5 Building the Foundation of Learning Partnerships

Beginning with Meaningful Relationships

The best teachers teach from the heart, not the book.

—Horace Mann, American Educator

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

—Maya Angelou

We laid the foundations for building a practice around self-awareness in the last chapter. Now we turn our attention to the students, the classroom, and the content. Too often though, we ignore the quality of our interactions with students and instead focus primarily on the curriculum. In culturally responsive teaching, relationships are as important as the curriculum. Geneva Gay, pioneer of culturally responsive pedagogy (2010) says positive relationships exemplified as "caring" are one of the major pillars of culturally responsive teaching. This reality stands in contrast to the dominant factory model of schooling, with its focus on the technical aspects of curriculum coverage and testing to sort and label students. In the factory

model, relationship building is seen as a secondary issue related to classroom management more than to learning. The second practice area of the Ready for Rigor frame is focused on reframing and repositioning student-teacher relationships as the key ingredient in helping culturally and linguistically diverse dependent learners authentically engage. Even for high achieving students of color, positive relationships help them reach their fullest potential under less stress.

Why? In a collectivist, community-based culture, relationships are the foundation of all social, political, and cognitive endeavors. This is consistent with the fact that all human beings are hardwired for relationships after living in communal, cooperative settings for millions of years. Back when early man roamed the savannah populated with wild animals, living in community offered protection from these physical threats as well as from attack by hostile neighbors. Maintaining healthy relationships became very important so one wasn't ejected from the protection of the village. As pointed out in Chapter 2, relationships became so important to well-being and safety that the brain created an entire social engagement system to ensure we stay connected and in good standing with the tribe (Porges, 2011).

At the core of positive relationships is trust. Caring is the way that we generate the trust that builds relationships. We have to not only care *about* students in a general sense but also actively care *for* them in a physical and emotional sense. Cammarota and Romero (2006) highlight in their research, *A Critically Compassionate Intellectualism for Latino/a Students: Raising Voices Above the Silencing in Our Schools*, that many teachers and students at all grade levels report feeling disconnected from each other and, at times, even distrustful of one another. This is especially true when building relationships across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines where implicit bias can get in the way (Howard, 2002; Quiroz, 2001). Stephen Brookfield, author of *The Skillful Teacher* (2000) calls relationships the "affective glue" in teaching and learning:

> Trust between teachers and students is the affective glue that binds educational relationships together. Not trusting teachers has several consequences for students. They are unwilling to submit themselves to the perilous uncertainties of new learning. They avoid risk. They keep their most deeply felt concerns private. They view with cynical reserve the exhortations and instructions of teachers. (p. 162)

Neuroscience tells us the brain feels safest and relaxed when we are connected to others we trust to treat us well. It responds to this sense of

connection by secreting oxytocin, called the bonding hormone. Oxytocin makes us want to build a trusting relationship with the other person we are interacting with. Simple gestures, a smile, simple nod of the head, a pat on the back, or touch of the arm from another person stimulates the release of oxytocin in the recipient. I know a White school leader of a unique charter elementary school serving Cambodian, Latino, and African American students who acknowledges each student she passed in the hall with a simple greeting and what I called her "Namaste" pause. She would pause slightly and turn her attention to the student and give an almost imperceptible bow in the student's direction. Every time, I witness the students' faces lighting up at this small gesture of **affirmation** and respect.

Ironically, researchers found that when participants in one study felt they had won the trust of another, their own brains responded by producing oxytocin. Being seen as trustworthy by another stimulates the brain for connection. To make sure we connect with others, our brains developed *mirror neurons* to keep us in sync with each other. Mirror neurons are special brain cells that prompt us to mimic others. Observing another person engaged in a particular behavior will light up regions in our brains as if we were actually doing it too. These special brain cells prompt us to mimic or "mirror" the behavior. It's the reason why when someone we are talking with smiles, we also smile. They cross their legs, we cross our legs. Mirror neurons encourage us to match our body language and facial expressions to the other person's to signal trust and rapport. Our neuroception kicks in to help us read the situation. This synchronizing dance triggers our relaxation response, and we feel more trusting. This is more than neuroscientific trivia. The culturally responsive teacher uses this information to make a more personal and authentic connection with students across differences.

THE NEED FOR A DIFFERENT KIND OF RELATIONSHIP

When I was in elementary school, my teachers would describe me as "a handful." I was always talking to other kids at the wrong time, talking back to the teacher, and generally off task. This went on from second grade until I met my match in fourth grade with Mrs. Morris. Rather than put up with my shenanigans, send me out of the classroom, or put me down with sarcastic remarks as some of my other teachers had, she took a different approach. She'd give me that look that said you know better. Other times, I realized she was actually studying me when she was looking in my direction. She initiated a different type of relationship with me that forced me, as a 9-year-old, to rethink my behavior and my own identity as a learner.

During my early days as a teacher when I thought about Mrs. Morris, I realized that culturally responsive relationships aren't just something nice to have. They are critical. The only way to get students to open up to us is to show we authentically care about who they are, what they have to say, and how they feel. Building a culture of care that helps dependent learners move toward independence requires what I call a **learning partnership**. Gay (2010) points out that caring within a culturally responsive context automatically places teachers in a different kind of emotional and academic partnership with students. This relationship is anchored in affirmation, mutual respect, and **validation** that breeds an unshakable belief that marginalized students not only *can* but *will* improve their school achievement (p. 52). The learning partnership is made up of three components that work together to turn this unshakeable belief into reality. Think of it as an equation: **rapport** + **alliance** = **cognitive insight**. Each part of the learning partnership is essential. You can't ignore one and expect to develop the others.

Each phase acts as a stepping-stone to the next. First, building rapport focuses on establishing an emotional connection and building trust. In the alliance phase, we use this emotional connection to create a partnership that has the teacher and student coming together as a team to tackle a specific learning challenge. Each agrees to bring their will and skill to the effort. Because there's trust, the teacher can provide a degree of "push" or challenge without having the student experience an "amygdala hijack" and either withdraw or become defensive. It is in this phase that we help students acquire the tools to become independent learners and expand their intellectual capacity. This alliance will allow cognitive insight to happen. Cognitive insight is about making the invisible visible so the teacher is able to get a better understanding of the student's thinking routines. In the process, the student becomes more aware of his own learning moves and is positioned to begin directing his learning. In this phase, both the teacher and student will gain a better sense of the student's particular learning strengths, content misconceptions, and challenge areas. Too often, teachers try to figure out a student's learning process based on test scores or other types of assessments, but these tools don't offer holistic insight into the student's learning moves. Getting dependent learners to be open and vulnerable enough to show you their learning moves begins with rapport.

Rapport and Affirmation

Rapport is generally defined as a "sympathetic connection" with another person that results in that warm, friendly feeling you get when you are in sync. In culturally responsive teaching, rapport is connected to

the idea of affirmation. Affirmation simply means that we acknowledge the personhood of our students through words and actions that say to them, "I care about you." Too often, we confuse affirmation with building up a student's self-esteem. As educators, we think it's our job to make students of color, English learners, or poor students feel good about themselves. That's a deficit view of affirmation. In reality, most parents of culturally and linguistically diverse students do a good job of helping their children develop positive self-esteem. It is when they come to school that many students of color begin to feel marginalized, unseen, and silenced.

Affirmation and rapport are really about building trust, not self-esteem. Trust and fear are inversely related; fear activates the amygdala and the release of cortisol. Cortisol stops all learning for about 20 minutes and stays in the body for up to 3 hours. Remember, when the brain feels there's a potential threat based on past experience with a particular person or because of one's own implicit bias or marginalized status in the larger sociopolitical context, the amygdala goes into action and "hijacks" the brain's other systems, throwing the body into defensive fight, flight, or freeze mode. Trust deactivates the amygdala and blocks the release of cortisol.

Trust, therefore, frees up the brain for other activities such as creativity, learning, and higher order thinking. In communal, relational cultures, our own individual sense of survival and well-being is so intertwined with others that we have trained our safety-threat detection system to be on the alert in social settings for any hint of psychological or social threat that might lead us to being shamed, ostracized, or rejected by the group. Keep in mind, the brain experiences social pain—not connecting with others or being rejected by them—in the same way it experiences physical pain. The same areas in the brain light up whether we stub our toe or get rejected.

Most often mistrust builds because a student or parent doesn't feel acknowledged, affirmed, or cared for. I remember having a conversation with a teacher who could not figure out why her relationship with her African American students felt strained. She was especially troubled that several African American girls in her class had refused to participate in a mask-making activity in which the kids placed plaster strips across their face all the way up to their hairline. One girl spoke up and told the teacher that her mother would be upset with her if she got water or the grainy plaster in her hair. The teacher causally dismissed their concerns and insisted they do the activity along with everyone else. The teacher was unfamiliar with the significance of hair in African American culture—how it's cared for, its connection to self-esteem and self-expression.

In turn, she missed an opportunity to affirm the students' cultural needs by simply making scarves available in the classroom when doing activities with water, sand, or any other substance that might mess up their hair. Whether it's being insensitive to Muslim students fasting during Ramadan by having a class party with food and drink or ignoring a low-income family's ability to provide money for a field trip, these small actions chip away at trust and personal regard that are at the core of authentic relationships. This lack of care leads to mistrust, which, over time, can put students (and parents) on the defensive. This underlying mistrust is the reason some parents seem antagonistic. They become defensive and protective based on the perception that the teacher doesn't care.

Core Practices: Affirmation and Validation

In the inner circle of the Ready for Rigor framework, affirmation and validation are two practices that undergird all efforts to operationalize personalization and rapport building. Affirming is simply acknowledging the personhood of each student, appreciating all aspects of them especially those culturally specific traits that have been negated by the dominant culture. Validation, on the other hand, is your explicit acknowledgment to students that you are aware of the inequities that impact their lives. In the next chapter, we will look at the concept of validation in more depth.

Building Trust and Rapport

You can try to speed the trust-building process, but feeling connected grows slowly and requires time for people to get to know each other. It happens in those small day-to-day interactions as a student comes into the classroom, when you pass him in the hallway or on the playground. It happens in the quiet exchanges we have with a student during an activity or with our subtle body language, whether it's a head nod, a quick smile from across a room, or a gentle hand on a student's shoulder when he is struggling with completing his work. Students will begin to feel cared for when they recognize and experience familiar forms of affection and nurturing.

Where to start: Trust begins with listening

The most powerful way to build rapport is by practicing what Reggio Emilia practitioners call a *pedagogy of listening*. Listening communicates a sense of respect for and an interest in the student's contributions.

Research says that 70% of communication is nonverbal. So listening doesn't just mean hearing the words but listening to the emotional quality of the conversation. This seems simple, maybe too simple and obvious.

Janice was a third-grade teacher I met when I was asked to work with an instructional leadership team at Storybrook Elementary School that wanted to get some traction with culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms. Up until this point, it had been hit and miss. Janice knew something was not clicking between her and her students. Because of it, every day, she said, seemed long and uninspired. At first she wasn't convinced about focusing on building rapport with students because she saw it as some touchy-feely performance she had to do every day to get kids to pay attention. I coached the team to understand rapport in a different way based on neuroscience, sociocultural learning theory, and findings from teachers successful with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Janice agreed to restructure parts of her instructional day to make time for relationship building but wasn't sure where to start. Before trying to make a connection with students by being friendlier or sharing more of herself, I suggested she do something else—start with listening.

Because there was a schoolwide effort at Storybrook to use conferencing to talk about student writing, Janice decided to devote the first five minutes of every student writing conference to two simple questions: "How are you?" and "What are you excited about these days outside of school?" She let students talk. She made it clear to students that what they had to say was important. She reported back that at first students were not used to being listened to. They just sat in silence thinking it was some type of test. Finally by the end of a month, she had learned a great deal about her students during their "little chats," as she called them. Janice said the sense of connection and rapport spilled over into other classroom activities. Simply setting time aside to listen with her full attention helped generate rapport. Practicing a pedagogy of listening may be simple but it isn't always easy. Unfortunately, the kind of empathetic, attentive listening that builds rapport is not what we typically do in most classrooms on a day-to-day basis.

Figure 5.1 Listening With Grace

- Give one's full attention to the speaker and to what is being said
- Understand the feeling behind the words and be sensitive to the emotions being expressed
- Suspend judgment and listen with compassion
- Honor the speaker's cultural way of communicating

Using Trust Generators to Build Rapport

In addition to building trust through acts of caring and authentic listening, we can build trust by being more authentic, vulnerable, and in sync with our students. According to researchers, there is a set of actions that help us make more intimate connections with one another and opens the door for building trust (Brafman & Brafman, 2011). I call them *trust generators.*

Figure 5.2 Trust Generators

Trust Generator	Definition	What It Looks Like
Selective Vulnerability	People respect and connect with others who share their own vulnerable moments. It means showing your human side that is not perfect.	Sharing with a student a challenge you had as a young person or as a learner. Sharing new skills you are learning and what is hard about it. The information shared is selective and appropriate.
Familiarity	People develop a sense of familiarity with someone who they see often in a particular setting such as at a bus stop every day or in the café on a regular basis.	Crossing paths with a student during recess or lunch. Bumping into students and their families at a community farmer's market or at a local park. Attending community events that you know the student may have attended.
Similarity of Interests	People create a bond with others who share similar likes, dislikes, hobbies, and so forth. This common affinity allows a point of connection beyond any obvious racial, class, or linguistic differences. This plants the seed of connection in the relationship.	Sharing hobbies, sports, or other things you like that are similar to a particular student's interests. Also sharing social causes that you are passionate about, such as saving the environment or caring for animals.
Concern	People connect when another shows concern for those issues and events important to another, such as births, illnesses, or other life transitions. This plants the seed of personal regard.	Remembering details from a student's life. Demonstrated by asking follow-up questions about recent events.
Competence	People tend to trust others who demonstrate they have the skill and knowledge, as well as the will, to help and support them. This plants the seed of confidence in others.	Students trust the teacher when the teacher demonstrates the ability to teach effectively or make learning less confusing, more exciting, and more successful.

The trust generators are universal in their ability to help us feel an instant sense of connection. How we go about using them is as unique as our fingerprints. It depends on your personality, experience, the age of the children you teach, and your own understanding of their culture, to name a few. That's why you have to give some thought to how you would approach it. There is no formula.

Let's look at how we might use selective vulnerability. Practicing vulnerability requires that we be willing to let down our guard a bit. The most powerful thing we can do to create a culture of caring is to allow ourselves to be seen as human beings, not just in our role as teachers. Psychologists have long known that self-disclosure is one of the hallmarks of intimate, trusting relationships. There is considerable evidence that teachers, leaders, and other authority figures who disclose part of their authentic selves to students or employees build not only trust but generate greater cooperation and teamwork within a group as well (Offermann & Rosh, 2012).

Selective vulnerability is best employed through storytelling. Turns out that storytelling is one of the universal ways people connect and get to know each other around the world. The human brain is hardwired for stories. Long before humans developed writing they passed down their history, culture, and traditions orally through stories. Across cultures, stories have many characteristics in common. Every culture uses stories to entertain, get to know each other, or pass on wisdom. It is not surprising therefore that neuroscience is beginning to find that our brain reacts to a story in a particular way.

For example, when we tell stories to others, the brains of the people listening synchronize with the storyteller's brain. Uri Hasson and his colleagues from Princeton (2010) found that similar brain regions in the prefrontal cortex were activated in both the listener and the storyteller. He calls it "neural coupling," similar to what mirror neurons do. His research suggests that storytelling creates a much deeper connection between people and actually builds empathy and trust. Small talk and general chitchat fit in this category of trust-building communication. Researcher Jeremy Hsu found personal stories and small talk make up 65% of our conversations. Sharing your story with students makes you more human and vulnerable.

Ways to Put Selective Vulnerability in Action

- Tell your story by weaving it into your lesson—what were you like as a student? What were your favorite subjects? What were some challenges? Bring in pictures of yourself as a child or during your school days.

- Share a new skill or process you are learning—not the finished product but the less-than-perfect beginning and middle parts.
- Share your interests with the whole class and then find fellow fans among individual students with whom you share an interest in the same sports teams, movies, or hobby.
- Bond over a local social cause that means something to you. Let students make a connection to what is important to the community and to you.

Use the worksheet below (Figure 5.3) to reflect on how you might use the trust generators to build a more authentic connection with your students.

Assessing the State of Rapport in the Classroom

Our ultimate goal is to position dependent learners so that they will take the intellectual risk and stretch into their zone of proximal development (ZPD). That's the point of rapport—building trust is designed to help dependent learners avoid the stress and anxiety that comes with feeling lost and unsupported at school.

Figure 5.3 Points of Connection Worksheet

My Points of Connection • *What do you see as the best points of connection you can make with your students?* • *In the space on the right, identify a few experiences or stories you might share based on some combination of the trust generators.*	
Trust generators to consider • **Selective Vulnerability** • **Familiarity** • **Similarity & Interests** • **Concern** • **Competence**	

Life in the classroom is often so busy that we aren't always aware of the small interactions that chip away at trust and rapport. It's important to not assume everything is fine. Remember that we are trying to make "the familiar strange" in an effort to gain a deeper awareness of the quality of trust between you and your students. So, what is the current reality? Like Janice, you have to step back and get a better sense of the state of rapport and trust between you and students who are different linguistically and culturally.

How do you find out? Take an inquiry stance. Collect some data on a small group of students rather than trying to assess the class as a whole all at once. Focus in on one or two students we commonly call *focal students*, to get a more intimate view. Use the data to illuminate unconscious patterns in your interactions. Spend about a week or two tracking the quality of the interactions with your dependent learners, especially those that are culturally and linguistically diverse. I asked all members of the Instructional Leadership Team at Storybrook Elementary to track the quality of their interactions with students for two weeks with a simple tally sheet (Figure 5.3). At the end of two weeks, they were quite surprised that the assessment in their heads didn't match the data they collected. One teacher thought she had interacted with her dependent learners quite a bit when in reality she went through most days not even exchanging a word or glance with them. Another teacher realized that she was labeling an interaction as positive because she was using a nice tone of voice. In reality, it was a negative interaction because she was always pointing out to one particular student what he was doing wrong and how he was off-task, never highlighting when he was on task.

Here are some steps for assessing current reality in your classroom.

Identify a specific student you would like to have a better learning partnership with. That student should be representative of a similar group of students in the classroom. What you learn in building a better relationship with this one focal student can be easily applied to other students.

Assess the quality of your relationship with your focal student. Think about how you and your focal student currently interact with each other. Reflect on the following questions and be honest with yourself. Set an intention for what you would like to be true in the future.

Create a system to help you look closely at and listen carefully to your focal student. It seems almost impossible to pay attention to every student in the classroom all the time. That's why you need a system for gathering information about individual students so that you begin to feel you know them personally.

Try "kidwatching." Literacy educator, Yetta Goodman popularized the term in the 1980s as part of a literacy strategy, but the practice has its roots in Montessori and multicultural education. Rather than try to notice every student every day, you select 3–5 students to watch over the course of a week and make notes about each student. Choose a simple system to make note taking easy. Some teachers use index cards, with a card or two for each student. Others use sticky notes. You can plan your observations around social or academic tasks depending on what information you'd like to gather. Over the course of several weeks you should have a great deal of information about your focal students.

Keep track of student responses over time. In the activity of the classroom, it is easy to miss the small signals that trust is growing. Be sure to track your attempts to connect with your focal students and their responses. Think about what adjustments you want to make and track those as well. The goal is to pay attention to this blooming relationship in a new way. Keep a journal. Keep note cards in your desk. Record a voice memo on your smart phone. Whatever way is most convenient for you will work.

You can use a tally sheet like the one in Figure 5.4 to track the number of positive interactions, negative interactions, and neutral interactions. A positive interaction is when the reason you are talking with the student is to show care, affirm him, or simply say hello, while a negative interaction is when you are reprimanding or redirecting the student. Remember that, no matter how upbeat your tone of voice is, if the intention is to point out something the student is not doing, it is a negative interaction.

Crunch the numbers and analyze the data. Once you have tracked your student interactions for a given time period, review it to get a sense of the big picture. How many times did you have a positive interaction? How often did you redirect the student's behavior, give him a verbal warning, or give him "the look"? When analyzing your data, ask yourself if it matches what you imagined was happening. There should be at the very least a 2:1 ratio of positive to neutral or negative interactions. Usually teachers find that they are not having as many positive interactions as they thought. Be sure to analyze the nature of the interactions: When did more positive interactions take place? Why were you having a negative interaction? What was the student's reaction in either case?

Based on your findings, identify one small change you can make to build trust with your focal student. Think about one small change you would like to make that you believe would shift the nature

Figure 5.4 Rapport Interaction Tally Tracking

Mark each time you have an encounter with your focal student. Indicate with a P, 0, or N whether the encounter was positive (P), neutral (0), or negative (N). Make brief notes describing the encounter—what type of interaction.

Dates	Interactions (Tally with P or N)	Notes

of your interactions. Think about the elements of the learning partnership and building rapport. How might you generate more trust? How might you show up differently? Remember that the burden is on you to change the nature of the relationship and build trust between you and your students.

Track the impact of the one small change you made. Once you decide what changes you'd like to make, be sure to track the impact of those changes. If it seems to be leading to positive changes, then continue. If not, do more inquiry and figure out why. The important thing is to practice ongoing inquiry and reflection as you make small adjustments. The goal is to be deliberate and focused.

Operationalizing Rapport Strategies

Once you have assessed what needs to improve in terms of building trust with students, you will want to think about ways to make it happen organically as well as in more structured ways. Here are some suggestions.

Express care in nonverbal ways that shows your concern. Practice listening with grace—communicating nonverbally as a sense of warm concern, openness, attunement to the other, and nonjudgment. Give the student your attention. No multitasking. Look at him directly. Use body language, facial expressions, and hand gestures to convey your attention. Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting. Get down on their level when possible. Be selectively demonstrative. A pat on the back, a fist bump, or a high five goes a long way in communicating caring and encouragement.

Find time to play and have fun as a class. Practice creating time to just hang out in class—socializing with no other purpose but to connect and nurture relationships. It might be having students perform skits or tell jokes during a "brain break." Laughing produces endorphins, those feel-good chemicals in our brain. It might be sharing a meal together as a class.

Commit to practicing affirmation. Make a commitment to finding something to affirm in each student related to his racial, culture, gender, or linguistic identity. It's common in our individualistic dominant culture to praise students mostly for what they do. On the other hand, in more communal cultures it is more important to recognize and appreciate who the child is and the unique contributions he makes to community life. The

important point here is to develop the intention to accentuate the positive in every student, even those that you have yet to develop a connection with or who behave in ways that feel challenging.

Find ways to routinely let each student know that you see who he is, including aspects of his cultural identity. As important as it is for students to be known by their teachers, it is equally important that they know that you know and value them. Recognize those characteristics, attributes, and behaviors that have been portrayed in the larger society as negative or bad, such as hairstyles, energetic and lively style. It can be simply noticing or complementing a new hairstyle. Stay away from stereotypical compliments, such as what a good athlete the student is. This is a great place to remind ourselves that the greater sociopolitical context that students exist in tried to limit their possibilities and life options.

Show appreciation for students' native language, especially the proverbs, adages, and poetry that are passed from generation to generation. Use simple phrases or words in their native language as class words to signal transitions from one activity to another or get their attention for announcements. Put the proverbs and inspirational sayings on bulletin boards in the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING DEPENDENT LEARNERS AND BUILDING INTELLECTIVE CAPACITY

Building rapport with culturally and linguistically diverse students is essential if we want to improve their learning and guide them to do more rigorous work. Remember that we want to partner with students in a new way so that they eventually can take ownership of their learning. But it begins with being more authentic ourselves. Building trust is an important goal in culturally responsive teaching because it paves the way for us to lead students into their zone of proximal development. Still we have to be prepared for students to be skeptical and slow to embrace this new relationship. Practice, persistence, and patience. Trust builds slowly.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Because our safety-threat detection system is continuously scanning for potential social-emotional threats, it is the job of the culturally responsive teacher to build trust and rapport in order to reassure our students that they are safe and cared for.

- Culturally responsive teaching that supports dependent learners requires a learning partnership that includes both rapport and alliance.
- Relationships are the cornerstone of culturally responsive teaching.
- It requires a new type of relationship we call a learning partnership.

INVITATION TO INQUIRY

- How would you characterize your relationship with students of color, English learners, or other students who are different from you?
- How can you learn more about what would help your students feel safe and trusting from their perspective and experiences?
- How do you create a sense of trust and safety in your relationship with your students? Do you do this deliberately or randomly?
- See your students in a new light: Where do they excel? What are they expert in?
- Build an asset-based profile of your dependent learners.
- Find out what trust/rapport looks like in your students' respective cultures. Identify commonalities and differences.
- How would you manage potential cultural conflicts around respect and trust?

GOING DEEPER

- *Trust and School Life: The Role of Trust for Learning, Teaching, Leading, and Bridging* (2014) by Dimitri Van Maele, Patrick B. Forsyth, and Mieke Van Houtte
- *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* (2004) by Peter H. Johnston
- *Fires in the Middle School Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from Middle Schoolers* (2009) by Kathleen Cushman and Laura Rogers
- *Click: The Forces Behind How We Fully Engage with People, Work, and Everything We Do* (2010) by Ori Brafman and Rom Brafman

6 Establishing Alliance in the Learning Partnership

Becoming an Ally to Help Build Students' Independence

Every child deserves a champion: an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists they become the best they can possibly be.

—Rita Pierson, Educator of 40 years
and a staunch antipoverty advocate

In the first part of the learning partnership, the focus is on creating a sense of connectedness with students who come from a relationship-oriented culture. In this chapter, we continue to explore the Learning Partnership quadrant of the Ready for Rigor frame, with a particular focus on the second part of the equation—building an alliance with students. Ladson-Billings (2009) and others emphasize that the point of culturally responsive teaching isn't just about getting along with students but to use that connection to stretch and empower them as learners. According to Gay (2010), this is the ultimate goal of the culturally responsive teacher: to provide resources and personal assistance so students cultivate positive

self-efficacy beliefs and a positive academic mindset. As she says, "loving children should not become a proxy for teaching them" (p. 53).

From the beginning, I have tried to make the point that as culturally responsive teachers, we have a particular duty to help dependent learners build their intellective capacity so that they are able to do more independent learning and higher order thinking. As much as we want students to take responsibility for their own learning from the start, they cannot do that without help in the beginning.

James Banks, the father of multicultural education (2002) asserts that if education is to empower culturally and linguistically diverse students, it must be transformative. Being transformative means helping "students develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions and implement their decisions into effective personal, social, political, and economic action" (p. 131). Empowerment also can be described as student academic competence, self-efficacy (belief in one's ability), and initiative. This empowerment, according to Edmund Gordon (2004), co-author of *All Students Reaching the Top*, begins with helping marginalized students increase their intellective capacity. But for this to be true, we know students must believe they can succeed at learning tasks and have the motivation to persevere through challenging work. This is the essence of academic mindset. Academic mindset is defined as a student's attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions about school, learning, and his capacity as a learner that are associated with effort, perseverance, and positive academic achievement (Snipes, Fanscali, & Stoker, 2012).

That is why the second part of the learning partnership, *alliance*, focuses on helping the dependent learner begin and stay on the arduous path toward independent learning. An alliance is more than a friendship. It is a relationship of mutual support as partners navigate through challenging situations.

WHY MARGINALIZED DEPENDENT LEARNERS NEED AN ALLY

I met tenth-grader Tyree when I was working with a secondary English Language Arts teacher who had been assigned to what her school district called a "strategic reading class." The strategic reading class was made up of ninth and tenth grade students, largely African Americans with some Latino students, the majority boys who were reading several years behind grade level. Most of them read at the third to fourth grade level. Tyree's teacher, Marci

and I were beta testing a literacy curriculum I was developing to accelerate high school students' reading development. Tyree read at the third grade level, but was naturally smart and a bit of a ham. But reading is the primary vehicle for taking in new knowledge in school after fourth grade, and because of his low skills, Tyree had fallen way behind.

His academic challenges weren't just that he couldn't read but that his background knowledge was shallow and his academic vocabulary was small. He couldn't do complex analytical work. Tyree was always up for trying out the learning tools and games I brought for the class to test. I could tell his slow reading frustrated him. He didn't even try when asked to read a complex grade level text. Instead, he feigned disinterest and said this was boring and a waste of time. Tyree was a dependent learner in need of an ally like his teacher, Marci. She didn't blame the students for their reading problems but she didn't sugar coat things either. She pushed them to roll up their sleeves and work to become better readers. In turn, she rolled up her own sleeves right alongside them to find the right tools and most effective strategies. She was their ally.

The alliance phase of the learning partnership speaks to the realities of education in the sociopolitical context that creates unequal academic outcomes for students of color, English learners, and poor students. The education system has historically underserved culturally and linguistically diverse students of color. We have acknowledged the achievement gap that has left many of them with lower skills, unable to do higher order, academically challenging work. Because of institutional inequities, these students have underdeveloped "learn-how-to-learn" skills as well as weak foundational skills in reading and analytical writing (Boykin, Tyler, & Miller, 2005).

As a result, many students go from grade to grade, like Tyree, without becoming proficient readers, writers, or mathematicians. Their awareness of their own lack of academic proficiency leads to a lack of confidence as learners. Unfortunately, many culturally and linguistically diverse students start to believe these skill gaps are evidence of their own innate intellectual deficits. They internalize the negative verbal and nonverbal messages adults at school send to them in the form of low expectations, unchallenging remedial content, and an overemphasis on compliant behavior (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

On the inside, many students of color become discouraged and disengaged. In high school, we see them in the back of the classroom, hoodies pulled over their heads, head on the desk napping during the lesson, or painting fingernails. While on the outside, some teachers interpret this behavior as a lack of motivation and a cultural lack of investment in education. What looks like lack of motivation is in reality the student losing

hope that anything can ever change because the academic hurdles seem insurmountable (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Quiroz, 1997).

For dependent learners, this can lead to **learned helplessness**. According to Martin Seligman (2006), learned helplessness is the student's belief that he has no control over his ability to improve as a learner. Because he doesn't believe he has the capacity, he doesn't exert any effort when faced with a challenging work assignment or a new skill to develop. Think of learned helplessness as the opposite of having an academic mindset.

Research finds that unconsciously teachers reinforce learned helplessness among low-performing students of color. I remember a bilingual teacher in a meeting putting it succinctly: "When a teacher expresses sympathy over failure, lavishes praise for completing a simple task, or offers unsolicited help, you send unintended messages of low expectations."

The student with this limited outlook believes effort is useless. He begins to cover up, hide, or act out because he believes failure on an assignment or task might expose him as "dumb" to his peers, leaving him vulnerable to teasing and being ostracized. This is likely to trigger an amygdala hijack. Or it might trigger what former Stanford professor and education researcher, Claude Steele calls **stereotype threat**. Stereotype threat is a type of racially charged amygdala hijack. It happens when a student becomes anxious about his inadequacy as a learner because he believes his failure on an assignment or test will confirm the negative stereotype associated with his race, socioeconomic status, gender, or language background (i.e., Black kids aren't good at math; Spanish speakers can't develop academic language). This type of anxiety attack can also be a form of **internalized oppression**, whereby the student internalizes the negative social messages about his racial group, begins to believe them, and loses confidence. In the classroom, anxiety interferes with his academic performance by releasing the stress hormone cortisol, which in turns reduces the amount of working memory available to him to do complex cognitive work. It also inhibits the growth of the student's intellective capacity.

VALIDATING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

Learned helplessness is just another form of hopelessness. The alliance phase of the learning partnership provides an opportunity for teachers to restore hope for struggling students left on the wrong side of the

achievement gap. It begins with practicing validation. Validation simply means that we acknowledge two things. First, we acknowledge the realities of inequity that impact students in and out of school. It could be acknowledging that students of color have historically been treated differently at school. Or it can mean that their culturally different ways of learning are often mistaken for intellectual deficits. Often in an effort to be color-blind, some teachers downplay or trivialize subtle but persistent microaggressions directed at culturally and linguistically diverse students on a daily basis. For students, these situations cause stress and emotional pain. As an ally, we have to let them know they are not crazy. Inequity is real. Second, it's a chance to validate the personhood of the student and legitimize those ways of speaking or being that have been branded "wrong" in mainstream school culture. Validating students is the first step toward empowering them. Ladson-Billings (2009) says that empowerment through validation is a critical feature of culturally responsive teaching because it helps restore students' sense of hope (Figure 6.1). Restoring hope is one of the main jobs for the teacher as ally in the learning partnership (Duncan-Andrade, 2007).

Being hopeful can be hard if as social justice educators, we continually beat the drum of oppression and social inequity. Culturally and linguistically diverse students know this reality already. Instead, we should focus on highlighting a community's resiliency and vision for social change. Culturally and linguistically diverse students are not helpless victims. They come from communities with a rich history of being the catalyst for social justice movements that have changed the face of the world. And that's not hype. It's history. Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Caesar Chavez, Fannie Lou Hammer, and Dolores Huerta were all merchants of hope within a sociopolitical context that marginalized people of color. Validation has to focus on the resilience of communities of color as exemplified in Maya Angelou's (1994) poem, *And Still I Rise*. In many ways, culturally responsive teachers are merchants of hope in their role as allies in the learning partnership.

WHAT IS AN "ALLIANCE"?

The concept of working alliance grows out of the fields of counseling and coaching. Psychologist Edward Bordin (1994) analyzed the special relationship between counselor and client and identified a unique, collaborative relationship he called a *therapeutic alliance* between the person in need of change and the person there to help support the change process. It has three essential components:

Figure 6.1 Categories of Hope

Not all hope is helpful. Duncan-Andrade highlights the difference between false hope that is superficial, leading to no real change in teaching or learning and critical hope that is realistic about inequities and leverages teacher and student energy.

False Hope	Critical Hope
Hokey Hope This type comes from blind optimism that ignores the laundry list of inequities that impact the lives of culturally and linguistically diverse students inside and outside the classroom when the evidence does not warrant such optimism.	**Material Hope** This type comes from the sense of control young people have when they are given the resources to "deal" with the forces that affect their lives. Quality teaching is the most significant "material" resource we can offer culturally and linguistically diverse students.
Hope Deferred This type comes from a focus on idealistic socioeconomic changes in society such as ending all poverty—before we can help students. Recognition of social and educational inequities leads to unrealistic hope for change in a distant future.	**Socratic Hope** This type comes as teachers and students examine their lives and actions within an unjust society and allow their pain to pave the path to justice, self-determination, and collective action through academic excellence. The righteous indignation or so-called student "hostility" it generates is seen as a strength to be channeled into positive action and engagement.

Source: Adapted from "Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete," by Jeffery Duncan-Andrade, 2009. *Harvard Review.*

- A shared understanding and agreement to tackle a specific goal
- A shared understanding and agreement about the tasks necessary to reach the goal along with confidence that these activities will lead to progress
- A relational bond based on mutual trust that creates an emotional connection and sense of safety for the client in order to do the hard work necessary to reach the goal

Bordin explains that what makes a therapeutic alliance unique is the reality that working to change or improve in an area will mean working on our

weaknesses and that working on these weak areas will definitely trigger the amygdala's fight or flight response in the client's brain, leading to defensive behaviors such as acting out or shutting down. He points out that taking on these tasks will test their bond. But because of the skill and commitment of the ally, the client is able to manage his emotions and shift to a more receptive mindset. This mindset allows the client to stretch himself. In the end, the client expands his capacity. This is why, he says, the client has to have deep trust in his ally and a sense of safety within their relationship. When a client has little trust in the person supporting him through the task and has little or no faith in that person's ability to help him improve, then the client becomes reluctant. While he may go through the motions of working toward change, he isn't able to commit 100% to the process out of fear and lack of trust.

I first recognized the need to establish a similar type of alliance with my students when I was a new high school writing teacher. I was confident in my content knowledge about the different elements of writing and how to teach so students learned to be competent writers. Despite my confidence in my pedagogy, I ran up against something I didn't expect: resistance from my struggling students. It wasn't that they lacked confidence in my ability. It was that they lacked confidence in their own ability. I realized that they were dependent learners who didn't believe they were capable of figuring out how to write well. It was as if I was asking them to go out on a limb and risk their safety. Resistance came in a variety of forms. Some cried. Others got defensive. Others simply withdrew.

I knew that just marking up their papers or having them write yet another draft of the assigned essay would never get them past this mindset. We needed to partner in a different way. I needed to become their ally so that I could ask them to take new risks in their development as writers. In some cases, we literally shook hands to seal our partnership.

FEATURES OF THE LEARNING PARTNERSHIP ALLIANCE

There are three critical parts patterned on Bordin's idea of therapeutic alliance: *the pact, teacher as ally, and the student as driver of his own learning.*

The Pact. The pact is a formal agreement between teacher and student to work on a learning goal and a relational covenant between them. They each pledge to bring their attention and effort to the pursuit of the goal. Often teachers will put in place learning contracts or IEPs, but these are technical tools focused mainly on compliance. The pact has to be relational as well. It is possible to use the formal process of writing up a learning contract with a student as an opportunity to create a focus on the social and emotional aspects of risk-taking.

Teacher as Ally and Warm Demander. As part of her commitment, the teacher acts as an ally to the student in his quest toward independent learning. In this role, the teacher offers both *care* and *push* as needed. The main focus here is cultivating the skills to push students into their zone of proximal development while helping them manage their emotional response so they don't set off their amygdala. The skills and attributes of **warm demander** pedagogy allow teachers to push students to take more academic risks and gain confidence (Ware, 2006).

Student as Driver of His Own Learning. For his part in the alliance, the student commits to being an active participant in the process and taking ownership of his own learning as he works toward his learning goals.

CREATING THE PACT

When I first began the practice of developing a pact with my writing students, I struggled with how to make it feel like an opportunity rather than a punishment. I realized that it meant finding a learning target that would allow the student to experience success but was significant because it set him up for seeing immediate results in other areas of his writing. It also had to be something that the student felt challenged by but wouldn't shut him down. This meant we had to talk about what felt like his strong areas and what he saw as hard or confusing.

It was important to talk *with* the student, not *at* him about taking up this challenge. Make space during your conversations for the student to share his thoughts. Provide open-ended questions and lots of wait time. Students, especially struggling students, are not used to being asked their opinion or to be reflective. You are shifting the power dynamics with the creation of a pact—not power *over* the student but as master instructional coach Jim Knight (2013) says in *Impactful Instruction*, power *with* the student. Here are some tips for getting the Pact off to a good start.

- *Ask the student to identify what he thinks is getting in the way for him around a specific learning target.* It is amazing how accurate students are in identifying where learning breaks down for them or where they feel stuck.
- *Together select a learning target that is small, specific and significant.* Identify a fundamental subskill that has the potential to allow a student to unlock other areas. For example, I realized one of my students didn't understand his long vowels. This impacted his reading fluency, which reduced his comprehension of the texts he was expected to

write about. These problems also showed up in his writing too. So that was our goal: internalize all the long vowel variations.

- *Set a deadline* for mastering the learning target.
- *Set up benchmarks* to check on progress and offer corrective feedback.
- *Share what you are willing to do as the student's ally.* Let him know you are his partner in this process. Be specific about how you will support him.
- *Be explicit about your belief in his capacity to master this learning target.* Make this authentic. Students are good at sniffing out fake flattery. Share the information you've learned about the student's strengths during your rapport-building phase. Help the student understand that you really believe in him.
- *Forewarn him that you will ask him to stretch himself* and that it will feel uncomfortable, but that you are there to support him. Help the student understand this point by drawing a comparison between sports or another skill he has mastered outside of school such as learning to play an instrument.
- *Ask him to explicitly name what he intends to do as part of the partnership to meet this challenge.* Once he's answered, offer two or three other ways he can take responsibility for his own learning.
- *Create some type of simple ritual to mark the occasion.* A handshake, fist bump, or high five. A special pencil with an inspirational slogan on it. It is important to cue the brain so that the experience is infused with emotion so the brain remembers. This stimulates the student's RAS and amygdala and reframes the challenge as a positive activity rather than as a potential threat. Now the student will feel excitement and energy rather than anxiety when thinking about this area of learning.
- *Write down key agreements* and notes from the conversation after you end the meeting with the student.

Find a way to organize the classroom schedule so that you can have periodic conferences or check-ins with students. This use of time is an extension of creating a culturally responsive classroom environment. Talk explicitly about joining forces to make progress on a learning goal within a specific period of time. For example, in three weeks, the student will learn the difference between a complete sentence and a sentence fragment, but the teacher commits to providing specific help in the form of appropriate scaffolding, tools, and feedback. This is the "partnership" element in learning partnerships.

BECOMING A WARM DEMANDER

Your role as ally in the learning partnership calls for you to know when to offer emotional comfort and care and when to not allow the student to slip into learned helplessness. Your job is to find a way to bring the student into the **zone of proximal development** while in a state of **relaxed alertness** so that he experiences the appropriate cognitive challenge that will stimulate his neurons and help his dendrites to grow.

To do this, the culturally responsive teacher takes a warm demander stance. Educator Judith Kleinfeld (1975) at the University of Alaska originally coined the term *warm demander* to describe the style of those teachers most effective with Eskimo and Native Indian children from small rural villages attending urban schools in Alaska. Other educators over the years have identified a similar teaching stance among effective teachers of African American and Latino students (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ware, 2006). Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) in their research of two Latino community-based high schools defined this characteristic as *hard caring*, "the combination of high expectations for academic performance that teachers place on students and supportive, instrumental relationships between students and teachers." In *Teach Like a Champion* (2010), Doug Lemov calls it "warm/strict." Even movies have immortalized warm demanders on screen like Jaimie Escalente in *Stand and Deliver* (1988), Marva Collins in *The Marva Collins Story* (1981), and ex-Marine turned teacher, LouAnne Johnson played by actress Michelle Pfeiffer, in *Dangerous Minds* (1995).

Earning the Right to Demand

It is easy to think that just being firm and authoritarian is the key to increasing student achievement for marginalized students. Kleinfeld (1972) and others found the opposite was true. Kleinfeld identified two elements that when put together increased the engagement and effort of students who had disengaged because they were English learners and felt like outsiders in the classroom: *personal warmth* coupled with what she called *active demandingness*. Personal warmth is what Gay (2010) labels *care*. Kleinfeld said this element was important to those students in the study because it was consistent with their collectivist cultural worldview and practices that put a high premium on relationships. Active demandingness isn't defined as just a no-nonsense firmness with regard to behavior but an insistence on excellence and academic effort. This unique combination of personal warmth and active demandingness earns the

teacher the right to push for excellence and stretch the student beyond his comfort zone.

She noted that these two characteristics stood in contrast to teachers who exhibited some combination of *professional distance* (no focus on rapport) and *passive leniency* (no focus on effort). The chart in Figure 6.2 lays out the characteristics of each combination of characteristics.

Warmth with passive leniency produced the *sentimentalist*, a teacher who is friendly but holds lower standards and expectations for certain students in a misguided attempt not to hurt their self-esteem. The Sentimentalist offers caring without a focus on helping students take on challenging academics. Professional distance coupled with passive leniency creates the *elitist*, a teacher who sees dependent students of color as less intellectual and favors students whom he deems smart and more like him. He makes no effort to help dependent learners grow their intelligence. Then there is the *technocrat*. This teacher focuses on the technical side of teaching and doesn't try to build relationships or help students develop self-confidence as learners. He is successful with independent learners and some dependent learners.

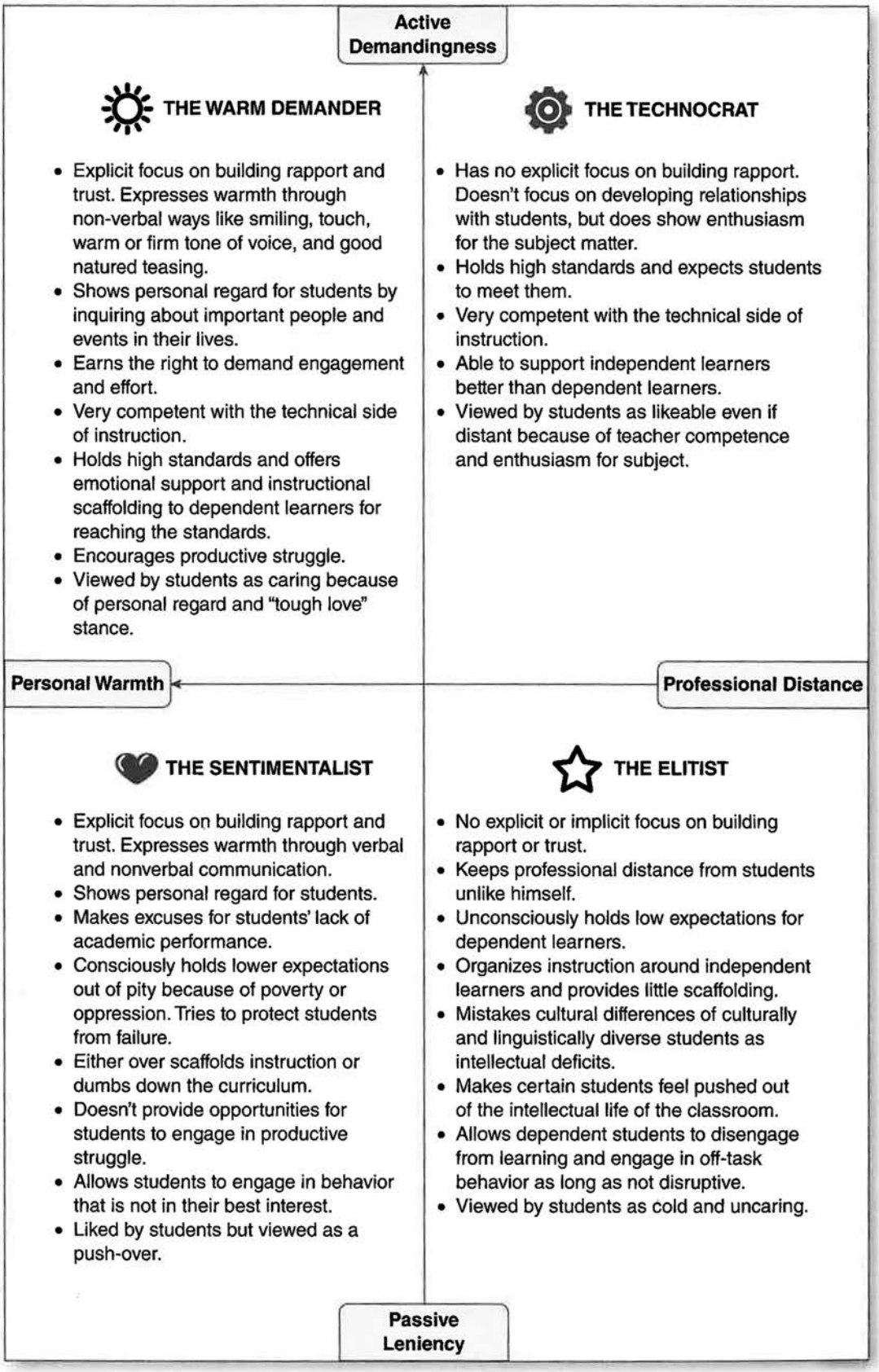
Students interpret the warm demander's mix of care and push as a sign that the teacher "has his back" (Cushman, 2005; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Obidah & Teel, 2001). Personal warmth and authentic concern exhibited by the teacher earns her the right to demand engagement and effort. Here is where the power of the teacher as ally in the learning partnership is realized. The culturally responsive teacher willingly develops the skills, tools, and techniques to help students rise to the occasion as she invites them to step out of their comfort zone into the zone of proximal development.

Any teacher can become a warm demander, but it is important to know what your inclination is as a teacher (Figure 6.2). For example, are you more inclined to be a technocrat? Then, you will want to work on cultivating authentic personal warmth and rapport with students and express your active demandingness in positive ways. Remember the big idea from Chapter 4: Self-reflection is the key.

GIVING DEPENDENT LEARNERS THE BASIC TOOLS FOR INDEPENDENT LEARNING

As part of my project beta testing prototypes of morphology literacy games in Marci's classroom, we gave Tyree and his classmates simple data collection sheets to keep track of their level of automaticity with recognizing and matching word roots to their meaning. We started with a few

Figure 6.2 Warm Demander Chart



diagnostic assessments to establish their baseline in key reading subskills. Then we did a mini lesson on how the brain learns to read to help them understand what the numbers meant so they could help in analyzing their own diagnostic data. The simple act of collecting data to establish a baseline and having some understanding of what those numbers meant was eye opening for them.

To our surprise, they became very interested in knowing how they were improving. They paid attention to their own growth in new ways. While they still struggled with reading, we could see that they now had some motivation to push themselves when playing the games. In some small way, being an active participant in tracking their own growth encouraged them to take more responsibility for their learning.

The ultimate goal as a warm demander is to help students take over the reigns of their learning. This is the social justice aspect of culturally responsive teaching. The first step toward independent learning is acquiring the tools to be more data driven in one's decision-making about learning tactics and strategies. Dependent learners have been conditioned to be passive when it comes to making decisions about their learning moves. They have relied on the teacher to tell them what to do next. If they are to become more independent we have to provide them with the tools. The concrete things they need from their allies are:

- *Kid-friendly vocabulary for talking about their learning moves.* Help them put into their own words concepts such as data, progress, and assessment that are broader than the traditional standardized testing lingo they hear.
- *Checklists to help hone their decision-making skills during learning and focus their attention during data analysis.* Checklists and rubrics act as cognitive scaffolds. For example, Wheeler and Swords (2006) use a process called contrastive analysis to help African American students who speak and write in African American vernacular (AAV) improve their academic writing skills. They provide students with a list of the top ten AAV patterns that they should be on the lookout for and reduce in their writing. By using the checklist students are able to correct their usage during the revision process.
- *Tools for tracking their own progress toward learning targets.* Provide graph paper or tally sheets so they can plot results from various formative assessments and track their growth over time. Help students develop visuals such as graphs or pie charts so they can see their progress at a glance.
- *Easily accessible space to store their data.* Create a physical place in the classroom to keep data they have collected during formative

assessment tasks. Create portfolios that are more than a random collection of artifacts. Include write-ups, students' reflective notes, and their work samples.

- *Regular time to process their data.* Make time for reflection and data analysis often. Protect this time as sacred. Don't let it get whittled away by less important busy work that often takes up time in the classroom. Consider student assessment reflection time as instructional time.
- *Practice engaging in metacognitive conversations* about their learning moves and cognitive strategy as it relates to improving their learning. The teacher can provide sentence frames. Teachers at The Springfield Renaissance School use an interactive process they call debriefing circles as a way for students to talk to each other about what worked and what didn't work to help them complete the assignment.
- *A clear process for reflecting on and acting on teacher or peer feedback.* One of the fastest ways to improve student performance and build independence is to provide the learner with useable, actionable feedback.

THE POWER OF FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE LEARNING

It is not an accident that students become more engaged in their own learning when they are actively involved in tracking their own progress rather than passively filling in bubbles on standardized tests. To survive, the brain depends on getting regular feedback from the environment so that it can adjust its strategy in its effort to minimize threats and maximize well-being. This is *neuroplasticity* in action. Earlier in Chapter 2, we defined neuroplasticity as the brain's ability to grow itself in order to meet the challenges presented to it from the environment. Feedback helps us literally change our minds. Neuropsychologist, Dr. Rick Hanson (2013), in *Hardwiring Happiness* suggests that activities that promote mindfulness and focused attention (like we do when we are reflecting on feedback or analyzing our assessment data) cause the brain to rewire itself and grow by generating more dendrites and laying down more myelin.

Feedback is an essential element in the culturally responsive teacher's arsenal. Too often, culturally and linguistically diverse students who struggle have developed a set of learning moves that aren't effective and they are not sure what's going wrong or what to do about it. They cannot do higher order thinking or complex work if they cannot learn to adjust their learning moves, acquire new ones, or strategize about how to tackle a task.

According to education researchers Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback is one of the most powerful tools we have to improve learning. The brain needs feedback or it will keep doing the same thing over and over even if that move doesn't result in improved skill or performance. We see dependent learners do this all the time. James Zull (2002), author of *The Art of the Changing Brain,* points out that when students use feedback and are able to improve their performance or understanding, it triggers the brain's pleasure and reward centers, releasing the powerful brain chemical, *dopamine.* This hit of dopamine motivates the student to apply more effort and stick with the task.

Harvard business professor Teresa Amabile (2012) says our confidence and effort grow as a result of what she calls the *progress principle,* the idea that people develop a greater sense of "I can do it" when they are able to confirm they are making progress toward their goal. Her findings are right in line with Rick Stiggins' work on assessment *for* learning. Stiggins and other advocates of **formative assessment** highlight that an assessment activity can help learning if it provides information that teachers and their students can use as feedback to measure progress and to modify their teaching and learning activities (Wiliam, 2004).

And there are fringe benefits. By engaging in frequent feedback cycles that lead to change, teachers deepen and strengthen their learning partnership with the student. The student recognizes the teacher's willingness to help them get better. This builds trust between them.

Contrary to what we may think, simply giving feedback doesn't initiate change. It has to be accepted as valid and actionable by the learner. He then has to commit to using that information to do something different. For dependent learners this can be scary. Part of our role as an ally is to offer emotional support as well as tools. You have to be able to be in conversation with students who are trying to stretch themselves.

Here is one of those fun facts from neuroscience: The very act of reviewing and applying feedback stimulates the growth of neurons and dendrites in the brain. This action grows more gray matter. More gray matter means more brainpower. For the warm demander, the feedback conversation offers an opportunity to engage the student and help him "up his game." But not just any old feedback will do.

Think about how you learned a new skill or got better at an existing one. You were able to get instructive feedback that helped you make specific adjustments rather than evaluative feedback that just told you whether what you did was good or bad but offered no information to get better. You see corrective feedback in action in sports coaching. The player practices and the coach observes, comparing the player's moves to effective execution of the move. Then, the coach steps in and suggests the player lift

his elbow when swinging the bat or asks him to flick his wrist when releasing the basketball. The player takes in this information and makes those specific adjustments. Unclear evaluative feedback is likely to only make matters worse for dependent learners.

Figure 6.3 Types of Feedback

Types of Feedback		
Instructive and Corrective	**Advice not Actionable**	**Evaluative not Instructive**
"In the third sentence, you used the wrong punctuation and have a run-on sentence." "When you added *x* to the equation, you didn't follow the correct procedure." "When you are adding two columns of numbers, you are forgetting to carry the number over."	"You need more examples in your report." "Fix your run-on sentences." "Provide more evidence in your paper." "Watch it when you carry your numbers when adding."	"Good job." "This is a C paper." "Nice presentation." "Your addition is sloppy."

Quality feedback has some distinct characteristics:

- **It is instructive rather than evaluative.** The feedback is focused on correcting some aspect of the student's performance—a step in a procedure, a misconception, or information to be memorized. It isn't advice or a grade but some actionable information that will help the student improve. It is important to know the difference between the three types of feedback because not all feedback is actionable.
- **It is specific and in the right dose.** Your feedback should focus on only one or two points. Don't point out everything that needs adjusting. That's overwhelming for a dependent learner and may actually confirm her belief that she is not capable.
- **It is timely.** Feedback needs to come while students are still mindful of the topic, assignment, or performance in question. It needs to come while they still think of the learning goal as a learning goal—that is, something they are still striving for, not something they already did.
- **It is delivered in a low stress, supportive environment.** The feedback has to be given in a way that doesn't trigger anxiety for

the student. This means building a classroom culture that celebrates the opportunity to get feedback and reframes errors as information.

Making Feedback Culturally Responsive: Giving "Wise" Feedback

For feedback to be effective, students must act on it. We have to engage our students' willingness to act on our feedback. By looking closely at their work to understand what they get and identify where they need help, we are listening to our students. Our feedback can communicate to them that we have heard them, and they will be more likely to trust us enough to follow our advice for that sometimes difficult next step. One of the challenges the ally teacher has to confront in the learning partnership is how to give feedback so that it doesn't shut the student down emotionally or create anxiety.

Research by Cohen and Steele (2002) found that students of color often did not receive timely, actionable feedback from their teachers either because the teacher didn't want to hurt the student's feelings or he didn't want to be perceived as prejudiced because he was pointing out errors to a student of color. Cohen and Steele identified two types of feedback students got. One was effective and the other wasn't. The ineffective feedback they called "cushioned feedback." The teacher downplayed the severity of the errors and provided little if any information the student could use to improve his performance. Delpit (1995) talks about this as a common point of disconnection in cross-cultural communications. She points out that "helpers" from the dominant culture who are trying to give feedback become more indirect and less precise in their communication in a misguided attempt to equalize a racial, linguistic, or socioeconomic power difference. It backfires because the student interprets the vagueness as an attempt to hide the truth.

Cohen and Steele recommend an approach they call **wise feedback**. It's different from the typical sandwich feedback model—start with positive feedback, then give the negative or hard feedback, and end with a positive observation or encouragement. Wise feedback is a way of giving feedback that reassures students that they will not be stereotyped or doubted as less capable. Cohen and Steele (2002) suggest that to be helpful, the teacher has to convey faith in the potential of the student while being honest with the student about the gap between his current performance and the standard he is trying to

reach. While delivering negative feedback, the wise educator adds three specific elements to her feedback:

- An explicit holding of high standards. This helps the student understand that his or her mistakes are not necessarily a sign of (perceived) low capability but rather a sign of the high demands of the education program or academic task.
- A personal assurance to the student that he is capable and can improve with effort.
- Specific actionable steps to work on.

Over the years, as I've tutored struggling readers and writers, I created a feedback protocol that has evidence of wise feedback. I call it the *asset-based feedback protocol.* Instead of cushioning or softening the feedback by

Figure 6.4 The Asset-Based Feedback Protocol

1. Begin with a check-in. Have a few minutes for reconnecting. Ask about the student and what is going on in his life—how he is feeling.
2. State explicitly the purpose of your meeting and affirming your belief in the student's capacity as a learner. Give evidence by citing progress and growth in other areas.
3. Validate the student's ability to master the learning target while acknowledging high demands of the task. Have the student analyze the task with you. Identify the easy parts and the harder parts.
4. Deliver feedback that is specific, actionable, and timely. Restate what the final goal is and what mastery looks like and then show the student where he is in relationship to the goal.
5. Create space for the student to react to what he has heard and how he feels about it.
6. Give the student specific actions to take to improve: new strategies, instructions on what to tweak during the execution of the task. Give feedback and action steps in writing if possible. Provide some way to track progress.
7. Ask the student to paraphrase what he heard you say—what is wrong, what needs to be fixed, and how to go about fixing it.
8. Offer emotional encouragement and restate your belief in him. It is important not to skip this part, even if the student seems uncomfortable. He is taking it in even if he is playing it cool.
9. Set up a time to follow up and check progress.

making it less precise and vague, feedback is delivered in a more explicit yet affirming way.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING DEPENDENT LEARNERS AND BUILDING INTELLECTIVE CAPACITY

Struggling students need not just an advocate but also an ally. It's important to remember that, because of learned helplessness, low confidence, or a negative academic mindset, on their own dependent learners may not be capable of developing the skills and habits of mind that allow them to take on more rigor. It is critical that they do. Rigorous academic challenges are the key to building more neurons and dendrites.

Having a two-way alliance in the learning partnership is essential. The challenge of moving dependent learners forward doesn't all rest on you. The goal of the learning partnership is to help students become more actively engaged in their own learning. It starts with creating a pact between students and teachers. If you create the right conditions of care and challenge as a warm demander, students will rise to the occasion.

Your task is to think about the tools, tactics, and techniques you need to gather or develop in order to be culturally responsive within the learning partnership.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Being an effective culturally responsive teacher means building an alliance with students.
- The teacher in the role of ally is mindful of balancing rigor and expectation with support in order to avoid triggering an amygdala hijack.
- Offering actionable corrective feedback is critical.
- Feedback must be offered in ways that affirm the student's capacity to learn yet is honest in pinpointing where he is in relationship to his goal and offers concrete steps for improving.

INVITATION TO INQUIRY

- Of the four types of teacher, what type are you? What shifts would you have to make in order to become more of a warm demander?
- In what ways are you being an ally to your students?
- What role does feedback play in your instructional practice?

- What type of feedback are you usually giving? Is it evaluative or instructive?
- What might you do differently in offering more wise feedback?

GOING DEEPER

- *Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete* (2009) by Jeffery Duncan-Andrade
- "The Power of Feedback" (2007) by John Hattie and Helen Timperley
- *Opening Minds: Using Language to Change Lives* (2012) by Peter H. Johnston
- *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* (2004) by Peter H. Johnston
- *Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools* (2001) by Jennifer Obidah and Karen Manheim Teel
- The Deeper Learning Series: Debrief Circles: A Peer-to-Peer Feedback Strategy (Video) The Teaching Channel. www.teachingchannel.org