

BELONGING AND BECOMING

How SEL Supports Academic Mindsets in Adolescence



Participant Journal

Workshop, New Teacher Center Symposium 2016

facilitated by Kathleen Cushman

Co-Founder, What Kids Can Do, Inc. (WKCD.org)

Co-Author,

Belonging and Becoming: The Power of Social and Emotional Learning in High Schools

(Harvard Education Press)

Facilitator

Kathleen Cushman is an educator and journalist who for 25 years has specialized in the lives and learning of youth. As co-founder of the nonprofit [What Kids Can Do](#) (WKCD), she has collaborated with adolescent learners nationwide on ten books, including the best-selling *Fires in the Bathroom* series, which concludes with *Fires in the Mind: What Kids Can Tell Us About Motivation and Mastery*. For her most recent book, *The Motivation Equation: Designing Lessons that Set Kids' Minds on Fire*, go to [HowYouthLearn.org](#), a WKCD site containing many other teacher resources on motivation and mastery.

In workshops, presentations, and [audiovisual documentation](#), Cushman brings student perspectives on their learning to educators and policymakers around the country. She has documented the Project Mastery initiative of the Gates Foundation (on proficiency-based pathways), as well as the work of the Community of Practice educators involved in Hewlett Foundation's Deeper Learning initiative. With support from the Nellie Mae Foundation, she co-authored with Barbara Cervone ["Teachers at Work: Six Exemplars of Everyday Practice"](#) for the "Students at the Center" initiative (Jobs for the Future, 2013). With support from Novo Foundation, they also co-authored the forthcoming book *Learning by Heart: The Power of Social-Emotional Learning in Secondary Schools* (Harvard Education Press, fall 2015).

After 35 years in Harvard, Massachusetts, Kathleen Cushman moved in 2003 to New York City, where she lives and works in northern Manhattan. She can be reached by email at kathleencushman@mac.com or by phone at 917.428.3878.

Learning Objectives

At the end of our work, you will be able to:

- **Recognize** the SEL factors that boost the academic success of adolescent learners
- **Identify** key SEL challenges in your own learning community
- **Explore** effective SEL practices through the perspectives of other teachers and students
- **Create an action plan** for a social and emotional challenge in your work with students

Workshop Process

- **Introduction** to the SEL themes of our work together; listening to student/teacher voices
- **Table work**; thinking about school structures & practices that support student agency
- **Action planning** for a social and emotional challenge, with collegial feedback
- **Large-group reflection** and takeaways

Introduction: What makes school “my place” for youth?

Transcript of video “This Is My Place”:

Doris: At the beginning of the year I didn't raise my hand for anything. That voice always comes into my head, Will I be able to do the work? What happens if I get something wrong? I'm scared if I get one question wrong that everyone's gonna laugh at me and that for some reason he's gonna lower my grade cuz I don't understand the content of what we're learning.

Foyisal: I was holding my umbrella. It was raining pretty bad and I had a big one and some ignorant 8th graders came over and hit me, tried taking away my umbrella down, and I got really mad. I thought I was gonna lose it. But I know if I do that, one, my reputation's gonna go down. And if they do it again, next time they won't be seeing me like who I am right now.

Gabriella: In gym we were playing a game, and it was pretty familiar to me. But they added a twist to it. And I was the first one on line, and then I mixed up the goals. They were all upset. So it really made me a little nervous from then on.

Evan: We had a project due, a group project, where I was assigned with four other partners. But everybody turned their back on me. Two partners wanted to talk to each other. The other two wanted to like annoy each other and they kept fighting. I felt like giving up cuz I knew I couldn't do this on my own.

Tarina: Unlike other schools, the teachers will not give you a zero and they will not fail you, because they want to see you succeed. They don't wanna see you fail. So they really make sure that you're doing the work and understanding the work so you do much better than you were in the past.

Evan: She really made me feel like I did well and I could do better at this. And it kinda made me feel like, “Do better. Do better. If you don't do well next time, then your next assignment will be better.”

Gabriella: I never added my opinion, because that was never important at my old school. So when at first I tried it, my teacher told me that I didn't add enough of my opinion, and I was shocked! Then it really made me sit down and say, “Wow! They care about what I think.” And after that I learned to be more open with my opinions and my thoughts on different things.

Miles: My teachers would trust me to be the captain. So I'd have to help my group figure out what to do, and but not push them too hard, like being pushy, but actually helping them as well. So that made me feel more responsible for what I had to do. Because that's what leaders do. They help when other people can't do what they have to do.

Doris: One of the homeworks was type up an essay, like your own personal draft of what you think the school is like, and I did that. I felt important in this school, not just another student, and that made me very happy.

Foyisal: The teachers and the students, they really do make you feel like it's home. Everyone has a voice in my school. And that if we wanted to open our mind and do something, we can. The more you know, the better it is here. And that's how you create safety. With the knowledge of others. It made me feel like I could do so much more now. I belonged here. This is my place.

How do students come to “belong” in your learning context?

Element 1: Structures to help us know all students well

- Daily 'home base' develops 'whole learners'
- All adults show that they care about students
- Smaller class sizes via creative measures
- Feedback protocols meet learners where they are
- Teachers collaborate for student success

Transcript of "Just Listen" video clips:

Maksoom: I think in high school it's really important for a teacher to have a personal connection with their student, because that just makes the experience much better. And that helps a student learn a lot more about the real world, about what's actually out there. So a teacher can talk about . . . it's the way that the teacher expresses their talent to us that shows us that maybe that's the way we should think. Maybe that's the way the world is looking at us, and how we should look at them.

Hannah: I think it's very important for a teacher to be a friend, but also to distinguish the difference that they're *not* your friend, and that they're your teacher as well. But as long as you have that type of connection where you guys can talk about things that are more than just school related, I feel like it strengthens your relationship with the school itself...and it makes you feel a lot more comfortable in the classroom if you're speaking in front of people or just getting your work done. And it's a lot easier to ask the teacher questions and come to them with problems that you have if you have a better relationship with them on a more personal level.

Rashaun: When I look at my teachers, I'd say I see it as this is a person that I'm gonna be spending a lot of time with, be going after school, gonna be doin' a lot of homework and needin' help. You know, there are some subjects that you know I . . . I get help at, some subjects that I'm good at. I say, "Oh, I'ma have a good time with this teacher because, you know, I know I'm smart at this subject, so we're gonna, you know . . ." But then you know there are subjects that I'm not all that great at, but then I see the teacher as, "She'll work with me" or "He'll work with me." They'll understand and they'll help me out. Long as I put in the effort to, you know, to . . . to work *with* them.

Maranda: What I see when I look at my teachers, I see people who are . . . well, for most of them, because I know I've some teachers who, you know, shouldn't have been teachers. [laughs] But when I see my teachers, I see people who are dedicated to their job, who I think . . . their . . . the way that they help get through to us is by learning *from* us. Like I feel like our teachers, even though they give so much to us every single day, you know, week in and week out, you know, the good, the bad [laughs], and the ugly, I think they definitely take a lot away from us as well. And I think, you know, the teachers who, you know, can honestly say that, "Yeah, you know, my students this and my students that, you know, they may be silly or have, sometimes they may not always do their work [laughs], but I mean . . . you know, I get a lot from them."

How does your learning community ensure that every student is known well by at least one adult?

Element 2: Building an Intentional Community

- Transition programs orient new students
- Peers make the case for the school’s expectations
- Students & teachers create classroom rules together
- Assemblies and rituals mix fun and traditions
- Security staff act like part of the community

Transcript of video “Changing a Life”:

In other schools they have many, many problems inside of the school, like, gang trouble. They fight each other to control the area. And the security can do nothing. The police had to come to control it. Here, we don’t have these kinds of problems. Because we came to different parts of the world and we know the reality of our country. In my country there are many, many problems. Guns problems. It’s like a trap — it was a problem in my neighborhood, that a lot of gangs, they ask you for money. If you don’t have money they can kill you.

This is the hardest part for me — the behavior. ‘Cause if I don’t change, nobody changes for me. When I was in 9th grade, almost all the time the teachers had me in the office because I made many, many troubles. The contract we made with the principal: it’s like, if I do something wrong, they can take me out of the school, or they can change my school. I don’t want to change schools. This school is good for me. Almost all the time, we have fun here. We have peace in the school.

My favorite class is government because this class interests me about how the government works for the people. Every week we did one quiz, then we learned something different, kind of part of the government. The teachers speak Spanish—that can help us, speaking in Spanish to us. And then they can say the word correctly, and we can repeat it. We have a program after school when we can work with people that helps us to do our work. We work with people from UC Berkeley. They came to help us, and then, if we came 8 days a week, they give us a bus pass. This helps me. I try to stay focused in school, graduate from high school and get my diploma, then pass both CAHSEEs. I will go to Alameda College. And then, they told me they have a mechanic program. I will take this program, to get a better life. And I think, get married, in the future. Get a work, a job. I want to be a mechanic.

How does your learning community make sure that everyone feels like an essential part of a larger whole?

Element 3: Participation, respect, reflection

- Transition programs orient new students
- Peers make the case for the school’s expectations
- Students & teachers create classroom rules together
- Assemblies and rituals mix fun and traditions
- Security staff act like part of the community

Transcript of video “Making Argument Safe”:

Shaquana: You have to be confident that you won't be criticized for your opinion within the people around you. Kim creates a safe place. Like she doesn't allow people to call people's ideas stupid or like completely disregard your opinion. You have to understand that it's your opinion that they're attacking. Not you. You just have to take it all in stride. And trying to appreciate their thoughts on your opinion without getting aggressive and defensive.

Gabriela: We've also learned how to defend, because it's not enough to just state your opinion. We also have to provide evidence. Like where do you see that happening? At what point in the book did your opinion change and make you stand on where you stand right now? So you move what you learn from this class to other classes because in the other classes they make you do the same. It's not enough just to create a thesis, you have to provide support and defend your opinion.

Teacher, Ben Wides: Kids start to recognize that they can use these intellectual concepts. Pull out evidence. Read. Annotate. Use that evidence to support a point of view. We're very deliberate about teaching skills that will help students to do this work more independently. One of the things that is very important is that they're considering alternative arguments. Almost every paper they're writing in the 11th grade, almost every paper that they're writing in the 10th grade, almost every paper that they're writing in the 9th grade, if it's a persuasive essay as opposed to a reflective essay or something, is going to involve alternative arguments and they learn how to do that. So they come here and they'll say, “Well, where do we do the alternative argument part?” You know, they'll anticipate that.

How does your learning community work toward developing an acceptance of differences, inclusive practices, and the habit of reflection?

Element 4: Restorative practices

- Meeting basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter
- Resolving conflict through peer mediation, juries, peace circles, etc.
- Using ‘public apology’ to acknowledge and repair harm done
- Counseling for those in need
- Maintaining close contact with families at home and at school

Transcript of video “Fairness and Respect”:

Joselyn: One of these girls on my softball team, her attitude is really strong when it’s...she’s very opinionated. So when something’s wrong she thinks is wrong, she starts getting all out of proportion. So in order for her to play in my softball team again and for her to enjoy, she has to give a public apology to every single, to the whole softball team, and the softball team has to allow her to come back on the team. ‘Cause at the end of the day it’s a team effort. It’s not just one person.

Luis, dean of students: you start with that foundation in 6th grade, developing that mentality where we’re in this together. We’re family. Not just the language of it, but the actual, the meaning of it. And you know that people are gonna be fair with you, people will actually treat you with respect, and it’s not just a one-way street, it’s gonna be sometimes when us as the adults have to look at some of our actions and say, “You know what? You’re correct. Maybe we were too strict, or too much I rushed to judgment. I should’ve listened to you first.” And then they start saying, “Yeah. This is real.”

Joselyn: The teachers here are fair. They let you have a time to defend yourself and to let you have a chance to talk and explain yourself. So they don’t like to give out punishments. It’s just that if it’s needed, they will.

Zane: In school here the teachers look out for each other. Like if a student would be in class having an attitude, then the teacher, like adviser, would come and they could take you out and talk to you about what’s going on so that it wouldn’t happen again. I’ve been taken once or twice into the dean’s office with another kid saying that I’m sorry and resolving the problem . . . you feel like a better person because you came out and said that you’re sorry to the person so that you guys could end up being friends or something more.

Chris, assistant dean: I think we do a great job here of being able to find a kid, pull a kid out of class. Even if it’s just talking to them up and down the hallway. Or when we see a kid that’s going to the bathroom, “Hey. This issue that came up yesterday, I didn’t get a chance to speak to you.” And there’s a lot of that going on. Not just with the deans. It happens with the teachers when they’re on their preps. When they see a student, they speak to them one-on-one. We’re huge on being preventative.

Joe, assistant dean: 100% Respect is a campaign that we started, designed to help teachers and students communicate, respect each other, and get along, because we’re dealing with each other for nine, ten hours out the day. For students, good ways for how do you communicate with a teacher when you feel like you don’t agree with something. And creating those avenues for teachers as well to pull a kid to the side and say, “Listen. I love you to death, but you’re killing me in class with the jokes nonstop.” See, when you say trouble, it could be both positive and negative, you know, [laughs] in a good way or a bad way. You know a lot of times when a student is dealing with an issue that happened or an incident, I think it’s a good teaching moment, you know, for the child and yourself, because a lot of times, you know, they’re still learning at the same time. And, you know, if it happens again, we’ll reflect on it. But mistakes are gonna be made as you grow, you know.

Diamond: Most teachers, they treat us like their own children. Like they care for you and anything you do bad or good, they’ll like sit you down and talk to you about it cuz they...it’s not just cuz they’re a teacher they have to talk to you. No. They’re coming from their heart saying how they feel and what they want you to do to be a better person. Like me. I got suspended like a week ago for having a fight in school. And they sat me down with the girl, and we had to talk about our issues and why did it lead to a fight. And it was for a dumb reason. It was unnecessary to fight. Sometimes it helps kids to be friends again. Sometimes they just don’t talk to each other anymore and they just don’t bring any more drama to the school. Since I came here, I get in less trouble. It’s like this place, it calms me down.

How does your learning community find constructive alternatives in order to redress harm done to others?

Element 5: Curriculum that connects and engages

- Projects & expeditions that take learning outside school
- Student choices in matters of curriculum & assessment
- Reading & expression that engage learners with life issues
- Chances for students to teach what they know
- Service-learning to increase sense of meaning & purpose

Transcript of video “Opening Minds, Changing Hearts”:

Gabriela: We were reading “Fences,” by August Wilson. And it was just that whole analyzing how the father’s actions and how his relationship influenced everything that had happened to Corey, his son. So, you know, we just really got to think about, “Hey! How did *our* relationship with our fathers, or any figure in our life as important as a father, how did that affect us, who we became in the future? And our persistence and our ambitions, how did that come to be?”

Susan: All these fictional works, every single character has some trait that’s like basically like the essence of human nature. And once you figure that out, it’s really easy to connect [with] them, because it’s like they have the same trait that you have even though sometimes you don’t show it. ‘Cause you’re like, “In a way I’m someone like them, and I would probably do something like that, too, if I was in the situation.”

Edwin: What this class has done for me is just open my mind to the possibilities of what the world is doing or changing around me. And I just feel like social and academics just come together as one. I just take what I learn through this class and apply it to everyday situations now

Suraiya: This class changed what morals and ethics that I thought was wrong and right. There was this book that we read that really changed how I thought. It was “Ruined” by Lynn Nottage. And the main character, she was running a brothel, which when I first read it, I was like, “Why is she doing that? She’s reinforcing the patriarchy.” But as I read it, she was doing the right thing. Because that was her way of undermining the patriarchy and giving these women a safe place to stay in. It just made me open my eyes more to the world. I think it made me a stronger person. Yeah, voicing my opinions, but also understanding why people do what they do, because before I was just, “Oh! They’re wrong. Why would they do that?” But you need to understand their perspective, too.

Anissa: I find myself outside the class always talking about them. Like what would you do in that position? And just like thoroughly explaining what we were reading. And even outside the class I continue to ponder and just be like, “Oh. I could’ve said that.” Or, “Oh, this was a great idea.” But it’s always outside of the classroom.

How does your learning community link engagement and scholarship in ways that matter to youth?

Element 6: Developing student agency

- Meeting basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter
- Resolving conflict through peer mediation, juries, peace circles, etc.
- Using ‘public apology’ to acknowledge and repair harm done
- Counseling for those in need
- Maintaining close contact with families at home and at school

Transcript of video “Finding the Future”:

Jen, 10th grade teacher/adviser: So I know this kid and I know something that she might be interested in, so I push it. But then I know that there are other students, for example, who didn’t even speak English three years ago -- is an honor student and a high, an overachiever in school, but he’s not really involved in any clubs or any activities. So it’s like he’s the kid in my head like, “Oh. I wanna try and find something for him to do in the school to get him more hooked in in the school community.” I want him to feel like he fits and really belongs here, too. That’s another big part of the role of the adviser, trying to find something for each student, try to match them with their interest and passion.

Julie: The school that I used to go was more like, “You came here to study and that’s it.” and here it was like the connections. You talk to the teachers. You come to after school. // ...they basically look up any after school or extracurricular activities that you can do, not necessarily in this school. It can be in another school or it can be in a college and teachers as well as the principal. // And I noticed that I started, you know, leaning towards math and science, kind of. So started looking out for careers or majors that had to do a lot with that. And the one that most popped out to me was electrical engineering.

Josh: It’s because of this school that I was really able to get my own independent mindset in my studies, and I was able to sort of branch out and look for even stronger sources for things that I became interested in. Biology, history, but archaeology in particular, I just went on on my own and decided to get an internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And it was getting into all the different seminars and learning of different techniques of curating artifacts, and really got a behind-the-scenes. It was like heaven.

LJ: I learn from living life. I learn. I can read a book, or I’ll look up online something I wanna learn. Like in law & justice we learned about the laws and stuff, but we don’t learn everything we need to know. Just now I was looking up how to say no to a stop from a police officer. Like how to specifically do that, what to say and what precedents and cases and stuff. We didn’t really learn that specifically in law & justice, but we learned some really interesting and what I feel is relevant stuff in law & justice, ~~though~~. But I was doing that on my own. So...I didn’t exactly get that from school, but it was inspired by school.

Bryan: I didn’t know who I really was at first. I live with an immigrant family, and we have a lot of obstacles and challenges. And so it’s like I’ve always been focused on those challenges rather than myself and academics. And, you know, I think I lost myself. You know, at such a young age to be worrying about, you know, the law and all that kind of stuff instead of myself and developing my character or developing who I am mentally and physically. And 9th grade was a huge transition from junior high school. I didn’t feel like I was in jail anymore. [laughs] The thing is is that I never had a principal who would invest so much in their students. Especially ones who wanted to achieve more or were just like me in 9th grade, didn’t know who they were, but, you know, would follow anybody just to discover themselves. So this school has really gotten me out there as far as exploring what is it that I wanna do. And I’m ready to start the next chapter of my life.

How does your learning community help students develop the beliefs and habits that lead to satisfying and productive lives and learning?

Name _____

MY ACTION PLAN

What new ideas and possibilities do these elements suggest about my own work?

What one idea do I think I could follow up on?

What three specific steps can I take to turn this idea into action?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

How will I know if these steps are working?

Step 1. _____

Step 2. _____

Step 3. _____

Present your plan to a partner for feedback. (5 min)

