The California Center for School Climate
EDUCATOR SPOTLIGHTS

This brief is Part 3 of a series designed to capture insights from educators' experiences in schools. Through our programming, the California Center for School Climate (CCSC) team seeks to highlight and build upon the successes, challenges, and recommendations discussed in the educator audiocast series.

This audio gallery is a product of the CCSC, a California Department of Education initiative operated by WestEd that provides free support and training on school climate and data use to local education agencies in California.

Learn more about this work and listen to all the audiocasts in this series at ccsc-gallery.wested.org.

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CREATING A COLLABORATIVE CLASSROOM CULTURE

Since the CCSC launched in January 2022, one of its core principles has been that partnering with students, educators, caregivers, and community partners is a crucial component of creating safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments. At the end of the 2022/23 school year, the CCSC Audio Gallery Team sent out a call for nominations for educators and school site staff members committed to cultivating positive school climates across California. Nominees were then chosen to be a part of group discussions with school-based staff with similar roles and approaches.

As studies continue to prove the importance of collaborative learning environments, classrooms have shifted away from emphasizing traditional knowledge transmission principles and toward student-centered learning.[1] Instead of prioritizing lecture-style knowledge dissemination, student-centered classrooms are designed so that students construct skills and understanding through discourse and inquiry.[2] Research indicates that strong peer-to-peer relationships have a favorable impact on students' learning and engagement.[3] Consistent social interactions also lead to higher level thinking and meaning-making, enabling students to evaluate and construct knowledge through engagement with their peers.[4]

Before students can feel ready to collaborate with and learn from each other in the classroom, teachers must establish a trusting environment and cultivate strong relationships among students that are characterized by mutual respect, openness, and care.[5] Creating opportunities for students to engage in dialogue is a key feature of collaborative learning. When students collaborate, collective sense-making can broaden their thinking.[6] Educators should establish clear structures and protocols for teamwork and conversation to ensure equitable access to the curriculum.

Key Teacher Mindsets to Support Student Collaboration Across Grade Levels

In Part 3 of our educator audiocast series, we spoke to three teachers about their commitment to creating collaborative, empowering learning environments across grade levels. Lavita Jones, Jim Keating, and Abby Noche each spoke about their approach to leveraging student-to-student relationships to enhance academic learning. Over the course of the conversation, they highlighted three key mindsets that help them create collaborative classroom environments for students.

Mindset 1: Act as Guide, Not Expert

As veteran teachers, Jim and Abby reflected on how they began their teaching careers thinking they needed to perform expertise as the "sage on the stage." Abby noted that during the first several years of her career, she prioritized introducing hundreds of concepts in her science classes. Over time, however, and in learning from colleagues and workshops about different ways to approach teaching, she shifted toward emphasizing the learning process through text-based collaboration. In her class, students sit in groups of four that rotate every year and engage in inquiry-based exploration of shared texts by asking questions, expressing confusion, and sharing insights to construct meaning. This focus on process changed Abby's role from simply delivering content to facilitating students' learning.

We need to provide the opportunities for them to interact around their process because that's part of them discovering, "Who am I as a student?"

Abby Noche

Jim shared that he has also learned over the years to prioritize students' relationships with each other, making him a "guide on the side." In his role, he focuses on creating opportunities for students to teach and learn from each other by explaining their thought processes aloud.

And I think we've all learned over time, the kids will learn more from each other than any smart thing I think I can say.

Jim Keating

Mindset 2: See Students as Cocreators

Lavita shared how she encourages her students to see themselves as leaders by assigning them roles in cocreating the classroom environment. She emphasizes collaborative work in her class and uses recurring structures such as "turn and talk" and "think-pair-share" to encourage dialogue and offers students the opportunity to lead class discussions themselves. Her students rotate through different self-selected class jobs that support daily classroom tasks. She also shared how her students collaborate on creating classroom agreements at the beginning of each year. All three teachers reflected on the increased buy-in that occurs when students have an active role in designing their learning environments.

Mindset 3: Celebrate Mistakes as Evidence of Learning

Creating a collaborative learning environment requires teachers to release some control, as educators are traditionally posed as the main source of knowledge in the room.[7] Student-centered educators know they need to not just expect but actually reward students for testing out new strategies, making mistakes, and exploring ideas in new ways.

One of Abby's classroom norms is "confusion is cool," which helps normalize mistakes and encourage persistence. The structured conversations in her class are designed to facilitate collaborative meaning-making among students. For example, Lavita will purposefully surface incorrect or incomplete answers and invite students to correct her mistakes. Jim creates opportunities for playful exploration in his improvisation and English classes by encouraging students to remember a quote he has on the classroom wall that says, "Please join me in taking risks, making mistakes and exploring ideas."

Students are becoming okay with being wrong.

... Let's celebrate these mistakes. I mean, how else are you going to learn?

Lavita Jones

Lavita, Jim, and Abby's reflections illuminate the power of shifting teacher mindsets to create collaborative, empowering learning environments for students of all ages.

References

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[7] Garrett, 2008.

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Consider while you listen . . .

Where does your school community land on the spectrum from more traditional and teacher-led to more collaborative and student-centered? Are there particular classes or programs that come to mind when you consider student-centered learning environments? What makes them stand out?

Lavita, Jim, and Abby surfaced three mindsets that help them nurture collaboration with and among students in their classrooms. Do you see evidence of these mindsets at your school? What other mindsets might be key to creating collaborative learning environments?