

Fostering Character in a Collaborative Classroom

“Our schools build cultures of respect, responsibility, courage, and kindness, where students and adults are committed to quality work and citizenship.”
—Ron Berger, chief academic officer, EL Education

EL Education is committed to equity: to creating schools that value all learners, that give real opportunities for achievement, and that prepare them well for the future. The EL Education Language Arts curriculum addresses three dimensions of student achievement:

- The mastery of **knowledge and skills** (a deep understanding of content; the ability to apply learning to new tasks, to think critically, and to communicate understanding effectively)
- **Character** (working to become effective, ethical people who contribute to a better world)
- **High-quality student work** (creating complex work that reflects higher-order literacy skills, demonstrating craftsmanship, and creating authentic work)

This section specifically focuses on the “character” dimension, addressing two main topics:

Part 1: What EL means by character and how EL Education’s curriculum promotes habits of character

Part 2: Setting up the classroom environment, structures, and culture that will help this curriculum succeed

Many schools have well-developed approaches to character development and social-emotional learning. EL Education’s curriculum is meant to enhance, not supplant, those frameworks.

Part 1: How does EL Education define and promote habits of character in the curriculum?

Connecting to existing frameworks

Many common frameworks are used to help educators think about the development of character in the classroom: character education, social-emotional learning (SEL), nonacademic factors, the social curriculum. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the development of character is about helping “students and adults understand, care about, and act on core ethical values.” A central goal of this curriculum is to give children the tools to become effective, ethical learners who work to make the world a better place.

EL Education has our own language and approach to foster what we call students’ “habits of character.” But these can and should complement, not replace, schools’ existing frameworks, language, and routines for promoting social-emotional learning.

For example, some schools focus on the five core competencies identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), or others might be using Responsive Classroom or Caring School Communities, two programs designed to integrate social-emotional learning with daily classroom practices. Schools may have codified specific character words or habits to focus on (e.g., self-discipline or kindness), which can continue to be used. Instead, teachers can simply help students connect the language used in the curriculum (e.g., “perseverance”) to how their school may talk about character (e.g., “tenacity”). Such connections will expand students’ academic vocabulary and enrich their understanding of these important concepts.

EL Education’s curriculum gives students authentic opportunities to practice these habits of character (e.g., persevering as they work on multiple drafts of their performance task). The curriculum is unique in that it integrates an intentional focus on developing students’ habits of character within the context of the Language Arts lessons (see the chart below). No curriculum is values-free; every curriculum either explicitly or implicitly addresses how students are expected to behave, in addition to what they are expected to learn. EL Education’s curriculum requires habits such as self-reflection and collaboration; we choose to be explicit about those character strengths and how teachers can foster them.

Promoting character development is not new to classrooms. What makes EL Education’s curriculum distinct is how habits of character are integrated into all aspects of the daily life of the classroom. It is not preached through admonishments or commercial posters; rather, it is taught through authentic experiences and ongoing reflection on those experiences. How children learn is as important as what they learn.

EL Education's habits of character

The chart below illustrates three specific aspects of character that are taught in the curriculum, and describes in student-friendly language some of the particular habits we work to grow.

| Aspect of Character | Habits of Character (in student-friendly language) |
|---|---|
| <p>WORK TO BECOME EFFECTIVE LEARNERS: develop the mindsets and skills for success in college, career, and life (e.g., initiative, responsibility, perseverance, collaboration)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I take initiative. This means I notice what needs to be done and do it. • I take responsibility. This means I take ownership of my work, my actions, and my space. • I persevere. This means I challenge myself. When something is hard, I keep trying and ask for help if I need it. • I collaborate. This means I can work well with others to get something done. |
| <p>WORK TO BECOME ETHICAL PEOPLE: treat others well and stand up for what is right (e.g., empathy, integrity, respect, compassion)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I show empathy. This means I try to understand how others feel. • I behave with integrity. This means I do the right thing even when it is hard. • I show respect. This means I treat myself, others, and the environment with care. • I show compassion. This means I notice when people are sad or upset and reach out to help them. |
| <p>CONTRIBUTE TO A BETTER WORLD: put their learning to use to improve communities (e.g., citizenship, service)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I take care of and improve our shared spaces. • I use my strengths to help others grow. • I apply my learning to help our school, the community, and the environment. |

The relationship between habits of character and “academic mindsets”

In her work “Academic Mindsets as a Critical Component of Deeper Learning,” Camille Farrington suggests that one of the most basic motivators for increasing student achievement is the development of four academic mindsets (“the psycho-social attitudes or beliefs one has about oneself in relation to academic work”).

- I belong to this academic community. (Connection)
- I can succeed at this. (Confidence)
- My ability and competence grow with my effort. (Perseverance)
- This work has value to me. (Relevance)

Farrington’s work has focused on high school students. Yet EL Education has found that this framework is powerful for elementary students as well. In explicitly addressing the habits of character described above through the use of our curriculum, teachers can actively help develop these mindsets. When students develop a sense of belonging and engagement in an academic setting that engenders a sense of confidence, they are more likely to grow to become effective learners and ethical people. And contributing to their community helps students see first-hand the value of their work and feel satisfaction in their efforts.

How the curriculum actively develops students’ habits of character

Habits of character are imbued in every lesson and taught in the context of students’ work. Students may read about people (real or fictional) who embody certain habits. Students practice aspects of character as they work independently, collaborate with peers, and care for one another and their classroom. They reflect upon habits of character individually as they evaluate their work, set goals for themselves, and contribute to the evaluation of classwork. The chart below includes specific examples of how EL Education’s curriculum integrates habits of character into the daily life of the classroom.

Developing Students’ Habits of Character

| Structures and Practices in the Curriculum | Explanation and Example |
|---|---|
| Provides structures that empower students to participate in a collaborative community. Fosters a sense of belonging. | Students consider how to collaborate effectively. For example, in Grade 3, Module 1, students generate norms for group work that are tied directly to specific habits of character: “I show empathy,” “I behave with integrity,” “I show respect,” and “I show compassion.” |
| Teaches the language of character explicitly and authentically in the context of lessons (not as a stand-alone “character curriculum”). | Students learn how to talk about their interactions. For example, in Grade 1, Module 1, students do a collaborative challenge (stacking cups) to practice speaking and listening. During the Closing of the lesson, they reflect on how they used initiative (a habit of character) to complete the challenge. |
| Devotes time for students to regularly set and reflect on <i>individual</i> goals. Students see they can succeed at this work. | Students own their own learning, regularly self-assessing. For example, during the K-2 Reading Foundations Skills Block, students complete an assessment at the end of each weekly cycle. Each student then briefly confers with the teacher to reflect on progress and set a specific goal for the next week. |
| Devotes time for students to regularly set and reflect on <i>group</i> goals. | Students frequently “step back” and consider how their interactions are going and what could be improved. For example, in Grade 3, Module 1, students work in small groups to discuss the books they chose for independent reading. After the discussion, they score themselves green (met the target), yellow (on our way), or red (not yet) based on how well they followed the discussion norms during their conversation. |

| Structures and Practices in the Curriculum | Explanation and Example |
|--|---|
| Includes intentional grouping and protocols, so students interact with a wide variety of peers. | Collaboration is a critical life skill explicitly named in the speaking and listening standards. In the module lessons, protocols—simple discussion routines—develop students’ ability to have collaborative conversations with diverse peers. |
| Fosters collaboration as students work to create high-quality work. Students see that this work has value to them. | EL embraces three dimensions of student achievement. One is students’ ability to create high-quality work that matters to them. Collaboration is a key means to this end. For example, in Grade 1, Module 1, students read <i>The Most Magnificent Thing</i> and then work in small groups to design and then create a “magnificent thing” for their classroom. |
| Builds students’ self-direction and independence. | EL helps students “own their own learning” whenever possible. For example, in the K-2 Labs, across the eight weeks of a module, students are introduced to materials and activities, practice them with support, and then gradually increase their independent work. And in Grades 3-5, every day in the Additional Language and Literacy Block (ALL Block), students spend at least 20 minutes following a “task card” to guide their work with peers. |
| Builds students’ ability to give and receive feedback that is kind, specific, and helpful. | Students regularly critique one another’s work. They learn and practice how to give feedback. For example, in Grade 1, Module 1, students pair up and give each other one “star” (positive feedback) and one “step” (suggestion) on their draft “magnificent things,” then revise. |
| Challenges students to connect their learning with a broader world and help solve real problems. | Students are most engaged when doing real work that matters. In many of the Language Arts and all the Life Science modules, students are challenged to address an actual or simulated problem in their school or community. For example, in third grade Life Science, they design a frog pond based on a scenario. |
| Repeated reading of texts allows children to make connections with the human condition and see other points of view. | Students read literary and informational texts that show many experiences and perspectives. For example, in Grade 3, Module 1, students read a true story about a young girl from Afghanistan who gains access to education by attending a “secret school” for girls. |
| Children are in the role of experts. | Children learn about the work that real professionals (such as meteorologists) do, and take on those roles when possible. |
| Helps students see and celebrate how their ability is growing with their effort. | Growth mindset permeates the curriculum. For example, almost daily in the K–2 Reading Foundations Skills Block, students notice how their effort to identify letter-sound patterns is helping them become better readers. |

Note: Habits of character are promoted in every module (see the Module Overview document for each specific module for details). Students reflect and self-assess on their growth on particular habits (e.g., “How did you show compassion during today’s lesson? How did that help your critique partner?”). But habits of character are not formally assessed, because they are hard to quantify and many schools may have some sort of character code as a part of existing report cards.

Part 2: Classroom environment, structures, and culture that will help this curriculum succeed

EL Education’s curriculum both requires and promotes a learning environment that is **respectful, active, collaborative, and growth-oriented**. Many of the ideas on the following pages are based on EL Education’s book *Management in the Active Classroom (MAC)*, which lays out in great detail this vision and specific strategies for fostering students’ habits of character. (The book points teachers to online videos showing students and teachers in action: <http://vimeo.com/channels/managementactiveclass>.)

EL Education’s mission is to create classrooms where teachers can fulfill their highest aspirations and students achieve more than they think possible, becoming active contributors to building a better world. We envision

classrooms that are lively and learning-centered. Classrooms where students smile as they walk in, where they feel interested and compelled by the work at hand: reading, writing, talking, playing, singing, moving, creating, acting, contributing. In such an environment, “classroom management” works because students are active and feel a sense of ownership and investment in the work at hand. We aspire for students to be delighted and engaged, not quiet and compliant. Teachers understand that EL Education’s curriculum requires children to create authentic, high-quality work, tackle real-life problems, and take charge of their own learning within a collaborative setting. So they took steps to build a classroom culture of trust, challenge, and joy for students to draw upon as they take on the challenges in the curriculum.

Building and strengthening such a classroom culture happens throughout the year. But it is critical from the start. So what sets the stage for success with EL Education’s curriculum? (For live classroom examples, see the videos included in *MAC*.)

Below, we highlight two specific elements that will help teachers set the stage for success.

Teacher Presence

- Mindset
- Classroom spaces that teach
- Students and teachers connecting and building community

Creating a Self-Managed Classroom

- Crafting classroom norms together
- Problem-solving and consequences
- Establishing routines through modeling and thinking aloud
- Introducing classroom materials through guided practice
- Setting the stage for shared learning and discussion

Teacher presence

Teacher presence is the care that teachers take to manage their own actions for the benefit of their students and to serve as models of self-respect and discipline.

Researchers Carol Rodgers and Miriam Raider-Roth (2006) describe a teacher’s presence this way: “[We view] teaching as engaging in an authentic relationship with students where teachers know and respond with intelligence and compassion to students and their learning. We define this engagement as ‘presence’—a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individuals and the group in the context of their learning environment.”

Mindset

A teacher’s attitude and mindset form the foundation for her presence: knowing and valuing herself as a teacher; knowing and valuing her students for who they are; and acting as her authentic self and knowing that her ability, like her students’, grows with her effort. (*MAC*, p.9)

Considerations:

- Develop your own mindset by thinking about who you are as a teacher: your strengths, weaknesses, passions, and values and the things you want to learn. (*MAC*, p.9)
- Develop relationships with students that let them know who you are and that you are interested in who they are.

- Check any biases and assumptions you may hold (consciously or unconsciously) about your students, given your background and theirs. Be aware of how students from different backgrounds may have experienced school and interpersonal relationships and interactions, and commit to making your classroom welcoming for all.
- Get to know the children not just by prior test scores, but also by what they care about and what brings them joy. Know their cultures, backgrounds, and needs, perhaps through an interview with them or their families. Likewise, share what you care about and what brings you joy along with stories from your culture, background, and challenges you've faced (as appropriate). This helps students respect your authenticity and feel respected in return. (*MAC*, p.9)
- Attend to language. EL Education offers suggested teacher language in each lesson that conveys a trust in the students' ability to think deeply and share about something of importance. It is language of:
 - **Inquiry**—conveying curiosity and inviting conversations (Example: In introducing Grade 2, Module 1, teachers ask, “What is school? Why is it important?”)
 - **Observation**—enabling conversations without judging (Example: In the first lesson of Grade 3, Module 1, the teacher says, “I noticed many of you persevering with your planning process even when it was challenging.”)
 - **Focusing**—inviting students to think about something of note rather than looking to the teacher for answers (Example: During a K-2 Skills Block spelling lesson, a Grade 2 teacher might focus on common errors, asking, “This is how you spelled the word cuts and this is how I spelled it. It looks like we made some different choices. What do you notice about the choices we made?”)
 - **Choice**—giving options, opportunities, and practice for making decisions, inspiring ownership (Example: “Jonathan, I see you are having a hard time settling down this morning. I can give you a choice: Take a quick stretch and try again, or get a drink of water and try again.” [*MAC*, p.69])
 - **Access**—when critical, repeating and rephrasing questions and answers, providing think time (Example: After a K-2 Skills Block reading and spelling assessment, the Grade 2 teacher gives a student feedback: “It looks like you and I made some different choices in how we spelled these words. What do you notice about the choices each of us made?” She repeats herself, and then rephrases what she said as well: “Think about the way we each spelled this word. Can you tell me what’s the same and what’s different?”)

Classroom spaces that teach

The physical classroom space sends a potent message to students about how to behave and learn. The wall space, seating, work areas, and materials support not only instruction, but also the strong habits of scholarship, independence, and responsibility that are central to EL Education’s curriculum. If the physical classroom works against these principles, much time and energy will be spent “fighting” the space rather than teaching and learning. (*MAC*, p.22)

By contrast, if the space is organized to encourage collaborations, to showcase student work, to meet the physical and learning needs of all students with resources that are easily accessible, the form of it will fit the function of the classroom and enhance the learning and teaching that takes place there. (For more, see *MAC*, p.22.)

Considerations:

- Create a respectful, personalized space where students feel welcomed, peaceful, and at home. (*MAC*, p.23)
- Set up a collaborative space that has the room and flexibility for various configurations: independent work, group work, and whole class work. (*MAC*, p.23) (EL Education’s curriculum uses all of these configurations daily.)

- Organize the space so students can easily access and care for materials. Provide enough room for students to store both their work and their personal belongings. Find manageable ways for students to help in the arrangement of the classroom by creating labels, sorting books, making charts, or arranging classroom tools.
- Create a growth-oriented space that prioritizes effort and promotes goal setting and reflection. Ensure wall space for charts of classroom norms, academic anchor charts, module guiding questions, and documentation panels (that show both students' finished work and their growth through multiple drafts). (MAC, p.23)
- Display student work. Expand the definition of high-quality work to include work that shows high growth (e.g., work that a struggling student may have completed that is concrete evidence she achieved more than she thought possible).
- Involve students in discussions about the care of the classroom and create classroom jobs around that care.

Students and teachers connecting and building community

“The purpose of life is to make the world a better place and to have a good time doing it.”
—Sydney Thomson Brown, activist for social, economic, and environmental justice

The need for love and belonging is a basic human need (Maslow, 1943). Children arrive on the first day with pressing questions: “Where are the bathrooms?” “When is snack time?” “Will we go outside?” “Am I safe here?” And, most important, “Do I belong here?” Though many of these questions are unspoken, children look to their teachers for answers. On day one, the teacher is a gracious host, inviting children in. But she quickly needs to address students’ basic questions and move them toward a sense of “ownership” of the classroom. Nothing is more important in fostering students’ growth than the degree to which they care about their own work and the success of the classroom community as a whole (*Leaders of Their Own Learning*, p.6). And nothing fosters caring more than feeling that one is a valued member of a community.

Considerations:

- Use purposeful play to get to know one another and build group identity. Invite participation through songs and noncompetitive games. Often, play is viewed as in opposition to serious learning. But experience and research show the opposite: Play is the natural way children learn and a joyful way to build the group cohesion that is so necessary for collaborative deeper learning.
- Take time to get to know students personally as well as academically. Share your personal and academic stories when appropriate. Be aware of differences that may exist between your own background and experiences and those of many of your students, and how those differences shape your interactions.
- Give students time to get to know you and their classmates through daily greetings, noncompetitive group activities and challenges, and focused sharing. Throughout the curriculum, students work in diverse groupings. By learning about one another and playing together, children become more comfortable with the give and take such work requires.
- Encourage families to share their excitement and concern about the classroom and curriculum, and integrate these considerations. Invite families into the classroom to convey their excitement and care, and to serve as experts on particular topics.

Creating positive relationships with students and families lays the foundation for a self-managed classroom, which in turn lays the foundation for success with EL Education’s curriculum.

Creating a self-managed classroom

Self-management is the explicit teaching of the structures and routines needed to create a culture that gives students the power to make wise choices and to maintain a respectful classroom community, where students and teachers have self-knowledge, self-discipline, and self-control.

Crafting classroom norms together

Rules, constitutions, guidelines, expectations—the behaviors we wish students to exhibit have many names. EL Education calls them “norms.” Norms are the foundation for respectful behavior among students, between students and teachers, and among teachers. (*MAC*, p.27)

Through a process of co-creating norms, students appreciate immediately that they are not being asked to regurgitate your thoughts, but are genuinely included in the process of governing themselves and their classroom. Co-creating norms is a great opportunity to raise awareness of how different students are comfortable interacting interpersonally at home, socially, and academically, and to then integrate these routines into the classroom. Because they have authored the guidelines themselves, students understand clearly the intent behind them and are invested in respecting them. The key in creating norms is to generate a positive, thoughtful discussion and for the teacher to distill student suggestions into a clear and effective list. Norms are then discussed often and used daily to guide interactions and behavior. (*MAC*, p.30)

EL Education’s curriculum promotes student self-assessment. Even the youngest students learn how to reflect upon and articulate their own growth and to then set goals for themselves. Creating and reflecting on norms is a vital first step in the yearlong process of setting and reflecting on goals.

Considerations:

In *Teaching Children to Care*, Ruth Charney describes how to create norms by first asking each student to reflect on hopes for the coming year.

- Charney starts by modeling. She states her own hope and dream, translating them into concrete behaviors that children can understand: “I hope that our class will work together and learn from each other” or “I hope our class helps the whole school be a friendly place to learn.”
- Next, students generate their own hopes and dreams in writing or in pictures.
- From this list, students, with teacher guidance, create norms that reflect their hopes and dreams. (The teacher may start by using the class brainstorm of norms on chart paper.)
- Then the teacher consolidates and simplifies the ideas into the positive norms that students will use throughout the year. She turns all the “don’ts” into “dos” (e.g., “Don’t run” becomes “Walk”). As Charney says, “Rules are to do.” (*Teaching Children to Care*, p.70)
- The norms are then “published” and posted prominently in the classroom.
- If your school has school-wide codes of conduct, the last step is to connect the classroom norms to the school-wide ones. Both documents should be a living part of the school culture and understood by students. (*MAC*, p.29, based on *Teaching Children to Care*)

Problem-solving and consequences

“Where did we ever get the crazy idea that in order to make children do better, first we have to make them feel worse?”

—Jane Nelsen, Positive Discipline

In creating the norms with students, a teacher is not abdicating her authority for classroom management; rather, she is making a promise to uphold what is most important to the students. Perhaps nothing you do carries more weight than how you manage misbehavior. All your norms, circles, advice, morning meetings, and advisory periods mean nothing if you don't deliver on what you say when it really counts.

Classroom management should serve the goal of helping students self-manage, and therefore should focus on problem solving and consequences that serve this end. Fair and logical consequences make students feel supported and help strengthen the classroom community. To take full advantage of EL Education's curriculum that teaches collaboration, perseverance, and initiative, students must be able to depend on this level of emotional safety. In the curriculum, students are regularly asked to take risks academically. They need to feel emotionally safe to do so. If students violate the norms, that must be addressed directly, specifically, and with compassion.

Considerations:

- Carefully choose your words and tone. Students should hear, “You made a bad choice,” not “You are a bad person.” Consequences should be delivered firmly and gently. (*MAC*, p.37)
- Use reminders or quick redirections. Rather than a long lecture, give a quick, subtle gesture that is culturally appropriate for all students. Fewer words frequently bring the best results because little attention is taken from the flow of the class. (*MAC*, p.37)
- Consider these guidelines for consequences:
 - **Relevant** to the deed (Example: If a student writes on a desk, then he or she should clean it up.)
 - **Respectful**—a consequence is not a punishment but feedback from which a child can learn (Example: Rather than taking away recess for unsafe play, have a child stay close to you for a short time until the child is able to say and demonstrate that he or she is ready to play safely. No consequence should be forever or delivered out of frustration.)
 - **Realistic**—doable for the child and you, and not overly harsh (Example: If a child writes on a desk, then he or she should fix the mistake by cleaning that desk, not all the desks).
- Introduce the concept of consequences and problem solving through discussions and modeling. Question the idea that all students are familiar or comfortable with a consequences-driven approach to problem solving. Discuss your approach and rationale with families.
- With students, first discuss the positive consequence when students do follow the norms: “What happens when you choose to cooperate with your classmates?” “Why might that be important?”
- When students violate a norm or feelings get hurt, have set guidelines for fixing the mistake that repairs the harm done. Use restorative questions (rather than accusations) to find out what happened and what can be done to fix it. (Example: “Can you share what you were you thinking at the time?” Or “Tell me what you think happened.”)

Establishing routines through modeling and thinking aloud

Inviting students to feel welcome in and responsible for the classroom requires taking the time to teach and practice daily routines. This is best done through modeling, “think-alouds,” and guided practice, just as all new academic routines are introduced in EL Education’s curriculum.

Modeling is a way to scaffold learning. It is a participatory strategy that goes beyond just telling students what you expect; it shows students what is meant, invites them to reflect, and allows them to try/practice, leading them to ever more independence. Students who are learning to self-manage require a growth mindset; they understand that routines and transitions are skills to practice and improve upon. (MAC, p.44). Modeling is effective to teach start-of-the-year routines (such as lining up for lunch, responding to teacher signals for attention, hand washing, and transitions). These routines must be efficient, practiced, and purposeful. Combine modeling with think-alouds, which show students the internal and external language that supports decision-making and thinking processes.

Considerations:

- Model routines just as you would model academic work. Begin with an exemplar or ideal behavior, deconstruct the parts so students understand, and finally put it back together to practice. Suggested steps for modeling routines (MAC, p.43):
 - Teacher models the routine, including thinking aloud if appropriate.
 - Ask the students what they noticed about what she did (e.g., “When you raised your hand, other students did, too”).
 - Summarize the routine and have students repeat the steps.
 - Call on one or two students to demonstrate.
 - Ask again what students notice.
 - Have everyone practice until it is 100 percent correct for all students. (Don’t settle for less.)
- When practicing, consider aspects of teacher presence, such as body language and voice, to convey the message that you know the students can succeed.
- Strive for repeated practicing to feel more like the pleasure of a well-choreographed dance than a forced march.

Introducing classroom materials through guided practice

Guided practice is much like modeling, but it is used specifically to introduce materials that students will use in more open, creative ways throughout the year. (For example, using a three-hole punch should be modeled because it has one basic use, but paints are better introduced through guided practice because they can be used with endless possibilities.) A critical aspect of guided practice is to first generate excitement about the possibilities that a given material offers and secondly to think about the care and placement of it in the classroom so that everyone can use it throughout the year. Guided practice directly promotes equity, because it lets everyone have experience with materials before using them for work (rather than assuming students have prior experience with them). Knowing how to use materials effectively and creatively will be important as students begin work in the 3-5 ALL Block and the K-2 Lab times where they will be working both collaboratively and independently.

Considerations:

The Responsive Classroom approach to guided practice is called Guided Discovery and offers a good example of introducing materials. In *Teaching Children to Care*, Charney highlights five steps to Guided Discovery:

- Introduce the material. With younger students, this may mean sitting in a circle on the rug with a box of crayons in the middle. With older students, it may mean “field work” down to the computer lab. Bring students’ focus to what material or space you want them to “discover.”

- Ask students what they notice about the material or the space (e.g., “It looks sharp,” “You can’t see it from the teacher’s desk,” “It might spill.”).
- Let students explore the material or area. This may mean passing it around from student to student or letting them mill about a particular area of the room.
- Once they have explored, ask them to share anything else they notice. Help them generate ideas about possible ways to use the material (including unintended uses or possible safety concerns).
- Have students try a few of the ideas they generated.
- Ask students to suggest and come to agreement on the “rules” they want to set up for using that material or area. Young students may benefit from signs around the room that remind them of proper use. To support their sense of ownership of the classroom, consider assigning different materials or areas of the room to individual students or small groups. They can create signage and help you monitor how things are going throughout the year and determine if the class needs a refresher discussion about using that material or space. (*MAC*, p.55, based on *Teaching Children to Care*)

Setting the stage for shared learning and discussion

In the first few weeks of school, when students are just getting to know one another and learning how to work together, the focus is on sharing about oneself in a clear and concise way and on active listening and supportive responses.

At this stage, sharing may look somewhat like the traditional “Show and Tell,” but it is much more than that because it is the underpinning to building working relationships that are positive and participatory. Sharing things that are important for the sharer engenders feelings of belonging and for the listener, connection and empathy.

It provides a format for respectful interaction that will be later built upon as the children begin to critique one another’s work, and it is the basis for using the many protocols employed throughout the modules. Protocols for collaboration and discussion; consultation and decision-making; sharing and presenting; reading, writing, and annotating; building vocabulary; and checking for understanding are all rooted in the culture of respect and participation that is planted initially in learning how to share and listen to one another.

Protocols (simple structured conversations) serve as an excellent scaffold for both sharing and discussion. (For all protocols used in the curriculum, download EL Education’s Classroom Protocols pack from curriculum.ELeducation.org).

Considerations:

- Use the same steps to model sharing as you do to model routines (see above).
- Teacher sharing should feel everyday, not sensational, showing students that everyone has things to share.
- As with any routine, establish transparency. Invite students to question and explain why sharing is important in your classroom and to learning.
- Set a routine that includes ways for the “audience” to respond. For example, the child who is sharing is the one to signal that he or she is ready for questions and comments.
- Keep the interactions positive and safe by tightly controlling the experience in the beginning. Then slowly give over more control to the students. For instance, on day one you might cue the child who is sharing to signal her audience that she is ready to begin; on day 15 she should be able to do so independently, and the rest of the class should respond to the student without cues from the teacher.
- Uphold the norms by setting firm expectations for the care in which students interact. Be willing to stop any situation that is not friendly for everyone.

- Once a sharing routine is established, introduce other protocols. For the start of the year, consider these: Back-to-Back and Face-to-Face, Think-Pair-Share, and Turn and Talk (see Classroom Protocols). These protocols require children to work with various classmates rather than just a best friend.
- Take time to explicitly teach, practice, and reflect on how well students are using the protocols. “Go slow to go fast” in terms of establishing routines that will show up frequently.
- Plan the introduction of sharing and protocols to accommodate individual students’ specific needs. For instance, “Back-to-Back and Face-to-Face” might be intimidating to a child on the autism spectrum, so you might have to change it to “Back-to-Back and Side-to-Side” so that the child isn’t required to look anyone straight in the eye.
- Build your own expertise with “Conversation Cues”—simple talk moves to promote productive and equitable conversations (e.g., “Can you say more about that?”). See the Conversation Cues section of the Module 1 Appendices for details.

Why does this all matter?

The way a teacher structures and leads the classroom sends an important message to students about their capacity and responsibility, and helps define the nature of the learning process. If the goal is for students to be effective learners and ethical people who work to make the world a better place, then they need to fully participate in their education. To do this, they first need to have successful experiences engaging in classroom activities.

When teachers use play to build community, they give students that experience in a fun, nonthreatening way. When teachers take the time to get to know students, and for the students to know one another, they create a classroom culture that values and appreciates its members for who they are as people rather than just for what they can or cannot yet do on a test. And when all students know how to use and care for the classroom materials, and how to follow and benefit from the classroom routines, they begin to settle in and call the place their own. They begin to understand that “I belong in this academic community,” “If I try, I will get better at this,” and “I care about this work.”

For students, the first few weeks of school are the steppingstones to becoming successful—opening wide the school door and beckoning them to come in and begin.

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