



# Resources for Professional Educators:

Resources for Elementary School Teachers

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**Dear educators,**

As dean of the NC State College of Education and the wife of a current high school teacher, I know first-hand that educators have one of the toughest jobs in the world. For that reason, I have made it one of my goals to elevate the profession and provide as much support as possible to teachers in the field.

As part of this work, we have curated a series of tips and ideas based on our Ask the Expert series to assist K-12 teachers in a wide range of relevant topics. These tips are based on research and vetted practices from our College of Education faculty, many of whom spent time as classroom teachers themselves.

I hope you find these tips useful as you prepare for the upcoming school year. Please also know that all of the hard work you do is appreciated and valued by those of us here in the College of Education.

I wish you a great school year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paola", followed by a horizontal line.

Paola Sztajn

Dean,  
NC State College of Education







# Building Inclusive Classrooms

## How Can I Make All Students Feel Included?

By acknowledging and leveraging different cultures, values and ways of knowing, students are able to extend their understanding of content and themselves. The goal of an inclusive classroom is to make teaching practices relevant to all students by incorporating native languages and unique background knowledge and making space for perspectives that have not traditionally been included in the curriculum.

### → Tips for Building Inclusive Classrooms

#### 1. Celebrate different languages and ways of writing:

While there will always be a need to teach academic writing, teachers can also offer assignments that allow students to express themselves. Allowing students to write in dialect or slang, or use their native language in writing, can enable them to see their form of expression as valid.

#### 2. Allow books to be “mirrors and windows:

When possible, choose classroom texts that reflect the diversity of your students as well as open doors to different cultures they may not be familiar with. In making selections to fit your classroom, it can help to think about who the text was written for, what perspectives are omitted from the texts, what cultural meanings can be construed from the text and how the text is positioning the reader.

#### 3. Consider your students and their environment:

Thinking about your school and community, as well as where your students live, what types of experiences they have outside of school and what resources are available to them, can help guide lessons that encourage students to look critically at the world around them.



“Allow yourself to be engaged with the full humanity of your students by learning about their family, their culture, what inequities they might face within the community and how you can help address that.”

**Assistant Professor  
of English Language  
Arts Education  
Crystal Chen Lee**





# Supporting Students Through Trauma

## What Trauma Might Students Experience?

Any event that challenges a person's sense of physical, emotional, social or moral safety can be classified as trauma. For students, trauma can happen on multiple levels. At the home and individual level, students might experience emotional or physical abuse, family separation due to homelessness or parental incarceration, or diagnosis of a serious illness. At the community and worldwide levels, students can experience trauma related to natural disasters, poverty or global circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic.

### → Tips for Engaging in Trauma-Informed Teaching

- 1. Make the classroom a safe space to share:**  
When a student shares a story of a trauma they experienced, it may be natural to want to divert from the conversation, but it is important to allow students to share their feelings. Not doing so can cause children to re-experience those emotions.
- 2. Use picture books to address issues of trauma:**  
The stories told in picture books can normalize a lot of diverse experiences for children. It's recommended that teachers primarily use books published within the past decade, as older selections can sometimes contain outdated or problematic representations of various groups and newer books often focus on more relevant social issues.
- 3. Use available resources:**  
In addition to working with school social workers, a variety of resources exist for free to help educators engage in trauma-informed teaching. **The Brown Bookshelf** and **Children's Literature Assembly** offer picture book recommendations and reviews while the **Learning for Justice** website has a selection of trauma-informed lesson plans, articles and other resources.



"Teachers need to create classrooms that are safe, accepting places and, when stories are shared, it's important to bear witness. In other words, acknowledge that those stories happened and that child has legitimate experiences."

**Associate Professor  
of Literacy Education  
Angela Wiseman**



# Helping Bilingual Students Become Proficient Readers

## What Additional Struggles Do Bilingual Readers Face?

While non-native English speakers tend to develop interpersonal communication skills quickly, academic language and literacy skills can take more than twice as long to develop. Bilingual students or English learners typically have fewer opportunities than native-speaking peers to learn academic vocabulary in everyday contexts and, as a result, may not always have the same depth of knowledge as their native-speaking classmates. English learners may also have different background knowledge than their peers, making it more difficult to make connections to texts.



### ➔ Tips for Supporting Bilingual Readers

- 1. Draw on students' ability to read in their native language:** Studies show that the knowledge bilingual students establish in their native language can be transferred to the development of literacy skills in a second language. Drawing on literacy experiences and resources in a students' native language may help them more quickly learn new literacy skills in English.
- 2. Build on what students already know:** Gather as much information as possible about students' prior knowledge and family and community experiences in order to link those experiences to classroom instruction and build on what they already know.
- 3. Provide ample discussion opportunities:** Rich and meaningful classroom experiences can help English language learners solidify their understanding of new academic vocabulary and concepts. Provide students with opportunities to engage in discussions with friends about what they have read or learned as well as opportunities to write about the topics they encounter in texts.

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“An English learner's strong oral language proficiency doesn't necessarily mean that they have an equivalent level of literacy skills in English. The students need consistent exposure to a variety of texts and explicit and sustained literacy instruction in school.”

**Assistant Professor  
of Literacy Education  
Jackie Eunjung Relyea**



# Improving Students' Reading Comprehension

## Why Might a Student Struggle with Reading Comprehension?

Reading comprehension is often talked about as a single skill, but the process actually involves an orchestration and accumulation of multiple subskills. In many cases, a student who appears to be having difficulty comprehending a text may actually be struggling with word reading and can be helped with more practice in phonics and letter-sound correspondences. However, there are cases where children who fully master word reading need additional help in reading and language comprehension.



### Tips for Helping Students Improve Reading Comprehension

- 1. Model understanding:**  
Teach students to monitor a breakdown in comprehension by explicitly and intentionally modeling what a reader should do when they notice something doesn't make sense. This can be done by pretending you don't understand a word in a text and modeling how to work through the misunderstanding or by substituting a nonsense word or a mixed-up phrase or sentence in a read-aloud and hoping students notice and stop to question the part that didn't make sense.
- 2. Ask questions along the way:**  
Instead of waiting until the end to ask questions, pose questions in the moment to prompt students to think deeply about what they're reading. Although it may feel unnatural to interrupt a student as they are reading, questioning them as they work through a text can help teachers gauge if a student is understanding what they're reading and help students develop the habit of independently questioning their own comprehension.
- 3. Create interactive activities:**  
Word cards can be used with students to help them learn to create and understand complex sentences. Starting with four or five cards, students build a sentence and then gradually they can add more cards to the existing sentence to practice complex grammatical structures. Connecting the words used in the sentences to topics students are learning about in class additionally helps students expand their knowledge of concepts in other subjects.



"The more we can integrate what we call reading instruction with what we call content area instruction, the better because there are clear opportunities in science and history instruction where kids get to read something, think about it and act on it."

**Associate Professor  
of Literacy Education  
Dennis Davis**





# Helping All Students Feel That They Belong

## Why is a Feeling of Belonging Important?

Students who feel a sense of belonging at school are typically more energized, more likely to spend time on-task and return to activities, and more likely to choose to be in the school environment. Students who don't feel a sense of belonging often struggle to devote their full cognitive resources to tasks and experience issues with emotional wellness.

### → Tips for Helping Students Feel They Belong in the Classroom



- 1. Build connections between home and school:**  
Bring in community members, artifacts or even local news stories to reinforce concepts that are covered in the curriculum. You can also give students opportunities to discuss the ways in which the content connects with their outside lives, allowing them to drive connections themselves.
- 2. Incorporate students' passions into lessons:**  
In a school where sneaker culture was important to students, educators created a lesson that allowed students to design shoes that would be both aesthetically appealing and protective for a mission to Mars. The assignment allowed them to express their creativity and honor their culture while learning that success doesn't have to come at the expense of leaving their culture behind.
- 3. Give students a voice:**  
Allowing students to share about their lives in class can help them feel more connected to the educational environment. One way to do this is to pass around a ball before the start of a lesson and allow students to share one good thing that has happened to them that week. Additionally, students can feel a sense of ownership in their schools if they have a say in the way things are done through roles on advisory boards or collaborations to lead initiatives within the school.

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A sense of belonging at school means feeling a sense of acceptance, respect, inclusion and support in a learning environment.”

**Associate Professor  
of Educational  
Psychology and Equity  
DeLeon Gray**





# Using Students' Strengths to Teach Math

## What is a Strengths-Based Perspective?

Students' thinking is often evaluated from a deficit standpoint, focusing on what they don't yet know or understand. This can be even more prominent when teaching students with disabilities. Flipping the point of view to use a strengths-based perspective means teachers focus on what students already know about a subject and then uncover their strengths and build on them through instruction.

### ➔ Tips for Teaching from a Strengths-Based Perspective

- 1. Understand your students' ways of thinking:**  
By using instruction as a way to uncover students' thought processes, teachers can use students' existing ideas, encourage active thinking through a task while providing opportunities for reflection and provide ways for students to connect their thoughts to others' ways of thinking.
- 2. Get to know your students' interests and background knowledge:**  
By observing and speaking with students both in the classroom and in non-academic spaces, like lunch and recess, teachers can gain a better understanding of areas in which students feel competent and find ways to connect math to student interests. Use this information to create broad tasks that can expand mathematical ideas and bring forward and build upon multiple types of prior knowledge.
- 3. Ensure tasks are accessible to all students:**  
Providing accessible tasks that allow individual students to conceptualize problems in ways that are meaningful to them and giving them opportunities to reflect upon and verbalize their reasoning can increase understanding. Allow for different ways to engage with mathematical activities, as certain physical actions, like cutting paper or manipulating objects, can be difficult for students with certain disabilities.

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Strengths-based instruction is not just embracing the notion that students think differently and allowing that in instruction, but it's also meeting that reality with accessible instruction that adapts to and responds to that difference in ways that allow students to build from their own reasoning.”

**Associate Professor of Mathematics Education and Special Education**  
**Jessica Hunt**





# Getting Students Excited About STEM

## Why Do Young Students Need to Learn About Engineering Concepts?

Children start out as natural engineers, from finding ways to escape their cribs to developing new uses for toys. Building on this natural curiosity and ingenuity by teaching engineering concepts can help students envision a future career in STEM fields.



### → Tips for Introducing Engineering Concepts:

- 1. Seize real-world learning opportunities:**  
Formal lessons on engineering aren't required for introducing students to concepts within the field. Ideas can be introduced organically by pointing out real life examples that are familiar to young kids, such as engineering that exists within houses, cars, smartphones and tablets.
- 2. Take a low-tech approach:**  
Although technology can be used to teach about engineering, low-tech approaches are usually more accessible to young students and can inspire them to be more creative in projects. Creating a "treasure box" of common household items like popsicle sticks, rubber bands, paper towel holders, glue and even broken toys can inspire children to design and build.
- 3. Break down stereotypes:**  
"Don't tell students that they have to be good at math and science to be successful," Jones says. "If you do that, the students who don't like math or science, or who think they are not good at those subjects, will dismiss engineering as a career pathway. Instead, tell them that they may need math and science to accomplish the goal of solving a problem."



"Kids' imaginations and creativity are the best. If you introduce engineering concepts and learning in K-12, you keep them thinking creatively and believing that they can solve problems. If you add math, physics, chemistry, structures and circuits to an idea, it's beyond 'magic.'"

**Assistant Professor  
of STEM Education  
Tamecia Jones**





# Teaching Equitably, Not Equally

## What is Equity?

To meet the needs of all students, it is essential that students are treated equitably and not simply equally. Equality, which involves giving everyone the same tools and opportunities across the board, is not the same as equity. Equity acknowledges that, because of systemic oppression and historical legacies of exclusion, different groups will have different needs, and access to equal resources will not close educational gaps.

### → Tips for Becoming an Equitable Educator



#### 1. **Focus on transformational initiatives:**

"When something happens in society," Gayles says, "we often write a response, but we don't put meaningful, authentic action behind that response. Transformational work requires doing something (e.g., changing policy and practice) that challenges the status quo. It takes a lot of risks to do this kind of work, and you have to be willing to take a stand."

#### 2. **Examine your values, upbringing, and assumptions,** and be aware of how you perpetuate and sustain inequity in conscious and unconscious ways. Take responsibility and commit to change through reflexive praxis.

#### 3. **Embrace mistakes and make progress:**

"In doing this work, we are all likely to make mistakes," Gayles says. "When you make a mistake, you must own it, take responsibility for it, avoid getting defensive, seek to understand, and apologize. From there, figure out how you're going to move forward differently. It helps to be in community with people who can hold you accountable, to help check yourself, to make sure that the work that you are doing doesn't cause more harm than good."



"It's more about looking at what specific people need and providing that, making sure historically marginalized people have what they need to be successful within environments."

**Alumni Distinguished  
Graduate Professor  
and Senior Advisor for  
Advancing Diversity,  
Equity, and Inclusion  
Joy Gaston Gayles**



# Our Contributors



**Chandra Alston** is an assistant professor of English language arts education who has worked for over a decade preparing beginning middle and high school English teachers and studying the implications of educational policy reforms on literacy instruction. She worked as a high school English teacher in North Carolina for several years before earning her doctoral degree.



**Dennis Davis** is an associate professor of literacy education who studies literacy instruction with a focus on reading comprehension, assessment and intervention for students with reading difficulties. With past experience as a classroom teacher in fourth and fifth grade, he now serves as the director of the Literacy Space at NC State and spearheaded the Yadkin Wolfpack Literacy Partnership for Yadkin County teachers.



**Michelle Falter** is an associate professor of English education who studies English teacher education, young adult literature and emotion in the teaching of literature and writing in secondary classrooms. A former middle and high school English teacher and instructional coach, she recently engaged in a content analysis of young adult literature to get students excited about reading through diverse, high-interest books.



**Joy Gaston Gayles** is an Alumni Distinguished Graduate Professor and senior advisor for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion who studies access, equity, and success in higher education with a focus on barriers student athletes, women and people of color in STEM fields face and how barriers can be removed to help promote student success. She currently serves as the president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education.



**DeLeon Gray** is an associate professor of educational psychology and equity who supports educators, parents, leaders and mentors in unpacking the concept of motivation and closely studies issues related to feelings of belonging at school among historically marginalized students. He is the founder of iScholar, an after-school STEM-focused program that gives students the opportunity to collaborate on meaningful projects and speak to issues they identify within their own communities while developing a sense of belonging.



**Jessica Hunt** is an associate professor of mathematics education and special education and a Friday Institute Faculty Fellow who designs asset-based learning environments and tests interventions, including game-based curricula, to understand and support student learning, specifically for students with disabilities. Her experience as a middle school math teacher helped her develop a passion for teaching students with mathematics difficulties and learning disabilities.



**Tamecia Jones** is an assistant professor of STEM education who draws on her experience as a trained engineer to to change the experience for K-12 students who may want to pursue a career in the field. A former classroom teacher and curriculum designer, Jones now focuses on research related to K-12 engineering education, informal learning and assessment.



**Crystal Chen Lee** is an assistant professor of English language arts and literacy and a Friday Institute Faculty Fellow who studies the intersection of literacy, communication and marginalized youth. A former high school English teacher, she now leads the Literacy and Community Initiative, which partners with community-based organizations in North Carolina to amplify youth voices through publications.



**Jackie Eunjung Relyea** is an assistant professor of literacy education who studies literacy development and instruction for K-6 students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. She holds K-12 certificates as a reading specialist and English as a second language (ESL) teacher and serves as the director of the Cultivating Literacy, Inquiry and Content Knowledge (CLICK) Lab and co-director of the Literacy Space at NC State.



**Angela Wiseman** is an associate professor of literacy education who studies visual and multimodal literacies, childrens literature and family literacy. A former elementary school classroom teacher and literacy specialist, Wiseman now prepare's educators to use a trauma-informed approach and utilize picturebooks to address issues of trauma in the classroom.

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