
Vignette: Illuminating An Instructional Equity Lens That Benefits a Diverse Socioeconomic Title I School

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The Minnesota metropolitan Title I school featured in this vignette is comprised of 94% students of color (Asian, Hispanic, and Black) in about equal numbers; 6% of the students are White. Eighty-four percent qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. Nearly 40% of our students are English language learners, speaking primarily Spanish. Approximately 360 pre-K through 5th-grade students are served in our school.

Statewide statistics point to Black and other students of color as scoring 30 points or lower when compared to White schoolchildren and youth, which reflects the challenge faced by educators and policymakers. A lingering question for us is, "How can policy, research, professional learning practice, and funding reduce the 'gap' so that all children in our school can succeed and are sufficiently prepared for the workplace and, hopefully, lifelong learning?"

Our staff has been on a professional development journey with staff from the National Urban Alliance organization (<https://www.nuadc.org>). This journey began with a monthly cohort meeting to both examine and increase equitable learning experiences for all students. Yet it wasn't until NUA's Robert Price, NUA Educational Consultant, led the cohort in the spring of 2020 that our teachers began to fully understand the benefits of integrating culturally responsive instruction into our daily practice (Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Teachers came to learn that NUA is not just another "thing" on their plates, but rather is an essential aspect of our instruction that is directly tied to our equity work. Instruction is designed for building on students' strengths and schemas to ensure that meaningful and sustainable learning takes place (Hillstrom, 2009; Hillstrom et al., 2023; Jackson, 2011).

While the pandemic and the need for virtual learning brought many challenges, it also created the impetus to reframe how we provide professional development, especially as it pertained to our NUA partnership. Our cohort no longer consisted of one teacher representative from each grade level, but rather, we moved to a schoolwide model in which all teachers received NUA professional development. Our educators are feeling invigorated and empowered by the professional development they have received because they are seeing their students succeed in ways they could not have imagined.

Since beginning our NUA work 3 years ago, we have focused on social-emotional learning as well as academic rigor through NUA's applications of the science of High Operational Practices as presented in the Pedagogy of Confidence™. The High Operational Practices include identifying and activating student strengths; building relationships; eliciting high intellectual performance; providing enrichment; integrating prerequisites for academic learning; situating learning in the lives of students; and amplifying student voice (Jackson, 2011). We no longer have students throwing chairs or leaving classrooms in a rage. Our students' social-emotional well-being will always be imperative, but it is now addressed through our strong beliefs in the High Operational Practices embedded intentionally into our lesson planning (Cooper, 2004; Levine et al., 2000; Nessel & Baltas, 2000).

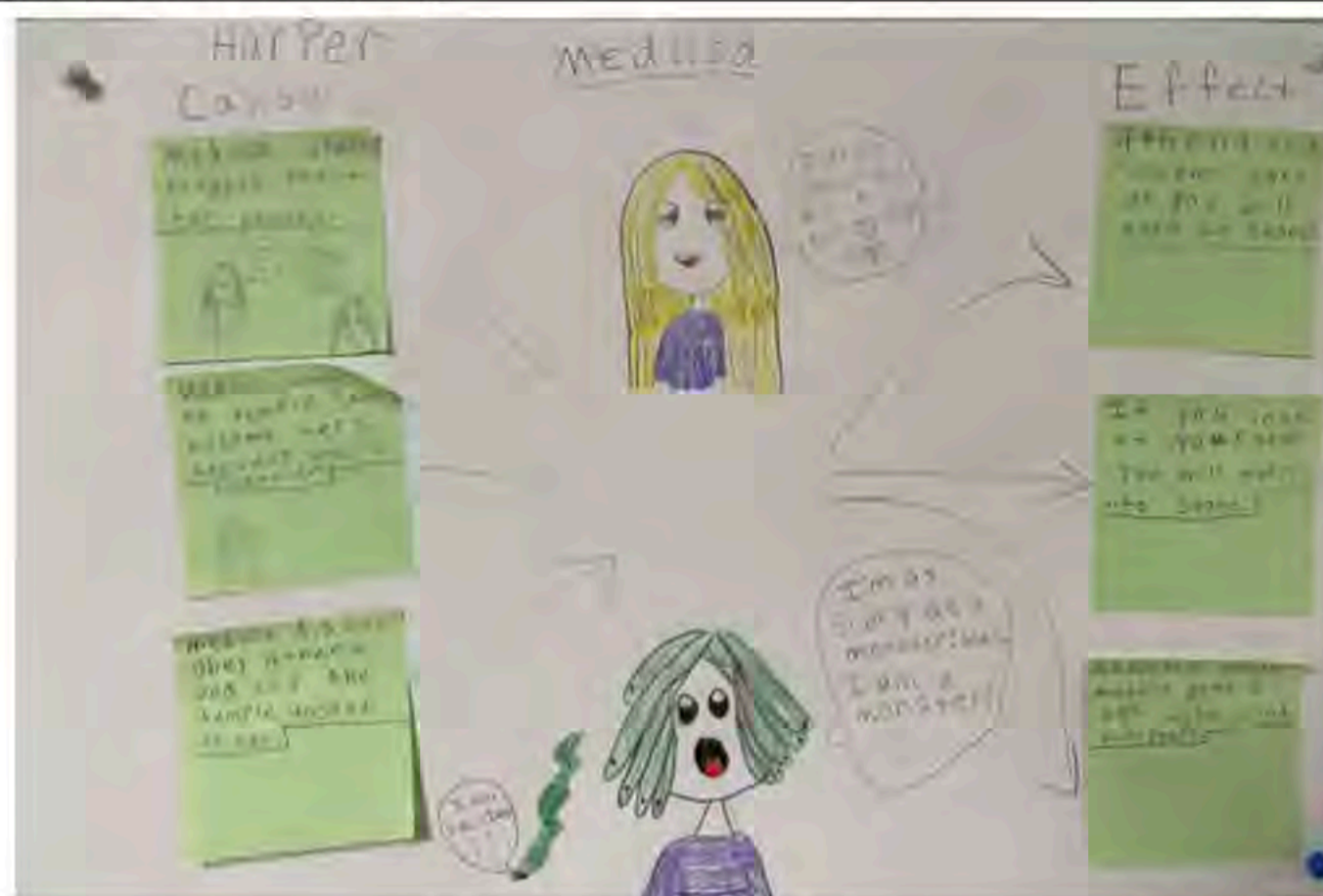
We began using a multipronged approach to professional development that included meetings between Robert and the site core leadership team, NUA mediators, grade-level teams, individual teachers, and all staff. While teachers were able to gain valuable insights during large-group workshops, the pivotal moment was when we began facilitation of grade-level Professional Learning Team (PLT) meetings responsive to both student and teacher needs.

Based on our partnership with NUA, there has been a fundamental change in the culture of our school, and our discussions are now centered on students' strengths and developing them as critical thinkers who know how to make choices about their learning. For example, when students learn they know more than they think they know

(background knowledge), their cultural narratives are celebrated and utilized in bridging the gap between what they know and do not know, and by organizing instruction to account for student learning variability in flexible and diverse groupings, interest in learning increases (Strickland, 2008). When our teachers became effective at facilitating a learning environment where all students develop resilience, become confident learners, and recognize that collaboration among their classmates is the sine qua non of academic success, achievement soars and is sustained—this demonstrates that instruction has been centered around the irrefutable beliefs we hold about our students' learning capacities and beliefs about ourselves. We believe our students can achieve at the highest levels, and will learn to write better life stories for themselves. We believe in ourselves regarding our capacity to help them reach their hopes and dreams of being successful students and lifelong learners (Jackson & Cooper, 2007).

As we have continued to deepen our understanding of these practices, our teachers have come to realize that NUA training is not about isolated strategies for teaching particular concepts, but, rather, we have had a philosophical shift in how we activate student voice and create equitable instruction that is purposeful across the curriculum (Jackson, 2011; Weil & Joyce, 1978). We have seen our quietest students become our most outspoken leaders and take on leadership roles that previously had not existed. It was powerful to observe two of our most resistant 4th-grade students take over a literacy discussion for the first time. The questions they asked their peers were thought-provoking, and it was enlightening to see how attentive their classmates quickly became to engage in the dialogue. The will of our staff is more evident than ever as they continue to build their skills and capacity; we now share a collective conviction and commitment to incorporating NUA into our daily teaching along with a common belief in our students to achieve at the highest levels of performance. As one kindergartner shared during a class reflection on their phonemic awareness lessons, “You have to believe. Believe in yourself and others. Believe that you can do stuff, and if it’s hard, you can still do it. You never give up.”

Historically, teachers have stood in the front of the classroom and called on two or three students with all of the answers to complete a graphic organizer and to feel as though they sufficiently taught, for instance, cause and effect, concept sequencing, problem solution, compare and contrast, and other textual structures (Jackson, 2011). We have since learned that a “visual tool” (Hyerle, 2000) is not an end product but rather a means to an end. Our teachers provide priming by connecting the text to their students' background knowledge and experiences (Harris & Cooper, 1985; Jackson, 2011). Students then construct their understanding and make necessary parallels by choosing which tools will best help them process their thoughts (Allington, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2008; Levine et al., 2000; Strickland, 2008). They use Post-its and a Hyerle's Circle Visual Map, for example, to annotate a text (Jackson, 2011; see [Figure 10.1](#)). Next, they may decide to manipulate their Post-its in finding various ways of classifying and organizing the details they have extracted, all the while collaborating with their peers by sharing their discoveries and explaining their ideas. They continually reflect on their frame of reference as they delve below the surface and go beyond the words on the page. By the time they have participated in the real work of studying a literary piece, they have already discovered the key relationships between the essential elements of a story and applications across content areas (Herber, 1978; Pearson & Johnson, 1978). This is one example of how we implement High Operational Practices (HOPs) as developed in the “Pedagogy of Confidence” and as captured in demonstration lessons conducted by the NUA.

Figure 10.1. Post-its and Hyerle's Circle Visual Map

We created authentic learning experiences for individuals and grade-level teams through a collaborative learning process. Like students, we had to experience firsthand applications of authentic and relevant instruction. These meetings were then followed by 2-day intensive in-person visits where an NUA consulting mentor coached our teachers through NUA pedagogy in real time. This allowed NUA's role to evolve from an outside organization that delivers professional development to some staff once a month, to one in which Robert (our primary consulting mentor and coach) demonstrated strategies that put theory into practice. As our coach, Robert provides all teachers with meaningful and applicable guidance. His support is highly connected to each staff member's pedagogical practices, which is why we believe the professional development has increased the extent to which our staff is able to apply what they are learning and accelerate our schoolwide growth. Additionally, our Title 1 elementary school academic coach meets with each staff member to provide follow-up to the NUA sessions for coaching, co-teaching, and instructional planning and to further build staff capacity (Cooper & Levine, 2008; Levine & Cooper, 1991).

Observing one another's practice in teams deepens our understanding of what is presented and transforms how we implement best practice. For an example, in a kindergarten lesson on being responsible for books, the pedagogy to involve all students includes inquiry, developing background knowledge, and connecting to the student's personal experiences. Before the book is read, students are primed for background knowledge and academic vocabulary, followed by whole classroom participation, with personal experiences connecting to the primary concept of book responsibility or taking care of their books. The observing educators reflect on the pedagogy of the lesson. Next, a pair of teachers from the team follow the same exact process with another kindergarten class. By seeing more than one person teaching the same lesson with different classes, the focus is on pedagogy and not the personality of one particular presenter; consequentially, we are improving the practice of both individuals and the school collectively.

Additionally, NUA has been instrumental in guiding us toward using peer observations with focused reflection on student outcomes, an integral part of the NUA approach (Levine & Cooper, 1991). Colleagues observing each other in teams has become a regular practice at all grade levels, including paraprofessionals, special education teachers, English Language (EL) facilitators, and all other adults in the school who have an impact on student learning. De-briefs, a key part of the process with the team, have helped to dramatically raise the level of discourse in our weekly

Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) and staff meetings as we continue to gain ideas for improvement and plan next steps. Veteran educators who have been in the classroom for 30 years, along with those at the beginning of their careers, have been courageous in recording their lessons on video to share with team members for analysis at grade-level meetings. Together, we closely examine our practices to ensure that long-term learning is taking place. As one of our 5th-graders explained during an interview with a peer as part of a student-led film documentary project, “The younger students are doing better than we did because the teaching has gotten better. I think it’s because teachers are helping each other more. I see them going into each other’s classrooms, and I’ve seen the difference it has made this year in my classroom.”

SUMMARY

All students need good and caring teachers. The diverse students in classrooms today have a greater need for teachers who see them, care for them, and want to teach them. They need teachers who are consummate learners and who are supported in their learning by school leaders guided by a vision that seeks to empower them with forward-thinking and equity-focused professional development. Both teacher educators and school leaders must be ensuring that pre-service and inservice teachers of children are prepared with the knowledge needed to engage in high-leverage practices that ensure success for the diversity of the underserved children living in poverty.

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EQUITABLE LITERACY INSTRUCTION for **Students** in **Poverty**

