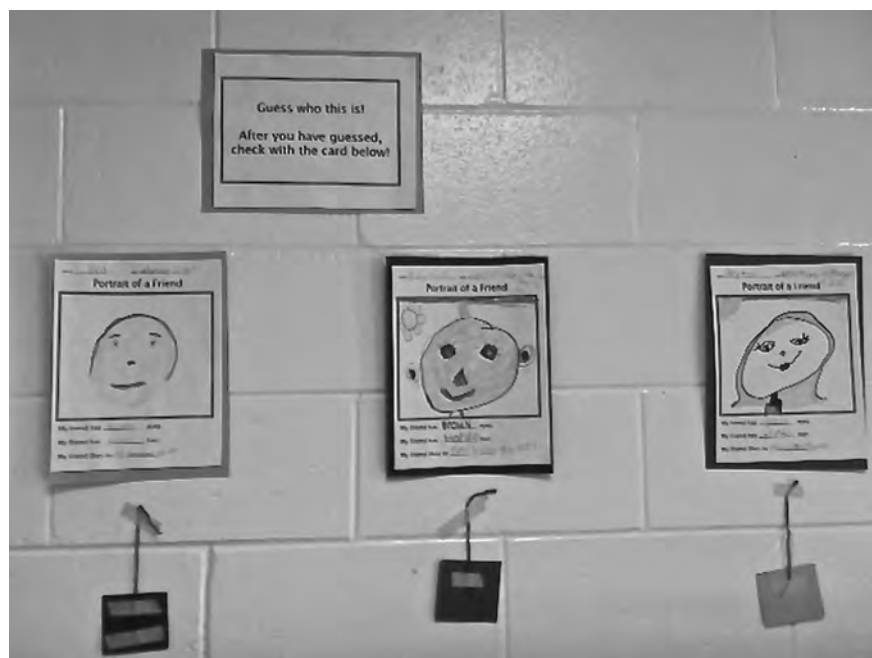


POSTCARD FROM THE CLASSROOM



In Christina Morgan-Poort's Grade 1/2 split, the students thought of facts that described them. These facts were hung on the wall with their self-portraits and students had to guess who each person was. This kind of introductory activity is a fun, hands-on way for students to learn about each other, independently and throughout the day. It also allows each student to claim the unique facts that will make him or her different from everyone else.

Identify Strengths

As teachers, we have a desire to quickly assess where students are lacking, either individually or as a whole, and we make it our job to “fix” this problem. Certain areas we can predict. We know that very young students are going to struggle with working in groups, especially when some are still engaged in parallel play. We know the academic knowledge that most students will need at the age level we teach, be it making friends, mental math, the concept of fractions, or forming a persuasive essay. This has been our role for centuries. We have been the fixers: we prepare our students for the next step. People put considerable importance on a teacher's ability to impart knowledge.

We need to shift our students from only relying on us to learn to also taking learning into their own hands and sharing their learning with their peers. Nurturing our students' strengths and finding ways to use those strengths to collaborate with peers or further their own learning is also teaching a life skill. Our first step to building on our students' strengths is to gain a better understanding of them as individuals.

From our perspective, we need to know the following:

- *How do our students interact with others?* Understanding our students' individual social strengths and areas for improvement and development will be

key to helping our students progress throughout the year. The classroom is a social experience and we need to know how each student copes with and thrives in this dynamic.

- *How does each student work best?* Do they perform better individually or in groups? Do they need a space on their own in a quiet focused area to concentrate or do they thrive with music and being in the centre of the room?
- *What assets do they bring?* Identifying our students' strengths helps us prepare them to be leaders in those areas. They can use these strengths for assisting others, modelling tasks, and identifying what the next steps are. We also need to know where the ceiling is for their strengths, how far can we nudge our students before they reach the point of frustration.
- *How do they respond to different experiences: e.g., with happiness, frustration, disappointment?* The school year is full of change and healthy challenge. What will be our students' reactions during these pivotal moments? How do they share their excitement and how do they cope with less-positive situations? Being able to predict or know a student's reaction helps prepare us. It also provides a window into how a student might be feeling.
- *What areas do we see as work in progress?* Our goal is still to help our students grow to their potential; that means we need to assess what our students' next steps are, just as they learn to.

How do we gain this information? It is fine to say that we need to learn all of these facts but, if we have 30 students swinging in 30 different directions with multiple learning styles, abilities, strengths, areas of improvement, and personalities, how do we gather needed individual information on each student?



Small Hop: Beginning-of-the-Year Letter Home

DESTINATION

To collect student information from home and from the students themselves.

SHIFT

While collecting individual data is important for starting the year, such information is difficult to obtain when we are establishing many new routines. By sending a letter home that requests this information, we are inviting our parents and students to be partners in their learning. We are validating parents' knowledge of their children and the voices of our students. We are also laying a foundation for a collaborative relationship and outlining our teaching philosophies.

SPARK

As a lure to task completion, link parents' participation to a curriculum night or interview night where the details parents and students provide will be discussed. This link will establish the importance of their dialogue, as well as signalling greater significance for the task.

UNFOLDING THE ROADMAP

- Send home a letter to outline the task, discussing why it is important and how you will use this information.
- Encourage parents and children to work together to complete the task, including their different perspectives.

- In the questionnaire, include a range of activities or questions that captures both the child's social/emotional abilities and the academic issues.
- You might choose to have older students write their own letters or complete the questionnaire in class, where they can feel the autonomy of not needing parent feedback. You could also send home an additional letter for parents to complete with or without the student.
- Here is a sample letter, addressed to the student:

Dear Samuel,

I am thrilled to be learning with you this year. A big part of starting off this adventure together is having a better understanding of each other. Included with this letter is a list of activities that I hope you will complete with your family. Please sit down and talk about what activities you love, which activities you feel comfortable with, and which ones you would like to get better at.

I want to ensure that that the curriculum and learning activities this year are meaningful to you. By having a better understanding of what you enjoy and what you do not like, I will get a sense of what motivates you and what you see as goals for the year. Although I cannot promise to incorporate all of your favorite activities, this list will help me tailor assignments and activities to incorporate your interests.

When you have completed the checklist, please select the top four things that you feel I should know about you. These four items can be things that you enjoy or would like to work on.

On Monday, I will share my list of activities and my top four items with you so that you have a better sense of what learning with me will be like. On September 28, the school is hosting a settling-in interview and you and your parents are invited to discuss the transition into our classroom. On this night, we will also take a moment to discuss your list of top four items.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.
Sincerely,

POSTCARD FROM THE CLASSROOM			
Please place a checkmark in the box you feel most represents you			
	I love this	I feel comfortable with this	I would like to work on this
Playing with friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading stories	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Working all by myself	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meeting new friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listening to stories	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Following rules	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helping others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sharing with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Talking about stories	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Solving problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tidying up	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Working with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sharing my ideas with the class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

This sample shows a possible task sheet for a younger primary student. The expectations are intentionally mixed up (i.e., social skills are not grouped together; reading skills are not grouped together), requiring student and parents to read each one and not just follow a theme.

POSTCARD FROM THE CLASSROOM

I begin every year by giving each student a letter I've written to the class. In my letter, I talk about my summer, my personal interests, my family, and anything else I think they might be curious about. After finishing my letter, I ask them to write me a letter back. If they retort that they can't think of anything, I tell them to look at my letter and find some ideas. These letters help me learn about my students' likes and dislikes (yes, some do include "letter writing" in their dislikes), and the other nuances that make them who they are. They provide me with a starting point for how I can connect with each of my students. It is a simple but powerful way to begin the year—by showing my students that I care to know who they are.

When I am not teaching, my hobbies include running, bicycling, swimming, hiking, gardening, reading, cooking (and eating) and cartooning. My favorite things to eat are pizza (ham and pineapple) and candy. I am usually a happy person, but there are a few things that drive me nuts: getting my socks wet (when my feet are in them), mean people, throwing away things that can be reused, and hard licorice.

Flashback to me in Grade 5...my favorite author was Gordon Korman. My favorite subjects in school were art, drama, and language. When I was in Grade 5, I thought I would be a photographer, a teacher, or a cartoonist. So here I am, a teacher who cartoons and takes pictures.

CLOSURE

By sending this task home with students, we create a stronger bond between school and family. Parents feel validated and students begin to discover the power of their voice. This document also acts as one of our first formal pieces of assessment for learning (see page 104). We can use this data to determine the interests of our students and the areas they feel they need work on. We can use it to match students with similar interests or areas for improvement, or we can use it to pair up students with differing abilities for collaboration.