4.2 Personalise and connect learning: Connect learning to students’ lives and aspirations

Key actions: Teachers
- Identify and develop topics that demonstrate relevance to life beyond the classroom
- Encourage students to connect learning with issues of personal, local or national significance
- Use contemporary technologies (e.g. podcasts, social networking websites) in meaningful ways
- Actively seek opportunities for linking the community with programming and planning
- Enrich learning by ensuring a range of purposes and community audiences for students’ work
- Create opportunities to involve families in ways that acknowledge and support their contexts, cultures and aspirations for their children
- Value individual self-expression and capitalise on students’ unique strengths to convey their meaning

Key actions: Students
- Understand we’re all different and say what’s important to me
- Listen to my classmates and try to understand their views
- Be confident to talk about my hopes and dreams, fears and concerns
- Link my classroom learning to the things I do at home
- Use technology skills to help my learning
- Understand that technology happens everywhere, not just at school, and try new activities in the community

Multicultural or Eurocentric?

My own schooling had been Eurocentric, my background was European and my tertiary studies were based on European, American and white Australian ‘dead, white, male’ artists.

Our school is a very multicultural school in an outer suburban region. Vietnamese and Cambodian families have made this area their home over the past twenty years, and a strong community has evolved.

Until three years ago, racial harm only had been the norm in our community. Then a serious incident occurred. For me, that upheaval was the catalyst for significant curriculum reform.

Initially, I was incensed at the disruption that the incident caused for our school, the untrue claims and the way in which prejudice was fuelled. I began to think more deeply about prejudice. I reflected on and, for the first time, really questioned my own values and beliefs.

Was I providing learning opportunities that built on the diverse cultural understandings of students in my classes? I realised that even though many of my students were of Asian background, what I taught was predominantly Eurocentric.

In reality, I knew very little about my students’ cultural identity— their history, religion, language and arts. There was a gap in my own understanding of a major part of the world’s geography and history, despite Australia’s close proximity to Asia and my pivotal role in the learning journey for my Asian students.

That disruptive incident was an awakening for me. I now recognise that my students have rich cultural backgrounds that we can explore in developing curriculum that connects to their experiences, interests and enthusiasms.

adapted from McRae (2001)
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Language that teachers can use to connect learning to students’ lives and aspirations

- How can we use your strengths and enthusiasm to make your school learning really meaningful for you?
- When you watched that program, how did it connect to your life?
- Who might see this differently?
- You’re on the computer all the time at home. Let’s use your IT skills to get the most out of this learning task. Any new ideas?
- What do you hope for your future?
- Are there extra skills you think you need?
- How can we support you?
- How can you use this learning in other ways?

There are community agencies that may be able to help you with this issue. Do you know how to get in touch?

This element is not demonstrated if:

- Teachers fail to consider their students’ and their families’ needs/interests and enthusiasms when planning for learning
- A monocultural perspective prevails in the classroom
- Racist, sexist, ageist and class conscious comments and perspectives are expressed and not challenged
- Teachers predominantly teach and value only traditional print literacies from the pre-digital world
- Teachers avoid engaging in conversation with students about current, complex social issues

Practice check

- Have I created an environment where students feel comfortable in sharing their families’ stories, rituals and traditions?
- Do I know what my students aspire to?
- What links can I make with the community to broaden my students’ opportunities and encourage their aspirations?
- Do students feel safe to disagree with each other and me?
- In my classroom, do I make the most of each student’s individuality?
- Do I listen to students’ perspectives and pick up on their knowledge?

Notes:

When a teacher is familiar with aspects of a child’s culture, then the teacher may be better able to assess the child’s competence. Many teachers, unfamiliar with the language, the metaphors, or the environments of the children they teach, may easily underestimate the children’s competence. I have also discovered that to effectively monitor and assess the needs of children who may come from a different cultural background, the notion of basic skills often needs to be turned on its head.

Lisa Delpit

Anticipating outcomes: Ask students to predict possible applications remote from the learning context. For example:

- After students have practised a thinking skill or other skill, ask, “Where might you use this or adapt it?” Let’s brainstorm. Be creative.” List ideas and discuss some.
- After teachers have taught a concept, ask, “Who might see this knowledge?” (e.g. crash investigator, town planner, bridge architect, boat builder, building demolition expert). “When may they use this knowledge?” (e.g. to work out the speed of cars and impact after a crash, to establish gradients).

How does this fit with me?:

After establishing a new learning topic, ask students to individually complete questions that make the topic more pertinent:

- How can I use this at home? In my life outside of school?
- How do other groups or cultures use this knowledge, skill, strategy?
- How might I use this in the future?
- Is this learning important to me? Why? Why not?
- What do I want to know about this? Why?

Play The Connection Cube:

The Connection Cube is an interactive thinking game on the Active Learning Practice for Schools (ALPS) website.
The Connection Cube can be accessed at <http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking>.

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… training across many cultures is a mighty challenge—people have different ways of learning, different views about assessing competency, different approaches.

Kate Horwood

South Australian Teaching for Effective Learning Framework guide | Teaching for effective learning

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Formation of competent learning – Teachers are familiar with the language, the metaphors, or the environments of the children they teach, and can assess the children’s competence effectively.