I-5: Create a welcoming environment

Model Welcoming Values and Messages ("Practice what you preach")

Ensure that your classroom reflects and reinforces your values – that your students experience a reality behind your messages. To do that, model your messages in interactions with students, develop class "policies" that reflect your values, and implement systems that reward achievement or progress towards those values.

Teachers' actions should show students they are welcomed, valued, and expected to learn. Such modeling meets students' need for affirmation, contribution, purpose, power, and challenge and ultimately form students' collective classroom experiences in both conscious and subconscious ways.

Establish a Respectful Tone

Model respectful communication (and preserve students' dignity) when you speak with your students, regardless of their behaviors (especially when asserting authority):

- Speak in your own natural voice at all times; do not yell or use a condescending tone.
- Refine the skill of *observing* offending behaviors, without *judging* them (unless they are egregious enough to merit harsh judgment).
- Criticize the behavior ("I can understand why Tania's comment felt hurtful" or "Tania, that was a rude comment") rather than the person ("Tania you are rude!").

Err on the side of being "overly" sensitive to your students' feelings. Beware of using sarcasm, even in a joking manner.

Show a respectful interest in each student as an individual

It's important to get to know your students so that you can better know how to ensure that all of your students feel comfortable, safe, supported, and willing to take academic risks. By modeling and showing respectful interest in each student's uniqueness you teach students how to value people as individuals. Building personal connections with them—and communicating to students that they matter—is foundational for creating a welcoming environment.

Suggested opportunities to interact with students:

- attending students' activities outside of class
- having students eat lunch with you
- allowing students to contact you outside of school with school-related questions
- sending personal notes
- joining in physical activities
- joining in school and community events
- using a suggestion box to collect student feedback in your classroom (this will help make your students feel respected and valued).

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Respect and appreciate students' varying learning styles

Communicate that all diverse learning styles (kinesthetic, visual, auditory, and tactile as well as different cultural learning styles) and multiple intelligences are valid and valuable. To read more about considering learning styles, visit the P-4 page.

Example: Mr. Verna knew from his own research that his 3rd graders, all African American students, came from a culture with a rich oral tradition of call and response. After several months in the classroom, he realized that his students were perfectly willing and able to raise their hands and to wait until being called upon to speak. However, he also sensed that this was somewhat confining for his sometimes squirmy, often enthusiastic group. To break the monotony for them, and to respect some of their energetic inclinations, he instilled a weekly activity called "Name That Number." The activity, a math game, required students to race through calculations (sometimes individually, sometimes in groups) and Mr. Verna permitted them to shout out their answers as soon as they were calculated. The answers would soon take the form of verbal exchange, as Mr. Verna would expand on the original formula by adding, subtracting, multiplying or dividing additional numbers. Students understood that this was the sole activity during which they were allowed to shout out responses, and Mr. Verna found that the looser communicative structure seemed to generate a great deal of energy and interest.

Deconstruct your own personal biases to value diversity

Since you're asking students to examine their own hidden biases and prejudices, be willing to do the same (and recognize that you will not be able to successfully model your messages and values until you deconstruct your own biases). Recognize and challenge your own prejudices. Left un-checked, stereotypes can impact the expectations you hold for your students and the way you communicate with them.

- Constantly reflect on your assumptions about your students and their families (including their backgrounds, personalities, cultures, etc.). Example: reflect on your biases about certain "kinds" of students (when you were in school, did "the thug," the "know-it-all," or the "star athlete" bother you? Your own teenage reactions may bubble up within you when you see these qualities in your own students. As the adult, the personal demeanors of your students must not influence the way you treat them; remember that you are caring for fragile children and adolescents.
- Reflect on your feelings toward each student: read through each name in your roll book and consider what first comes to mind and how you act toward him or her. Do you think of Devin as the "disruptive one"? Do you treat her that way? Do you groan in annoyance when you think of Juanita? Do you ignore insensitive comments made to her? Do you think of David as the "LD" student who requires all the accommodations? Do you send him that message when you dismiss him to the resource room? Acknowledge your thoughts honestly, admit any inappropriate behavior, and work to establish a mental fresh slate with that student. Verbalizing and working through your biases with a fellow corps member or someone on your regional staff is helpful.
- Recognize when your perceptions may be based on prejudice (including bias against gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) and challenge these prejudices in order to break them down. Example: one highly effective New Orleans teacher told us, "As a women's studies major, I thought I would be acutely aware of the needs of all my female students. However, during a post-observation with my program director, I began to realize that I was giving the boys in my class much more attention—their rowdiness made me more apt to discipline and pay attention to them. Once my PD pointed out this trend, I immediately took steps to change. I began walking around with a spreadsheet of all of my students' names and noting each time I called on them or gave them attention. This really helped me spread my awareness and focus on all of my students, regardless if they were rambunctious or shy. I noticed a major change in my female students as well, as now I was chatting with them more and giving them the attention they deserved."
- Participate in workshops and seminars aimed at increasing sensitivity to diversity issues.

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- Get to know your students and their families, which will help ensure that you treat your students as individuals rather than on the basis of any group perceptions.

Treat mistakes as learning opportunities

Establish a class culture in which students are comfortable taking academic risks; students need to feel secure that their peers won't make fun of their mistakes. Perhaps choose a classroom motto like "Mistakes are Learning Opportunities." Or a class chant: Preston Smith (Bay Area '01) reinforces the message that mistakes are learning opportunities by teaching his first grade students the following chant, "_____" made a mistake, but that's ok, because as long as he learns form it, we say hurray!" To read more on treating mistakes as opportunities to learn, visit the I-1 page.

Use Inclusive language

Choose your language consciously to ensure that you don't inadvertently alienate some of your students.
Examples:
- Use the term "family" rather than "parents," (some students will live with extended family or caretakers rather than biological parents.)
- Use language that does not exclude gay and lesbian relationships (for example, "spouse" or "partner" rather than "wife" or "husband," "parent" rather than "mother" or "father").

Publicly correct your own stereotypes (to explicitly acknowledge that we all have them and to model for students what it looks like to challenge one's own assumptions)

Seize the opportunity to share your own misassumptions with students. For example, "That was totally wrong of me to assume he wasn't a citizen just because he speaks with an accent. Of course there are millions of American citizens who were born in other countries!" or "You're absolutely right Lila, you can be both the oldest and the youngest child at the same time since you have step-siblings. Thank you for correcting me about that."

Challenge, don't perpetuate gender stereotypes (including your own)

Challenge your students views:
Do your students think that only girls should use the measuring cups at the kitchen station? Do your students think only boys should help carry your 150 textbooks from the storage room? Look for opportunities to challenge their views, for example, by inviting a male nurse and a female police officer to come and speak to the class if you're doing a thematic unit on careers, and by consciously breaking gender stereotypes at every available opportunity (i.e. when discussing sports, refer to female athletes; when discussing parents, refer to fathers and grandfathers).

Challenge your own stereotypes as well:
Do you assume that girls will be stronger in language arts than math? Do you call on boys more often? Do you tolerate more disruptive behavior from boys than from girls? If you catch yourself making assumptions about a student based on gender, correct yourself and be transparent about the fallacy of your assumptions (i.e. "Why do I always ask the boys to carry the textbooks? That's pretty illogical. Girls are perfectly capable of carrying them too!" or "I shouldn't assume the doctor would be a man. In fact, half of all doctors are women.")

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Seize opportunities to model inclusive language (i.e. say "police officers" instead of "policemen", "humankind" instead of "mankind", etc.).

Reach all students (especially those who typically exclude themselves)

Ensure that all of your students, regardless of individual differences, feel equally valued. Engage those students who routinely appear to be left out in the cafeteria, on the playground, or in other social settings.

Track student participation. Some teachers carry a clipboard with students' names on it and put a check by the student's name as he or she shares a response or gets to participate in a demonstration. A quick scan of the list lets you see who should participate next or to whom you might direct your next question.

For classroom observation tools that can help you uncover hidden patterns of preference, see the I-5 Tools section.

Show students you are mindful of their needs by creating a student-centered classroom

Your physical classroom should reflect the student-centered values you espouse. Consider students' needs as you structure every aspect of your classroom including: room arrangements, work surfaces, seating plans, personal space and classroom displays.

Creating a Student-Centered Classroom Arrangement	
Room Arrangements	In a student-centered classroom arrangement, the students may be seated in pairs or in clusters and often face each other for easier interaction during cooperative learning or other group activities. Students may also be seated in a large circle. In contrast, teacher-centered classrooms tend to minimize the amount of interaction among students. Desks face the teacher and are often separated or in rows. Requirements: Students can see the chalkboard, students can easily access learning materials and can easily communicate with each other when necessary, teacher can circulate easily among the students. *For a checklist for classroom organization, see below.*
Variety of Learning and Work Surfaces	Since people work best in a variety of different settings, create different opportunities for students to sit up straight, stand, lean, lounge, etc. Use bean bags or carpets to provide alternative spaces for students. These different work surfaces should be appropriate for the age and developmental levels of your students. Students of any age will appreciate cushions and comfortable seating areas to read and do work individually or with peers. (The opportunity to break up long periods of time sitting at a desk or the option of sitting at a study carrel can be particularly advantageous for some special needs students.)

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Seating Plans:	Your seating plan should take into account individual students' special needs: • Students with vision problems, should be seated close to the board • students with limited English skills could be seated next to bilingual students • A student who has particular trouble concentrating could be seated in a desk away from peers but near the teacher. • If you assign seats, consider changing the seating assignment on a regular basis to give students an opportunity to work with different groups of peers. On your parent or student survey, you might ask, "Do you need to sit in a special seat for any reason (to hear better, to see better, etc.)?
Personal Space:	Many students need personal space in order to feel that they belong to the classroom and that they can keep their personal belongings safe. In addition to personal desk space, students may benefit from having their own mailbox, folders, or space to display their student work. You may create these items or have the students create them themselves.
Classroom Displays	Displaying student work sends an important message. Such displays help build a sense of identity and belonging and create a lively classroom environment where learning is relevant and valued. Student input and assistance in decorating the room will help to give students a sense of ownership of the learning environment. Create displays to which students can add their own thoughts or additions (like a word of the day, or a reading recommendation, etc.).

Checklist for Classroom Organization

Can all students see the board?	Yes	☐	No	☐
Do you separate active areas and quiet areas?	Yes	☐	No	☐
Does your room have clear and safe traffic paths?	Yes	☐	No	☐
Do you have areas devoted to enrichment?	Yes	☐	No	☐
Have you considered where you will put your desk?	Yes	☐	No	☐
Have you arranged the desks to enable quick and easy monitoring?	Yes	☐	No	☐
Are the pencil sharpener and trash can accessible?	Yes	☐	No	☐
Are student materials stored visibly and accessible?	Yes	☐	No	☐
Have you determined a seating chart?	Yes	☐	No	☐
Do students have a place they can call their own?	Yes	☐	No	☐
Do you have a display area for student work?	Yes	☐	No	☐