**Empowering Students to Develop an Academic Identity**

**STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

Empowering Students to Develop an Academic Identity

High school teachers can move beyond forging personal connections with students to ensuring that they feel validated as learners.

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“What can we learn about ambition from *Macbeth*?” the teacher asks. “Anyone want to offer an opinion?”

In the last row, Ricky hesitates. This is the only Shakespeare play that he has ever liked, but he usually doesn’t have much to say in English class. When nobody volunteers, Ricky tentatively raises his hand. The teacher immediately grabs the opportunity to call on him, excited that a typically quieter student wants to participate. “Ricky? What do you think?”

“For me, it’s about how you get where you’re going. There isn’t anything wrong with being ambitious, but killing people might not be the best way to go.”

There is some light laughter from a few classmates, but Ricky can tell from the teacher’s face that his answer is not what she was looking for. She nods briefly and says, “OK, good start. Other thoughts?”

Ricky feels resentment stirring as the teacher moves on. *Guess that’s what I get for raising my hand,* Ricky thinks. *I’m never doing that again.* *Clearly, she couldn’t care less about what I have to say.*

Academic identity is grounded in the way students assess their own intelligence, and it sits at the core of their success. If they are not empowered to feel like worthy contributors to learning, kids are far more likely to disengage from their classes and assume that they hold little worth in scholarly settings.

Ensuring that all students recognize their value is a complex challenge, and one that teachers can only partially achieve through building personal connections during and outside of instructional time. For students to genuinely engage with instruction, they must receive validation as learners through the ideas they share. When teachers embrace student-centered approaches to increase engagement and build trusting relationships that have meaning beyond interpersonal affinity, the result is a classroom that clearly values all voices.

**RECONSIDER HOW TO BUILD RAPPORT WITH STUDENTS**

Moving from personal to academic connections: Educators tend to elevate the necessity of rapport, which is how teachers develop connections with students on a personal level that help us better relate to them. These relationships are an important first step to building the mutual trust that is integral to an ideal classroom environment. However, the construct of the “popular” teacher can be harmful to kids who struggle to relate to the teacher as a person rather than as a leader of learning.

When I was in high school, I had a social studies teacher who was very popular. Everyone loved him; he talked about trendy TV shows in class and spent his lunchtime wandering around the cafeteria chatting with students at tables. I never felt that same sense of connection with him, and not just because he never came to my lunch table or talked about the shows I watched. Somehow, that personal chemistry just wasn’t there, and my natural wariness of him made me feel like an outsider in his class. As a result, I participated less than in any of my other courses.

When students don’t jell with the popular teacher, they may disengage from the class because they feel invisible. To create substantive relationships with students that value their academic rather than personal identities, consider how to cherish the importance of scholarship. For students, cultivating an academic identity is dependent upon being given a safe learning space in which the contributions they make are received with visible appreciation.

Making room for all ideas: When teachers prioritize the importance of all perspectives, even those that might be unexpected or unpopular, the result is a classroom that embraces the productive struggle that embodies authentic growth.

Being specific about the way *all* ideas uncover important learning is a validating move. Suppose a teacher asks a student to share an answer to a problem and the response is incorrect. Instead of highlighting the result, the teacher might say something like “That answer is interesting to me because I came up with something similar the first time I did this problem. Can you share your thoughts about how you got there?” This emphasis on the learning journey rather than the destination not only normalizes the role of mistakes in learning; it also creates a safe space for students to take risks, thereby building their sense of academic identity.

**CHANGE THE WAY WE ASK STUDENTS TO CONTRIBUTE THEIR IDEAS**

Sometimes, students who share their thoughts in front of the class feel like they are taking a significant risk, especially if they have been dismissed in the past. If the teacher has not created a safe environment for academic risk-taking, students are often silent and may feel resentment at the invitation to participate. We can build opportunities for all learners to contribute in ways that are meaningful to them.

During the pandemic, students on Zoom had the opportunity to share their thinking via the chat function. I noticed that those who were comfortable expressing themselves in writing were far more active than they might have been in a traditional class setting. Now that Zoom classes are (fingers crossed) largely behind us, how can teachers create similar structures that allow all learners to be heard?

Silent discussion: One effective strategy to increase student voice involves increasing nonvocal discourse. For example, when students are grappling with a new concept, I collect open-ended questions or thoughts on sticky notes, have students post them on the wall, and then have them do a “gallery walk” as they move through the room and write responses to one another. Anyone in the room (teacher or student) can select sticky notes to highlight specific ideas for further exploration. In a similar vein, students might have a “silent discussion” by passing notebooks around the classroom with comments and questions.

Engaging in written discourse prior to having a conversation opens additional avenues for communication, allows students to process ideas in a low-risk setting before being called upon in front of a group, and demonstrates value for the different ways in which students share information. When students see that their ideas have been given legitimacy, their sense of academic identity builds and they are more likely to feel confident, increasing both the frequency and consistency of the contributions they make, whether in writing or vocally.

**EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO GROW AS THINKERS**

Our goal as teachers is not limited to being likable and approachable, though that can be very helpful. More important, it is to prioritize student capacity to grow as thinkers, learners, and scholars so that long after kids leave our classrooms, they believe strongly in their ability to be valuable contributors to their communities. That way, we have done more than just make them like us, or like our classes—we have taught them to trust in themselves and to invest in their own very bright futures.

Imagine if Ricky’s teacher had responded differently to him and his thoughts about *Macbeth*. This time, after Ricky shares his ideas about ambition, the teacher pauses and considers. “I like the nuance of what you’re saying,” she says. “Ambition is absolutely a worthy goal, and there is nothing wrong with it. Bearing that in mind, how can we build further on Ricky’s observation?”

As the class continues, Ricky is satisfied. *That wasn’t so bad,* he thinks. *She actually listened to me.* He sits up with more attentiveness. Maybe he will have something else to say if he follows the conversation closely.