Personalizing Learning and Learning Environments for Adolescents

READINGS TO BE READ BEFORE SEMINAR

Meeting the Developmental and Cultural Needs of Diverse Learners

In her book *The Right to Learn*, Linda Darling-Hammond suggests that knowledge of adolescent development is a critical competency for secondary teachers. This understanding should include "knowing how adolescents think and behave; appreciation for the vast range of normal adolescent thinking and behavior; awareness that each students' cultural identity influences their development; and the awareness that an adolescent's intellectual, social, emotional, and ethical development are inextricably linked, although these aspects of development may reach maturity at different times within a single adolescent." (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 294)

Some Benchmarks of Adolescent Development

The four major tasks of adolescence are:

- Establishing one's own identity—healthy identity involves a "balance between being with others and being comfortable being alone." (Pruitt, D., 1999, p. 30)

- Becoming more intimate with peers—as students get older they spend increasing amounts of time with friends.

- Developing a mature relationship with one's family—older adolescents see themselves as equals of their parents, and parents tend to recognize that the power balance in family relationships is shifting.

- Achieving a growing sense of autonomy, control, and mastery in the world.

EARLY ADOLESCENCE: 10 – 14 Years, Peer Acceptance

There are big individual and gender differences in the timing and results of puberty. Early maturing girls seem to be especially at risk of emotional, behavioral, and adjustment problems. While most girls have gone through the major transitions of puberty by the time they reach ninth grade, a small minority may lag behind their peers. Most boys entering high school will be in the midst of their developmental transition. Boys who lag far behind are likely to have the most difficulty adjusting and finding acceptance with their peers.

Gaining a sense of their "maleness" and "femaleness" is an important part of their development. Pre-teens are curious about sexual matters. Pre-teens develop new feelings about their own bodies rather than developing sexual relationships with the opposite sex. Young teens have a huge need for privacy that emerges from what David Elkind calls the imaginary audience—the notion that everyone is watching you all the time. Kids are very self-conscious at this age and "almost die" from fear of embarrassment! This is the stage when children begin to develop their self-awareness, thus feeling more in control of themselves. With this new felt control come greater challenges to adult authority.

Early adolescents have a desire to have time to engage in same gender activities. Membership in groups is important to the pre-teen. "Heroes" to look up to are important. This may include special people outside the family.

Special athletic, artistic, academic, or musical talents may emerge at this time. Adults should encourage areas of potential success as a means of building the child's self-esteem.

MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE: 14 – 17 Years, A Time of Change

Teens struggle with rapid growth, sexual maturation, and desire for independence from their parents. Adults need to keep in mind that their child's hormones have more control over their moods than they do.

Changes in personal habits, manners, dress, and hair, and a pre-occupation (or lack of it) with personal hygiene are normal ways for teens to try on their teenage selves. Adults need to choose their battles on this front very carefully.

Teens have a strong sense of fairness and are judgmental of adults and peers who do not do what is "fair." Teens have a deep need for love and acceptance by parents and peers. Adults should be aware that such a need is often hidden in an effort to act mature.

A physical need for extended periods of rest is normal. Adults often mistake this for laziness. Too little rest can result in moodiness. Adults should depersonalize these ups and downs and look beyond them as much as possible.

Opportunities for drug and alcohol experimentation are common. Once teens become sexually active, they remain sexually active.

Different social influences on boys' and girls' behavior often show up in school settings.

For instance, girls are likely to believe that they are not capable of handling challenges and retreat into helplessness, where boys are more likely to feel confident about their problem solving. Girls also seem more likely to take on failure as a personal flaw. On the other hand, on almost every academic measure girls excel more than boys.

Although in childhood girls are more resilient than boys, this flip flops in adolescence where girls appear to be at more psychological risk. Most boys and girls experience negative feelings about physical changes and body image.

Teens find security in structure, although few ever admit it to adults. Adults need to be firm and consistent around a few "bottom-line" rules and expectations. The rules you state need to be enforced, so don't make too many. Adolescents tend to be much more responsible when the consequences are spelled out ahead of time.

By middle adolescence most kids develop what Elkind calls a personal fable, the belief that no one has ever experienced what you're going through and can possibly understand you (except, maybe your best friend). This sense of uniqueness goes hand in hand with feelings of invincibility and wanting to be center-stage for attention.

A teen's sense of self is increasingly shaped by how they see themselves differently from others and where they fit in the social network. Most teens experience more internal conflict than social conflict and most teens don't identify themselves as belonging to just one group of peers. The average teen spends 22 hours a week with friends. Adolescents who have friends report more positive images of themselves and appear to have better relationships with parents and teachers. Attributes of well-liked teens include spontaneity, willingness to try new things, cheerfulness, liveliness, and interest in others. Lonely and shy teens feel more self-conscious —this results in a reluctance to speak, so these kids tend not to be noticed. Shy kids may feel they are perceived as undesirable and may retreat from most social situations.

LATE ADOLESCENCE: 17 – 19 Years, Decisions

Mature appearance and behavior may be misleading on all fronts. We may assume that students who "look grown" may be more emotionally, socially, or intellectually mature than they really are. Adults need to acknowledge that most adolescents experience some feelings of frustration and depression during this period due to fears around facing adulthood, school pressures, social life, first time employment, and future planning.

Career choices can be difficult. Schools should help teens explore careers which are suited to them rather than careers which their parents wish they would pursue.

One of the dilemmas of late adolescence is the ambiguity around passage to adulthood.

There are few rituals that help teens mark their coming of age. And going to work or going to college result in very different transitions.

25 more things you should know about adolescents that influence their success in school and life

1. The diversity among adolescents is staggering. In the human life span, the period we define as adolescence (13 -19) is characterized by the widest range of differences between one human being and another.

2. Timing and pacing of adolescent maturation is uneven and unpredictable. Although social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and identity aspects of development influence each other, they each have a different time table within the same individual. In addition, sudden changes and shifts in kids' personalities, behaviors, attitudes, and habits are **NORMAL**.

3. The second most significant growth spurt in the brain (the first is between birth and three) occurs during adolescence. The **SYNAPSES** (grey matter) can double in one year during adolescence. The overproduction of **SYNAPSES** can also make it difficult to keep track of multiple thoughts and retrieve information quickly.

   The good news → teens can re-pattern behavior, learn new skills and habits, and do make significant changes in how they operate day to day.

   The bad news → habits, preferences, and patterns of behavior get hard-wired as kids move through adolescence – if you're a couch potato at 15, you're likely to be a couch potato for the rest of your life --- unless there is a compelling, dramatic, transformative experience that motivates and inspires the perseverance to change.

4. Think of the teenage brain from a "use it or lose it" perspective – by 18 the brain starts losing neurons that aren't hard-wired by experience – it's called "pruning" and allows the brain to function more efficiently. The brain nourishes what it uses and tosses away what it doesn't. You can't retrofit the brain in adulthood.

5. The **FRONTAL CORTEX** (Lobe) is one of the last parts of the brain to mature. It's the CEO of the brain ("the brain police") in charge of executive functions like planning, organizing, setting priorities, making sound and informed judgments, assessing risk, managing and defusing intense and out-of-control emotions. The brain's circuit board is not completely installed until the mid-20's. There's a reason why adolescents do not gain full adult status until they are 21. For most adolescents, the **CORTEX** is asleep at the switch some or most of the time. Consequently, adolescents' judgment is highly erratic – they are capable of making extraordinarily good judgments and really bad ones (within the same hour!).

6. The **CORPUS CALLOSUM**, which is linked to self-awareness and intelligence, continues to develop until the mid-twenties – hence, the "late-bloomer" status for a lot of us.

7. **SEROTONIN** (a neurotransmitter) is responsible for inducing relaxation, regulating moods, and regulating sleep. Generally, women have 20% to 40% higher levels of **SEROTONIN** than men. However, during the teen years, levels of serotonin decline for both sexes, creating conditions that can increase impulsive behavior.

8. Under the influence of enormous hormonal changes, teenagers' rely more on emotional center (**AMYGDALA**) in the limbic system than on the reason center in the **CORTEX**. The **AMYGDALA** is revved up, in hyper-drive – intense feelings like anger, fear, or elation are normal and frequent. This center gets activated when "your button gets pushed", and it captures and stores emotionally intense memories – one reason why trauma can impede and interrupt learning.

9. Kids learn best in a state of "relaxed alertness" or "unanxious anticipation". Emotional turmoil can hijack kids to the land of "not-learn". Transitions that help students shift gears and get "brain ready" for work are crucial.

10. Strong emotional connections with the teacher, the subject, or the task (whether positive or negative) generates learning with more "sticking power" related to memory, retention, comprehension, and application.

11. Learning preferences (likes and dislikes, fears and passions, what comes easy, what's hard) tend to harden and narrow during adolescence, especially if students' educational experience includes more of the same old, same old.

12. Challenging and complex human contact and relationships stimulate the brain. Teens watch an average of 23 hour of TV per week, more time than they spend interacting with friends, teachers, family. Unlike previous generations, adolescents in 2004 spend far more time alone (separate phones, headsets, TV's, computers, etc.) and spend far less time with adults outside of school.

13. New experiences with an element of risk, thrill, uncertainty, or danger, stimulate neurons that release **DOPAMINE**, which produces feelings of intense pleasure. So, how can we package the intense experiences that kids crave minus the life-threatening price tag? FYI: Physical play, sports, and dance and movement of all sorts harnesses and releases positive emotions and serves as a healthy outlet for emotional and sexual energy.

14. Somewhere between 10% to 15% of adolescents experience mild to severe depression. That means that at any given time three to four kids might by walking into any classroom depressed. There does appear to be a higher incidence of mild depression (**DYSTHEMIA**) among underserved students who live in families who experience poverty and serial crises. Fewer than 1 in 5 depressed adolescents receive treatment.

15. Teens' biological clocks <u>are different</u> – their **MELATONIN** levels are elevated into the early part of the school day – the brain is saying, "It's night time." At the end of the day, teens are not chemically ready for sleep until 11 pm. Yet, teens require more sleep than adults (8 to 9 hours) – sleep is when hormones critical to growth and maturation are released. Sleep is brain food. Sleep deprivation reduces REM sleep and can result in memory and judgment impairment, irritability, and mild depression.

16. The girl researchers arrived at some misleading conclusions about girls being short-changed in schools: During adolescence, increasing numbers of girls **DO** struggle with issues of self-image, assertiveness, and social pressure and acceptance. **YET**, on almost every measure, <u>girls do better in school</u> and experience better life chances during young adulthood. Boys, on the other hand, tend to have more positive images of themselves, greater assertiveness, and higher perceptions of social acceptance. **YET**, on every measure of success in school except one (% of students who score between 1500 and 1600 on SAT's), <u>boys are less successful than girls</u>. It's also important to note that different sub-sets of boys and girls appear to be more vulnerable to school failure, teen pregnancy, dropping out of school, other high risk behaviors, and some mental illnesses like eating disorders and self-mutilation.

17. Both sexes experience surges of **TESTOSTERONE** during adolescence – ergo, aggression, hostility, and irritability increase. This is **NORMAL**. Kids' <u>social skills and interpersonal effectiveness actually **DECLINE**</u> in early and middle adolescence unless social skills are modeled, taught, practiced, and assessed.

18. Kids who behave aggressively over a long period of time share four things in common: 1) they are unable to identify their own emotions, "read" the feelings of others, or empathize with the target of their aggression; 2) they have difficulty predicting the consequences of their actions; 3) aggression, whether verbal, psychological, or physical, is the only tool is their conflict tool box – they don't know alternative responses; and 4) they tend to attribute hostile or aggressive intentions to new people they encounter.

19. The job description of all adolescents includes questioning and challenging authority. In particular, students of color, low-income students, newcomer students, and English language learners may be more likely to distrust adult authority and distrust the intentions of adults generally. Authoritarian (as apposed to authoritative) teachers who demand, command, and use their power to trump students, are more likely to trigger responses of hostility and defiance, rather than efforts to cooperate.

20. Adolescent "frequent fliers" (kids who experience chronic academic and behavioral difficulties) are least likely to respond positively and productively to punishment. In fact, a punitive approach to discipline (without opportunities for reflection, self-correction, instruction, support, and meaningful consequences and interventions) usually escalates feelings of anger, hostility, alienation, and rejection in already troubled students.

21. Reluctant, resistant, and failing students who "turn-around" cite two factors that enable them to get back on track: 1) a long-term, positive relationship with an adult; and 2) learning experiences that are personally meaningful and involve multiple ways of knowing, understanding, and demonstrating what you learn.

22. The most significant factors linked to high risk behaviors among adolescents (i.e. violence, substance abuse, pregnancy, etc.) are 1) their degree of attachment to school; 2) their level of academic achievement; and 3) the friends with whom they hang out.

23. Students who work less than 15 hours a week or participate in some personally significant school activity do better academically than those who don't work outside of school or participate in school life. However, kids who work more than 15 hours a week tend to under perform at school.

24. By 9th grade the majority of adolescents see themselves as "losers" in the game of school. To be sure, there are developmental factors at work here, as well as years of negative labeling (by self and others), and years of navigating in a very harsh WIN-LOSE culture that communicates, "Some of you matter and some of you don't". Distressingly, the gap between successful and unsuccessful students actually **INCREASES** between 9th and 12th grades.

25. As you read this, the single greatest determiner of success in high school remains the level of family income.

What Are Some Important Learning Characteristics of Adolescents?

1. Their learning is both concrete and abstract (formal operational thinking), although it's important to remember that most adults and adolescents use their abstract skills infrequently. Critical thinking, for example, is an abstract ability, but it needs to be taught in a concrete context.

2. Students' learning preferences and styles become even more distinct as they get older. Struggling readers find it more and more difficult to slog through texts; kids who thrive on "hands-on" learning but don't get the chance to learn this way may become restless, resistant, and reluctant learners. Only 23% of kids are linear-sequential learners. (McCarthy, 2000) This means that they are "book smart" and "test smart," with the ability to process large amounts of information. This 23% of students becomes even more savvy at "doing school," while the majority of students find formal, abstract learning (if presented without a real world context) boring and disconnected.

3. Knowledge needs to be relevant; hence, student-centered learning (where students have more choices about what they learn or how they learn it, and more opportunities to link their own interests and experiences to classroom learning) becomes even more important for adolescents, who are always going to ask, "What does this have to do with me? Why do I need to know this? How can I personally express myself in this assignment?"

4. Knowledge is constructed socially. There is a need to process information and check it out with others, so cooperative, experiential, interactive learning works for a majority of kids.

5. Adolescents get better at multi-tasking, yet sometimes overreach their capacity. (I can listen to music, cruise the net, and do my homework at the same time!)

6. Adolescents are immersed in their own culture—they truly live in the here and now of their own lives. This is why history, for example, if it's not connected to their own world or feelings is a challenging subject for most students.

7. Students are questioning adult norms and beliefs—their radar is ultra-sensitive to hypocrisy. They can make better arguments and more critically examine the arguments of others. It is natural for young people of this age to challenge rules and assumptions.

8. Young people gravitate toward controversy. They enjoy a thoughtful argument and like to discuss issues that don't have just one answer.

9. They can hold multiple perspectives; they can use more sophisticated powers of reasoning to examine several perspectives at once rather than looking at problems as an either/or proposition.

10. Students like to create their own theories and test out the theories of others.

11. The more "intelligences" students utilize in a learning experience, the more they will retain. Howard Gardner has defined the intelligences as: verbal/linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. (Gardner, 2000)

12. Activities that combine cooperation and competition grab most kids' attention and focus.

13. Adolescents' thinking becomes more complicated. They can handle issues that have gray areas; in fact, kids like being challenged to dig around, if the digging around makes meaning for them. Moral dilemmas, ethical questions, "big ideas" around life and death issues are extremely interesting to young people.

14. Most adolescents love contests, games, puzzles, mysteries—most anything that begins as a problem. Whenever possible try to "problematize" the curriculum.

15. Authentic assessment that has an audience is compelling to most adolescents. Think about sports, drama, bands, chorus, the newspaper, art shows, peer education, tutoring, service learning—all of these activities have a real audience where there is a definite product or performance. Kids like to demonstrate what they know and can do.

16. Kids want and need to express themselves—to put their personal stamp on things This is why what we call electives are critical to a balanced curriculum.

What You Can Do

Emotional security is the foundation of self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Teachers can support teens' healthy development by:

• Offering reassurance.

• Offering praise and positive feedback and using criticism sparingly.

• Encouraging students to share their interests and demonstrate their talents.

• Being patient (This will not last forever!)

• Encouraging independence.

• Keeping lines of communication open.

• Encouraging friendships.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice – Teaching to Adolescents' Developmental Realities

Although educators win as many bad jargon awards as any other group of specialized professionals, "DAP" is actually a useful term, one that should become commonplace among high school staff. DAP means Developmentally Appropriate Practice. Emerging from the field of early childhood education, this phrase is a way of describing the relationship between instruction and the specific intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and ethical development of an individual child.

In other words, DAP is about linking appropriate learning experiences to the developmental stage that indicates what and how a student thinks and feels, what a student can do physically, and how a student perceives and engages with people and the world around her. An important reminder about DAP—a developmental stage of learning and readiness is informed by a child's chronological age and a child's life experience in her family, her culture, and her immediate environment.

Good teaching is occurring when developmental considerations guide decisions about the appropriate learning environment and instructional activities for a particular child or children of a particular age. DAP devotees would say that developmental ages and stages should shape how teachers talk to kids, how teachers respond to various behaviors, how teachers guide children through simple and complex learning experiences.

Here are a couple examples that illustrate what developmentally appropriate practice is all about. Young children cannot recognize letters of the alphabet until and unless they've had plenty of experiences discriminating one shape from another. Consequently, an early childhood teacher provides lots of opportunities for children to explore, identify, and sort two- and three dimensional shapes. Other reading readiness activities help children develop their imaginations and share stories about life beyond the immediate visible, physical space that they can see and touch. This capacity to imagine something that cannot be seen is crucial for making meaning of the abstract symbols on a written page.

On the social side of things, young children need guided practice that helps them experience how to share, how to play fair, or how to sit in a circle quietly and listen to other children. These are all learned behaviors that only become habits when teachers notice, encourage, and talk with children about how they practice these behaviors on a daily basis. High school educators could learn a lot from watching the interactions between a pre-school teacher and a four year old.

Why is any of this relevant to secondary education? Development doesn't stop when a child becomes fourteen. Rather, the opposite occurs. The intensity and pique of adolescence might, in fact, inspire us to be even more mindful of how we design learning environments and curricula that are more responsive to young people's intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and ethical development. When we overlook asking if and how we engage in developmentally appropriate practice, we risk making high school students endure a lot of things that verge on the developmentally ridiculous, instead of engaging them with effective practices. A few examples will suffice.

From the Developmentally Questionable to Developmentally Appropriate:

A Few Examples

School Start Time: Most high schools begin classes between 7:15 and 8:00 a.m. because of bus schedules and adult preferences to start early and leave early.

What's developmentally inappropriate? Adolescents' biological clocks are different—their physiological rhythm of waking and sleeping is later to bed and much later to rise and be fully present.

What's more developmentally appropriate? School start-time would be closer to 9 a.m.

Emphasis on Teacher-Directed Whole Group Instruction: Teachers often determine most of what is taught and how it is learned, requiring all students to do the same thing the same way at the same time.

What's developmentally inappropriate? The desire for increasing autonomy, choice, and independence dominates the adolescent years just when learning in school becomes the most restricted. Most academic courses offer diminishing opportunities for personal expression and engagement with subject matter at the very time when adolescents are most eager to place a personal stamp on what they do. It is ironic that kindergartners usually have more choices and independent learning experiences in one day than a high school sophomore might experience in a week of 35 classes.

What's more developmentally appropriate? Balance whole group instruction with opportunities for students to pursue personal choices, interests, and independent explorations. Even when learning involves the whole group, provide opportunities for students to help make decisions about curricular content and how they go about learning it.

Treating Adolescents Like Adults: It's normal to fret about how best to prepare students for the harsher realities of life after high school. Our worries about students becoming too dependent on second chances can lead to the following declaration to students: "I need to treat you like adults and hold you accountable to adult standards. Otherwise, I'm not preparing you for the real world out there."

What's developmentally inappropriate? The irony is that we are most tempted to hang the adult label on the adolescents who exhibit the most un-adult behaviors, especially when they haven't lived up to academic responsibilities. It's easy to get caught up in the "Big Scold" (much of which is hyperbole anyway) that's usually followed by the "Adult Sanction."

It sounds something like this:

 "I expect you to be an adult here, so I don't accept late papers. When you have a full time job, there's no room for excuses. You better figure out now how to manage your time, before you're out there in the real world. You're going to have to take a zero on these two assignments." Or "You play, you pay. Next time study harder. This time it's an F. There are no re-takes or second chances in the adult world out there."

The kids who haven't developed the maturity and sense of responsibility we expect of high school students test our patience and best behavior on a good day, much less on a

day when we're already stressed. The problem is that the Adult Sanction of punitive grading reinforces irresponsible behavior—the student gets off the hook because he isn't held responsible for completing, correcting, or putting in more serious time and effort to demonstrate a satisfactory level of competence. The Adult Sanction sends another potentially damaging message to students who have the most trouble getting their act together; it communicates to these kids that we care more about punishing the irresponsible behavior than we care about helping them learn how to be better, more responsible students.

What's more developmentally appropriate? Regardless of legal rights, voting status, and growing responsibilities, there are good reasons why the developmental stage of adolescence spans from ages 11 or 12 to about 19 or 20. (Dacey and Kenny, 1997, and Pruitt, D., 1999) Maturity is incredibly personal, depending upon an adolescent's genetic predispositions, physical development, birth order, family circumstances, social experiences, cultural background, and life opportunities in and out of school. In addition, physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and ethical maturity develop at different rates within a single individual. It's only in the early to mid-twenties that all of these aspects of self become fully integrated into an adult personality. High school is the laboratory where young people are learning how to manage their time and responsibilities; it's just that some students are better at this much sooner than others.

All of which is to say, it's a risky business to treat kids in high school as if they are already full-fledged adults. Adolescents are becoming adults; they are not adults yet! Being a teenager means constantly negotiating when you want to be treated like a kid or like an adult to get what you need. One of the biggest challenges for high school teachers is navigating back and forth between adult-to-adult and adult-to-kid learning experiences and communication modes. It's a fine line to get this right and has a lot to do with knowing when our role is more parental and when our role is more like that of a mentor or facilitator with individual students and the group.

If we teach with the assumption that students are not adults quite yet and recognize that the students we teach are at different stages on the maturity continuum, we have another choice. Instead of relying only on grade penalties and punitive responses, we can develop a sequence of consequences and interventions that say we are for serious about insisting that students meet their academic responsibilities. Instructional support strategies can

include making an academic plan to complete one's work, daily check-in's, learning new organizational and study strategies, revisions and re-takes on important assignments and tests, tutoring, or early morning study sessions.

And for the zero completion gang who rarely experience the satisfaction of handing in quality work, there is always the friendly but firm call to arms, "Today's the day you and your mother agreed that you will not leave school until this work is completed. It matters to me that you pass this course. You put in the effort, we'll work on one thing at a time, and you'll get out of the hole. I'm confident you can do it." For kids who are immature and the least "adult-like," we need to keep asking the question, "What will help this student learn what it takes to become more responsible? More punishment or more guided support?"

High Stakes Grading: Test grades are final. If homework isn't handed in on time, it's a 0. A student's final grade is the cumulative average of all graded work, regardless of progress or later mastery in the semester.

What's developmentally inappropriate? The current "accountant" approach to grading belongs in the bookkeeper's office, not the classroom. In fact, where else, ever again in a person's life, will an average of tests, quizzes, and homework grades determine the quality and effectiveness of someone's performance? As a result of high stakes grading, millions of high school students spend four years never completing a thing or never experiencing mastery in the academic realm. High stakes grading lets a lot of kids live

in the land of the shoddy, where on-time behavior takes precedence over completion, where first time performance is emphasized at the expense of revision and correction, and the sheer quantity of graded tasks forfeits the deeper satisfaction of learning what it takes and what it feels like to master something difficult or produce quality work. High stakes grading devalues the very qualities that help adolescents become life-long learners and support the goal of competency in the work place.

What's more developmentally appropriate? Eliminating obsessive grade calculations is not likely to happen in your lifetime. However, there are plenty of ways to make grading practices more developmentally appropriate.

- Weigh grades differently according to task and purpose. Give less weight to practice tasks; give more weight to assessments that illustrate working knowledge and understanding of a key set of skills and concepts. Example: When students are learning a new skill, practice tasks indicate what a student has or has not learned proficiently at some point in time. The purpose of practice tasks is not to give A's to students who got it and F's to students who didn't. Practice tasks give you feedback on where to go next and what to do to maximize learning for all of your students.

- Provide more time to complete fewer projects and assessments during a grading period; but make sure that these are the kinds of projects and assessments that require students to fully demonstrate in-depth understanding and application of what they are learning.

- Assess effort as well as performance—otherwise, many students will disconnect what they did or did not do from the grades they earn.

- Create opportunities for self-correction, revisions, and re-takes as part of developing proficiency.

- Don't employ grades as a threat, a punishment, or control lever—these tactics never work for kids who are struggling or have chronic problems turning in assignments or reading assigned materials.

- Help students to develop their own goal-setting and self-assessment rubrics.

One of the greatest obstacles to successful instruction is treating students as a homogenous group, rather than appreciating their developmental and cultural differences. By emphasizing differentiated learning strategies and providing differentiated support, teachers can accommodate differences in student interests, learning styles, abilities, and cultural experiences.

Teachers who engage in developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive teaching value the quality of resiliency within young people —the innate "self-righting" mechanism of individuals to transform and change—and believe in each student's capacity and desire to learn and succeed. (Werner, E. and Smith, R., 1992, p. 202)

When we have a better understanding of students' developmental and cultural needs we are more likely to teach, talk, and discipline in ways that increase student motivation and cooperative behavior. Moreover, a greater understanding of what different groups of adolescents need to be successful invites us to take an unsentimental look at traditions, policies, and practices within our schools that may actually harm rather than promote a student's academic success. School faculties who are committed to reducing personal, social, and cultural barriers to learning and development are more likely to implement changes in classroom practice that reduce school failure and narrow the achievement gap among various groups of students.

Give Students High Support to Meet Your Expectations

High support provides students with a road map and an emotional compass to meet high expectations. It's the catalyst that can trigger an individual's positive motivation and meaningful engagement in learning. Meeting the emotional needs of adolescents is at the heart of support and encouragement, in fact, the feelings students bring to any learning experience are the greatest determiner for whether they will learn or not. What you do and say has the power to change how students feel and what they choose to do. Think about teacher support in this way:

Adolescents' Developmental Needs

Psychological and physical safety

Belonging, attachment, and affection with peers & adults

Control over parts of my life and a voice in decisions that affect me

Freedom to make choices

Respect and acceptance for who I am (regarding race, ethnicity, gender, culture, class, abilities, interests)

Recognition for what I do

Power to achieve, contribute, and meet challenges

High expectations, clear boundaries, and high support

High Teacher Support

When teachers provide support to meet these needs, most kids feel positively motivated

➔ **Learning Can Happen**

Low Teacher Support

When teachers don't provide support to meet these needs, most kids are likely to feel resistant, angry, hostile, rejected, alienated, invisible, or disinterested

➔ **Learning Can't Happen**

Students with High Motivation

Some students are the exception - their needs are met or unmet in ways that spark so much personal drive that teacher support may not be as crucial for learning

➔ **Learning Can Happen**

What Does High Teacher Support Look Like?

The idea of teaching as delivering content will work most of the time for 30% to 40% of kids. But for the vast majority of adolescents, it's only half the job. The other half of teaching is about creating the environment and providing the kind of support that young people need to learn and mature. For example, student self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) is enhanced when teachers:

- Create opportunities for different kinds of performance accomplishments that students successfully complete. (Every teacher has their own laundry list of verbs that frame various tasks that students do.)

- Model the behaviors that you want students to use in class and do the learning tasks that you expect students to complete.

- Communicate messages of hope and confidence in a student's present and future.

- Maintain a supportive low-stress/low threat learning environment. It's understandable that high support might be construed as coddling or viewed as that "touchy-feely" stuff that counselors are supposed do with kids. High school teachers are more inclined to live by a fairly narrow definition of support that's about helping kids in academic trouble; but this misses the mark. All students need to feel supported emotionally.

High support isn't about supplying a little boost here and there or adding something extra once in a while. It's about the hundreds of little things teachers do everyday to:

- Create a learning environment that meets students' emotional needs for safety, belonging, freedom, respect, recognition, and power—this has to be in place before many students will be ready to learn.

- Provide students with the tools and "know-how" that will help them express and manage their emotions and utilize their emotions productively.

- Develop relationships and personal connections that invite students to see you as their ally and partner who will help them to learn and grow.

- Provide the kinds of encouragement and support appropriate for different kinds of kids.

- Provide the tools and "know-how" for every student to become more "school smart."

- What would you prioritize as your most important behavioral and academic goals and expectations? What kinds of support will help students meet them?

The Feeling-Learning Connection

The latest brain-based research as summarized by Robert Sylwester confirms the positive relationship between emotions and learning. (Sylwester, R., 1995, 2000) How students feel will determine whether they choose to be open and receptive or resist learning, whether they use their emotional energy to listen or use it to draw attention somewhere else.

When students feel safe, settled, calm, and purposeful, they have the ability to balance their feelings with their ability to think. This sense of balance creates the capacity to use emotional energy to focus and pay attention. Students must be able to focus to remember. And without access to memory, students are unable to learn. For adolescents, this is no easy task in the best of circumstances, and there's an irony here. By educating their hearts, by welcoming their feelings and emotional energy into the room, we are better able to educate their minds. On the other hand, when students are out of balance and feel emotionally flooded, it's hard for them to focus on anything except the unsettled feelings that they're experiencing. When students' emotional needs are ignored or trivialized, their feelings of anger, hurt, hostility, and resistance are going to rule the day.

Embracing this aspect of teaching requires the courage, honesty, and generosity to see adolescents as they really are, not as adults would wish them to be to meet their own needs of comfort and convenience. This also means accepting that adolescence is messy, for both the student who is experiencing it and the adults who are supporting students through this stage in their lives. Students want to believe that you're on their side, that you are there for them, especially when they're having a tough time.

Different Support for Different Students

Different students need different doses and different kinds of support at different points in time. For highly interested, high achieving students, support may mean encouraging them to explore careers where people spend a lifetime working in the discipline you teach. You might tap into their enthusiasm by directing them to other resources or suggesting independent projects that give them an opportunity to share their expertise with the class.

For students who struggle academically, support might involve explicit teaching of cognitive strategies that will help them organize, plan, focus, and study. In other words, your support may focus on helping students to become more "school smart." Developing a trusting and caring relationship may be a critical first step toward accepting support from an adult at school. When you show that you're interested in getting to know students personally, they may start to believe that they can count on your positive regard for them. If they begin to trust that you will listen first, before judging or disciplining, they are more likely to invest the time and effort to do well.

For students resistant to seeing themselves as successful students, support may first mean validating their life experiences outside of school. Inviting students to tell their stories gives you a way to acknowledge the hard knocks they've experienced and encourage them to tell you things they're proud of in their lives. Time to listen gives you a chance to empathize with their pain and affirm what they care about. Some young people may have never talked with an adult in school who can help them to make connections between the skills they use to manage and navigate their personal lives and ways that they can utilize these same skills and abilities to succeed at school. Mirror back the inner qualities you see in them that reveal their capacity to meet the challenges they face. Resistant students may also need your support in reframing their images of themselves.

This doesn't mean asking students to trade one identity for another as a requisite for academic success. That approach will only intensify resistance and resentment. It does involve giving students feedback and encouragement that can help them to hold a more inclusive picture of themselves, one in which they can be a successful student, without giving up loyalty to friends or sacrificing their sense of self and racial and cultural identity.

For kids who really think school stinks, normalizing the stance of being a reluctant or resistant learner can reassure students that they're not failures for life, just because school is not working for them right now. Share stories about people who hated school but found a life long passion despite earlier setbacks. Or bring up examples of people who turned their lives around by early adulthood or who failed many times in life before finally achieving personal success.

Support won't always be easy for you to give or for students to accept—a negative school history can make kids justifiably suspect of any teacher's motives and intentions. Timing and pacing can make a big difference for kids who may be hesitant to believe that you are really there for them. Be conscious of a student's readiness or reluctance to be engaged with you, with other students, and with the subject matter. Small doses of support over a few months can be more effective in the long run than intrusive attempts to get everything out in the open and push too soon. Hard to reach students need to see you in action for a while before they will risk making connections and accepting your efforts to support them. Finally, it's good to remind yourself and communicate to these students that every small improvement and every sign of progress spells SUCCESS.

Create a Culture of Excellence Where Every Student Is Expected to Succeed

Creating a culture of excellence is not an easy sell to most teenagers who are immersed in a FedEx'd world where fast gets more play than well done. Even defining academic excellence, proficiency, and mastery can be an elusive proposition for students. It's worth exploring examples of excellence that young people experience in their own lives and solicit from them the criteria that make a sports team, a piece of clothing, a movie, or a meal excellent. In the classroom, develop rubrics for important assignments that describe explicit criteria for proficiency.

For many students recognizing the differences between excellent and mediocre end products or performances is blurry at best. Ask students to share something in their lives that they have mastered successfully or a skill or talent where they have increased their level of competence. Explore the differences between a personal performance they would describe as lousy and a personal performance that indicates a high level of proficiency. This kind of critique requires lots of practice and the patience to observe and compare different results systematically with an eye for detail. Students need to look at and discuss a variety of work samples that run the gamut from shoddy to superior quality.

Students also need to develop an accurate assessment of their efforts. What will it take for them to reach a level of proficiency or high performance? Ask students to spell out what specific efforts they think are necessary to earn an A and what kind of effort earns a D.

The point here is many students will never experience the personal satisfaction and pride that accompany a high level of proficiency unless we create an environment that expects excellence from everyone and we provide the push and support to help them get there.

Require All Students to Reach a Standard of Mastery on Important Assignments

Choose one project, problem, performance, or product each quarter that every student must complete at a level of excellence. Develop criteria for completion; ask students what they will need in the way of support; block out time to meet with students individually; create a way for students to indicate the status of their work; develop ways for students to share and critique their work with other students; choose how the class will celebrate everyone's successful completion.

Insist on Completion

Many teachers share the opinion that students who choose not to complete work must accept the consequences of this choice—a lot of zeros in the grade book. Unfortunately, this policy makes it difficult to help students acquire the tools that make completion a consistent habit.

Failing or marginal students often attribute their turnaround to teachers who "dog" them, who won't allow them to do nothing. Develop a set of strategies that back up your expectation of completion. These strategies might include:

- Required conference hour (the day you stay late after school) for students who have more than two assignments missing.

- A system of partial credit for completing work late and retaking tests.

- Establishing a required "homework" hall with other teachers so that a group of you can rotate monitoring these afterschool sessions.

- Learning contracts that you, the student, and a parent/guardian sign that state what each person will do to support student's completion of school work.

Help Students Become School Smart

Most of us would like to think that high schools provide the opportunity for all kids to learn and achieve a modicum of success. Sadly, the gap between achieving and non-achieving students actually increases between 9th and 12th grades, with already advantaged students becoming more so and disadvantaged students forming an even larger pool of the unsuccessful. High schools tend to reward students who already know how to be smart in school. These kids come to 9th grade with norms, habits, resources, and values that mirror what teachers prize and expect from "good students."

Although all teachers are pretty good at spelling out what will get students in trouble, fewer recognize the importance of discussing and teaching specific behaviors and strategies that will help kids become "school smart." Instead, young people who don't fit the ideal student norm are likely to hear a litany of frustrations and complaints about what they should have learned or known before they arrived. This "sink or swim" attitude is not a big motivator for kids who come to school feeling different, alienated, or discouraged.

Have a Conversation About School Smart Strategies

One step is making time to discuss this topic in class. Acknowledging that high school is not exactly a "student friendly" environment for lots of kids goes a long way toward building trust with students who can't imagine that any adult knows what school is like for them. Equally important is explaining to students that people aren't born with "school smarts." Anyone can learn what it takes to be smart. We do need to be mindful, however, that students who grow up in white, middle class, educated families, get a lot more practice at this before they ever enter 9th grade. Less advantaged students should be able to count on some adults in their lives who will help them decode what high school is all about.

Reassure students that high school primarily rewards one kind of academic success, giving less attention and recognition to other ways of being successful in the world. Even though students have countless occasions outside of school to show how they are capable, competent, and responsible, it's the satisfactory completion of high school that remains the gatekeeper to a young person's future.

So helping students learn how to "do high school" is a good thing. Being "school smart" doesn't have to remain a mystery, and it doesn't mean students have to give up who they are.

The composition of students in each class will influence whether your conversations occur with the whole group, in small groups, or one-on-one. If most of your students need to become more "school smart," talking about this openly in class can be positive and supportive. On the other hand, if most kids are already savvy about how to "do school," you may want to share some information with the whole group and discuss other issues privately with students.

How might you begin a conversation about "school smarts"?

1. You might begin by discussing different kinds of "smarts" that students need to survive and succeed. For example, exploring what students need to know to be "street smart" or "work smart" can help them appreciate the need for behaving differently and holding different attitudes in different settings.

2. Brainstorm the benefits of moving successfully from one setting to another, pointing out that people who can do this well usually have more choices and more opportunities in life. How does this ability to move from setting to setting give students more power?

3. Give students information and teach them strategies that help them become more "school smart."

Share Strategies and Habits That Help Students Do School

The following section describes some specific school smart strategies with suggestions for how you might help students develop these strategies and use them more often.

I know how to "read" what really matters from teacher to teacher. For example, I can figure out the bottom line rules I need to pay attention to in each class and I know what to avoid to stay out of trouble.

A Way to Help: Give students a quiz on school-wide rules and consequences and classroom boundaries, non-negotiables, and consequences in your class. And be sure they know that it counts toward their grade.

I know what to do and say that will get a teacher's positive attention without "brown-nosing" or "sucking up."

A Way to Help: Let students know five things they can do to get your positive attention. To lighten things up have a bag of mini-candy bars or funky prizes to toss out intermittently when you catch students doing the right thing.

I can adjust to different norms from class to class. For example, I know for one teacher tardy means "not in your seat when the bell rings" and for another teacher tardy means "you've got a minute or two before you will be marked late."

A Way to Help: This is good thing to discuss with students for all kinds of reasons. Are norms consistent or inconsistent from one class to another? Ask students how they navigate this. You might want to explore what's good and what's bad about having different norms.

I know how to become invisible when I'm not prepared or when I'm distracted by a something else going on outside of class.

A Way to Help: This is probably a private conversation. The idea that there are things you can do to disappear or avoid drawing attention to yourself is big news for some kids. In the same vein the idea of pretending to pay attention actually helps some kids to focus.

I know how to talk with teachers privately when I've got a problem learning something, completing an assignment, or meeting a deadline. I also know that if I do this sooner than later, it will probably be easier to deal with it.

A Way to Help: This is so important that it deserves to addressed with the whole class. A good way to introduce this skill is to ask students to present two different role plays, showing ineffective and effective ways to get the help and understanding a student needs. Be sure to do the ineffective role play first so students can discuss what made it ineffective and what they might do and say differently to make it a more effective request. Keep in mind that students who don't have the words might not have the confidence to do this, so rehearsal is extremely helpful.

I can "buddy up" with other students when I think it will help me study or complete an assignment.

A Way to Help: This may merit a discussion about the difference between cheating, copying, and working collaboratively. You might want to establish "home groups" so students automatically have some study buddies they can work with throughout the year (p. 92). Or you might explore with a student who they would imagine to be a good partner to work with.

I can identify the students in class who can help explain or show me how to do something when I don't understand.

A Way to Help: Students ultimately feel more personally powerful when they have strategies they can use that don't always involve going to the teacher for help. One idea is to have students identify two others they feel comfortable asking for help. Have students write the names down for you and for themselves. This way you have the information to suggest when it's timely.

Affirm diversity in your classroom

Although affirmation, acceptance, and appreciation for diversity are cornerstones of a *Partners in Learning* classroom, these principles are easier to say than to put into practice. Developing the competence, comfort, and sensitivity to teach so many different students effectively can inspire and overwhelm us. For young people, choosing to act on these principles can conflict with the clannishness of adolescent sub-cultures and the pressures of growing up in a "put-down" society where one student's self-esteem may come at the expense of another's. Adolescents bring equal doses of fear and fascination to their growing awareness of the diversity that surrounds them.

This mix of vulnerabilities and attitudes about diversity can build a wall of stony silence among various groups in the classroom. Or we can make the classroom a safe haven where differences are recognized as resources and assets that can add a richness and vibrancy to any learning experience.

Several things can help us better appreciate, learn about, and teach to the differences among our students. First, we need to know ourselves. Teaching is highly personal and subjective.

Thus, we need to be aware of the personal and cultural perspectives that shape who we are in the classroom. The more we know about ourselves, the better we can bridge the multiple and different worlds that we and our students inhabit.

Second, we need to know our students and communicate our interest in knowing more about their unique cultural experiences. Knowing our students well also means learning more about how differences of color, culture, class, character, gender, and genes (the physical traits, personality, and intelligences we inherit) influence adolescents' experience of schooling and how they learn.

Third, we need to know the culture of our school, taking a closer look at how the dominant culture of most American high schools continues to advantage some groups of students while disadvantaging others. For students who perceive themselves as culturally different from the high school norm or whom we perceive as culturally different from that norm, high school life can feel particularly discouraging.

Finally, we need to develop a bigger toolbox of strategies and expertise that can help us become more culturally responsive teachers. Specifically, how do we help normalize the vast range of differences among adolescents? How can we teach more effectively to these differences? And how can we help students better understand and "appreciate how individual and group differences complement each other and make the world a much more interesting place?" (CASEL, 2002)

Know Yourself and Know Your Students

"To be effective teachers, you must be fully aware of who you are. What baggage (your ideas of race, gender, class, and so on) do you bring to the classroom? Before you can be "real" with your students, you must "deal" with yourselves." (Rasool and Curtis, 2000, p. 94)

Our perceptions of reality—what we take in through all of our senses, what we select to respond to out of everything that comes our way—depend on our identity lenses. Our lenses determine the way we make sense of what we see. Take 60 seconds, and without stopping to think, write down all the words that identify and describe who you are:

These identity lenses help define who we are to ourselves. They affect how we communicate and interact with students and colleagues. They also influence how others define us. Put simply, these lenses shape what we experience in our lives every single day.

While some aspects of your self-identity are permanent, other aspects may vary according to the privileges, disadvantages, passions, and stressors you experience at any given time in your life. Some lenses may change or shift in importance over time. You might choose to keep some aspects of your identity hidden from others. And there may be some descriptors you didn't list because they don't feel important to you, even though they may be obvious to others.

When you think about your identify lenses, which ones have the most influence on who you are as a person and a teacher. People claim different lenses as part of their core identity and there's nothing right or wrong about valuing any one aspect of your identity over another and no one's unique set of lenses are better or worse than anyone else's. It's also important to remember that every lens carries with it a collection of perspectives and biases that affect the classroom decisions you make every day—from the texts and materials you select, to the learning experiences you value, to the kinds of kids you're most comfortable teaching.

Biases are not all bad—they reflect our passions as well as our prejudices. However, becoming conscious of our biases can help us adjust our teaching practices in ways that foster balance, fairness, and equity. For me, this meant teaching students very differently from the way that I personally learn best. As a school kid, putting a book in my hands was the window to learning just about anything. Yet, through my teacher preparation I became aware that this learning preference is the comfort place for less than a quarter of all learners. So I deliberately set out to learn how to teach in ways that emphasized "hands-on" experiences as well as more reflective learning tasks.

A few examples can help illustrate how biases influence our views of students, teaching, and learning with the caveat that the particular biases mentioned are not necessarily associated with all teachers who might fit the description in the example. If I'm a math teacher who came to the educational profession after a lucrative business career, I might be more intentional about exposing students to a variety of career paths linked to the world of numbers. By contrast, the algebra teacher down the hall who's spent thirty years in a classroom may not even think about math in a context beyond four walls and a math book.

If I was a very successful honors student who loved high school, I might know very little about young people who hate school and struggle to get through four years of it. On the other hand, if high school was an alienating experience for me, I might go out of my way to make connections with the kids who are labeled as loners, losers, and outsiders.

If I am a social studies teacher with a master's degree in Women's Studies, I might include gender perspectives in all of my courses while other faculty may never even highlight women in history.

If I am a gay man I might have a keener eye for choosing literature that addresses all kinds of issues around tolerance and exclusion. On the other hand, if I grew up in a culturally conservative community, I might avoid choosing any literary works that might be deemed controversial.

Our identity lenses can also affect the quality of our relationships with different people. When we encounter someone who shares similar aspects of identity (physically, culturally, emotionally, socially, intellectually), we are likely to feel an immediate sense of rapport and affinity with that person (Bandler, 1989, 1993). Think about the kids you are drawn to, the kids with whom you feel the greatest affinity. Who are they? What is it about these kids that creates special connections?

Parker Palmer, in his book *The Courage to Teach*, describes good teachers as those who possess "the capacity for connection." (Palmer, 1998) Imagine creating a space that welcomes students' whole selves into the classroom—a safe space that invites students to express and share important aspects of their identity without fear of embarrassment, condescension, or rejection. As teachers, the more conscious we are of all aspects of our identity, the more open we can be to seeking many different points of connection with students. We might find ourselves continually asking, "What is it I like about this kid that I see in myself or that I see in those I love and respect?" The connectedness we feel with another person also tends to prompt positive assumptions and images of him or her and elicit more supportive, accepting, and forgiving responses toward this individual.

The opposite is also true. Perceiving others as immutably different from ourselves can trigger negative assumptions and feelings of discomfort, mistrust, and fear. These feelings can lead to physical and emotional distancing, and perhaps even contribute to negative stereotyping of all people whom we perceive to be different in the same way.

Sometimes our lack of awareness can drive obvious differences underground. Teachers will often declare to students and colleagues, "I don't see color in my classroom—I treat all students alike." In school settings, you're also likely to hear, "I don't treat boys and girls any differently" or "I don't care where you're from or who your parents are—when you come into this classroom you're all the same."

However well intentioned, these sentiments deny the fact that students do experience school differently as a consequence of race, gender, class and other key aspects of their identity. In "Multicultural Education in Middle and Secondary Classrooms", Rasool and Curtis note that this denial can create psychological walls between students and teachers making it difficult to connect with students whose identity is culturally different from their own. (Rasool and Curtis, 2000, p. 36) When teachers neither notice nor appreciate students' multiple identities, kids can easily pick up the message that, "You don't see me for who I really am."

When young people experience messages of invisibility repeatedly in their lives, "You don't see me" can turn pretty quickly into "You don't want to see me—maybe something's wrong with me." During adolescent identity formation, the absence of positive recognition and images of who you are—through direct affirmation or through the faces you see on TV and in the movies, the characters you read about, the people you study, the adults who work with you—is developmentally dicey. What's worse, though, for many young people, is the experience of being bombarded with negative images and stereotypes that target groups with whom students may identify most strongly—racial and ethnic cultures, newly arrived immigrant groups, poor people, religious minority groups, or gays and lesbians.

Kids cope with assaults on their identity in different ways at school. Some suffer in silence. Other students create a bifurcated identity where they take on a dominant culture persona at school and replace it with their home culture identity as soon as they leave school. This strategy often comes at the cost of "always feeling weird and never fitting in

anywhere", as one student put it. Poor and working class students are likely to be mistrustful of adult authority, especially when it's heavy-handed, and will often choose defiance as a way of standing up for themselves. Young people who see themselves as members of "out-groups" at school may turn to ridiculing "in-groups."

Sometimes, as a matter of self-protection, a student will reject learning and the values (i.e. being successful at school) of adults and peers within the dominant culture who convey their dislike or disapproval of all things different from conventional white middle class norms and preferences. Herbert Kohl calls this stance, "not-learning."

Not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity. In such situations, there are forced choices and no apparent middle ground. To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject their world. (Kohl, 1994, p. 6)

More than anything else, adolescents want to feel normal and be seen as normal. They are preoccupied in the paradoxical search for a unique identity and a sense of connection with others "just like me." A gay colleague shared what his experience was like in high school.

I wanted my teachers to respect and appreciate all of me, not just the achiever/leader part of me that I brought to school. I kept asking, 'Am I normal?' It would have meant so much to me if teachers had pointed out, in a positive, joyful way, the remarkable differences among people we read about and talked about, especially people who broke away from the stereotypes of who they were supposed to be and what they were supposed to do. It would have made such a difference if teachers would have shared stories and examples of people who truly represented all of us—men, women, people of all races and cultures, gays and straights, people with different families, religions, jobs, and education. If teachers would have just been a little more conscious of this, I would have felt such relief. 'I could have said to myself, 'Okay, I can fit in here. There a place for me with the differences I bring. There are other people like me she finds worth noticing and discussing.'

With my peers, it was the same deal. I wouldn't have felt so alone if teachers had reassured us that being different was normal—that there were lots of ways that kids were different from each other, the same way there were common experiences that we all shared growing up. If we had known a little more about each other—if teachers had let us know more often that the differences we brought to class made us much more interesting and made us all a better group—I think our acceptance of each other would have felt easier and more real.

Know Your School and the Dominant Culture That Shapes What Goes on There

Only when we acknowledge that most high schools espouse a fairly narrow set of cultural norms, values, and traditions can we go about creating high school experiences that better serve all of our students. Sometimes it's just a matter of asking some really simple, but critical questions: "Which students get recognized and rewarded? Do the things we teach and do here reflect the needs and interests of all of our students and families, just some of our students and families, or somebody else's students altogether? Do any of our practices and policies favor some groups of students and harm others? Do any of our practices increase separation and divisiveness among student groups?"

Four brief stories illustrate how paying attention can make all the difference between good practices and bad ones.

1. Two teachers in a dialogue group taught the second year of a two year algebra course for lower track students. As designed by the department chair the course was a series of unrelated abstract topics with no practical applications whatsoever. Students who generally performed well in year one (where the curriculum included lots of hands-on experiences and practical problem solving) performed miserably in year two. Only a fraction of these students went on to take geometry. As these teachers described their students' frustrations and their own frustrating attempts to change the course, several teachers had a collective "ah hah!" One person remarked, "You've been griping about this for four years. How long do you think it would have taken to get this course changed if it was a class full of AP students and their parents?" The grim contrast between whose needs get attended to and whose needs get neglected sparked a healthy outrage. The group rallied other teachers to the cause, prepared a course change recommendation, met with the principal and department chair, and redesigned the course by the next semester. In the process, they changed how they would teach the course and changed their expectations of students. They took on the goal of preparing every student to take geometry.

2. Another high school was confronting the fact that year after year, student leaders came from the same academic track and the same neighborhoods. So what did they do? Students and teachers personally invited kids attending summer school to be part of their Student Leadership training team. This one decision completely altered the composition of student leaders and led to an annual campaign to recruit student leaders who more accurately represented all groups within the school.

3. I worked with students and faculty in a large urban high school where a majority of students were recent immigrants from Southeast Asia and Central America. For years, the school fielded a losing football team where only a handful of fans showed up. Finally the school spirit squad had sense enough to ask students why they didn't come out in big numbers to field the team or watch the games. A lot of kids shared that they had no interest in football at all. What they wanted were more opportunities to play soccer and ping pong. The happy solution? The school stopped trying to make square pegs fit into round holes. They abandoned varsity football, enlarged their soccer program, and established intra-mural and inter-high school ping pong leagues.

4. In a high school that takes great pride in its monthly assemblies and celebrations sponsored by various ethnic clubs, the social studies department decided to stage an annual medieval fair that highlighted European life in the 15th century. As it was conceived, no one raised questions about requiring all world history students to participate in a school-wide event that drew attention to one cultural group at the exclusion of all others. Four years later, there is open discussion and some excitement about making this event one that celebrates the life and culture of groups across the continents during this period of history.

It would be easy to assume that high schools create opportunity and provide greater access for those who don't belong to the dominant culture. The opposite is true. High schools tend to reinforce low self-worth among students of color and non-native English speakers. (Nieto, 1998) Furthermore, the achievement gap between students of higher and lower socio-economic status is greater by the end of high school than it is for incoming ninth graders. (Nieto, 2000, p. 40) Class remains the most influential determiner of academic success in high school.

High schools, in particular, are laden with unspoken rules and assumptions about the right way to behave, the right way to speak, the right way to get respect and power, and the right way to learn and be tested. These rules and assumptions are part of the "hidden curriculum" of every high school, although you won't find most of them in an official school handbook. Rather, these unwritten codes reflect the values and dominant culture of the people who make the rules. Historically, high school rule makers reflect the norms of the educated upper middle class families.

Generally, students who reflect these norms physically, socially, and intellectually get more attention, more encouragement, more resources, better teachers, a more engaging curriculum, and more critical and creative learning experiences. Most structures, practices, and activities in high school are designed to support the success and achievement of this group over other groups.

Taken for granted privileges are all too obvious to people who don't have them. Yet, educators and parents from the dominant culture are often reluctant to acknowledge how policies and practices that favor some students will, by definition, disadvantage others.

Advanced Placement courses and the "honors track" illustrate how dominant culture privileges can operate on overt and covert levels. In many high schools it is assumed that parents are at least familiar with the courses students are taking and will play an active role in helping their children succeed in advanced courses—whether it's editing and proofing a paper, taking time to discuss a project, or ensuring that their kids have the right supplies, books, and gear at their fingertips. Upper track students are expected to manage multiple tasks seamlessly and "chunk" their work into discrete tasks that build on one another. It's assumed that students can find all the resources they need easily and use them effectively. Most importantly, when students are experiencing difficulties, it is assumed that they can talk with teachers comfortably or seek out other students to study with. All of these behaviors reflect habits, family values, and expectations associated with upper middle class educated families.

Over the years, I've talked with hundreds of students and adults who saw themselves as culturally different from the majority of their peers in advanced classes. Here's what they have to say about what it was like for them in advanced and upper level courses:

From a young man who recently emigrated from Cambodia:

"I didn't know other kids in the class while they all seemed to be friends. If I didn't know something, it was hard to ask them. I didn't want to feel stupid."

From a Mexican young woman:

"My friends thought I was crazy to take this class. In a way I had to pretend I wasn't me. It was like somebody else was taking this class, speaking and acting in a foreign language."

From a white working class young man:

"I don't have a computer at home so it's hard to keep up. I have a job too. I had to drop one AP class because I didn't have time to do all the reading. I felt so different from everyone else, like I wasn't really good enough to be here. Sometimes it felt like everyone else knew what the teacher was talking about except me."

From an African-American young man:

"I constantly felt like I had to prove that I belonged in this class even though I knew I was smart. Other kids kept looking at me as if they were waiting for me to drop out. It was hard to speak because I was so afraid of making a mistake. Who needs that? No wonder my friends won't take AP classes."

From a Puerto Rican young woman:

"As soon as people heard my name in class I was different to them—and Spanish wasn't even my first language growing up. What was I doing in advanced science classes? Nobody came right out and said this but I knew that they were thinking it. I hated that I had to wear this label when the white kids didn't have to wear any."

From a young woman from Guyana:

"My parents had to push people at my high school so I could be in advanced classes. English was my first language, but everyone assumed that I couldn't speak English well because I was dark skinned and from a different country. No one ever bothered to ask what my education was like before I moved here."

One absolute about high school is that no student feels confident and on top of things three days in a row. On the other hand, the fears about fitting in and doing well don't feel quite so daunting when kids feel supported by friends and adults at school. When I asked these students what kinds of support from teachers and the school helped them succeed and the kind of support they wished they had had, some common themes emerged:

- It was helpful when teachers made an effort to check in with them instead of assuming that they would go to a teacher and ask for help. Countless students remarked that the rule of thumb in upper track classes was, "If you have a problem, see me." For many students, this expectation of assertiveness felt awkward and uncomfortable because it was so different from the way they were taught to relate to adults at home. One student said, "When I was having trouble writing essays the way the teacher wanted them written, I was always hoping he would ask me to come in and work with him on my writing. There were times when the written comments on my papers just didn't make sense to me."

- Students say how much they would have liked to hear from former students who were just like them—students who could give them a "heads up" about what to expect and offer tips on how to survive.

- Students of color often expressed sadness and anger when pointing out how seldom they ever had teachers of color who taught them upper level courses. Students felt frustrated that so many of their teachers couldn't understand why many ethnic minority students see being smart and being "good at school" as a "white thing." One young man remarked, "Take a look around. Most of the teachers, administrators, upper track students, and parents you see in school are all white. My coach is black—how's that for stereotyping? What I wanted was a black physics teacher." In this discussion, students never ran out of ideas for how to invite a more diverse cross-section of men and women into their schools who could share their career pathways and successful lives with young people.

- Words of reassurance that they really could do the work felt particularly crucial to these students. When they felt lost or overpowered by their peers, they longed for words of confidence and a boost of encouragement.

- They wanted teachers to truly understand what it took for them to make it in their classes. None of these kids ever said, "I want my AP teacher to cut me some slack." What they did say is how much it meant to them when a teacher invited them to talk about how it was going for them day in and day out, what was hard to manage, what was getting easier. Students were deeply grateful when teachers took the time to talk to them privately and acknowledged the sacrifices and efforts they were making to hang in.

- Many students said that they wished they could have taken fewer courses during a semester—fewer, but more difficult classes. Students felt that learning the ropes of doing well took so much longer than they ever anticipated. Many said that they would have learned more if they could have successfully completed fewer more difficult courses than ending up with a mediocre record in six mediocre courses. For kids who worked long hours or were slow readers, they felt they could have done much better at juggling home, work, and school if they had had more time to study during the school day. Some students brought up that they never even knew they could take courses in the summer if they hadn't failed anything. Many students would have been willing to adjust summer job schedules to set aside mornings for a course.

- Many students shared stories of not having their academic act together until the second half of high school and didn't want to be written off. "Just because I messed up in the beginning doesn't mean I'm always going to mess up. Sometimes I needed a new start."

Other ways to counter the advantages that some students bring to class include teaching students the explicit codes and rules that are part of being "school smart." This can be as simple as helping a student figure out where to sit to maximize alertness or as complex as learning how to skim a book or chapter when you don't have time to read the entire assignment carefully.

In some high schools where advanced courses are open to all students, faculty and volunteers facilitate study groups to ensure that all students have access to the resources that will help them learn successfully. Other schools have developed mentoring programs where students of color meet regularly in support groups with a mentor who is from their own cultural background. These groups become a sanctuary where students can share success stories, discuss their difficulties, problem solve together, and support one another.

Becoming a Culturally Responsive Teacher

As defined by Raymond Wlodkowski and Margery Ginsberg, [Culturally responsive teaching is] *"an approach to teaching that meets the challenges of cultural pluralism... it has to respect diversity; engage the motivation of all learners; create a safe, inclusive and respectful learning environment; derive teaching practices from principles that cross disciplines and cultures; and promote justice and equity in society.* (Rasool and Curtis, 2000, p. 94)

As suggested earlier, becoming a culturally responsive teachers begins with knowing ourselves, knowing our students, and knowing our school. We are more tuned into the personal and learning differences that make each student unique, and we are more aware and appreciative of how differences in cultural identity impact students' daily experience of schooling and learning. Culturally responsive teaching "capitalizes on students' cultural backgrounds rather than attempting to override or negate them." (Abdal-Haqq, 1994)

From the perspective of teaching and learning—from the classroom environment we create, the assignments we design, the learning experiences we construct, the support we provide, the consequences we enforce, and the ways we grade—it means we're willing to trade in the mantra of "one size fits all" for "one size fits few." (Ohanian, 1999) It means knowing the difference between treating kids the same when it comes to setting high academic and behavioral expectations and treating kids fairly but differently when it comes to the kinds of support and assessment tools we use to help all students achieve. Here's a short list of questions that can inform your thinking about how to make your school and your classroom more culturally responsive:

- How does your school define success? How might a definition of success be broadened to better reflect the aspirations of all of your students?

- How have your life experiences as a targeted person and/or as an ally helped you to connect to young people who are targeted or feel excluded from the dominant culture?

- How does your school (and how do you) encourage students' pride in their home cultures and home languages?

- How can families and respected elders in the community play more vital roles in supporting academic excellence at your school and in your classroom?

- What's already going on at your school that makes all groups feel included and welcomed? What changes in courses and activities would help all groups feel more included and welcomed? What new initiatives would you like to see at your school that would affirm to students, staff, and families that a diverse community is supported and valued?

- What changes in policies and teaching practices would go the farthest to ensure that students who are not part of the dominant culture receive the same treatment and opportunities of those who are more advantaged? In what ways can you provide more differentiated support for diverse learners in your classroom?

- What courses, activities, projects, and events seem to involve the most positive interactions across cultures and different groups? What is it about these activities that attracts a real mix of students (ethnic, gender, social, class, and academic diversity).

- In what ways can you personally encourage and provide opportunities for kids to cross borders in classrooms and school-wide activities?

- How can you encourage students to draw strength and satisfaction from their capacities to cross borders from one culture to another?