

Learning Environment: Evidence and Resources

1. Learning Environment: The learning environment supports all students to take risks, ask questions, and make and learn from mistakes. The physical space, routines and procedures, and development of positive relationships create a physically, socially, and emotionally safe environment.

Supporting Beliefs

- The learning environment is a shared domain between students, teachers, families, and other partners.
- Positive and meaningful relationships are the foundation of a productive learning culture.
- Safety and respect are vital to engagement and risk-taking.

Key Traits

Physical Space and Routines

- Clear, consistent, and respectful routines, procedures, and expectations are collaboratively established; students know what is expected, when, and why.
- Tools and materials are readily available to students.
- The learning environment can be configured in different ways to best fit the task at hand.
- Students are empowered to use and move around the learning environment in ways that support their learning.

Relationships and Culture

- Teachers, students, and families establish and maintain positive relationships.
- Families are included and engaged in a variety of ways to promote student learning.
- All students feel safe to take risks and participate.
- Students are supported in building productive relationships with a variety of classmates across differences.
- Students collaborate with each other throughout the learning process.
- Making multiple attempts and mistakes is expected, accepted, and used as a foundation for further learning.

Literature Supporting the Element

1. “The physical space of the classroom does not exist independently from the instruction and learning that live there. The wall space, seating, ‘learning zones,’ and materials in the classroom not only support instruction, but also support strong habits of scholarship, independence, and responsibility. Like other aspects of teacher presence—body language, voice, and managing your emotions—the classroom environment is a backdrop to how a student experiences school.”
—Berger, R., Strasser, D., and Woodfin, L. (2015). *Management in the Active Classroom* (2nd ed.) (p. 23). New York, NY: EL Education.
2. “In short, when students feel a sense of belonging in a classroom community, believe that their efforts will increase their ability and competence, believe that success is possible and within their control, and see work as interesting or relevant to their lives, they are much more likely to persist at academic tasks despite setbacks and to demonstrate the kinds of academic behaviors that lead to learning and school success.”
—Farrington, C.A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T.S., Johnson, D.W., & Beechum, N. (2012). *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners. The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review* (pp. 29-30). Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research.



3. “In summarizing the research on parent involvement, it becomes very clear that extensive, substantial, and convincing evidence suggests that parents play a crucial role in both the home and school environments with respect to facilitating the development of intelligence, achievement, and competence and their children.”
—Becher, R. M. (1984). *Parent Involvement: A Review of Research and Principles of Successful Practice* (p. 39). Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.
4. “Transformationist pedagogy means teaching and leading in such a way that more of our students, across more of their differences, achieve at a higher level, more of the time, without giving up who they are. In the transformationist classroom the price of success is not assimilation (‘acting White’), but rather a process of deep engagement with authentic identity and one’s own intellectual efficacy. The reward in such classrooms is that everyone gets smarter together, including the teacher, while at the same time maintaining, strengthening, and honoring our differences.”
—Howard, G. R. (2006). *We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools* (2nd ed.) (p. 133). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
5. “Students who are surrounded by disbelieving peers and discouraging adults, or who suffer from institutional labels that predict underperformance (such as “remedial,” “SpEd,” or anything other than “gifted and talented,” or “advanced placement”), may find it difficult to generate the motivation to attempt challenging tasks. Therefore it’s important that we manage those social expectations, too, through strong and responsive classroom management techniques and reflections on our own beliefs about what’s possible for our students and ourselves. We might even need to reconsider and reform the way we test, sort and rank students by ‘ability.’ After all, no learning environment will be successful if students don’t believe they will succeed.”
—Toshalis, E. (2015). *Make Me!: Understanding and Engaging Student Resistance in School* (p. 106). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
6. “You know, great classrooms are places where kids are not just listening to the teacher, but they are also learning from each other, learning with each other, and problem solving together. For that to happen, teachers actually have to teach kids how to work together, and teach them that working together does not mean copying someone else’s work, but it really means each person is taking responsibility for their contribution. If you are able to create an environment where kids are working together, it is easier for teachers to address the individual needs of children.”
—Rea, D.W. (2015). Interview with Pedro Noguera: How to Help Students and Schools in Poverty. *National Youth-At-Risk Journal* 1(1), 11-21.
7. “Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks.”
—Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (p. 21). New York, NY: Routledge.
8. “Learning occurs in every social, intellectual, and procedural transaction between the teacher and students and among the students. Therefore, it is important to foster positive, caring relationships with other students and the teacher in the classroom. Because relationships matter, who you are and what you know and can do matters. While a teacher may have the ideas that being colorblind and ignoring differences shows equal acceptance of all, even young students are very aware of their differences. Instead, in identity safe environments, student differences are recognized and validated. Consideration is given to every aspect of the classroom, to all the subtle and overt messages that recognize that diverse ideas, perspectives, and materials can actually enhance learning.”
—Steele, D. M., & Cohn-Vargas, B. (2013). *Identity Safe Classrooms: Places to Belong and Learn* (p. 8). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
9. “When considering an environment where students are constructing their own understanding, educators may conclude that a teacher has nothing to do. On the contrary, a teacher’s role in a constructivist class is no less critical than the teacher’s role in a traditional class. It is different. Teaching no longer focuses solely on making presentations (although those are still sometimes appropriate) or assigning questions and exercises. Instead, teaching focuses on designing activities and assignments—many of them framed as problem-solving—that engage students in constructing important knowledge.”
—Danielson, C. (2017). *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching* (2nd ed.) (p.17). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
10. “To find the core of a school, don’t look at its rulebook or even its mission statement. Look at the way the people in it spend their time—how they relate to each other, how they tangle with ideas. Look for the contradictions between words and practice, with the fewer the better.”
—Sizer, T.R., & Sizer, N.F. (1999). *The Students are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract* (p. 18). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Resources and Readings

Brief Articles

1. Haberman, M. (1991). The Pedagogy of Poverty Versus Good Teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(2).
This article outlines the common practices of pedagogy performed in urban schools and details the problems with these common approaches. In addition, it explains the ways in which teachers can shift their pedagogy to better serve poor students including crafting learning environments that engage and challenge students.
2. Stewart, E., Rebollar, E., Howle, H., & Patterson, M. (2016, October 13). Lift Every Voice: Classroom Essays from Our 2016 Fishman Prize Winners. Brooklyn, NY: TNTP. Retrieved from <https://tntp.org/publications/view/teacher-training-and-classroom-practice/lift-every-voice>.
This series of essays by classroom teachers explores the ways in which the relationships they build with students, families, and communities impact what and how they teach.
3. Davis, C. (2001, February 1). Ending the Day Right. *Responsive Classroom*. Retrieved from <https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/ending-the-day-right>.
This article offers ideas for creating good endings to the school day. Several educators reflect on the “closing meeting” process and ways it can be used to bring the school day to a peaceful end.

Books and Reports

1. Berger, R., Strasser, D., & Woodfin, L. (2015). *Management in the Active Classroom*. (2nd ed) (p. 23). New York, NY: EL Education.
This book presents resources in two parts—Foundational Structures and Practices that support active learning in the classroom and Protocols and Strategies that build collaborative environments where students take responsibility for their learning. The tools and resources are widely applicable across grade level and content area.
2. Daniels, H., Bizar, M., & Zemelman, S. (2001). *Rethinking High School: Best Practices in Teaching, Learning and Leadership*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
This book is organized around best practices in teaching and learning related to areas including school climate, community experiences, and relationships.
3. Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Pumpian, I. (2012). *How to Create a Culture of Achievement in Your School and Classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.
Fisher, Frey, and Pumpian believe that no school improvement effort will be effective unless school culture is addressed. They identify five pillars that are critical to building a culture of achievement.
4. Ferguson, R.F., Phillips S.F., Rowley, J., & Friedlander, JW. (2015). *The Influence of Teaching. Beyond Standardized Test Scores: Engagement, Mindsets, and Agency*. The Achievement Gap Initiative, Harvard University. Retrieved from <http://www.agi.harvard.edu/projects/TeachingandAgency.pdf>.
This report examines how classroom contexts affect noncognitive factors, especially student agency. The report is based on data collected from schools ends by exploring the implications of the research on classroom and instructional practices.
5. Henderson, A., & Berla, N. (Eds.) (1994). *A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement*. St. Louis, MO: Danforth Foundation. Retrieved from https://archive.org/stream/ERIC_ED375968/ERIC_ED375968_djvu.txt.
This report reviews the research in 66 studies that consider the impact of family on student educational achievement and summarizes key findings.
6. OWP/P Architects, VS Furniture, Bruce Mau Design. (2010). *The Third Teacher: 79 Ways You Can Use Design to Transform Teaching & Learning* (1st ed). New York, NY: Abrams.
This book explores the link between the school environment and how children learn, and offers practical design ideas to improve schools. The book is intended for educators, education decision-makers and community members.
7. Rajagopal, K. (2011). *Create Success!: Unlocking the Potential of Urban Students*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
This book a model for teaching that unleashes the potential of students who may have failed or struggled throughout their school careers. Rajagopal’s CREATE model for closing achievement gaps helps educators improve their instructional approach for all students, especially those who are underserved in urban classrooms. Using examples

from math, language arts, and other subjects, he explains how to achieve success with even the most disruptive and disengaged students.

8. Steele, D. M., & Cohn-Vargas, B. (2013). *Identity Safe Classrooms: Places to Belong and Learn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
This book focuses on translating research into practice, outlining the domains of child-centered teaching, cultivating diversity as a resource, classroom relationships and caring environments as critical to creating learning environments that promote success for all students. The authors describe practices that support each domain and common challenges related to that domain, ending each section with questions to help teachers implement the practices.
9. Tomlinson, C.A., Ford, D., Reis, S., Briggs, C., & Strickland, C. (2004). *In Search of the Dream: Designing Schools and Classrooms That Work for High Potential Students from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds*. National Association for Gifted Children. Storrs, CT: National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
This book presents guiding principles for culturally diverse environments and curricular choices to support multicultural inclusiveness.
10. Tomlinson, C.A., & Imbeau, M. (2010). *Leading and Managing a Differentiated Classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
This book presents ideas for how to address student differences in thoughtful ways. The book is broken into parts-- the first half of the book focuses on what it means for a teacher to effectively lead a differentiated classroom and the second half of the book focuses on managing a differentiated classroom.
11. Toshalis, E. (2015). *Make Me!: Understanding and Engaging Student Resistance in School*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
This book explores student resistance through a variety of perspectives, arguing that oppositional behaviors can be not only instructive but productive. According to Toshalis, the focus of teachers' efforts should not be about "managing" adolescents but about learning how to read their behavior and respond to it in developmentally productive, culturally responsive, and democratically enriching ways.
12. Toshalis, E., & Nakkula, M. (2012, April). Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice. *The Students at the Center Series*.
<http://studentsatthecenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Exec-Toshalis-Nakkula-032312.pdf>.
In this report the authors review research on achievement, motivation, school engagement, and student voice. The report explores what works and highlights the importance of fostering student voice and empowerment.

Videos

1. Teaching Channel. My Favorite No: Learning from my Mistakes.
Retrieved from <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/class-warm-up-routine>
2. Teaching Channel. Group Contracts for Collaborative Work.
Retrieved from <https://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/group-contracts-ntn>
3. Edutopia. 5-Minute Film Festival: Classroom Makeovers to Engage Learners.
Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/film-festival-learning-spaces-classroom-makeovers>
4. Rosalia Films. World Peace and Other 4th Grade Achievements, Extended Trailer. (2010, September 7).
Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICq8V2EhYs0>
5. TED. John Hunter: Teaching with the World Peace Game. (2011, March)
Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/john_hunter_on_the_world_peace_game
6. Coalition of Essential Schools. Second Year Algebra: Coaching a Lab Investigation.
Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/album/3850193/video/158827152>
7. EL Education. Setting Up Your Classroom Environment.
Retrieved from <https://eleducation.org/resources/setting-up-your-classroom-environment>
8. EL Education. Connecting Class Norms to Schoolwide Norms.
Retrieved from <https://eleducation.org/resources/connecting-class-norms-to-schoolwide-norms>