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## Socially Just Literacy Teaching within Virtual Spaces: Using Woods' Model for Evaluating Practice

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

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# Socially Just Literacy Teaching within Virtual Spaces: Using Woods' Model for Evaluating Practice

by Elizabeth Isidro and Laura Teichert



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## Introduction

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and universities were forced to shift to online-only formats, revealing to the broader society the social, economic, and racial inequities that have long plagued education (Lacina & Griffith, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). As higher education courses continue to be offered online, our charge in teacher education then needs to broaden to include not just building knowledge and skills but also promoting socially just teaching.

As literacy teacher educators, we problematize this challenge on two accounts. First, socially just literacy teaching (SJLT) is still an emerging line of research at the pre-service level, especially when it comes to teaching in virtual spaces (Isidoro & Teichert, 2021). Due to a paucity in the research, teacher educators do not have enough empirical evidence to glean from as a pedagogical model to guide pre-student teachers (PSTs) in implementing SJLT within an online context (Price-Dennis, 2020). Second, facilitating SJLT is in itself no easy feat for PSTs considering the other tensions and often, competing institutional D/dis-courses (Gee, 2004) they encounter (e.g., university requirements, district mandated curricula, mentor and school expectations) (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2014; Waldron, 2021; Yuan & Lee, 2016).

However, understanding PSTs' teaching experiences from a SJLT perspective is a worthwhile endeavor if we want to prepare them to serve the needs of *all* students.

In this paper, we drew from Woods' (2018) Socially Just Literacy Pedagogy SLP model as a way to re-examine our data in hopes of better encapsulating our PSTs' experiences. In our previous work (Isidro & Teichert, 2021), we emphasized Cochran-Smith's (2009) Theory of Practice in Teacher Education for Social Justice; however, this framework does not specifically focus on literacy instruction and does not directly address virtual teaching and learning. While Woods' SJLP Framework does not speak to virtual teaching and learning, it focuses on literacy instruction and therefore becomes a more viable lens to evaluate literacy instruction. What remains uncertain is its usefulness in understanding and evaluating socially just literacy instruction in virtual spaces. This uncertainty is what this paper will address. We framed our inquiry with the question: what are undergraduate pre-service teachers' experiences in virtual tutoring that align with socially just literacy teaching?

Socially Just Teaching Research

To understand SJLT, we need to look into socially just teaching, which is conceptualized through a large body of work built on culturally responsive, culturally relevant, and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Au & Jordan, 1981; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Socially just teaching is also founded on Fraser’s (2003) research on social justice, which centers on three concepts, redistribution, recognition, and representation. Redistribution refers to the distribution of resources to promote equitable access to learning, engagement, and participation for all students (Woods, 2018). Recognition refers to recognizing students and families based on culture, race, gender, religion, language, sexuality orientation, and (dis)ability (Cochran-Smith, 2010) and considering them as partners in education. Representation refers to creating systems that afford all parties a voice in decision making in students’ learning (Cazden, 2012). From this large body of work, other scholars have examined socially just teaching from various angles. Scholars have called for a coherent curriculum in order to promote socially just teaching

among teacher educators across a preparation program (Aronson et al., 2020). Researchers have also noted the benefits for PSTs when they have teaching experiences in a variety of settings, such as service learning, where they are given opportunities to reflect on social justice and multiculturalism to revisit their own assumptions and disrupt deficit mindsets towards students of color (Baldwin, et al., 2007). This is not a smooth process, since different factors such as time pressures, availability of school support, and level of agency in curriculum decision-making may compromise PSTs’ ability to practice SJT (Lee, 2011). Additionally, these findings from research are based on in-person studies and not focused on virtual literacy teaching. There is a dearth of research in SJLT within virtual spaces.

Socially Just Literacy Teaching: A Model

We framed this study using Woods’ (2018) Socially Just Literacy Pedagogy model (see Table 1). Rooted in Fraser’s (2003) concepts of *redistribution*, *recognition*, and *representation*, the model consists of three interrelated dimensions and corresponding considerations.

Table 1  
Woods’ Socially Just Literacy Pedagogy Model

Dimensions	Considerations
Pedagogy	<div>1. Teachers regularly examine practices and think about new ways of teaching literacy (e.g., comprehension, multimodal texts, oral language strategies).</div> <div>2. Teachers share expertise and collaborate with colleagues.</div> <div>3. Teachers link curriculum content with the community and/or world contexts.</div>
Literate Citizenship	<div>4. Teachers produce literate citizens born out of a mutual respect for students and their families.</div> <div>5. Teachers shift patterns of talk and interaction with students, families, and communities to develop productive relationships.</div> <div>6. Teachers link content to political, disciplinary, and community issues that are relevant to students’ lives versus a narrow focus on basic literacy skills.</div>
Student Well- being	<div>7. Teachers provide a supportive and safe environment and the right equitable outcomes; address the recognitive, redistributive, and representative social justice elements when working with students from culturally diverse and high poverty communities.</div>

Woods (2018) conceptualized this model for teachers working with students from culturally diverse backgrounds and high-poverty communities but emphasized that a social justice stance is “crucial for *all* teachers and *all* students” (p. 214). This model informed our thinking especially since the PSTs reported in this paper were White, middle-class women who provided literacy instruction to students from culturally diverse backgrounds and many of whom qualified for free and/or reduced lunch.

## Methods

We utilized Narrative Inquiry methods as a way to co-construct meanings from our participants’ experiences and our own. This method provided us a way to understand the experiences by organizing them into a meaningful whole (Chase, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Our inquiry also assumed a socially just perspective since contextual, temporal, and social understandings of experience are viewed from the eyes of the participants (Montero & Washington, 2021).

### Context of the Study and Participants

This study was situated in a literacy methods course at a university located in the Midwestern part of the US during the Fall 2020 Covid-19-impacted semester. The course was the second required literacy course for elementary education majors. Course content was accessed asynchronously in weekly modules. Both of us were directly involved in the tutoring program. Included in this study were two sections of the same course, with a total of 35 PSTs enrolled. Laura taught the methods course and supervised the PSTs in tutoring, while Elizabeth coordinated the field experiences by recruiting families and K-8 children to participate in the virtual tutoring program and also observed the tutoring sessions.

To prepare PSTs for virtual tutoring, PSTs accessed course content asynchronously in modules. Modules consisted of readings, video tutorials, podcasts, discussion boards, and resources. Course content focused on literacy teaching methods (e.g., related to teaching comprehension, fluency), literacy assessments (e.g., Leslie and Caldwell’s [2017] Qualitative Reading

Inventory [QRI]), together with other topics, such as use of diverse texts in instruction, authentic communication with students, critical literacy, and honest caregiver-teacher conferences (Edwards et al., 2019).

During the eight weeks of virtual tutoring, PSTs worked in partners and were paired with a K-8 student. The initial session consisted of literacy pre-assessments, with required administering of a literacy interest inventory, and the QRI, so that PSTs could develop instructional activities in response to the identified learning needs of their K-8 student.

Eight PSTs agreed to participate in the study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted after final grades were submitted. In this paper, we highlight the richness of Kerry’s, Tory’s, and Ava’s stories in relation to our theoretical model. These three participants were selected because they tutored a student of color and they self-identified as White, middle-class women. Their background as White, middle-class women is salient, given research documenting challenges of preparing White women to work equitably with students of color in the field (Emdin, 2017; Sleeter, 2001). To protect the privacy of individuals included in this paper, pseudonyms were used.

### Data Sources and Analysis

Part of a larger study investigating virtual literacy tutoring, data sources reported in this paper center on semi-structured interviews with PSTs. We interviewed each PST for approximately one hour after the semester ended. Interview questions focused on virtual tutoring experiences such as literacy instruction activities, successes and challenges, and any attempts to promote equity (e.g., making content more accessible for the student).

We analyzed the data inductively by (re)reading through the texts and creating margin notes to form initial codes, which were later collapsed into categories and themes. We engaged in coding and categorizing independently followed by discussions to reconcile any differences in our coding. The common themes we developed included “lack of prior online

literacy teaching experiences,” “referencing student’s interests,” “teaching comprehension,” “building relationships online,” and “viewing the family conference.” We represent our participants’ stories by employing three analytical tools of narrative inquiry namely, broadening (i.e., providing context of our participants’ circumstances), burrowing (i.e., focusing on specific details in the data), and restorying (i.e., capturing the significance of participants’ lived experiences) (Kim, 2016).

## **Findings**

### **Kerry’s Story**

#### ***Personal Background***

At the time of the study, Kerry was a senior working toward an Elementary Education certification with a major in English Language Arts. She described herself as a non-traditional student (i.e., older than typical) and identified as Anglo-American. She considered her teaching experience consisting mainly of teaching her own children and volunteering in her mother’s classroom. Prior to the course, she did not have any experience teaching online. She reported her fears of being on camera and had low comfort levels with the use of technology.

#### ***Virtual Tutoring Experiences***

Kerry recalled feeling challenged about transforming the print-based activities and books into the online platform. However, she shared that it was the literacy interest inventory that was helpful in designing lessons for her third-grade student, Jeremy.

We took the interest inventory, and that’s really what we based most of our lessons off of. And we just looked at what he was interested in, and then we tried to kind of stick with what lessons we were learning in class ourselves and see how we could take his interests and pair them with what we were learning at the time, and it all just tied together very well. And then we wanted to make sure that each week we took a page from the last week’s (lesson) and put it in there to reinforce that and just keep him interested in what we were doing (interview transcript, p. 3).

One of Kerry’s lesson activities that was drawn from the interest inventory was a comprehension game she designed focused on predicting and inferring.

I created this [Jam]board because I knew that he liked games, and he liked Jumanji, and it would be interactive that he could move his piece. I didn’t have to move it for him, and he could just play the game, which then I did ask questions about the book. But it wasn’t just, ‘Well, tell us who was the main character?’ It was ‘Okay. Now, tell us this...’ (interview transcript, p. 11).

Aside from Kerry’s close attention to her student’s interests, we also noticed her flexible approach to teaching. She explained that instead of adhering to a fixed lesson, she found it more important to focus on Jeremy’s interests and skills. The quote below exemplifies this flexibility as well as the thought process behind her instructional decision.

So we ran out of time to do the whole book, but our student was so excited about the game of asking questions. So we kind of abandoned the book idea and continued it into the next week on having him ask questions... and talk more about asking questions that (he) really wanted to know the answer to, which then led us into, ‘Well, let’s do inquiry-based lessons and let him choose a topic’ (interview transcript, p. 4).

Kerry’s experience in virtual tutoring culminated with the caregiver/family-teacher conference. As it was her first time interacting with students’ families, she described her feelings during the virtual conference and what she realized from the experience.

...that had made me nervous as I was being welcomed into someone else’s home. And so I needed to be mindful, which we should always be respectful and mindful of other people. But it really was a good experience. I’m going to have parents who come into the classroom someday because they’re not happy about something I said or did. So it was a great experience ... good



practice for being mindful of how other families may hear what I'm saying and how I may need to change the things that I'm doing or saying (interview transcript, p. 13).

As for challenges, Kerry mentioned that Jeremy had experienced audio issues and struggled with the small fonts on the screen. These events prompted her to consider the need for multimodal means of presentation for students.

### **Tory's Story**

#### ***Personal Background***

Tory, of Anglo-American descent, was in her senior year and was completing her degree in Elementary Education. She reported earlier experiences working as a teacher assistant in preschool classrooms as well as tutoring third- through fifth-grade students in math and literacy. However, none of this experience was with online teaching.

#### ***Virtual Tutoring Experiences***

Tory shared that she held two thoughts when anticipating virtual tutoring. She was nervous about how she would keep her student engaged in a virtual setting while also being excited about the experience, particularly as it would prepare her for an online- only pre-internship placement.

Working with 4th grader Javier, Tory recognized his fluent reading and decided to focus on further developing his comprehension skills. She drew from a repertoire of multimodal texts, such as YouTube and materials emailed to Javier's parents (then printed). Tory liked YouTube because she could turn closed captions on so Javier could follow the transcript. She also noted that since YouTube could be screen shared, he "was able to see all the pages but also hear the story" (interview transcript, p. 4).

When engaging in instructional activities, Tory was attuned to Javier's needs and reflected on a moment when teaching about the 'main idea.' Tory described,

The way the lesson was designed was that we would

read different sections of the story and talk about each main idea of what was just read. At the end, we were hoping to tie them all together into one big main idea, but [Javier] actually got really bored with that. He just wanted to go through the story. So then we [Tory and her partner] let him just read through the story (interview transcript, p. 4).

Rather than require Javier to diligently follow the lesson plan, Tory adapted her instruction and allowed Javier's needs and interests to guide instruction. She was still able to meet her learning outcome, just in a different design.

We asked him questions that guided him towards thinking of main ideas of the beginning, the middle, the end. And then from that he was able to come up with what he thought was like the big main idea of the entire story (interview transcript, p. 5).

Before virtual tutoring began, Tory worried building a relationship with Javier in an online setting would be challenging. Yet, in reflecting on her experiences, Tory realized that:

[In] the end because we did form, a similar relationship as we could have formed in person. ... It just went really well because there was a part of it that made me [at the beginning that was] a little sad like, Oh, I'm not gonna be able to meet these students in person it's not going to be the same but although it wasn't the same, we still built a very positive relationship (interview transcript, p. 6).

One method Tory used to develop this relationship was to plan time for Javier to share whatever he wanted about his week with her. She explained,

We always tried to start each of our meetings by just asking him how his week went and if there was anything he wanted to share with us because he really enjoyed what he did over the weekend or what was coming up that he was excited about (interview transcript, p. 7).

Importantly, it was a reciprocal process as Tory also shared moments from her own life with Javier so that it was not just his responsibility to share personal details. She explained,

I have a little one that's 11 months old and there was one point where I was trying to share something on my screen with [Javier]. The item didn't pop up but my screensaver was on with a picture of my son. He asked me to go back [to the picture] and asked 'oh, who is that?' So I explained to him and then every meeting after that he would ask me 'well, how is your son doing?' I felt I was just giving him the opportunity to talk about himself and get to know us a little bit outside of being his teacher (interview transcript, p. 7).

Tory was reflective about how digital technology can aid or hinder children's educational experiences. For example, she stated her consideration for students' access to technology and their home environments:

They might not have a device that they can, you know, connect with us and or they may not have a quiet area where they can work with us. There might be a lot of distractions and stuff going on in the background if they have a large family. So just different things like that just trying to navigate. How to accommodate just all the different scenarios that students might be in (interview transcript, p. 8).

Tory's thoughts about digital technology may have stemmed from her own experiences during virtual tutoring. While her technological challenges were minimal, she did recount an issue when Javier inadvertently minimized his screen:

We weren't sure what was going on because he, you could hear him. We couldn't see him, but we could hear him just saying that he didn't know where his teachers went. And we could hear him talking with his mom. And so that was, that was kind of tough because we didn't know what happened, we didn't know his computer turned off or if he had minimized it. And so we were kind of unsure as to how

to help them. So yeah, that was probably one of the toughest moments. He ended up being able to help him bring the meeting back (interview transcript, p. 10).

Tory finally also described her experience during the conference with Javier and his family.

The family conference went really well. Both mom and dad were present, and our student actually was there too. He wanted to be involved. So we kind of let him lead it, that's just kind of like the personality he had. So we just let him share different parts of the experience and then we would just kind of expand on it. We pointed out a lot of his accomplishments, and the good growth that he made. And then we also made some additions to them towards the end of it and ways that they could continue helping him build on his comprehension skills and some resources and stuff that they could use (interview transcript, p. 9).

### **Ava's Story**

#### ***Personal Background***

Ava, also Anglo-American, was working towards an Elementary Education certificate with a major in Special Education. She reported having little experience with teaching literacy but had hosted virtual music lessons with elementary-aged children. She considered herself having a high level of comfort with technology.

#### ***Virtual Tutoring Experiences***

Ava admitted feeling some disappointment that she was going to miss the opportunity to be with students in-person. However, given the circumstances at that time, she was not surprised at all by the idea of virtual tutoring. She stated that her concerns were mainly building a connection, reading body language in an online environment, and maintaining her student's interest online. She referred to the interest survey results and learned that her student had a wide variety of reading preferences and literacy activities. Having plenty to choose from, she described how she turned to physical activities as her way of maintaining interest and connecting with third-grade student Nina.



So (my partner) and I used a lot of brain breaks and physical movement for our student. So we would do jumping jacks. We would play ‘Simon Says’--that was her favorite. I mean, she got us to do cartwheels, and that was very difficult for both of us, but she had the best time doing it. So for the sake of building connection, I did a cartwheel (interview transcript, p. 4).

For Ava, such activity sent a message that it was okay to be silly and that helped establish a relationship with Nina. She recalled that it took a while before Nina responded with more than one-word answers even when they regularly asked her how she was doing and what she did for the weekend. Ava left us with a note of how the social-emotional aspects of learning within virtual settings are important.

Our students are missing out on seeing people and the development that happens with other people--it's so important--the social emotional skills. I think it would be really valuable for teachers to look for more ways to connect with their students. And we have to do it in a time efficient way. There are a lot of ways you can do that, whether it's just asking them to share something about themselves or maybe have assignments that apply to their personal lives so they can have that opportunity to share and learn at the same time (interview transcript, p. 11).

Another component of her teaching to promote interaction was the use of graphic organizers. Her lessons included using a KWL chart to help Nina record the information before, during, and after reading a specific text. Her lesson also included the use of a Frayer Model to help Nina differentiate fiction from non-fiction texts. To add, she enumerated the other comprehension supports they tried.

We used a story map a lot--what happened in the beginning, what happened in the middle, what happened in the end. We'd have specific questions within those story maps to guide her responses... We also used a BDA model, *before, during, after*, with pre-reading questions, so activating prior

knowledge of what she had concerning the material in the text. Then, *during* questions for comprehension as we were reading, stopping about midway through the book or a couple pages in, or paragraph, depending on the length of it. And then, the post reading comprehension questions after. So story map, BDA, and Frayer Model were the three most used ones (interview transcript, p. 7).

Ava had never experienced facilitating a conference with families prior to the course. She remembered feeling nervous and careful about how to communicate information.

I have never done a parent teacher conference. So that was definitely a little nerve-racking. We wanted to make sure we connected with them, but also made the information--we didn't want to be technical. You can't use jargon. You can't start talking about all these data points and spreadsheets... you want to make it easy for them to understand, but also not talk down about the information at all. So I hope we were able to do that, and her parents were very kind (interview transcript, p. 9).

Ava described her challenges in maintaining a good pace with lessons (given that tutoring sessions were short) and questioning her own ability to perform the assessments correctly in a virtual environment. Finally, she emphasized the need for teachers to consider access to the internet or devices that students may or may not have.

### **Demonstrations of Socially Just Literacy Teaching in Virtual Spaces**

Observing our PSTs navigate virtual tutoring experiences at the height of the pandemic last year led us to the question, “What are undergraduate pre-service teachers’ experiences in virtual tutoring that align with socially just literacy teaching?” In this section, we used Woods’ (2018) model of Socially Just Literacy Pedagogy to evaluate PSTs’ lived experiences as discussed above across the dimensions of literacy pedagogy, support for students’ well-being, and the development of literate citizenship.

## **Varying Knowledge and Skills in Literacy Pedagogy Within Virtual Spaces**

The findings above show PSTs' comprehension instruction within virtual spaces. Such instruction was facilitated and implemented in different ways and in engaging formats (e.g., Kerry's interactive Jumanji game; Tory's use of multimodal texts). Having no exact formula for what constitutes effective online literacy instruction, we considered the participants' innovative approaches as explorations of both print-based and multimodal resources for instruction (Price-Dennis & Carrion, 2017; Walsh, 2017) which exemplified their ways of rethinking literacy instruction (Woods, 2018). Providing students with multiple ways for meaning making is important because it increases points of access for students to learn content and help reduce the digital divide (McLaughlin & Resta, 2020; Rowsell et al., 2017).

PSTs' use of the interest survey was another literacy instructional practice they found beneficial in virtual tutoring. Used to inform instruction, it allowed PSTs to design lessons that were engaging and student-centered which are part of a high-quality literacy pedagogy (Woods, 2018). This practice reminds us of what Kunz and Lapp (2020) said: "all children need skilled teachers who can identify their strengths and needs and differentiate instruction accordingly" (p. 13). This is critical given the inequitable access to education in virtual settings (Harambam et al., 2013).

We found PSTs' pedagogical practices as discussed above demonstrative of Fraser's (2003) idea of recognition where students' personal backgrounds are made visible in the curriculum if teachers use what they know about students to design instruction (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This also demonstrates Fraser's notion of representation, since students are positioned to have a voice in their learning.

## **Forms of Virtual Support for Student Well-Being**

Evident in our PSTs' narratives is their support for the well-being of their students. These forms of support included providing brain breaks, using physical movement, asking students about their day, and considering

students' home environments and social-emotional needs. These teacher moves reflect a consideration for students' contexts (i.e., the virtual learning environment and greater societal conditions caused by the pandemic) and a reimagination of virtual teaching that is more socially just. This is based on the assumption that equitable access to learning includes showing empathy for how students engage within virtual spaces (Smith et al., 2020). These actions are also rooted in Fraser's (2003) notion of recognition where students' learning needs are addressed and a sense of classroom belongingness is nurtured (Comber & Woods, 2018).

## **Literate Citizenship: Mindful Communication**

SJLT calls for the development of literate citizens that is based upon teachers' respectful relationships with students and their families (Woods, 2018). One aspect of this work involves a consideration for patterns of talk and interaction that assume asset-based perspectives rather than deficit mindsets (Souto-Manning et al., 2018). We found some evidence of this practice from our participants' experiences (e.g., being mindful of how families receive what teachers say; thoughtful communication during family conferences). Though PSTs felt nervous prior to the family conference, they respected them as partners in their students' education (Peralta, 2019).

Another aspect of literate citizenship is linking curriculum content to students' lives and the community (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Woods, 2018). This approach disrupts a narrowing of the curriculum which tends to focus on basic skills (Tierney, 2009) and instead it orients students to community-engaged literacies and civic engagement (Watson et al., 2020). Unfortunately, this type of instruction was not evident from our PSTs' experiences. We speculate that since the topic on critical literacies and social action projects were offered on the 13th week of the semester (i.e., virtual tutoring was ending), PSTs most likely did not have the time to integrate such activities into their lessons.

## **Other Elements**

Our findings also revealed other elements from our PSTs' virtual teaching experiences which did not neatly

fall into any of the three dimensions of Woods' (2018) model. For example, the PSTs reported that they felt intimidated, challenged, or disappointed by the idea of virtual tutoring. This affective dimension, whether coming from the teacher's or student's side, should be addressed because affect could act as a filter that mediates practice (Cochran-Smith, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2019). Furthermore, PSTs reported technology issues (e.g., Jeremy's audio, Javier's minimized screen), which also mediate students' access to learning. While Woods' (2018) model was grounded on in-person contexts, these other elements that mediate socially just teaching need to also be considered.

## Conclusions

As we reflect on the outcome of our research, we conclude that Woods' (2018) model enabled us to examine PSTs' virtual teaching experiences from the perspective of SJLT. Having a framework is important to help us label literacy teaching approaches and scaffold us to advance our practice in SJLT. However, we also unraveled other elements that need to be considered and added into the model to guide PSTs and beginning practitioners into their journey towards SJLT. Finally, since our research is limited in scope, we acknowledge that much work remains in terms of exploring literacy teaching approaches within virtual spaces that promote socially just literacy teaching principles.

## Implications for Practice

We end our inquiry by listing some of the practices described in our findings. We encourage exploration of these practices within the individual contexts of teacher educators, PSTs, and other practitioners committed to promoting SJLT in virtual spaces.

1. Capitalize on literacy assessments that survey students' strengths and interests to inform instruction.
2. Provide students with multiple ways for meaning making through the use of multimodal texts and digital literacy activities.
3. Create engagement within virtual spaces through student interest-based lessons and interactive games.
4. Support students' well-being through activities

that allow students to be themselves (e.g., breaks, physical movement, conversations, games).

5. Connect lessons with students' lives outside the classroom and into their communities.
6. Build a respectful relationship with students and families through thoughtful communication and seeing them as partners in education.

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