



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

DAVID MCDONALD, M.ED.

I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.

—Angela Davis

I could not even begin to talk about my experiences as a classroom teacher without first sharing about my experiences as a student myself. I was born in Dallas, Texas, but raised in the neighboring city, Mesquite, Texas, which is a 15-minute drive from downtown Dallas. It didn't take long for me to realize that I would be one of the few Black students in my class. As early as 2nd grade, I started to notice that my classroom experience was different



from the experiences my classmates were having although we sat in the same seats. While most students would advance through their schooling experience with minimal interactions with school discipline, my experience on the other hand, was mostly defined by school discipline. It didn't matter that I was a straight-A student and had almost perfect attendance. It didn't matter that I had been identified as gifted and talented and been considered by my teachers and school leaders for early advancement to the next grade level on multiple occasions. It also didn't matter how involved my mother was in our school's programs or that she always had an active role in our Parent-Teacher Association. But what mattered the most was that I, as a Black boy in a predominately white elementary school, did not think, did not show up, did not speak, and did not learn in the same ways that my white peers did. What started as a few phone calls home for "talking too much," later turned into disciplinary referrals for "disruptive behavior" and "insubordination" from my teachers.

Referrals to the school front office became so routine that there was a desk reserved next to the principal's office for students like me who would end up sitting there for the entire school day. (I guess this was our elementary school's

version of in-school suspensions.) This desk was also conveniently located right in the middle of the hallway between the nurse's office, the front reception desks, and the staff bathroom. Consequently, most of my day was spent responding to staff members walking by to use the restroom asking, "what happened this time, David?," as I sat there with all of my work for the day to complete. Every student going to the nurse and every office visitor including parents and even the mailman would see me sitting and would all have the same question. . . *"What did you do?"* It would not be until I became an educator myself that I would find the answer to that question.

There were many factors that contributed to the negative relationship that I had with the system of education early on. Attending a school where neither the administrators, faculty, or staff could identify with the me as a student, the lack of diversity training and identity development given to the teaching profession as a whole, and the absence of culturally relevant curriculum and materials all influenced my interactions with my school and my teachers. It surfaces a memory from the 2nd grade of an end of school year celebration where I can remember the last words I heard from one of my teachers. Imagine a 7-year-old student standing outside the door of a classroom because they have just been kicked out of class. Since it is the last day of school, your teacher is sharing final words to all of your classmates before the summer begins and says "This has been a great year, and I will miss all of you very much. All of you! Except for David out there!" This is a true story and happens to be the most salient

memory of my early schooling experiences. Being one of the few Black students who attended my elementary school gave me different challenges. It gave me a new perspective about who the education system was created for and who had been disregarded. Hearing those words from someone you are designated to learn from in school and the person who is supposed to teach you has an impact on your ability to believe that a school is a place for you. That was one of the earliest memories I have of school that impacted my thoughts and beliefs about school for the rest of my life.

I thought that I would never become a teacher or even step foot near the field of education after graduating. But life has a funny way of making us eat our words. It would be 15 years later that I would be standing in my very own classroom as an educator. I look back at those moments from my experience as a student and I use those memories to remind myself of how my action can both positively and negatively impact my students for the rest of their lives. I became an educator because I did not see people who looked like me in the classroom. I did not see teachers who shared the same racial identity that I had; I didn't see myself represented in the curriculum taught and even in the books we read in class. I just felt like school did not represent my background and did not show me reflections of myself through how we learn. I'd always been a child who loved learning and loved finding new things and engaging in projects and experiences. But when it came down to the actual content that we were learning, it just did not excite me. That lack of engagement and excitement in school turned

me into a brilliant kid, and when I would finish my work very quickly, I would often get in trouble. My mindset at a young age was when I did not find meaning other than just completing work for a grade in the absence of connection and purpose, I would retreat from the instruction. Can you blame me?

That mindset influenced the ways that I taught as an educator once I entered the field of education and what I would do and would be for my students I knew were sitting in my classroom just like me. Students who might have been bored, or disengaged, or had a teacher who tarnished their relationship with education. My goal was to be the person that I believed I did not have in my classroom. I wanted to be someone who not only could understand that students need to see themselves in their curriculum and in the instruction, but also the person who could give them the space they needed to grapple with who they are in connection to what they were learning about. All of those things are so very important. Those are the experiences that I lacked in my own K-12 experience, which should be brought to the center of the educational experience.

There were so many aspects of my classroom that I believe contributed to the unique culture and memories created. Still, the connection between our classroom and the community is central to the approach I took to my teaching. The examples that I share through the rest of this chapter are by no means an exemplar of a partnership between schools and the community. But instead, it is what I believe is the bare minimum expectation of how we expect educators and schools to work with the community.

COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE

Community Knowledge: The culturally responsive educator gains critical knowledge about the local community and students' families, including history, culture, and values. Teacher leverages community knowledge to foster a safe and responsive learning environment.

Being raised in the Dallas community gave me so much more leverage in the classroom with how I could set up instruction for my students. It allowed me to bring a new world to my students through enhancing the instruction versus simply teaching the given curriculum. All English Language Arts teachers know that literacy is essentially about reading, listening, speaking, and writing. If that is the core of instruction, it leaves the entire world of literature and life open to exploring. Why would we not use books that connect to the world around our students? By building my community knowledge about the city where my students live in relation to my lived experiences from being a Dallas resident, having my family in Dallas, and knowing a lot about Dallas from my upbringing. It did not stop there. I learned that just because you are from the city, does not mean you know everything about your students' actual experience in that city. I continued to step outside of what I thought I knew to learn more about the Dallas community as a whole and what that looks like and sounds like for my students.

It looks like attending community events, baseball games, and performances put on by the local theatre department. It looks like going to Dallas community meetings or city council town halls to build more of an understanding about what is happening at the city level that may impact our students' lives directly in the classroom and our school environment. It also means using the power of the internet like Google, (yes, Google!) and social media to research the history of the community. I took on an active role to broaden my understanding of the community my students and I came from.

When you build that community knowledge around your students and the city where your students live, you are able to repurpose that into your instruction and content to make an even greater impact on your students. One of the critical things that I could do with my community knowledge was to bring in my network of relationships with people who live in the Dallas community. I knew who the critical leaders in our community were and had been able to build connections from businesses to organizational leaders. Though my students already had some background knowledge of various aspects of the community, they were able to add to building the community knowledge; however, as the educator, I was able to expand their perspective by allowing them to personally meet, see, and hear from these individuals. When I bring those individuals into the classroom, whether as a metaphor, or just an example during my instruction, students are more easily able to access those references because they already have experienced that right in their backyard.

It is also about building those connections so that you continue to learn more about the community in which your students live. You are also able to make some of those more intimate connections with your students. When the time comes to build relationships with students, you have some more context because you've spent time learning about the community to impact them.

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Family Involvement: The culturally responsive educator develops trusting relationships with diverse families to maintain involvement throughout the year. Teacher consistently incorporates family input and insight when determining academic goals, curriculum, and expectations.

One of the most critical parts of my approach to teaching was the concept of an open classroom. Creating a space to be flexible and open enough for community members, other teachers, students, and most importantly, families to be able to enter the classroom and become a part of a learning experience at any moment regardless of what was on our “agenda” for the day. Too often, we see in our classrooms where it is almost impossible for parents to visit the classroom and to be able to join in as a part of the learning community

outside of meeting the teacher nights and progress report meetings. We close our doors and keep our students inside for those 60 minutes, or however long class is. Creating an isolated island of the learning experience, which leaves our students at a disadvantage. I think that psychologically when we open those doors of our classroom, it generates a breathable place for creativity, imagination, and exploration and we make it possible for the community to access our school.

I remember vividly that at any moment, during my teaching career, parents would pop up with surprises. It may be as small as a birthday party for their child. It may have been a special week for a basketball game and the parents chose to celebrate with the entire class. There may have been a great lesson coming this week because parents have heard about it from their child who is expressing excitement, so they want to come and be a part of the learning. They were welcomed. Students might be making oral presentations in one class period or share some reflections from their journal entries this week. My door was always open. At any moment, anything could happen, and I was ready.

Involving families not only benefits the individual student, but it also benefits the entire class and school environment. Families will feel compelled to show up even when you least expect it. I am thinking about parents like the Johnsons who would always come through for students even if it was the last minute of the day. At the end of the six weeks, the Johnsons wanted to surprise the class with a celebration because they heard how well the students were doing on

their work throughout the grading cycle. Yes, of course, they heard from me because I continued to keep the families updated, through various forms of communication (more on that later!) They decided to get pizza from the Domino's Pizza down the street from the school. They showed up right near the end of class and blessed the class with a bit of celebration for their perseverance through the hard work that they were displaying in the classroom. That was only possible and only permissible if the classroom was open and the school was available enough to allow parents to join and be a part of the educational environment. Now, it does not have to always be a pizza party, or a huge celebration with balloons and candy, external rewards for the students, you know, that's something that we see a lot, especially in lower grades or just at school in general. Some other ways parents can join the classroom community regularly are by writing encouraging notes to the students, observing instruction for a day or class period, donating necessities for students in need, or simply being a part of classroom or school events through volunteering their time.

As a teacher, I also participated in the home visit project. An initiative established in the Dallas community that allows teachers to get more involved with students' families by visiting their homes and breaking some of those barriers between the school building and home communication. A group of teachers would be asked to select a few students to go to their homes and visit and learn about the student; who they are, what their families and living experiences are like. How they are going

about life outside of the classroom. We are not talking about grades. We are not talking about anything behavior-wise. We are not talking about anything other than just learning about the families. What are their interests? What were their hopes and dreams for their child? What are they involved in? What brought them to Dallas? How has their experience been in our schools? Learning more about the families is the entire purpose of the home visit project, and being able to share, of course, just celebrations from the experiences so far with that student. By participating in that project, I was able to learn so much more about my students. It created a completely different experience for that student once we got back into the school building because as an educator, I was able to see them in their natural being outside of the classroom. I was invited into their space and that student-teacher relationship has now been elevated. Therefore, if a student were to act out or struggle emotionally, socially, or academically, I may react differently now that I have a perspective contrary to the view I had of the student only from the classroom experience.

I had one student who I visited during a home visit project that has stuck with me long term. You know, there is always going to be every school and grade level with a particular student that can be a handful at times. A student that other teachers may find challenging to deal with and may not have the tools or the patience to get to the root of the student's problem. Maybe their behavior could be for a plethora of reasons. This student did a complete 180 in terms

of their perceptions of our school and even my classroom after I visited their home during the home visit project. I saw the difference almost immediately the next day in the classroom. Initially, this student was not excited about coming to school. They were not enthusiastic about the work they were provided. They would give other teachers pushback about certain things due to a lack of engagement. Based on their experiences of how schools received them as students thus far, they had built up a mindset and attitude around how they were going to show up to the school-house, almost like a defense mechanism because of their negative experience of schooling. Honestly, I cannot blame the student for their response to their learning experience based on my personal experiences in K-12. As I mentioned before, as early as the second grade, knowing how my teachers felt about me as a student and how my turbulent experience was, I was pushed to create my own narrative of how school was going to be for me. In order to protect myself from ever hearing something like that from another teacher again, I chose to defend my experience by controlling my own version of schooling. Therefore, as a teacher, being able to break through those negative experiences for other students and recreate new ones was extremely important.

I digress. Let's go back to my student. That next day coming back into the classroom, it was like a light had just lit inside their head. The student entered the classroom. His enthusiasm showed through his face, through his movements, literally

bouncing and dancing as he approached the door. For a brief moment, I almost did not recognize the student. However, he was transformed from being a student who was disengaged in my classroom who refused to do the classwork and collaborate with his peers or was apprehensive about sharing out in the whole group in the classroom. If it were possible, I wish I could embed videos into the book to show you all an example from a drama conducted in class where students practiced reader's theatre. As an educator, the culminating moment for me was seeing him embody a scene from the drama that we were reading. He was open with the character's feelings and held himself to an expectation of perfecting the lines of the character. He modeled the energy of the storyline and drew his peers in to him as the character by making them laugh and applaud as if we were in an actual theatrical experience. He was their number one star. He exhibited a deep understanding of the material by taking it from the written form and depicting the character in a realistic form by using his creativity. I could see that his internal motivation was now activated. It really allowed me to see that growth happening in real time and his experience of school turn into a positive experience. I do attribute that to being able to visit the home of that student. Therefore, my wish is that we can have more educators and our families have these types of interactions and occurrences. It really will shift the culture for some of our students and how they participate with our schools.

What is critical to me is making sure that we contact our parents and allow them to be consistently updated about

what is going on in the classroom and in the school environment, how they can be involved, and how their children are doing in our class. Often, I used group messages as one form of communication. This created the village and community necessary to get our students through; to push them to success. In many Black family traditions, we often hear that “it takes a village to raise a child.” Therefore, I took that same concept into my classroom to build that community in that village for our students. Something as simple as group messaging using apps such as Google phones or GroupMe allowed for parents to share ideas for lessons, to participate in polling where parents’ voices are elevated on critical issues. One instance I was not so sure would work, was when I asked our parents what topics I should include in our classroom discussions. Another example was when I would send some pictures from our lessons so that they could have insight into the classroom experience without having to physically be in the room. Some parents worked long hours and were unable to come up to the school or be as involved as they wished to be; however, they still loved and cared about their child. Therefore, I wanted to find creative ways for the parents to continue to know what was happening in order for the parent to be able to show some love to the student for the student work and activities they were able to view on that day. This also helped generate open communication between the student and the parent when they returned home. From a conversation of when the parent asks the student, how was their day at school to the parent now saying, “Hey! Your

teacher sent me a picture of some of the incredible work you guys were working on as a class project, tell me a little about that.” I believe that this impacted the family unit, the classroom community, and the relationship between the school environment and the home and allowed the distance between home and school to close.

SUPPORT SYSTEM

Support System: The culturally responsive educator invites family and community members to be active participants in maintaining the social emotional well-being of students. Teacher facilitates opportunities for students to talk about identity, experiences, and other aspects of their lives.

When I think back to my classroom experience as an educator, some of the fondest memories are times that were spent outside of teaching—particularly thinking about the comradery during lunch breaks. I know that lunch breaks are pretty standard for most teachers in having about 30 minutes to eat, take care of your needs, and get ready for your next class. Part of that 30 minutes is spent talking to a colleague about something that needs to be done or going to the office to run an errand and maybe taking a personal phone call or even using the restroom. Perhaps having back-to-back

classes and the demands of teaching in general, your time is precious. However, at times I would choose to dedicate some of my precious time to our students and use this time to create a system of support for certain students who are in need. Maybe there is a space where students need to talk about something where the classroom instructional time is not appropriate. Because my school allowed for teachers to create these supportive spaces for our students, I granted access for my students to come into my class during lunch. We would sit and talk about some of the things that were going on in their lives. I would even offer my classroom for mentors during lunchtime to talk with students as their mentees to create those multiple levels of support for the student. Lunchtime became one of the favorite parts of my experiences as a teacher because of the time that I spent with students to simply check in on their emotional well-being outside of structured classroom time. Getting to know them and providing a space where they could relax, let their guard down, and have fun within the same environment that they learnt also allowed me to see these students in a different light. Frequently, I would have almost my entire class still in my room during lunch because they just enjoyed the space so much, both when we were learning and when there was downtime, to be in community with one another. I found that this was therapeutic for me as an educator as well, because I built a supportive collective where students could lean on one another as well as lean on their mentor-mentee relationships in addition to me as the educator.

CONTEXTUAL LEARNING

Contextual Learning: The culturally responsive educator builds bridges of meaning between the classroom and the students' home community. Teacher utilizes real-world events, issues, and information as the basis by which students explore and engage in learning.

One thing that baffled me during my teaching experience was using the field lessons and taking students on field trips to take the lessons and the learnings outside of the classroom. Even in the first school I ever taught at, it was sometimes even hard to get outside of the classroom due to lack of funding or a focus on maximizing instructional time and no outside exploration. There were so many restrictions and focus on structure, from how many kids could be in the hallway and what side of the hall they had to walk, to how much red tape and hoops we had to jump through to receive approval to do extended activities with the students to broaden their perspective outside the classroom. Unfortunately, it limited our ability to create opportunities for contextual learning.

Other than recess and sports activities, how often do we allow students to get outside of the four walls of their classroom to expand their experience? Most importantly, I believe that those field lessons and experiential learning experiences that we can take students on are critical to the

students' experience. Creating opportunities where students can engage with the community through volunteering or going to museums, theaters, historical parks, and more are essential to pushing the boundaries of textbook learning.

For example, during my second year of teaching, the then Secretary of Education, Betsy Devos, decided to come and visit our school to see some of the things that we were doing inside the school and the classroom. There happened to be a lot of controversy with educational policy laws and the views of Betsy DeVos. Therefore, when the news started to circulate in the Dallas community that she was coming to visit our middle school, there were a lot of mixed emotions and differing opinions which led to individuals protesting her school visit during this time. There were also those in support of her views who showed up as well. However, despite my personal views as an educator, I was sure that taking this as a learning opportunity for my students would provide them with the tools and skills to respond in an informed manner and be confident in their views of this experience.

I took this as a chance to get our students involved in the things that were going on, why there were people literally on the outside of our schoolhouse with opposing views because of a visit from one person. We have windows, and I knew that the students could see the crowd forming outside of the school. Therefore, I wanted to get them up and moving and in front of the doors of our school. I was going to use this as an opportunity to create some impact with our students. Instead of simply ignoring the crowd of protesters outside and

all the news circulating our school about this visit, we turned this real-world experience into a classroom project where students would research some of the controversial policies that the Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, favored during her term. Based on their research and our discussions, students were required to create statements that included their personal experience of how the educational policy laws that Ms. DeVos favored impacted the students directly. Approved by the school administration, students would craft their statements, practice with their peers as well as myself, and share those statements during Ms. DeVos's visit to the classroom. Students took on the role of news journalists and reporters to record themselves talking. We created a live press conference in our classroom. We got to have students come up and share their opinions and share what they thought it meant to be a great leader and how someone can be in a position like Betsy DeVos, which significantly impacts our communities. In this context, Ms. DeVos allowed for students to share their voices. I believe that this instilled a sense of pride within the students to not only speak from a knowledgeable perspective about real-time policies that directly impacted them as students, but to speak to those in positions of power who have the ability to change those policies to better serve the community.

The visit from the Secretary of Education, Ms. DeVos, was not the only example that I could use to create contextual learning experiences for my students. Another prominent case that happened within the city of Dallas was that of Botham Jean. Botham Jean was a 26-year-old, Black man who

was tragically murdered in his apartment by an off-duty white woman police officer, 31-year-old Amber Guyger, in downtown Dallas who mistook him for an intruder in his own apartment. Officer Guyger reported that after ending a long shift at work, she wrongly entered his apartment thinking it was hers, and shot him point blank range in the chest because she believed he was a burglar. Guyger was convicted of murder for fatally shooting Jean and sentenced to ten years in prison. This happened not too far from our school. Our students heard about this case and had been talking about it; rightfully so. There were feelings of confusion, anger, and resentment, hurt and pain, and so many questions that were circulating the classroom. When tragedies like these happen so close to home, within the community, I find that students struggle with understanding the historical context of these events. Therefore, as the educator, I was thinking about how we could help students process this incident and talk about what was going on in a productive way for them and their learning. I was also thinking about some of the things we could do to help them get involved and be active participants by performing our civic duty in this case.

As Language Arts teachers, there is an expectation that we always incorporate some type of reading and some writing into the lesson to continue to build that skill. Therefore, once we learned about the case and the actual events that led up to the tragic shooting, we first held classroom discussions to allow the students to share their personal feelings about it. This allowed students to bring their lived realities into the

space that I believe their peers had never heard. It also allowed me to teach healthy discussion habits when heavy emotions are involved in cases such as these. From there, students reflected in their journals and wrote about the facts of the case as we evaluated the evidence presented by news articles. Once students were able to process their emotions and the events of the case, they were then asked to craft letters to the judge who presided over the case to detail how cases such as these impact the student experience. Students became overly committed to the case and voicing their concerns to the judge. Not only was it relevant to them as a student, but it was also necessary for our community. They also felt like they could lend their voice to create change within their community and beyond. I expressed to them that those letters could be mailed out to State and City Council members to add additional perspective from individuals they may have never heard from before. Those letters could have been included in the impact statements presented to the judge at the sentencing. When we, as educators, open our minds to enhance our instruction and pay closer attention to what is happening in our communities, we add much more value to learning experiences for our students.

As we move forward in community partnerships for our students, the following section is community service. As we continue to ask students to be leaders and step up and be involved in our classrooms, we often do not allow the time to show them how to. We do not give students the same access and ability when it comes to things that directly impact them

such as school policies and school board elections where too often, their voices are not sought out. One of the things that I tried to elevate during my time in the classroom was thinking about community service as an outlet to let students explore leadership opportunities, to be involved in the things that directly impact their community.

COMMUNITY SERVICE AND LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

Community Service: The culturally responsive educator creates opportunities for students to build community through volunteerism that directly benefits the community.

Local Partnerships: The culturally responsive educator is able to partner with local organizations, businesses, and leaders, to maximize learning experiences through guest presentations, interviews, demonstrations, etc.

In addition to enhancing the classroom experience, during 2017, there was a moment for school board elections. I had an opportunity to allow a couple of my students to sit in on some of the candidate forums to give their opinions on the educational policies that the candidates were proposing,

in an effort to lend their support based on what they heard from them. This opportunity led to students being able to show encouragement to potential candidates in the form of service, by either writing letters of support, canvassing neighborhoods, and getting people excited to vote during school board elections. In the past, turnout was usually low. However, my students had a direct hand in increasing the voter turnout for the school board elections and shared why they believe in specific policies at the school.

Another experience that will forever stick with me was in my additional role as a Debate Coach at the school. During my first year of teaching, we were able to start the very first debate team at our school. When we created the team, we knew we had novice students who had never debated in any form or capacity before. Therefore, we realized that we had a lot of work to do because historically many of the other debate teams that we would compete against were experienced and able to access resources to build their skills that we were not privy to. Where they may have had an entire class of debate team members, our school was a small, afterschool club run by me and one other teacher who served as a co-debate coach.

We spent hours at the school, practicing and learning about what debate looks like, how you stand and your posture, how to showcase your confidence and elevate your voice, and other techniques of debate. We noticed right away that our students had more flavor, and more swagger in the ways that they talked and the ways that they walked.

They brought their authentic selves to the debate team, and we were sure as coaches not to strip that away from them. However, at their first competition, we noticed that they were not getting brownie points for their authentic selves in the way that we felt like they should have. Debate is very standardized and structured in the way you are expected to look and respond and because we allowed our students not to fit into this box, we felt that they were being penalized for this. Therefore, we wanted to honor our students and truly celebrate all the work they put into their first ever debate competition. So as coaches, we hosted our very own Debate Night for our students. This event entailed our students competing against each other where we invited the entire school, family and friends, and the community. Community members in attendance were invited to participate as judges. We partnered with local organizations such as the Black Chamber of Commerce, the Dallas area Urban League, as well as the Young Professionals organization. We were able to show our students that these are people who look like you, who come from places where you have been, who live in this community, and who work in a community. Let them be your judge and be the ones to decide how well you are doing. It turned out to be a phenomenal event. We had over 300 people attend. Being able to create an experience like that where we truly partnered with the school and other community organizations to put on an event and inform their community in a way that our students would never forget. A service simply from being their authentic selves that they did not know they had.

SUMMARY

Community partnerships are the basis for strengthening the family-school community throughout the academic school year. When the school and the classroom serve as a space that is open and accessible to families, community members, local businesses, and organizations, an exchange of wealth and wisdom occurs. The school becomes a place of hope, not just for our students that we serve each and every day, but for everyone. We should think of the community and the school-house as a collective that drives student success. According to Ready et al. (2002), schools have historically served as a place to “preserve democracy, eliminate poverty, reduce unemployment, ease the assimilation of immigrants to the nation, overcome differences between ethnic groups, advance scientific knowledge and technical progress, prevent traffic accidents, raise health standards, refine oral character, and guide young people into useful occupations.” To transform the state of education today, this is a goal that we must strive to return to. Although we are aware that academic success is the priority for all students, there is no way we can get there without community partnerships.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Take some time to reflect and make a plan for **Community Partnerships** in your classroom using the guiding questions below:

- 1 How have you allowed your students to incorporate their community knowledge into your classroom?
- 2 What local businesses, organizations, and leaders can you reach out to bring to the classroom?
- 3 How do you believe families and diverse communities add value to your classroom instruction?
- 4 What opportunities of volunteerism can you think of to build a stronger community inside and outside of the classroom?

