Element
Knowledge of Students’ Interests and Cultural Heritage

Description
Students engage in many activities and family events outside of school. These experiences both reflect their individual passions and contribute to their approach to learning new material. Furthermore, students’ cultural heritage enriches classroom life and may influence students’ interactions with teachers and other students.

A Closer Look
To help you recognize the subtle differences between the higher levels of performance for this element, note the keywords emphasized in the descriptions and review the activities common to those levels.

PROFICIENT
The teacher recognizes the value of understanding students’ interests and cultural heritage and displays this knowledge for groups of students.

At the proficient level of performance, teaching practices may include the following types of activities:

• Teacher has students complete an interest survey and uses this information when designing learning experiences for groups of students.
• Teacher solicits information from parents or guardians about their student and takes that information into account when designing learning experiences for groups of students.
• Teacher designs lessons that allow for some choice.
• Teacher seeks out information about the cultural heritage of students and uses that information when designing learning activities.
• Teacher examines resources and materials for cultural sensitivity.
• Teacher holds individual interviews with each student during the first week of the course or term or upon enrollment.
• Teacher writes a letter to students to welcome them on the first day of class, and students respond in a letter to tell the teacher about their interests.
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- Students maintain interactive journals with the teacher.
- Teacher plans homework assignments or projects that offer opportunities for students to explore their families’ cultural heritage and share it with the class.

**DISTINGUISHED**

The teacher recognizes the value of understanding students’ interests and cultural heritage and displays this knowledge for individual students.

At the distinguished level of performance, teaching practices may include the following types of activities:

- Teacher has students complete an interest survey and uses this information to design individual learning experiences.
- Teacher solicits information from parents or guardians about their student and takes this into account when designing learning experiences for individual students.
- Teacher regularly designs lessons that allow for individual choice.
- Teacher experiences cultural traditions and practices firsthand, such as by attending an event at the local cultural center, and uses this experiential learning when designing lessons.
- Teacher examines resources and materials for cultural sensitivity and adjusts materials, resources, and the lesson design as appropriate.
- Teacher’s lesson plan reflects student-initiated ideas for incorporating culturally relevant activities and assignments.
- Teacher understands cultural expectations while being sensitive to the individual variations within the cultural group.
- Teacher attends cultural events in the community to enhance understanding of and appreciation for the culture.

The tools that follow will help you explore how to put the activities of these high levels of performance into practice in your classroom.
Element Reflection

- Teacher tool
- Student tool

1. How do you learn about your students’ interests and cultural backgrounds?

2. Describe the implications of the range of student backgrounds for your planning.
Letter to Send Home to Students Before School Starts

Dear [student name],

Hello, my name is Mr./Ms. _____________________. I’d like to welcome you to our ______________________ classroom.

[You might want to include a paragraph here about yourself and your interests.]

I am looking forward to working together in the coming school year. I’m interested in knowing more about you and your interests. Please fill out the following information and return this sheet to me by mail, by e-mail, or by dropping it off at the school office. Feel free to add anything not included that would help me learn more about you.

Thank you.

My name is ______________________________________________________

I like to be called __________________________________________________

My favorite activities are _____________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

My favorite subject in school is _______________________________________

I participate in the following cocurricular activities:
Designing Student Interest Inventories

Teacher tool

Teachers need to know students’ attitudes about the subject area they are teaching as well as what interests students outside of school, including the activities they participate in, the music they listen to, and the movies they watch. An interest inventory, usually given the first day of class and throughout the year to any new students, paves the way to get to know your students.

If a student has academic difficulty or behavioral issues in the class, the teacher can refer back to the interest inventory for insight about potential sources of the problem and open up a conversation. For example, if a student does not turn in homework assignments, the interest inventory may reveal that the student works late hours or participates in a sport. The interest inventory also gives teachers ideas about rewards that may work with a particular set of students.

There is no minimum or maximum number of questions for the inventory, but make sure that questions are about

- Your subject area and school in general. Do students like your subject area? What is the hardest aspect about your subject area? Elementary school teachers may want to ask which subjects their students like the most, feel most confident in, and so forth.
- Interests in sports or other extracurricular activities, music, and movies.
- Work schedules and home life, such as how many people live in your student’s house.

If you work with elementary or kindergarten students, parents may be able to better articulate the strengths and interests of their children. Before the school year starts, you can send a letter and survey to students’ homes to introduce yourself and solicit information from parents. You can also modify the letter to send to the homes of students who enroll throughout the year.

You can customize the following samples of inventories to suit your needs, or create your own.
STUDENT INTEREST INVENTORY: HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH

Your full name: ____________________________________________________________

The name you prefer, if different from above: __________________________________

Your birthday (month, day, year): ___________________

Name of parents/guardians: ________________________________________________

Names and ages of your brothers and sisters: __________________________________

In what grade did you first enter __________________ Public Schools? __________

1. As you think about your English classes throughout middle school, what was your most valuable learning experience?

2. What did your teacher do that helped make it such a valuable learning experience?

3. Here are some areas of study in English classes. Place a plus beside those that you enjoy the most and a check by those that you would like to practice more.

   - Reading literature
   - Writing essays/expository writing
   - Presenting speeches
   - Writing a research paper
   - Writing fiction/creative writing
   - Reading/acting in dramas

4. What do you most enjoy doing in your out-of-school time?

5. What school activities (sports, government, band, etc.) are you taking part in this semester?

6. What job, if any, do you hold? If you do have a job, approximately how many hours a week do you work?

7. What will make this English class a success for you?
STUDENT INTEREST INVENTORY: KINDERGARTEN AND ELEMENTARY LEVEL

Dear families,

In anticipation of the new school year, we would like to welcome you to our classroom. We are looking forward to getting to know your child and working with you to make this a wonderful year. Our classroom is sensitive to the strengths and needs of each child. Because you are the person who knows your child the best, we would like to invite you to share your thoughts about your child. Anything you can think of will be helpful. This reflection will help us better match our teaching styles and the curriculum to your child and her individual needs.

Thank you!

Student's Name: __________________________________________

Date of Birth: ____________________________________________

1. What do you enjoy most about your child?

2. When your child is upset, what are some strategies that you find helpful?

3. When your child has conflicts with other children, what are some ways he works them out?

4. Has your child experienced any traumatic events in her lifetime?

5. Did your child attend preschool?

6. What are your child's key personality characteristics?
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7. By what means do you prefer me to communicate with you?
   - E-mail: ____________________________
   - Telephone: __________________________
   - Written notes
   - Other: ______________________________

8. What is the first language spoken in your home?

9. Are there important holidays or celebrations that you observe?

10. What do I need to know about your child to teach him best?
    Academically:

    Emotionally:

    Socially:

    Culturally:

    Other: