in your class, you must be authentic and take a sincere interest in the whole child to help them build upon what skills they have so they can grow. Yes, they have to learn the standards. Yes, they have to learn the curriculum, but what ways can we make our classrooms more relevant to them where they feel seen and where they feel validated? I come from a faceless generation where the 18-inch weaves to flow down to the apple bottoms of a nice styled shorty with poppin' lips and thick hips. Our students come from a time where to get likes is to be loved and to unfollow is basically the ending of years of friendship. 15 seconds can make you famous or destroy your name before you have the opportunity to block them. We must adapt to where they are at or there will continue to be an achievement gap. We need to see them, all aspects of them, to reach them. We need to see them to teach them. My name is Estee Nsek. You can reach me at [contact@e.expression.com](mailto:contact@e.expression.com). Thank you for your time.