





INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

CELEBRATE

INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

By Laura Bengs

As an immigrant from the Dominican Republic and a person of color, Luis Pérez learned to navigate the United States educational system as a young multilingual learner. Then, when he was diagnosed with a visual impairment at the age of 29, after a series of car accidents, Pérez began to experience life as a person with a disability.

His story may be unique, but his situation is not uncommon. Multilingual learners, like Pérez, often carry multiple identities beyond “English learner.”

There are an estimated 4.9 million children in public schools in the U.S. learning the English language (Mitchell, 2020). But like Pérez, being multilingual is not all that defines these students. “We are not little checkboxes,” said Pérez, who is a leader on the postsecondary workforce development group at CAST. “We’re more like Venn diagrams.” He also said that an individual’s sense of identity can change. “What’s important to us at one point in our lives may not be as important at another.”

Celebrate intersectional identities.

Race, class, sexual orientation, disability, trauma and other life experiences influence a student's sense of identity and experience in the classroom, Pérez said. Our intersectional identities are critical pieces of who we are and how we learn. And they are assets to learning that should be celebrated.

“How much richer would education be if we recognized that every learner is unique and has a complex identity that we should celebrate and incorporate into learning?” he asked.

The difficulty is, traditional curriculum places a heavy focus on competencies — versus centering learners — and that creates barriers for diverse groups of students in classrooms today. According to Amanda Bastoni, educational research scientist at CAST, when learners aren't the focus, even engaged students will struggle. A “defiant,” “avoidant” or “disinterested” student may be facing a systemic barrier that limits their access to the curriculum and learning experience.

Consider, instead, how variable and flexible learning environments are inclusive of all identities. At CAST, which is a non-profit education research and development organization, Bastoni and Pérez work together to eliminate curricular barriers, supporting educators as they create classrooms that support all learners. Using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) — an approach CAST (2023) pioneered almost 40 years ago — educators acknowledge the variability that exists in an environment and create flexible solutions that acknowledge and celebrate learners' differences.

Center the students in their learning.

UDL does not accept curriculum as a given. “There is no one checking that you've taught every student each competency in this way,” Bastoni said. “You might think curriculum is the most important thing in the room, but I would suggest that the learner is the most important thing in the room.”

And Pérez said the goal of UDL is to create expert learners that are able to be motivated self-advocates. “In reality, it should be a partnership between the teacher and the learner to co-design the learning environment,” Pérez said. “It's a lot more proactive — rather than retrofitting the curriculum.”

Rely on three principles to design flexible learning environments that empower and motivate learners to grow.

1. REPRESENTATION

Creating variability in how concepts are shared with students

2. ACTION AND EXPRESSION

Including multiple options for students to express knowledge

3. ENGAGEMENT

Offering choice to spark interests and autonomy

Bastoni recognized that teaching is a hard job that requires a lot of work — especially when trying to meet the needs of a variety of learners — but Pérez said, “in a great UDL environment, there’s not more work for the teacher.” He said the framework highlights the good work educators are already doing and makes the learning experience design more intentional. They went on to discuss the UDL strategies that foster inclusive environments, embracing and celebrating unique identities.

Create a sense of belonging.

Students can often feel isolated by their unique differences, thinking, “I’m the only one like this.” And this can cause students to withdraw in the classroom. “It’s very challenging to be the only one,” Bastoni said. “I think the most important thing teachers can do is make sure all students feel a sense of belonging.

“Create environments where people can feel like all of them — the whole human being — belongs there and is important.” Further, she said that the National Science Foundation is engaged in studies that examine belonging as a factor influencing whether people choose a certain career, thus indicating its importance in the learning environment.

Design authentic, engaging learning experiences.

“If you’re engaged, you’re going to find ways around barriers,” Pérez said. One way to engage students is by designing assignments that allow them to share parts of themselves.

Have photography students photograph their favorite food and share why it’s their favorite. Have woodworking students

document the trees and wood types around their homes. No matter the discipline, weave in opportunities for students to connect authentically with their environments. “You’ll be surprised by what they will share,” Bastoni said.

Model resiliency & representation.

Diverse students must be represented in career development activities. Show them examples of diverse professionals who have had success in different areas. Pérez recommended bringing in guest speakers that represent different identities and, even if you can’t find a guest speaker, he said, there is an endless supply of virtual guest speakers on the internet.

Find a video on YouTube and frame the viewing with discussion prompts. Ask students to observe elements of the presentation that connect with their own lived experiences, and discuss afterwards. Bastoni encouraged educators not to overthink this practice. Even something as simple as putting up representative visuals can be a good start.

Make good use of accessible resources.

Today, students possess incredibly powerful resources at their fingertips and in their pockets. Pérez recommended that educators help students learn how to access curricula using assistive technology applications and devices. Text-to-speech apps, customizable visual displays, timers to help with focus and many other accessibility tools can help meet students’ individual learning needs.

Pérez also recommended thinking creatively and flexibly about how students create and submit information, which can attend to both accessibility and engagement.

Be vulnerable.

“Part of creating an environment where people feel like they can belong is that teachers can share a little bit of themselves, too,” Pérez said. Sharing parts of your own learning journey — including challenges, failures and successes — models resiliency and shows students how to overcome obstacles.

Open dialogue between students, their families and the school.

Pérez said it's easy to assume that when educators are not hearing from students' families, it's because they're disengaged. The reality is that there are barriers to engagement. Some work two jobs, others may not speak the language. Some may have a transportation barrier. There could be a number of reasons. But family members are critical partners in learning, Pérez said. Seek to remove barriers that will help families participate in supporting and reinforcing their children's education. (Can you host an event online or post information online? Can you host events at different times?)

Addressing some barriers for students and their families will require support and involvement from other professionals in the building, Pérez said. So don't be afraid to reach out to others. Counselors can help arrange career exploration opportunities. A student suffering from a trauma or experiencing homelessness may need assistance from a social worker.

If you're feeling limited by school policy or pressured to show statistical success of your program, having open conversations with administrators about how best to meet the needs of students could be productive. Clearly defining prerequisites and enrollment criteria (or the absence of perceived prerequisites — like a certain level of language proficiency) can help open the door for students that may be facing barriers to entry.

And while the initial goal of these strategies may be to address the needs of multilingual learners, Pérez said that these strategies can help educators address the needs of all of their students and make them better educators. "When you have to consider there are different ways that people take in information, and different ways people show understanding, I think you're going to be a more creative teacher, and that's going to benefit everybody."

The National Education Association (2020) predicts that by 2025, as many as 1 in 4 children in classrooms across the U.S. will be multilingual.

Laura Bengs is a former educator and freelance writer in the Midwest. She covers education, the arts, parenting, food and beverage, and culture.

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