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# Understanding and Reaching Your Students

by Patricia A. Edwards

You may have made your initial decision to become a teacher because of your love of a particular discipline or your admiration for an inspiring role model. Although many teachers give these as reasons for the attraction of a career in education, most remain in the profession because they enjoy being with their students (Olsen, 2008, Zeichner, 2003).

## The Millennial Classroom

Today, you can expect a class to consist of a complex mixture of students with varying ability levels, ethnic backgrounds, family situations, maturity levels, and school experiences. You can also expect that, while these differences can create a rich experience for all of your students, they can also present many challenges throughout the year. According to Danridge (1998), “The heart of schooling beats in the classroom. It is the place where students and teachers interact.” If the way we teach is guided by the needs of developing students, it will re-shape not only our classroom practices but also our classroom environments. A classroom can be viewed as a kind of “aquarium,” containing the ideas, ethics, attitudes and life of all its inhabitants. Looking into the aquarium, we often believe that the reality of life within is obvious (Edwards, Pleasants & Franklin, 1999). What we sometimes fail to realize is that there can be many types of “fish” within an aquarium that are not equally equipped to survive in the environment provided for them. A teacher’s lack of ability to change the environment in which the students “swim,” can become problematic for the students, the teacher, and ultimately the parents (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999). To create a student-centered environment, a teacher first must understand the students, their families, and their learning and language backgrounds.

Although teachers may often wish for classes composed entirely of motivated students who are capable of performing well all the time, most teachers know that teaching is a challenging job with many unique frustrations. The rewards of teaching, however, are innumerable. When you look at your class roster, remind yourself that every one of your students deserves the best instruction you can deliver every day and develop confidence in your abilities to deliver that kind of instruction. A teacher’s confidence grows with understanding of the various environmental issues that appear in the classroom aquarium.

While teachers encounter struggling students on a daily basis, the reasons some students “get it,” while others seem completely “at sea” are among the great mysteries of teaching. While you may not always unravel the mystery, you can employ effective instructional approaches that can help you inspire and lead students to learn, especially those who struggle with increasingly demanding standards-based curriculum and content. The following key strategies can positively affect the success of struggling students.

## Build Student Motivation and Confidence

Among the many difficulties a teacher faces, the variety of reasons for students’ lack of motivation is one of the most challenging. Determining which cause applies to a given student can be a daunting task (Mendler, 2009). With a little patience, some conventional and unconventional thinking, and a lot of perseverance, however, a teacher can identify and implement ways to encourage and inspire students to become more motivated. Erica Belcher, *eHow* contributor, (2011) provides a list of instructions for motivating students.

- **Enhance access.** To help students feel welcome, create a classroom atmosphere that emphasizes effort instead of achievement. Encourage participation and risk-taking by showing students that the classroom is a safe place that honors all thinking, including thinking that leads to incorrect answers. *National Geographic Reach for Reading* offers several tools that help the teacher accomplish this. For example, every unit begins by activating prior knowledge about a topic (Share What You Know) and each day begins with an activity that suggests a bridge to accessing the content for the day (Warm-Up).
- **Obtain information.** Identify causes of the lack in motivation. Problems at home, at school, or both may distract the student’s attention. Psychological or mental issues may hinder the student’s ability to grasp the information or stay focused. To counteract these and other causes, the affective and metacognitive assessments provided for *Reach for Reading* may help you target specific topics or genres that will motivate reluctant readers.

- **Remain positive.** Show that you care for each student. To establish effective rapport with students, share your own struggles and mistakes as a student. Encourage students to share personal goals and plans for the future. As part of the Small Group Reading or Leveled Reading time *Reach for Reading* provides guidelines for student-teacher conferences that can help you demonstrate your interest in the student's goals and challenges.
- **Recognize results.** To help increase the student's self-esteem, reward positive behaviors instead of criticizing the student's efforts. Continue rewarding positive behaviors to encourage the student to repeat this behavior. In *Reach for Reading*, the Check and Reteach feature that accompanies every lesson for a specific learning objective suggests effective strategies for revisiting the concept; the Differentiate features that are provided for every day suggest effective alternative approaches to reach students who have learning or language differences.
- **Model embracing learning challenges.** Maintain high levels of energy and enthusiasm while presenting information. Teacher scripting in *Reach for Reading* models positive attitudes toward challenging concepts. To demonstrate that learning and building literacy is a lifelong process, share aloud your own thinking and learning challenges. Teach problem-solving skills and encourage the student to self-evaluate and self-monitor progress. In *Reach for Reading*, explicit steps in reading and writing lessons and Language Frames provide support for expressing ideas and concepts. To develop students' confidence, offer choices of activity such as those suggested for each Unit Project.

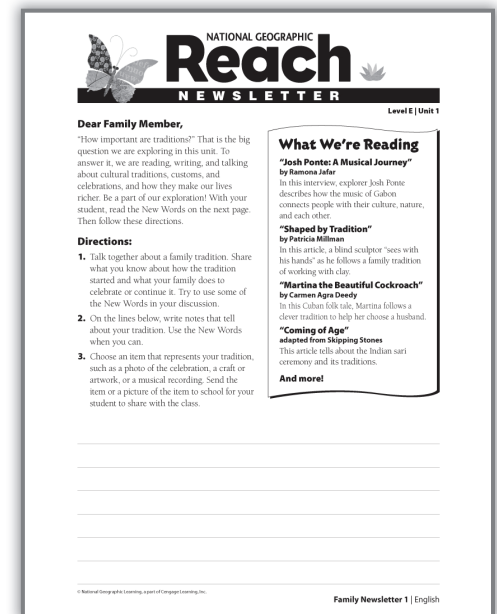
## Connect with Family and Community

Parents and families have very direct and lasting impacts on a student's learning and development of social competence. Research indicates that family engagement leads to student achievement. When parents are involved, students achieve more, exhibit more positive attitudes and behavior, and feel more comfortable in new settings (Edwards, McMillon & Turner, 2010; Edwards, 2009, Epstein, 2001).

Today, family structures are markedly different than they were even a decade ago. A student's principal caretakers may include grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other guardians. In this economy, many students' caretakers devote a great deal of time to working two jobs or seeking other income sources; they may both attend school and work full time; they may be single parents or raising their children with help from other family members (Edwards, 2009).

Regardless of the specific family structure, you and the family members have something in common; you both want the very best for the student. To be effective, however, you must understand the dynamics of various family structures before deciding how to approach a situation in interaction with family members. The following key strategies can help you develop effective family involvement with students' learning.

- **Communicate in a variety of ways.** Use the *Reach for Reading Family Newsletters* (available in 7 languages) to reach out to families and make connections between the home and the classroom at the start of each unit. Draw upon the knowledge and strengths of individual family members to communicate in relevant ways. For example, identify the family's preferred method of communication. Many millennial parents respond more quickly and effectively to email and text messages than to letters or phone calls.
- **Develop trust.** Consistent and frequent communication is the key to building trust among family members. Be dependable: initiate communication with family members, follow through, and reach out when you say you will. A positive response from the family is more likely when the members perceive that they can depend on the teacher to communicate regularly and consistently.
- **Focus on the student's education.** Each family is unique and each will react in its own way to feedback about the student. Many times families are struggling with a variety of life issues. Keep your conversations with family members focused on issues that affect the student's academic progress and suggest other resources for discussion of unrelated issues and concerns.
- **Collect parent stories.** According to Vandergrift & Greene (1992), "every parent has his or own story to tell." Coles (1989) further contends that "one's response to a story is just as revealing as the story itself." Encourage family members to select anecdotes and personal observations from their own individual consciousnesses to give teachers access to complicated social, emotional, and educational issues that can help to unravel for teachers the mysteries around their student's literacy learning (Edwards, Pleasants & Franklin, 1999).



- **Include a third party.** Sometimes a conversation may benefit from additional perspectives. Invite another teacher to a parent-teacher conference or a scheduled meeting with the parent to assist with effective communication. Encourage family members to bring with them a spouse, another caretaker, or someone else with pertinent information or insight.
- **Continue communication.** Communicate with the family routinely, whether things are going well or problems arise. This can play an important role in maintaining trust and helping motivate the student. Use the Strengths and Needs Summary provided with *Reach for Reading* to clarify the student's progress. Express appreciation as progress is made and encourage family members to continue their support of the student's efforts. To promote a continuing relationship with family members, thank them frequently for their participation in the student's education.

## Utilize Language and Cultural Differences

Today's classrooms are rich in diversity of language and cultural backgrounds as well as unique learning styles and abilities. To motivate and connect with the diverse learners in your classroom, you may need to utilize a variety of approaches. The Differentiate features provided for every day of instruction in *Reach for Reading* model a broad spectrum of specific lesson adaptations to meet the unique learning needs of students in these categories: English Learners, Below Level, Above Level, and Special Needs. Following are some more general approaches for working with students with specific cultural and learning needs.

### Tips for Working with African-American Students

While there are many strategies that are effective with all students, there are also some that are particularly successful in teaching African-American students (Lazar, Edwards & McMillon, 2012; Lewis, 2010, Gay, 2000, Ladson-Billing, 2000, 1994). Here are a few methods to try:

- **Respect culture.** Giving students opportunities to learn by integrating their cultures into the school culture is a good approach. Be attentive to and express genuine concern about all aspects of the student's life.
- **Teach rules.** Neither excuse nor scold students for not knowing rules of behavior and/or language. Teachers can help students become successful in the classroom by taking the time to teach rules. It is important to clarify expectations, provide support, and insist on compliance with the rules.
- **Support collaboration.** Challenging students to improve their reading skills and giving them the support they need to achieve academic success builds self-esteem along with cognitive development. Structuring your classroom to encourage working

together and sharing ideas also creates a cooperative atmosphere that supports each student in becoming a more confident learner.

- **Integrate culturally relevant literature.** Using culturally relevant literature is a key to a culturally relevant approach. African-American students need to read, write about, and discuss literature with which they are able to make text-to-self connections. Students benefit most from instruction that integrates culturally relevant materials with explicit strategy and concept instruction.
- **Build academic language.** For students who experience language problems that inhibit their academic language development, provide instruction in conventional English language patterns and support for the student's process of transition to mastery. The Language Frames in *Reach for Reading* provide models that teachers can use to teach conventional language patterns.

Individual and small group instruction, using a variety of materials and instructional strategies, can support academic vocabulary development. For instance, a key ingredient to word recognition is the student's awareness of language rhythm and patterns. Rap music, which developed in African-American culture, is a type of language play that can be used to enhance instruction. Traditional clap routines can also be used to develop pattern recognition. Word repetition activities facilitate the acquisition of new words. Rhyming can be used as a tool to help students make connections among words. In each unit, *Reach for Reading* provides vocabulary strategy lessons that develop such understandings as the similarities among words and use of what students know about one word to figure out meanings of similar or related words.

### Tips for Working with English Language Learners

The backgrounds, skills, and past experiences of English language learners may be very different from those of other students in your classroom. Students who come to the United States from a country in which they attended school regularly bring with them literacy skills and content knowledge in another language, some of which can be applied to English. Other students may come from situations in which there was little, if any, opportunity for consistent schooling (Li & Edwards, 2010; Cary, 2007; Freeman, Freeman & Mercuri, 2002; Freeman & Freeman, 2000). Students' home backgrounds may differ as well. Some students will come from very low-income families; the parents of some of these, however, may have been highly educated in their home countries, and may have once held professional positions. The resources and needs that individual students bring are therefore likely to vary widely.

The first step in determining an appropriate instructional approach for a given student is to discover details about the student's

background and current situation. As for any of your students, understanding the skills, needs, resources the student brings will help you to plan instructional goals and to build a classroom environment that will enhance the student's learning. *Reach for Reading* provides a series of monographs that explain perspectives, strategies, and suggestions to help you work with English learners. The presence of English language learners in your class can serve as a valuable resource, aid the learning process for all of your students, and improve language skills and cross-cultural understanding for the entire class.

While a wide variety of subject-specific strategies can be used to improve English learners' success, the following checklist offers proven strategies for any classroom (Nutta, Mokhtari & Strelbel, 2012; Herrell & Jordan, 2012). These strategies are integrated into *Reach for Reading* throughout the Teacher's Edition.

- **Use visual aids.** Visual aids give visual cues that may help clarify meaning and solidify learning. Visual aids should be clear and reproduced for English learners, whenever possible.
- **Use hands-on activities.** Where appropriate, hands-on activities help English learners connect with content concepts. Processes that can be experienced or observed make learning more concrete.
- **Provide sufficient wait time.** English learners may need additional time to formulate their answers in English. Some may still be translating their first language into English; others may need time to find the appropriate words. Pause after asking a question so that all students, including English proficient students, have time to formulate responses before answering.
- **Model spoken language.** Refrain from correcting your students' spoken language. Instead, model the proper usage in a restatement. For example, if a student says, "No understand," you might respond with, "Oh, you don't understand." If a student asks directly for correction, provide the correct language pattern slowly and clearly.
- **Provide lesson outlines.** Teacher-prepared outlines or notes can help English learners follow along in class. Alternately, you may ask another student to share notes with the English learner. You may also choose to provide information about the teaching plan and objectives to support English learners in following the lesson.
- **Teach pre-reading strategies.** Directly teach reading strategies that will enhance English learners' reading skills. Skimming, scanning, and even outlining chapters in the textbook are excellent pre-reading strategies that can help students preview material prior to reading. English learners can also benefit from other strategies, such as predicting chapter content from headings, creating vocabulary lists, writing responses, and summarizing. *Reach for Reading* suggests a pre-reading strategy for each major selection.
- **Respect the silent phase.** Most second language learners experience a silent phase as part of the learning process. Forcing a

student to speak may cause embarrassment or self-consciousness. While the intention may be to provide extra practice, this approach is more likely to be counterproductive.

In addition, it is important to support English learners in using their knowledge of their first languages to help develop understanding of English. For example, cognates with which students are familiar can help them understand and retain understanding of both academic and content area vocabulary. *Reach for Reading* provides lists of appropriate Spanish-language cognates for words taught in each unit.

### Differentiate

**EL English Learners**

**ISSUE** Students do not understand definitions.

**STRATEGY** Provide translations of the Key Words. Access **Family Newsletter 1** for translations in seven languages. Use cognates for Spanish speakers:

*musical/musical*  
*tradition/tradición*

See also "Enrich instruction with technology" section below.

## Tips for Working with Hispanic Students

Instruction must specifically address the unique needs of Hispanic students who come from a variety of cultures (Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000). Researchers suggest five research-based practices that, while valuable for most English learners, have been particularly successful for teaching Hispanic students (Padron, Waxman, & Rivera (2002; Waxman, Padrón, & Arnold, 2001). The practices described below are integrated into *Reach for Reading* in each unit.

- **Be culturally responsive.** For Hispanic students whose experiences and everyday living may not be parallel to typical experiences in the United States school environment, culturally-responsive teaching can make new subject matter and everyday lessons relevant and significant. It increases the transfer of school-taught knowledge to real-life situations and exposes students to knowledge about other individuals or cultural groups (Rivera & Zehler, 1991). This approach includes acknowledgment of the legitimacy of cultural and ethnic heritages, building bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences, use of strategies that connect various learning styles, and incorporation of multicultural information, resources, and materials (Gay, 2000).
- **Use cooperative learning.** With cooperative learning strategies, students work together to accomplish specific tasks and activities. This enables students to maximize and stimulate their own learning as well as that of others in the group (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Opportunities to discuss and defend their ideas help students reach understandings of sophisticated

concepts. This teaching practice is student-centered and creates interdependence among students and the teacher (Rivera & Zehler, 1991).

- **Conduct instructional conversations.** An instructional conversation is an extended discourse between the teacher and students in an area that has educational value as well as relevance for the students. These conversations can be initiated by students to develop their language and complex thinking skills and to guide them in their learning processes (Tharp et al., 2000). Opportunities for extended discourse satisfy an important principle of second language learning (Christian, 1995).
- **Use cognitively-guided instruction.** Cognitively-guided instruction emphasizes learning strategies that enhance students' metacognitive development. It focuses on the direct teaching and modeling of cognitive learning strategies and giving students opportunities to practice them. Through explicit instruction, students learn how to monitor their own learning by tapping various strategies to accelerate their acquisition of English or academic content (Waxman, Padrón, & Knight, 1991). One example of effective cognitively-guided instruction is reciprocal teaching, a procedure in which students are instructed in four specific reading comprehension-monitoring strategies: (1) summarizing, (2) self-questioning, (3) clarifying, and (4) predicting.
- **Enrich instruction with technology.** Technology-enriched instruction is student-centered, incorporating active student roles in their own learning. When using multi-media and other technology, the role of the teacher shifts from delivering knowledge to facilitating learning (Padrón & Waxman, 1999). Web-based picture libraries can promote students' comprehension in content-area classrooms (e.g., science and mathematics). Multi-media materials can facilitate auditory skill development by integrating visual presentations with sound and animation (Bermúdez & Palumbo, 1994). Digitized texts, such as *Reach for Reading's* Comprehension Coach, are also effective tools that allow students to request pronunciations and definitions for unfamiliar words, and ask questions. Technology-enriched instruction also helps students connect learning in the classroom to real-life situations, thereby creating a meaningful context for teaching and learning (Means & Olson, 1994). It allows students to connect classroom instruction that may be beyond their everyday experiences via rich and interactive media that may be more familiar to them.

## Tips for Working with Students with Special Needs

*Special needs* is a very broad term that encompasses a wide range of learning conditions. In years past, special needs students were segregated in separate classrooms or centers, where they had little contact with the general school population. This practice ended with

the passage of Public Law 94-142, which mandated that students be educated in the “least restrictive environment”—that is, that students with special needs be mainstreamed to the greatest possible extent (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001, Turnbull, Turnbull, Stowe, & Wilcox, 2000). Because of this law, students who have special needs are now frequently part of everyday classroom life. In today's classroom, you can expect to have many types of special needs students in your classes, from students who need only slight accommodations to help them learn to students with severe disabilities that require more complex adaptations. Your success in handling this challenge depends on your attitude. Along with having a positive attitude, the following general strategies can help you effectively address the unique learning issues of students with special needs (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001, Turnbull, Turnbull, Stowe, & Wilcox, 2000). Specific types of strategies are integrated into *Reach for Reading* Differentiate features throughout each unit.

- **Use the resources available to you.** Study students' permanent records in order to understand the instructional strategies that have worked well in past years. As soon as possible, contact the special education staff to whom the students in your class are assigned so that you can learn the specific strategies that will help them learn successfully. Some of the other adults who can help you learn about your students are parents, the school nurse, counselors, previous teachers, and the library staff.
- **Understand your students' limitations.** Although some teachers think students with disabilities that are not as obvious as others just need to try harder, trying very hard is not enough to create success for many of these students. Students who do not understand the work or who need extra help will not be successful, no matter how much effort they put forth. To support these students' learning, the teacher must utilize a variety of teaching approaches and present content material in a variety of ways that help the students overcome their limitations.
- **Be proactive.** Make sure you understand each student's specific disabilities and the required accommodations. Your special education resource staff can help you identify students' specific limitations and strategies that can help them succeed.
- **Give your best effort.** Work closely with the special education staff at your school to help you modify your instruction to meet the needs of every learner in your class. Give this special instruction your best effort and your special needs students will gain more than many would expect.
- **Accept responsibility.** Continue to educate yourself about how to work well with your special needs students by reading professional literature, researching relevant Web sites, attending workshops, observing special education staff as they work with students, and applying recommendations of your special education staff.

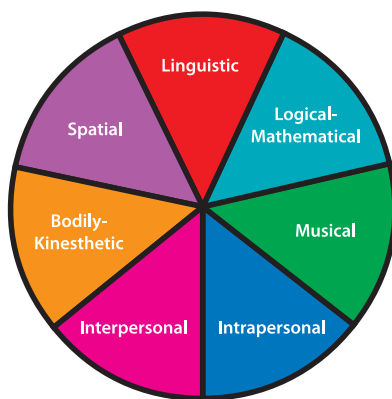
- **Be sensitive to and anticipate students’ needs.** Seat students with special needs where they can see and hear you without distractions. Provide appropriate levels of exposure to noise and activity levels of the classroom. You may need to shield some special needs students from stimulation; for others, you may need to provide more stimulation, such as frequent redirection or task assignments.
- **Discuss students’ concerns with them.** Make it easy for your special needs students to communicate with you. Even young students can often tell you a great deal about how they learn best and what activities help them master the material.

## Tips for Working with Various Learning Styles

There is no right or wrong way to learn; a variety of methods work in unique ways for a variety of learners. The key to better learning is to evaluate each student’s learning process and use techniques that will contribute most to the student’s learning.

Howard Gardner’s work in the realm of multiple intelligences has had a profound impact on thinking and practice in education (Gardner, 1999, 1993, 1983). Gardner identified seven distinct intelligences. According to Gardner’s theory, “we are all able to know the world through language, logical-mathematical analysis, spatial representation, musical thinking, and the use of the body to solve problems or to make things, an understanding of other individuals, and an understanding of ourselves. Where individuals differ is in the strength of these intelligences — the so-called profile of intelligences — and in the ways in which such intelligences are invoked and combined to carry out different tasks, solve diverse problems, and progress in various domains.”

Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences ▶



Understanding learning styles can help you create more inclusive classrooms where everyone has a chance to succeed. For instance, a student who prefers to listen quietly or a visual learner who is uncomfortable with speaking can be at a disadvantage when a portion of a student’s progress and/or grade are based on oral participation in class. Effective teachers understand this and use a variety of methods to promote and evaluate student learning. Following are some basic tips about how to teach effectively in a diverse learning environment (Nieto, 2010a; 2010b; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

- **Recognize individuality.** Having a “color-blind” classroom is neither possible nor beneficial. Trying to do so inevitably privileges a particular perspective (usually that of the teacher) and fails to recognize the experiences and needs of the learners. It is preferable to use strategies that recognize and capitalize on diversity.
- **Appreciate individuality.** While generalizations sensitize us to important attributes students share, it is essential to recognize and celebrate that each individual student has unique values, perspectives, experiences, and needs. An effective teacher appreciates the unique contributions each learning style has to offer and expresses that appreciation to students.
- **Acknowledge one’s own individuality.** Being aware of our own individualities allows us to develop a more inclusive teaching style that can benefit all our students.

Every unit of *Reach for Reading* concludes with a project about the unit’s Big Question (Share Your Ideas) that honors various learning styles by offering a variety of means for students to use to express their ideas.



## Tips for Working with Students Who Change Schools Mid-Year

Since families move from school to school more frequently today than in the past, students often are dealing with more stress within the home and the school community. When a student suddenly leaves with no explanation, other students may become frightened. Students who leave a current school experience anxiety and other stresses as well. Although you have little control over a student's move, there is much you can do to help all students in a class cope with the change. (Edwards, 2009, Popp, 2004). Below are some suggestions for addressing this situation:

- **Prepare for the change.** Before a student leaves, encourage classmates who have moved to share their experiences and explain their feelings about entering a new school.
- **Address the feelings.** If you know in advance that a student is moving, ask the student to share questions about the new school. You can then request answers from the receiving school and share the answers with the student.
- **Ease the transition.** You can send letters from a student's current classmates to the student's new school to greet the student upon arrival. You can also send a profile sheet about the transitioning student to the receiving teacher. This allows the new teacher to make the initial greeting meaningful and personal for the student.

When a new student enters your classroom, encourage the student to ask questions and invite other students to help answer the questions. Assign an appropriate classmate "buddy" to ease the new student's feelings of isolation and confusion.

## Conclusion

Teachers have responsibilities to ensure that all their students have equal opportunities to achieve to the best of their abilities. If instruction reflects the cultural and linguistic practices and values of only one group of students, then the other students are denied equal opportunities to learn. Daily contact with students provides teachers with unique opportunities to either further the status quo or make a difference that will impact not only the achievement but also the lives of their students. Indeed, teachers must recognize their "power" and use it wisely in teaching other people's children (Delpit, 1995;1988). Although the curriculum may be dictated by the school system, teachers teach it. Where the curriculum falls short in addressing the needs of all students, teachers must provide bridges; when a system fails to honor cultural and linguistic differences, teachers must demonstrate understanding and support. *Reach for Reading* provides materials and examples that engage in practices and demonstrate values that include, rather than exclude, students from a variety of backgrounds. By doing so, *Reach for Reading* enables teachers to fulfill their responsibilities to all their students.

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