

## Feature 3: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Teaching

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—Former principal in the Long Beach Unified School District<sup>41</sup>

### What Students Need

An important part of creating an educational community in which young people can thrive and learn is ensuring that all students feel valued and seen for who they are. In addition to designing the school for relationships and creating a physically and psychologically safe, inclusive culture, this work involves an explicit commitment to culturally responsive and sustaining teaching, which promotes respect for diversity and creates a context within which students’ experiences can be understood, appreciated, and connected to the curriculum.

This is especially true in today’s U.S. social context, where issues of identity are at the forefront of public discourse, often in ways that may communicate a message to many young people that they do not belong. Indeed, evidence suggests that intolerance is on the rise. In a 2022 survey of California high school principals, 42% indicated that incidents of intolerance on campus had increased since before the COVID-19 pandemic, and only 5% said such behavior had decreased. More than three quarters of principals (78%) reported students making hostile or demeaning remarks toward their LGBTQ classmates, 66% reported racially hostile statements toward Black students, and 50% reported racially hostile statements toward Latino/a students. At the same time, large numbers of principals reported that parents or community members had sought to challenge their schools’ efforts to teach about race and racism, to protect LGBTQ student rights, or to focus on social and emotional learning.

Students who hold one or more identities that are stigmatized in society regularly encounter messages that undermine their conception of their own ability to succeed—and they may have had those experiences in school as well. These identities may be related to race, ethnicity, language background, immigration status, family income, gender, sexual orientation, or disability, among other things. This stigmatization or discrimination can produce what is known as social identity threat, which occurs when people feel they are at risk of being treated negatively based on their identity.<sup>42</sup> The pervasive sense of threat impacts the brain by creating a toxic level of stress that can create anxiety, depression, and other health problems and can undermine the learning process.<sup>43</sup>

In this context, it is critical for educators to be proactive in upholding the dignity of all and for our public schools to see a core part of their purpose as educating young people to be members of a diverse democracy.<sup>44</sup> Effective educators proactively seek to create a school environment that is identity safe—where all students feel welcomed and included, where their identities and cultures are not a cause for exclusion but a strength to be valued and celebrated.<sup>45</sup>

## Key Practices

### Counteracting Stereotype Threat

In addition to the ways that many students experience discrimination outside of school, **social identity threat** can also be triggered in schools by many factors. Within large schools, tracking systems often segregate students and allocate lower-quality curriculum and less experienced teachers to those in the bottom tracks, who are disproportionately marginalized students of color.<sup>46</sup> Researchers have long found that some teachers hold inaccurate characterizations of academic ability and behavior of students based on race and ethnicity,<sup>47</sup> have lower expectations of Black and Latino/a students, and interact with them less positively than with White students.<sup>48</sup> These implicit biases are associated with significant disparities in disciplinary actions, as well as lower levels of support for academic performance.<sup>49</sup>

Young people are very observant. They note these patterns, and they internalize the perceptions that are communicated to and about them. Not only do educators need to overcome their own potential biases, but they also need to be aware of biases that exist among students. For example, at San Francisco's June Jordan School for Equity the staff held a fishbowl conversation with Black students to better understand their experiences, and one girl explained how her peers treated her as less capable, saying:

If you're African American, a lot of other students don't think that you're really educated. If I'm in class and there are four of us at the table, and I'm the only Black person, [my peers] will ask every other person at the table for help, but not me.

Uncovering this dynamic, and hearing from the student about ways some teachers had successfully interrupted it, allowed the staff to more effectively address the unconscious racism that is present throughout American society.<sup>50</sup>

Social psychologist Claude Steele coined the term “**stereotype threat**” to describe the social identity threat that happens in education contexts when one fears being judged based on a group-based stereotype. He and his colleagues showed how it can interfere with academic performance, as anxiety interferes with working memory and focus, as well as how it can be addressed by specific actions taken in a classroom or testing situation.<sup>51</sup> In addition to reducing practices like tracking, as the redesigned schools in this publication have done, these actions include means for creating connections to students that allow them to communicate their thoughts, experiences, and aspirations; communicating confidence in students' abilities while helping them to meet high standards of performance; and creating an open, inclusive environment in which students feel that they belong.

A growing body of research shows how educators can foster identity-safe environments that counteract societal stereotypes that may undermine students' confidence and performance. Key elements include:

- caring classroom environments in which empathy and social skills are purposefully taught and practiced, helping students learn to respect and care for one another;
- encouraging interactions between the teacher and each student that communicate affirmations of worth and competence, along with public sharing of these perceptions;

- teaching that promotes student responsibility for and belonging to the classroom community, and cooperation in learning and classroom tasks; and
- cultivating diversity as a resource for teaching through regular use of culturally diverse materials, ideas, and teaching activities, along with high expectations for all students.<sup>52</sup>

## Building Empathy

Practices that build empathy and common ground among students and teachers have been found to reduce bias and support the growth of positive and trustful relationships.<sup>53</sup>

Tools that allow educators and students to learn what they have in common, like “**Getting to Know You**” surveys, have been shown to build empathy in relationships that, in turn, positively affect student achievement. In one

study, researchers found that both students and teachers who learned that they shared commonalities with each other indicated they held more positive relationships, and students earned higher grades when teachers learned about their similarities with students. This was particularly true for teachers’ relationships with Black and Latino/a students, closing the achievement disparities for these student groups by over 60%.<sup>54</sup>

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**Empathy interviews** represent another empathy-building practice that is growing in use in secondary settings. These interviews are “one-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences that help uncover unacknowledged need.”<sup>55</sup> They aim to support deep listening in ways that cultivate care, interest, and a sense of shared humanity between those engaged in the conversation.

The interviews are guided by a set of four to eight open-ended questions that are tailored to the purpose of the interaction and can range from surfacing challenges in schools and classrooms to surfacing insights into an individual’s lived experience. These questions are accompanied by probes like “Tell me more” or “Why” to ensure that the experiences and points of view of those participating in the interview are well articulated. Each person engaged in the empathy interview is both an interviewee and an interviewer, enabling each individual to share their perspective and to understand the point of view of the other.

While seemingly straightforward, empathy interviews often require norms, technical skills, and specific mindsets that should be understood and developed among all participants. These include allotting ample time for each person to share their thoughts without interruption or response; actively listening; and remaining aware of one’s biases, including those related to power dynamics among school actors.

## In Practice: Empathy Interviews

Long Beach Unified School District has incorporated empathy interviews into its efforts to become a “relationship-centered district.” Empathy interviews have become a central practice in the district’s Learning Days, which provide opportunities for educators, leaders, and high school students to learn alongside one another and to discuss equity-focused topics. In this forum, attendees are introduced to the norms and practices of empathy interviews and, subsequently, provided an opportunity to observe them in action and to reflect on the process and its impact. A former principal who participated in empathy interviews during a Learning Day and later engaged educators and staff at her school in this activity described their power in changing perspectives:

There was a level of respect that [students and teachers] had for one another when they got in the room and started grappling with what would work and what wouldn’t work at our school. Everybody came away and said, “I have a different respect for our students’ perspective,” or “I have a different respect for teachers.”

Other Long Beach Unified practitioners also expressed that empathy interviews helped them develop deeper understandings of the issues that students faced and the ways those challenges could constrain positive relationships between students and teachers. For example, practitioners noted that students’ descriptions of unjust disciplinary practices that targeted students of color as well as a lack of diverse representation in curriculum elevated how implicit bias could shape their experiences and sense of belonging in schools. In turn, these practitioners expressed that empathy interviews helped them recognize how certain forms of harm were being inflicted on students while spurring the practitioners’ desire to collaborate with youth and staff to alleviate inequitable structures, practices, and mindsets.

Source: Hernández, L. E., & Rivero, E. (2023). *Striving for relationship-centered schools: Insights from a community-based transformation campaign*. Learning Policy Institute.

## Supporting Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogy

Effective schools develop and maintain environments that explicitly embrace the identities and cultures represented by the students in their classrooms as well as in the larger society. Research on learning makes it clear that an individual’s social, emotional, and cognitive experiences are intertwined and influence learning.<sup>56</sup> These experiences—grounded in place, space, and the multiple communities a person interacts with (family, friends, neighborhood, places of worship, school, and others)—form the cultural contexts within which each person encounters the world. Since learning is a process of drawing connections between what we know and what we are newly discovering, these cultural contexts provide the foundation for learning and identity development. Pedagogies and practices in K–12 classrooms that center the whole child, including their cultural experiences and identities, support learning and development.

**Understanding and Connecting to Cultural Contexts.** Culturally responsive and sustaining practices require teachers to learn about and from students and their communities through curriculum and instruction strategies that both surface and build on that knowledge. This includes learning what students already know, in what areas they already demonstrate competence, and how that knowledge

can be leveraged for deeper learning in the classroom context. Most effective are learning spaces that are not only *relevant* and *responsive* to students' cultures, languages, experiences, and identities but also center them in ways that *affirm* and *sustain* students' cultural ways of being.<sup>57</sup>

As educator Gloria Ladson-Billings notes, "All instruction is culturally responsive. The question is: To which culture is it currently oriented?"<sup>58</sup> There is a large body of research showing that effective teachers of students of color form and maintain connections with students within their social contexts. They understand that adolescents are going through a critical period of identity development. They celebrate their students as individuals and seek to learn about their cultural contexts. They ask students to share who they are and what they know with the class in a variety of ways. They regularly incorporate instructional materials that provide various viewpoints from different cultures.<sup>59</sup> Research shows that this approach improves students' sense of belonging and improves educational outcomes.<sup>60</sup>

## In Practice: Educators Learning From Students

Shared learning opportunities that enable adults and students to grow their knowledge, skills, and relationships together can help educators develop cultural knowledge. For example, at June Jordan School for Equity, located in San Francisco, CA, students in a leadership class used action research to analyze the experience of undocumented immigrant students at the school and make recommendations at a staff meeting. The students organized an interactive lesson for the staff, first asking them to engage in an "agree-disagree" activity around statements such as "Undocumented students feel like they can talk to adults about their situation and get help," and then presenting the results of a survey they had conducted with over half the student body, and finally leading the staff in a talking circle to reflect on the survey data and think about ways to improve the experience of undocumented students. Some staff suggested that undocumented students may actually feel more supported than the survey indicated. The student leaders pushed back respectfully but firmly, saying, "We need teachers not to be in denial, but to admit the problems—and then we can work together to solve them."

At McLane High School in Fresno, CA, students have been invited to participate in schoolwide professional development sessions, where they have engaged in shared learning around community building and restorative justice approaches. According to school administrators, opportunities like these allow teachers to hear what students at their school value and what type of positive and negative experiences are affecting their engagement and success. In addition, they noted that having students as thought partners in these professional learning settings created opportunities for staff to learn more about student identities and what was important to students' sense of belonging.

Sources: Safir, S. (2017). *The listening leader*. Jossey-Bass (pp. 166–167); Hernández, L. E., & Rivero, E. (2023). *Striving for relationship-centered schools: Insights from a community-based transformation campaign*. Learning Policy Institute.

Teachers can use their **knowledge of the community** to advance student learning and to fortify feelings of solidarity with the students they teach by sharing students' passions and affection for the community and its multiple cultures. They also can bring community elders and experts into classrooms to support and enhance student learning. (See also [Feature 9: Community Connections and Integrated Student Supports](#).)

Effective schools promote examples of cultural excellence not just in the classroom but across the school as well. They have active cultural clubs and host performances and presentations, often led by students or their family members, that highlight the cultural strengths of the groups that make up the school community. Students are actively encouraged to create and participate in social clubs and activities that reflect the local community's cultures, values, and traditions. Their families' participation in the school is a valued contribution that staff members pursue through persistent outreach via multilingual invitations and announcements, home visits, and social events.

Another way of leveraging cultural connections is being familiar with distinctive **traditions of excellence**—either contemporary excellence or the historical legacy of excellence that can be found in all cultures. Educator Lisa Delpit often does an exercise with audiences of teachers where she says, “I want you to think about a famous explorer, a famous writer, and a famous mathematician.” Almost everyone can give examples. Then she says, “OK, now I want you to think of a famous Chinese explorer, a famous African writer, and a famous Latin American mathematician.” The responses are usually few and far between. Delpit challenges teachers to educate themselves about these examples of excellence so they can inspire students to meet and exceed them.<sup>61</sup> Effective teachers do not shy away from talking about the barriers that systems of oppression have created, but they also emphasize cultural strengths in the face of those barriers.

**Engaging in Culturally Responsive Practices.** The goal of culturally responsive practices is not only to create a sense of safety and belonging but also, as Zaretta Hammond notes, to get students “ready for rigor.” In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, Hammond identifies four key strategies for creating culturally responsive schools:

1. Helping educators become aware of how the brain learns, of culture and context, and of students' learning behaviors.
2. Developing learning partnerships between students and teachers that cultivate positive mindsets, self-efficacy, students' ownership of learning, and students' understanding of their own learning processes, while reducing stereotype threats in the classroom.
3. Creating communities of learners in a supportive learning environment that is intellectually and socially safe, collaborative, focused on learning, and restorative.
4. Supporting information processing through authentic, culturally connected tasks that build on students' experiences and offer the right amount of challenge for what students are ready to do.<sup>62</sup>

Culturally responsive teachers are passionate about their content as well as about their students' learning. They use an active approach to **teaching in partnership with students**—demonstrating, modeling, explaining, writing, giving feedback, reviewing, building on students' ideas, and pushing and probing for depth of understanding. One example of this active partnership is what educator Chris Emdin calls reality

pedagogy, where students take ownership of their learning by codesigning lessons with teachers and their peers, bringing their own cultural and family strengths into the classroom. Emdin recalls a time when he was teaching a lesson on Newton’s laws of motion and he thought students would be fascinated by an imaginary scenario involving two marbles on an endless frictionless surface—but his students were confused or disinterested by this example. So, he asked two students to plan and teach a lesson on the same concept the following day. They used a scenario of someone riding on the New York City subway and asked the class to consider how forces would act on their body if someone pulled the emergency brake. The class was very engaged and understood the concepts related to Newton’s laws. Emdin then used the students’ lesson himself in a different class period, also with success.<sup>63</sup>

High expectations are a key part of a set of practices used by effective teachers who are “**warm demanders**.”<sup>64</sup> These teachers demand a lot of their students but are warm, caring, and supportive, not punitive or permissive. Warm demanders believe in their students’ potential, and they push them with love and structured support. The warm demander teacher–student relationship is humane and equitable and is characterized by a sense of community and teamwork. Delpit gives an example of how a young high school teacher was a warm demander with Delpit’s own daughter:

Ms. Maggio “read” my daughter’s attitude of academic indifference correctly when she sat down with Maya for a long talk. Ms. Maggio finally broke through Maya’s shell of nonchalance when she said, “You just don’t think you’re very smart, do you?” Through sudden tears, my child admitted the truth of that revelation. From then on, Ms. Maggio proceeded to prove to this child that she was indeed intelligent by pushing her relentlessly to excel.<sup>65</sup>

This is just one example of how an assets-based perspective can generate a sense of agency that is solution-oriented, whereas a negative perspective can reinforce a sense of helplessness that inhibits problem-solving. Furthermore, an assets-based approach uses students’ existing capacity to build new capacity, just as instruction that builds on students’ prior knowledge creates a base for their learning new knowledge.

## In Practice: Rigorous and Culturally Responsive Practices

Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJ Humanitas) is a small neighborhood high school located in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. Serving primarily Latino/a students (96%) from low-income families (93%), the school has a 97% graduation rate, which far exceeds that of the district and state, as do its college eligibility rates (at 95%, nearly double the district rate) and achievement scores.

SJ Humanitas takes a culturally responsive approach to curriculum by centering the experiences and strengths of the Latino/a community and other marginalized groups, so students can develop a sense of identity and confidence that supports their perseverance and success. For example, 9th-graders read *Always Running*, a memoir by Luis Rodriguez about his experience in the East LA gang wars of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Students then write an essay reflecting on the relationship between the author’s perseverance and his ability to draw on cultural strengths to overcome challenges, which students can connect to their own experiences growing up in a low-income community in a different time and context. This assignment also helps students develop social-emotional skills as they analyze the author’s decisions and understand the impact of trauma on his life.

Tenth-graders learn about various social movements, such as the Farm Workers movement, LGBTQ+ rights, and the #MeToo movement, and then in groups they choose and research one of the movements and create a play based on it. This enables them to learn about social change from multiple perspectives while they hone their research and writing skills; their speaking, listening, and performance abilities; and their abilities to work in groups with their peers.

One of SJ Humanitas educators' key goals in using these culturally relevant strategies is to help students “unlearn” the negative beliefs they may have internalized about themselves and their communities. A teacher who grew up in the community herself explained that she remembered “thinking about how ‘ghetto,’ or ugly, or dirty my community was, and just thinking about all the negative aspects of my community. What we’re trying to do is ... flip that, and we’re trying to come from an assets-based understanding of our community, and what our kids bring to school, what our parents bring, and instead of focusing on all the negative things, we want to focus on the positives and how can we use those to help propel us forward.”

Source: Saunders, M., Martínez, L., Flook, L., & Hernández, L. E. (2021). *Social Justice Humanitas Academy: A community school approach to whole child education*. Learning Policy Institute.

**Supporting Integration and Community.** High expectations with strong supports are key to culturally responsive and sustaining practices. Tracking has been largely eliminated in redesigned high schools, although students can choose different classes based on their interests and aptitudes, especially as they reach their junior and senior years. (See [Feature 5: Student-Centered Pedagogy](#) and [Feature 9: Community Connections and Integrated Student Supports](#) for the adaptive pedagogies and school supports that make this possible.)

One of the major challenges facing high schools is that there is a tendency for groups to self-segregate even when schools have eliminated segregative mechanisms like tracking. All of us feel more comfortable with people who are like us, whom we already understand and identify with. When students choose different academies, career pathways, or extracurricular activities within a school, those communities can begin to become segregated, and there can be variations in resources, academic rigor, administrative attention, or other factors that lead to inequalities in the quality of education across contexts.

It is a special challenge to create democratic schools, and small learning communities within schools, that seek out diversity, in people, perspectives, ideas, and experiences, and then to work to ensure that the diversity is valued as a great source of strength. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey noted that “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living.”<sup>66</sup> He stressed the importance of creating circumstances in which people share a growing number of interests and participate in a growing number of associations with other groups, observing that:

In order to have a large number of values in common, all the members of the group must have an equitable opportunity to receive and to take from others. There must be a large variety of shared undertakings and experiences. Otherwise, the influences which educate some into masters educate others into slaves. And the experience of each party loses in meaning, when the free interchange of varying modes of life experiences is arrested.<sup>67</sup>



Communications that, in Dewey’s words, are “vitaly social or vitaly shared” allow people to experience the perspectives of others, and by that connection to develop understanding and appreciation for that person’s experience of the world, thus expanding their own knowledge and building a broader common ground. This is the fundamental goal of education in a democratic society, a goal that is all the more critical at this moment in our nation’s history.

## School Profile: Creating Community-Connected Curriculum at Oakland High School



Photo provided by Oakland High School’s Environmental Science Academy.

By creating learning opportunities that allow students to explore issues of interest to them in school and community settings, [Oakland High School](#) in Oakland, CA, provides a curriculum that draws on young people’s experiences and knowledge. Instruction within the [Environmental Science Academy](#) pathway—one of the small learning communities within the school—is focused on developing young people’s leadership skills through a student-centered and culturally sustaining curriculum. As science teacher M Fields explained:

A lot of our curriculum is focused on student-centered problems and student-centered leadership opportunities to solve those problems. I think that’s one of the big things that makes Oakland High a community school. ... In many cases, the curriculum at Oakland High is almost written as we go, in order to address problems that are cropping up throughout the year. ... We’ll address environmental problems that crop up in our neighborhoods and in our communities.

In addition to prioritizing student-centered learning, teachers in the Environmental Science Academy pathway believe that their job is to be culturally responsive and help students understand themselves, what they care about, and how they can positively impact social issues that matter to them. At the assembly welcoming incoming students, one of the codirectors of the pathway said:

We are the Environmental Science Academy, so obviously we care about the environment. We want all of you to be environmentalists. But, more importantly, we want you to figure out what you care about. So, if you want to be an activist to end the school-to-prison pipeline or fight for racial justice or end homelessness or fight for gender equality—whatever you feel passionately about—we want to help you become an ally, advocate, and activist for that cause. So that’s one of our core missions.

To achieve their pedagogical and instructional aims, Environmental Science Academy teachers prioritize project-based learning as a pedagogical approach, which allows for collaborative engagement in learning as students explore a relevant question or problem. For example, the “lake class” taught by Fields is designed around the ecology of Lake Merritt, a short walk from Oakland High’s campus. In an activity made possible through a partnership with the Lake Merritt Boathouse, students embark on pontoon boats once per week to survey different areas of the lake for various water quality factors and collect samples for testing. Students then study the samples to determine the likely causes of water pollution and contaminants. After determining the pollution sources, students study potential policy interventions to address the health of their community lake. At the culmination of the class, students develop their own interventions to address water quality, which they present to a mock city board made up of local scientists, advocates, and other industry professionals.

One student’s final project included building a three-dimensional map that, as Fields explained, “identified that the golf course above the cemetery was a likely source of nitrogen phosphate pollution due to the amount of fertilizer that they use, and he pinpointed this by testing the tributaries that come through that area. Below the golf course is a big, open cemetery that has lot[s] of grass everywhere. ... So the student proposed a replanting plan for the cemetery that included a native plant shrub forest that could soak up and absorb the nitrates and phosphates before they got to the lake.”

The lake class demonstrates how environmental science can be made relevant and culturally responsive by focusing on the environment as the space in which students live, work, and play. The Environmental Science Academy curriculum frames the environment as not just the melting of the Arctic shelf or the extinction of rare birds but also conditions of the local ecosystem, including Lake Merritt, which is a stone’s throw from their school campus. Furthermore, even as it builds science knowledge and research and writing skills, this project-based work requires use of social-emotional skills, as students must work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and manage and track learning that is important enough to support the hard work and revision needed to achieve mastery.

Source: Klevan, S., Daniel, J., Fehrer, K., & Maier, A. (2023). *Creating the conditions for children to learn: Oakland’s districtwide community schools initiative*. Learning Policy Institute.

## Additional Resources

### Identity-Safe Classrooms

- [Identity Safe Classrooms](#): This website, based on a book of the same name by Dorothy M. Steele and Becki Cohn-Vargas, includes activities, practices, and resources for creating identity-safe classrooms.
- [Identity Safe Classrooms and Schools](#), Becki Cohn-Vargas, Learning for Justice: This blog post is part of a three-part series that links implicit bias, stereotype threat, and identity safety and describes practices educators can draw upon to build identity-safe classrooms and schools.
- [Not in Our School](#), Not in Our Town: This website includes lesson plans, professional development guides, and other resources to support the creation of safe, accepting, and inclusive school communities.

### Culturally Responsive Teaching

- [Culturally Responsive Education Hub](#), Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative, NYC Metro Center: This hub provides practitioners with an array of resources to advance culturally responsive education and ethnic studies. These include research studies and briefs; resources for culturally responsive education during remote learning; and a video series that illustrates the impact of culturally responsive education from the perspective of parents, educators, and students.
- [Culturally Responsive Teaching](#), Edutopia: This web page provides practitioners with links to articles, resources, and videos that support culturally responsive teaching. The resources cover various topics, including broader discussions of how to advance equity and anti-racism in classrooms at different grade levels as well as guidance on how to adopt and implement a range of discrete culturally responsive teaching practices.
- [Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain](#), Zaretta Hammond: This website for the book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* also has links to blog posts and videos about designing and implementing culturally responsive instruction consistent with research on brain development and neuroscience.
- [Portrait of a Culturally Responsive School](#), The Leadership Academy: This resource offers guidance for school leaders and their teams to develop practices, policies, and structures that support the academic, social, and emotional success of youth of every race, language, or other identity backgrounds. Through its eight action areas of culturally responsive leadership, the guide supports practitioners in disrupting systemic oppression and decentering dominant cultures to accelerate learning and well-being
- [Warm Demander](#), Kathleen Cushman: This short video shares the voices of four teachers talking about what being a “warm demander” means to them.
- [The Warm Demander: An Equity Approach](#), Matt Alexander, Edutopia: This blog post describes the warm demander framework developed at June Jordan School for Equity.