

2b ESTABLISHING A CULTURE FOR LEARNING

A “culture for learning” refers to the atmosphere in the classroom that reflects the educational importance of the work undertaken by both students and teacher. It describes the norms that govern the interactions among individuals about the activities and assignments, the value of hard work and perseverance, and the general tone of the class. The classroom is characterized by high cognitive energy, by a sense that what is happening there is important, and by a shared belief that it is essential, and rewarding, to get it right. There are high expectations for all students; the classroom is a place where the teacher and students value learning and hard work.

Teachers who are successful in creating a culture for learning know that students are, by their nature, intellectually curious, and that one of the many challenges of teaching is to direct the students’ natural energy toward the content of the curriculum. They also know that students derive great satisfaction, and a sense of genuine power, from mastering challenging content in the same way they experience pride in mastering, for example, a difficult physical skill.

Part of a culture of hard work involves precision in thought and language; teachers whose classrooms display such a culture insist that students use language to express their thoughts clearly. An emphasis on precision reflects the importance placed, by both teacher and students, on the quality of thinking; this emphasis conveys that the classroom is a business-like place where important work is being undertaken. The classroom atmosphere may be vibrant, even joyful, but it is not frivolous.

DOMAIN 2 • THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

The elements of component 2b are:

Importance of the content and of learning

In a classroom with a strong culture for learning, teachers convey the educational value of what the students are learning.

Expectations for learning and achievement

In classrooms with robust cultures for learning, all students receive the message that although the work is challenging, they are capable of achieving it if they are prepared to work hard. A manifestation of teachers' expectations for high student achievement is their insistence on the use of precise language by students.

Student pride in work

When students are convinced of their capabilities, they are willing to devote energy to the task at hand, and they take pride in their accomplishments. This pride is reflected in their interactions with classmates and with the teacher.

Indicators include:

- Belief in the value of what is being learned
- High expectations, supported through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors, for both learning and participation
- Expectation of high-quality work on the part of students
- Expectation and recognition of effort and persistence on the part of students
- High expectations for expression and work products

UNSATISFACTORY • LEVEL 1

The classroom culture is characterized by a lack of teacher or student commitment to learning, and/or little or no investment of student energy in the task at hand. Hard work and the precise use of language are not expected or valued. Medium to low expectations for student achievement are the norm, with high expectations for learning reserved for only one or two students.

CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES

- The teacher conveys that there is little or no purpose for the work, or that the reasons for doing it are due to external factors.
- The teacher conveys to at least some students that the work is too challenging for them.
- Students exhibit little or no pride in their work.
- Students use language incorrectly; the teacher does not correct them.

POSSIBLE EXAMPLES

- *The teacher tells students that they're doing a lesson because it's in the book or is district-mandated.*
- *The teacher says to a student, "Why don't you try this easier problem?"*
- *Students turn in sloppy or incomplete work.*
- *Many students don't engage in an assigned task, and yet the teacher ignores their behavior.*
- *Students have not completed their homework; the teacher does not respond.*
- *And others...*

BASIC • LEVEL 2

The classroom culture is characterized by little commitment to learning by the teacher or students. The teacher appears to be only "going through the motions," and students indicate that they are interested in the completion of a task rather than the quality of the work. The teacher conveys that student success is the result of natural ability rather than hard work, and refers only in passing to the precise use of language. High expectations for learning are reserved for those students thought to have a natural aptitude for the subject.

- The teacher's energy for the work is neutral, neither indicating a high level of commitment nor ascribing the need to do the work to external forces.
- The teacher conveys high expectations for only some students.
- Students exhibit a limited commitment to complete the work on their own; many students indicate that they are looking for an "easy path."
- The teacher's primary concern appears to be to complete the task at hand.
- The teacher urges, but does not insist, that students use precise language.

- *The teacher says, "Let's get through this."*
- *The teacher says, "I think most of you will be able to do this."*
- *Students consult with one another to determine how to fill in a worksheet, without challenging one another's thinking.*
- *The teacher does not encourage students who are struggling.*
- *Only some students get right to work after an assignment is given or after entering the room.*
- *And others...*

PROFICIENT • LEVEL 3

The classroom culture is a place where learning is valued by all; high expectations for both learning and hard work are the norm for most students. Students understand their role as learners and consistently expend effort to learn. Classroom interactions support learning, hard work, and the precise use of language.

- The teacher communicates the importance of the content and the conviction that with hard work all students can master the material.
- The teacher demonstrates a high regard for students' abilities.
- The teacher conveys an expectation of high levels of student effort.
- Students expend good effort to complete work of high quality.
- The teacher insists on precise use of language by students.

- *The teacher says, "This is important; you'll need to speak grammatical English when you apply for a job."*
- *The teacher says, "This idea is really important! It's central to our understanding of history."*
- *The teacher says, "Let's work on this together; it's hard, but you all will be able to do it well."*
- *The teacher hands a paper back to a student, saying, "I know you can do a better job on this." The student accepts it without complaint.*
- *Students get to work right away when an assignment is given or after entering the room.*
- *And others...*

DISTINGUISHED • LEVEL 4

The classroom culture is a cognitively busy place, characterized by a shared belief in the importance of learning. The teacher conveys high expectations for learning for all students and insists on hard work; students assume responsibility for high quality by initiating improvements, making revisions, adding detail, and/or assisting peers in their precise use of language.

- The teacher communicates passion for the subject.
- The teacher conveys the satisfaction that accompanies a deep understanding of complex content.
- Students indicate through their questions and comments a desire to understand the content.
- Students assist their classmates in understanding the content.
- Students take initiative in improving the quality of their work.
- Students correct one another in their use of language.

- *The teacher says, "It's really fun to find the patterns for factoring polynomials."*
- *A student says, "I don't really understand why it's better to solve this problem that way."*
- *A student asks a classmate to explain a concept or procedure since he didn't quite follow the teacher's explanation.*
- *Students question one another on answers.*
- *A student asks the teacher for permission to redo a piece of work since she now sees how it could be strengthened.*
- *And others...*