Mr. Amram’s Classroom

In the Marshall Islands, Mr. Amram’s fifth grade class is learning about Pacific island ecosystems and, more specifically, about consumers (animals), producers (plants), and decomposers (some fungi & bacteria), as well as what roles they play in ecosystems and how they are impacted by weather and climate change. Vocabulary words, such as producers, are often not readily familiar to students, especially English learners. However, many students know about specific examples of these ideas from their everyday lives. Mr. Amram understands this and wants to build on their prior knowledge. For example, many students know about seasons and the times of harvest or Rak. Mr. Amram has talked to elders in the community about their knowledge of the local environment, and they explained that Rak is the harvest and rainy season, and that the winds are usually calm then too. This calm means that there is less salt spray and so plants, or producers, grow well. He knows that, historically, people of the Marshall Islands developed many methods for the sustainable harvest of resources – Mo – and traditional environmental management is still practiced in some places.

Mr. Amram may start his lesson by asking about what families harvest during the months of Rak. This connects to specific cultural activities and ecosystems. He also introduces the idea that people are consumers. He asks students to think about what kinds of animals eat the plants that their families are harvesting – these animals are other consumers. This form of questioning recognizes that children are making observations in their daily lives and that they can reflect and connect those observations in classroom learning. In summary, when Mr. Amram begins a lesson he:

- places children’s everyday practices at the center of learning and uses them to meet learning objectives, and
- explicitly and intentionally positions the western science content he is teaching in relation to local knowledge about the environment in respectful and equal ways.

Funds of Knowledge

All people come to activities with prior knowledge, experiences, beliefs, skills, values, and interests. These in turn affect their abilities to remember, reason, problem-solve, and learn new things. Whether intentionally or not, people connect and make sense of new experiences and knowledge in relation to what they previously experience and know. Thus learning happens best when teachers actively engage students’ prior knowledge and view it as an asset for learning. This has been referred to as engaging students’ funds of knowledge and ways of knowing and doing. This can, and often does, include teaching in a student’s first language.

Teachers’ views and understandings of culture and learning shape:
- Decisions about what to teach,
- Decisions about how to teach,
- Interpretations of students’ thinking and behavior.

Critical Reflection

Do you have a good sense of your students’ funds of knowledge? Connecting what happens in classrooms with local contexts and ways of knowing is an important step towards strong communities and quality education. How have you been helping to make this connection? How might you try this in your context?
This is just one example of how to begin with children’s funds of knowledge to enhance learning. There are so many ways to build on what kids know. Be like Mr. Amram and develop your own.

**Conditions for Learning**

For effective learning to occur, teachers need to understand deeply the sociocultural context(s) in which they teach. For example, teachers who have knowledge of students’ communities and cultures and are prepared to link curriculum to local concerns, interests, and cultural knowledge are in the best position to promote student learning. Also, when teachers incorporate aspects of their heritage science knowledge, students are more engaged in learning and perform better. In general terms, teachers create effective conditions for learning by using science knowledge from students’ communities – for example, the importance of the mangroves ecosystem for healthy coastal environments – as a means for teaching to the local and national science standards.

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**Culture**

People often have different understandings about what culture means. Understandings of culture as related to teaching and learning have moved beyond particular characteristics – for example, observations that Marshallese children can be more reserved in the classroom – to understanding the range of ways human beings make sense of and construct knowledge about the world as they participate in the daily lives of family, community, and nations, including their values, beliefs, and traditions, or *manit*. These practices are both historically grounded and connected, and they also change as all cultures evolve over time. From this perspective, all people, throughout their lives, develop different ways of making sense of the world that help them accomplish what is valued by the communities in which they belong. Such varied ways of knowing and doing are revealed in how we ask questions, how we argue or disagree about things, how we narrate or explain things, and how we approach the natural world. These differences can shape what a person thinks is important to pay attention to or what needs explanation and effort. Furthermore, these different ways of making sense of and engaging in the world are shaped and impacted by the languages they speak.