

Reciprocal Learning Environment

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Proximal Level 2: Galvanize a positive, culturally and linguistically responsive, reciprocal learning environment.

Proximal Lever 2 Reciprocal Learning Environment

Strategies

1. Nurture relationships
2. Practice reciprocity
3. Leverage cultural responsiveness
- 4. Engage students with learning**

We concluded in Part 2 that for too many children, poverty depresses their verbal facility and eagerness to learn. Schools and teachers have tried many ways to improve verbal skills and boost the motivation to learn for children living in environments that can dampen both. Despite many successes, and despite the many children who defy the odds, gaps in performance remain for kids from chronic poverty. In the previous section, we tackled this problem head-on, pinpointing fourth grade as a time of difficulty for students who come to school with

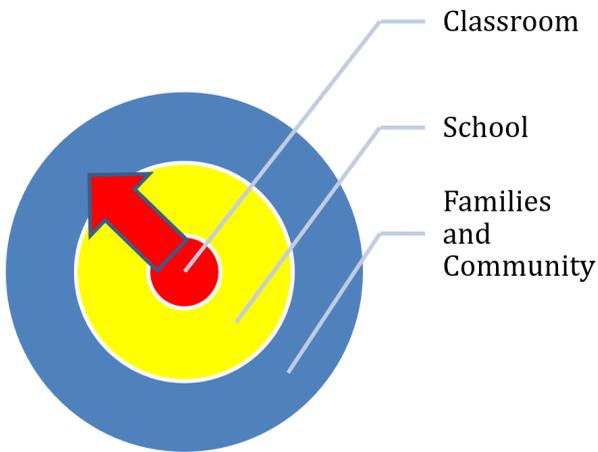
lagging verbal skills and experience a “fourth grade slump” because of the increased demands on their reading comprehension in all subjects. Without the learning skills to meet those demands, their eagerness to learn slackens, and they fall further behind. We recommended that the fourth grade teacher increase students’ engagement with rich content while equipping them with learning strategies to build their competence and confidence as learners.

There is more to the problem of how best to educate children from poverty than enriching their curriculum and bolstering their learning skills, however. Poverty, with its stresses on families, also “adversely affects social comprehension and regulation of emotions” (Budge & Parrett, 2013, p. 38); disrupts self-regulatory processes that are important to children’s coping strategies (Evans & Kim, 2012); exposes children to social dysfunctions and personality disorders that are escalated by peer rejection, lack of friends, and exposure to violence (Finkelhor et al., 2012); and engenders problematic patterns of behavior—acting out, impulsivity, gaps in politeness and social graces, inappropriate emotional responses, less empathy for others (Jensen, 2013a; 2013b).

These personal and relational consequences of impoverished environments obviously impact a student’s learning and intermingle with depressed verbal facility and dampened

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motivation, holding many children back. As part of the solution we recommend, this lever begins right in the classroom and extends out in concentric circles of influence, to the school and the home.



A reciprocal learning environment begins in the classroom and radiates out. Putting the onus for initiating and growing a reciprocal learning environment on the individual classroom teacher does not mean that the process can't be fostered by a team of teachers or that the principal can't play a big role in supporting teachers and teams. But a reciprocal learning environment need not wait for that infrastructure of collegial

engagement to be launched. In fact, the individual teacher may be both the champion for her students in creating a reciprocal learning environment and the leader for her colleagues in spreading the idea through the school.

To a Fifth Grade Teacher

Yes, we all know the statistic. In their first 18 years of life, kids spend, what, 80% of their time in the care of their parents, not their teachers? The statistic is cited to make the point that outside influences impact students greatly, even compared to what they learn in school. But then, a big chunk of out-of-school time is spent sleeping, and a tiny fraction is devoted to flash cards, Sunday School, and family reading circles. The thing is, that tiny fraction of time spent in positive family activities, including simple conversation, really makes a difference.

Many years ago (1983), a savvy young scholar by the name of Reginald Clark wrote a book called *Family Life and School Achievement: Why Poor Black Children Succeed or Fail*. What he discovered in his research then is just as true today. Clark said that the family has a huge impact on the school success of poor children, but not the structural factors that he said get too much attention—working mothers, broken homes, family income, racial or ethnic background, poorly educated parents. What matters is what he called the family culture, the relationships among the people, the routines, the whole of family life. We can describe an ideal home environment, and we know what it can accomplish. We also know what a good school can accomplish, and especially a good teacher. How would

we describe an ideal classroom environment?

“Learning environment” is a fitting term to describe a classroom, a school, or even a youngster’s larger context, certainly including the home. With online access to the world, the definition of learning environment is vastly enlarged. Let’s start with the classroom as the environment we want to describe in its ideal form, and we will call it a “reciprocal learning environment.” We will later work our way outward from the classroom to encompass, by extension, more of the world, virtual or real, over which the teacher holds sway and into which a student’s adventure in learning can proceed. What does it mean that the learning environment, beginning with a classroom, is “reciprocal”? Why is reciprocal a good thing, especially for kids who arrive at school from impoverished material circumstances?

What poverty may have subtracted from a child’s environment, the reciprocal learning classroom (and its extension to the school and home) adds back. Experiences, boundaries, positive role models, conversation, caring attention can be shortchanged in a family subject to the chronic stress of financial fragility. This is what a reciprocal learning environment helps replenish—experiences, boundaries, positive role models, conversation, caring attention. These are important ingredients for fostering a confident, competent, verbally adept learner. They are not a substitute for hard work toward acquisition of knowledge and skill—learning is the central word in “reciprocal learning environment,” but they engender more confident and competent learners.

Introducing David Early in his Fifth Grade Year

David is a fifth-grader. A very responsible fifth-grader. He sets his own alarm clock to jolt him from sleep in the morning so he doesn’t miss the school bus. His older sisters ride an earlier bus, and they are immersed in their teenage lives and little interested in David. At the buzz of the alarm, David jumps out of bed and pulls on jeans and a superhero shirt. He laces up his shoes, brushes his teeth, and pours a bowl of Cheerios. With his last bite of cereal, he hears the bus’s brakes squeal as the bus stops in front of the house. David’s house is much like the houses that surround it in this very small town where every backyard opens to a farmer’s field, and the gravelly street winds by the front of each little house. Most of David’s house is unpainted on the outside, the original paint long ago faded and chipped away. But the front of the house is white, painted just a year ago by David’s mother’s boyfriend at the time, the one they called Big Jim.

David sprints through the front room, past his mother stretched out on the couch, one leg dangling off the side, the TV still pulsating with background sound since Momma collapsed here when she came home from work—graveyard shift. David hop-skips through the tiny yard to the bus, jumps onto the first step, passes through the split door that

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Charlie, the driver, has opened. Two neighbor girls, a year behind David in school but nearly a head taller—David is slight of frame, wiry—mount the bus steps right behind him. They crowd forward, nudging David to step into the aisle before Charlie eases off the brake and the bus squeaks and rolls.

“Get to your seats, and get there quick,” Charlie snaps at David and the two girls huddling close behind him. David hurries to row seven, the seat by the window. Slumping, he can barely see over the seat in front of him. The two girls take the seat behind him. They giggle. “Enough of your noise,” Charlie barks, “I’m not putting up with this again today.” Teddy, an eighth-grader on the other side of the aisle, laughs out loud, setting Charlie into a higher orbit of fury. “Laughing at me, boy?” Charlie is looking up into the big, rectangular mirror above his head, and his eyes lock onto Teddy. “You ain’t no smarter than your brother,” Charlie yells. “Both wise guys. Just try me and see what you get. You know what happened to your brother and his smart mouth.” Teddy bites his lip and looks out his window. David shrinks further into his seat.

The school bus bounces on, stopping, onboarding two or three kids with each stop, same squeaking brakes, and same hostile commands from Charlie. The noise level escalates with each set of new passengers—giggles, screams, threats, taunts—and always interlaced with Charlie’s sour howls, which at their peak include mild profanities. At last, the bus arrives at school—Phillip Warrington Elementary School. David crowds into the aisle, sandwiched between taller kids, and duck walks until he reaches the door, takes the steps two-at-a-time, and hits the ground running. He weaves through clusters of kids that fill the school yard, each clump of three, four, six boys or girls, and occasionally boys and girls, coalesces each morning, picking up from where they left off the previous day, before their brief social encounter is interrupted by the bell, which has more the sound of a monotone siren than a church chime.

The hallways are like the aisle on the bus—crowded, loud, big kids shoving smaller kids. Instead of Charlie’s voice, there is the principal’s scratchy, staccato blurts over the speakers hung overhead. The words between the crackling sounds are saying something about the six boys who didn’t show up for detention after school. David navigates the hallways the best he can, and, at last, ducks into Mr. Jepson’s fifth grade classroom.

We will pause the story here, but return later to describe Mr. Jepson’s classroom, a haven of reciprocal learning. But first, we must look ahead to the end of David’s school day, which is very much like his morning in reverse, the tape running backwards. Crowded, noisy hallway, crowded noisy schoolyard, crowded, noisy bus. Charlie’s harsh admonitions. A bouncy ride home. Momma on the couch, starting to stir now, soap opera has replaced the morning show, sisters nowhere to be found—up to mischief somewhere

in the neighborhood. David shuts the door to his room and fires up his Game Boy. Tomorrow will be another day, very much like this one.

Now Back to Mr. Jepson's Classroom

The heart of each school day, David spends in Mr. Jepson's classroom. He is happy to be there, and with some trepidation faces the times he leaves for lunch, recess, and PE. Mr. Jepson's isn't a silent classroom; it often buzzes with activity, like a beehive in summer. But this is soft, joyful sound, not rising tides of silliness curtailed at intervals by angry shouts like the bus, or raucous rumbling punctuated with shrieks like the schoolyard. It is also not still and lonely, like David's house so many times when Momma is working or running errands and the sisters are with their friends.

Our Fictitious Mr. Jepson Describes His Classroom

At a district professional learning institute this week, Mr. Jepson was asked to describe his classroom to teachers. His classroom had been a topic of conversation among teachers the previous school year, Mr. Jepson's first year at Phillip Warrington Elementary School. Mr. Jepson began his presentation by showing a short video of his classroom, his students, himself, the beehive. Then he wrote three words on a big sheet of paper suspended from an easel at the front of the room.

1. Relational
2. Reciprocal
3. Responsive

Next Mr. Jepson explained the meaning of these three words in the following way.

Relational. My classroom, first of all, is a place of connection among people—the students with me, with each other. When I say my classroom, I mean also the occasions when we are connecting virtually. Also, when I say a connection among people, we never forget the students' important connections with the people in their lives outside the classroom and outside the school. I read about a concept called "relational suasion," and I try to never forget it. "Classroom culture...emanates from the personal relationships of the teacher with her students and the relationships among the students...through the student's eyes, the teacher, by virtue of her role, is worthy of respect. By her actions she adds to or subtracts from that appraisal" (Redding, 2013, p. 8 as quoted in Budge & Parrett, 2018, p. 51). I know I have great influence with my students, and I take care to exercise that influence in the most beneficial way with each and every student. I also know that students have great influence with each other, and I talk with them about that, and the responsibility they bear because of it, and also the opportunity.

The Solution

John Hattie (2017) says that teacher–student relationships have a high effect size (.72), and that peer tutoring and peer-to-peer co-teaching are quite powerful tools, with an effect size of .55. He also explains that students have a large impact on each other (effect size of peer influence is .53) and that peer acceptance is linked with both student disengagement (when it is low) and academic achievement (when it is high). I'm glad Mr. Hattie agrees with me that these relational aspects of teaching have power to improve students' learning. It's not really all about relationships, as I have heard some people say. Teaching is much more, but it starts with relationships.

Reciprocal. I call my classroom a Reciprocal Learning Environment. Not an original name, I guess. You have probably heard of “reciprocal teaching,” in which the teacher and a group of students take turns being “teacher” in guided practice exercises for reading comprehension. Mr. Hattie (2017) says that reciprocal teaching has a very high effect size (.74) and that its use goes beyond reading comprehension, as it helps students build their repertoires of learning strategy at the same time they are mastering the content of the subject. But I say our classroom is a reciprocal *learning environment*, not teaching, because I want to emphasize that whoever is in the role of teacher is also a learner. This isn't fuzzy pedagogy. We work hard toward the knowledge and skill every student deserves to acquire, and we do it together.

Reading comprehension is very important in our classroom, because so many of our students struggle in fifth grade, as reading becomes more difficult and their shallow vocabulary more a problem. But the real problem is that they are not accustomed to *grappling* with text. Reciprocal learning is a way to model how to grapple with text to get meaning from it, to extract new words from it, to think about it and write about it. Not only do I model the grappling, but, reciprocally, they learn to press each other to grapple. They grapple strategically. Teaching and using metacognitive strategies, learning strategies, is part of the reciprocal learning environment. Tracking their own mastery is a great strategy, and explaining and sharing the “learning pictures” (their visual display of their tracked mastery) with each other is a rich technique.

Responsive. I have not always been a believer in culturally responsive teaching, but I realize now the power of specific approaches to responsive teaching that work well within a reciprocal learning environment and certainly do much to enhance relationships. In studying to develop a philosophy for my own teaching and to design a classroom environment consistent with that philosophy, I read this about culture, and it stuck with me:

To be clear, culture is not race, ethnicity, class, or socioeconomic status. It may run alongside these characteristics so closely that it seems their shadow at times, but it should not be conflated with them. Poverty, for example—endemic

in many low-achieving schools—is a situation, not a culture. It’s a situation shared by a multitude of groups of people from Appalachian Whites to Somali immigrants, groups who likely don’t share much in terms of values, dispositions, and behaviors that usually describe culture (Gorski, 2013). Yet too often, when teachers or other adults face a behavior such as apathy or aggression that they can’t explain or identify with, “culture” becomes the catch-all culprit, “randomly and regularly used to explain everything” (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Rather than using culture as a catch-all for blame, successful schools honor it and harness its power to reach and engage students. (Redding, & Corbett, 2018, p. 2)

Effective instruction for any student requires that the teacher respects and leverages each student’s cultural background, taking advantage of each culture’s richness to help students make connections among ideas.

Mr. Jepsen then projected onto a screen some major points for creating a reciprocal learning environment, and he handed out a paper that included notes he wanted us to take with us. Here are his suggestions, with his notes.

STRATEGIES TO CREATE A RECIPROCAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

A. Nurture Relationships

Tactics

1. Be a “warm demander.” Exercise “hard caring” with your students. We hear a lot about having high expectations for our students. We have to also show our students that we sincerely believe they will meet those expectations and that we will help them work like crazy to do it. (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006; Kleinfeld, 1975)
2. Explicitly teach social/emotional skills. Skills related to self-regulation, communication, and cooperation are a foundation for academic learning. But students sometimes exhibit social behavior that we interpret as callous or diffident when they simply lack the behavioral steps to interact in certain situations. Role play. Teach the behaviors. Using strategies such as cooperative learning groups, the teacher can also support students in teaching each other, learning from each other, and assuming responsibility for each other’s learning. (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017)
3. Get real. Kathleen Budge and William Parrett understand kids from poverty, and they write in a way that both inspires a teacher and gives a teacher practical advice. Especially keen are their “practical suggestions for building relationships.” They suggest four building blocks for establishing and maintaining relationships with

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students, and I memorized them and practice them. (1) Identification—find something in common with each student; (2) Authenticity—students don't want me to be one of them or be like them, they want to know who I am; (3) Empathy—kids have fears and anxieties and go through tough times and also experience joy and have victories, and I try to feel what they feel to understand them and for them to know I understand them; (4) Trust—this is sometimes the hardest for me, and I have to work at always operating with a positive presupposition, but it is so important for my students to trust me, and to gain that trust I have to show it for them. I teach these four relationship builders to my students. I write them on the board. We discuss them. We refer to them. (Budge & Parrett, 2018)

B. Practice Reciprocity

Tactics

1. Exalt a community of learners. Foster a sense of community among students in the classroom and with their families. Base the community on learning—the thrill of learning together and of helping each other learn. Explain to your class that they are like the scientists and engineers and astronauts they see on TV, at NASA launching a rocket. They have so much to learn in order to succeed at what they do. They exude a joy in helping each other learn, in getting smarter to get better at what they do. Exploration of space is a huge laboratory for learning. Your classroom is like that, and your students carry this excitement home to their families—they are part of your community of learners. Your classroom is *knowledge-centered*. *You strive for every student to sense that he or she is seen, matters, and belongs* in this community of learners. (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2009)
2. Create a classroom culture. Culture is a mix of a group's values, beliefs, traditions, customs, and rituals. A classroom culture also is built on these components, and it transcends the cultures the students bring to the classroom. Classroom routines are part of the customs of a classroom, and for students they are touchstones to the day, the week, the order of things in this class. Routines give stability and comfort for children whose lives might otherwise be filled with uncertainty and confusion. Maintain a *knowledge-centered classroom*. That value for "what we know" permeates your classroom culture.
3. Teach each other. The main point of reciprocal teaching and learning is that the roles of teacher and learner are interchangeable. We learn when we teach. Create situations where students teach other students (peer-teaching), tutor other students (peer-tutoring), and prepare and present lessons in groups. Swap roles

in small groups and with individual students. Soon the formal arrangements of planned reciprocity become organic, fluid, and the way of the classroom.

4. Embrace families. Reach out to them, include them in your reciprocity. Hear their voices. Learn from them. Teach them. Wrap them around the lives of your students. Connect them with each other to form a community among them, an extension of your classroom community.

C. Leverage Cultural Responsiveness

Tactics

1. Bridge cultural referents. Don't change the standards. Bridging cultural referents means starting with examples that resonate with the students' lives and then bridge from the familiar to the new, which may be more common in the dominant culture. Exercise students' prior knowledge. That is always a good way to build a bridge to new learning and to honor the world from which the student comes to you. (Ladson-Billings, 2009)
2. Use story. Stories establish bridges across other factors that separate people (such as race, culture, gender, and social class), penetrate barriers, and create feelings of kindredness (Gay, 2010). Stories can create links between home, family, and school and can be used to give deep meaning to many different kinds of lessons. Teachers use story in their lessons, and students learn to tell stories. They can be based on student interviews with family members. Students might bring parents into the classroom to tell their family stories. Students learn that stories describe the motivations of their characters. For all these reasons, stories shared and held in common among classmates contribute to their sense of community and attachment to the classroom and school.

D. Engage Students with Learning

Tactics

(See section on Engaged Learning Strategy for details on these four tactics.)

1. Active student response (ASR)
2. Student learning pictures (SLP)
3. Close reading notation (CRN)
4. Academic and social norms (ASN)

The Solution

Mr. Jepson tells a story

Mr. Jepson became very animated when he explained each of his points for creating a reciprocal learning environment. It was obvious that he lives and breathes these ideas, and his students surely know it. Mr. Jepsen closed his presentation with a story of his own, to explain how he extends the reciprocal learning environment beyond the classroom. Here is how he told it:

One day after school this week, the students had vacated the classroom, but one young man remained. David sat at his desk, his head down, silent. I knew that David had something heavy on his mind and was waiting for me to pull it out of him. I scooted a chair next to David and sat beside him, waiting at first for him to speak. He was having a hard time getting words out, so I nudged a bit, asking if he enjoyed the lesson today on the mathematics of baseball. David relaxed and grinned, shaking his head yes. Then in a burst he said, "Whatever I do will be wrong."

"What do you mean," I asked.

"If I leave your class with everybody else when school is out, I get shoved by one of the big boys in the hallway. Sometimes they knock my book out of my hands. If I wait until the halls are quiet, I barely make it to the bus, and Charlie yells at me and the other kids laugh at me. If I miss the bus, my mom worries about me, and my sisters scream at me when I get home."

"Sounds like you are in a pickle," I said. Then I realized that wasn't much help to David. So, I suggested that we solve the problem by breaking it into parts and working on it together. Here is what we agreed to do, starting the next day.

I realized that this is where my reciprocal learning environment has to expand.

1. First, David and every other student in our school deserves to feel safe in the hallways and in the schoolyard. I agreed to meet with the principal and convince her to form a committee of teachers and parents to solve this problem. I will suggest the committee be given just a week to come up with a solution.
2. Second, Charlie has to undergo a personality transplant or be removed from his job. I have heard other complaints about Charlie. No student should be talked to the way Charlie talks to them every day. I agreed to meet with the principal and superintendent and see how quickly Charlie can be dealt with. Of course, he will first get a warning. And the district needs to provide a training for all the non-certified staff—custodians, bus drivers, cooks, clerks—to stress their importance to the school and the expectations for their behavior with students, parents, and visitors. We need them to be positive role models.
3. Third, I agreed to call David's mother and ask to meet with her, David, and the girls,

preferably at their house. I have nothing particular in mind other than to get to know them better. We will talk. I will tell them about myself and my family, and I will listen to them. We will see what comes up in this meeting, but if nothing else it will give me a basis for better helping David.

There you go. One. Two. Three. Sometimes it is my classroom that has to change. Sometimes it is the student who needs guidance with their behavior. But other times, like in this case, the student's environment can use some shaping up, and I should do what I can to see that it happens. I extend the boundaries of the reciprocal learning environment. I learn more about Charlie, the hallways, and David's family. I help others learn how to make life better for David. A two-way street, or maybe a multilane highway. Reciprocal. But it starts with me.

Questions for Reflection

1. Does the description of David and his world seem true to life? Why or why not?
2. Mr. Jepsen is a fifth grade teacher, but would his idea of a Reciprocal Learning Environment make sense for teachers at other grade levels? Any subject? Why or why not?
3. What did you find most compelling about Mr. Jepsen's classroom? Why does he call it "reciprocal"?
4. What questions are left unanswered in your mind? What more would you like to know about Mr. Jepsen and his classroom?
5. Do you find the nine teacher actions to create a Reciprocal Learning Environment convincing? Will they really benefit students, especially students who rely on their school day for peace and order and safety and strength?
6. What does Mr. Jepsen mean that his classroom is *knowledge-centered*? Why is that especially important for students from poverty?
7. What did you think of Mr. Jepsen's ad hoc response to David's problem? By taking action, was Mr. Jepsen extending the reciprocal learning environment? What does this say about any teacher's ability to have influence beyond their classroom?