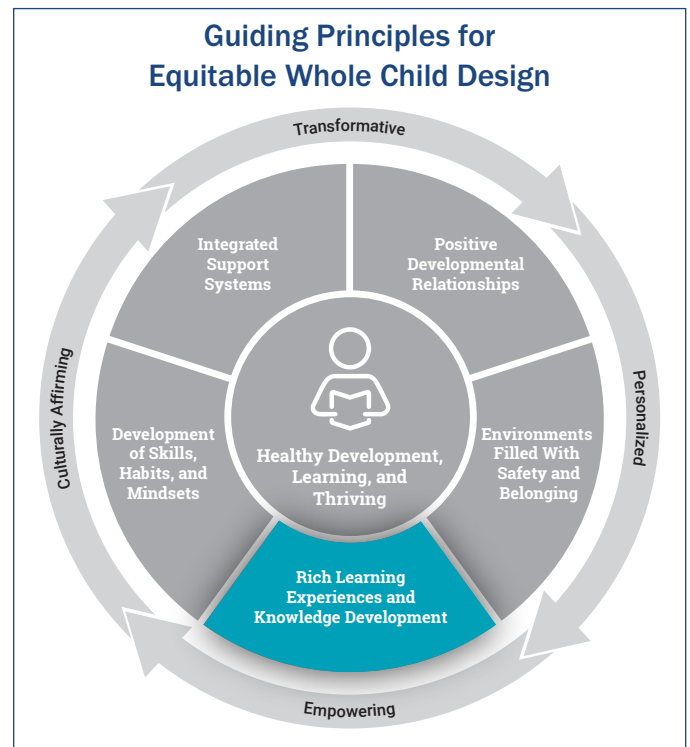


## Key Takeaways: Rich Learning Experiences and Knowledge Development

The Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design show how practitioners can integrate a range of structures and practices to maximize productive learning and development. Among its five elements are rich learning experiences and knowledge development, which enable students to deeply understand disciplinary content, communicate effectively, build analytic skills, and develop and transfer skills and knowledge to new and increasingly complex problems.

Learning is a function both of teaching—what is taught and how it is taught—and of student perceptions about the material being taught and about themselves as learners. Students learn best when they are engaged in authentic activities and are collaboratively working and learning with peers to deepen their understanding and to transfer knowledge and skills to new contexts and problems. Students’ motivation, performance, and belief in their abilities are shaped by the nature of learning tasks and contexts and can be nurtured by skillful teaching that builds on students’ cultures, prior knowledge, and experience to accomplish meaningful tasks.



Because learning is individual, teachers need opportunities and tools to understand and accommodate students’ interests and distinctive learning pathways. Approaches to curriculum design and instruction should recognize that learning will happen in fits and starts that require flexible scaffolding and supports, differentiated strategies to reach common goals and support productive struggle that leads to new skills, and methods to leverage learners’ strengths to address areas for growth. To do this, schools can implement the following:

**Universal Design for Learning:** All learning is variable. To enable the success of diverse learners without tracking and stigma, educators should allow for the use of varied teaching and learning modalities that connect to students’ experiences and prior knowledge. The [Universal Design for Learning](#) framework provides guidelines that can support practitioners in creating learning experiences that allow students to use multiple tools, forms of engagement, and modes of expression to demonstrate their learning.

**Scaffolds for Success:** Learning scaffolds are the structures and practices that provide students with the guidance that allows them to more readily master increasingly complex skills and achieve conceptual understanding. Effective scaffolds include:

- **motivating tasks**, which make learning opportunities relevant, clear, and authentic;
- **structured supports**, which chunk performance tasks and offer thoughtful guidance so students can make meaning and feel reassured throughout the learning process;
- **formative assessments** that offer close observations of students’ work and provide educators with rich information about students’ thinking, which can, in turn, inform next steps in the learning process;
- **tools**, such as assistive technologies, classroom artifacts that remind students of facts and processes they’ve learned, and other memory assists that free up the mind’s attention for higher-order thinking; and
- **multiple ways to show understanding**, through which students have varied opportunities and options for exploring, understanding, and demonstrating their learning and see the connections among ideas and events across time, space, and disciplines.

**Inquiry-Based Learning:** To optimize learning, educators should build on students’ prior knowledge, connect it to the big ideas of a discipline, and design tasks that are engaging and relevant to their interests. A powerful way that this can be enabled is through inquiry-based learning that engages students in finding the answers to meaningful questions. This approach—which can structure a single day’s lesson or a multiweek project—allows students to take an active role in constructing knowledge, to engage in authentic tasks, and ultimately to “learn to learn.” Inquiry-based learning is most effective when it is carefully scaffolded and supported by educators with direct instruction, informational resources, structures for group work, and other tools at key junctures.

**Performance Assessments:** Performance assessments ask students to apply their knowledge and skills by creating a product, presentation, and/or demonstration that is then assembled through a portfolio or other systematic work collection over time to demonstrate growth and achievement. These assessments are most effective when they incorporate opportunities for feedback and revision and are guided by well-defined criteria that guide learning and support the application of skills and knowledge to new contexts. In addition, providing opportunities for students to set goals and to assess their own work and that of their peers—often using rubrics and presentations that allow for questioning and exchange—can encourage students to become increasingly self-aware, confident, and independent learners.

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:** Culturally responsive pedagogy invites students’ identities into the classroom to support rigorous learning by affirming their strengths and by making explicit connections between students’ prior knowledge and cultural experiences and the content under study. Doing so enables educators to be responsive to students—both by validating and reflecting the diverse backgrounds they bring and by building upon their unique knowledge to propel critical thinking. This teaching challenges and supports students in transferring knowledge and skills to new content areas and, ultimately, improves their achievement and leads to greater competence. It also furthers belonging and inclusion as well as positive identity development and engagement in learning. Culturally responsive approaches include:

- **practices for learning about and from students and their communities**, such as classroom meetings, carefully chosen assignments, journaling, surveys, and community walks, which can allow educators to know students and the knowledge they carry;
- **opportunities for student voice and agency**, which include activities that explore identity or community issues and allow young people to think about what they have experienced, care about, and can do;
- **community-based projects**, which ask students to critically analyze relevant questions or problems within their communities and take action to make change; and
- **content and materials** that empower students to value their own and other cultures and incorporate cultural information into the heart of curriculum, instead of simply adding on at the margin. These materials should also build bridges between students’ experiences and school content that draw on the familiar to propel new learning and expression.

Adopting culturally responsive pedagogical approaches requires that practitioners acknowledge that teaching and learning can perpetuate patterns of inequity. With this understanding, educators can design learning experiences that disrupt these patterns and enable growth of higher-order skills and academic competencies.

To see the full playbook, visit <https://k12.designprinciples.org>.

