

TRANSFORMING SELF, TRANSFORMING LEARNING

The girls in our eighth-grade “Inquiry into Identity” course sit in a circle in the middle of the classroom. Each girl takes a turn reading aloud from the open letter they have written to the boys. The boys, sitting around the outside of the circle, listen quietly as the girls list their grievances. Maggie* finishes reading her part and passes the letter to Shandra, who clears her throat before beginning the next section.

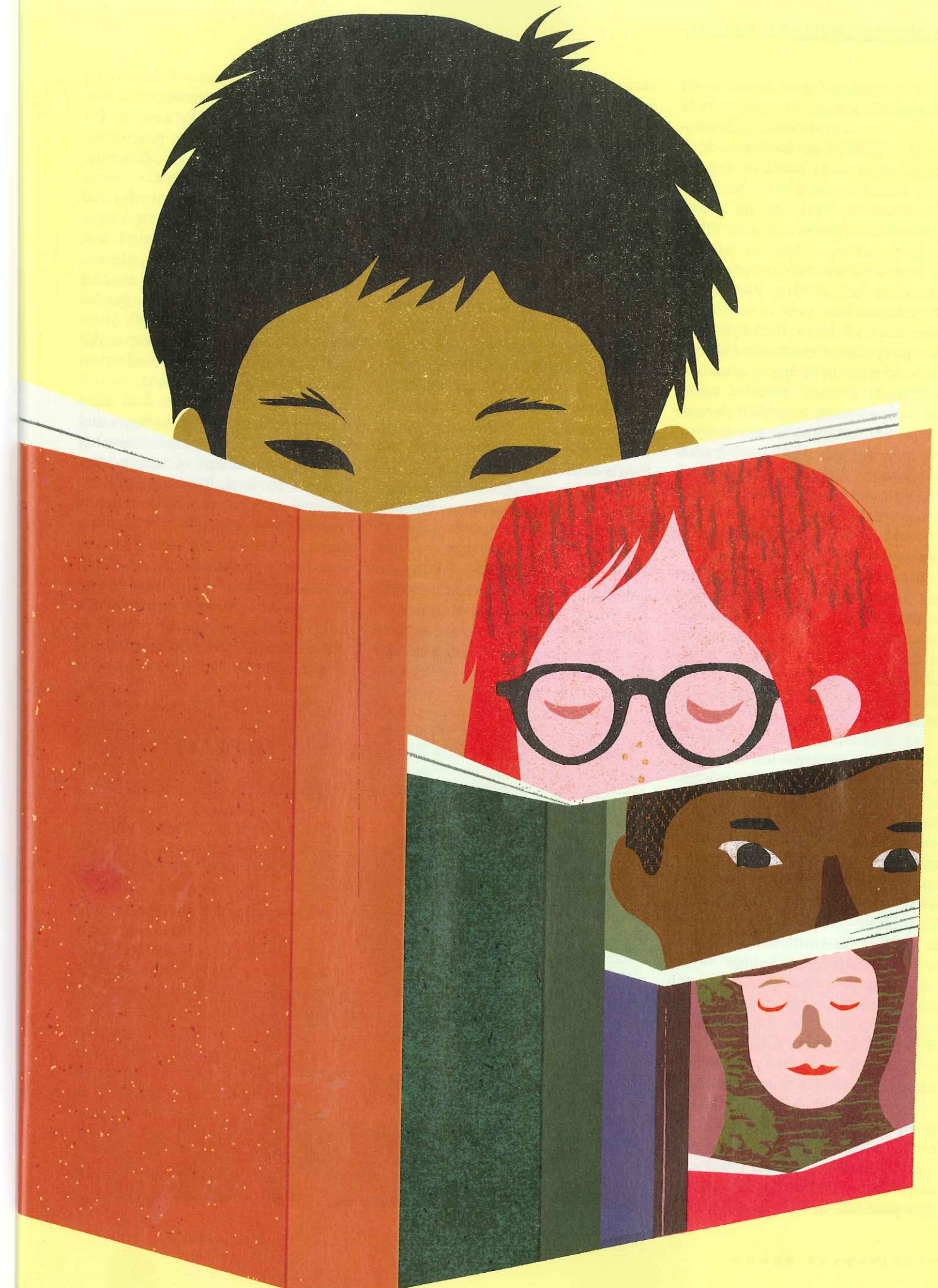
“Putting us down, harassing us, and using us like objects is one thing, but not admitting that you do it is another,” she says. She looks up and sees several girls nodding in agreement. She passes the letter to Robin, who continues, “When we finally confront you about it in class, you pretend that you have no idea that it happens and talk about putting a stop to it. Then when class is over, you’re at it again. You rate girls to boost your masculinity without thought of how it affects us. We want to say something, but we know we’d never be heard or that you’d say, ‘Stop being so emotional.’ But you know what? We aren’t the ones being overemotional. You are the ones being *underemotional*.”

*The students’ names have been changed to protect their identities.

On Racial, Class, and Gender Identity Development in School

BY MARTHA CALDWELL

ILLUSTRATION BY
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My coteacher, Oman Frame, and I had recently learned that several boys in this class routinely made rude comments to girls, in the hallways and at lunch, rating them based on appearance, ridiculing them when they performed well academically, and excluding them from sports activities. When the girls challenged them individually, the boys deflected their criticism with comments such as “Stop PMSing” or “Why do you have to be so sensitive?” Other boys joined in, hoping to gain peer acceptance. Others stood by quietly watching, not daring to intervene. This social dynamic operated under the radar of teachers until it became a topic of discussion in our integrative language arts and social studies curriculum, “Inquiry into Identity,” in which we use race, class, and gender as generative themes.

To address the underlying gender power dynamic in our classroom, Oman and I separated the students into same-sex groups for several class sessions. Oman facilitated the discussion with the girls that ultimately led to their open letter. I, meanwhile, directed the boys’ attention toward analyzing the effects male stereotypes could be exerting on them.

In a brainstorming session, the boys listed characteristics of a “real” man as “tough,” “strong,” “independent,” “muscular,” and “unemotional.” Brad described a “real” man as “someone who never shows weakness or cries.” Steven commented that in trying to adhere to this stereotype, boys learn to “push away” their feelings. They began to see that the pressure to appear unemotional interfered with authentic relationships — not only with girls, but also with each other. Steven readily confessed that he actually liked and admired many of the girls in the class, but was afraid to express it for fear of ridicule from other boys. He felt safer demeaning and mocking girls he admired. When given the opportunity to express sincere admiration (rather than the more typical “put-downs”), the boys were surprised to find that the behaviors they most admired in the girls and in

each other were not those that conformed to typical gender stereotypes, but rather those that countered them. Brad even expressed admiration for Shandra for “calling him out” for sexist behavior. “How else would I know it was wrong? How else could I change?” he asked. In a reflective response to the class discussion, Daniel wrote, “I wish I could live in a world where I don’t have to follow these rules to be accepted. I want to be able to express love for my family, loved ones, and friends without getting weird looks. Any show of affection for a male friend and it’s ‘Fag.’ ‘Gay.’ ‘Queer.’ Any show of affection for a female friend and it’s ‘Ooh, you like her. Are you guys going to start dating?’” He concluded, “All love is outlawed for my gender.”

Through collaborating on and sharing their five-page letter, the girls found their focus and the strength to speak the truth. They were learning assertive communication skills, the power of a supportive community, and the effects of organized action. As a united front, they insisted that their concerns be heard and addressed and asked that the boys not only respect

them but also join them in their struggle to achieve fair treatment.

The boys ultimately rose to the challenge. As the course progressed, and they learned more about gender issues in society through a series of academic lessons (reading articles and responding to films, analyzing media, discussing oppression theory) and inquiry projects (collaborative research and presentations, reviewing current events), they realized that the gender dynamic addressed in the girls’ letter reflected one found in the wider world, one that exerted a negative effect on them as well as on the girls.

Brad and Steven, who had been involved in rating girls at the beginning of the year, led a collaborative research project on the effects of “macho” stereotypes on boys. Their group’s presentation to the class outlined much of what the boys originally offered in our discussion, but their academic sources elucidated the systemic nature of their experience. As a group, these young men agreed to support each other in interrupting disparaging comments about women, girls, and gay and lesbian people. We brainstormed ways

they could “interrupt” gender oppression in nonconfrontational ways. Scott later reported that when other boys on his baseball team used terms like “gay” and “fag,” he felt strong enough to say, “That’s not cool, guys. Cut it out.” On another occasion, a group of boys came to me privately to discuss a schoolmate whom they knew was harassing girls online anonymously. As a result, the school was able to take disciplinary action.

In the spring, the boys got another opportunity to put what they had learned into practice. A sixth-grade teacher asked my colleague Jennifer Swift and me to visit her class and talk to the girls. These sixth-grade girls had divided into factions and were enacting typical “mean girls” scenarios within their social relationships. In talking to the girls, Jennifer and I discovered that in November the boys in their class had begun rating them on a scale of one to ten based on appearance. The girls’ unexamined reaction was to compete with each other for higher ratings, which translated into higher status in a painful social hierarchy. When we asked, “Who gave the boys the power to rate you?” our question was met with stunned silence. We could then talk to the girls about the importance of supportive relationships among women in a world in which they continue to face inequality.

When I told my students about this conversation, our boys wanted to get involved and talk to the younger boys. Brad and Steven presented their research on male stereotypes and told the story of how they, too, had naïvely rated girls without realizing how hurtful such behaviors were to girls and to themselves. Oman and I subsequently received letters of thanks from the sixth-grade students. “I learned so much about stereotypes going around in our world, and it really opened my eyes and made me think,” wrote Cassie. “Your eighth graders were so kind and open-minded. It was a great experience for all of us and made our class a better environment for us to come to every day.”

Identity and Adolescent Development

Like most early adolescents, our middle school students are grappling to form stable identities. They are struggling to discover who they are and define who they want to become. Their racial, gender, and class identities are crucial components in their emerging sense of self. According to University of Arizona Professor Stephen T. Russell, 75 percent of students who report being bullied say they are targeted because of their race, gender, religion, perceived sexual orientation, or physical or mental disability. Bullying is associated with high-risk behaviors, poor grades, and emotional distress in students, and Russell’s study suggests that when the bullying is related to these core components of a student’s identity, the negative consequences are even worse. Russell believes engaging students in ongoing discussions about race, gender, religion, sexuality, and abilities can address these behaviors and mitigate their devastating effects.¹

Engaging students in productive conversations pertinent to their budding senses of identity fosters individualization, strengthens peer relationships, creates safe learning communities, and satisfies the need to belong. If the need to belong is met in healthy ways, it strengthens relationships, builds bridges across differences, and sets the stage for higher order thinking. If unmet, the need to belong leaves adolescents vulnerable to negative forms of relating, such as bullying.

Adolescents who don’t understand how to relate in healthy ways will resort to unhealthy means in an attempt to fit in by trying to be “cool,” complying with peer pressure, or conforming to stereotypes. This blind conformity makes students reluctant to speak out about what they think, feel, believe, and find meaningful for fear of ridicule. In striving to connect with their peers in inauthentic ways, students may lose connection with their inner thoughts and feelings. Ignoring, avoiding, and shutting down emotions result in apathy, disconnection from school, and superficial cognitive

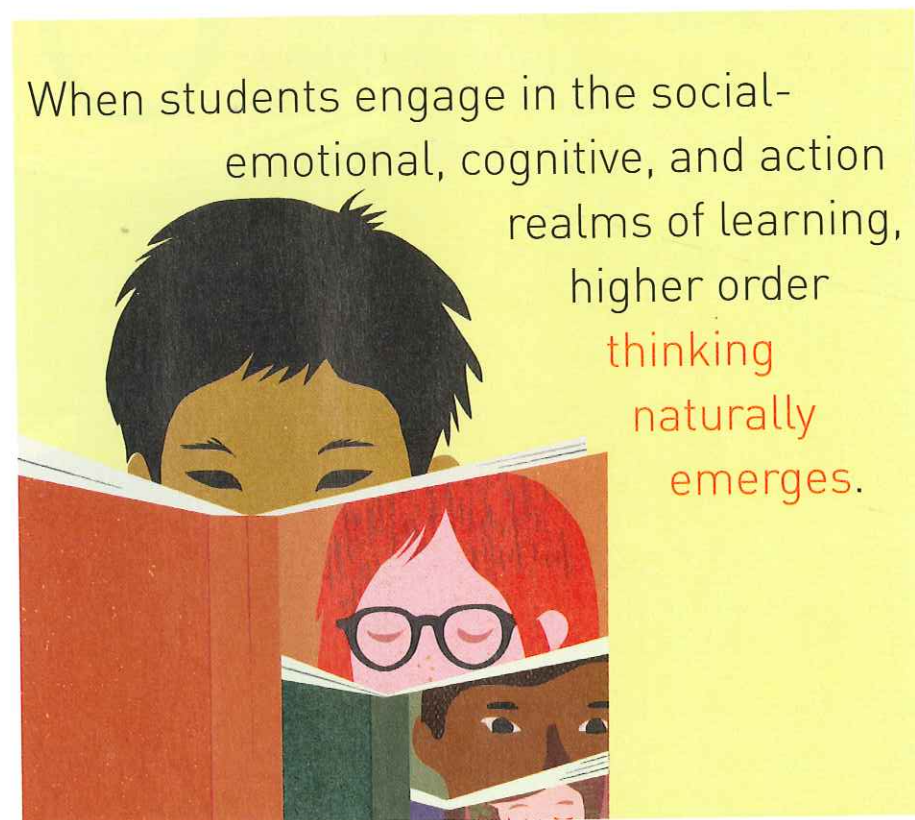
processing. Such behaviors do not ultimately meet the need to belong, but instead actively thwart it.

As our students explore their identities through the lenses of race, class, and gender, they frequently share experiences of bigotry and exclusion. Students of color routinely share stories of being followed by security guards in stores, being called racial slurs on the playground, and being underestimated by teachers. Girls share the effects of the pressure they feel to identify with their appearance, to be thin and pretty, and the rejection they feel when boys do not acknowledge their intelligence. Boys describe the pressure they feel to demean girls to protect themselves from being called “gay” or ridiculed for not being “manly” enough. As students share their experiences, they begin to realize that their demeaning behavior is a result of social insecurity and does not express their deeper feelings and beliefs. They also discover they are not the only ones who feel afraid; indeed, almost everyone does.

Transformational Learning

Students enter our classroom with a host of unexamined assumptions about their own identities and the identities of others. Our “Inquiry into Identity” class combines social-emotional learning with academics and social action to surface and challenge these assumptions. When students engage in the social-emotional, cognitive, and action realms of learning, higher order thinking naturally emerges.

Maggie, a white female, came into our class believing that “putting girls down was just natural for boys at this age.” She believed that biology determined gender roles and accepted being demeaned by boys as part of her fate due to “natural male aggression.” Adults in her life had told her that when a boy picked on her, it meant he liked her. When she began to understand the politics of power and oppression, she was angry at first. Over time, however, she was able to process her emotions and channel her feelings into productive action, not only through sharing and listening



but also through more cognitive processes such as reading, research, and writing. Maggie came to believe that sexist behavior is not natural, but rather “normalized” by society. She had learned for herself how aggression might be channeled into higher order thinking and constructive action. She was motivated to challenge the norm and take a stand for herself and other girls when she felt they were being treated unjustly.

The Social-Emotional Domain

Discussions that focus on a student's identity can be sensitive, and teachers need to be prepared to negotiate this sometimes unfamiliar and unexamined social-emotional terrain. Students instructed in how to attune to their emotions and listen attentively can respond empathetically to each other. Through sharing and listening to each other's stories, they learn to mirror, reflect, and empathize. The deeper connections they form as a result serve as the foundation for a dynamic, synergistic learning community. The social-emotional skill set they acquire begins with empathy, which lays the groundwork for perspective taking and higher-order thinking.

We tell our students that conflict is an essential component of real-life learning and can be productive when resolved through a precise and reliable process. We ask our students to “lean into the discomfort” and find their “learning edge.” We let them know that they can expect to feel cognitive dissonance at times, but they can also learn to recognize conflict as part of a productive learning process that results in critical reasoning.

Because we begin our course with students' stories, before analyzing broader social and historical contexts, we set expectations for listening and sharing in the first lesson. For a classroom to be a safe place for students to share personal stories, it is important to establish clear boundaries for sharing and listening. We begin by asking our students what kind of environment they need to create in order to feel safe sharing personal information.

They readily brainstorm a list of characteristics that would constitute a safe classroom. Invariably the list includes the need for respectful listening, empathetic feedback, confidentiality, and, of course, the right to privacy.

When students begin to share their experience and find support, their feelings may initially intensify, but once they process these feelings, they emerge with new insights, a stronger sense of their own identities, and greater academic confidence. Powerful feelings are the beginning of understanding, insight, and compassion, and teachers can help students process feelings and emerge with new insight in a number of ways. Students often recognize their own thoughts and feelings reflected in each other's stories, and are immeasurably reassured by the realization that they are not alone.

As they mirror each other's experiences, they begin to form deeper connections and build supportive alliances. These connections serve their need to belong and counteract relational aggression. Bearing witness to each other's stories unflinchingly engenders empathy and respect in students.

The Cognitive Domain

Because their starting point is personal and social, they are better able to make connections to the more cognitive dimensions of history, politics, social theory, current events, and literature. As a result, they find the academic work more meaningful, and their motivation to learn increases. The results we see in our class are consistent with research indicating that students who engage in dialogues about their diverse identities score higher on critical thinking tests.² Higher order social-emotional skills are essential to critical thinking and creativity and establish the foundation for participation in a dynamic learning community.

The students' stories provide the motivational impetus for the academic component of the class. Because they understand that the issues addressed in the curriculum affect them personally, they are inspired to learn more. Guided by their own questions, stu-

dents thrive in the academic component of the class. Reading and discussing articles, essays, novels, short stories and poetry, learning about oppression theory, collaborating with peers on inquiry research projects, learning histories, and writing reflective responses strengthen students' understanding that social disparities have historical and societal roots and are not personal problems. Viewing their identities through the lens of a social matrix reassures them that they are part of a larger picture and expands their worldview.

Alicia, an African-American girl, explored the concept of beauty in her journal, questioning if she could ever be considered beautiful because of her dark complexion. She began an inquiry study into the intersecting oppressions of race and gender for women of color and discovered a standard of beauty influenced by a history of white domination. She analyzed film and media representations of black women, discovering her own sources and sending me annotated links. Alicia emerged from her study with greater understanding of the social politics of beauty but, more important, with the determination to resist cultural stereotypes and define beauty on her own terms.

The Action Domain

The learning cycle ends with collaborative action projects in which students address real-world problems. Action is the antidote for helplessness, and adolescents may feel helpless when learning about systemic social issues if they feel there is nothing they can do to change things. When they organize action projects, however, they gain a sense of power because they are taking a stand, and feel they are making a difference. Our students have lobbied for juvenile justice reform, protested immigration legislation, raised money to build a well for a village in Sierra Leone, posted signs to protest gender stereotypes in the hallways at school, and organized a movement to interrupt gay and lesbian slurs in online gaming forums. This year, a small group developed an advisory curriculum for their former middle school. Action projects

are an essential part of a social emotional/cognitive curriculum, especially one that focuses on injustice or inequity among social groups.

The New Center of Education

The research on the relationship between social-emotional awareness and higher order thinking is clear — which is why educators like Stanford Professor Linda Darling-Hammond encourage schools to make it central to their programs. Darling-Hammond calls for social-emotional education to be factored into our discussions of how to teach for deeper learning — or learning that can be transferred from one situation to another.

Students in our “Inquiry into Identity” class transfer knowledge they learn about racism to later studies in gender and class oppression. They often identify similar patterns in religious intolerance, learning issues in schools, and other examples of unfairness they see in the world around them, including the social

hierarchies at school. When they give research presentations on people's histories, they readily identify historical patterns prevalent on timelines of various cultures. They learn to look at who is interpreting a historical work to determine bias.

With clear instruction, constructive feedback, and continuing formative assessments, students can learn the social, emotional, and cognitive skills necessary to form dynamic learning communities that advance higher order thinking. In the process, they learn to form social bonds that foster supportive relationships, critical reasoning, and lifelong learning. In a classroom culture that encourages empathy, positive peer acceptance, and the inclusion of diverse ideas, individuality and diversity flourish simultaneously. In our classroom, we see how the interplay of information from the emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioral domains creates a synthesis that lays the groundwork for transformative learning.

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Notes

1. Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, “Does Labeling Bias as ‘Bullying’ Hide the Real Problem?” *Newsweek/Daily Beast* (2009, September 24), Web. 04 Nov. 2012.
2. Patricia Gurin, Eric Dey, Sylvia Hurtado, and Gerald Gurin, “Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Learning Outcomes.” *Harvard Educational Review*, 72(3), 2002, pp. 330–366. Dan Berrett, “Encounters with Diversity, on Campuses and in Coursework, Bolsters Critical-Thinking Skills.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Web. 23 Jun. 2013. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Diversity-Bolsters/135858/>.

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