

Making Learning Meaningful

Connecting learners to the communities around them

When planning

- ▶ **Before the school year begins or starting a new unit, survey what is going on in the community, country, or world** to identify occasions where you might connect to topics you are already teaching. What current events are children likely to know and care about? Which local events, issues, or organizations might enhance or extend children's learning? Consider local cultural, civic, or other public institutions such as colleges, museums, libraries, government agencies, and arts and civic groups.
- ▶ **Invite local people of interest to the class** (e.g., a florist, carpenter, politician, activist, artist), either to share their expertise or to ask for student input on a problem or question they are facing.
- ▶ **Consider children's rights and responsibilities as members of their classrooms, school, and larger communities.** What issues are missing student voices? How might children influence the thinking of others by sharing opinions about policies and practices that will affect their lives (e.g., school transportation, recycling, public spaces, etc.)? Interview children individually or in groups to ask them what problems their community faces and what ideas they have for addressing them.
- ▶ **Identify an authentic audience for learners to share their learning with,** in or outside school. Potential audiences include students in other classrooms, grades, or schools; younger or older students; families; and community members. Older students might write an article for a platform like Wikipedia about a topic of interest that they think others would find valuable.

When teaching

- ▶ From time to time, **ask children to make connections between what they are learning and why it matters.** "Why does this matter to me? To the people around me? To the world?" For more information, see [The 3 Whys](#) thinking routine¹.
- ▶ **To support children's desire to take meaningful action, ask them to consider different spheres of influence.** Let them know that having a conversation about raising awareness or engaging others in identifying or solving a problem can also be a form of action. "What actions can we take with people we know?" (e.g., at the dinner table, face-to-face); "What actions can we take with people in our community?" (e.g., school or neighborhood); "What actions can we take with people around the world?" (e.g., online, nationally, or internationally). For more information, see the [Circles of Action](#) thinking routine².



More Than One Way

- ▶ **Partner with another organization**, such as a children’s museum or library, to build on children’s strengths and share their expertise with the community. See [Places to Play in Providence: A Guide to the City by Our Youngest Citizens](#)³ and the [Children are Citizens Guidebooks](#)⁴ for inspiration.
- ▶ Another way to connect learners to the community is for the class to **receive an invitation from a public official or another person of note** asking for their ideas or participation. In the Boston Public Schools (U.S.), kindergartners receive a letter from the mayor inviting suggestions about construction in the city that would make Boston a fairer and more interesting place for children. Children’s constructions are displayed at City Hall.

Notes

1. **The 3 Whys thinking routine:** www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/the-3-whys
2. **Circles of Action:** www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/circles-of-action
3. **Places to Play in Providence: A Guide to the City by Our Youngest Citizens:** issuu.com/r2lp/docs/places_to_play_in_pvd
4. **Children are Citizens:** www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/children-are-citizens