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# Preface

**G**rowing up, you've probably heard it a million times that *practice makes perfect*. Generally speaking, the more you do something, the better you get at it. Lawyers build successful law practices by successfully representing clients in court, providing sage legal advice, and drafting well-thought-out legal documents. Doctors with successful medical practices are able to consistently and accurately diagnose health challenges and prescribe the best course of treatment. However, much less widely does society hold the perception that K–12 educators who teach conduct an *educational practice*.

The use of knowledge to perform the duty of educating students defines an educational practice. Effective educational practices consist of practitioners who utilize research-based pedagogy to attain educational and social outcomes. They are defined by professionals who refine the quality of instruction through repeated planning, preparing, and presenting of material. Successful practitioners are able to consistently place learners in optimal situations of success by making the appropriate modifications and adjustments to instruction. The instruction is refined by self-reflection and feedback from the principal consumers of the curriculum—the students.

What does a highly *engaging* educational practice consist of? When you think of engaging students, elements such as time on task, students showing interest in a topic, or students showing excitement while completing a task may come to mind. Engaging educational practices are about sustaining student engagement whether the students are in or out of school. These practices are characterized by students who excitedly anticipate what the teacher has planned each day, interact effectively with their peers in the classroom, and most of all, enjoy the presence of the teacher. It's about enveloping students in an engaging educational experience.

To the point, the hallmarks of highly engaging educational practices are teachers who are able to consistently connect with students

through strong emotional and intellectual bonds. It consists of committed educators whose main emphasis is to make learning about *students* and consistently place them in situations of success. As a guide to assist you in building your practice or making your existing practice more engaging, this book will provide you with a well-constructed seven-step process represented by the acrostic *INSPIRE*:

- **I**nspect to inspire: Become a scholar of your students.
- **N**urture their attributes: Turn commonly perceived deficits into deposits.
- **S**ew success into your instructional fabric.
- **P**artner to make emotional connections.
- **I**ntersect their interests and experiences with instruction.
- **R**eflect on practice as a tool of improvement.
- **E**xpect nothing short of excellence.

This process will assist you in transforming your practice from one that simply delivers instruction into one that provides a dynamically engaging educational experience. It will also assist you in enhancing the academic rigor in your pedagogy with methods for providing challenging tasks and content, meaningful real-world applications, and not only elevating but also sustaining expectations for all.

## Organization of This Book

**Chapter 1.** The introductory chapter provides insight into the elements of engagement, what an engaging practice is along with the rationale for creating one, the theoretical framework supporting engagement, and similarities between teaching and sales situations.

**Chapter 2.** The first principle in the *INSPIRE* process, *Inspect to Inspire: Become a Scholar of Your Students*, is explored. Your success in creating a highly engaging practice rests on the effectiveness of processes that consistently inform you about your students. That is, tools, techniques, and strategies for gathering critical information about both personal and academic facets are examined. You'll receive specific guidance for designing your survey to elicit critical feedback and ultimately make the learning more student centered. These invaluable pieces of information serve as the foundation of the engaging practice.

**Chapter 3.** A common perception held in many high-poverty, urban, largely minority schools (HUMS) is that student deficits are

largely responsible for achievement failures. This chapter explores ways to turn commonly perceived deficits among students into deposits of the learning community. Specific ways of affirming, legitimating, and harnessing what students bring to the learning community are examined.

**Chapter 4.** One of the biggest barriers that preclude emotional and behavioral engagement is the lack of academic success of students. Moreover, chronic failure has been cited as one of the biggest contributors to student misbehavior in classrooms. Strategies for creating a highly supportive learning environment with pedagogy that consistently places students in positions of success are examined.

**Chapter 5.** A recurring emphasis in many urban classrooms is the creation of an environment of control rather than one in which strong emotional ties are developed with students. The extent to which teachers in HUMS successfully engage their students is inextricably tied to the strength of such emotional connections. A plethora of specific techniques, tools, and strategies for successfully developing strong, yet essential, emotional bonds is examined.

**Chapter 6.** One of the most effective ways to engage students is to find a way to weave required academic content with their world. This chapter yields a wealth of timely insight on how to minimize boredom, apathy, and disinterest and connect student interests and experiences with the core content areas of English language arts (reading), mathematics, science, and social studies. How to intersect play (games) with content and use multimedia tools and closure as a means of engaging the students is explored.

**Chapter 7.** One of the surest ways to stay stagnant or render a practice ineffective is to infrequently engage in reflective practice. This chapter describes the fundamentals of reflective practice and provides techniques, such as video, for framing and reframing issues, learning from experience, and, as a result, improving your practice.

**Chapter 8.** Pervasively negative perceptions of the impoverished conditions of HUMS students and their communities often contribute to the subconscious lowering of academic expectations. Strategies for critically examining your current expectations, elevating them, and maintaining high expectations of HUMS students are explored.

## Vignettes

Several key principles of this writing are illustrated through vignettes of three teachers as described below:

1. Ms. Klein, a 26-year-old teacher who grew up in a tony upper class midwestern suburb, has three years of teaching experience. She teaches fourth grade in a large urban elementary school in a midwestern city where 100% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Most students' homes are headed by single parents who don't consistently participate in the school activities.
2. Mrs. Jones, a 31-year-old teacher who grew up in the same neighborhood and attended the same school in which she teaches, has eight years of teaching experience. She teaches seventh grade English language arts in a large northeastern urban city. The city has seen a precipitous decline in population as a changing economy shuttered many once-thriving steel mills. Several of her students have to walk by abandoned houses during their journey to and from school.
3. Mr. King, a 43-year-old teacher who grew up in the Great Plains, has five years of teaching experience. After being laid off from his midlevel management position when his former employer downsized, he returned to school to earn a teaching certificate. He relocated to the West Coast and teaches economics to 10th graders at an urban high school that is often marred by violence; its walls are marked by gang graffiti.

## Actionable Professional Learning

Would you agree that when information is presented in books, other media, or professional learning workshops, the presentation too often ends with no meaningful way to extend the learning? That is, it doesn't answer the "so what?" or "what now?" or "how do I?" questions. To help you put ideas into practice, each chapter of this book concludes with a framework for you and your colleagues to engage in continual learning. In the last section of each chapter, Actionable Professional Learning, practical ways to critically reflect on, integrate, and improve the implementation of ideas over time are given to use within the framework of a teacher learning community.

When teachers are active participants in ongoing professional learning, such as professional learning communities (PLCs), their professional knowledge is continuously enhanced, and student learning improves. As Darling-Hammond (2008) poignantly noted,

“Teaching in which teachers have the opportunity for continual learning is the likeliest way to inspire greater achievement for children, especially for those whom education is the only pathway to survival and success” (p. 99). Moreover, knowledge is not only woven into the thread of teachers’ daily experiences but is understood best when engaging in shared critical reflection with those with similar experiences (Buisse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003). Such teacher learning communities yield much needed collegial support as well as opportunities to learn from each other about ways to create the “richest opportunities for student growth” (Lieberman & Miller, 2011, p. 19).

As you’re probably aware, collaboration is a cornerstone of PLCs. With the well-documented challenges of teaching in high-poverty underresourced urban schools, collaborative practices provide sorely needed collegial support. This book will encourage your team to utilize shared practices, critiquing of practice, collaborative inquiry, action research, and debriefing and dialoguing as vehicles of improvement.