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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Removing Labels, Grades K-12*, by Dominique Smith, Douglas Fisher, and Nancy Frey. This excerpt explains the what, why, and how of using asset mapping.

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TECHNIQUE 15

Asset Mapping

What: Asset mapping is a student-generated visual representation of the cultural strengths and community resources they draw on (Borrero & Sanchez, 2017). Students use inquiry to discover stories about their families, identify individual strengths, and draw on the values and ideals of the community in which they live. These asset maps are displayed and used for a classroom gallery walk. A second gallery walk is hosted to invite families and community members to see the assets their children have identified.

Why: An education that defines students by their perceived deficits will never disrupt systems that perpetuate achievement gaps. These systems don't just operate at the state, district, and school levels; individual classrooms function as microsystems. Deficit-based education does a disservice to teachers, too, as it prevents them from drawing on the tools they need to advance learning—namely, their students' individual and cultural assets (Kohli, 2009).

Asset mapping draws from several traditions, including sociology, urban planning, and social work. You have probably seen versions of this, usually a map of an area that identifies historical structures, public art, religious institutions, libraries, and such. Community developers use cultural asset

mapping to inform urban planning by identifying not only physical spaces and institutions but also the individuals, stories, and values that influence a neighborhood and make it unique.

Our students are walking asset maps waiting to be truly seen by us. Student cultural asset mapping was developed by Borrero and Sanchez (2017) as a gateway to enacting culturally sustaining pedagogy at the classroom level. In their words, “these maps are students’ own projects and are designed to focus on the cultural strengths that exist in students’ portrayals of their own lives and their communities” (p. 280).

As one example, Samoan American high school students identified generosity, family responsibility, and respect as important cultural traditions that sustained them from one generation to the next in an effort to combat the effects of systemic racism (Yeh et al., 2014). Consider how these cultural assets could be utilized by their teachers. Generosity is a necessary condition for high levels of collaborative learning to occur. Values of family responsibility can be leveraged to empower young people to name and work toward college and career aspirations that benefit their families. And respect illuminates the importance of conveying regard for a student during affective statements (see Technique 5). Knowing your students’ cultural assets (and using these assets) increases your effectiveness. Students’ knowledge of their cultural assets helps them discover their power.

How: There are three phases of development of cultural asset maps. The first begins with you as the teacher. You can start by reflecting on these questions:

- What are your cultural assets?
- What/who/where has helped you achieve your successes?
- Where do you go for support?
- What led you to become a teacher?
- What/who/where helps you grow and learn?
- What is your cultural history?
- What stories are a part of your culture? (Borrero & Sanchez, 2017, p. 283)

Next, consider the visual and aural images that convey these ideas. A cultural asset map needs to stand alone so that others can view it without explanation. The medium you use might be as simple as chart paper and markers, or it might be a diorama of objects. A digital platform might be more suitable, such as a multimedia poster (e.g., Glogster), or you might add augmented reality to a physical display (e.g., Aurasma). This exploration into the development of your own cultural asset mapping deepens your reflective thinking about what you bring to the classroom. In addition, it will aid you in defining what this project will look like for your students.

The second phase of the project starts with you sharing your cultural asset map with your students. This should be done judiciously, as teachers must make decisions about what is appropriate to share with students. Explain the project to students, adapting questions like those listed previously to guide them in their exploration. Younger students will likely respond well to questions that encourage them to find out more about their family's history, develop timelines of their own life, and identify places and traditions that are important to them. Useful questions might include the following:

- Who helps you?
- What do you know about your culture?
- Who can help you understand your culture?
- What traditions are important in your family?
- What traditions are important in your community?

Older students can add more about historical experiences that have shaped their ancestors' lives, identify local community leaders and institutions they value, and report on their own advocacy and service. For example, adolescents might want to share the struggles they have experienced, the issues that they care about in society, and the ways in which their ancestors have shaped their life.

The third phase of the cultural asset mapping project is a gallery walk. Therefore, it can be useful to add informal peer review at the midway point so that students can gain actionable feedback about their project. Because the maps need to stand on their own merit, students may realize that they have to do

more explaining. Peers who ask clarifying questions about the symbols and images chosen by a classmate can shed light on what needs to be further refined. Once the asset maps are completed and displayed, the classroom gallery walk serves as a rehearsal for a community-based showcase for invited families and community members. In the process, you will learn much about your students' strengths, and they will gain from this self-knowledge. The community-based showcase further extends your range as you build connections with the people most important in your students' lives.