

# Strategies

FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS ON DISTRICT-LEVEL CHANGE

An issues series of the  
PANASONIC FOUNDATION

in cooperation with  
AASA, THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS  
ASSOCIATION

UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR  
EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

VOLUME 17 / NUMBER 1 / SEPTEMBER 2015

## Destination: Equity

Our systems of public K–12 education in the United States have never been pervasively equitable. The islands of educational equity that can now be found in our sea of inequity stand as proof-points, demonstrating what is possible when strong leadership is combined with high operational practices™, which are indispensable to the achievement of educational experiences that are equal to the vast potential that resides in all of our students, including those who are currently grossly underserved in our schools. We have learned a great deal about what works in promoting high intellectual performance in students whose natural capacity to learn has too often been stunted, if not extinguished, in our schools.

This brings to mind the words of Ronald Edmonds, Effective Schools advocate and scholar: “How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of poor children? If your answer is more than one, then I submit that you have reasons of your own for preferring to believe that pupil performance derives from family background instead of school response to family background. We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need to know to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.”

We now know even more about what works for successfully engaging students in poverty and students of color in intellectually rigorous work than we did when Edmonds penned those words several decades ago. And the question remains, why are these best practices not being systematically and systemically integrated into our classrooms, schools, and districts?

This special issue of *Strategies* is devoted to highlighting this knowledge base and corresponding practices. To accomplish this task, we welcome guest contributors Dr. Yvette Jackson and Dr. Denise Nessel. Dr. Jackson, who is serving as Visiting Scholar to the Panasonic Foundation (2014–2016), is the CEO of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Schools (NUA) [[www.nuatc.org](http://www.nuatc.org)] and the author of *The Pedagogy of Confidence: Inspiring High Intellectual Performance in Urban Schools*. Dr. Nessel contributes to NUA as a writer, a member of the instructional assessment team, and a presenter at the annual NUA Summer Academy.

In the pages that follow you will find an in-depth case study of a school district engaged in systemic improvement, using the principles and practices of what Dr. Jackson calls the Pedagogy of Confidence®. We then delve further into the evidence-based beliefs and practices that underlie the Pedagogy of Confidence.

We all know the definition of insanity attributed to Albert Einstein: doing the same things over and expecting different results. The same inequitable results will follow the implementation of the Common Core Standards and corresponding assessments *unless* they come with a profound shift in how educators see students and the level of enrichment and support these

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## Systemic Equity

The Panasonic Foundation believes that school systems that practice systemic equity must do the following:

- Demonstrate a sense of urgency at all levels of the system to do “whatever it takes” for every student to achieve success in school.
- Engage all students in all classrooms in mastering rigorous academic content.
- Maintain a collaborative and productive culture and climate, encouraging all students and adults to “go the extra mile” to improve student outcomes.
- Develop a school board that demonstrates leadership, courage, and the will to govern the district on behalf of the entire community.
- Hold all adults accountable for the improvement of student outcomes.
- Use data effectively to continually assess, report, and guide the improvement of the performance of all students and adults.
- Provide a comprehensive student support system to remove barriers to the academic, social, and emotional success of all students.
- Ensure that every student is being taught by a high-quality teacher and that every school is run by a high-quality principal.
- Engage a variety of local partners in strategic and collaborative efforts to support the academic and social success of all students. ◀

students receive. The authors of this special edition of *Strategies* challenge us to see our young people and their teachers differently — our young people as more capable, and their teachers as more efficacious and better able to design learning for all students that is challenging, enriching, and structured to build on strengths and assets that children bring to school. The high-yield strategies and operational practices presented in this issue provide a set of evidence-based approaches for really moving the needle on the essential work of breaking the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes that now constrain not only our systems of education but our potential as a nation.

If you are fed up with an educational status quo that is preventing far too many students from realizing and building on their innate strengths as natural-born learners, this is an issue of *Strategies* you will not want to miss. ◀

—Larry Leverett, Executive Editor

—Scott Thompson, Editor

### About the PANASONIC FOUNDATION

The Panasonic Foundation was established in 1984 by the Panasonic Corporation of North America. It works in long-term partnership with a select number of school districts that serve a large proportion of children in poverty to help them develop the system-level policies, practices, and structures necessary to improve achievement for ALL students: All Means All.

### About AASA, THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

The mission of AASA, the School Superintendents Association, is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children.

### About the UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

The University Council for Educational Administration is a consortium of higher-education institutions committed to advancing the preparation and practice of educational leaders for the benefit of schools and children.

# Strategies

**Strategies is published by the PANASONIC FOUNDATION in cooperation with AASA and the UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION**

PANASONIC FOUNDATION  
2 Riverfront Plaza, Newark, NJ 07102  
Larry Leverett, Executive Director  
Scott Thompson, Assistant Executive Director  
<http://www.panasonic.com/foundation>

AASA  
1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314  
Daniel A. Domenech, Executive Director  
<http://www.aasa.org>

UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR  
EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION  
405 Emmet Street South,  
Charlottesville, VA 22903  
Michelle Young, Executive Director  
<http://www.ucea.org/>

#### Strategies Staff

Executive Editor: Larry Leverett  
Editor: Scott Thompson  
Copy Editor: Kathleen Larson Florio  
Design: Janin/Cliff Design, Inc.

# The Journey Toward Equity

*When the boy we'll call Reggie was in 1st and 2nd grade in his urban school, he had a sharp intellect and curiosity, but his behavior often infuriated his teachers, who regularly sent him to the office. The principal didn't quite know what to do with him, and his classmates, thinking him odd, frequently made fun of him. Despite all the disapproval, he didn't change, seeming unconcerned with what people thought of him.*

*His teacher for the next three years accepted him and appreciated him. She liked his keen sense of humor and looked for ways that he could win positive attention as the high achiever he was. For example, she had the students rate each other's creative writing periodically, and those with the highest scores did not have to do homework that evening. Reggie generated such clever, well-crafted, funny accounts that he was often excused from homework. With effective nurturing, he became a model student in 3rd and 4th grade, deeply engaged in demonstrating his intelligence and desire to be socially accepted and appreciated. In 5th grade, he earned top grades in language arts, social studies, math, and science. By that time, his classmates realized that he was much more successful in school than they were. Their earlier teasing was replaced by genuine admiration for his talents and accomplishments.*

*At this point, Reggie's parents moved out of the city and enrolled him in a school with a reputation for high achievement. They were not wealthy but were willing to sacrifice to give their son the best possible start in life.*

*Unfortunately, things did not work out as the family had anticipated. Reggie was the only black child in his new school. His classmates taunted him with racist comments. His teachers, influenced by their stereotypes, assumed that he couldn't do the work and would be a behavior problem. In obvious and subtle ways, they found fault with him and expected little of him. His parents hoped the situation would improve because they could not afford to move again, but by 8th grade, Reggie was cutting school regularly, no longer feeling a sense of belonging or value; no longer interested in hoping to receive what he and his parents had believed the school should have been able to offer him. He graduated from high school, but his grades were well below average, and he did not apply for college, instead taking a job that required little intellectual effort and offered little satisfaction other than the independence that a regular paycheck afforded.*

*Those who had seen so much potential in Reggie knew he would have been successful in any of a number of fields, and his parents were prepared to support him all along the way. Seeing him settle for so much less was heartbreaking.*

*Several years later, the teacher who had helped him thrive met up with him. "Reggie," she said, "you would have done very well in college. Why did you choose not to go?"*

*"Well," he replied, "when I was in your class, I thought I was smart, but when I moved away, I was taught that I wasn't smart at all, so I stopped trying."*

 **Equity for all learners must take a central position in every aspect of the system.**



## Equity in Education: What Is It?

An equitable system is one that guides *all* students to develop their competence and confidence as learners so that they are able to pursue higher education, engage in satisfying employment, and become effective citizens. Such students will have acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills and substantial knowledge but will also be skilled at critical and creative thinking, collaboration, effectively presenting their views, and thoughtfully listening to the views of others. They will also have acquired a strong sense of agency regarding the direction they will take in life. ◀

The inequities that affected Reggie continue to exist in countless American schools and lead many students to conclude, as Reggie did, that they are inept and incapable and that school has little to offer them. Classrooms where teachers recognize their students' strengths tend to be enriched learning environments, where teachers hold high expectations for student success. The reality in too many other classrooms is that adults' perceptions of student deficits result in low expectations. In other words, student characteristics are not the source of educational inequities; adult beliefs and practices are. Many students are chained by what the Panasonic Foundation describes as the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes.

What's needed to break those links is a transformation of school culture that includes high standards, instructional approaches oriented toward the strengths of learners, and responsiveness to their culture. Equity for the Reggies and all other learners must take a central position in every aspect of the system, from the vision and commitment of school boards to the day-to-day functioning within the hallways and classrooms of individual schools.

In the following pages, we first highlight a school district that has been undergoing such a transformation and then discuss the foundations on which district educators have based their efforts. ◀

—*Yvette Jackson and Denise Nessel*

# Robbinsdale School District: From a Desegregation Order to the Pedagogy of Confidence

In 1995, the [NAACP](#) brought suit against the State of Minnesota for inequities in the state's educational systems. The case identified a number of issues in Minneapolis-area schools, including the Robbinsdale School District. The plaintiffs argued that students were not receiving equal educational opportunities and that remedies were required. The court agreed.

## First Steps

An early court-ordered response was [The Choice Is Yours](#) (CIY), a program beginning in 2001 that transported a number of low-income students from Minneapolis to schools in Robbinsdale and other suburbs, increasing the enrollment of students of color in those largely white schools. Most of the educators in the receiving schools were not prepared for these changes, and it was not clear what kind of help and support they needed to respond effectively. Also, the incoming students were as unfamiliar with the schools' cultures as the schools were with the cultures of the new arrivals. As all worked to adjust, misunderstandings arose and tensions developed that had to be addressed.

While implementing CIY, Robbinsdale also explored other ways of responding to the court order, seeking the help of experts and consultants. Meetings, workshops, seminars, and other efforts ensued. For several years, widely different perspectives on equity existed in the district. Some educators eagerly embraced the work but had different ideas of what to do. Others were uncertain, skeptical, and resistant to the idea that changes could be made or were even needed.

At this time, Robbinsdale joined other districts in the Minneapolis area in a consortium that became the [West Metro Education Program](#) (WMEP). Key aims of WMEP were to provide culturally responsive professional learning and to respond proactively in other ways to identified inequities.

## WMEP/NUA Professional Learning

In 2002, WMEP decided to partner with the [National Urban Alliance for Effective Education](#) (NUA) to design a professional learning program that would focus on equity, literacy, and language within the framework of the Pedagogy of Confidence® (discussed further below). In 2003–04, the first year of the program, 19 schools participated, two of which were middle schools in Robbinsdale.

Participants attended full-day, large-group seminars led by NUA, and NUA mentors visited individual schools to demonstrate effective teaching practices and to engage teachers in examining their beliefs about the relationships among race, socioeconomic status, and achievement. NUA also held separate leadership sessions for administrators of the participating schools. These included presentations and modeling of effective teaching practices, examinations of beliefs, and discussions of what administrators can do to foster equity.

At its peak, the WMEP/NUA effort served 41 schools, but budget cutbacks in 2008 resulted in WMEP losing most of its funding, and the professional learning program was cut back substantially. Although many individual teachers and administrators were making substantive changes in their practices, the participating districts varied widely in the extent to which they were bringing about the transformation needed to achieve equity.

### The Continuing Journey

Dr. Aldo Sicoli became the superintendent in Robbinsdale in July 2009. Before that, he had been involved in the WMEP/NUA effort as a principal, so he was familiar with the Pedagogy of Confidence, committed to equity, and eager for Robbinsdale to make even better progress. As the new superintendent, he faced several challenges:

- *Continually increasing diversity.* Each school year brought new challenges as new families with different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds moved to the community and enrolled their children in the schools.
- *The need for an explicit consensus about equity.* Although the district had been involved in some aspects of equity work for the previous eight years, efforts were fragmented and not all schools had equity as a priority.
- *Varied outlooks and approaches.* Key people in the district had different ideas about how to identify and address inequities, while policies and procedures across the schools were inconsistent even though individually they were based on the best intentions.
- *Limited perspectives within the district leadership.* In 2009, only one person of color held a position on the district leadership team. Such limited diversity at the highest levels meant that important perspectives were not part of leadership conversations and decisions.
- *Staff mobility.* Because of teacher and administrator turnover, a number of current staff members had not been involved in earlier equity efforts and had different levels of experience addressing equity issues.

Under Dr. Sicoli's leadership, systemic change began. The most important step was to create a districtwide plan with equity at its core: [\*The Unified District Vision: High Intellectual Performance Through Equity\*](#). This plan, reflecting widespread input, was published in the 2013–14 school year. Its four goals are directly related to equity and are firmly grounded in the Pedagogy of Confidence:

1. Policies and procedures that will lead to academic excellence for all
2. Culturally responsive teaching and personalized learning for all
3. Families and community members engaged as partners
4. Empowering students by amplifying their voice



## 7 High Operational Practices

All students have an innate desire for engagement, challenge, and feedback. The Pedagogy of Confidence includes evidence-based High Operational Practices (HOPs) for addressing this need with all students, including those who are underperforming learners. The Robbinsdale goals reflect to a considerable extent these HOPs.

1. *Identifying and activating student strengths.* Teaching that encourages students to recognize and apply their strengths releases neurotransmitters of pleasure, motivating students to actively participate in the learning experience, set goals for their learning, and follow through with their learning.
2. *Building relationships.* Students fare best cognitively and emotionally when they know they are liked, appreciated, and part of a vibrant, caring community. Positive relationships stimulate both the motivation and the memory capacity critical for learning.
3. *Eliciting high intellectual performance.* Students crave challenges. Their intelligence flourishes when they are asked to think at high levels about complex issues, demonstrate what they know in creative ways, and develop useful habits of mind such as thinking flexibly and raising substantive questions.
4. *Providing enrichment.* Enrichment taps students' interests, increases their cognitive capacity, and guides them to apply what they know in novel situations.
5. *Integrating prerequisites for academic learning.* Readiness activities are critical at all grade levels so that students have the right foundations for learning new information and acquiring new skills. This foundation heightens students' understanding, competence, confidence, and motivation.
6. *Situating learning in the lives of students.* Students perform most effectively when they can connect new learnings to what is relevant and meaningful to them. Without such personal connections, the new learnings are not likely to be retained and used effectively.
7. *Amplifying student voice.* Encouraging students to voice their interests, perspectives, reflections, and opinions is not only motivating but also builds the confidence and skill students need to join wider communities of learners and doers in the world outside of school. ◀

For the first time, the entire district became focused on the pursuit of equity, with the Unified District Plan serving as the compass to guide the actions of the school board, the central office, the schools, and the classrooms throughout the district. Efforts at all levels could now be aimed at the same goals; policies and practices could now be connected and aligned. Key actions have included the following:

- *Establishing equity structures.* The district created an Office of Integration and Equity, along with a district equity council and equity teams at the building level. Equity moved to the forefront in conversations, influencing hiring, planning, and decision making at all levels.
- *Improving leadership diversity.* One-third of the positions on the district leadership team are now filled by people of color (in contrast to the one person of color represented on that team in 2009), and the district has intentionally recruited and retained people of color for leadership positions at all levels. Equally important, Robbinsdale has put in place leaders of all backgrounds who have what the district has identified as strong *equity consciousness*, which is a clear awareness of inequities and a strong commitment to addressing them. The improved leadership diversity has significantly broadened the perspectives that are voiced and acted upon across the district.
- *Aligning school plans.* A new framework for School Improvement Plans is directly aligned with the Unified District Vision and includes not only specific will-do items but also will-not-do items, otherwise known as *impermissibles*. For example, two impermissibles listed in the district's strategic plan for special education are *predetermined student outcomes* and *lack of response to failure*. Those providing special education services have thus agreed to avoid making assumptions about what students can and can't do. A child who is having trouble will get meaningful, specific response from the teachers (using the child's strengths to fortify underdeveloped skills) until success is achieved.

- *Expanding and refining professional learning for teachers.* Participants in a current NUA-led professional learning effort have increased from several teachers at two middle schools to growing numbers of teachers from six of the 14 schools in the district. The other eight (elementary) schools in the district are engaged in professional learning that is led by an internal, NUA-certified instructional coach. Members of teaching and learning teams, who provide ongoing support to classroom teachers, are also working toward NUA certification. The NUA-led work and other professional learning efforts are directly aligned with the Unified District Vision so that such activities across all K–12 schools are based on the same principles.
- *Providing professional learning for leaders.* The superintendent, cabinet, school administrators, and instructional coaches are all involved in ongoing professional learning with NUA that reflects the Unified District Vision. These leaders at first requested a focus on the fundamentals of school improvement and the change process and then began concentrating on specific equity work. An example of the latter is the Courageous Principal Institute, a two-year program for school administrators with a strong equity focus, led by two former superintendents. Also, monthly principal meetings are infused with equity-oriented professional learning, from the topics of conversation to the use of meeting activities that illustrate effective, equitable learning strategies.
- *Establishing and aligning walk-throughs.* Before, administrators didn't ordinarily do walk-throughs to monitor instruction. Now these are common across the district, and the walk-through guides are similar across schools, bringing consistency to this practice. Also in use are data walks, during which teams collect evidence that specific practices reflective of the Pedagogy of Confidence are being used. These observational strategies all reflect the emphases set forth in the Unified District Vision. In addition, students do classroom walk-throughs with teachers to identify examples of high engagement and discuss principles of engagement. For more information about this innovative strategy, see the video at [C41 Google Hangout, 18 Nov 2014, 33:00](#).
- *Bringing equity to STEM efforts.* Teachers of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) are working with Science House, a resource for teachers at the [Science Museum of Minnesota](#). Science House personnel and Robbinsdale educators work together to set goals for STEM instruction and assess the needs of the teachers in these areas so that STEM professional development can be as meaningful and useful as possible. Importantly, these efforts are directly aligned with the Unified District Vision so that they are consistent with other professional development efforts.
- *Developing healthier classroom cultures.* A distinct shift in school culture at all grade levels is occurring. Teachers are doing more collaborative planning and teaching and are more willing to share ideas and change their classroom practice so that their instruction is more effective. A “we’re all in this together” attitude is taking hold, replacing the sense of isolation that many teachers previously felt.

## Impact of the Pedagogy of Confidence

Under the guidance of Superintendent Melissa Krull from 2002 to 2011, the Eden Prairie School District in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, was part of the WMEP/NUA effort and embraced the principles of the Pedagogy of Confidence. Reflecting in 2011 on the district's concerted effort, [Superintendent Krull stated](#):

*Over the last three years, our black students have made a 21 percent gain. Our non-English speaking kids made 28 percent gains and our low-income students have made 21 percent gains. Our white students have made a 5 percent gain, so that moved them up into the 91st percentile. So what we have is a model where our achievement gap has been nearly cut in half in the area of reading. Prior to this year, we had some schools using this approach, and other schools using different approaches. This year, they're using it system-wide.*

See a case study on [Eden Prairie here](#). ◀

For further insights about the equity work in Robbinsdale, listen to the [discussion between Robbinsdale's Superintendent Aldo Sicoli and NUA's Yvette Jackson](#), which is presented by the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) in collaboration with the Panasonic Foundation. Or watch clips that address these questions:

- What's needed to engender [belief in students' potential for high intellectual performance](#) and a staff's ability to elicit and nurture that potential?
- How do you create an [architecture of support](#) to translate this belief into a transformative, unified district vision of high intellectual performance for all students through equity?
- Why was it [important to include the word equity](#) in the title of the Unified District Vision? ◀

- *Making substantive changes in actions to match new beliefs.* A good example of an important belief-driven change is the redesign of 9th grade English at one of the district's high schools. The grade had tracked students into pre-AP English or regular English classes. Students and teachers alike had negative perceptions of the regular classes. Significant behavior issues and underachievement were prevalent in those classes. After study and discussion, the school detracked the program. All students were placed together in heterogeneous English 9 classes, and each student could decide whether to earn pre-AP credit in that context. Students and teachers received ongoing support in the new arrangement. After the first semester, behavior referrals were down to zero, 30 additional students earned pre-AP credit, and pre-AP credits increased among students of color. Furthermore, teachers found the quality of student work was decidedly higher and students had an increased sense of community. The school intends to extend the detracking to English 10 and is advocating that the middle schools redesign their English programs accordingly.

All of these actions are aimed at high achievement for all students, but Robbinsdale educators have realized that to raise test scores and keep them high, the humanistic foundations have to be strong. Healthy relationships are critical, within and across classrooms and schools. Nurturing is essential, for students, teachers, and administrators at all levels. People will not do their best if they are unnerved by repeated demands to raise test scores. They will be effective only if their voices are heard, their efforts are appreciated, and they are given room to thrive as part of a meaningful effort. This is equally true for students, teachers, and administrators.

Although Robbinsdale has made significant progress, including much more than we have space to describe here, the journey is not over. Further refinements at all levels are being explored and a variety of outcomes are being assessed, but the district is confident that it will have more positive achievements to celebrate in the coming years. As one leader said, "It took us a long time to get to this point, but we weren't ready earlier for real systemic change. We didn't even know what we needed. Now we know. We have a unified vision of where we're headed, strong leadership, and the right foundations. There's a new, positive energy now that we all feel, and we're hungry to keep learning and improving." ◀

# The Pedagogy of Confidence: A Framework for Equity

Let's now take a look at the Pedagogy of Confidence, the framework on which the efforts in Robbinsdale, Eden Prairie, and other schools and districts have been based. The framework comprises three essential beliefs about learning. When fully internalized, they generate new perspectives that help educators transform schools.

## Belief #1: Intelligence Is Modifiable

The IQ score, once the key to the doors of gifted classes, AP programs, and prestigious universities, is an outdated measure. We know now that individuals do not have a fixed amount of intelligence that they carry with them through life and apply equally in every situation. In fact, everyone's intelligence varies with context, is influenced by expectation and experience, and is affected by mediation. It is no longer reasonable to assume that either high scores or low scores on intelligence tests, or their proxies, indicate individuals' capacities across the full range of human endeavors. At best, IQ scores predict success within a very narrow range of tasks that are related to traditional schoolwork. They are far less reliable at predicting success in innovative learning environments or in other areas of life.

The modifiability of intelligence has been clearly demonstrated, notably by Reuven Feuerstein and his colleagues. Their astute mediation with learners that others considered hopeless has been an inspiration to many teachers and other professionals. [Feuerstein's work](#) leaves no doubt that intelligence can be improved significantly with the right kind of mediative learning environment, one in which the mediators are adept at identifying the learners' strengths and using the strengths to make needed improvements in other areas of functioning.



[Read more about the Pedagogy of Confidence.](#)

[Watch Yvette Jackson talk about the Pedagogy of Confidence.](#)

**“W**hy are there such high percentages of children with learning disabilities? We say that they are the logical outcome of ongoing neglect of a very important topic: the need to systematically teach our children learning and thinking strategies. Think of the child that comes to school without the ability to compare, to focus, to collect data. How will he learn? He will indeed learn less well. Then the system will classify him as though the fault were in him. As though he is genetically lacking, faulty, defective. And we say, no, the child doesn't have a learning disability. Don't point your finger at him. He simply suffers from a teaching disability. You didn't teach him, equip him. Why are you surprised that he cannot function?” Words spoken by Rafi Feuerstein ◀

For a related perspective that questions the reliance on intelligence as an indicator of success, see [Angela Duckworth's 2013 TED Talk](#) and [this account of her research](#) into factors other than intelligence that affect individuals' success, notably the trait of grit.

## **Belief #2: Learning Is Influenced by the Interaction of Culture, Language, and Cognition**

Understanding culture, language, and cognition and the way they interact is critical for achieving equity in schools. Too often, language and cognition get attention in academic settings largely as separate entities, subdivided into language skills and thinking skills, while culture is ignored altogether; but they need attention as a triad.

### *Culture*

Culture is the composite of the history, customs, traditions, behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, values, and modes of thought that are shared by a particular group of people. Our culture influences what we know and how we know it, the attitudes and perspectives we have, the things we do, and the particular way we do them.

We are all members of different cultural groups simultaneously. We have cultural affinities with people in our families and neighborhoods and with the people outside our immediate circles who share our age, gender, racial/ethnic background, and geographical location. Our culture also includes influences from our occupation or profession as well as our religious beliefs, political leanings, interests, and leisure pursuits. In a very real sense, whatever is important to us is an integral part of our culture. Aspects of our culture may evolve with time as we move, change jobs, marry, have children, take up new interests, meet new people, travel, and so on.

Culture can thus be seen as a combination of things that we can't change (such as when and where we were born and to whom) and things that we do change (such as where we live, what we do with our time, and who we associate with).

Because our culture reflects all of our past experiences, it strongly influences what we learn, how we learn it, and how we use our learning. Culture is an ever-present influence, affecting how we infer meaning, interpret experience, make predictions, and set goals. However, because culture is such an integral part of us, we are not always aware of how our culture affects us as learners. This is especially true of young people in school. That's why the more learners can become aware of how their culture influences them, the more adept they will become at using their cultural frames of reference to enhance and deepen their learning. For an elaborated discussion of culture as it impacts learning, see [The New Frontier](#) by Sheryl Petty, et al. (2010).

### *Language*

Skillful understanding and use of language is a key to success in learning. We must learn to listen, speak, read, and write well in order to receive information and ideas and express our own understandings and experiences effectively. The four language processes are closely related and develop in conjunction with one another. For example, listening to texts of high quality helps us read effectively, and our reading influences what we understand from listening. Learning to write more effectively makes us more attentive to the texts we read, and what we read and hear often influences how we express ourselves in speech and writing.

Specific aspects of verbal language learning that lead to facility with language include vocabulary, idiom, literal versus figurative meanings, and a variety of language patterns, such as letter-sound patterns, syntactical patterns, and text structure patterns. In addition, learners develop their language capacities by using language inventively to compose poetry, relate narratives, present information creatively, and otherwise represent their thoughts.

Perhaps the most important aspect of language as it relates to learning is how students use their unique voices to express their understandings and their perspectives on themselves and what they are learning. From the earliest years through adulthood, talking

is a vital means of making important personal connections to what is being learned, a process that greatly enhances understanding. Exploratory talk is especially important, from the chatter of toddlers as they play to the discussion of older students as they work on a project or share their thoughts about what they have heard or read. At all levels, students benefit greatly from [having their say about what they are learning and how they are learning](#). For examples of student talk in action, see [NUA's Student Voices](#).

## *Cognition*

When students attempt to make sense of new information, they must connect the new to what they already know. Making such connections is at the very heart of cognition. Our brains are continually using past experiences and present expectations to make sense of the new. When we understand this basic cognitive process of [constructing meaning](#), we realize that telling learners new information is not an effective form of instruction. Instead, they need to be guided to make connections between what they know and what they are trying to learn. In fact, to develop students' cognition to the fullest, the focus must be on learning, not on teaching: the design of the learning environment, the skill with which the teacher engages the learners in culturally relevant ways, and the learning strategies students use. All of these strongly influence how effectively students learn to think and thus to comprehend what they are learning.

Because learners may not be aware of how they think or of how their thinking compares with that of others, school is an ideal place for improving cognitive awareness. The most productive classroom activities give students many ways to exercise their reasoning, compare their thinking with that of others, represent their thinking in different forms, and develop useful habits of mind. Instructional programs that explicitly attend to these aspects of cognitive development are thus much more effective than programs that focus only on giving students information or teaching them specific skills.

Educators are becoming increasingly interested in how to help students think effectively and represent their thinking productively. Seminal researchers and practitioners who have pointed the way include [David Hyerle](#), [Joseph Renzulli](#), [John Bransford](#), and [Ron Ritchhart](#).

## *Interactions Among Culture, Language, and Cognition*

The language that we experience creates neural patterns within our brains, and these patterns affect how we receive and translate messages and, thus, directly affect our understanding of those messages. In addition, because our reception of language occurs within our cultural frame of reference — the lens through which we perceive and understand the world — our culture influences how we process what we hear and read and how we express ourselves orally and in writing. In turn, our culture and our language capacities affect how we think, what we glean from experience, the knowledge we acquire, and what and how we understand.

The interactions among culture, language, and cognition need to be taken into account at all grade levels when deciding upon curricula and designing instructional programs. Learners' cultural frames of reference result in their understanding some things quite readily and finding other things inexplicably difficult or strange. If they are confused because the topic is remote from their culture, they will have a harder time developing necessary understandings and being able to talk and write effectively about the topic. That's why it's so important to uncover learners' cultural frames of reference as they study different subjects in school. By taking culture into account, students and their teachers have a better chance of seeing where confusions and misunderstandings may arise and addressing them before they become barriers to understanding. Students' cultures are also strengths, of course, that facilitate understanding in some areas and enrich the understanding of others by introducing a welcome diversity of knowledge and perspectives into the learning community.

The culture-language-cognition triad leads to new ways of thinking about learning and teaching, especially for underperforming students. Instead of teaching isolated skills, teachers who are responsive to the triad employ effective classroom practices that engage students, sustain motivation, and lead to high-level thinking and deep understanding. These teachers also realize that students benefit from being invited to discuss the process of learning and become teachers themselves.

Some teachers have had their teaching transformed because they have attended to the interplay of culture, language, and cognition. One example is [Jackie Roehl](#), 2012 Minnesota Teacher of the Year and active participant in the WMEP/NUA effort. [Merrick Academy](#), a school in Queens, New York, that works with NUA, provides another example: The staff transformed learning at the school with culturally relevant instruction.

### **Belief #3: Everyone Benefits from a Focus on High Intellectual Performance**

A commitment to High Intellectual Performance (HIP) for all students has important advantages. First, students' and teachers' attitudes about their daily work change. Instead of fatalistically assuming that some will make it and some won't, everyone commits to everyone's success, and that can-do attitude has a positive effect on everyone's performance — teachers' as well as students'. For example, teachers who strongly believe that all students are capable of HIP do not give up when some students don't understand at first. They try different mediation strategies until they find the right combination, and that not only helps the students but increases the teachers' own competence.

Also, when everyone is committed to HIP for all, the range of knowledge and skills available to the group increases substantially. Instead of a few high achievers dominating classes, all students contribute and benefits accrue to all. In addition, when all students come to believe they are capable, that belief strongly influences everyone's motivation and effort. Finally, students and teachers learn to question society's prevalent acceptance of intellectual class differences and give up the assumption that "smart" students are superior and are entitled to more admiration than "average" or "slow" students. The sense of privilege that has traditionally accompanied the achievements of a few gives way to a sense of pride in the achievements of everyone.

### **Implications of the Essential Beliefs**

Some ways of doing things have existed for so long in schools that they are seldom questioned. However, the essential beliefs at the heart of the Pedagogy of Confidence call into question several common school policies and practices and call for other, more equitable policies and practices. Here are some particular areas of concern:

*Focusing on deficits instead of strengths.* Teachers tend to focus on the deficits their students exhibit not only because they are concerned about how far "behind" some students are but also because they are compelled to do so by policies and mandates. In fact, concentrating on deficits and weaknesses is so ingrained that most teachers can't imagine thinking any other way. Yet the narrow focus has its costs. The danger is seeing only what needs to be fixed, dismissing what is causing the cognitive underfunctioning and ignoring the strengths the students have — the skills and capacities that can be nurtured and used to enrich deficit areas and convert weaknesses or underfunctioning cognitive processing into strengths. When [teachers focus on student strengths](#), motivation for learning increases substantially and students' actual performance improves, sometimes dramatically.



**How do students benefit when they are invited to think about learning from the teacher's perspective?**



**What kinds of classroom practices best motivate and engage students in ways that lead to high intellectual performance?**

**The importance of believing that all can succeed is brought home with stories of individuals whose lives were changed because someone believed in their capacities to achieve at high levels.**

**A sense of intellectual entitlement can undermine communities of learners in the same way that a sense of entitlement growing from economic class differences affects the communities in which we live. [Paul Piff's research](#) illustrates the deleterious effects of actual or perceived advantage.**

**Using defeatist language.** Referring to students as *low achievers* implies that they cannot rise above their current performance level. The only hope is for them to acquire the minimal knowledge and skills associated with being low achievers. The students are placed in special classes and given watered-down versions of curricula, actions that generate frustration and discouragement rather than enthusiasm and high achievement. More equitable is to consider low-performing students as *underachievers* who are not currently performing up to their potential but have the capacity to achieve at much higher levels. In fact, [treating underperforming students like gifted students has significant advantages](#).

**Using “ability” grouping.** In many schools, students are assigned to classes or to groups within classes based on their assumed capacities. For example, students with high IQs are put in gifted classes and students with low IQs are put in special education classes, or students are placed in honors, regular, or remedial classes based on other assumptions about their potential. Such divisions often begin in the earliest years when students are placed in reading groups based on their first attempts at reading. Teachers say that this kind of ability grouping makes instruction easier and more efficient. The unseen cost is that the placements end up defining the students’ capacities and depriving students of enrichment, challenge, and explicit development of higher cognitive skills. So-called high groups and low groups reinforce beliefs that intelligence is fixed and discourage teachers from inspiring learners to aspire to reach their full potential. [Heterogeneous grouping](#), on the other hand, provides students with access to pedagogy and opportunities that encourage them to develop their strengths and discourage them and others from making assumptions about their capacities.

**Relying on traditional classroom discourse.** The more a teacher talks in class, the more instruction is dominated by the teacher’s perspective and voice, and this often has a negative effect on student understanding. Learning is enhanced when teachers increase the amount of time students have to articulate and represent their understandings; formulate hypotheses, theories, and predictions; share their perspectives; ask questions; and in other ways become actively engaged in the higher levels of thinking involved in learning. Amplifying student voice is thus an important strategy when equity is the goal. Extended discussions are valuable, especially when they are conducted as student-led seminars, as are projects that encourage self-expression, such as publishing books, creating multimedia presentations, and hosting radio or television shows. In addition, classroom discourse is elevated [when teachers enable students to think more deeply about learning by taking a turn at teaching](#).

Teachers in urban schools sometimes believe — either consciously or unconsciously — that their students are deficient and that their underachievement is the result of limited potential. When we talk about people having undeveloped muscles or physiques, we say they’re “out of shape”; we don’t say they’re “deficient.” In our work, we focus on the idea that the brain is like a muscle; it requires specific exercises, guided personal training, and relevant and meaningful instruction to build competence and prevent dysfunction.

We know that far too many students of color have given up on waiting for the chance to demonstrate their creativity and intellect. We can re-energize these students by acknowledging that teachers often simply do not feel qualified to bridge gaps in experience and background in ways that draw out students’ strengths, connect with them, and maximize their potential. This doesn’t mean that these teachers are “bad” or can’t succeed with some students, but instead that they need new strategies and ways of thinking. (Excerpted from [“Cultural Relevance” on the NUA website](#).) ◀



**Yvette Jackson responds to these questions:**

**Why do so many students of color experience underachievement?**

**What is done for gifted students that all kids can benefit from?**

**What do leaders do to encourage stakeholders to adopt a belief in the innate potential of learners?**

**In transforming a school district, what is the most important critical element?**

**Relying on inequitable assessment practices.** High-stakes tests are norm-referenced, meaning they compare students against each other instead of against performance criteria. The students who answer the most questions correctly on a norm-referenced test receive the highest marks; all the others receive lower marks because they are compared to those who had the most right answers. The use of these tests is inconsistent with the belief that all students are capable of high intellectual performance. An equitable system, in contrast, uses a variety of assessments, measures student performance against specific criteria, and gives students some choices as to how they will demonstrate their learning. An equitable system uses assessment to identify strengths and to focus on underdeveloped skills in order to diagnose and address needs. More important, equitable assessment is never used to penalize with sanctions or punishment. ◀

<b>What Works Against Equity?</b>	<b>What Works for Equity</b>
<p><i>Concentrating on weaknesses</i> When teachers focus on deficits and weaknesses, students begin to question if schooling is worth the effort and are likely to lose their enthusiasm for learning.</p>	<p><i>Concentrating on strengths</i> Students benefit greatly from identifying their strengths and competencies, building on them, and using what they know and can do to shore up what they don't yet know and can't yet do.</p>
<p><i>The concept of "low achievement"</i> Using this term indicates that low achievement is a trait that the individuals possess and will possess throughout their lives.</p>	<p><i>The concept of "underachievement"</i> Using this term indicates that current performance is a temporary state that can be overcome with appropriate mediation and effort.</p>
<p><i>Homogeneous (ability) grouping</i> Assigning students to different categories of classes based on their assumed capacities is not consistent with the belief that intelligence is modifiable.</p>	<p><i>Heterogeneous grouping</i> The differences inherent in heterogeneous grouping generate synergies that help all students broaden their perspectives and learn to appreciate everyone's strengths.</p>
<p><i>Teacher-centered classroom discourse</i> When the teacher's voice dominates, the emphasis is on teaching.</p>	<p><i>Student-centered classroom discourse</i> When student voices and active participation are encouraged, the emphasis is on learning.</p>
<p><i>Norm-referenced assessments</i> These tests, by design, designate some students as high achievers and place the rest on a decreasing scale, with those at the bottom labeled failures. This form of testing discourages most of the students who take the tests and leads most to assume that they are not very capable academically.</p>	<p><i>A variety of equitable assessments</i> In an equitable situation, student performance is measured in different ways and is judged against specific criteria, not against the performance of other students. All students receive top marks if they meet all the criteria.</p>

## Final Thoughts

Our final thoughts are taken from *The Pedagogy of Confidence*, page 169:

The Pedagogy of Confidence creates an ecological perspective or frame of reference from which to view our students and ourselves. It is a perspective from which we can see our students not as data points within a gap, or as low-performing entities, but as intellectual beings waiting to excel and radiate excellence. It is a perspective from which we can see ourselves not as instructors, but as keys to the locks that imprison the excellence within our students — keys that can emancipate that excellence.

The Pedagogy of Confidence is freedom to harvest the strengths within our students and ourselves. Through artful application of the science of learning we can cultivate High Operational Practices that will elicit the high intellectual performance that motivates our students to self-directed learning and self-actualization. ◀



Learn more about the [principles of the Pedagogy of Confidence](#) in the context of the collaboration between Panasonic and NUA at this [Google Hangout](#).

On the NUA website are [additional case studies](#) describing school and district work on equity.