



**CONNECTING STUDENTS
WITH PEOPLE AND
PLACES THAT BROADEN
THEIR WORLDS**

Jostens[®]

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We live in a culture where the stereotype is of “breaking ties” as a key part of growing up and exploring the world. Young people are expected to rebel from families so they can “find themselves.” They must “find their own way,” and so they need adults to “back off” and “give them space.”

There is some truth behind this conventional wisdom. As students move through middle school and high school, they are actively internalizing a sense of who they are as unique individuals and how they will present themselves and leave their mark in the world. They need to find their own voice and discover who they are, their gifts and their passions.

At the same time, that growing and discovery process is most successful when it transpires while young people maintain strong relationships with parents, teachers, mentors, coaches and other trustworthy adults (not to mention positive friendships with peers). Important people in young people’s lives not only offer mirrors and sounding boards for self-reflection, they can also introduce young people to people, places, vocations, cultures and ideas that capture their imagination, expand their thinking and open possibilities for their future.

Teachers and other school staff play an important and unique role in expanding possibilities for students. They often have access to opportunities and ideas that the student may not think of or that the student’s family may not have experienced. They also can sometimes see possibilities in a young person that may not be obvious to families and friends who may have preconceptions of who a young person is or what possibilities they have for the future.

This month’s content focuses on how teachers can help students expand possibilities for the future, by introducing them to ideas, cultures, people and places that connect with their interests, passions and gifts and help them see expanded possibilities for themselves.

Positive relationships at school are critical for student success. [Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Framework](#), provides a tool for exploring the many dimensions of positive teacher-student relationships.

In many ways, the goal of education is to open up new possibilities for students through introducing and developing mastery in new ideas, literature or fields. In addition, a diverse body of research highlights the importance of strong relationships in helping students discover the possibilities that fit them and gives them the courage to explore those possibilities.

Close Relationships Help Youth Thrive in Adversity and Seek New Opportunities

Young people who have strong relationships are better equipped to pursue goals that take them out of their comfort zone. Researchers have found that close relationships provide a safe haven as a source of strength for youth. They also are a source of encouragement to create or seize opportunities. Support and encouragement weave together to give young people courage to step into new possibilities for growth and discovery.

Dependable Support to Make Exploring Safe

Strong relationships give young people a “secure base” from which to explore by...

- Providing opportunities for exploring new ideas
- Giving youth a chance to express negative emotion or vulnerability
- Defending youth, if they experience harm
- Helping develop strengths and talents
- Motivating and assisting youth when they encounter challenges or adversity
- Rebuilding their sense of self if their exploration doesn't go well or if they fail in something they try

Encouragement to Expand Possibilities

Strong relationships encourage youth to explore and expand possibilities by...

- Stimulating a desire to create and seize opportunities for growth
- Introducing possibilities that young people may not see for themselves
- Validating their goals and aspirations
- Encouraging youth to challenge themselves to learn or try new things they're curious about
- Promoting goal-setting and problem-solving

School Staff Can Empower Students By Opening Access to New Possibilities

Students succeed with the support of a network of trustworthy relationships in their lives. Teachers and other school staff play a key role in this network by connecting students to resources and opportunities.

In particular, students from low-income and minority families often benefit greatly from this support, as it widens their knowledge on navigating educational environments and imagining future possibilities, particularly if they live in neighborhoods and families that have not exposed them to the broader world.

A close relationship with a teacher, for example, can help shape a student's goals for the future. Positive relationships with teachers and other school staff increase the likelihood that students will attach to their school, giving students confidence in knowing where to go if they are struggling or if they wish to explore additional academic opportunities.

SOURCE:

Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2011). A social capital framework for the study of institutional agents and their role in the empowerment of low-status students and youth. *Youth & Society*, 43(3), 1066–1109.

Students Can Bridge the Gap into Adulthood Through Guidance from Teachers

As they transition into adulthood, students greatly benefit from adults who can teach them how to thrive as an adult. These contacts provide them with necessary information on how diverse adult worlds function, along with how to access opportunities. This information can be lost when the child-adult relationship is not based on mutual respect, however.

Teachers have an opportunity to build meaningful relationships with their students and model an expectation of mutual respect throughout the school year. With this foundation, students are more likely to be receptive to guidance on becoming a healthy and productive adult.

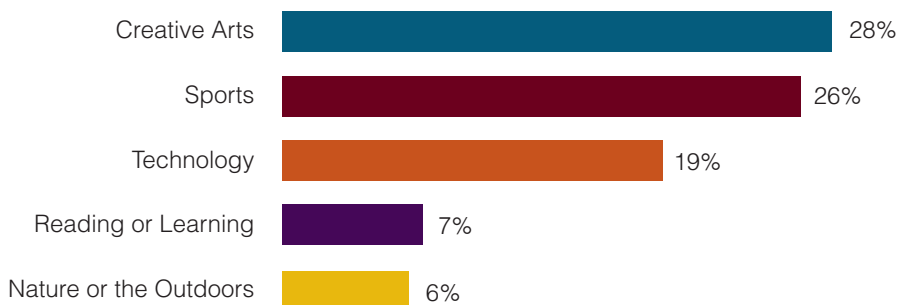
SOURCE:

Sullivan, P. J., & Larson, R. W. (2009). Connecting youth to high-resource adults: Lessons from effective youth programs. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 25(1), 99–123.

The Presence of Sparks in Young People's Lives

One important way to encourage young people to expand possibilities for their future is to learn about their interests, passions or “sparks,” then connect them with people and activities that help them explore those interests. When teachers know their students’ interests and values, they can incorporate them into lessons to increase the relevance of content and spark interest. All students benefit from this approach by being exposed to different ideas.

Most young people can tell what their “sparks” are (though 38 percent said they don’t know). Most can talk about things they’re at least curious about. These were the most common sparks among 15-year-olds when they were asked in a national study to identify just one spark:



SOURCE:

Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2010). Teen voice 2010: Relationships that matter to America's teens. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

Many Potential Adult Guides and Allies

One important way to help young people discover expanded possibilities or opportunities for their future is for them to connect with adults who either share their interests or who can point them toward opportunities that might fit them and their goals for the future.

Through these relationships, young people not only are introduced to new options, but they also see themselves through other people's eyes. Unfortunately, too many young people do not have access to a strong network of trustworthy adults beyond their families. These positive adult relationships can include:

- Extended family members
- Teachers, counselors and other school staff
- Coaches, employers and mentors
- Friends' parents and neighbors
- Religious leaders, volunteers or participants
- Youth program staff and volunteers

In the end, the specific type of relationship (whether a teacher or a neighbor) is less important than the quality of that relationship. What matters to young people is that the relationship is real and that the person takes an interest in them and wants the best for them. Many different trustworthy adults can play those roles in young people's lives.

SOURCE:

Roorda, D. L., Koornen, H. M. Y., Split, J. L., & Oort, F. J. (2011). Teacher-child relationships and interaction processes: Effects on students' learning behaviors and reciprocal influences between teacher and child. *Review of Educational Research*, 81, 493–529.

Introducing Students to Other Places and Cultures

When students are introduced to the world around them through the school curriculum, they are better equipped to engage the world and develop responsible roles in society. Part of expanding possibilities for students is to introduce them to other places and cultures, tapping their curiosity and deepening their learning about others — and, in the process, themselves.

Teachers can expand possibilities for students by:

- Exposing them to a wide variety of materials from different backgrounds.
- Creating learning activities to explore similarities and differences across and within cultures and groups in an open, reflective and respectful way.
- Having students design projects that encourage them to incorporate material that is culturally relevant to their lives.
- Encourage all students to discover more about themselves and teach the teacher what they know from their own backgrounds, cultures and experiences.
- Create an environment where students feel comfortable sharing their lives and ideas with each other during classroom activities.

Students share what they have learned with each other then grow in understanding and appreciation of cultures different than their own. Researchers have found that exposing students to other cultures and ideas increases their overall level of learning.

SOURCE:

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, 34(3), 159–65.

Zirkel, S. (2008). The influence of multicultural educational practices on student outcomes and intergroup relations. *Teachers College Record*, 110(6), 1147–1181.

Developing Culturally Responsive Relationships

Classroom lessons and activities can be structured to be more responsive to students' cultures and lives. As a result, students become more engaged.

- Focus on fostering positive bonds with all students, even those who may be challenging. Engage these students by asking them about something they are interested in.
- Learn about students' lives. Ask them to tell stories and to use their personal experiences to enrich their learning — and the whole class' experience.
- Talk to students in a manner that does not demean their age, lack of experience or background.
- As you learn about students' interests, experiences and strengths, tap these to stimulate new learning and to connect subject matter to their lives.
- Integrate your course's curriculum with material that is relevant to students' lives. Help students see connections between what they are learning in the classroom and what they dream of for their future.
- Use student-centered stories, vocabulary and language when introducing complex ideas.
- Encourage dialogue and discussion among students, shifting the focus from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered inquiry as much as possible.
- Create an environment where students can think critically about assumptions and bias in texts and media — and in their own lives.
- Adapt your teaching to the way students learn best.
- Ask students to share aspects of their lives in connection to what they are learning throughout the school year.
- Ask students what they are most curious about as they look forward to adulthood. Structure activities and projects that explore these topics.

TIP SHEET FOR EDUCATORS

	#1 “This Seems to Make You Happy.”	#2 “You’re Really Interested in That”	#3 “Have You Ever Heard about Sparks?”
What You Notice	A student is having a “flow” experience — that sustained “time doesn’t exist” thrill. For example, when a young person spends hours editing video footage and then shows others the resulting 5-minute clip.	A student is really engaged in something. It could be anything from spelling to soccer to singing to taking apart an old computer or tablet.	A student seems restless, bored or out of sorts — when he or she seems dissatisfied with everything: school, work or friends — all of it. The student might need a nudge to begin finding what he or she loves to do.
Breaking the Ice	Say: Doing ____ seems to make you happy. Tell me about it.	Say: You seem really interested in _____. What is interesting to you about it?	Say: Have you ever done something that you enjoyed so much that you lost track of time? What was that?
Questions, Probes and Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Do any of your friends like doing this, too? · Let’s figure out a way for you to do more of this. · What are the things you like about it? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · How long have you been involved in this activity? · What are you doing to learn more about this or get better at it? · Do you have any goals around this interest? Anything I can do to help? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Did you know Mr. Evans enjoys doing that too? · Have you noticed what kinds of experiences make you the happiest? · Look through the school activity guide. Which ones would you be curious to learn more about?
Follow-Through	Noticing a young person’s enjoyment affirms that this spark is something special about her or him. Pointing it out may help the young person take a new look at his or her identity.	No matter what the spark, there are places to go with it. Good spellers can compete in spelling bees. Great soccer players could become coaches for younger players. Help the student think about where he or she might take it next.	Encourage the student to try at least one new activity, and soon. Offer to do some of the legwork to get involved. Or suggest that he or she try it with a friend. Check back in a few days and problem-solve, if needed.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY # 1: CIRCLES OF OUR SELVES

The foundation of expanding possibilities is to do so based on our best understanding of who we are today—our identity. This self-reflection activity encourages students to examine their own identities and learn to embrace new ideas from others. Students create a diagram of some of the ways they see or describe themselves as a way of articulating what is important to them. Then they can build on the activity by sharing their circles with others or creating new diagrams to explore how others see themselves and the world.

This activity works best when there is a level of trust among students and where you hope to help the trust to go deeper. It's important to use it with groups where you are confident that students will be respectful of and supportive to each other.

Step 1

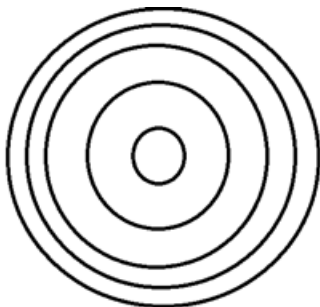
Before students start, remind them on your classroom's expectations of respect.

Step 2

Explain to students that identity is a lens from which you see the world. Culture is a shared system of meanings, beliefs and values that interpret our experiences. Our world might be very limited if we only interacted with people who share our identity and culture. However, when you interact with people from diverse groups and learn about their identities and cultures, you grow as a person and learn new ideas.

Step 3

Tell students that to start, they will each create a “Circles of Our Selves” diagram to share how they see themselves and what is important to them. Give them each a blank sheet of paper, and have them draw concentric circles on it, similar to a target:



Step 4

Ask students to write their name in the center and in each ring, write aspects of themselves that are important to who they are. Consider sharing your own circles to help start their thinking (and to help them get to know you better, too). As an example, students could list cultural identifiers, such as nation of origin or activities they are involved in, such as a sport or art.

Step 5

Direct students to share their circles with another classmate or in a small group. Provide time for each student to explain their circles, including background information, stories or why each item listed is important to their identity.

Step 6

After students have shared with each other, invite them to write outside their circles, things they have heard from each other that they are curious about learning for themselves. What did they hear that makes them want to explore a different aspect of themselves or the world? Encourage them to connect with each other to learn and share together.

Variations of this activity

- Students can create circles at the beginning and end of the school year and compare the two, noting any changes they see. Use the circles to structure a class discussion on how identities are reshaped by new experiences. Ask students to reflect on how their world has been expanded from what they learned during the school year.
- Utilize a school library or computer lab with your class to research information about another country, region, historical figure, current political figure, fictional character in a class novel, or ethnic or cultural group. Have students fill out the circles based on the values and identities of those they studied. Then have them report their findings. Circles from this variation can also be compared with their own, comparing and contrasting similarities and differences.
- Students interview a person outside their family and community, asking him or her questions about how they would describe their identity and what is important to them. During or after the interview, students complete multicultural circles to reflect what they learned. This might be someone who has more experience in an area of life that they are considering for a career or an area that is a “spark” for them.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY #2: THE WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF...

When teachers expand possibilities for students, they connect them to people, places and new experiences. Through this process, students discover more about themselves and what matters to them. Doors are also opened to new opportunities, including careers, education, art and community involvement.

This activity is a hands-on note-taking method of discovering the lifestyle and experiences of another person or culture. At the end of the activity, students share what they have learned with each other, further deepening the learning experience.

Step 1

Before students start, remind them on your classroom's expectations of respect.

Step 2

Explain to students that your identity is a lens from which you see the world. Culture is a shared system of meanings, beliefs and values that interpret our experiences. Our world might be very limited if we only interacted with people who share our identity and culture. However, when you interact with people from diverse groups and learn about their identities and cultures, you grow as a person and learn new ideas.

Step 3

Provide access to materials, books and the Internet for students to explore and research their assigned topic. Direct students to research their topic and take notes on what they find, focusing on how the subjects of their research see the world around them.

Step 4

Provide students with a template of two blank eyes, as seen below:



Step 5

Ask students to draw symbols and write words that would represent a person involved with their topic. Have them describe to the class (or a small group) how the person or group they studied views the world or the topic at hand.

Step 6

Have students reflect on what they learned. How is the world-view of the person or group they studied similar to or different from their own perspectives? What might be behind the differences? What might they learn from these other people or groups that expands or enriches their understanding of the world and their place in it?

