



UNIVERSITY  
OF MINNESOTA  
Driven to Discover<sup>SM</sup>

# Minnesota Center for Reading Research

## Research Brief

### Youth of Color and Being Known: Teaching and Learning in Racially Diverse Classrooms



What kind of knowledge do students gain from school about themselves? What can teachers do to get to know their students? These were questions explored during the MCRR Summer Literacy keynote address given by Dr. Vichet Chhuon, Associate Professor, Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Minnesota and Ahmed Amin, Teacher at Roosevelt High School, Minneapolis Public Schools. The presentation was based on research the two have done together in schools.



Dr. Chhoun began the discussion by presenting student perceptions of how they feel recognized and understood by their teachers. Some students perceive that their teachers already have their minds made up about the future and potential success of students. This can be an unfair starting point for the student-teacher relationship. Dr. Chhoun pointed out that the need for belonging in classrooms is inherent in youth, and that teachers are tasked with fostering care, avoiding assumptions, and connecting with students. “Being known” by teachers can be an essential starting place for effective teaching.

In Ahmed Amin's classroom at Roosevelt High School it is evident that students are able to share their voices and feel "known" by their teacher. In his presentation, Amin described an assignment that he gives every year in his secondary Social Studies classroom. Amin shared the important implications for creating a classroom culture where there is a sense of belonging from the beginning. Students start each class with a learning biography, where they explore who they are as learners and read several excerpts from significant texts such as "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" by Paulo Freire, "Diary of a Part Time Indian" by Sherman Alexie, and "Between the World and Me" by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Amin uses these texts because they foster thinking around students' learning identities. In small groups, students meet to examine teaching and learning from the diverse perspectives presented in the texts and also dig into their own schooling experiences. The assignment culminates with the writing of an "I am from" poem that allows students to share who they are, and helps them be known to their classmates and teacher. This assignment is a powerful example of how teachers can nurture student voice in the classroom.

Teachers in the audience wondered how Amin's work as a secondary teacher might be translated into elementary contexts with younger students. When elementary teachers are intentional about getting to know about the lives of their students, opportunities abound throughout the school day. Tapping into the lives of their students and cultivating student voice can happen in a variety of ways and can be manifested in the classroom when teachers make connections to student lives throughout classroom instruction. In a forthcoming book co-authored by Lori Helman, *Dilemmas and opportunities: Close looks into language and literacy learning for linguistically-diverse elementary students* (Helman, Rogers, Frederick, & Struck; Teachers College Press, forthcoming) the authors share several examples of how teachers can be intentional about getting to know their students:

- Create writing or drawing assignments in which students share about their out-of-school lives, values, friends, and family
- Survey students about their interests in and out of school
- Create "All About Me" books where students share their interests, family life, and background experiences
- Send home cameras for students to take pictures of the people, places and things in their lives that they are most proud of
- Learn from parents about their children's strengths and passions
- Bring in community liaisons who are members of your students' home language communities to facilitate cross-cultural discussions and sharing.

Throughout all of the activities noted above it is important that you remain open and positive as students express their background experiences. To ensure that students continue to share who they are and what they know with you, acknowledge what they share in a positive way. As you become aware of the background experiences, languages, cultural practices, and interests that your students possess, you can also learn more about them yourself. If you find that a number of your students speak a common home language, say Hmong, you can do a bit of research on line about the history or sounds in that language. Find a picture book written in Hmong and share it in class to see if it elicits excitement or sharing on the part of your students. Begin to include discussions about things that students do at home that spark interest in the class. Connect students' interests in sports or the natural world with the topics you are studying in class.

Many of the educators in our state are White and bring a particular set of cultural, economic, and linguistic backgrounds with them to their teaching roles. By finding out more about our students, and helping them to feel included and known in their classrooms, our schools can become more inclusive and, therefore, more equitable.