Invisible Forces: Portraits of Instructional Approaches to Mindset Development in Secondary and Postsecondary Writing Classes

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Invisible Forces: Portraits of Instructional Approaches to Mindset Development in Secondary and Postsecondary Writing Classes

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Karen Brennan
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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

2019
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For my father

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1942-2018
Acknowledgments

I am indebted to so many for this work. First and foremost, I thank my parents, Triung Yueh Yang and Shih-Long Liu, who always put their three kids first and, in raising us outside of their birth country, conquered challenges that I did not fully appreciate until far too late into adulthood. I try to enact my gratitude for what you have given me by working for the benefit of others. I am thankful also to my whole family for nurturing me—literally and figuratively—throughout six years of doctoral study, and beyond.

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Abstract

Synthesizing a broad swath of motivational and psychosocial literature, the Consortium on Chicago School Research identifies four “academic mindsets” (I belong in this academic community; My ability and competence grow with my effort; I can succeed at this; and This work has value for me) that predict positive academic and social outcomes for students. These mindsets and their analogous constructs increasingly appear in college readiness and success frameworks as critical factors for college attainment, academic performance, persistence, and completion. Yet student mindsets are particularly vulnerable at school transitions, and despite frequent calls for the expansive field of motivational research to be “translated” into practice, an understanding of how to foster and maintain students’ positive mindsets across the college transition remains surprisingly elusive. Specifically, inadequate attention has been paid to how secondary and postsecondary educators understand student mindsets and seek to influence them through intentional instructional design and pedagogical practices.

To address this gap in the literature, I conducted a multi-case portraiture study of 12th-grade English teachers and instructors of first-year college writing (N=4). Through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, I explored these educators’ understandings of academic mindsets and their pedagogical enactment of those understandings. I find that the educators’ understandings and enactments of positive mindset development often converged with extant theory but were complex and sometimes contradictory, manifesting in pedagogical tensions and tradeoffs. I identify two main instructional growth edges for supporting student mindset development in secondary and postsecondary classrooms: greater transparency about instructional intent and more comprehensive metacognitive scaffolding to assist students with motivational meaning-
making. Additionally, I discuss the emergence of parallel mindset processes in the focal classrooms: the educators’ approaches to promoting student mindsets often illuminated characteristics of their own mindsets toward teaching, particularly their growth and efficacy mindsets. I therefore conclude with recommendations for how institutional actors and researchers can support educators’ teaching mindsets and mastery of motivating instructional strategies, paralleling the supports we want educators to provide to students across the critical college transition.
Chapter 1

Introduction

I am on hall duty when Damian1 is kicked out of algebra class for the third consecutive school day. On Friday, he apparently called the teacher a “fucking bitch.” On Monday, he was thrown out as soon as he stepped through the door because the teacher was still angry about Friday and thought Damian should have been suspended (but had not drawn up the paperwork to initiate the process). Today—which is also the last day before the math MCAS2 exam that Damian and the rest of the 10th grade will be taking—he was talking in class, Damian says as he shuffles slowly toward me at the hall monitoring table.

It is May 2008, and I am nearly through an exhausting third year at Charlestown High School in Boston. After teaching 11th and 12th grade my first two years here, I was shifted to the “lower school” to fill a vacant slot that was initially supposed to be four sections of ninth-grade English. Charlestown High, however, had also just acquired a new headmaster and student recruitment had fallen through the cracks during the transition,3 leaving the ninth grade under-enrolled and necessitating a dramatic intra-school restructuring two weeks into the school year. My unit’s four sections of ninth graders were consolidated into two and we acquired two sections of 10th graders from another unit of teachers within the school—who, somehow, were allowed to hand-pick which students they wanted to

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1 A pseudonym.
2 Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, the accountability exam in Massachusetts public schools. In 2008, the high school MCAS exams that students had to pass in order to graduate were in English Language Arts and mathematics (the state has since added a science MCAS requirement), taken for the first time in 10th grade, with re-testing options offered in subsequent years for students who do not pass the first time.
3 Because high school students in Boston can choose any open-enrollment public school in the city, representatives from the high schools typically visit middle schools each year to introduce their school as an option to eighth-grade students and their parents.
reassign to us. On their first day in the new configuration, my 10th graders looked around the room at each other and said, “Dang, they put all the bad kids together in here.”

Though algebra class has been especially contentious, everyone has been struggling with these 10th graders all year. A month ago, I had it out with Damian myself when he would not stop wandering around the room, poking his classmates, and not doing his work during my class—and then also refused to serve the detention I gave him until I threatened to suspend him in a heated exchange that I later regretted. I probably lose my cool a bit more than I should with Damian because his latent potential is so obvious to me. He reads the extra books I give him outside of class and seems to have a near-photographic memory for tiny details in them; we’ve discussed the ethical issues raised in *Monster, Flowers for Algernon, The House of the Scorpion, The Kite Runner, The Bluest Eye*. Even when I handed him *The Sound and the Fury* on a whim, just because it’s a favorite of mine and I wondered what he’d do with it, he gave it a fair shot before finally returning to me to ask, “Miss, what *is* this??”

Damian is also an especially frustrating puzzle to me because he seems so self-aware. He surprised both of us during our suspension argument after I told him, “I am so sick and tired of having this conversation with you!” and he replied, “I’m tired of making you have to have this conversation with me.” Nor is he defiant and confrontational with teachers by default; last week of his own volition, he hung out in my classroom with me and my co-teacher after school, joking that he was going to crash her upcoming wedding. “You know that part at the end when they ask if anyone has objections?” he said. “I’m gonna stand up and start wiling out: ‘Hell no, I didn’t approve this marriage—nobody even asked me!’ They all gonna be like, ‘Who’s that skinny Black kid in the front row?'”

Now, he perches on the edge of my table, all long limbs and natural hair and big
eyes—he’s always reminded me of a Simpsons character come to life—and suddenly says, “You know how when you’re a little kid, they give you a ribbon or a prize no matter how you do? Like if it’s a competition, even the last-place kid gets something, because he tried? I don’t think that’s right.”

I reply that some people believe that we’re raising generations of people who never develop self-reliance because they are dependent on praise for everything they do. Damian nods emphatically: “I think that’s true! And it makes the people who win less motivated, because it’s like, if you get a prize for coming in last, who cares about coming in first?”

“Some people might also argue,” I continue, “that in a school like this, the kids who do well don’t get enough recognition because the teachers—”

“—spend all their time on the bad kids,” he interrupts, finishing my thought but in blunter language. “Like in class, if you listen to my teachers, it’s always, ‘Damian, sit down. Damian, stop doing that. Damian, do your work.’ But there are kids in there who just do what they’re supposed to do, all the time, and they don’t really ever hear their names. Maybe sometimes they get a ‘good job.’ But not as much.”

I ask him if he thinks this is fair, and he says no. “People are always trying to give me chances and give me a break because they know I’m smart,” he says. “But even if kids aren’t as smart as me but are doing their work, they deserve more attention.” He pauses. “You know, I’m envious of those kids who can just sit and do their work and get it done and get good grades. I watch them in class sometimes, and I wish I was like that. I wish I knew how to do it. But I just can’t do it, I don’t know what it is. When I was younger, I used to at least get all my work done first and then start walking around or making jokes. But this year…” He trails off, shaking his head. “I just don’t know.”
A Question of Motivation

Damian, along with the hundreds of other students I encountered over eight years of working in secondary schools, motivated my interest in what the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) calls “academic mindsets.” Organizing diverse literature on psychological constructs from a range of disciplinary traditions, the CCSR defines mindsets as the “beliefs, attitudes, or ways of perceiving oneself in relation to learning and intellectual work that support academic performance” (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 28). It proposes a conceptual framework in which these mindsets comprise one of five categories of “noncognitive” factors that predict positive academic performance and social outcomes for students (Liao, Edlin, & Ferdenzi, 2014; Robbins et al., 2004); indeed, mindsets serve as the antecedent to the other four categories of noncognitive factors, including academic behaviors (Figure 1). In other words, mindsets comprise the most foundational psycho-social and motivational constructs underlying students’ academic behavior and ultimately their academic performance.

Using the language of the CCSR model, what constantly landed Damian in disciplinary trouble were his academic behaviors: he often did not do his homework or classwork and instead engaged in unproductive or disruptive behavior, such as swearing at his algebra teacher. Underlying these behaviors were, most notably, inconsistent academic perseverance skills and learning strategies, including self-discipline and self-control (“I used to at least get all my work done first and then start walking around”) as well as some self-regulated learning processes: Damian could and would self-regulate when it came to reading

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4 Although many of these skills are, in fact, cognitive processes, I adopt CCSR’s “noncognitive” terminology while echoing their acknowledgment of the ongoing debate (and confusion) over the proper nomenclature for such competencies.
and making meaning of the extra books I gave him, but he did not always apply those same learning strategies to my course assignments.

Figure 1. Theoretical model adapted from the Consortium on Chicago School Research showing the relationship between noncognitive factors (academic mindsets, social skills, academic perseverance, learning strategies, and academic behaviors), academic outcomes, and contextual factors (Farrington et al., 2012).

However, Damian recognized the presence of an even deeper mechanism driving the noncognitive factors like self-discipline, self-control, and self-regulation that would ultimately manifest as more compliant and engaged academic behavior. Without having the vocabulary for it, Damian was speculating about academic mindsets—his own and others’—
that day at the hall monitoring table with me. He wondered what underlying invisible forces gave his classmates the self-discipline and self-control to “just sit and do their work and get it done and get good grades” in class when he felt himself incapable of doing the same, even though he wanted to, and even though he believed himself to be equal—or even superior—to his peers in intellect. To Damian, some students seemed to be guided by an internal compass that was both different from his own compass and from academic skill and ability; he viewed this internal compass alternately as an innate characteristic (“I wish I was like that”) and a learned and enacted skill (“I wish I knew how to do it”).

I will discuss the CCSR’s four academic mindsets more specifically in the next chapter, but I want to focus here on another dimension of Damian’s speculative reflections: the influence of school and classroom context on students’ academic mindsets. The CCSR model positions academic mindsets as the noncognitive factors that are most proximal to and directly influenced by the learning environment; mindsets mediate the relationship between the learning environment and students’ downstream academic behavior. Damian believed that a learning environment that rewards everyone equally and makes no distinction between winners and losers can influence the mindsets that would motivate individuals to work harder and more strategically. However, this influence is not automatic or pre-determined; mindsets reflect a learner’s integration of contextual factors with his own individual psychology, meaning there is also individual variation in whether and how the learning environment affects mindsets and, ultimately, behavior. Even though they were in the same learning environment, Damian himself saw that some of his classmates, unlike him, were able to “just do what they’re supposed to do, all the time,” even though “they don’t really ever hear their names” as a reward for their behavior. The complex intersection between the individual and his context yields the seeming paradox in Damian’s case: he
accepts personal responsibility for his actions (“I’m tired of making you have to have this conversation with me”) while simultaneously acknowledging the contributions of external forces (“if you get a prize for coming in last, who cares about coming in first?”).

The Lasting Effects of Educator Choices

Looking back at Damian’s story, I am interested not just in the immediate prizes and reward structures that he himself critiqued, but also the array of other contextual factors—particularly the decisions and actions of adult educators—that also potentially influenced his mindset development, and in ways that had lasting effects on his schooling. When given the opportunity, his former teachers chose to ship him and the other self-identified “bad kids” out of their unit. His new algebra teacher threw him out of class constantly, including the three consecutive days before a high-stakes standardized test. He and I generally had a good relationship, but I still occasionally lapsed into frustration and threatened him with disciplinary sanctions. I was also undeniably one of the teachers he saw as “always trying to give me chances…because they know I’m smart,” plying my charismatic underachiever with extra books and attention after school but still struggling to figure out how to make class time equally engaging to him—and possibly, as Damian himself pointed out, expending disproportionate effort on him compared to other students (“teachers spend all their time on the bad kids”), thus influencing their mindsets about school.

These educator actions can have long-term repercussions for students. As Damian’s 10th-grade teacher, I looked into options for him to take college-level courses, believing that a more flexible, self-directed learning environment would be a better fit for him; however, perhaps because of what school had been like for him as a result of educator actions, Damian never really entertained the idea of college, even though I and many other adults
and Charlestown alumni told him that it would be different from high school. I was transferred back to upper school after the 2007-08 school year and thus ended up teaching Damian’s cohort for three consecutive years, including their 12th-grade year. While Damian did gradually become a somewhat more consistently engaged student (and remembered our hallway conversation), the improvements were incremental and relative, and he never changed his mind about pursuing any further formal education after high school.

Damian would likely say that it was entirely his own decision not to apply to college, and certainly he should not have felt compelled by me or anyone else to do so if it was not what he wanted for himself. The concern, however, is that he may have prematurely foreclosed on the idea due to negative mindsets born out of his school experiences. Noncognitive factors like academic mindsets are increasingly appearing in college readiness and success frameworks as critical factors for college attainment, academic performance, persistence, and completion (D.T. Conley, 2008; Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013), but unlike with analogous efforts on academic readiness (ACT, 2005), we may not be giving enough attention to how K-12 educators are influencing student mindsets leading up to the college transition.

I also wonder how Damian would have fared in college if he had gone; while I could imagine the different environment being beneficial in some ways, I also worried that his struggle to “just sit and do work and get it done” would not magically change in college and would be an even greater liability in the new setting. Because mindsets are context-specific, they can be disrupted by changes in context, leaving students especially vulnerable during school transitions, such as the shift from high school to college (Farrington et al., 2012). As an upper-school teacher for most of my career, I had seen many of my students—including
those who had exhibited far more positive mindsets and adaptive academic behaviors than Damian did in high school—go off to college and then struggle mightily. I wondered how college instructors, my counterparts on the other side of that school transition, continued shaping the academic mindsets of students like Damian through instructional choices.

Damian was one of many students who originally piqued my curiosity about academic mindsets, but as I look back on his story now, with a new perspective gained through professional experience, I am even more intrigued by the educators around him—myself included—the positive and negative influences we had on his mindsets, and how we could have approached our work with him differently. The link between classroom context and academic mindsets in the CCSR’s heuristic is a critical one; although Damian was the one who faced the disciplinary, academic, and life-trajectory consequences for his decisions and behavior in class, our decisions and behavior as educators were, and are, equally deserving of attention. Yet these educator decisions and behavior that can impact student mindset development are surprisingly understudied in the current literature. In this dissertation, I seek to draw attention to educator choices that inform the classroom conditions from which students like Damian take their cues and develop enduring mindsets about themselves in relation to learning and school.

**Educator Understandings and Enactments**

Literature suggests that a comprehensive exploration of educators’ practice must include not only what they do, but the beliefs that underlie those actions. This is not to say that educators’ actions always directly reflect their beliefs—several studies document differences between espoused and enacted values (Assen, Meijers, Otting, & Poell, 2016; Murray & Macdonald, 1997; Schein, 2010)—but an extensive scholarship base in secondary
and postsecondary settings supports the influence of educator beliefs on classroom practice (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; de la Harpe & David, 2012; Ertmer, Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Sadik, Sendurur, & Sendurur, 2012; Evans & Kozhevnikova, 2011; Kim, Kim, Lee, Spector, & DeMeester, 2013; Sak, Sak, & Yerlikaya, 2015). Ecological studies of classrooms (Eccles & Roeser, 2011) additionally urge us to consider both observable behaviors and participants’ perceptions of those behaviors as key components in the social process of instruction (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003; Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

In this study, I adopt “understandings” as the umbrella term to encompass the concepts of “teacher attitudes,” “beliefs,” “perceptions,” “implicit theories,” and “knowledge” that are not fully synonymous but are often used interchangeably in the literature to describe “psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions that are felt to be true” (Richardson, 1996, p. 103, emphasis added). I feel the term “understanding” better conveys the compromise I wish to strike between historical and disciplinary debates over the distinction between “belief” and “knowledge” (Richardson, 1996). Its resemblance to a gerund also evokes “knowledge-in-action” (Schön, 1983) or the “practical knowledge” of educators (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991; Elbaz, 1983), in which knowledge is acquired and validated through the ongoing interpretation of lived experience, rather than proved through abstract “epistemic standing” (Richardson, 1996, p. 104). This notion of “understanding” reflects contemporary awareness of the complex and mutually reinforcing relationship between theory and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Schubert, 1991).

My choice of the CCSR framework as the entry point into this work is therefore deliberate as a way to solicit educators’ existing understandings. As I will discuss in the next chapter, the balkanization of motivational psychology into multiple theories with
overlapping foundational concepts and analogous terms is a problem that the field itself recognizes (Pintrich, 2003). The mindset framework is an attempt to identify the common themes and desired outcomes from diverse theories and communicate them to a practitioner audience in an accessible way. Rather than expecting or requiring educators to have formal knowledge of specific psychological theories, the mindsets articulate student attitudes and perspectives that educators commonly encounter in classrooms and will therefore have developed understandings about.

**Dissertation Overview**

This study seeks to explore the understandings about academic mindsets held by secondary and postsecondary educators and the pedagogical enactments of those understandings. The research questions guiding my inquiry are:

1. What do 12th grade English teachers and instructors of first-year college writing understand about the role of academic mindsets in students’ college readiness and long-term success, and what factors have shaped their understandings?
2. How do these educators enact their understandings about academic mindsets through their instruction?
3. What similarities, differences, and alignment, if any, exist between these educators’ understandings and enactments of positive mindset development?

In the next chapter, I delve deeper into the extant literature informing these research questions, including the psychological theories that comprise the academic mindsets, the salience of mindsets at the college transition, and the rationale for focusing my inquiry on

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5 Throughout this dissertation, I use “college” and “postsecondary” interchangeably to describe undergraduate education. Reflecting differences in professional pathways and identities across sectors, I use “teacher(s)” for high school and “instructor(s)” for college, while “educator(s)” refers to both/either population.
writing-based classes. In Chapter 3, I outline the design specifics of my multi-case portraiture study and briefly profile the four focal educators. I present the individual educator portraits, along with analytic commentary, in Chapters 4-7 before concluding the dissertation with a cross-case synthesis and general discussion in Chapter 8 and implications for practice and research in Chapter 9.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this literature review, I first define the four academic mindsets identified by the CCSR and describe the learning conditions and experiences known to support the positive development of these mindsets. Next, I discuss challenges to achieving mindset-supportive instruction that can be attributed to educators’ understandings of the mindsets, their students, and sometimes the educators themselves. I then elaborate on the salience of mindsets at the college transition and in writing-based classes. I conclude with further grounding in my conceptual approach to examining instruction.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Academic Mindsets

The CCSR framework identifies four academic mindsets, which it expresses as statements from a student’s perspective: 1) “I belong in this academic community;” 2) “My ability and competence grow with my effort;” 3) “I can succeed at this;” and 4) “This work has value for me.” Throughout this dissertation, I refer to these in shorthand as, respectively, the belonging, growth, efficacy, and value mindsets. Below, I define each mindset through analogous constructs from human development, motivation, engagement, and social psychology literature, and through the classroom conditions and instructional strategies identified in the literature as promoting—or threatening—each mindset.

“I belong in this academic community” (Belonging mindset). Rooted in attachment theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), social belonging has long been recognized in psychological research as a basic human need (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Gray, 2017), in part through extensive empirical evidence that a lack of belonging can have emotional, physiological, and cognitive consequences (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gray, 2017). In its
most basic form, belonging stems from perceived in-group similarity and membership (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). It is strengthened and sustained through warm, caring, and nurturing relationships; indeed, “it is common to see the terms relatedness and belonging used interchangeably in the literature” (Kumar, Zusho, & Bondie, 2018, p. 88). There is general consensus in school psychology that positive, caring teacher-student relationships are a key mechanism for adults to help promote students’ school belonging (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), which is defined as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others, especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80). Teachers can convey caring through being attentive to and involved with students (Raufelder et al., 2014; Teven, 2001; Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998), listening empathically (Hayes, Ryan, & Zseller, 1994; Noddings, 2005; Wentzel, 1997), speaking kindly to students (Alder, 2002; Valverde, 2006), and upholding established norms of behavior that foster feelings of trust and safety for students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Voelkl, 2012).

However, it is important to note that teacher relatedness or caring is itself a multidimensional construct that might look different to different students, particularly with regards to the intersection of emotional and academic support (Liu, Savitz-Romer, Perella, Hill, & Liang, 2018). While literature rooted in the ethic of care in education emphasizes the emotionality of teacher-student relationships and the value of caring and community as a worthy end unto itself (Noddings, 2005), other conceptions of caring and belonging incorporate dimensions of academic support that link the caring teacher-student relationship to outcomes of achievement motivation and school performance (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Martin & Dowson, 2009; McMahon & Wernsman, 2009; Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012). For example, the National Research Council (2004) identifies sense
of belonging and social connectedness as a critical factor in students’ academic engagement. Studies also suggest that students—particularly those from minoritized groups—commonly identify teachers’ academic help and assistance as a dimension of caring (Garza, 2009; Hayes et al., 1994; Nieto, 2004; Tosolt, 2010).

The attention to variations in students’ perceptions of caring and positive relationships is particularly critical given that students of different backgrounds can have widely different experiences with social support at school (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016; Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005). While belonging is acknowledged as universally important and beneficial to all students, the academic and achievement component of school relationships can introduce a key threat to belonging in the form of students’ perceptions of negative stereotypes about their academic ability (Steele, 2003). Research demonstrates the sensitivity of adolescent students in particular to perceptions of teachers’ differential academic expectations for students across identity groups; the perceived dismissal or exclusion of certain groups from achievement culture can become a self-fulfilling prophecy leading to lower performance and feelings of alienation from school (Brown, Higgins, Pierce, Hong, & Thoma, 2003; Thompson, 2004; Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). In response to these risk factors and threats to belonging, research is increasingly considering the importance of culturally responsive approaches in schools (Arunkumar, Midgley, & Urdan, 1999; Bonner, 2014). These include designing inclusive curriculum and using practices that enable diverse students to see themselves reflected in the academic community (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006), as well as building relationships with students’ out-of-school caregivers and community members (Bonner, 2014; Ware, 2006).
“My ability and competence grow with my effort” (Growth mindset). The growth mindset statement articulates a theory of intelligence and ability as malleable, in contrast to an entity or fixed theory of intelligence as a static or endowed trait (Dweck, 1999). A critical dimension of this mindset is the divergent interpretation of mistakes and failure across the two theories of intelligence: individuals with a growth mindset understand mistakes as an inevitable part of development and an important learning opportunity, whereas individuals with a fixed mindset understand mistakes as evidence of a lack of innate ability, which can lead to negative self-concepts and feelings of shame (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2014). A healthy body of literature demonstrates that people who believe that intelligence is malleable and grows incrementally through effort exert more effort in their learning, persist through difficulty, and eventually achieve at higher levels than people who hold a fixed view of intelligence (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Kennett & Keefer, 2006; Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006).

Research on locus of control (Rotter, 1966) and attribution theory (Weiner, 1986) complement the growth mindset field. These two theories focus similarly on human interpretations of causality, distinguishing primarily between attributions of internal versus external causes and controllability. Because of its emphasis on the development of intelligence and ability through individual effort, growth mindset overlaps conceptually with internal causal attributions and an internal locus of control (Dong, Stupnisky, & Berry, 2013; Hall, Jackson Gradt, Goetz, & Musu-Gillette, 2011). Paralleling research on growth mindset, studies show that internal causal attributions and controllability are positively associated with motivation and performance (Hall et al., 2007; S. E. Jackson, Hall, Rowe, & Daniels, 2009).

With its theoretical grounding in social psychology, growth mindset research has
always closely examined social processes as the mechanism through which students develop theories of intelligence and ability; daily classroom practices play a key role in developing and sustaining students’ growth mindset (Boaler & Staples, 2008; Dweck, 2006). Much of the work in this area focuses on teachers’ implicit messaging to students about intelligence and ability (Cimpian, Arce, Markman, & Dweck, 2007; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Smith, Brumskill, Johnson, & Zimmer, 2018), including through the nature of their praise and feedback (Dweck & Kamins, 1999; Mangels et al., 2006) and their responses to student mistakes (Kazemi & Stipek, 2009; Santagata, 2005). In particular, studies show that students’ growth mindset is enhanced when teachers give specific feedback, attribute students’ success to effort or strategy, and provide opportunities for students to incorporate previous feedback and demonstrate improvement (Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Wilbert, Grosche, & Gerdes, 2010). Yeager et al. (2014) describe the positive impact of “wise feedback,” in which teachers explicitly frame feedback as a sign of their high expectations for students and add the phrase “and I know you can achieve them.” Studies of growth mindset interventions have demonstrated the benefits of teaching students about mindsets (Wiersema et al., 2015; Yeager & Dweck, 2012), perhaps through a similar mechanism of explicitly re-framing students’ interpretation of critical feedback, mistakes, and failure. Finally, teachers can support students’ growth mindset through formative and summative assessment policies that codify the valuation of effort and improvement (Black & Wiliam, 2003; Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, & Kauffman, 1982; Sun, 2018b).

“I can succeed at this” (Efficacy mindset). Perceived efficacy is consistently identified as a key dimension of academic motivation and is reflected in the construct of self-efficacy from social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), the competence dimension of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), and success expectancies from expectancy-
value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). These constructs all describe an individual’s self-assessment of her ability and potential to succeed at a particular task. Distinct from global self-concepts like self-esteem, perceived efficacy—like all four mindsets—is domain- and task-specific (Butz & Usher, 2015; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000); for example, someone can have high self-efficacy in math and low self-efficacy in writing, or varying efficacy mindsets toward different academic tasks in the same class. This means that the specific, shifting conditions of learning environments are highly salient to students’ efficacy mindset.

The growth and efficacy mindsets are closely linked conceptually through their shared contributions to students’ conceptualizations of what academic success means and whether and how it can be achieved (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Achievement goal theory provides a framework for this linkage between the two mindsets by highlighting the role of academic goals in organizing and driving student beliefs and behaviors (Ames, 1992), namely through two goal “orientations.” Mastery-oriented students feel motivated by acquiring new skills and improving, whereas performance-oriented students hold normative standards or benchmarks (e.g. a grade or score) as the primary markers of success and are motivated more by external demonstrations of competence than by internal, individual progress. The two goal orientations have since been further subdivided into approach and avoidance valences (Elliot, 1999; Pintrich, 2003); for example, performance-avoidant students are motivated less by a positive vision of success than by a desire to avoid failure. Growth mindset and higher self-efficacy are associated with mastery orientations, whereas fixed mindset and lower self-efficacy are associated with performance orientations (Chatzisarantis et al., 2016; Coutinho & Neuman, 2008; Dweck et al., 2014). However, performance goals are not inherently bad; evidence suggests that holding performance and mastery goals simultaneously can also yield positive student engagement and adaptive learning (A. M. Conley, 2012; Midgley, Kaplan, &
The challenge for educators is to design learning environments that balance performance goals with the development of mastery goals.

Achievement goal theory includes the consideration of learning environment design: through their instructional practices, educators create “goal structures” in their classrooms that convey messages to students about the role of effort, improvement, and assessment in academic success and individual efficacy (S. C. Gordon, Dembo, & Hocevar, 2007; Kaplan, Middleton, Urdan, & Midgley, 2002). Educators can promote students’ efficacy mindsets by setting appropriately challenging expectations and providing the necessary learning scaffolds to help students meet those expectations (E. W. Gordon & Bridgall, 2007; S. K. Green, 2002), and by giving students opportunities to master increasingly difficult tasks (Bandura, 1997; Butz & Usher, 2015). As with growth mindset, teacher language, feedback, and assessment practices play a key role in developing efficacy mindsets. Clearly articulated learning goals and feedback on progress toward those goals through interim checks on skill or content mastery can help make success pathways transparent to students (Marzano, 2000; Panadero & Jonsson, 2013; Wollenschläger, Hattie, Machts, Möller, & Harms, 2016).

Teachers can also promote students’ efficacy mindsets by verbally expressing confidence in students and providing success exemplars with whom students can identify (Ahn, Bong, & Kim, 2017; Bandura, 1997; S. K. Green, 2002), and by promoting peer collaboration and mutual encouragement rather than practices that foster social comparison and competition (S. C. Gordon et al., 2007; Maehr & Midgley, 1991; Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008).

“This work has value for me” (Value mindset). The value mindset expresses students’ reasons for engaging in a given academic task, in the form of what perceived value the task offers the student. The expectancy-value model of achievement motivation is a
common framework for classifying different types of perceived value (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992); it identifies three intertwined facets of perceived value: 1) intrinsic value, an individual’s perception of the inherent value of a task or intrinsic satisfaction derived from doing it; 2) attainment value, the perceived contributions of a task to an individual’s achievement or other personal goals; and 3) utility value, the perception of a task’s value for or application to an individual’s daily life, or its broader social utility (Gaspard et al., 2015).

Of these three types, utility value is the most commonly studied, and is often used interchangeably with the term “relevance” (Barron & Hulleman, 2015; Hulleman, Godes, Hendricks, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009), though more recent work distinguishes utility value as linked to specific personal goals whereas relevance is a broader recognition of interconnected topics or ideas (Hulleman, Kosovich, Barron, & Daniel, 2017). Expectancy-value theory also links the value mindset with the efficacy mindset through the construct of success expectancies: whereas success expectancies have been found to relate to students’ immediate task performance, task value seems to be more strongly associated with students’ enduring academic beliefs, intentions, and choices (B. D. Jones, Paretti, Hein, & Knott, 2010; Wentzel, 2000).

The dimensions of value in expectancy-value theory also overlap conceptually with several other analogous constructs. Attainment value is similar conceptually to achievement goals, discussed above under the efficacy mindset. Intrinsic value maps onto theories of interest development (Harackiewicz, Smith, & Priniski, 2016; Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2010; Renninger & Hidi, 2002), which further distinguish between short-term situational interest and more enduring and internalized individual interest. The construct of relevance is also used in youth development literature, particularly regarding the importance of relevance and choice for adolescents in fostering cohesion between their academic activities and their
sense of self (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Feeling a sense of personal connection to and relevance in one’s tasks is also a component of self-determined autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and sense of purpose (Yeager, Henderson, et al., 2014). In particular, Yeager et al.’s (2014) distinction between self-oriented versus self-transcendent purpose for learning maps onto some of the theorized sub-dimensions of utility value in expectancy-value theory, such as personal value versus social value (Gaspard et al., 2015).

As with other motivational theories, expectancy-value theory positions educators as key “socializing agents” who can shape students’ goals, expectancies, and values (Butler & Shibaz, 2018; Hardré & Sullivan, 2008; Simons, Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Lacante, 2004). Educators can influence students’ perceived value through the design of academic tasks, which are more likely to be valued by students if they include clear and relevant learning goals (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; M. C. Jackson, Galvez, Landa, Buonora, & Thoman, 2016); provide students with variety, choice, and autonomy (Hafen et al., 2011; Patall, 2013); and promote collaboration and active, higher-order thinking (Carr & Walton, 2014). Beyond task design, educators can further promote a value mindset by modeling their own academic interests and speaking explicitly about the relevance of academic tasks to students’ interests (S. K. Green, 2002; National Research Council, 2004). Studies of the utility-value intervention have also shown that teachers can promote students’ value mindsets by inviting students to identify and articulate the value or relevance of what they are learning, either verbally or through a reflective writing prompt (Harackiewicz et al., 2016; Hulleman et al., 2010, 2017; Kafkas, Schmidt, Shumow, & Durik, 2017). A helpful organizing framework for these approaches is Brophy’s (2008) three-step model for cultivating students’ “appreciation,” or perceived value, for what they learn in school. The first step of Brophy’s model charges educators to consider what students are learning, consistent with the
recommendations above about curriculum and task design. The second and third steps of the model describe how educators can “frame” and “scaffold” student appreciation through instructional strategies that map onto many of the teacher verbalizations of value and reflective writing interventions described above.

**Challenges to Mindset-Supportive Instruction**

While the research underlying the mindsets identifies associations between certain pedagogical practices and the development of positive mindsets, relatively little research examines the reasons for variation in these classroom practices. In other words, why don’t all educators use these research-recommended practices? Studies of educators’ understandings of academic motivation—whose dimensions map onto mindsets—demonstrate that varying understandings of motivational principles, as well as varied perceptions of student characteristics, can influence educators’ choice of strategies and efforts to motivate students (Hardré, 2010; Hardré & Sullivan, 2008, 2009). Moreover, in a parallel application of some of the mindset theories, educators’ perceptions of their own efficacy as teachers and their locus of control predict whether and how they enact certain motivating strategies (Hardré & Hennessey, 2013). Below, I examine each of these phenomena in the context of mindset research.

**Educator understandings of mindsets.** Literature demonstrates that some aspects of motivational and mindset theory are commonly found in educators’ existing understandings. In one study, Sweet et al. (1998) found that teachers’ implicit theory of achievement motivation was “remarkably compatible” with Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory, and other studies have shown that educators’ strategies for motivating students echo many of the theoretical mechanisms described above (Dja’far, Cahyono, &
Consistent with the notion of “practical knowledge,” these understandings and enactments may stem from educators’ practical experience working with students in classrooms, or from educators’ understandings of their own motivation (Richardson, 1996), as well as from coursework in human development for many state-certified K-12 teachers (Greenberg, Walsh, & McKee, 2014).

However, educators can also hold incomplete understandings or misconceptions about mindsets that can have ripple effects on students through learning environment design and educator-student interactions. Among the four mindsets, there is the most research on educators’ understandings of growth mindset, in part because educators are increasingly familiar with the theory (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar-Cam, 2015), and many schools have sought to integrate growth mindset principles into professional development and/or organizational culture (Hanson, Bangert, & Ruff, 2016). However, this practice-based scholarship on growth mindset has also revealed that educators who subscribe to growth mindset in theory can nevertheless maintain fixed and growth mindsets about their students’ abilities (Sun, 2018b, 2018a), or their mindsets can shift depending on the situation or domain (Buehl, Alexander, & Murphy, 2002; Yeager & Dweck, 2012), impacting their ability to enact growth mindset-supportive practices in the classroom. For example, Rattan et al. (2012) found that teachers with fixed mindsets themselves were more likely to comfort students after a poor academic performance in ways that conveyed fixed mindset and low expectations to students, even though the action was taken with sincerely positive intentions. Similarly, Sun (2018b) notes that teachers may understand the core tenets of growth mindset and articulate the value of struggle as part of an authentic learning process, but then unintentionally undermine this message at other moments by advising students to avoid struggle and choose easier or time-saving pathways.
Some attention has also been directed to educators’ understandings of the value mindset. In their discussion of Brophy’s (2008) model of teaching for appreciation, Pugh and Phillips (2011) identify the challenge that some teachers face in identifying the “affordances” in curriculum that will allow students to perceive it as valuable and relevant:

Unfortunately, much of the content taught has few apparent affordances that are meaningful to students and many students are not able to make these connections on their own. This tends to put the burden on teachers to identify and articulate the meaningful affordances, which is not always easily achieved…Often, teachers simply accept the importance of curricular content without considering the experience it came from or the impact it might have on students’ everyday experience. At one point, someone thought this was valuable to teach, but a good question to ask is “Why?” (p. 288)

However, very little research has been done on educators’ understandings of the value of their own course content. Studies of the utility-value intervention focus on increasing students’ perceived value for course work without fully engaging the question of whether the course content is valuable, or how an educator would answer the reflective prompt at the heart of that intervention. One study that does examine educator understandings of value is Green’s (2002) analysis of two elementary teachers’ classroom practice and the beliefs underlying those practices. The two teachers held different views not only on what was relevant and valuable about their curriculum, but also on what “relevance” itself meant; these divergent understandings, in turn, influenced their different strategies for enacting those understandings. For example, one teacher enacted relevance by “choosing tasks that involved activities relevant to student concerns and interests (e.g., games, hands-on activities)” whereas the other enacted it through verbalizing rationales for “more traditional classroom activities” (S. K. Green, 2002, p. 1001). Likewise, in a study of middle school science teachers, Schmidt et al. (2018) found that teachers who perceived less complex connections between science and students’ lives also talked less about the relevance of
science to their students during class.

**Educator beliefs about and expectations of students.** Variations in educators’ beliefs about and expectations of their students can inform the nature of teacher-student interactions over academic work, which in turn implicates students’ belonging and efficacy mindsets particularly. In addition to the risk to sense of belonging posed by students’ perceptions of differential teacher expectations that I described previously, an extensive body of literature demonstrates that educators themselves can hold different beliefs about and form different kinds of relationships with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds (Moule & Higgins, 2007; Reiter & Davis, 2011; Ukpokodu, 2004), genders (Buyse, Verschueren, & Doumen, 2011; Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001; Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2009), language fluency (Fumoto, Hargreaves, & Maxwell, 2007), and special education status (Shaunessy & McHatton, 2009). For example, McGrady and Reynolds (2013) found that White teachers had different overall positive and negative perceptions of students with different racial backgrounds. Similarly, educators’ differential perceptions of student conflict or aggression in minority youth have been linked to disproportionate disciplinary actions that convey messages to students about their lack of belonging in school (Ferguson, 2001; Saft & Pianta, 2001). Importantly, though, even when educators may hold similar understandings about students, they can enact them in different ways. For example, it is common for educators to expect female students to be better socialized for school (Kesner, 2000; Silva et al., 2011), but this understanding might lead to preferential treatment for female students in some educators (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Timmermans, Boer, & Werf, 2016), while other educators may exert more effort to relate to and re-engage male students as the vulnerable population (Francis et al., 2008; Marsh, Martin, & Cheng, 2008).
Beyond expectations and perceptions that can impact relatedness with students, educators can also hold differential beliefs about student efficacy based on identity factors. For example, studies have shown educators holding lower academic expectations for Black and Hispanic students (Chen & Weseley, 2011; Oates, 2003) and for female students in math and science classes particularly (Andersson, 2010; Lazarides & Watt, 2015), perhaps reflecting stereotypes about these students’ intelligence and ability. Teachers have also been found to make different predictions about students’ future educational success based on visible identity markers (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2011; Pigott & Cowen, 2000). According to achievement goal theory, educators’ understandings manifest in the classroom goal structure (Deemer, 2004); accordingly, differential expectations for or assumptions about student ability and success potential have implications for how educators design their courses and teach on a daily basis, including their use of mindset-supportive instructional strategies.

**Teacher efficacy and locus of control.** Beyond their understanding of the mindset theories themselves or of student characteristics, educators’ own mindsets—e.g. their fixed mindsets, or their limited perceptions of the value of their course content, as described above—can play a role in their varied approaches to supporting students’ mindset development. Hardré and Hennessey (2013) found that teachers’ perceptions of their own ability to influence student motivation—including their sense of teaching efficacy and perceived locus of control—informed their motivational strategy use. Likewise, Morrison and colleagues (1999) found that educators’ beliefs about teacher control predicted the goal structures they established in their classrooms. Consistent with the idea that mastery of experience is a critical component of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), debates in teacher education over how best to prepare teaching candidates for authentic classroom instruction
point out that holding an abstract “conceptual understanding” of a pedagogical principle is different from knowing how to enact it successfully (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009); the same principle holds true for in-service educators as well (Assen et al., 2016; Murray & Macdonald, 1997). Thus, achieving the goal of learning environments that effectively integrate an array of mindset-supportive practices faces challenges not only from educators’ understandings of the mindsets and their students, but also from their understandings of themselves and their ability to influence student mindsets.

**Mindsets at the College Transition**

Creating mindset-supportive learning environments for students is especially challenging—but also especially important—when students transition from one school to another (Farrington et al., 2012). In this section, I review the scholarship on mindset vulnerabilities at the college transition, as well as the potency of mindsets as protective factors for college students. I then describe the targeted interventionist approach to mindset development employed by many colleges that misses opportunities to strengthen mindset support in core academic classrooms. I conclude by discussing the potential benefits of greater alignment between the secondary and postsecondary sectors around mindset development, and the viability of writing classrooms as a salient context for both mindset development and K-16 alignment work.

**Mindset vulnerabilities.** School transitions are always vulnerable times for students because moving between levels of schooling is generally accompanied by paradigm shifts in how education is conducted, as well as in the preparation of the educators on either side of the divide (De Wit, Karioja, & Rye, 2010; Wallace, 2014). These contrasts are especially stark at the college transition, as many students move from a localized (and often segregated) K-
12 educational system to the far more variegated system of higher education (Venezia, Callan, Finney, Kirst, & Usdan, 2005; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). There is consistent evidence, for example, that ethnic minority, low-income, or first-generation college students face unique challenges in the college transition, especially at predominantly White institutions (Bryson, Smith, & Vineyard, 2002; Harper, 2009; Jack, 2016; Terenzini et al., 1994), in part because college may present such a contrast to the culture, norms, and expectations at the types of high schools these students typically attend (Bangser, 2008; Hudley et al., 2009).

The college transition also coincides with a well-documented trend of decreasing perceptions of value and overall motivation for school over time (Frenzel, Goetz, Pekrun, & Watt, 2010; Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002; Spinath & Steinmayr, 2008; Watt, 2004; Wigfield et al., 2015). Although the elective nature of higher education (versus compulsory K-12 schooling) leads many instructors to assume that college students hold self-motivating reasons for being in college (Dja’far et al., 2016; Wallace, 2014), the shift to a college setting does not necessarily end this decline in perceived value. Hendy et al. (2014) found that some college students maintained “class devaluation beliefs” in math, which predicted their academic behaviors in college. Additionally, the new learning environment coupled with the more imminent career decisions that students face in college may recalibrate their mindsets about membership in certain professional communities and the value of their college experiences in preparing them for those communities. For example, studies have examined the influence of stereotype threat on students’ perceived value for certain fields of study (Smith et al., 2018), as well as their efficacy beliefs about themselves in such majors and careers (Song, Zuo, Wen, & Yan, 2017).
The shift to more difficult postsecondary coursework also threatens students’ mindsets about their intelligence and ability, definitions of success, and success expectancies, which can adversely affect other mindsets and academic performance overall. Kosovich et al. (2017) found that declining self-efficacy in college students during a single semester course was associated with declining perceived value of that course. In their study of 151 college students, Forsythe and Johnson (2017) found that a majority held fixed mindsets toward their own abilities, contributing to their defensive and defiant responses to challenging academic experiences such as negative feedback. This is consistent with other work on college students with fixed mindsets exhibiting defensiveness about poor academic performance (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008), posing obstacles to educators trying to help students improve by providing feedback.

**Mindsets as protective factors.** However, even as mindsets can be vulnerable at school transitions, matriculating college students are also in a prime position to leverage positive mindsets. The college transition coincides with a stage at which students’ abstract thinking, including their perceptions of self and others, is highly developed (Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005; Stringer & Kerpelman, 2010). Older adolescents and emerging adults are therefore not only undergoing a substantial change in schooling context, they are also cognitively processing that transition in a complex way, including shifts in academic mindsets. As Wiersema et al. (2015) write:

> Throughout high school, some students have been successful meeting expectations and getting good grades in most, if not all, subjects; others have excelled in certain classes; and some have struggled to meet minimum standards. These experiences form the foundations of beliefs not only about learning, but also about individual abilities to learn. (p. 1)

In Damico and Quay’s (2009) study of college student adjustment and academic
development, first-year students themselves identified “the process of learning to learn” in college—including adapting to college-level expectations and effectively self-regulating their academic habits—as a key component of their experience. Positive academic mindsets could therefore be important assets in students’ adjustment to college (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

Research bears out the positive effect of mindset-related constructs in college students’ critical first-year adjustment as well as their longer-term college outcomes. Han and colleagues (2017) found that high measures of academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and “academic motivation”—operationalized as intrinsic value—in first-year college students were predictive of both first-year academic performance and retention between the first and second years, with belonging having the strongest association with retention and self-efficacy having the strongest association with first-year performance. These findings are consistent with other studies on the importance of college student belonging (Alvarez et al., 2007; Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomon, 2002), and an extensive literature showing positive effects of early-college academic self-efficacy, primarily on academic performance (e.g. Bong, 2001; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; DeFreitas, 2012; Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, & Wilcox, 2013), but also on persistence (Baier, Markman, & Pernice-Duca, 2016; Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock, 2013). Early-college studies have also shown that students’ locus of control (E. Jones, 2008), perceived value (Bong, 2001), and mastery goal orientations (D’Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014) predict academic performance.

**Approaches to postsecondary mindset intervention.** Reflecting an awareness of both the vulnerable transition period and the potential of mindsets as protective factors, many first-year college programs have begun targeting mindsets (Greenfield, 2013),
sometimes through dedicated college transition or adjustment courses, or through mindset curriculum embedded in introductory courses (Brooman & Darwent, 2012; Cone & Owens, 1991; Higbee & Dwinell, 1992; Nichols & Clinedinst, 2013; Nix & Michalak, 2012). Programs like first-year seminars (Hyers & Joslin, 1998) and learning communities (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011) have similarly been designed to foster students’ feelings of belongingness and perceived value for their work by allowing them to opt into small classes focused on varied, often interdisciplinary, topics of interest.

However, these initiatives have primarily been situated in student affairs, advising, or specialized first-year programming (C.S. Conley, 2015); less is known about opportunities for mindset development in core academic classes. While classroom-based interventions have been shown to increase college students’ self-efficacy (Boese, Stewart, Perry, & Hamm, 2013; R. A. Green, Conlon, & Morrissey, 2017) and perceived value (Hulleman et al., 2017; M. L. Johnson & Sinatra, 2013), there has been little focus on educators’ daily teaching practice as a context for mindset development. Even many evaluations of learning communities focus on the intervention’s wholesale effect on student outcomes, rather than examining possible underlying mechanisms, such as pedagogy and classroom dynamics (Mayer et al., 2013). Yet studies have identified the positive influence of college faculty on students’ beliefs related to belonging (Meeuwisse, Severiens, & Born, 2010; O’Keeffe, 2013) and efficacy (Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010; Micari & Pazos, 2012; Vogt, 2008). However, there has to date been much less attention paid to the nature of in-class faculty-student interactions in postsecondary education compared to secondary education (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014), leaving the link between educators’ classroom practices and student mindset development particularly understudied in the higher education sector.
The importance of secondary-postsecondary alignment. Very little research has been conducted on how mindsets may directly “carry over” from the secondary to postsecondary context, in part due to traditional siloing of research within the sectors (Venezia et al., 2003). However, studies have shown that high school experiences, particularly relationships with high school teachers, influence students’ relationship-building interactions with college faculty, potentially influencing their sense of belonging and experience with the social persuasion dimension of the efficacy mindset (Hudley et al., 2009; Hurtado et al., 2011). Consistent with the presence of an ongoing feedback loop in many mindset theories that shows the mutual reinforcement of academic mindsets through performance results, research has demonstrated that high school students who are better prepared academically for college tend to have higher self-efficacy and internal locus of control compared to their less-prepared peers (Lease, 2004; Melzer & Grant, 2016). Studies in math have also shown that pre-college students’ self-efficacy in and perceived value for math predict their academic behaviors in college, such as college course selection and choice of major (Musu-Gillette, Wigfield, Harring, & Eccles, 2015; Priess-Groben & Hyde, 2017).

Opportunities therefore exist not only for greater attention to college students’ mindset development in core academic classes, but also to their mindset-related classroom experiences prior to college matriculation. K-16 alignment efforts on mindsets and other noncognitive skills lag behind analogous initiatives on academic expectations (Kirst & Venezia, 2004) and curriculum (ACT, 2016; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). As with those academic initiatives, looking at the conditions for positive mindset development in classrooms on both sides of the college transition is a key first step for understanding what educators can do to better support their students’ college readiness and success.
Writing as context for mindset development at the college transition. Writing classrooms provide an apt context for studying educators’ support for positive mindset development on either side of the college transition. Writing is a critical academic skill for college readiness and success (O’Neill et al., 2012), its importance reflected in the prevalence of four-year English requirements in high school and first-year writing requirements in college (ACT, 2014; National Council of Teachers of English, 2013). Beyond its role as a “gateway” skill, Sommers and Saltz (2004) argue that writing also socializes students in the college transition, helping to situate students “in the academic culture, giving them a sense of academic belonging” (p. 131). Moreover, the procedural and affective features of writing—such as incorporating feedback, writing multiple drafts, and interpreting evaluation criteria—lend themselves to many of the instructional strategies that influence students’ mindsets (Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Cox, 2009; Ferris, 1995; Straub, 1997).

Recursively, studies have shown that attending to mindset constructs such as self-efficacy and perceived value can improve students’ writing performance (Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007; Zumbrunn, Carter, & Conklin, 2014), contributing to the field’s longstanding interest in mindsets. Indeed, the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (2011), developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project, highlights eight “habits of mind” that partly echo academic mindsets: “curiosity,” “openness,” “engagement,” and “creativity” overlap with some dimensions of the interest and relevance theories underlying the value mindset; while “responsibility,” “flexibility,” and “metacognition” map onto elements of growth and efficacy mindset; and the eighth habit of mind, “persistence,” is an academic behavior shown to be associated with positive academic mindsets. Thus, writing is a discipline whose ubiquity in the college transition and underlying skill set supply a particularly fitting context for
studying mindset development, and whose major professional organizations have already embraced the notion of promoting student mindsets as an integral part of quality K-16 instruction.

The Present Study

My dissertation contributes to the mindset literature by providing a holistic perspective on the classroom practices that secondary and postsecondary educators use to try to support students’ positive mindset development, and by exploring the complex educator understandings that underlie—or diverge from—these practices. The motivational scholars whose work informs academic mindsets have for years called for more empirical work embedded in authentic contexts of learning; as Pintrich (2003) argues, “we need to examine cognition and motivation from the outside in first” (p. 681). Likewise, Urdan & Schoenfelder (2006) write:

The research examining classroom influences on motivation has often not been conducted in actual classrooms. In addition, when the research has been conducted in real classrooms, it has often employed methods (such as the use of surveys) that make it difficult to determine the actual mechanisms responsible for the association between contextual factors and student motivation. (p. 344)

Yet over a decade later, scholars are still repeating this call for research that integrates the educational psychology traditions underlying the mindsets with sociocultural approaches that engage the importance of contextual factors and complex interpersonal relationships in classrooms (Graham, 2018; Gray, Hope, & Matthews, 2018; Kumar et al., 2018; Urdan & Bruchmann, 2018; Zusho & Kumar, 2018).

This gap in the mindset literature that scholars self-identify converges with calls for more comprehensive exploration of the complex intersection between understandings and
enactments in pedagogy. As Richardson (1996) writes, “An understanding of a teacher’s practices is enhanced by research attention to both beliefs and action through interview and observation…these understandings are quite person and context specific” (p. 104). Some studies cited throughout this chapter have used case study to probe educators’ understandings and enactments (S. K. Green, 2002; Ware, 2006), but few such studies have been conducted at the secondary and postsecondary levels and none have directly engaged the participants themselves in an explicit discussion of the theoretical framework. In the next chapter, I explain my rationale for multi-case portraiture as the methodology uniquely suited to address these gaps in the literature and my research questions in a study that ultimately targets instructional improvement as its desired outcome.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Portraiture

To achieve my dual goals of depicting contextualized, authentic classroom practices and exploring educators’ complex understandings that inform those practices, I turned to the methodology of portraiture. Pioneered by sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, portraiture is a qualitative research method rooted in the phenomenological paradigm that seeks to “blur the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). The core underlying principles of portraiture—an assumption of goodness, the recognition of goodness as complex, and the self-aware dialogue between portraitist and participants throughout the research process—resonated with my study goals.

The search for (complex) goodness. Portraiture deliberately seeks to counter the “focus on pathology” characteristic of much social science research by rooting empirical inquiry in a search for goodness, understanding that “the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). Such a stance is sorely needed in classroom-based studies that often quantify instructional practice through surveys (e.g. Quirk et al., 2010) or deductive observational methods (e.g. Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010) that, by definition, begin with an a priori assumption of what is good and then rate instruction against that standard. Portraiture allows not only for more expansive and alternative conceptualizations of good instructional practice, but also the illumination of the educator’s own understandings of goodness that drive her pedagogical choices. As discussed in the literature review, the complex manifestation of educators’ understandings and
enactments in classrooms means that exploring the *why* of teaching, rather than only the *what*, is critical for promoting instructional change and improvement.

By taking a “generous and critical stance” toward participants’ expertise and understandings (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 143, emphasis in original), portraiture also refutes the assumed deficit in educator knowledge conveyed in much of the psychological research on mindsets. The idea that “knowledge of motivational theory and research is accessible to practitioners if they are willing to work with researchers” (Barron & Hulleman, 2015, p. 168) is a common sentiment found in mindset literature; in addition to placing the onus on practitioners to initiate and welcome collaboration with researchers, such statements implicitly value a researcher’s theoretical knowledge over an educator’s practical understandings and suggest that practitioners are lacking in the “right” kind of knowledge. By contrast, as a portraist I begin from an assumption that educators are knowledgeable about mindsets and that researchers can learn from educators’ expertise.

Additionally, in contrast to methods that reduce classroom practice to easily measured inputs and outputs, portraiture’s five “essential features”—context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole—allow for the depiction of goodness that is highly complex. I present a brief overview of these five components here and expand on them in later sections of this chapter where relevant. Portraiture defines context as the intersecting “physical, geographic, temporal, historical, cultural, aesthetic” settings of participants’ experience that provide the researcher with “a rich resource for examining and interpreting behavior, thought, and feeling” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 41); such contextualized analysis is especially salient for studying instruction, which is highly influenced by individual educator and school characteristics (S. M. Johnson, Kraft, & Papay,
The portraitist also engages in multiple intentional uses of voice—her own, and in conversation with participants—that in turn invite the reader's internal voice as part of the collective, “generous and critical” interpretation of complex data. This intersection of voices requires the establishment of “productive and benign relationships” between researcher and participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135), rooted in the search for goodness discussed above, as well as the development of empathetic regard, reciprocity, and boundaries. Finally, a key distinction between portraiture and other qualitative approaches is its concern with the aesthetic whole, a tapestry that is “both authentic and evocative, coded and colorful” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 243)—its richness mirroring the complexity of the phenomenon it is depicting—and that can speak to multiple audiences.

This blend of art and science in portraiture made it particularly appealing to me as a way to try to capture the “gestalt” of a classroom in a way that I, as a former teacher, have rarely found in extant scholarship: the intersecting personalities and overlapping voices, the spontaneous and improvisational elements, the delightful messiness, and most of all, the humor and warmth and humanity found therein.

**The portraitist.** Portraiture also acknowledges and accepts that in the process of weaving this complex tapestry,

the voice of the researcher is everywhere: in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework she brings to the inquiry; in the questions she asks in the data she gathers; in the choice of stories she tells; in the language, cadence, and rhythm of her narrative. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 85)

The introduction to this dissertation makes clear the personal experience and inspiration underlying my inquiry. Having occupied the roles of English teacher, mentor teacher, faculty developer, and evaluator over eight years of full-time work in high schools, plus worked in
university-based teacher education and instructional development initiatives to improve teaching and learning in higher education, I cannot ignore the professional expertise I bring to my scholarly work. Rather than silencing that voice, portraiture provides the researcher with a framework for establishing an authorial voice that is omnipresent but restrained in the final portrait. In a study that I have grounded in recognizing and valuing educators’ understandings, it is fitting that I recognize and value my own: I do not see teachers and teaching in the way that many mindset researchers do, and that is an asset to this work—provided I utilize appropriate tools and strategies to temper my voice appropriately. I describe those strategies later in this chapter, in the discussion of validity.

**Participant Selection**

My sampling procedure employed the principles of literal and theoretical replication in a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2009). I selected two high school participants and two college participants to prevent a single educator being cast as a representative case for each sector (Yin, 2009), and to allow for triangulation of findings within as well as across sector. It is important to note here that rather than seeking to demonstrate the “prevalence of phenomena” (Yin, 2009, p. 56), I employed portraiture’s stance toward generalization, in which even a single case—including its particular idiosyncracies—can yield “resonant universal themes,” evoking “identification” through the specificity and subtlety of description (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14). Thus, I sought to illuminate specific features of participants’ practice that would inform our broader understanding of how to promote positive mindset development in classrooms, while simultaneously acknowledging the uniqueness of each individual educator.

I designed my study so that the timing of data collection would mirror students’
transition from high school to college, with high school data collection occurring in the spring semester of senior year and college data collection occurring in the fall semester of freshman year. Therefore, I recruited high school participants first and had already completed high school data collection by the time I recruited college participants.

I recruited participants first by sampling schools that I theorized would be promising places to find educators interested in mindset research. I identified my two focal high schools through “purposeful selection” (Maxwell, 2005) of traditional public or public charter high schools that expressed—through a mission statement, curriculum reform, instructional improvement plan, or programming like advisories—an interest in social-emotional development, college readiness, or student engagement. I theorized that faculty at schools with some form of articulated institutional commitment to these domains of student development would be familiar both with concepts analogous to academic mindsets and some classroom strategies to promote them. I sampled public schools in an effort to portray school experiences that would be accessible to any student in a given community, but I looked for similar types of districts in the same state so that the two schools would be situated in similar demographic and policy contexts. I prioritized small schools (around 100 students per grade), hypothesizing that smaller schools would feature more cohesive faculty culture and investment in holistic student support. At each school, I contacted the principal to request permission to recruit among their 12th-grade English teachers and to obtain permission to conduct my study on site if a teacher agreed to participate.

I identified my two focal colleges through a similar process of purposeful selection. Because I had already identified writing as the appropriate disciplinary context for my college research, I searched for colleges that had a first-year writing program specifically, rather than
first-year seminars which tend to be more interdisciplinary. Given the wide variety of options that students have when matriculating into higher education, I did not aim for alignment across the sectors in terms of looking for colleges that graduates of the focal high schools commonly attended. Rather, I looked for two colleges that were similar enough to each other for me to be able to draw some cross-case comparisons within sector. Because the administrative and governance structure of colleges differs from high schools, I contacted either the English department chair or the faculty director of first-year writing to request permission to recruit among their writing instructors; this faculty member then assisted me in making any additional contacts with central administration that were necessary to secure permission for the study.

In both sectors, I sought educators with at least three years of teaching experience prior to the data collection year, theorizing that this was the baseline level of experience to have sufficient comfort in the classroom to be willing to host an observer, be able to identify specific pedagogical strategies and engage in reflective commentary through interviews, and generally feel able to manage participation in a study. After securing permission from the relevant administrator at each school, I sent an email to eligible educators that provided a brief overview of my study and invited them to contact me if they were interested in learning more. I spoke with each interested educator either in person or by phone to discuss further details of the study and eventually obtained their official consent to participate. In each sector, I accepted the first participant who agreed to the study and then took the next interested educator whose institutional context sufficiently “matched” the first participant’s, thus completing my sample. I then worked with each participant to identify a cohort of students whom I would observe and a procedure for explaining the study to that cohort and securing student and/or parent permission according to the school’s requirements. Each
participant received a $50 gift card as a token of appreciation at the conclusion of data collection.

Participants

My high school sites were “Riverside Academy” and “Oak Bridge School” (OBS): small schools in separate urban districts of approximately the same size (roughly 25,000 students), in the same northeastern state. Riverside served approximately 700 students in grades 6-12, while OBS served approximately 275 students in grades 7-12. Student cohorts generally entered both schools at the earliest grade level through lottery-based admissions, with very few new students enrolling in the later grades. At both schools, the majority of students were students of color, and there was a high percentage of “economically disadvantaged” students. Both schools also had impressive results on the state high school equivalency exam, with passing rates in each subject exceeding those of their respective districts. Appendix A provides more detailed information about the two high schools.

“Diane Bauer,” the Riverside participant, was in her 29th year of teaching at the time of the study; she had taught for 19 years at a comprehensive public high school in Connecticut and was in her 10th year at Riverside. Diane taught all four sections of 12th-grade English at Riverside, but because she had a student teacher working with three of those sections, we determined that I would observe her Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature and Composition class, which comprised 22 students. Riverside had a rotating schedule, so Diane’s class met at a different time every day, with class periods ranging from

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6 I use pseudonyms for focal participants, their students, as well as any institution whose practices are subject to analysis anywhere in the dissertation. In this chapter, I use quotation marks when introducing pseudonyms for the first time, but remove the quotation marks in all subsequent mentions.

7 School-related statistics are approximated throughout this dissertation to mask the identity of the institutions.

8 The state department of education defines “economically disadvantaged” as participating in one or more state food assistance programs, foster care, or Medicaid.
57-65 minutes in length.

“Zachary Kaplan,” the OBS participant, was in his fifth year of teaching, all at OBS. He taught two sections of ninth grade and two sections of 11\textsuperscript{th}/12\textsuperscript{th}-grade English. I observed his 12:23-1:23 pm class, which had 25 students and met four days a week.

My two college sites were “Mayfield University” and “Abbott University,” both private institutions in the same northeastern state as the focal high schools—in fact, Mayfield was in the same city as OBS. Mayfield served approximately 2,200 undergraduates, with a first-year cohort of about 540. Abbott served approximately 5,000 undergraduates, including 1,300 first-year students. Both colleges had selective undergraduate admissions. Mayfield was rated “highly selective” under the Barron’s classification, with a 55% overall admissions rate; incoming first-year students had average critical reading and mathematics SAT scores in the low 600s, and an average high school GPA of 3.65. Abbott was rated “most selective” by Barron’s, with a 16% admissions rate and average incoming SAT scores in the low 700s. Both colleges were predominantly White institutions, posting similar percentages of domestic students of color (22% for both) and international students (Mayfield: 14%, Abbott: 12%), and had fairly low numbers of Pell Grant recipients (Mayfield: 22%, Abbott: 13%), which is often used as a proxy for income level in higher education research. Appendix B provides more detailed information about the two colleges.

“Liz Cartwright,” the Mayfield participant, was in her fifth year of teaching at the time of the study. She had taught first-year writing for two years at the state university where she had earned her M.F.A. in fiction, and my data collection occurred at the beginning of her third year of teaching her course at Mayfield. She taught one section: a class of 18 students that met on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:00-10:15 am. As a part-time instructor with an
advanced degree in English/writing, Liz fit the typical profile of Mayfield writing instructors, and undergraduate writing instructors generally (Samuels, 2016; Schell, 2017).

“Colin Zimmerman” was in his fifth year of teaching at Abbott and, during the semester of data collection, was also teaching the same class concurrently at a nearby college with similar selectivity as Mayfield. Colin was himself a student at Abbott: a Ph.D. candidate in English. Thus, he likewise was a part-time instructor with a profile similar to other Abbott writing instructors as well as to the undergraduate writing instructor population generally. Colin’s Abbott class set-up was nearly identical to Liz’s: his class met twice weekly for 75 minutes, but in the afternoon (12:00-1:15 pm), and he had slightly fewer students, with 16.

**Data Collection**

I collected high school data from February to June 2017 and college data from August to December 2017. Appendix C outlines the data collected from each participant in more detail, but I summarize the main data sources below.

**Individual interviews.** With each educator, I began with a baseline 1-hour interview, modeled on Seidman’s (2006) phenomenological interviewing strategy, to explore each participant’s understandings of academic mindset development and their instructional enactments of those understandings (Appendix D). During this interview, I showed each participant the four mindset statements and explicitly asked them about pedagogical practices they used to support the mindsets. I then conducted follow-up interviews approximately once per month. These interviews followed a responsive interviewing structure (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), with main questions related to observed classroom events, document features, and emergent themes pertaining to mindsets; and “second questions” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) to acquire the necessary level of detail about how the educator
understood these incidents, documents, or approaches to be supporting academic mindset development. I also interviewed the director of writing at Mayfield once for 30 minutes to obtain additional information about how their first-year writing program was set up.

I conducted interviews with the high school teachers on-site during the teachers’ free periods, whereas the college instructors’ part-time status and lack of physical presence on campus meant that I had to arrange separate meetings for those interviews. As such, I ended up interviewing the high school teachers five times, but generally for about 45-50 minutes at a time (the duration of a school period, minus transition time), and the college instructor four times for about an hour each time. Because of scheduling difficulties, I had to conduct Colin’s first interview by phone, but all other interviews were in person. I audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews.

**Non-participant observations.** I established an observation schedule with each focal participant. At the high schools, the distance between Riverside and OBS and Riverside’s rotating schedule led to an original plan to observe each teacher twice a week. However, I was quickly reminded of how irregular a high school schedule can be, especially in the “spring” semester that stretches from January to June: snow days early in the semester, special school and grade-level events later in the semester, school vacations, and my own availability reduced the number of observations I was able to achieve at each site. In the end, I observed Zachary 17 times over the course of the semester and Diane, 19 times. Colin and Liz’s class schedules—and the far fewer disruptions to class time in higher education—were much more conducive to my observing both on a regular basis. I was able to observe all 23 of Liz’s whole-class sessions, plus two class meetings that were converted into individual

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9 The only unscheduled disruptions to my college observations were class cancellations due to instructor illness: Liz cancelled one class and Colin, two.
office-hour meetings with students (there were two additional conference days that I did not attend), for 25 total observations. Colin asked me not to attend the first two classes while he was settling in with students, but subsequently I observed all 21 of his remaining class sessions. In total, I spent close to 100 hours observing classroom instruction.

During each observation, I sought to capture as much low-inference “thin description” as possible (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), documenting patterns of interaction between educator and students; choice of instructional language, particularly in feedback and praise of students; and other classroom dynamics that conveyed support for students’ positive mindset development, as established in my anticipatory framework drawn from relevant mindset literature (Appendix E).

**Course documents.** Finally, I asked the participants to share with me as many relevant course documents and materials as possible. As a baseline, all participant shared their course syllabus and any handouts or assignment sheets distributed to students during classes I observed or that were relevant to the students’ ongoing work. I also arranged a system with each educator to obtain student work. Because Diane, Zachary, and Liz primarily collected student work in hard copy and because the high volume of student work in English classes made it impossible to copy everything while not disrupting the educators’ feedback and grading flow, I generally asked them to select a representative range of student work to pass on to me after they had written feedback on or graded the work. Occasionally at the high schools, I was able to remain in the classroom after my observation and quickly photograph student work. Colin had his students post all their work on a Google+ class website he had created; he added me as a member to the website, which meant I was able to access all student work in his class. Likewise, when Liz’s students submitted their final
assignment to her via email, she was easily able to forward them on to me. Similarly to the
class observations, I was interested in how these documents reflected instructional practices
consistent with those recommended in the mindset literature (Appendix E). For example, I
looked at how the participants communicated expectations and provided feedback, whether
and how participants broke down large or complex assignments and constructed
assignments that accommodated student choice and interests, as well as evidence of
students’ responses to instruction and, of course, their mindsets.

**Data Analysis**

In portraiture, as in many qualitative research methods, the process of collecting,
organizing, and analyzing the varied data sources occurs in “iterative cycles” (Miles &
Huberman, 1994). I began with the anticipatory framework of the mindset literature, which
provided me with an etic framework (Appendix E) that guided my eyes and ears during
observations, document analysis, and interviews. Throughout my data collection process, I
wrote impressionistic records (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), similar to field notes and
interpretive memos used in other qualitative research (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).
These impressionistic records included initial interpretations, questions, and preliminary
hypotheses about the educators’ understandings and enactments of positive mindset
development according to my etic framework, informing subsequent data collection and
analysis. For example, my reflections in early impressionistic records noted the use of
numerical grades in Diane’s class that I did not fully understand and the near-total absence
of classroom talk related to grades in Zachary’s class. As the mindset literature identifies
grading structures as relevant to students’ growth and efficacy mindsets, I developed a
follow-up interview protocol focused on eliciting the participant’s philosophy and approach
to grading to ensure I had that data on this topic for both high school teachers, as well as the next semester with the college instructors.

However, at the same time that I was maintaining my etic framework to ensure comprehensive data collection, I also had to be open to the unique nuances and character of each participant’s classroom and instructional practice. I hand-coded observation notes, interview transcripts, and course documents for each participant to explore new “theoretical possibilities…in the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47). I then used portraiture’s analytic techniques of listening for repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, and cultural and institutional rituals (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), ultimately developing a set of “focused codes” (Charmaz, 2006) that characterized each participant’s practice. For example, Colin explicitly used a metaphor of games in his course design, but there were other resonant metaphors in his data that he was less consciously aware of—such as his frequent use of performance metaphors to describe teaching (e.g. “every class is sort of a wild improv routine;” “I feel like I’m on stage”)—which ultimately provided me with critical insight into how he understood the work of teaching and his own role as a teacher and contrasted with the kinds of metaphors that his counterpart, Liz, used to describe teaching. I continued documenting my emergent thinking about these codes, triangulated them across the different data sources and across participants, and began to identify emergent themes and patterns through the contrasting data, ultimately finalizing a set of 10-12 codes for each participant that described the key characteristics of their teaching (Appendix F).

At this point, I returned to my original anticipatory framework and mapped my etic codes onto the emic codes to create a visual matrix of thematic convergence and divergence across individual participants (Appendix F). This visual helped me begin to “weave the
tapestry” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), not only of each individual participant’s portrait, but of all four portraits in conversation, collectively addressing my overarching research questions for the study. I used the matrix, informed by the impressionistic records and memos I had written throughout the process, to prioritize which themes felt most resonant for each participant, which felt well-supported with multiple data sources, which ones would “hang together” (Willig, 2008) best in an individual narrative, and which would complement the narratives of the other participants. It was at this stage that I decided to focus each participant’s portrait on a focal mindset: Diane on the belonging mindset, Zachary on the value mindset, Liz on growth mindset, and Colin on the efficacy mindset. I acknowledge that depicting four mindsets across four participants is a suspiciously convenient structure, and in fact I utilized several checks (described further below) to try to dissuade myself from using it. However, the very same disciplined rigorous process of ongoing “description, interpretation, analysis, and synthesis” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 185) ultimately convinced me of the special resonance of the focal mindset for the paired participant.

**Authenticity**

Portraiture operates with “authenticity” as the standard for validity, seeking to achieve “resonance” with three audiences: the participants, other readers, the portraitist herself. To achieve a “credible and believable” portrait for these three audiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 260), I employed multiple strategies, consistent with other approaches to validity threats in qualitative research (Willig, 2008), during both data collection and analysis.

My semester-long involvement with research participants through observations and
periodic interviews provided a check on validity threats by affording me ongoing opportunities for “respondent validation” (Maxwell, 2010). The interviews were both a data source in and of themselves and a setting for hypothesis checking of my emerging interpretations of the participants’ understandings and attempted enactments of mindset-promoting practices. For example, in at least one interview with each participant, I shared an excerpt of observation field notes or a classroom artifact that I had written about independently in my impressionistic records or thematic memos and explicitly asked the participant for his or her interpretation. In some cases, the participants’ interpretations were consistent with my own, but in other cases they provided an important counterpoint that gave me new insight into their thinking or illuminated an important tension through our contrasting views. I also sent the participants near-final drafts of their respective portraits so that they could correct any errors, make clarifications, request that I add explanation or contextualizing details, and provide feedback on my interpretations. All four participants responded and affirmed the resonance of the findings and the portrait narratives, making only minor requests and corrections, all of which I incorporated.

The immersive data collection process also supported my accumulation of “rich data” that allowed for triangulation across multiple data sources; these are additional strategies to address threats to validity (Maxwell, 2010) and achieve portrait authenticity for all readers. In my portraits, I balance the “thin” description of specific observational details with the “thoughtful, discerning interpretation” that constitutes “thick” description (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 91), seeking to equip the reader with sufficient data to evaluate whether the narrative themes of the final portraits feel earned and resonant. I also wanted my portraits, which use a phenomenological approach, to resonate within the landscape of mindset research, which is grounded in more positivist traditions of inquiry. As
such, I sought to address construct validity, a common challenge in case study research (Yin, 2009), by utilizing the analytic methods described above to connect my emic codes and emergent themes back to the etic anticipatory framework drawn from the mindset literature.

Throughout this process, portraiture’s emphasis on balancing multiple intersecting voices has guided my work on achieving resonance for myself with these portraits while also observing restraint to allow other voices, perspectives, and interpretations to stand alongside mine. I employed “disciplined skepticism” toward my own interpretations by writing reflective memos in which I identified the biases and “personal predisposition[s]” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 13) that could be informing my emerging analyses and forced myself to articulate counter-interpretations and alternative hypotheses (Maxwell, 2010). I also shared excerpts of data, emerging findings, and portrait drafts with an interpretive community of fellow doctoral students who assisted me in the process of “listening for gaps, inconsistencies, and associations” in the raw data as well as in my understanding of those data (Luttrell, 2000, p. 517). Their insights as fellow researchers but also as a general audience were invaluable to me in crafting final portraits in which I hope the rich, varied, and detailed description supports my interpretations but also invites readers to contemplate and evaluate both the portrait and the portraitist for themselves.

Notes on Composition

I close with explanatory notes about a couple of methodological and aesthetic choices in my portraits. First, the educators are my focal participants, not their students; as such, I have fully de-identified students’ written work. However, it is impossible to observe instructional interactions without including the student side. As such, I have made certain decisions about how to present students in the portraits. I give students pseudonyms if I
deem it necessary for narrative clarity and then continue to refer to them by pseudonym if I feel a reader might gain insight into the educator’s practice by seeing the same student’s reactions to various instructional decisions or events. If knowing a student’s identity, even by pseudonym, is not necessary for either of these two objectives in a classroom scene, I refer to him or her generically (“student,” “young man,” “young woman”). There are also a few cases, especially in the larger high school classes that I entered mid-year, where I did not know students’ names yet and therefore could not identify them in my early observations.

Additionally, I do not provide any identifying physical descriptions of the students themselves, other than occasionally describing their clothing. This decision is partly practical but also philosophical: I do not have demographic data on the students in the observed classes, nor did I ask the students how they identify, so I choose not to make assumptions about their race and ethnicity. (For the sake of conventional narrative clarity, I had to compromise on this standard with regards to gender identity and pronoun usage.) As I composed the portraits, I also became intrigued by the idea of focusing on what the students were saying and doing, rather than what they looked like, and thus putting readers in the position of wondering how their own reactions to certain classroom events might change depending on the identity or appearance of the student(s) involved.

I use block text throughout the portraits as a technique for restraining my interpretive voice and presenting readers with a self-contained unit of data. Block quotes present participants’ longer comments without interruption from me, for the reader’s independent consideration. Similarly, excerpts of field notes presented in block text function as snapshots or sketches laid in front of readers, for them to pick up and examine for themselves. I am occasionally present as the observer in these field notes—what Lawrence-
Lightfoot (1997) calls “voice as witness,” the most restrained use of a portraitist’s voice—to help convey the “feel” of the moment beyond the technical aspects of what people are saying or doing, but refrain from the other, more visible dimensions of interpretive voice until I return to the main portrait narrative.

I have also made certain decisions regarding formatting consistency across the portraits, especially given the language-rich environments and the centrality of writing as the core skill in all four classrooms. Within the portraits narratives, italics designate all written text; I use underlining (in narration) and capitalization (in dialogue) for emphasis. Finally, other than redacting identifying names and making one edit for clarity in some of Liz’s students’ work that I explain in Chapter 6, I present all student work unedited; any mistakes in italicized text throughout the portraits should therefore be considered “sic erat scriptum.”
Chapter 4

Making the Team: “I belong in this academic community”

Positive, caring teacher-student relationships are a key dimension of students’ sense of belonging in school, but teacher caring and relatedness can take many different forms, especially when leveraged in service of academic achievement and outcomes. In this portrait, we see Diane Bauer’s active investment in Riverside Academy’s distinctive school culture that seeks to encourage students’ sense of belonging to an achievement-oriented “team” that will help them “compete” within the educational system. However, there are times when Diane questions the implications of such mission-driven relationships when the teachers and students come from different “teams” outside of school, and must negotiate what tradeoffs they are willing to accept in order to belong in the Riverside community.

Team Spirit

The colorful banner hanging over Riverside Academy’s high school entrance reads, Work hard. Get smart. Be nice. Each phrase is superimposed over a corresponding photo: students studying together, students staring down at a paper together, a student smiling. After being buzzed through the outer door, I walk past a metal detector that seems to be out of use (or order) but still takes up half the entryway, sign in at the main office, then continue down the main artery of the school. Slender flags displaying Riverside’s “character traits”—including Perseverance, Responsibility, Self-Discipline, and Friendship—hang from the ceiling, spaced a few tiles apart. The cinderblock walls are painted in pastel neutrals and decorated with a combination of professionally printed posters and curated student work. Underneath a series of glass-encased bulletin boards, individual students’ college acceptances are publicized on half-sheets of colored paper taped to the wall. Throughout my semester at
Riverside, this display has expanded in an ad hoc fashion, presumably as students share their admission news with school staff: some students have three or four acceptances posted in close proximity.

Diane Bauer’s classroom is off this front hallway, in between the Respect and Cultural Sensitivity ceiling banners. As with other Riverside classrooms, a sign next to the room number placard spells out the teacher’s name and degrees, which in Diane’s case include an Ed.D. from Fairfield University. The door itself is dominated by a large laminated poster version of a slogan that has become familiar to me from recent political protests and rallies:

_In this classroom, this is truth:_

- Black Lives Matter
- Women's Rights are Human Rights
- NO HUMAN IS ILLEGAL
- Science is Real
- A Person should not be Judged by the Actions of Others
- Love is Love
- Kindness is Everything

Inside the spacious, brightly lit classroom, the 22 students in Diane’s AP English Literature class are buzzing. It’s a designated Spirit Week at Riverside: the school uniform rules are relaxed to allow students to dress according to the daily wardrobe theme. Today is Decade Dress-Up and the senior class has the 1990’s. As the students compare outfits and chatter excitedly about the upcoming photo shoots in their advisories, I am amused—as a child of the 90’s myself—at their hyper-stylized vision of a decade that predates most of their births; there are lots of pale-wash jeans, half-unbuckled overalls, and sky-high ponytails. The students continue talking through the morning announcements, ignoring the disembodied voice coming over the loudspeaker until she announces two recent college
acceptances, including one from this class: Talia has been admitted to Mayfield University. Talia jerks her head and crinkles her brow, either in genuine surprise at hearing her acceptance broadcast to the entire school, or in an elaborate adolescent pantomime of exasperation at being singled out. The roughly 100 students in Riverside’s 12th-grade cohort have been at the school together since the sixth grade, however, and so Talia’s classmates do not let the moment escape unnoticed: Zara makes soft golf-clapping gestures with her fingertips, and Will leans over from a nearby desk to give Talia a high-five.

Diane, a White woman in her 50’s with blonde pixie-cut hair and a wiry frame, sits at the school-issued laptop stationed at the front of the room, chatting intermittently with the students as she finishes typing out a Do Now prompt that she wants the students to discuss in pairs. She asks one young man if he’s dressed on theme, and he affirms that he is, somewhat defensively (“I wouldn’t dress like this normally!”)—though, like Diane, I am uncertain how his light blue button-down shirt and khaki shorts are particularly evocative of the 90’s. Another student interrupts to tell Diane how “sweet” her ride is, having finally identified her red pickup truck in the school parking lot this morning. Outside of working at Riverside, Diane prefers a rural lifestyle: she lives on several acres of farm land north of the city and keeps horses.

Diane draws the students’ attention back to the prompt projected on the white board, which is mounted on the front wall of the room along with dozens of Riverside t-shirts commemorating past events and student cohorts dating back to the class of 2011: 

*Riverside JUNIOR PRIDE, Riverside 1st Homecoming, Congratulations, you played yourself.* The students have had time to discuss the Do Now, so Diane cold-calls: “Marisa, baby.”

“Yes, mom?” Marisa says, swiveling away from her partner to face front but
answering with her usual touch of sass.

“In your opinion, which character should feel the most guilty? Why?” Diane asks her, reading the Do Now prompt aloud.

“I said Dimmesdale,” Marisa replies, “because he got Hester pregnant.”

Nathalie, who is wearing a red bandanna tied over her hair, enormous hoop earrings, and an oversized T-shirt, offers Chillingworth, “because he’s always looking for revenge.”

“That 90’s look is so good on you,” Diane tells her.

“Thank you.”

“Just smashing. Is that Tupac?” Diane asks, gesturing at the enormous face screen-printed on Nathalie’s shirt. It is, and Diane nods. “I love that,” she says.

“What decade are you, Dr. Bauer?” one of the other students asks. Although she teaches all four sections of 12th-grade English at Riverside, Diane is not dressed like her students; she tells them that she is a 10th-grade advisor and is therefore assigned that grade’s decade, the 1970’s. She jokes that unlike the students, she could just rummage in her own closet to produce her look, which includes a flower-embroidered peasant tunic, striped wool poncho, ripped jeans, and moccasins. On most other days when I visit, I find Diane wearing some kind of Riverside apparel, including duplicates of the t-shirts that are stapled around the white board. A fanciful vision that struck me once of Diane pulling shirts directly off her classroom wall to wear is both amusing and not entirely unfitting: in her tenth year of teaching here, Diane thoroughly embodies all things Riverside.

Diane was looking for a school with a strong vision and identity when she decided to leave her teaching job of 19 years at a comprehensive public high school in an urban district
in Connecticut. Near burnout from the exhaustion of toiling in a school where “you go in your room and you shut your door” and colleagues resisted notions of student-centered pedagogy, collaboration, and professional development—even more or less “chas[ing]” out a principal who tried to implement them—Diane felt she was “fighting a losing battle. I was like, 'I can’t do this anymore,’” she tells me. “If I was going to teach again it had to be somewhere different and cool, and this is how I found Riverside.”

Founded as an Expeditionary Learning (EL) school in partnership with the experiential learning program Outward Bound, Riverside is part of an educational “movement” that blends character education with mastery approaches to authentic learning to engage student and teachers alike in work that is challenging, adventurous and meaningful, the EL website explains, helping them become active contributors to building a better world.10 When she was initially hired as the ninth-grade English teacher in Riverside’s second year of operation, Diane was finishing her doctorate in education “with a focus on progressive schools” and found Riverside’s mission—including its stated commitment to providing a small, personalized setting to support students in learning to care for themselves and others—appealing as a different model for working with an urban student population very similar to her students in Connecticut. Forty-seven percent of Riverside students are classified as Hispanic, 25% Black, and 1% Asian, with 25% classified as White; 48% are classified as economically disadvantaged, and Diane identifies many of her students as first-generation college-goers, meaning they will be the first in their families to attain postsecondary education.

Unlike the “losing battle” she was fighting alone in Connecticut, Riverside provides Diane with the opportunity to feel like part of a team of educators, working together to

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create a learning environment where students from historically underserved populations can likewise feel a strong sense of belonging in a culture of achievement. I notice that in contrast to how she talks about her former school, Diane often uses “we” when describing Riverside, positioning herself as part of a unified collective. With her students, she has “talked a lot about teamwork and us being a team,” she tells me. “The community is the team; we’re all trying to help each other.” For Diane, teams are defined by collectively working toward the same goals and rooting each other on in the process: “We’ll psych ourselves up like a team” prior to the AP exam, she tells her class one day.

Indeed, much of Riverside’s messaging around students’ scholarly potential feels analogous to the kind of “psyching up” that occurs around athletic team competition. Like a stadium bedecked in championship banners and tributes to franchise legends, the school building is decorated with artifacts that remind students of their team membership and the legacy of success they are part of. Students see their own names lining the hallways they walk through every day, their community membership paired with exemplary work, honors and accolades, and college acceptances. For the seniors, graduation takes on a community meaning all its own, as the 12th-grade teachers have coined the moniker “Operation Graduation” for their united mission to ensure that 100% of the students graduate. Displays in the hallway report out on target graduation benchmarks from each 12th-grade advisory, and several of the tees on Diane’s classroom wall are Operation Graduation shirts from previous years. The shirts also mark senior class identity more generally; the students are sometimes directed to wear them for grade-level events even when the event has nothing to do with graduation. These rituals of wardrobe coordination, like the Spirit Week dress-up

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11 Ultimately, 94% of Riverside’s Class of 2017 cohort graduates on time, compared to 77% of the district.
themes, serves as a physical demonstration of team affiliation and belonging.

However, the more I talk with Diane, the more I realize that being part of the Riverside “team” actually comprises membership in multiple communities at different levels—the classroom, school, educational system, and a broader societal or cultural level. Each of these communities has different characteristics of and conditions for belonging and requires Diane to negotiate different challenges and dilemmas of authority, ownership, and responsibility for the team’s function and well-being.

Coach and Cheerleader

A birthday sign for one of the 12th-grade advisors has been taped up next to the entrance when I arrive at Riverside one day—a detail that I initially register as insignificant until the bell rings for the start of third period, which follows advisory, and Diane’s classroom is only about half full. A Do Now prompt projected on the board asks students to Write down 3 strategies you would use when taking the AP multiple choice exam, but the students are moving sluggishly, the low attendance conveying a lack of urgency to do anything and making it difficult for Diane to focus the students who are present on the task at hand.

“YOU don’t have your notebook open, YOU don’t have your notebook open,” Diane calls out, pointing to individual students in a kind of reverse-Oprah routine as she weaves between the rows of desks to reach the phone at the back of the room. “What’re you eating?” she asks one student who used the classroom microwave to heat up some food and is now chowing down at her desk. “It looks really good.” When she reaches the phone, Diane dials the main office to request that they call the birthday teacher’s room and have him send any of his lingering advisees to class. “Right now,” she adds.

“And how is everyone today?” she asks the rest of the students, hanging up the
phone and crossing back to the front of the room. The students answer in solo words—“good,” “tired,” “dead”—as Diane starts passing back a practice AP section that the students took last week. Janie gazes briefly at the score on the front of her packet before holding up a clear plastic folder stuffed full of papers and shaking it at Diane, saying, “This whole thing—it’s full of 1’s from this class!”

“That’s because you didn’t try enough,” Esther says, with just enough of a lilt in her voice to make me suspect she is ironically parroting an often-heard line.

“Apparently, I didn’t!” Janie scoffs.

“Are you being sarcastic or serious?” Diane asks Janie. “You ARE improving, you just have to keep trying.”

Diane understands that students’ relationship with the course content influences their sense of belonging in a classroom. The AP class provides an opportunity for some students to enact a particular academic identity and join a community of learners they want to belong to. “I think it’s kind of a cultural mindset that...there’s a group of kids who are the ‘smart’ kids—” Diane curls her fingers into air quotes around the words—“and they naturally are going to go into AP because that’s just where they’re all going. And for one of them to not do that would probably be a difficult choice, like, ‘I’m putting myself in with those other kids.’” Other students, though, may have been “pushed in” to AP by a well-intentioned teacher or counselor trying to challenge students “to do it just to see that they could do it,” and may “feel like they really don’t belong” because they are struggling

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12 Janie is either referring to the scoring scale of 1-5 for the criterion-referenced AP exam, where a 3 designates a student as “qualified” for college-level work (according to the College Board, the creators of the exam), or the scale of 1-4 used for Riverside’s standards-based assessment, where a 3 is equivalent to meeting the learning target. In either case, a 1 is the lowest possible score.
academically. Affirming and deepening students’ self-efficacy is therefore critical to their sense of belonging in the class.

In striving to build a community of learners with high self-efficacy, Diane occupies a hybrid role of team coach and cheerleader—the latter a role that she herself identifies playing for students, particularly struggling learners who openly say things like, “I suck at this, this is so hard…I shouldn’t be in here,” or otherwise draw attention to their poor achievement outcomes, as Janie does. Diane’s efforts to “be much more of a cheerleader for these guys to help them feel like they belong” include countering students’ negative mindsets by “remind[ing] them of our growth self-talk”—alluding to Carol Dweck’s work on growth mindset, which Riverside teachers and students alike have learned about through school-wide initiatives. “You have to say, ‘I can and I will and I’m going to,’” she says. She also models her own improvement process to show students that making mistakes is a natural part of growth and does not invalidate someone’s belonging. Despite her decades of teaching experience, this is Diane’s first time teaching an AP class, a fact she says she openly admitted to students at the beginning of the year, telling them, “I’m new at this, too. We’re going to grow and figure this out together.” In one lesson, she admits to the students that an activity “didn’t work as well as I thought” and reassures them that “that’s not your fault, it was my lesson idea.” Likewise, she sometimes allows students the option of revising final graded essays, especially if she recognizes patterns across the class indicating that “we really haven’t practiced this as much as maybe we should’ve, or maybe I need to re-teach the lesson a little bit clearer.” Such a revision policy is not without logistical challenges—including a sometimes dizzying shuffle of multiple assignments being turned in or passed back at the beginning of class and Diane snatching precious minutes of class time to keep up with her piles of grading while students are working—but it is a key way to show students
that she, too, is actively working toward self-improvement.

Diane knows, though, that verbal “cheerleading” only goes so far; she also has a coaching responsibility to guide students through exercises that will simultaneously build their efficacy and feelings of belonging. These exercises can be as simple as the Do Now prompt activating students’ thinking about test-taking strategy for the AP exam, or they can serve as the guiding principle underlying classroom interaction. She invokes the notion of “teamwork and us being a team” again when it comes to collaborative learning activities like discussions, where “if I don’t understand something, my classmates will talk about it and help me understand. And it’s not like they know much more than me, it’s that as a group we can all get this. Alone, maybe if I look at a poem, I’m like—” Diane blows out air between her lips in a “pffft!” of exasperation. But “as a group we start to talk and help each other out, so it’s a lot of teamwork here again, too.”

Joining the team at Riverside taught Diane about the value of pedagogical activities that position students as collaborators and co-constructors of knowledge. “When I taught in Connecticut, I had never even heard of any of this stuff,” she tells me. “It was almost a new language” that she had to learn at Riverside, since EL Education “is all about protocols” that require active student participation and interaction. These activities “are hammered home” in professional development and EL institutes Diane has attended over the years. “That’s one of the magics for me of coming to this school,” she says: “it’s like I learned to teach all over.” That learning process was not without challenges. “The planning is so much harder,” she says, because “there’s just many more moving pieces” to constructing a meaningful student-centered learning activity instead of preparing a lecture. “My first few years here…it felt like I was juggling 16 balls at the same time,” but gradually she saw her planning efforts
behind the scenes playing out in a new kind of classroom dynamic, one where “I could just sit back and watch” as the students collectively owned the responsibility for the work in class. “I think it’s better teaching, you know?” she reflects. “It makes them more active and in charge of their own learning…if you get out of their way, they often do better.” Diane recognizes that her coaching role is bounded; at a certain point, coaches have to step back and expect the team to execute.

I witness this dynamic at work one day when Diane divides the students into groups to “become experts” on one of the four novels they read this year (Great Expectations, The Scarlet Letter, The Great Gatsby, and Things Fall Apart); tomorrow, the students will form heterogeneous “jigsaw” groups—a student says the name along with Diane, revealing his familiarity with the protocol—where they will each be responsible for teaching their expert content to the new group, giving everyone a role to play in the collective learning experience. “Understand what you need to do?” she asks.

“Yes, mom,” a couple of students intone.

I am sitting closest to the Great Expectations group, and while I hear them oscillate between the assigned task and free-associative comments—whether there is a difference between a graveyard and a cemetery, college rejections, financial aid, glaucoma, backless bras for prom—they also regulate themselves. One student play-acts a strict teacher at one point to get the team back on topic. “Everyone say a character,” she orders. “Janie, go.” When Diane adds another task, assigning the expert groups to read through a list of Q3 essay prompts dating back to the 1970 AP exam and choose four that could be answered with
their assigned novel,\textsuperscript{13} the group instantly strategizes, electing to divide and conquer the lengthy packet—essentially creating their own kind of mini-jigsaw protocol to accomplish the task as a team.

As Diane herself tells me, though, turning things over to the students can be “messier…way messier. And that’s what’s scary” about enacting pedagogy that commits to student-centered collaborative learning, rather than a teacher-centered model. Within the Great Expectations group, the students share out their ideas about the essay prompts and collectively choose the four that they feel work best, but they do so with minimal engagement with the text before quickly returning to their other topics of conversation, which they discuss for the remainder of the class period. Across the room, one member of the Gatsby group is turned around in her seat talking to Esther, whose Scarlet Letter group appears to have disbanded: Kirk’s head is on his desk and, in one of the only displays of student conflict I ever see at Riverside, Amanda has drawn her desk away from the others and turned it around so that her back is to them. When Diane checks in with the class a few minutes later, the Scarlet Letter group is the only one that reports not being finished with their work. “Why not?” Diane asks them. “Everyone in this room is finished except you—why is that?” I cannot hear the student responses, but Diane warns them that they must be caught up for the jigsaw portion of the activity tomorrow because “everyone else is gonna rely on you to explain The Scarlet Letter.”

“We got it,” Esther assures her.

\textsuperscript{13} Two hours of the AP English Literature exam are devoted to three essays worth 55% of the total score. The first two essay questions ask students to perform a textual analysis on a poem (Q1) and a prose or drama passage (Q2) supplied by the exam. The third question (Q3) is a thematic analysis prompt that students apply to a book of their choice that they have read previously.
The moments when Diane, as cheerleader and coach, is relegated to the sidelines are crucial moments for the team’s growth. Part of belonging to the team means contributing to the team’s execution of a task, and collectively owning successes and failures. When reprimanding the Scarlet Letter group, Diane invokes their responsibility to the rest of their peers as the impetus to get the work done; they are letting the team down otherwise. She also does not offer them any assistance in solving their self-inflicted problem, leaving them to sort it out amongst themselves—which Esther assures her that they will.

But as Diane notes, even these relatively contained hiccups in the team-building process are “messy” and “scary” for a teacher to leave up to the students. The anxiety only increases when the team is not performing on a larger scale, when the stakes are higher than the successful completion of a jigsaw protocol. Diane’s sense of responsibility to student belonging extends to a definition of community beyond the walls of her classroom, which in turn raises different questions about her role in relation to the team.

Family Ties

At the end of my second observation at Riverside, Diane tells the students she wants to use the last few minutes of class to share with them what the 12th-grade teachers discussed in their most recent meeting about “HOWs.” Ignoring the handful of audible snorts this acronym prompts, Diane points out that the 12th-grade has the fewest Scholars in the school, largely because of low homework completion.

Riverside designates homework completion as a “habit of work,” one of four academic success behaviors that the school promotes;\(^\text{14}\) collectively, the four “HOWs” are

\(^\text{14}\) The habits of work are: 1) I come to class ready to learn; 2) I actively and collaboratively participate in class; 3) I assess and revise my own work; 4) I complete daily homework.
assessed as 20% of a student’s quarter grade in each class and also averaged as a kind of alternative GPA. Students who reach a certain threshold on their HOW GPA each quarter can earn an additional team affiliation: recognition as a Riverside “Scholar.” The Scholars bulletin board, which explains the selection criteria and displays the full names of the Scholars by grade level for each marking period, is directly across the hall from Diane’s classroom and informs me that in addition to public recognition, Scholars receive rewards such as free admission to school events, extra dress-down days that relieve them from uniform requirements, and bathroom privileges: middle school Scholars are allowed to go to the bathroom at their discretion during lunch, while high school Scholars have access to a dedicated Scholars bathroom, the bulletin board explains.

Diane asks the students to help problem-solve what to do about the low Scholar attainment in the 12th grade; in the younger grades, she says, the teachers have decided to start giving detentions for missed homework.

The students groan en masse, and then all start talking at once. My not knowing their names yet adds to the impression of general cacophony. Many students are incredulous that “we’re getting ready for college” and teachers want to give detentions for not doing homework?! Diane agrees that a punitive approach may not be appropriate, but what about new incentives? Would those help? One young woman scoffs, “I’m still not doing it.” Within a couple of minutes, Diane and the students are in agreement that neither punitive consequences nor incentives are preparing students for the reality of college, but if that’s the case, Diane wonders, what should Riverside teachers do?

The students are talking partly amongst themselves and partly to Diane. “Just leave it.” “It is what it is.” “Think about it, if you go to college and don’t do your work, you get a
“Well,” says Diane, “it gets nerve-wracking when those zeroes become an F and you don’t graduate.”

“That’s our fault,” someone says. Another student explains that it’s a matter of prioritization. When multiple assignments are due, she takes care of the biggest or most pressing one; if the smaller assignments don’t get done—“oh well,” she shrugs.

Diane observes that homework detentions are consistent with another recently announced policy: assigning detention to students after they are tardy to school three times.

A young woman near me speaks out so forcefully that her classmates fall silent to listen to her. She argues that the tardiness policy “ignores different socioeconomic situations,” such as homeless students, and “targets” those students unfairly when they have legitimate reasons for not being able to get to school consistently on time.

Diane drags an empty student desk toward her at the front of the room and sits on the table portion, her feet on the chair seat, facing the students, perhaps signaling that she is pulling up a seat at the debate table, that this conversation is serious and worthy of settling into. Resting her elbows on her knees as she addresses the class, she acknowledges that there are students who face real obstacles and transportation challenges in getting to school, but “what about kids who just don’t want to get up?”

“That’s on them,” the young woman retorts.

Another student observes that it’d be one thing if the tardiness policy had always existed, but “they can’t just make up new rules at the end of the year.” Her comment opens the floodgates again for the rest of the class. Someone bursts into a tirade about “certain
teachers—not naming any names” who assign huge projects but then say, “You can’t text me past 8 pm”—“SEVEN!” someone corrects—and how unfair it is that teachers can impose time restrictions on answering questions from students who are sometimes staying up all night to complete the work. “And then I’m punished for being late to school because I’m tired?!” the student exclaims. “OK, I’m just not gonna do it, then.”

Diane is highly cognizant of the demographics of the Riverside student population and constantly negotiating what role she should assume in order to serve students best. She is aware that many of her students “have to deal with life on a very different level than wealthier students might,” but at the same time she recognizes that they need to find a way to overcome those circumstances and perform despite the obstacles. Many of the terms and conditions of community membership at Riverside are not just about creating a sense of belonging here and now, they are intended to equip student to belong to future academic communities. “My thinking has changed a lot from teaching ninth graders to 12th-graders,” Diane tells me. “Like if I didn’t teach ninth grade well, at least there would be 10th, 11th and 12th-grade teachers] that could possibly pick up where I left off.” When teaching 12th-graders, “I need to give them a product that is going to help them when they walk out of here,” she says, because “there’s nobody after me to help fix it up…that’s really scary on my part, you know.” Diane feels a sense of urgency to try to give her students everything they will need to succeed in their post-high school lives—which, ideally, includes the ability to sustain membership in a college community. “Since college is our end goal here,” she says, “if we’re not preparing them then we’re not doing a service…I say to my students at the beginning of the year, I have a responsibility to prepare you to be successful in your college classes, and I take that responsibility very seriously.”
That seriousness manifests through Diane’s enforcement of Riverside’s rules and policies in a way that evokes a tough love, “my house, my rules” parenting approach. Diane says that Riverside—again using the school name to describe the collective behavior of the faculty—“pushes and prods and encourages and lifts and hugs and holds and cajoles” its students, conveying an intimate, familial relationship between teachers and students. It has not escaped me that some of Diane’s saucier students call her “mom” when she gives them a directive. Moms can nag and scold and punish, but they do it because they care about you and your future.

Indeed, Diane sees the role of family as critical in conveying a sense of investment in the current academic community in order to gain access to a future team. She often speaks about a difference in “cultural expectations”—“‘cultural’ meaning, you know, not necessarily skin color,” she says, “but social expectations”—between Riverside families and those in more affluent communities. For example, in her own experience growing up in an “all-White, upper middle-class” New England town, Diane explains, “it was kind of like, you learn to walk, you learn to swim, you learn to ride a bike, and you go to college. It was just part of—there was just no NOT doing that. So, you did your homework.” By contrast, “I’m thinking that where families have different kinds of expectations for their children, it’s different,” she says. “Our students, they don’t do homework. They do not do homework. They won’t do it, they don’t do it, they don’t care if they’re gonna fail or not. It’s like, ‘I’m not doing homework.’” While she acknowledges that her students can face structural impediments such as having to work or take care of younger siblings after school that may not leave them “as much time to ‘do school,’” Diane also sees schools and teachers as providing a kind of surrogate family acculturation of students into the importance of doing homework that is necessary for students to surmount those impediments and achieve on par
with their more privileged peers.

A similar philosophy guides Riverside’s policy of “sweating the small stuff” in service to the Self-Discipline character trait; the rules are intended both to create a certain kind of team environment in the present and to make students competitive for their future teams. For example, *School uniforms help to create a professional learning environment*, the Riverside student/family handbook proclaims, *and wearing appropriate attire is a good habit for the future workplaces that our students contribute to.* I also observe a common understanding of behavioral expectations that are not codified in official school policies, such as when Diane reminds students to “SLANT” when listening to a guest speaker. “What does SLANT mean?” she prompts, and after some temporary amnesia over some of the letters, the students are able to collectively piece together the acronym (*Sit up, Lean forward, Ask and answer questions, Nod your head, Track the speaker*).

Yet Diane expresses some reservations at the implications of this teacher-student dynamic when a predominantly middle-class White faculty is placing these conditions on low-income students of color. Riverside’s full-time staff—a broader category than teachers alone—is 70% White,\(^{15}\) making it slightly more racially diverse than the district and much more diverse than the state and country,\(^ {16}\) but Diane is aware that the inverted student versus teacher demographics can make a school’s promotion of achievement culture seem like “paternalism”—a perversion of the idea of family. “Our guidance counselor—who is a woman of color—points out that it’s interesting that mostly urban schools and kids of color

\(^{15}\) The state department of education provides racial demographic data only for full-time equivalency (FTE) staff at a school, which includes staff members who are not classroom teachers. The proportion of White teachers is likely higher than 70%.

\(^{16}\) District-wide, 71% of FTE staff are White; state-wide for public school teachers, the figure is 90%. Nationally, about 80% of all teachers (public and private school) are White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).
have those tight rules,” Diane tells me, whereas “if you go to suburban schools and White schools and districts, there’s none of that. And I’m like, that’s interesting, I wonder why teachers, urban schools feel the need to tighten up so much, you know? And does it help or does it make things worse?”

“Do you have an opinion about that?” I ask.

“Well,” she replies, “I just had a thought that could come from my, you know, very White upbringing and White privileged self: maybe it is White people’s thought that students in urban settings don’t have enough structure in their families and lives, so we have to make structure for them.” She sees the problematic assumption of inferiority reflected in this perspective, but also insists that “it’s never been like the Great White Hope, I’m going to go in and ‘save’ those kids.” Rather, she recalls the explanation provided by Riverside’s founding principal, the man who hired her and who is “White as White can be,” Diane says. “Irish-Catholic…grew up doing the White upper middle-class thing.” She summarizes his philosophy as, “If we want students to be able to make their way in a White-dominated society, they need to have those skills to be able to code-switch in and out. And it’s not necessarily taking away their culture, but we’re not teaching them to compete with the dominant society if we’re not giving them that ability.

“And, you know, that feels OK to me,” Diane says, because “we still are a White-dominated society, so if a kid can find more opportunities there, then that’s great.” She muses briefly over whether she might have some “Black colleagues who might not necessarily feel that way,” but ultimately concludes, “I think pretty much everybody here is on board with the philosophy.” She also sees that collective buy-in from the staff as critical for “everybody in the building having the same expectations” and creating a consistent
school culture. “When I worked in Connecticut, there was no sort of unity,” she says. “Everybody did their own thing, there was no set of common rules, and that place was insane.” Diane views the enforcement of school rules and expectations as similar to the use of active learning protocols: the goal is that “do[ing] school” in these ways “becomes kind of second nature” to the students and teachers alike, creating a shared understanding of what membership in this community looks like.

Yet I wonder whether “unity” in a goal or mission must necessarily be enacted through behavioral conformity, especially given the discretion I see Diane herself exercising with regards to the rules. She admits to being “on the fence” about the merit of some school policies and can be selective in her enforcement of them. For example, until I perused the Riverside student handbook later, I was unaware of the rule that students may not bring food or drinks to class, with the exception of water because they are a distraction from learning, since I never saw Diane enforce the rule by throw[ing] away unauthorized food and beverages in the classroom, as the handbook dictates; in fact, she lets students use her microwave during class and bonds with them over their food several times over the course of the semester. Neither does she mindlessly toe the company line even with the many school rules that she does enforce. She questions some of the “very insignificant” minutiae within the dress code, for example, as possibly not worth the “backlash” teachers sometime get from students, “escalat[ing]” minor infractions into major disciplinary issues and ultimately distracting from learning more than the original offense. “Is it more important to send a kid to in-school suspension for the day because they’re out of uniform three times,” she asks rhetorically, or to keep students in class as much as possible? Diane also tries to continue enacting her “team” mentality by inviting students into the teacher debate over homework detentions, giving them space to push back and express the conflict between school policies and their lived reality.
For their part, the students respond to Diane’s invitation in complex, possibly contradictory ways. They simultaneously demand individual accountability (“that’s on us”) and teacher support via text message late into the night. However, they also highlight the difference in agency allotted to teachers versus students: teachers are allowed to set boundaries on their out-of-school time, but students are still beholden to school responsibilities even after leaving the building. This imbalance is a feature of all teacher-student relationships—teachers assign homework and control the pace of class—but there are additional power and privilege dynamics here as well. Diane acknowledges that many Riverside students “have to deal with life on a very different level than wealthier students might”—including after-school responsibilities that may delay their homework start time—and the students argue that the school punishes them for not overcoming these obstacles without providing equivalent support to help them meet those expectations or demanding reciprocal teacher accountability.

Indeed, Diane tells me that Riverside “kids I’ve talked to who have gone to college find it easier because they have more time. They’re like, ‘We have a lot of homework but we have more unstructured time to do our homework, even with jobs.’ Because, you know, they spend a million hours a day in school here, no break—” As if to punctuate her point, the bell signaling the end of the period sounds over Riverside’s PA system and interrupts her, and she trails off, losing her train of thought as students spill into the hall.

In Diane’s comment, though, I hear the echoes of her insight from the student-centered active learning protocols: “if you get out of their way, they often do better.” Like her experience leaning to facilitate those activities, Diane’s efforts to create a unified sense of urgency around the team mission while also allowing space for students to occasionally
direct the conversation can be “messier...way messier” than being entirely prescriptive. It requires finding a tenuous balance between promoting a strong team culture and recognizing and valuing counter-perspectives from team members’ out-of-school lives.

The “I” in Team

Diane and I are discussing how she might handle ideological disagreements during her research paper unit—in which students are examining a “national issue” connected to the newly inaugurated presidential administration that “affects or will affect you or your family”—when she suddenly says to me, “I don’t know if I ever told you about coming out in front of the kids.”

“No!” I am startled not by the comment itself—Diane has spoken openly to me about being gay since I first met her, and all of her students know—but rather by its seeming non sequitur from what we have been discussing.

Diane chuckles and leans back in her seat, settling in to tell the anecdote. “Oh, it was a trip,” she says, recalling that it was early in her first year at Riverside, when she “barely knew” her ninth graders. The morning announcements over the loudspeaker that day included a reminder about a GSA meeting after school, which prompted some students to ask what the acronym stood for. When Diane explained that it was the Gay-Straight Alliance, the students erupted. “They were all like, ‘blahhh, gayyyyy,’ you know, like a lot of ninth-grade silly comments about gays,” she says. “I couldn’t shut them up.” One student in particular kept insisting, “There’s no gay people in this school!” to which Diane replied, “Yes, there are.’ And he’s like, ‘WHO?!’ and I said, ‘I AM!’

“So then they were all like—” Diane sits up rigidly in her seat, eyes and mouth wide open, imitating the students’ shock. “So I said, ‘All right, let’s talk about it. Go ahead and ask
me anything you want to ask.’’ Though relatively composed in the moment, she says she was “shaking a little bit” after class; “at my old school,” she says, “it was don’t ask don’t tell,” so she had never before talked about her sexuality in a school setting. When the principal happened to walk by, Diane told him what she had done:

I said, “I just outed myself to the class.”
And he goes, “Are you OK?”
“Yup.”
“OK. Do you need me in there?”
“No, I don’t think so.”
“Well, that was a great teaching moment; get back in there and talk about it.”

…So like the whole day was talking about being gay and answering questions. There was an adult in my room…I can’t remember if she was special ed or whatever, and she went and complained to [the principal] that it was inappropriate, and he said, “No it’s not. If you don’t want her to talk about that, then go to your office and take down the pictures of your family and don’t ever mention your spouse again.”

So, you know, as I did that, more teachers did that and…it just became a non-issue. It’s just not a thing, and that’s made it really easy for gay kids to come out, we’ve had some transgender students, and it just becomes a “whatever”…And that’s really what our school focuses on, is the staff just being OK with being who you are. Which is wonderful…we’re people first, you know…there’s never been a time where we’ve been told not to be who we are.

Although Diane then directs me “back to our questions,” apologizing for being “off topic, I know,” I find her story illuminating. She otherwise speaks so often and so seamlessly as part of the “we” of Riverside that it is fascinating to hear her retrospective on a time when she was still figuring out where and how she as an individual might fit into that “we.”

Embedded in her colleague’s complaint is an implicit conception of what school is about and a belief that certain out-of-school group affiliations, i.e. dimensions of individual identity, do not belong in the fabric of the school’s collective identity. In his rebuttal to the complaint, the principal stretches that fabric to include acceptance of diverse individuals as a condition
of Riverside team membership—a sentiment that Diane echoes years later by posting a statement of inclusion on her classroom door, the words conveying the idea that you should not have to give up who you are to be part of the team.

At the same time, though, familiar messages remind us that being part of a team sometimes requires individual sacrifice. We might be told to “take one for the team,” or that “there’s no ‘I’ in team,” encouraging us to be selfless in putting the team first and subordinating our needs and desires to the competitive goal or well-being of the team as a whole. The principal in Diane’s coming out story is the same one she quotes to me arguing that the school’s goal of helping students “compete with the dominant society” is “not necessarily taking away their culture.” Even if the school’s intense focus on achievement culture and identity is “not necessarily” subtractive, though, I am curious about where teachers like Diane find space not just to tolerate individual difference, but actively to invite students’ culture and individuality into class.

Diane herself identifies an ongoing tension around this question, especially in her AP class, where her deep sense of responsibility to prepare students for college sometimes conflicts with her inclination to provide more personally relevant learning experiences. She often refers to AP teaching as “teaching for a test, which is kind of a bummer,” she tells me, “but it’s the reality of the thing and I’d like for them to pass it so they can have that credit bump” from receiving college course equivalency, saving them “time and money.” Both to me and to the students, Diane often juxtaposes college readiness skills—and sometimes the prospect of college itself—with “real life.” She tells me that she and other Riverside teachers have “brainwashed [students] to think, over the years, that [their school work is] really important for college. Like [with] a research paper, I’ll get, ‘Why do we have to do this?
What does this have to do with life?’ And you know, it might not have anything to do with the job you hold ten years down the road, but it’s gonna help you in college.”

In addition to the pragmatic benefits of earning a high score on the AP exam, Diane believes the AP curriculum itself helps students to “keep up better” in college by training them to “tak[e] a piece of literature and [do] New Criticism, sort of just sticking with the text and talking about the elements of literature. Those are skills I know that they’re gonna need in college,” she says, “as opposed to more of a reader response, like what does this make you feel, how does this relate to your life?” The perceived imperative to teach classic literary criticism skills in AP persists for Diane no matter what the focal text is. In her first year teaching AP, she has pragmatically adopted the previous teacher’s reading list of what she derides as primarily “the White male canon,” so when she tells me she “want[s] to add an African American-authored book and…something more modern” to the syllabus next year,¹⁷ I expect her rationale to be increased representation and personal relevance for students. The main justification she gives, however, is that “in college, [students are] going to be exposed to a much greater variety of authors and styles and time periods,” so “being able to manage some different genres…will be helpful” for them. For Diane, trying to maximize students’ college readiness and achievement outcomes constrains her ability to personalize the curriculum. Without that pressure to prepare students for college, “my lessons would be more kind of character, real-world focused,” she says. “Like, what can we take out of this literature that might relate to you or the society we live in…you know, really getting at life issues as opposed to literature-focused elements.”

Despite these perceived constraints, Diane does manage to carve out some space to

¹⁷ AP English Literature has much more curricular flexibility than most other AP courses; many educators I talk to are surprised to learn, for example, that there is no set reading list.
“get at life issues,” even within the AP class. She reframes the research unit she teaches in all four sections of 12th-grade English to allow students to write their papers on a national issue that matters or relates to them, setting up a grade-wide “expedition”—the eponymous interdisciplinary, project-based learning that is a cornerstone of EL Education—on citizenship and activism. The expedition officially launches on a “kickoff day” that Diane and the 12th-grade teaching team organize: instead of regular academic classes, students hear invited speakers in keynote and breakout sessions, then engage in discussions as well as individual reflection before forming groups to begin thinking about their topic of choice for an activism project. On the morning of the kickoff day, Diane reminds the students that ultimately each project group will get to decide what their activism will look like, “so you have voice and choice. It could be a march, it could be writing a public service announcement, it could be a letter-writing campaign to senators, it could be fundraising for an immigrant center.” The goal is for the group to decide on an “organic action” rather than the teachers telling them what to do. Later, Diane tells me that this expedition is “the kind of stuff that has life-time value” for students. It also clearly holds personal value to Diane: many of the invited activist speakers are friends of hers, and partway through the semester I notice she has acquired and started wearing a rectangular pendant on a silver chain that reads, *Nevertheless, she persisted* in block letters, connecting her to the current activist movement of woman-led resistance.

As the longest-tenured teacher on the 12th-grade team, Diane takes a central role in planning and coordinating the expedition kickoff, and throughout the day I see evidence of her efforts to make the day inclusive of identities and lived experiences that differ from hers and the majority of Riverside teachers’. The photo slideshow that plays as students filter into the auditorium for the keynote session intersperses iconic images of Ruby Bridges, Rosa
Parks, César Chávez, Harvey Milk, suffragettes, and college students protesting the Vietnam War with images of a Black Lives Matter T-shirt, a “die-in” protest, Kobe Bryant and teammates wearing I can’t breathe warm-up shirts, and a kneeling Colin Kaepernick (a student near me murmurs his name when the image appears). The breakout session that I randomly choose to attend is led by a youthful-looking Puerto Rican man who grew up in the city and is now a Riverside parent and community organizer for criminal justice reform. He minces no words when describing the overlapping context of his work and personal background:

The U.S., he tells the students, was founded on principles of white supremacy, and this oppression continues today through ongoing rhetoric and policies aimed at being “tough” on people of color, such as the disparate sentencing for crack versus cocaine in the 1980s. Contrary to “the media narrative that we’re all lazy,” he says, it is these kinds of racist institutional policies that criminalize communities of color and entrench them in poverty. He has lived this pipeline himself. Growing up in a segregated neighborhood—several students nod in recognition of the local zone he names—and attending an under-resourced public school that disciplined him harshly for being “a hyper kid” caused him to “internalize that I was stupid. You guys know labeling theory, right?” he asks, explaining that he “started acting really tough” to counter the “really low self-esteem” he developed from absorbing explicit and implicit messages about his ability and worth. He was incarcerated twice on drug charges, the first time at age 18. When he was released, he struggled to get a job, “even at McDonald’s,” he says, even though “I’m light-skinned, right, and I can dress up real nice and look professional.”

Eventually, the speaker says, he was able to turn his life around in part because he began taking community college classes and realized for the first time that “school was fun.” He could go to the bathroom whenever he wanted and study topics that genuinely interested him, like Malcolm X and Puerto Rican history. He’d never known from his K-12 experience that education could be like this: “The school system sold me a lie,” he says. Around the same time, he landed a job as a janitor at a “prep school,” where he learned that “hyper kids” there were diagnosed with ADHD and given resources because “rich kids get taught” while “poor kids get tested” and pushed out. Wealthy students, he realized, are taught to think critically and feel a sense of agency over their lives. To do the same for “poor kids,” he argues that schools should “give them a true understanding of the systemic oppression of Black people to support the top tiny percentage of White people.” Without this critical understanding of systemic injustice, he says, poor communities of color can easily lapse into self-hate.
This speaker presents quite a different image of the “White-dominated society” than the one in the principal’s philosophy that Diane recalls: rather than a largely agnostic default academic culture that students should strive to be accepted in, the speaker depicts an actively hostile and oppressive hegemony to be challenged and changed. One by one, he takes aim at ideologies and practices that Riverside itself espouses through its “sweating the small stuff” policies: strict discipline, bodily control over students, the equalizing power of professional dress. (Diane shares with me that “sweating the small stuff” is rooted in broken windows theory, whose loaded history she is unaware of until I describe its connection to the over-policing of poor communities of color—though she is then able to link it conceptually to her own doubts over disciplining minor infractions.) Yet the speaker also sends his own daughter to Riverside—she is a 10th grader—and later in his talk credits “a White liberal woman” with “saving my life” by knocking on his door one day and introducing him to the idea of community organizing. Likewise, one of the keynote speakers—an African-American eighth-grade teacher at Riverside whom Diane introduces as “an activist by virtue of being a teacher”—delivers a similarly complex message, describing the experience of her 11-year-old son asking her about Tamir Rice as a clarifying moment when she realized she had to start thinking about “what I could do to change the way the world sees my son, and sees all of you,” to “prevent you from becoming the next hashtag.” She implores the students to “not just get accepted to college, but graduate, and take your rightful place on the throne of change.”

Both of these speakers present students with a stark perspective on the structural and systemic challenges that many of them face as members of urban, low-income communities of color. They speak from a place of solidarity with students, a solidarity rooted in shared identity and lived experience. Some of the students’ notes on the day—a
mandatory assignment that was collected for a grade—suggest the personal resonance of these perspectives; of the eighth-grade teacher, one student writes, *She reminds me of my mom...has to have hard conversations with [her kids] long before she thinks she has to. Story of life in Black America.* Yet the speakers also include Riverside in that solidarity, endorsing the school as an institutional ally through their choices to work and enroll their children here. It is a solidarity Diane has enacted by inviting them to speak at this event and privileging their voices above her own, at least for the day: other than introducing the speakers, she barely speaks in the keynote session and is not present in my breakout room.

I am left wondering, though, how these diverse and multifaceted perspectives might play out in a more sustained and systematic dialogue across different school stakeholders about what goals, hopes, and beliefs unite them as members of the Riverside community even while they may also have widely divergent philosophies that stem from their membership in different out-of-school communities and identity groups. As one student writes in her notes from the kickoff event, *People have an obligation to question societal systems.* Another student similarly observes, *We have the right and obligation to question the authorities.* It is unclear, though, what avenues at Riverside exist to continue fostering that spirit of critical questioning—and to allow it to be directed at local “systems” and “authorities” as well as national ones.

Achieving this kind of dialogue likely requires institutional commitments beyond the efforts of individual educators like Diane, who already struggled to balance what she saw as the “completely separate” curricular strands of AP and the activism expedition throughout the semester. She freely admits to me that she had to shortchange the expedition in her AP class because of time constraints. Her individual juggling act mirrors the larger institutional
trend she perceives of Riverside “becom[ing] more traditional” over time as it straddles the tension between the EL ideal of personally meaningful and relevant work and the perceived imperative to promote individual student attainment within the existing educational system. While these two goals are not inherently oppositional, Diane says that in practice it is hard to sustain an educational model that effectively balances both. “The ideal and the practical are two different things,” she tells me. “You can’t be a unique school and be part of a district, or necessarily be competitive…It’s just good practice to have our kids be able to keep up with kids in other schools. And get them into some better [colleges],” she adds. “A lot of our kids go locally into state schools,” but “it would be great to have a bigger chunk of high-reaching kids. And I think AP does that.”

Engaging students in the “real-world learning” ideal of EL Education has therefore taken a backseat to the pressures of the state accountability exam, adopting Common Core standards, and expanding AP offerings. Riverside ninth graders no longer attend Outward Bound, the founding partner of EL Education and “one amazing thing that made us unique” as a school, Diane says, but she accepts the sacrifice because, in the end, “was that going to make them get into colleges as easy as kids who were taking five AP courses at Western?” she asks rhetorically, naming one of the larger comprehensive high schools in the city that has drawn some students away from Riverside because of its broader range of offerings. “I think offering more AP classes is important. I think our kids want it and deserve it,” Diane says. “They deserve that opportunity”—even if it hampers teachers’ ability to design and implement more innovative curriculum that allows students to bring more of themselves into the classroom.

The irony here is that many elite high schools are increasingly moving away from AP
and toward curricular approaches that resemble the EL model; eight independent schools recently announced that they are abandoning AP classes in favor of a curriculum oriented toward collaborative, experiential and interdisciplinary learning that will not only better prepare our students for college and their professional futures, but also result in more engaging programs for both students and faculty...We expect this approach will appeal to students’ innate curiosity, increase their motivation and fuel their love of learning.\footnote{Anderson, N. (2018, June 18). Several well-known private schools in the D.C. area are scrapping Advanced Placement classes. \textit{The Washington Post}. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/06/18/several-well-known-private-schools-in-the-d-c-area-are-scrapping-advanced-placement-classes/} While this announcement comes a year after my Riverside data collection concluded, I recall an interview in which Diane alluded to socioeconomic disparities in which students are generally allowed to be themselves and develop as individuals at school. She mused that it would be “wonderful to have places that…speak to kids” who are not interested in traditional academics and/or “are great doing other things,” but added, “Who gets to go to them, you know? Rich people probably get to send their kids to these cool schools, but will low-income families get to do that?”

Diane was originally drawn to Riverside as a “cool school” for these “low-income families,” but in enacting its mission to field a competitive, college-ready team, Riverside has shed some of the “cool school” attributes that Diane loved about it—which in turn forces her as an individual teacher to conform to systemic pressures as well. She admits that “philosophically” she experiences “a great tension around that,” but she sees change as “ha[ving] to start, really, from the top down.” Unless “testing companies” magically “go away,” she says, or stop being so financially lucrative, “the whole school ‘thing’ that we’ve always known would have to be completely revamped” in order for educators to be genuinely free to build the schools they want for all students. And because “that’s not
possible,” she says, “if you’re gonna be a public school, you have to play by those rules. Until the entire education system changes from colleges on down, you have to keep doing what everybody else does.” Faced with what she perceives as an inequitable and intractable system, Diane sees conformity as the only viable strategy, even as it constrains the ability of teachers and students alike to fully “be who we are” in making a strong school team.

**Reflections on Promoting a Belonging Mindset**

The intersection of academic support and teacher caring is discussed in the literature on school belonging broadly but is particularly salient to the experiences of minoritized youth who may encounter lower academic expectations from teachers, as well as more contentious relationships borne out of negative perceptions or stereotypes. To counter this trend, many models of culturally relevant pedagogy incorporate high expectations and “academic press” as dimensions of teacher caring (Phillippo & Stone, 2013), such as in the notion of teachers as “warm demanders”: “warm” in the more traditional emotional definition of caring and “demanding” in their high standards and expectations for both student behavior and academic work (Ware, 2006). Warm demanders demonstrate caring and build relationships with students through authoritative—and sometimes authoritarian—upholding of classroom order through exacting standards for students’ academic behavior and discipline; they clearly define what it means to be a member of the current classroom community so that students can succeed in the future.

While she never uses the phrase itself, I see Diane striving to enact warm demander pedagogy; she uses similarly oxymoronic language in talking about teacher-student relationships at Riverside when she says that “Riverside pushes and prods [demanding] and encourages and lifts and bungs andbolds and cajoles [warmth]” its students. In her vision of her
class as a “team,” Diane emphasizes the mutual encouragement and social support that team members offer each other. She herself takes on head “cheerleader” duties, striving to replace students’ negative self-talk (“I suck at this, this is so hard, this is terrible, I shouldn’t be in here”) with positive affirmations and verbal encouragement (“I can and I will and I’m going to”). She participates willingly in goofy school traditions like Spirit Week and adorns her classroom with Riverside paraphernalia promoting a team culture of achievement. Beyond these verbal and visible messages of encouragement, Diane also “assume[s] responsibility for implementing strategies that enhance student learning” (Ware, 2006, p. 441) as a way of showing her support for students. She embraces the challenge of “learning to teach all over” again in order to enact Riverside’s student-centered, “progressive” pedagogical philosophy, modeling her own learning, development, and mistake-making for her students.

These pedagogical strategies and protocols themselves often relegate Diane to the metaphorical sideline by design; the emphasis is on the students’ performance, with Diane offering support, encouragement, and guidance from the periphery.

However, warm demanders also provide a “tough-minded, no-nonsense style of teaching” (Ware, 2006, p. 436). Diane’s acceptance and enforcement of most of Riverside’s “sweat the small stuff” rules reflect her belief that such structures are a way of showing her students the tough love they need to overcome out-of-school adversity and achieve academically. Even when she experiences doubt over the merit of some rules, such as the potential to be suspended over dress code violations, she is able to embrace the overall guiding philosophy and spirit of the rules as a mechanism for helping students find success.

The students jokingly calling Diane “mom” echoes Ware’s (2006) depiction of a warm demander who functions as an “other-mother” by providing a “cultural bridge” between the “middle-class, mainstream expectations of schools” and the students’ home communities (p.
445). Diane invokes the cultural divide between school and home often as a context for her work and responsibility as an educator; she sees herself and the other Riverside teachers as playing the role of surrogate family role in acculturating students to college-going aspirations and expectations. Moreover, Diane’s framing of Riverside’s mission as social justice activism and her blending of the activism expedition with AP instruction geared toward making students “competitive” echo historic perspectives on the importance of education for political and economic success in Black communities (Walker, 2001). There is a directionality and an intended outcome in “other-mothering”; Diane wants her relationships with students to promote their achievement motivations and outcomes, giving them greater economic and life opportunities.

However, it is critical to note that studies of “warm demanders” primarily center on African-American teachers of African-American students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ware, 2006); these warm demander traits and practices are therefore contextualized within a sense of shared racial/cultural identity and out-of-school community membership between teachers and students. White teachers face different challenges and considerations in trying to enact warm demander pedagogy with minoritized students (Ford & Sassi, 2014), such as the different valence of strict discipline policies coming from a teacher vested in sociopolitical systems of power, rather than authority stemming from shared community with students (Sleeter, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Diane invests her energies in cultivating a sense of “team” within the walls of her classroom—including posting a statement of inclusion prominently on the door—but she and her students simultaneously hold other team memberships that they do not relinquish once they enter school. Diane demonstrates her caring and recognition of the high stakes for her students through her decades-long commitment to urban education and ongoing efforts to improve as a teacher, but she does
not share in those stakes in the same way as do members of Riverside students’ various home communities. Beyond enacting certain practices, culturally relevant pedagogy also entails developing a deep understanding of racial identity and affiliation, which can be particularly challenging even for committed White educators (Hyland, 2005; Matias, 2013).

In many ways, Diane’s recognition of her own multiple team memberships primes her to do this work. Out of my four participants, she is by far the most frank and forthcoming about racial dynamics within her classroom and school: she readily identifies as White and names her Whiteness several times in our interviews as she mulls over the intersection of school policies and racial identity (e.g. her awareness of the danger of seeing oneself as “the Great White Hope” or a White savior). She is not a rule-enforcing automaton: she allows her students to challenge the teachers’ proposed new consequences for not completing homework or being late to school and air their grievances over the disconnect between school policies and the realities of their lives. She and her colleagues also demonstrate intentionality in the speakers they invite for the expedition kickoff: the Riverside parent activist and eighth-grade teacher both appeal to students from shared experience and community membership—and endorse Riverside as an allied institution in the process. However, Diane and the 12th-grade team seem to have taken these actions on their own, and the issues raised by these speakers are not sustained in conversations beyond the special event. There does not seem to be the same institutionalized support for Riverside teachers to engage in reflections and discussions about racial dynamics in the way that there clearly has been to achieve consistency in instructional and disciplinary approaches. Thus, Diane is left on her own to muse and speculate about whether she has “Black colleagues who might not necessarily feel that way. I don’t know. I think pretty much everybody here is on board with the philosophy.”
What would it look like to promote students’ sense of belonging in a strong school community that simultaneously acknowledges and affirms their other out-of-school identities and team affiliations? This question is not unique to Riverside—nor only to White teachers. The fact that the national teaching population is overwhelmingly White does make the issue particularly salient for that group (Zumwalt & Craig, 2008), but teachers of color are not automatically equipped with culturally relevant methods simply because of shared racial identity with students (Villegas & Davis, 2008). All schools and teachers should be engaged in this question. Riverside’s existing culture and the buy-in and continued effort it inspires from veteran teachers like Diane presents an especially promising institutional context, but more research is needed to bridge cultural perspectives with the motivational and psychological scholarship on belonging (Gray et al., 2018; Kumar et al., 2018). Such cross-disciplinary research could help schools like Riverside develop daily routines, building norms, and teacher professional development on cross-cultural relationships as another dimension of school culture that is valued as highly as “sweating the small stuff,” promoting students’ sense of belonging in a unified achievement culture that recognizes and values the individual differences of all team members.
Chapter 5

Choosing Your Adventure: “This work has value for me”

Perceived value comprises many different constructs in the scholarly literature, ranging from interest to utility to real-world relevance to general interconnectedness. In this portrait, we see how Zachary Kaplan understands “value” and “relevance” as multifaceted and dynamic constructs that include relatedness as a facet of value, not just a dimension of the “social milieu” of the classroom. Many of Zachary’s approaches to curriculum design map onto Brophy’s (2008) model for developing students’ appreciation for their course content, but they also demonstrate the tension between allowing students’ autonomous pursuit of what they find interesting versus more intentionally guiding the “invisible forces” of perceived value and relevance in service of student learning.

Clearing a Path

TESTING is hastily scrawled in green marker on a piece of scrap paper taped to the glass panels of Zachary Kaplan’s classroom door. Though the glass, I can see the telltale signs of a waning standardized exam session: desks spaced apart in rows, a handful of students lingering noncommittally over their papers, a bored proctor ambling around and looking at the wall decorations in someone else’s classroom. It is about a month into my observations at Oak Bridge School and the first of three days of the English Language Arts portion of the high school equivalency exam being administered statewide to 10th graders this week. The test’s disruption of normal routines is familiar to me from my own time teaching in the Boston Public Schools, and I am just turning away to continue my search for Zachary when the proctor comes to the door, having caught sight of my unfamiliar face peeking in. (In a school of 275 students and 18 teachers, it is easy to identify who doesn’t
belong.) He advises that I ask about Zachary’s room re-assignment in the main office.

Housed in a red brick building built in 1885, OBS does not have hallways in a traditional sense; on each floor, the classrooms open onto a spacious central area as large as the classrooms themselves. On the first floor, this central landing area serves as the “main office” but reminds me more of a youth hostel than a school because of all the people—mostly students, but sometimes staff—who are usually chilling around the large semi-circular secretary’s desk during my lunchtime arrivals for Zachary’s class. One time I had to shift a tray of celebratory cupcakes in order to sign in at the visitor log that no one seems to check. Today is especially busy, as students displaced from their regular lunch rooms by the testing have congregated here. I wait my turn for the secretary’s attention behind a soft-spoken ninth grader who is updating her on his recent academic and personal progress. I am in no rush; I know OBS is, as Zachary conveyed in an early email, “so small” that in the worst-case scenario, I could probably just wander the building until I found him.

In fact, it is Zachary who finds me as he crosses the first floor on a lunchtime trek around the school to attend to miscellaneous tasks. In his early 30’s, a self-described “Jewish-American male” with a narrow face and curly brown hair and beard, Zachary moves through the school with an easy-going energy, tossing back “Hey”s as students greet him in passing. The seniors call him just “Kaplan” out of both affection and an assertion of their respective statuses at OBS; in his fifth year here, Zachary is an established entity whom 12th graders respect, but also a ready participant in banter about NBA players and pop culture.

Zachary tells me that he has been relocated to a classroom on the third floor—grinning at the gasps of horror this announcement elicits from two nearby seniors who do not want to climb extra stairs—and sends me up ahead of him while he grabs laptops from
the technology cart. The ninth graders who are eating lunch there are slow to vacate and Zachary’s 25 students are slow to arrive, but since OBS has no bells signaling class transitions, the 12:23 pm start time has always been a little flexible. Today this gives Zachary some extra time to arrive with an armful of laptops, which he deposits on the front table before marking out six sections on the whiteboard with headings:

- Psychoanalytic
- Jungian
- Feminist
- Gender/Queer
- Critical Race Theory
- Marxist

Apropos of nothing I can discern, a few students start singing “This Land is Your Land” as they settle in at the unfamiliar desks, followed by a song I don’t recognize but with the similar cadence of an elementary school choral selection. Zachary doesn’t visibly react to this as he adjusts his tie, then unbuttons and rolls up the sleeves of his light blue dress shirt, combatting the overbaked, lunch-saturated air and also perhaps symbolically preparing to get to work. His unflappability extends to the two teachers who normally occupy this classroom staying seated at their desks and conversing with each other at regular volume throughout the entire period, even while Zachary is delivering whole-class instruction 15 feet away. This is maddening to me but if it bothers Zachary at all, he doesn’t let on. Instead, he launches class by telling the students he wants to give them a quick overview of the six critical theories written on the board, so that students can choose the “lens” they want to use for their two-part final project on the whole-class text: the 1982 X-Men comic God Loves, Man Kills.

A class of older high school students reading an X-Men comic book directly above the room where younger students are taking a high-stakes standardized test may seem
incongruous, but the juxtaposition feels familiar to me, as does the outsized impact of testing on an urban public school. Standardized testing seemed to suck up all of my former school’s energy and resources: it dictated ninth- and 10th-grade teacher assignments, scheduling, and learning objectives. In a manner reminiscent of Diane’s framing of the AP test, “passing MCAS” was understood by teachers and students alike to be the driving purpose of many class activities. Meanwhile teachers in the older grades were given little instructional guidance, apart from AP curriculum; no one seemed to know quite what to do with students once the testing hurdle was cleared.

As the ninth- and 12th-grade English teacher at OBS, Zachary experiences life on both sides of the testing divide. He can share in the pride of OBS’s results on the state exam, which are impressive for any school, much less one with a historically underserved student population. All but two students passed the previous year’s English exam and OBS’s passing rate on each subject exam exceeds that of the state as well as the district, even while 57% of OBS students are classified as low-income by the state department of education, and 88% are students of color (54% Hispanic, 20% Asian, 12% Black, 4% other). Zachary knows, though, that passing the test is not synonymous with being prepared for rigorous academic work. OBS students may do well on the relatively “closed questions” on the state test, he says, but when it comes to the question of, “are my kids producing college-ready work?”

Zachary admits that “oftentimes I find myself thinking, ‘No.’”

Zachary sees his students as “really bright kids…really good thinkers” who just need to be given the opportunity to “channel” that raw intellectual talent toward something meaningful to them in order to develop higher-order skills. That opportunity was missing in the existing 12th-grade English curriculum outlined by the district: a traditional British
Literature chronological survey course starting with *Beowulf* and working up to *1984*. Zachary saw that students were not “fully engaging in” the material because of a lack of perceived relevance, a key component in the value mindset that can help motivate student effort.

“Teaching *The Canterbury Tales* to a bunch of inner-city 12th graders is difficult,” he chuckles. “Like, ‘why are we reading this thing that’s a thousand years old?’ And I wasn’t really enjoying it either,” he adds. “I love Orwell, but teaching *1984* is a SLOG. You know there’s like 70 pages in the middle where it’s literally a textbook?” Zachary laughs heartily at George Orwell’s audacity. “And these kids who are already barely, BARELY interested are like—” he furrows his brow in an expression of adolescent incredulity—“now I gotta read this history textbook?!”

The uninspiring curriculum also exacerbated what Zachary sees as a uniquely 12th-grade brand of disaffection and lack of perceived value in their remaining high school tenures. “By the time senior year starts,” he says, students are “already counting down the days. Lethargy kind of sets in.” Seniors are “kind of burnt out from junior year, and they’re applying to colleges, and when that ends their brains kind of shut down.” Some seniors loaded up on AP classes and used Zachary’s non-AP English class as their mental break. The “lethargy” is particularly marked at a grade 7-12 school as small as OBS, Zachary says. Though he sees many more benefits than drawbacks to the small school size overall, one drawback is that 12th-grade students have been in “the same classes with the same 40 people for six years,” creating a feeling of “stagnation” in the cohort. Assignment completion rates “were terrible,” he says. “Every year around the end of the quarter I was tracking kids down about grades and stressing out about, you know, this kid has a 64 and I don’t want to give them a 64 on their transcript for colleges… it was really hard to get good work out of them.”
Zachary’s solution was to reimagine not just his own curriculum but the entire structure of 11th- and 12th-grade English at OBS. Rather than the traditional year-long grade-level English classes, 11th and 12th graders would be pooled together and given the opportunity to choose from semester-long electives. The principal approved the plan (“That’s the nice thing about being here,” Zachary says; “it's a flexible place to work, and if someone has...a good idea, a good effort is made to implement it”), and the new class offerings went into effect for the 2016-17 school year. Zachary offered two electives each semester: American Literature and the class I observed, Superheroes in World Literature. The colleague who had formerly taught both 11th-grade English sections now taught Gender and Shakespeare as well as AP English Literature, which remained a full-year course. The new courses still mapped onto district curriculum guidelines in broad strokes—the Superheroes class still reads Beowulf and excerpts from 1984—but in addition to freeing the teachers to think more thematically about curriculum, the restructure allowed students to opt in to their classes. All of the new electives are considered “honors” level, just as the previous grade-level courses were—there is no tracking at OBS, apart from AP and a couple of specialized courses—so there are no prerequisites or other barriers to student entry. The goal, Zachary says, was to “emulate” the “beauty of college,” where “you have a lot more freedom over what you study” and “a whole range of classes you can choose from.” His own high school experience in Madison, Wisconsin provided him with a model for this kind of self-directed learning at the secondary level; by employing a similar mixed-grade elective structure in its upper English classes, his school had helped make the transition to college “so natural for me.”

19 AP is a curricular “track” at OBS in terms of the designated level of the course but not any top-down student sorting or assignment process; any 11th- or 12th-grade student who wants to take AP can do so.
Zachary wanted to achieve the same effect at OBS, where despite the school’s success on the state exam, “I didn’t feel like we were doing our kids a service, telling them what classes they should be taking and telling them what they’re studying.” Instead, Zachary seeks to prepare his students for future academic success by making them feel like they are on a learning adventure of their own choosing, thus strengthening their sense of agency in school. Through his careful consideration of what curriculum and activities will feel relevant to students, as well as how to help students engage with content and with fellow learners in a self-transforming way, he seeks to promote students’ perceived value of the class content and learning overall.

Kindling a Spark

In contrast to his relationship to the former upper-school English curriculum, Zachary aims to design his new curriculum to kindle students’ value mindsets toward school by tapping into existing interests, opinions, and personal experience so that students see the work as “relevant to their lives or society today.” He explicitly tells students during a class early in the X-Men unit that he “want[s] to bridge between real life” and the comic. “Yesterday we talked about allegory, right?” he reminds them, then rattles through some of the examples they covered, including *Animal Farm* as allegory for the Russian revolution and *The Lorax* as allegory for environmental activism. I notice there are also allegorical representations on some of his classroom decorations, such as a poster advocating the purchase of war bonds that shows Captain America punching a cartoon Hitler in the face. Reinforcing the *Animal Farm* allegory, a hand-drawn student project features an anthropomorphized pig advising, “Don’t Be Beasts of England.”

The X-Men, Zachary says, have often been interpreted as allegory for certain social
issues “because they’re a small group of people who are persecuted and feared for how they were born.” He is going to play a couple of clips from the films *X-Men* (2000) and *X2* (2003), and he wants to hear what real-world connections students can make.

The students shift around in their seats to get a better viewing angle, in a manner I recognize from whenever I showed video in my class, no matter the topic. Their desks are scattered haphazardly around the room in what Zachary affectionately calls “amorphous blobs”; even when he directs the students to form more orderly configurations for group work, he is not a stickler about the furniture arrangements, and I never see him assign seats. The students are therefore sprinkled randomly around the room, the only real pattern being the absence of desks in an area where the view of the white board and pull-down screen is obstructed by a floor-to-ceiling support pole and the large wheeled cart that holds a document camera, projector, and Zachary’s laptop. He uses that laptop now to play two *X-Men* clips in quick succession. First, the fictional Senator Kelly announces the need for a mutant registry in a campaign commercial. Then, he pushes back on anti-registry testimony from Jean Grey—a mutant herself, unbeknownst to Kelly—on the Senate floor. In both clips, Kelly argues that mutants are dangerous and a registry is necessary for national security.

“If we’re looking for allegory here,” Zachary asks the students, “what could we look at?”


“That’s my family!” Veronica pipes up, with what sounds like pride. Zachary tells me later that Veronica wrote about her undocumented father’s border crossing in her final paper for Zachary’s fall-semester American Literature class—one month before the district
announced, after the 2017 presidential inauguration, that teachers should not allow students to write about their immigration status in school assignments.

“Also segregation,” Nia adds; “that part about ‘who your kids go to school with.’”

After soliciting a few more comments, Zachary moves on to the X2 clip, which shows the teenager Bobby Drake revealing to his family in the living room that he is a mutant. “It’s like coming out,” I hear someone mutter. At the end of the scene, the younger Drake boy sneaks out to call the authorities on his mutant brother, prompting a student near me, Eric, to hiss, “Snitch!” at the screen before asking Zachary, “Can we watch the fight scene?” Zachary declines this request but later indulges Eric in conversation while the students get started on their homework at the end of class:

Eric has been asking/talking about the new X-Men movie Logan for virtually the entire class to anyone who will listen, and when Zachary draws near on a meandering lap around the classroom, Eric asks him if they can watch it in class. Zachary deflects the question—it’s not (legally) possible given that the film is currently in theatrical release—but tells Eric that they will be looking at the character Wolverine more closely in class and will watch a fight scene then. “Which one?” Eric asks eagerly, rattling off several possibilities, and then both of them are off in a rapid-fire riff about the origins of Wolverine—or Weapon X, as Zachary calls him. “When he joined the X-Men, he became Wolverine,” he tells Eric, then chuckles a moment later when Eric tries to dispute another piece of X-Men lore. “Don’t listen to the movies,” Zachary says. “The movies aren’t canon.” When Zachary moves away, Eric uses his school laptop to pull up the Wikipedia page of X-Men characters and then searches “Weapon X” on Google.

In many ways, Eric embodies the vision and intent behind Zachary’s curriculum restructure: he clearly has an existing interest in comic books, saw an English class that matched that interest, and opted into it. In Zachary, he finds a partner in nerding out, as I jot down in the margin of my field notes on the Wolverine discussion. Later in the spring, Zachary describes to me a whole-class discussion on V for Vendetta in which “Eric was super
involved—to the point where sometimes he would only just talk to me,” he laughs. “He was sitting next to me and just talking to me.” The topic of the class and Zachary’s support for his interest provide the necessary hook to engage Eric in the coursework; at the end of the semester, Zachary describes him as “a much more academic being than he was three months ago.”

Zachary is aware, though, that his Superheroes class is not composed entirely of Erics. “So many kids,” Zachary says, “within the first couple of weeks were like, ‘I don’t like comic books. I don’t know why I took this class.’ And I’m like, ‘well, I don’t know why you took it; you had other options.’”

“Did you ever ask them that?” I ask him.

“Yeah,” he says. “They took it ’cause their friends took it. Or ’cause they like me,” he admits, “but like—don’t do that! You know?” His wry chuckle conveys the mix of flattery and exasperation he feels at students’ shallow decision-making.

However, because OBS only has two high school English teachers and one teaches AP English as a full-year course, even students who approach course selection with what Zachary sees as purer motives have only three options, from which they ultimately have to choose two to fulfill a year of English. For the students who do not bring to class an existing interest in the course theme, Zachary works to earn their “buy-in” by encouraging them to connect course content to their own lived experience as well as real-world issues that they recognize, as with the X-Men video clips. When parsing religious imagery and archetypes in a Superman comic, Zachary projects the Lord’s Prayer on the board and asks students to “raise your hand if you’ve heard this in church, or seen it in a movie, or you’re familiar with it in any way at all,” then asks them to examine the text and consider, “what is it that you’re
actually praying for?” In the ensuing discussion, several students rattle off the prayer in Spanish—the language of their church services—and link their textual interpretations to the accompanying church rituals (“that’s why we hold hands when we say it”). In another lesson, to activate students’ thinking about rhetoric in messaging, Zachary shows them video clips from “real life” that he warns “are hard to watch, so I want to remind us to be respectful to other people. I don’t mean that you have to be respectful to the views you’re going to hear—which are disgusting,” he adds after a beat, as if considering whether to say it, “but be respectful in your responses.” The students, in turn, react strongly but without “disrespectful” language as they watch footage of Pat Robertson equating Islam to Nazism (“Catholicism was just as bad!” someone scoffs) and Megyn Kelly interviewing Carl Higbie about a proposed Muslim registry (“They ruled that constitutional?” Nia squeaks in shock when the interview touches on Korematsu v. United States). Zachary also centers his American Literature elective curriculum on a question that positions students as experts in American identity and values: What does American literature say about who we are and what do you want American literature to look like in the 21st century? The final paper, he tells me, then becomes a way to include students’ personal histories among the class texts, as students “writ[e] about their place in American literature and American history,” expanding on themes and ideas from the course “in the context of their own story or a family member’s story.”

Zachary believes that inviting these kinds of personal connections and reactions gives every student an “entry point…like a doorway, where even the lowest[-skilled] kids have something valuable to say about whatever it is we’re studying.” It also results in higher quality work, he says, because the students are personally invested in the final product; Veronica’s paper on her mixed-status immigrant family was “the best piece of writing she’s ever done.”
Beyond his curriculum design, Zachary’s verbal responses to students in class reinforce the notion that their way of engaging with the curriculum is valid and welcomed; whatever point of connection, interest, or relevance they hit upon is entitled to at least a small amount of classroom airspace. He is strikingly open to students’ spontaneous questions, even when they divert attention from the curricular topic at hand. I never saw him knowingly ignore a student’s inquiry; over the course of my observations, he responded to questions that included:

“Are you responsible with your money?”
“Does the Bible ever say, where is heaven actually?”
“What’s the name of that song from the end of *The Breakfast Club* when the kids are running through the halls at the peak of finding themselves?”
“What’s the ACLU?”
“Is that how cults start?”

During the discussion of the Pat Robertson video, someone asked what the literary term was for a word like “televangelism” and Zachary praised the student who interrupted him a few minutes later with the correct answer (portmanteau) after openly using her cell phone—technically a violation of school rules—to look it up. (“How do you know she’s right?” the other students pressed, relentless.) The unfiltered questioning culture was so deeply entrenched that a student even turned to me one day during a brief debate over the word “connotes” and demanded, “You go to Harvard—how do you pronounce this word?”

Zachary also routinely affirms students’ declarative comments to validate their contributions to the classroom discourse. “That’s really interesting,” he often says, or simply, “Nice!” He praises students’ vocabulary (“great word!”) and points out when students are using higher-order thinking (“I like the connection you’re making”) or introducing new ideas (“I never thought of that before!”). He encourages students to expand on their thinking,
either through follow-up questions (in response to Zachary’s frequent rejoinder, “Can you say more?” a student one day replies, “No,” but then elaborates anyway, as if unable to help himself), or by giving them his undivided attention during individual consultations—even if this means temporarily not responding to anyone or anything else:

Zachary heads over to a student at the side table with his hand raised. I hear him say, “Good…good…that would be a great quote.” I scan the room. A few students are writing. Veronica is not; she starts making a soft high-pitched noise with her mouth wide open, then curling her lips in different ways to manipulate the sound. I don’t time her precisely, but she does this for far longer than I’m expecting: maybe 30 seconds. A classmate near her jokes about someone or something from *Spongebob Squarepants*, and the laughter from that soon escalates into loud joking and some squealing. Zachary is still conferring one-on-one and does not react to the other students.

“I mean, to be honest…I get really into their stuff,” Zachary laughs when I ask him about his unbroken focus on the student in front of him. “Like they’ll give me an idea and I get really wrapped up in it.” He realizes that there may be trade-offs in not monitoring everyone else’s behavior, but for him the opportunity to validate a single student’s thinking is always worthwhile. “Get[ting] five minutes of intellectual conversation with their teacher…is important for each kid,” he says, not only for affirming their thinking but also for “building relationships, even outside of the academic work.”

Those relationships are key to the overall learning atmosphere that Zachary is trying to create. In our interviews, he uses the word “fun” nine times to describe classroom-based experiences—both his own as a student, and what he hopes as a teacher to create for his students. He is unusual among my participants in how frequently he mentions fun and how foundational it seems to be in his philosophy of teaching and learning. He recalls that, “knowing what I know now about pedagogy,” his own high school English teachers weren’t “amazing, uh, teacher-teachers, you know what I mean? But they were just really fun and
inspiring and it was great sitting in a class” with them. For Zachary, relevance, interest, fun, inspiration, and classroom community are intertwined—and, I think, central to students choosing his class even when they hold no existing interest in the course theme. Zachary expresses a preference for students not to make socially motivated course choices, but it seems plausible to me that the opportunity to learn with Zachary is as much of a draw as the content, especially given that every OBS student has had him as a ninth-grade teacher. They know that in his classroom, Zachary will make learning fun not only by actively kindling students’ interests, but also by being kindling for them: his positive, affirming relationships with students provide the fodder to feed the initial spark into an enduring flame.

**Becoming Explorers**

When I arrive at OBS on an unusually cool day in May, all the seniors are wearing the college gear of the school they’ll be attending in the fall; the flagship state university is well-represented, as is a nearby public university. Zachary himself is wearing a Mayfield University Class of 2007 tee over a long-sleeved shirt and jeans as he stands in the center of the room, cuing up multiple videos and documents on his laptop before class begins. Today’s lesson is packed, with Zachary trying to conclude a paragraph-writing task that students began yesterday and then start a new activity, but everything is taking longer than planned. Though Zachary told the students to “come to class with your paragraphs ready to rock,” many students seem to be starting over from scratch. In the only sign of any impatience on his part, Zachary gives them many time checks—“let’s make this literally take, like, three minutes”—saying he wants to have enough time in the second half of class to introduce them to “an incredible study of social psychology” that is “gonna Blow. Your. Minds,” he teases. “Your lives will be forever changed.”
Although Zachary is being jokingly hyperbolic here to try to motivate the students to speed up, in a way his words also very much reflect another guiding principle of his curricular design for the Superheroes course. He stressed to students during the elective sign-up process that the presence of comic books on the syllabus did not mean that they would be allowed to “just sit around all day, talking about our favorite superheroes and that’s that.” He does not want to cater solely to students’ existing interests and personal experiences, letting them study only what is pleasing or familiar so that they will perceive the content as relevant according to their current understanding of themselves and the world. For Zachary “relevance also means—I think kids just want to feel like they’re learning something,” he says, even if that means that not every class is “fun” or “enjoyable” in the traditional sense. “I think as long as kids come in understanding that this class is meaningful in a way that there’s a tangible measurement for. That I go in and I leave and I am somehow…” He pauses briefly, considering the word he wants, before ultimately deciding on “changed.”

What Zachary categorizes as an alternative definition of relevance, I see as his reframing of relevance from an abstract noun to a dynamic, cyclical process. In his view, relevance and value are not just static qualities that students can either perceive or not, with the design of curriculum and learning activities the only leverage points for teachers trying to activate those perceptions. Rather, the process of engaging in learning can change students and enable them to recognize value and relevance that they would not have previously. Moreover, Zachary believes that that personal change process is itself valued by students. While Zachary describes these processes as linked to different dimensions of relevance, in practice they blend together in his instruction as he seeks to tap into students’ existing interests and values while simultaneously engaging students in a transformative process of
becoming a different kind of learner with a different kind of relationship with academic content.

The transformation that Zachary talks most about involves a change in perception: students coming to see the world differently as a result of their learning. This focus on personal perspective shifts dovetails with Zachary’s own preferences as a consumer of literature and culture and his perceived strengths as a teacher. He self-deprecatingly assures me that, unlike some of his teachers who “could go on and on and on for a whole class period just about the beauty of the language and, you know, more traditional stuff,” he is no brilliant literary scholar. “I’m much more suited to, can we find relevancies in our world today, or in human behavior, or human nature, or psychology, or philosophy.” These topics “interest me more,” and he likewise believes that “most kids have a natural attraction” to them that goes unmet in many high schools. Thus, even before Zachary initiated the new elective system, he was trying to incorporate philosophical and psychological theories into his traditional 12th-grade English class, believing that “any way that you think about how you think, kids are really interested in that, or how you behave.” There is something tangible and satisfying for students in possessing a possible explanation for human processes that are otherwise invisible.

With the greater freedom afforded him in the Superheroes elective, Zachary is able to center his curricular units more fully on questions of culture, belief systems, and human nature, pairing the more accessible and high-interest comic books with difficult supplemental texts that students would not naturally seek out themselves. He gives his students excerpts from the Book of Revelation so that they can identify religious allusions in a Superman comic and discuss it as an example of “cultural mythology.” He assigns excerpts from Plato’s
Republic to engage students in questions of morality and ethics. On that cool day in May, the “incredible study of social psychology” turns out to be Stanley Milgram’s 1962 experiment on obedience, prompting students to consider the psychological underpinnings of the dystopian authoritarian regimes in V for Vendetta and 1984 in preparation for a final essay. The students’ draft thesis statements for that essay show them trying out some of these new perspectives on human behavior and governance:

- All three texts show that humans can be slaves to authority.
- Authority can have a very negative impact on people, by restrictions, cognitive dissonance, or Authority fallacy.
- In every totalitarian government, a resistance rises. Normal citizens are brainwashed and follow the flow. Those who don’t are considered crazy.
- Surveillance changes the way a person acts based on the surveyors desires. Therefore obedience to authority requires an individual to feel like there are “Eyes” on them at all times.

The final assignment for the X-Men unit is an encapsulation of the transformative learning goal for students, as Zachary asks them to use Freudian, Jungian, feminist, Marxist, Critical Race, and queer theory as “lenses” through which to see the text and in turn, the world, differently. When Nia asks during the critical theory lens presentations whether there is such a thing as a “bad” lens, Zachary tells her that the criteria for a good lens is that it “opens doors that you’ve never seen before.” While Zachary laments to me afterwards that he “wasn’t convinced that they knew what they were saying” during the presentations—“and a lot of it went over the class’s head anyway”—the students nonetheless do describe real world phenomena through the lens of theory. The Critical Race Theory group names mass incarceration, the wealth gap, and housing policies as examples of systemic racism. The queer theory group talks about “heteronormative structures in society,” such as assumptions about what a couple or a family looks like, and arguing that the absence of openly gay
characters in the X-Men comic is a form of erasure that is common in media because producers “don’t want people feeling uncomfortable in any way.” The Feminist group points out that the 1982 publication date of the X-Men comic closely follows the “second wave feminism” of the 1970’s, when women who fought for equal rights were viewed by some as unnatural “mutants” for rebelling against established order.

Zachary likewise hopes that his teaching overall will help his students to “see the world in a much more academic lens,” and in particular to see themselves as belonging to that academic world, broadly defined. Students shouldn’t feel like “their interests have to be divested from academics or school,” he says; they should recognize that critical theory helps them think differently about their favorite Japanese anime, or that blockbuster movies rely heavily on narrative tropes and archetypes to trigger certain emotions in the audience. Zachary believes that developing a new way of seeing can “legitimize school” to students as a mechanism for informing and deepening their personal interests. He himself experienced such a perception shift in high school, once he reached the elective English classes in the upper grades:

> Once we started getting to more specialized classes, that was when I really loved [English]… When I started to put together, “Oh, I can write about pop culture in an academic way”—when I made that connection, that’s when English really took off for me. And that’s why this change in these courses was important to me, because I think our kids don’t get that sense [that], “You love Pokémon? You can write about Pokémon—academically, you know, and that can be your bridge into academics in college, that you didn’t know existed before.”

Such an “academic lens” can help give students agency by showing them new ways to use their learning, but also by “just mak[ing] them feel intelligent,” Zachary says. He tells me about a student who “ended up sending me a photo through text at 9 o’clock one night, ’cause someone had a *V for Vendetta* mask as a
bumper sticker. And—there was no comment, you know,” he laughs. “Until the next morning when she was like, ‘Mister, you get my text?’ But like, that’s cool! You know?” A moment of recognition or insight in the outside world can be “a really empowering moment for a teenager,” Zachary says. He recalls another former student who “came from a really rough home, really poor family. And she was going to Middlebury next year, which is, you know, very White and very—she was White, too, but…” Zachary trails off, looking at me knowingly, then finishes the sentence as if stating the obvious: “There aren’t going to be many people from her background at Middlebury.” This student had learned about Freudian analysis in Zachary’s old Macbeth unit, “and that really stuck with her. And she sent me a text a month into her first semester at Middlebury, telling me that she told her whole class about the wandering uterus and no one had ever heard of it. And she was, like, super pumped.” Zachary smiles at the memory. “And I think that’s a really important step. If you can give them those little things to latch onto, I think it really validates that in terms of, ‘Oh, I’m on the same level as these people and I deserve to…you know, my interests and my academics are just as valid as whatever else anyone else is bringing to the table.’”

The wandering uterus story positions school content that students can “latch onto” as a kind of knowledge capital that can transform not only how students see themselves, but potentially how others see them. “I think that legitimizes them too, socially, in a way that’s really powerful,” Zachary says. “I remember in high school and middle school, I felt like my best friend was just heads and tails above me, intellectually. And I thought that was really neat, and it made me want to do really well in school so I could kinda ‘battle’ him back.” The ability to hold one’s own intellectually, “enjoying that kind of discussion, that kind of engagement with people around you” was also a crucial part of Zachary’s experience in college, where he “made really good friends because I loved the conversations that we had.”
Zachary recognizes that this kind of “social legitimization” might be especially important for his students, who are “from a poor neighborhood and an inner-city school” and often have to contend with other people’s “misconceptions” about them. “I would love to have our seniors go off to school and just, you know, blow people’s minds,” Zachary says. “They should go to college and show that they’re just as capable of being there as anyone else and have things to say and things to think.” Even for his students who do not attend—or stay in—college, Zachary maintains that an “academic lens” is “important for their quality of life in the future…I think it makes them more keen observers of the world, it lets them into the world more than they would otherwise be,” he says. “Wherever they are, whoever they’re with, when they’re 30, when they’re 45, when they’re 50… I want these kids to value knowledge and information, and just talking about it…Being able to talk to anyone about anything I think is an important skill in our world.”

Zachary himself embodies this ethos in his own continued pursuit of transformative learning. When I ask him about how he handles the (self-inflicted) challenge of teaching brand-new classes filled with content that is less readily available in traditional K-12 teaching resources, he tells me:

I like the challenge. I mean, I loved being in school because I loved learning stuff. Teaching the same things for four years…I think I was just kind of looking to be inspired by doing something else. It’s a lot of work but it’s fun. I’ve learned way more about this stuff than I ever would’ve had I not taught this class, right? Like I didn’t know anything about the Bible or the Book of Revelation before last semester. I never thought my class would be a class where we’d be discussing Plato’s philosophies. I’m learning a lot more about philosophy and things like that because I’m trying to tie all that stuff into the class.

The new curriculum therefore provides Zachary with inspiration, perspectives, and a renewed appreciation for learning, just as he hopes it does for his students. “I’m sure good
teachers can do that in no matter what English class they have, but I was not doing that,”
Zachary says, in his customarily self-effacing way. “And now I am, I think...And I think that
[my] excitement and engagement transfer to the class.”

Guided vs. Solo Navigation

“It’s like a sweathouse up there,” Zachary warns when he sees me signing in at the
main desk. Indeed, I find both of his classroom doors flung open, the lights turned off, and
a wire-frame fan thrumming noisily in front of one open window. It’s nearly 90 degrees
outside, after similar weather yesterday, and the building is holding the heat like a brick oven.
Standing next to the laptop and projector, Zachary takes a long draught from a
condensation-laden water bottle and announces, “Here’s the plan for today.”

“I can’t really hear you,” Jessica calls out, pointing at the fan.

“HERE’S THE PLAN FOR TODAY,” Zachary tries again. He wants to start by
reviewing the writing process, since he’s finished grading the students’ previous assignments
“and there are some trends I’m noticing” that he hopes they can address for their upcoming
essay, the last of the semester. He explains that he will make a statement and he wants
students to raise their hands if they feel “yes, this applies to me.” Since it’s clear to me that
the statements will be about writing, I am amused that the student are all looking at Zachary
as if they are anticipating a game.


Not a single hand goes up, and the students laugh as they survey the room.

“Well, it depends on what you mean by ‘plan out ahead of time,’” Jessica says. “Like,
does 10 minutes count?”
Zachary revises the statement: “I think of my essays like a road trip, and I plan out where I’m going and how I’m going to get there.”

There are still no hands. “I write like three sentences and then I expand it,” Jessica offers. When Zachary prompts her for further explanation, she says that she writes the first paragraph and then she picks her evidence “and then I just expand from there.”

Zachary decides to elaborate to help Jessica relate her process description to his. On a road trip, he says, you generally have a destination in mind first and then you figure out which highways to take and in what direction—all before setting out. That way, even if your plans change along the way, you can modify from that foundation, rather than starting anew.

“Jessica, tell me if this is what you mean,” he says. “Instead of that road trip, are you saying it’s more like, ‘I wanna go somewhere, I’m not really sure where, and also I’m just doing it because my teacher told me to, so I’m going to just go out and hope that I hit it eventually?’”

“Yes, that’s it!” Jessica says, grinning.

Zachary appeals to the rest of the class: “How many people approach their writing like that?”

About four students raise their hands. “It’s like I’m blindfolded and throwing darts and just hoping I hit the target,” one young man says, cottoning on to the metaphor game.

“My goal is to have you understand that essays have a logical structure,” Zachary says. “Before we sit down and write, we have a map of where we’re going.”

By the end of the semester, this scene is a familiar one to me; in writing lessons in particular, Zachary often tries to coach students in this kind of meta-awareness of their own cognitive processes. To borrow from his favorite road trip metaphor, he wants students to
know both that a map exists, and that successfully completing the journey will require them
to interact thoughtfully with that map and monitor how they are using it. Ideally, students
will internalize this process so that they can replicate it on their own, as more experienced
writers like Zachary know to do. “When I write,” Zachary tells me, “I still outline things, you
know, I have a general sense of where I’m going with things.” This process awareness and
self-regulation means that writing “typically doesn’t take very long” for Zachary. His
students, however, still need prompting both to think of writing as a systematic process and
to complete the steps of that process. “They don’t understand how quickly these things can
go if you know what you’re doing beforehand,” Zachary says. “Even when I try to force
them to outline things, that typically doesn’t help…they still have a hard time seeing that as
the skeleton to an essay. And so my next step is, how do I figure out getting them to see it
like that.”

Zachary is describing the pedagogical work of scaffolding, or providing students with
supported learning experiences that will extend their skills beyond their current capabilities.
Zachary is scaffolding the students’ writing on two levels. At the more immediate level, he
sometimes “force[s]” students to outline their essays, making them participate in the interim
steps that will ultimately lead to a better product. But he is also aware that he needs to
scaffold their metacognitive processes: how they think about the outline they are making.
Being tasked with outlining an essay does not necessarily mean that students understand why
they are outlining, or that outlining is a transferrable strategy they can apply to other writing
assignments; they may simply write the outline “because my teacher told me to.”

Zachary recognizes the critical role that teachers play in scaffolding student learning;
he sees the “next step” of his growth as a teacher as “figur[ing] out” how to strengthen
students’ metacognitive awareness of the writing process. Asking students to describe their individual approaches to a task, as he does in the road trip discussion, is one strategy I see him use for reading comprehension as well as the writing process; once before class when I ask him how he saw students making sense of the dense Biblical excerpts they read the previous day, he readily tells me, “I actually don’t know. Want me to ask them?” and goes on to facilitate a brief class discussion on strategies for tackling difficult texts. He revisits this topic later in the semester by again having students identify their own strategies before reviewing “techniques for reading long texts.”

Yet while Zachary explicitly scaffolds his students’ academic skill development and has clear metacognitive takeaways he wants them to understand, he takes a more inductive approach to their value mindset toward the course content; he seems to view student perceptions of value or relevance as ideally arising somewhat organically or naturalistically. “I heard somewhere recently that one of the worst things a teacher can actually say to a kid is, ‘this is important,’” he tells me. “No one likes being told why something is important, you gotta come to it yourself.” He is therefore restrained about making explicit statements about value in the classroom, wanting students to “come to [the] conclusion” that the content is “helpful, or good to know” through their own engagement with it, “without me saying it. I mean,” he chuckles, “I’ve planned for them to come to that conclusion, but it’s better if they get there on their own.”

Thus, while Zachary designs thoughtful curriculum and transformative learning experiences that he hopes students will find meaningful, he does not want to be overly prescriptive to students about how they engage in the course content or what ultimate meaning or value they glean from it. He invokes the NPR podcast Invisibilia, a show about
the “invisible forces that we don’t see or understand shaping us,” to describe what he sees himself doing in relation to student mindsets. Thoughtfully designed curriculum and positive relationships with students are the mechanisms through which Zachary tries to “get those invisible forces to work to my benefit” by getting students “bought in” and personally invested in their own learning. Once he sees evidence of those positive invisible forces at work, though, he intentionally takes a light touch to allow students the freedom to navigate that experience on their own. He nods in agreement with my observation that some students occasionally spend the entire class period reading the whole-class text instead of participating in the lesson. “There are days where I’ve noticed Alicia isn’t doing what we’re doing, but she is reading the book, and—that’s great! You know? Like, OK,” Zachary laughs. “I don’t mind. She’s absorbing what we’re saying somehow, a little bit, and if she loves this book so much, the content of the course so much that she can’t stop, I don’t want to be the person to chastise her to say—” he adopts a stern, pedantic Teacher Voice—“Stop reading the book [because] we’re TALKING about it.” Rather than mandating that Alicia comply with an activity—even an activity that he deems valuable and important—he prefers to let her, as an agentic individual, follow her own passion in that moment, accepting that ultimately the mindsets and forces that move students are unseen, unknown, and not always aligned with a teacher’s carefully laid plans.

However, Zachary himself concedes that “it would be great if I could find a way to actually incorporate” more “tangible” and “deliberate” strategies for influencing the “invisible forces” within students. Out of the four mindsets, he names the value mindset as one of the hardest “because I think even sometimes our brightest kids are like, why are we bothering with this?” He takes on that difficulty by “work[ing] double” to craft meaningful curriculum and lessons for students, but muses aloud that he may be putting “too much
faith” in the invisible forces to respond in the desired way.

It strikes me that Zachary already has some deliberate strategies for building a stronger bridge between students’ engagement with his curriculum and their mindset development: the metacognitive discussions and explicit instruction he uses for students’ academic skill development. When it comes to writing, Zachary recognizes that he cannot just assign an outline, he must also build students’ understanding of the outline’s usefulness—yet when it comes to the value mindset toward course content, Zachary invites the students to make connections to the material but does not generally layer on that additional metacognitive awareness, perhaps out of deference to his ideal of student discovery and agency in the learning process. And indeed, a spontaneous student question in the aftermath of the critical theory lens presentations sparks the one occasion of Zachary taking a stronger declarative stance about the relevance of course material that is more analogous to how he talks about the writing process and reading strategies:

“I have a question,” Shay announces. “Do people dedicate their lives to doing this? And if so, then like why do they decide to use a particular lens?”

Zachary tells her that literature professors do this kind of textual analysis. He says that they’re interested in “how” a lens applies to a particular text. “The lens helps us filter our own ideas,” he says. “It makes what we study a little more relevant to the society we live in. It might not feel relevant to you at first—we don’t live in a Marxist society right now, and Marx himself died something like a hundred years ago—but using the lens gives us an interesting way to see how his ideas are reflected in a fictional society. And how does that relate to our own society?”

Zachary tells me afterwards that that discussion “was probably the first time in a while I’ve done any sort of metacognitive reflection, self-reflection kind of stuff” with his older students. He does more reflection with his ninth graders, “but in that class, no,” he says. “If it was a full-year class, there probably would be. I’m starting to realize how much dropping
from a full-year course to semester courses is just—you lose a ton of time,” he says. “I only have this short amount of time to get through all this content so I can’t spend as much time doing self-reflective stuff.”

This time crunch is one of the only downsides to the curricular restructure that Zachary mentions, and it is ironic that what gets cut is a potential mechanism to activate students’ value mindsets toward the curriculum that has been so thoughtfully designed to encourage feelings of relevance and perceived value. But Zachary’s prioritization seems to be more than just logistical, especially since he makes time in class to engage the students in shorter process reflections for their academic skills. His choice is also partly philosophical, as he wrestles with finding the right balance between providing guidance and allowing students their own individual experiences of interest, relevance, or value in school content. In searching for this balance, his own road trip metaphor may provide some insights: students can autonomously set their own course and undertake their own learning adventures while still benefitting along the way from both material resources and an experienced traveler who can help them make the most of the journey.

**Reflections on Promoting a Value Mindset**

In keeping with Brophy’s (2008) model of developing students’ “appreciation” for school learning, Zachary demonstrates deep intentionality in both *what* his students are learning and *how* he tries to promote their value mindsets toward that academic content. Concerning the *what*, Zachary found few affordances for perceived value in his traditional 12th-grade English curriculum and altered both the curriculum itself and the institutional student assignment structures in order to open up more affordances, including the affordances offered through students’ ability to choose their courses. Beyond that structural
overhaul, Zachary presents students with day-to-day content that is worth learning and activities that are worth doing. He retains some texts from the old curriculum, like *Beowulf* and *1984*, but makes their affordances more transparent to students by pairing them with high-interest comic books—which then reciprocally take on added significance and weight themselves when juxtaposed with the canonical texts. The video clips he plays in class are not just diversions to hold students’ situational interest; they illuminate larger questions about society and the nature of human interaction for students to unpack—as do his course assignments. Through these “wise choices about what content and learning activities to include” (Brophy, 2008, p. 138), Zachary engages in a process of “artistically crafting” a curriculum that students can value (Pugh & Phillips, 2011, p. 287).

Building on Brophy’s (2008) proposals for how students should interact with material in order to develop appreciation, Pugh and colleagues (2017; 2011) discuss the importance of framing content not as “some more school stuff to master” but rather as “possibilities” that “generate anticipation about what may be experienced, solved, or understood” (2011, p. 289). Zachary embraces the notion of curriculum as possibility through his intuition that students are “naturally attracted” to philosophical and psychological topics that help explain their world. His desire to “blow students’ minds” informs his framing of the content’s explanatory or curiosity-satisfying value through questioning and “entry point” strategies that invite students to make personal and real-world connections to the material. By invoking and then validating students’ insights and lived experience, he casts them as experts who are entitled to interrogate the content’s relevance and value—even when that interrogation manifests as questions that many other educators would perceive as tangential distractions or annoyances. Zachary’s teaching goal of leaving students “forever changed” is also consistent with Pugh et al.’s (2017) construct of “transformative engagement,” which comprises
students’ autonomously “motivated use” of learning in “free-choice contexts,” the “expansion of perception,” and “valuing content for how it enriches everyday experience” (p. 370). Zachary’s work with students on critical theory lenses and philosophical/psychological approaches in general embodies all of these components, as he seeks to give students new ways of seeing course texts that they can apply to future “free-choice contexts” in college assignments as well as “everyday experiences” like driving home from work, watching movies, and joshing with friends.

Indeed, Zachary’s vision of transformative engagement for his students hinges on the social connectedness of “everyday experience”; he names the ability to “talk to anyone about anything” as one of his goals for students. Motivational theories consistently name feelings of belonging and relatedness as a necessary condition for motivation, but Zachary’s approach to framing his course content hints at a deeper interconnection between the social environment of the classroom and constructs like perceived value than is reflected in the literature. Beyond enabling students to view course content as possibility, Zachary’s acceptance and affirmation of students’ questions and other verbal contributions are key components of his approach to building relationships with students through as well as for interactions over course content; his “artistically crafted” curriculum feeds the teacher-student relationships, and vice-versa. These content-centered relationships can be as much a target of students’ value mindset as the content itself; Zachary’s students seem to place relational value on engaging in this content with him, because of the affirming nature of their classroom interactions. Zachary himself envisions school-based learning shaping students’ social interactions and thereby their feelings of legitimacy (“My interests and my academics are just as valid as whatever anyone else is bringing to the table”) and self-satisfaction (“I think it just makes them feel intelligent”) that seem to align with definitions of attainment
and intrinsic value that are part of expectancy-value theory but rarely studied, especially from the perspective of teacher understanding and enactment. Yet we see that Zachary can articulate a personal theory of transformative engagement that identifies social interactions and relationships as mediators in the development of the more personalized and individually variable types of perceived value.

Finally, Zachary’s approach pushes motivation scholars to consider how to investigate and elucidate more thoroughly what appropriate scaffolding for appreciation or perceived value could look like. In his framework, Brophy (2008) urges the design of learning activities that “enable [students] to discover…value through firsthand experience…and scaffold their engagement so as to help them to notice and appreciate the activities’ empowering affordances” (p. 138). Zachary attends carefully to students’ “firsthand experience” with content, his framing strategies revealing his intentionality in considering how to introduce students to new material. He is equally intentional in how he approaches—or does not approach, as the case may be—students’ uptake of perceived value, but here his strategies diverge from theoretical and empirical recommendations.

Zachary often avoids explicitly articulating possible value attributions to students, preferring a subtler approach out of a fear that being too prescriptive could backfire on him; after all, “no one likes being told why something is important.” He also avoids intervening when he sees students like Alicia having a positive first-hand experience with material, and prefers modeling his own “excitement and enthusiasm” as a less intrusive strategy for conveying value to students. Yet Brophy (2008) observes that subjective learning experiences such as the internalization of perceived value “usually do not emerge spontaneously upon mere exposure to the content or even involvement in application activities” (p. 137). In other words, firsthand experience with meaningful content and activities is necessary but likely
insufficient at cultivating students’ value mindsets; “even with appropriate content, student engagement needs to be scaffolded in ways that help them notice the value such content possesses for enriching and expanding experience” (Pugh & Phillips, 2011, p. 290).

The challenge for educators is that very little practitioner-oriented work provides guidance on how to strike the delicate balance between generously inviting students into the content and intervening enough to provide appropriate (meta)cognitive scaffolding for students to build a recognition of value. In such a vacuum, educators are left to develop their own understandings and approaches to such scaffolding (S. K. Green, 2002). Zachary seems to assume that trying to target students’ perceptions of value would mostly take the form of pedantic teacher statements to students about what is important, but teachers can verbally convey value to students in many different ways, not just declarative statements about importance (S. K. Green, 2002; Kafkas et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2018). Research also suggests that students whose teachers more frequently articulate the value of course content are more likely to perceive that content as valuable themselves (Schmidt et al., 2018); meanwhile, studies on the utility-value intervention demonstrate that providing time and structure for students to articulate the value and importance of what they are learning can be an alternative strategy (Hulleman et al., 2010, 2017). However, there may well be scenarios where students, as relative novices in a discipline, lack the perspective necessary to articulate the relevance or value of school content. Shay’s question about real people’s use of critical lenses would likely be difficult for students to answer themselves through an inductive or Socratic process; it is Zachary’s broader experience with and expertise in literary studies that enable him to answer.

Educators would benefit from further empirical exploration of the possible
variations in approaches and the development of discourse tools and reflective prompts that can help promote students’ value mindsets toward their coursework. Zachary himself wishes for more concrete strategies to shape the “invisible forces” within students and is responsive to even the barest hint of a suggestion by turning my question to him about reading strategies around to the students as part of a class discussion. Although he is currently operating on his own well-reasoned pedagogical understandings, he is open to expanding that understanding and his existing toolkit—but the resources he needs are not yet available.

These resources would help educators scaffold their students’ growth across their motivational “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), or the distance between what students can do independently and the next level of development that they can achieve with guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). This process of motivational development is ongoing in any learning environment, but the transition from secondary to postsecondary education poses a particularly challenging context as students must adjust to a new educational paradigm that may test the limits of their motivational ZPD. We have seen both Diane and Zachary working off their own theories of mindset development to position their students to make that leap to the next level, but fearing that their best efforts may still leave a gap. I now shift to the postsecondary sector and the educators who are waiting to receive students on the other side of that divide. As we will see, similar questions around how to scaffold students’ motivational mindsets persist in the postsecondary setting, particularly around the growth and efficacy mindsets.
Chapter 6

**Trusting the Process: “My ability and competence grow with my effort”**

Out of the four mindsets, growth mindset’s literature base is arguably the most consistent at considering how educators’ specific messaging and practices can influence students’ beliefs, but research also documents wide variability in educators’ own growth mindset beliefs or intentions, their growth mindset-supportive practices, and the alignment between the two (Sun, 2018b). This portrait presents us with one such in-depth case of an educator, Liz Cartwright, whose teaching reflects growth mindset in many ways: her championing of the writing process as the key mechanism for improvement and many of her course design elements map onto growth mindset principles. However, Liz also shows us that fully espousing and consistently enacting growth mindset-supportive practices is more complex than it may initially appear.

**Developing a Practice Regimen**

Turn left as you exit Oak Bridge School and then right when the street intersects the main road, and you will reach Zachary’s alma mater, Mayfield University, in three long city blocks. The main campus is on the north side of the street—a classic green-lawned academic quad opens directly onto the busy road—but the university also spills across the street, with shiny new construction buildings and parking lots tucked in between churches, nail salons, a Tedeschi mini-mart, and tiny mom-and-pop ethnic restaurants. As I wind through the main campus, passing the five-story university library, the noise of the main road fades quickly; nestled among quiet side streets, I might be on any suburban college campus. Door-to-door, it is half a mile—10 minutes’ walk—from OBS to the building where Liz Cartwright convenes her first-year undergraduate writing class.
Liz’s classroom is at the end of a second-floor hallway that primarily houses the modern languages department: colorful posters of far-away locations, Japanese calligraphy, and French versions of Marlon Brando movies line the corridor walls. The classroom itself, though, is a neutral and nondescript rectangular space: a wooden teacher’s desk sits at one of the short ends, in front of a brown chalkboard, a wall-mounted projection screen, an outdated technology cart with a box television and VCR shoved into one corner, and the newer version with a sleek flat-screen monitor in the opposite corner. Occupying the student desks that line the remaining three walls in an angular U-shape are 18 students, all of whom arrived scrupulously early for the first meeting of the 9 am expository writing class—although doing so may have required some hustle from one young man, who is wearing Christmas-patterned fleece pajama pants. The class is a mixture of, in Liz’s description, “a lot of White kids from tiny towns in New England somewhere who’ve never met a person of color before, and then all these international students,” who often come from “really wealthy families.” This year, there are only two domestic students of color in the class; the other non-White students have all spent significant time living both overseas and in the U.S. Mayfield’s typical first-year cohort is around 14% international students and 22% domestic students of color; 22% are Pell Grant recipients.

The students have just concluded the opening activity of interviewing and then introducing a partner to the class, and Liz is now ready to deliver her overview of the course. She stands up from the teacher’s desk where she sat listening to the introductions and paces a little in front of the chalk board as she talks. A slim White woman in her 30’s, she has

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20 In the past, Liz has also taught “low-income students, often from immigrant families, from the surrounding area,” who are eligible for a local scholarship at Mayfield. Her class this year does not include any such students.
traded the t-shirt and cotton shorts she wore for our first interview last week for discernibly “teacher clothes”: a mustard-colored blouse, pencil skirt, and black flats. Her long brown hair hangs straight down her back as she tells students, “I’m hoping this class shifts your way of thinking about writing from how you may have thought about it in high school.” During college and beyond, she says, “you will always have to write and communicate with your writing,” whether they are chemistry majors or interested in economics, as some students mentioned in their introductions. She picks up a piece of chalk and writes the numbers 1-5 vertically on the board, which cues a rustle of notebook pages rippling across the room as the brand-new college students diligently prepare to take notes.

As she introduces the class to the students, Liz fills in the numbered list with the five principles underlying her course design: 1) Process; 2) Awareness; 3) Tools; 4) Practice; and 5) Community. She stresses to students that “there’s no such thing as a perfect essay, a perfect finished product.” Instead, the class is going to be “focused on different ways we write and revise to get to a product YOU like. Like most things,” Liz says, “writing is very responsive to practice. The more you practice, the better you get.” She assures the students that by the end of the semester, after all the writing they do together, “you’ll get better. It’s impossible not to. And you’d be surprised at how much better you get with practice.”

Overall, Liz tells the students, “I hope this is not a super stressful environment.” She alludes back to the partner interview prompt, *What are you nervous about?*, to which half the class responded with academic concerns: five students articulated worries about getting bad grades, “not being successful,” and failing; four were worried about time management and balancing classes with sleep. “We’ll do a lot of writing in class,” Liz continues. “We’ll do everything in incremental steps. There are no exams. There are no surprises.” The syllabus
lays out all the paper deadlines and expectations, “so you’ll be able to plan.”

She pauses to take questions, and there are several: students ask about laptop use in class, the typical length of papers, homework assignments, the nature of the final paper, and then, with a boldness that surprises me from a college freshman in his very first class, Ben asks, “How many times have you taught this class? Like, is this your first time?” Unfazed, Liz answers the question just as she has all the others, pausing only to search her memory and do the mental arithmetic: every semester for the past four years—two at the flagship state university, two so far at Mayfield—and sometimes multiple concurrent sections, “so…” she calculates aloud, “like 15 times?” The students seem surprised and, I think, impressed—or reassured. “Yeah, lucky for you, I get better every time,” Liz chuckles, echoing her earlier point about writing.

Although Liz tells me that she initially “found English to be super easy” as a student herself, and interpreted that perceived ease as a reason to major in it—“some people said that it wasn’t easy for them, and I was like, ‘Oh! Well then, maybe this is what I’ll do, since it’s easy for me’”—she got “so psyched out” and “paralyzed” over writing in her MFA program in fiction at the flagship state university that she could not resume “writing things I really really liked” until after she graduated. As a professional writer now as well as a writing instructor, she firmly believes that students should focus more on personal growth rather than trying to achieve a mythical “perfect finished product.” She also espouses other core tenets of growth mindset: writing skills are malleable, and “the best way to get better at writing is to practice.” Liz particularly emphasizes that what she calls “brute force” practice “is sort of the only—or,” she clarifies, “the best way, I think, to get better. Like, just to do it as much as possible, over and over again.”
Engaging students in a “brute force” practice regimen is therefore one of the main underlying design principles for Liz’s class. She assigns five papers over the course of the semester—a personal essay, an analytic essay, a research paper, a creative analysis of place, and a final reflection—with multiple drafts and supplemental writing exercises accompanying each one. As she pledges to students on the first day, she reserves time in class for them to produce the volume of writing she asks for, a strategy she carries with her from the pedagogical training she received at the state university, where MFA and Ph.D. students teach undergraduate writing courses—often their first experience leading a classroom. To counter the pressure that Liz and many other instructors felt to devise endless activities to fill class time, the instructional supervisors assured them, “This is a writing class. [Students] should be writing a lot of the time in class.” Now in her fifth year of teaching, Liz continues to adhere to this philosophy: I observe all 23 sessions where her full class meets during the semester, and 17 of them include several minutes of independent writing time for students during the 75-minute session.

In addition to believing fundamentally that practice is the primary mechanism for writing improvement, Liz recognizes that mindsets around ability and effort may be particularly vulnerable for first-year college students. “Their status is completely changing from being sort of the top of the class, the big, important, know-it-alls in high school, as seniors,” she explains, “to being terrified,” feeling like “no one knows them, and they don’t know anything.” The recalibration of students’ self-concept may be especially stark at a school like Mayfield, with its highly competitive admissions standard; students who were high achievers at their respective secondary schools—recall Talia’s acceptance to Mayfield being worthy of the morning announcements at Riverside Academy—are suddenly just part of the crowd. On top of that, Liz notes, “for the first time a lot of them are away from
home,” which introduces new challenges that can interfere with students’ ability to establish academic routines, including managing their time for sufficient writing practice. First-year students often “don’t have a lot of time to focus outside of class,” she says. “They have all these other things they’re doing, all these other tests they’re studying for, clubs that they’re involved in, their roommate’s having sex in the middle of the night and keeping them up,” she laughs. “And so, part of the class is like, defending some time there for them to actually try to concentrate and write.” She restates it for emphasis: “Defending that time for them in class, I think, is really valuable.” Liz views the allocation of class time as a strategy for conveying to students the importance of continued writing practice and supporting their overall adjustment to college; the two processes are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Leveraging class time to support students’ mindsets around and approach to writing and the overall college transition may be especially vital for relatively lower-performing students, a category that includes Liz’s students in the domain of writing. Although Mayfield itself is highly selective, enrollment in the first-year writing class is reserved for the lowest performers on a summer writing assessment that all incoming students must complete unless they have received a 4 or above on the AP English Literature exam. According to Mayfield’s director of undergraduate writing, about one-sixth of the first-year cohort—approximately 100 students—typically place into the class as an additional step before they are allowed to enroll in a writing-intensive disciplinary course, which is required of all Mayfield students for graduation. Liz’s students are therefore also confronting an institutional message that they are among the minority of students who are not yet ready to tackle a baseline requirement. For some of them, placing into Liz’s class seems to affirm their existing negative mindsets about their writing ability. It actually seemed kind of embarrassing when I did get my placement results,
one student writes in her final reflection. I didn’t really want to tell anyone that I was taking Expository Writing.

Liz is therefore trying to promote a growth mindset toward writing among students who are already adjusting their academic self-concept as part of the college transition and who potentially feel embarrassed and stigmatized as bad writers. Her decision to engage students in a “brute force” practice regimen is an important first step in implementing growth mindset principles, but the specific choices she makes about what that practice looks like and how to incentivize students’ participation reveal both the opportunities and challenges that educators face in trying to enact truly growth mindset-supportive practices.

Cultivating Voice

The Mayfield English department offices are housed in a gorgeous pale yellow Victorian house, one of several on a side street at the edge of the main campus. Wooden floors sheathed in worn carpeting creak under my feet as I mount the very narrow stairs to Liz’s third-floor office. The air is warm and vaguely dusty. Several copies of a sign congratulating a faculty member on earning tenure are posted throughout the building; other flyers advertise clubs, courses, and the new creative writing major debuting this fall. At this hour of the morning, most of the doors are closed, and I can see small faux-wood nameplates screwed on each one, just above eye level. The office at the end of the third floor hall does not have a nameplate; instead, Liz Cartwright and three other instructors’ names are printed on a piece of beige cardstock with a red border. One of Liz’s office-mates, an Early Modern specialist, has tacked an additional piece of paper to the door that features her photo and a brief biography. Above these identifiers, a bumper sticker advises visitors to Be the person your dog thinks you are.
Liz’s office is long and narrow and sparsely decorated, as if none of the four occupants wants to claim too much ownership of the space. The wall-mounted shelves are largely empty other than four stacks of writing books piled on one and some personal trinkets on another, including felt finger puppets of medieval figures (a princess, a king, a knight, a priest). A Mayfield campus map is taped up next to the door. The desk faces the middle of the long wall opposite the door, and Liz has pulled a wooden chair up alongside it for students to sit in when they arrive for their 20-minute, one-on-one writing conferences on their Unit 2 analytic essays. Students have the choice of responding to one of two essays on race, identity, and language—James Baldwin’s “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?” or Richard Rodriguez’s “The North American”—in a “conversation” between you and the author—one that takes your own ideas and the writer’s seriously, Liz’s assignment sheet explains.

Alexander, Liz’s third appointment of the morning, strolls in promptly when the previous student vacates the office. Other than his open-toed black athletic sliders and a pink Nike cap slung backwards on his head, he might be wearing the clothes he slept in: a rumpled t-shirt, sweatpants, and tube socks. He returns Liz’s greeting politely and hands her a printed draft.

“How’d this go?” Liz asks him as he settles into the chair.

“S’alright,” he says, then confesses that he had several other assignments to do last night, so he ended up writing this draft “in like an hour and a half.”

“Oh man,” Liz chuckles, flipping through the three typed pages in her hand. “I wish I could write that fast!”

Liz invites Alexander to begin, having told students previously in class that they
would be reading their drafts aloud in the conferences—a “useful” practice “because you catch things you don’t otherwise.” Indeed, Alexander notices and comments on several of his own typos and grammatical mistakes, even as he is reading so fast and with so little inflection that it is hard for me to follow along. Liz has an easier time as she scans the printed copy, a pen held loosely in one hand, occasionally nodding or making a note on the page. As she has done with the previous students, she murmurs, “Great,” after the last sentence in the introductory paragraph, and then praises Alexander when he finishes:

“Awesome. Great job. I really love the quotes that you were able to pull out.” She tells him his paper is “on track” and that he is able to “explain what Baldwin says and why you agree with it.” However, she calls his attention to some vaguely stated claims, pointing out that the lack of clarity often seems to happen in “places where you’re trying to avoid saying ‘I.’”

“My teachers always told me not to,” Alexander explains. “I don’t even mean to do it, it’s just what I was taught.”

“Yeah,” Liz sympathizes. “It takes time to get used to using ‘I’ and not feeling like you’re doing something wrong.”

Coaching students into using first-person in their writing is a common experience for Liz and represents more than just a grammatical or stylistic change; it is a perspective shift for students “to see themselves as having a valid opinion and a valid voice in the conversations they’re entering into,” which Liz sees as an important motivator for the “brute force practice” required to improve. “Up until college,” she says, “I sense that they aren’t taught that they are the expert or that they have valid ideas…[they’re] not really taught to trust themselves.” Instead, she believes that students are often taught “to write in this style that connotes a ‘truth,’ like you’re proving something scientifically and it has to be this
airtight argument. It can’t just be, ‘this is my experience and this is valuable.” As a result, she thinks many students enter her class thinking, “What does it matter what I think about this? I’m an 18-year-old college student.” Liz wants to impress upon them that “it’s time to start thinking that what you think matters, because it does.”

Liz therefore wants to show students that they will be expending effort in her class in service of creative, open-ended assignments that they can personalize and use to cultivate their authorial voice. Like Zachary, she hopes that validating students’ ideas and lived experiences will help them feel more invested in the assignments and motivated to exert more effort. She encourages students to incorporate personal experiences as evidence to support their claims in their responses to Baldwin or Rodriguez. In the personal essay, she asks students to identify and reflect on a “seeming contradiction” in their identity. The MLA-formatted research paper is required by the department, but Liz gives the students free choice of topic. In Unit 4, students compose a written piece that can take any form—most students write fairly conventional essays, but one writes a letter to a friend; another, a play—and deliver an accompanying oral presentation that analyzes a piece of media from, describing, or representing your hometown, or the place you’re “from” and discusses how your hometown helped shape...the way you think about things, your experiences, beliefs, actions, according to the assignment sheet. In the final assignment, a personal reflection on their growth as writers over the semester, several students share the effect of Liz’s assignments on their mindsets and effort toward writing:

I have found that I am much better at writing essays that are more personal. I am able to write more fluidly, the word float out of my mind and onto my paper. There is a personal connection that makes the paper almost more important to me as well. I feel like there is a larger desire to do well on it. I actually enjoy writing it as well. In high school, we did not do as many writing assignments that were personal...Once we got to Mayfield, it was nice to be able to write about something more personal for once.
Rediscovering one’s curiosity is no easy task... In high school, I was always told what to do my research on and it always had to be formally written. There was no such thing and choosing your audience, or adding in personal anecdotes... I used to like writing but in my later years of high school it became something that I dreaded. Thanks to this class, I’ve rediscovered something that was such a huge love of mine. I truly felt like I could be myself and was able to express myself freely.

Throughout her course, Liz aims to encourage similar feelings of free expression in all her students by imparting a core belief that she repeats to me multiple times in interviews:

“In writing, there’s not a ‘Truth’ with a capital T.” She wants students “to start thinking about there not really being a right or a wrong answer or a way to get an A.” Instead, she wants to validate their personal subjectivities, get them to think “more deeply about ideas,” and to lower their psychological barriers toward writing. I see Liz employ this tactic at the beginning of the writing conference that follows Alexander’s:

“How’d it go?” Liz asks, accepting the printed draft that Vera hands over.

Vera sighs a little with a self-conscious smile. “I don’t know, I feel like I’m just doing what I did in high school, so I don’t know if I did it right.”

“We’ll see,” Liz says in a mock-ominous tone, and then laughs. “No, I’m sure you did, and there’s no right or wrong anyway.”

Consistent with her philosophy of rejecting capital-T “Truth” and notions of right and wrong to encourage students’ exploration and growth, Liz tries not to assert herself as an omniscient authority and arbiter of “Truth” for her students. She is judicious about intervening in students’ interpretive process; while she will correct what she sees as major misconceptions or oversights, she tells Vera later in the writing conference to “focus on what you’re most interested in” from Baldwin’s essay and “if there are other things in this essay that are unclear to you...just leave it out.” Likewise, she does not give student guiding questions with their assigned course readings because “I sort of just want them to read and see whatever jumps out at them,” she tells me, “to give them a little more freedom in just
what they like or what they pick up on…It’s just like reading for pleasure.”

Liz also seeks to mitigate her authority by using peer review to disrupt many students’ preconceived notions of the teacher as the only useful source of feedback; a corollary to students recognizing their own expertise is recognizing their peers’ expertise as well. Peer review often constitutes the major activity for a given session of Liz’s class, as students trade papers multiple times with different partners and different prompts aimed at validating the reactions of other students as discerning readers of a work-in-progress. With the personal essays, Liz directs students to search for a line that could serve as a new opening; with the research papers, peer reviewers report back to each other what they learned about each other’s topics to test the clarity of the writing. The frequency of Liz’s peer review activities normalizes the practice of sharing imperfect drafts and ensures that students are doing a high proportion of the work: both important mechanisms in the development of growth mindset. Liz also tells students that peer review is an authentic part of writing in the real world, a fact that a couple of students comment on in their final reflections:

As I am planning to be a biochemist and would probably want to publish my research, I am going to peer review others’ works and be peer reviewed by others, and [this class] prepared me for that. It is a process that I will need to hold close to my heart even after I have stepped out of college and into the real world.

Many of the things I learned are not only useful in writing but are also useful in many other aspects of learning…The greatest writers in the world still get their work proofread. The greatest pieces of literature in human history have been reviewed by at least one person.

These students have made an additional inference relevant to growth mindset: they recognize that biochemists, researchers with advanced degrees, and “the greatest writers in the world” still seek out feedback to improve their work; the second student also recognizes that this principle applies to “other aspects of learning,” not just writing. In any domain,
being “great” is not synonymous with automatic, effortless perfection.

Importantly, however, growth mindset fundamentally requires students to adopt an internal attribution for their own development: students must think about their improvement in first-person, just as they learn to use first-person in their writing. An instructor can craft compelling writing tasks, set writing exercises, and mandate peer review, but students must recognize that the responsibility for growth ultimately lies within. This is not an easy process; in his final reflection, one student describes the eventual shift in his attribution of responsibility from Liz to himself over the course of the semester:

*You were a little bit disappointed…Your professor gave you some exercises to do in class, but …all the exercises in class did not seem to help you in your writing career…“Will this be a waste of a course?” you asked yourself.*

No, *I am writing this to tell you that you will learn something…Although your professor would help you a lot in the future, the person who would contribute the most to your improvement is, surprisingly, yourself…she did not help you do those exercises; you did all of them by yourself…What you finally learned is that you are the only one who can improve your writing skills by practicing more and more throughout your life.*

I see in this student’s reflection the echoes of Diane recognizing the power of “get[ting] out of [students’] way” sometimes, and Zachary’s belief that “no one likes being told why something is important, you gotta come to it yourself.” The design of Liz’s assignments and exercises and her commitment to “defending time” for students to write in class have provided this student with the right balance of external structure and adequate freedom and space for internal mindset development. Finding this balance for all students is the paradoxical challenge for instructors in mindset development work. They cannot directly influence students’ internal psychology; they can only set external conditions that they hope

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21 The conceit of Liz’s final reflection assignment is to compose a letter to your beginning-of-semester self, so some students write it in second person. I have converted most other reflection excerpts in this portrait to first-person for clarity (but do not otherwise edit them); the tone of this one, however, is lost if converted.
students will interpret in the desired ways. As we will see, this tension is particularly evident when it comes to students’ internal interpretations of external incentives and reward structures.

**Practice Incentives**

I arrive about five minutes early to the second class of the semester, and there are far fewer students here early—about half the class—though they all end up on time, and sitting in almost exactly the same seats as last time. “I’m so tired,” Dee tells her neighbor, Rafael, who nods in sympathy. “This is my only class today—I’m so glad,” he says.

Liz wants to review the syllabus in more depth today, after the high-level overview last time. She opens the document on the classroom computer, projecting it onto the screen behind her desk as she talks through it in order, reaching the section on grading a few minutes in:

*Your course grade will be broken down the following way:*

- **Unit I:** 10%
- **Unit II:** 20%
- **Unit III:** 20%
- **Unit IV:** 20%
- **Final Reflection:** 10%
- **Writing Community Membership:** 20%
- **Total:** 100%

*Your grade for each unit will be based on process (that is, assignments that help you produce your final draft, like exploratory writing and initial and revised drafts) and product (the final draft).*

Liz explains that the process and product grades are “sort of blended together” in the calculation of the final grade for the unit. Elaborating on the written description, she tells the students that the product grade is the quality grade they receive on their final essay in the unit, while the process grade is assessed through a unit portfolio, containing all of their
drafts, peer review comments, writing exercises, and other in-class activities. Students will submit these portfolios at the end of each unit, along with their final essay.

Derek raises his hand for clarification: “So, if you complete all the steps, your process grade is fine?”

“Yes,” Liz agrees. “If you do all the steps you’ll get an A on the process grade, and then the product grade is whatever you get on the final essay.” (She qualifies this description to me slightly afterwards, explaining that she might vary the process grades on technically complete portfolios if one student “[wrote] a sentence where someone else is writing a page,” but in general her policy on the portfolio assignments is, “you did it or you didn’t do it.”) Derek seems satisfied and doesn’t ask a follow-up.

Feedback and grading policies play a critical role in classroom messaging around ability and growth mindset. For the most part, Liz determines her own grading scheme; Mayfield has few departmental grading policies, other than that students who fail must re-take the course. (Both Liz and the writing director, however, express the sentiment that “you have to really try hard” to fail, either by simply not showing up to class or not turning in work.) Nor are there departmental standards for evaluating student work: although there is a rubric for the placement exam essays, neither it nor the exam itself is automatically shared with the course instructors.22 When I interview the writing director, she muses that “we should do a sort of norming session” with the instructors on assessing student writing, but

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22 Liz assumed the placement essays were largely judged on grammar and relevance to the supplied prompt. In reality, the rubric comprises four categories—Argument, Organization, Evidence, and Style and Usage—each evaluated on a scale from 1-6. Two Mayfield faculty from different disciplines read and score each student essay. Additionally, students complete a short questionnaire about themselves, including their perceived strengths and weaknesses as a writer, typical weekly reading load, favorite and least favorite assignments from high school, and the number of drafts they typically write before submitting a final. The writing director emphasized to me the department’s effort to be holistic in evaluating students’ writing placement.
that “we don’t pay them nearly enough” to justify requiring part-time faculty to attend
department meetings on their off-days: to do so would be “unethical,” she says. For her part,
Liz tells me that she “would love to have more meetings with other teachers and talk about
things and hear their ideas,” having found that a professional learning community made her
instructional training at the state university “a really valuable environment” for pedagogical
growth. “The change from that to adjuncting—and I don’t think it’s adjuncting specifically
at Mayfield, I think it’s just adjuncting in general,” she clarifies, “—is pretty stark. Like, no
one knows my face” at Mayfield. The department is “pretty hands-off, unless you come to
them with a problem.”

Thus, left mostly to her own devices, Liz finds grades a source of major tension
when trying to deliver a course focused on the writing process and individual improvement.
Ideally, she says, “I wish that there weren’t grades in a writing class. I just see it as, we’re all
there working on this thing together, practicing and practicing, and getting as good as we
each can individually.” Her written feedback to students conveys a sense of how she would
prefer to engage with them over their work. She invariably begins by identifying the piece’s
positive qualities: Great idea development! she writes on an A- paper. Great revision - I just wanted a
little more on some ideas! she tells a student who earned a B+. Good observation in the middle! she
notes on a B paper. In the margins of student drafts, she brackets off sections of text to
praise with yes! or good. Upon receiving drafts back in class one day, two students delight in
Liz’s use of LOL in the margin. Liz also chooses to begin the semester with a personal essay
in part because she feels this genre presents the best opportunity to “draw out the things that
they’re already doing really well in their writing and to point out to them, ‘Look at how
you’re engaging with the audience in this way and how impactful it is.’” By emphasizing
students’ strengths in her feedback, she hopes to combat the psychological barriers of
distaste, resentment, and/or insecurity toward writing that impede the mindset to improve.

Likewise, Liz views grades as potentially reinforcing student anxieties and inhibitions, so she does what she can in her own class to neutralize their negative impact. “I don’t know if this is the best philosophy,” she admits to me, “but I want [the students] to not be worried about this class...not feel dread, and not feel fear, and not feel like they’re doing a bad job. And I think that that actually makes them better.” She names a student whose papers “technically aren’t interesting...like, all of his sentences sound the same, it sounds like he’s just on the phone talking to his friend,” she chuckles. “But if he feels good about it and wants to keep writing, then his writing will be WAY better than if he feels bad about it, you know? So I feel like grades in writing classes should just be encouraging. ’Cause there’s no way for someone to improve if they don’t write, and the only way to get them to write is if they like it.”

Incentivizing students’ writing production by reducing their anxiety and getting them to “like” and “feel good” about their writing is therefore the guiding principle for Liz’s grading structure; her grades mirror her enthusiastic and encouraging written feedback. She is particularly generous with grades in Unit 1 in order to help students to “trust” that they won’t be receiving “a disastrous grade as long as they’re addressing some of the things that I tell them to.” As her syllabus breakdown spells out, Unit 1 is also worth only ten percent of the course grade—half as much as Units 2 through 4—to reduce early-semester anxiety and to provide students with a calibration period to see that the feedback on the drafts “eventually translated into an A- so I’m gonna kinda relax,” Liz laughs. She then modulates the product grades somewhat for the following two assignments, allowing a wider range, but the final two units are “easier to get good grades on.” In every unit, the process and product
grades are weighted equally, with the process grade serving as the tiebreaker if necessary: a student who receives an A on process and an A- on product receives an A for the unit overall. The students’ process grades are therefore cumulatively worth 40% of their semester grade, equal to the 40% devoted to the product grades on student papers (with the remaining 20% going to “writing community membership”). At the end of the semester, Liz tells me that the distribution of overall course grades in the class is consistent with previous cohorts: “more than half A’s, a little less than half B’s, and then a couple C’s and a D”—the last bestowed on a student who exceeded the five allowed absences and consistently failed to turn in required drafts.

Liz herself acknowledges that there are unresolved tensions in her grading philosophy, her enactment of that philosophy, and the students’ grade-related goals and meaning-making around the purpose of their effort—particularly at a selective college like Mayfield. “I feel like it might be a state school versus private school” thing, Liz says, but she finds Mayfield students “very, very sort of success-focused” in terms of having already identified career goals and necessary steps to get there: “like, ‘I wanna be a doctor, and here’s what I have to do to get there.’” By contrast, at “the state schools I’ve been to, both as a student and a teacher,” she says—in addition to attending a state university for her MFA, Liz earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Michigan—“the students all kind of don’t know what they’re doing or why they’re there. They’re like, ‘this is the thing you do after high school.’” That lack of purpose presents its own potential challenges, but conversely, Liz feels that Mayfield students can be “very focused on their grades…they’re less focused on learning and more focused on like, ‘what do you want me to do to get an A?’” She laughs, a little sardonically. “You know? Which is a little bit of like a high school mentality, I think.” She continues:
And I think actually the difference in my goals and their goals creates a lot of frustration for them. We’re not communicating clearly with each other. Like when I give them comments on their initial drafts…they’re like, “well what does this mean…like, would this be a B? Or would this be a C? How do I get to an A?” And I’m like, “What I want you to do is complicate this argument”…you know, we’re not talking in the same sort of framework. And so they feel—especially in the beginning before they see that, like, basically everyone gets B’s and A’s—a lot of anxiety that they’re not understanding what they have to do to get what they want. And I can’t…I can’t really deal in that economy with what I want them to get from it.

Bestowing “encouraging” grades is therefore a way that Liz tries to foster students’ authentic enjoyment of writing and motivate their continued practice of the skill, but it is also a concession to her students’ more transactional “economy”; she theorizes that giving the students what they most want will free them up cognitively and emotionally to engage in what she wants for them.

Liz is aware, however, that she sometimes “struggle[s]” to strike the right balance with her “encouraging” grades: easing students’ anxieties but also keeping them engaged in a process of effortful self-improvement. “Sometimes that’ll give them the freedom to focus on what I want them to focus on, and sometimes it gives them the freedom to not revise that much ’cause they’re like, ‘Oh, this class is easy,’” Liz says. “I don’t want them to stress out about their grades, but I don’t want them to think it’s not something that they need to try at, either.” She knows that “doing” and “thinking” are not necessarily synonymous—“like someone could not write that much but could be thinking about it a lot,” or vice versa—so assessing student effort based on production is not a “foolproof” method. “And there are some students who are, at this stage in their lives, better writers than other students,” she adds, “so making a great essay isn’t as much effort for them. And so, do you reward having a great product more than the effort that some other students put in to make a lesser product?” Liz is uncomfortable with how “murky” and “subjective” this question is, “so
usually it just ends up that everyone gets pretty good grades,” she laughs.

Without a clear alternative strategy, Liz opts to keep her generous approach to grading, prioritizing the potential positive emotional benefits for students who are willing to engage in the process and accepting the tradeoff that other students may disinvest. “For me at least,” she tells the class on the last day of the semester, “I noticed a huge change in confidence in your writing...a lot of you realized that you ARE writing, you’re good at it, you’re finding your voice, you know what you’re interested in and have something to say...that’s a really important step.” This uptick in confidence is precisely what Liz believes students—particularly weak or reluctant writers—need to motivate their continued effort and participation in a writing development process. Enacting a growth mindset, however, involves not just the willingness to exert effort toward improvement, but also persisting with that effort through setbacks and discouraging situations. Liz is aware that her “encouraging” approach to grading can create a tension over the former, but it also implicates the latter: if students consistently receive “pretty good grades” on their writing to boost their confidence, what opportunities exist for them to practice and make meaning of failure?

**Practicing Failure**

“Liz,” Sara says, breaking the near-silence that has descended on the classroom during a peer review activity. “Did you grade our portfolios?”

Sitting at her desk, Liz smiles a little, as if she knows where this is going. She carried an extra tote bag into class today and stowed it under her desk alongside her purse, but it is clearly visible to any students who are paying attention—as Sara evidently is. Liz affirms that she has graded the Unit 1 portfolios but that she will hand them back at the end of class.

This news prompts a flurry of talk and activity, mostly from Sara’s side of the
classroom but rippling to other areas as well, as students want to know if they can get their assignments back now, and also how they did. “Yeah, Liz, did I fail?” Charlotte asks. Liz assures her that nobody failed, but Charlotte counters: “OK, how bad would getting a C be?”

“Well,” says Liz, “A C is average…”

“Ugh,” Charlotte says dismissively. “What was the lowest grade in this class?”

Liz pauses, and I’m not sure if her hesitation is from reluctance to share, trying to remember the grade range, or merely a flair for the dramatic. “No one got lower than a C,” she finally says. This is apparently far from reassuring, as several students feverishly discuss the new information amongst themselves and the contagion spreads to the back wall near me: Michael says something about a C+ and Dee moans, “I don’t want a C.” Liz overhears and intones dramatically, in a deep voice, “Everyone got a C. Heh, heh, heh. No, I’m just kidding,” she says hastily, chuckling.

The students drop the subject as more of them finish reviewing their partner’s draft and begin sharing their feedback. Thirteen minutes later, though, after the class has transitioned to a new writing task, they resume pestering Liz, with Leila wheedling, “Can you PLEASE give us our portfolios?”

Liz holds firm that she’s giving them out at the end of class because “I don’t want the distraction.” She assures them, again, that “everyone did fine.”

“What do you define as ‘fine’?” Marcus asks.

“Yeah, that could mean a lot of different things,” Leila agrees eagerly. “Every teacher has their own ‘fine.’”
“That’s so true,” says Sara.

“Excuse me? When are we receiving our portfolios back?” Jackson—who has otherwise been quietly writing the whole time—asks with total innocence, perhaps believing this to be the first time the question has been posed today.

“Everyone’s really, really excited to get them,” Marcus deadpans, which makes Liz laugh.

“C’mon, Liz,” Sara presses.

“You gotta focus,” Liz protests mildly.

“I’m finished,” Sara retorts triumphantly.

“My plan to not distract you with this is not working,” Liz announces with a chuckle.

“Once you give it to us we’ll just look and put them away,” Sara bargains unconvincingly.

Liz tries to ignore Sara by doing a time check on the rest of the class and giving them two more minutes to write.

This scene is a literal embodiment of many of the grading dilemmas Liz has articulated to me—several students are not focusing on or engaging deeply with the learning task at hand because they are too preoccupied with their grades—but it also raises a critical question for growth mindset development: how are students constructing meaning around the idea and experience of failure? The class collectively seems to agree that a C is equivalent to a failing grade, rejecting the notion that such a grade could be considered “average” or “fine.” Charlotte seems to be angling for Liz to publicly repudiate the idea that she could
have failed and asking for the information she needs to calibrate how she stacks up against her classmates once she does receive her grade. While Liz tells me that students are always anxious before receiving back their first grade of the semester, an only slightly more muted scene plays out a month later when the students learn that Liz has graded their Unit 2 essays and portfolios: though Liz again hands back papers at the end of class so that students “don’t get distracted by what you got or why,” the students continue to perform identities centered on grades through comments that are audible to me as well as their peers. “I don’t like that minus sign,” Michael says, while Dee asks Liz from across the room, “Is there anything higher than an A?” Through these classroom exchanges, the students enact the norm that an A is the only acceptable grade; all the remaining grades below that simply represent relative gradations of failure.

According to their expansive view of unacceptable grades, Liz’s students do experience what they consider to be “failure” even within her generous grading policy; however, the critical issue for their growth mindset development is their understanding of what these “failing” essay grades reflect and how they can use the feedback to improve next time. This is an area that Liz self-identifies as a pedagogical challenge for her; she freely concedes that “there isn’t as much transparency in the grading process as I think [students] would like and as I would like.” She grades essays holistically and does not give students a rubric to translate these letter grades into a broader framework of writing strengths and weaknesses. “When I first started teaching” at the state university, she explains, “I would be super, like, mathematical and hair-splitting about all of these categories and spend forever figuring out grades for everything. And then, when I stopped doing that and was just sort of like, ‘ehhh, that’s an A-’ or, ‘that’s like a B+’ or whatever, I found that those results were exactly the same as if I spent hours and hours toiling over it.” She recognizes, though, that
the rationale behind the grades “would be clearer” to students if she had some kind of rubric or framework, but “I really struggle with trying to fit everyone’s effort into the same… ‘map,’ I guess.”

Liz actually gives her students a framework for their writing early in the semester, but she never explicitly returns to it or builds on it as the semester progresses. On the second day of class, after reviewing the syllabus, she draws a version of the rhetorical triangle on the board:

Liz tells the students that the triangle “is a way of visualizing what’s happening when you’re writing a text.” The three variables at the corners are “the things that define the text you’re writing.” For example, she explains, marking up the chalk triangle with notes as she talks, an email (text) to a professor (audience) asking for an extension (topic), “will look different than an email you’re writing to your mom about how to do laundry. The choices you make depend on the audience and the topic.” Liz sets the chalk down. “This exercise was basically to show you that you’re already doing this,” she explains. “Part of the point of this class is raising your awareness of what you’re already doing and giving you more tools to do some really exciting things.” However, this is the first and last time the triangle appears in class; although Liz talks throughout the semester about the importance of audience particularly, she never explicitly connects these comments back to the triangle. Nor does she use the triangle as an organizing framework for students’ writing exercises or the feedback she
provides on student work: she generally makes specific recommendations within each individual student’s draft, rather than mapping students’ work onto generalized terms and principles that can be carried across students and across assignments. For example, she underlines a sentence in one student’s research paper draft and writes next to it, *Move to beginning + let this idea drive rest of essay* but does not reference the importance of making the topic clear to the audience early on, or use a more generalized term like “thesis,” which would allow her to build on this writing principle in other assignments.

Given that Liz has a framework—albeit an underutilized one—I wonder if her self-identified “struggle” in this area stems more from a perception that imposing a common “map” onto her diverse students feels like an assertion of authority that conflicts with her other pedagogical commitments to encouraging individual expression, validating personal experiences, and challenging the notion of capital-T Truth—all of which she values as ways to help students enjoy and invest in the writing process. She also tells me that she has conflicted feelings about “White English, newscaster English” being held up as the gold standard in academic settings and valued above colloquial language and dialects. “To give one of those more value than the other, to train [students] to speak and write in one over the other, like I have a real problem with that,” she says. These beliefs drive both her design of the analytical essay on James Baldwin’s and Richard Rodriguez’s views on this topic as well as her commitment to letting students “focus on what you’re most interested in” from those readings. If she is truly trying to convey to students that “it’s time to start thinking that what you think matters, because it does,” she wants to validate not only what they say, but how they choose to say it.

Ironically, though, the absence of a common understanding of what constitutes good
writing ends up elevating Liz as the main arbiter of quality—the very didacticism that she philosophically rejects. On the last day of the semester, Ben tells Liz that when she gives them “specific things to look for in each other’s papers, that’s really helpful. But,” he asks, “how do we do that moving forward?”

Liz replies, “Actually, if you think about it, I kind of tell you the same thing a lot of the time.” She points out that her comments often relate to wanting to know more, wanting more specific examples, or identifying repetition. “Keep my voice in your head forever,” she jokes. “Liz would want to know more here, Liz would want me to give more background here.” She hints at common themes in her feedback that would comprise a “map” for revision, but she has not codified her own understanding into a shared vocabulary of effective writing that students can carry onward from her class.

Without generalizable principles or strategies for improvement, some students seem to persist in valuing an absence of mistakes in their writing, rather than viewing writing as a craft that can continually develop and improve. For example, while many students’ final reflections identify a new appreciation for peer review as an important takeaway from the class, a few student convey the idea that peer review is about minimizing any mistakes that you may not recognize…in grammar and sentence formulation and that peer comments being less everytime signifies improvement. When Liz tells the students to review their partner’s Baldwin/Rodriguez essay to make recommendations in three out of the six “polishing categories” she has written on the board,23 some do not—or cannot—comply with the directive:

23 The “polishing categories” are: 1) An opening that engages the readers; 2) an overall sense of purpose; 3) sufficient context/background/support of ideas; 4) a blend of discussion of the text and writer’s own thinking/experiences; 5) liveliness; 6) quotes/signal phrases.
Liz stresses that the students must pick three categories where the author can improve, even if they think the essay is already really good. After a few minutes of work time, Charlotte turns toward her partner, Sara, and they have a brief discussion. Sara turns toward Liz’s desk and says, audibly to me in the back of the class, “Liz, we were supposed to say which ones to WORK on?” Liz confirms the original instructions, and Sara replies that Charlotte “said I did an awesome job on all of them!” I miss Liz’s immediate response to this because next to me, Rafael has turned to Ellie and is telling her, “It’s good, it draws the reader in, your point is very clear throughout. It’s very well written, you use a lot of quotes, maybe just talk about your personal experience more. That’s the only thing I can think of.” Ellie just smiles with a quick intake of breath to acknowledge the feedback, a kind of modest little laugh, but as far as I can tell she gives him no verbal response. “You’re perfect,” Rafael adds, and Ellie makes the little noise again.

There are undeniably benefits to this kind of peer affirmation and praise, but conveying the idea of perfection is exactly counter to what Liz herself wants students to be thinking about when writing. The ongoing challenge for her is to find a way to balance those affective, social benefits of peer praise with students’ acceptance of and willingness to work through flaws in their work.

The balancing act is especially important and especially challenging for students like Liz’s: struggling writers who need encouragement and positive feedback to counter their negative mindsets, but who also have very real weaknesses in their writing. Throughout the semester, I constantly wonder how Liz’s students are squaring the fact that they “failed” the Mayfield placement exam but then ace the class intended to address their failure on the exam. Some students’ final reflections suggest that they have not fully reconciled these contradictory facts, as they couch their growth statements in disclaimers:

_Although at times I felt that I did not belong in that class because I think my writing is at a higher level than [this class], I am still grateful I had the opportunity of starting low to fill in the gaps of my writing._

_In all honesty, I know I didn’t need the writing practice but it’s never a bad thing to get better at a skill._
Everyone is gifted with a different level of talent than others... there were few students in my class that struggle with the earliest of English lessons, while others will be excelled much higher than me. Yes, we were all placed in the same English class with the same exam, but perhaps we all should have been split up into two distinct writing courses.

Additionally, the reflections suggest that when some students experienced a sense of failure on a specific assignment—most often, the research paper—they attributed the source of their struggle to external factors, counter to a growth mindset: the research paper lacked the more personal touch of the other assignments that were more engaging, the student picked a bad topic, or the length requirement was unreasonable:

I could have done [the research paper] in three pages only. However, needing it to meet the length of a five-page research paper enforced me to talk about two arguments instead of one which made it seem like too much. I think I prefer the teacher evaluating the students’ writing based on the quality instead of the quantity. That’s why I did not do well in Unit III.

I find the students’ enduring defensiveness especially ironic when I obtain from the writing director a copy of the 2017 writing placement exam administered to this cohort of students. The prompt provided students with two short popular press articles about failure and supplied ten questions that students could use to guide their response, including:

According to these authors, why are human beings afraid to fail if failure is integral to learning? and What is the relationship between failure, risk, and reward? Whatever the students may have written in response to these questions on the exam, it seems they may still be working through them even after a full semester of college writing instruction.

The exam essay questions are also salient to Liz’s own mindsets toward teaching and her attempts to enact growth mindset-promotive practices in her classroom. Liz has not substantially revised her course since discovering that “the exact class” she taught at her state university “fit all the criteria”—which are few—at Mayfield. “I still find it interesting to just teach the same stuff, over and over,” she tells me. “And I trust myself to do a better job
teaching something I’ve taught a bunch of times.” Otherwise, she says, “I miss things, and if I’m not confident and someone asks me a question, then I totally undermine myself and stumble and…” she trails off, shaking her head and chuckling at herself. “So yeah, having a lot of practice—I think it’s good for my students for me to have a LOT of practice.” In our last interview, she shares with me something else she has carried with her from her pedagogical training at the state university: a theory of student development that is also, indirectly, a theory about teaching:

When they were training us, they were like, “the 18-year-old brain is still not fully formed,” you know? There’s a reason that [students] don’t have super complex ideas yet. Some have more than others but it’s also like…they’re just not totally done “cooking.” [laughs] That’s sort of to be expected. And they would show us essays by this [age] group of students [from] all over the country and all over the world, and they all looked so similar. Like, it was just this age, you know? That’s the way that humans are thinking at that time, typically. And that was actually really interesting, ’cause you’re always like, “My students are still doing this, and it’s because I’m not teaching them right. I’m not a good teacher—I’m, like, failing teaching.” But then you see everyone’s students in the entire world doing that same thing and you’re like, “Oh, it’s not me. We’re all doing our best, and this is just part of the process of, you know, [student] development.”

In addition to presenting a kind of stage-based fixed perspective on students’ writing ability, this theory also has a corollary: a fixed perspective on teacher impact. This corollary gives Liz reassurance that “it’s not me,” that she is not “failing teaching”—a career that she has come to “love so much,” after initially being “terrified” at the prospect, “cause I hate talking in front of people,” she laughs.

“How much do you think of yourself as a writer versus a teacher now?” I ask her.

“That’s a great question,” she says. “I guess I think of myself…well, when people ask what I do, I tell them I’m a teacher…I really want to just teach forever.”

Despite sometimes expressing fixed perspectives on her teaching ability and impact,
Liz simultaneously holds a powerful growth orientation toward this work that she “love[s] so much.” She is unquestionably committed to improving as an instructor; she sometimes pauses during our interviews when a question prompts her to reflect in a new way, saying this is “exactly” why she signed up for the study, and in our last interview, she tells me that she participated because she “just felt like it would be good for me to think about the same things you’re thinking about, and to feel sort of accountable, and to get better.”

Liz’s own growth mindset toward teaching is just as authentically fluid and variable as her students’ growth mindsets toward writing. In a parallel process to what she wants her students to experience with writing, Liz has overcome her initial fear of teaching and negative mindsets about her teaching skills, achieving a level of enjoyment and a willingness to keep doing it “forever.” However, these parallel processes also illustrate parallel challenges in growth mindset development: even espoused growth mindsets can shift from moment to moment, sometimes making it difficult for educators and students alike to take risks that expose them to failure, to accept and embrace that failure as an opportunity to learn new strategies, and to continue engaging in the work even when it does not come easily.

Reflections on Promoting a Growth Mindset

Lay understandings of ability mindsets often present growth and fixed perspectives as dichotomous, but the two mindsets are probably better represented as ends of a continuum, with most educators’ beliefs and classroom practices falling somewhere between the two extremes (Sun, 2018b). Liz’s portrait illustrates the authentic fluidity of these ability mindsets in a classroom, providing much-needed nuance in the discussion of how to support educators in implementing more growth mindset-promotive practices.

A recognition of intelligence and skills as malleable lies at the heart of growth
mindset. Liz explicitly articulates this concept to her students on the very first day of class when she tells them that “writing is very responsive to practice. The more you practice, the better you get.” She does more than just pay lip service to this theory; one of her core underlying course design principles is to “defend time in class” for students to engage in that “brute force practice.” Her allocation of class time conveys the value and importance of the activity. Consistent with research on the context-sensitivity and domain-specificity of growth mindset (Buehl et al., 2002; Yeager & Dweck, 2012), Liz is aware that Mayfield students in general may experience a major adjustment to new academic and social challenges at college after feeling like they “kn[ew] everything” in their local high schools, and that her students in particular may feel particularly insecure after their writing placement test. A similar awareness of the vulnerability of growth mindset during school transitions drives efforts to implement growth mindset interventions for first-year college students; without being specifically trained in growth mindset intervention, Liz intuitively tries to leverage the “brute force practice” time in class to support students in making the adjustment to college work without feeling stigmatized for experiencing difficulty with the transition.

Additionally, Liz’s grading and feedback practices reflect her understanding of growth mindset’s role in the writing process. Because her immediate goal is always to get students to write more, as the prerequisite for their improvement, her assessment seeks to encourage student production. She avoids being “controlling” in her feedback (Reeve & Jang, 2006): her comments are unfailingly positive and often ask students to elaborate or write more on a promising thread, rather than focusing on “corrections.” Likewise, she deliberately tries to be “encouraging” with both her “product” and “process” grades—and the equal weighting of the two—to help students “feel good” about their writing and want to “write more next time.” These grading policies also directly counter students’ negative
incoming mindsets; even students who view themselves as “bad writers” will likely earn positive feedback and a good semester grade if they invest the effort to follow Liz’s process, perhaps altering their self-concept and implicit theories about their own writing ability.

A recurring tension in Liz’s practice, however, is the extent to which her definition of “brute force practice” resembles repetitive execution—doing things “over and over again”—versus “deliberate practice” (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993), or what Wiersema et al. (2015) distinguish as “mindful effort” instead of merely “time spent.” Liz wrestles with the subjectivity of trying to assess the quality of individual effort, and so defaults to a policy of rewarding evidence of time spent: “if you do everything, you get an A on the process grade.” This could actually undermine a growth mindset message for some students in that it externalizes effort by defining it primarily as mechanical repetition rather than an internal process of deep cognitive engagement and, ultimately, mastery of rigorous content or skills. In other words, when students expect to be rewarded for “time spent,” they may focus more on providing superficial evidence of effort, rather than engaging deeply in a learning process and effectively regulating their effort. Liz is not naïve about her grading policy; she knows that for some students, her “generous” grades convey a message that “this class is easy” and may lead them to reduce their effort—the opposite effect that she wants. Her dilemma is that she does not know how to counter the problematic interpretation while preserving a system that she believes helps “free” other students to focus on their writing by removing the pressure of grades, and so she sticks with what seems like the less damaging option.

Importantly, “mindful effort” or “deliberate practice” also requires the experience of failure in order to develop strategies to target the areas most in need of improvement. I
wonder whether Liz’s commitment to “encouraging” and helping students “feel good” about their writing impedes her willingness to give more critical feedback and expose weaknesses in students’ writing. As Sun (2018a) writes, the well-intentioned desire to protect students from negative feelings of failure is actually reflective of a more fixed mindset because it suggests that failure could psychologically cripple students and is something to be avoided, whereas a growth mindset re-frames failure as an inevitable part of learning. Liz tends to deliver affirming feedback that, consistent with her philosophy, may help students “feel good” and more positive about their prospects for success but may not help them identify concrete areas for growth; her advice to Vera in office hours to focus on what she “liked” about Baldwin’s essay and “leave out” anything she did not understand was a particularly striking example. Though done in a spirit of generosity and forbearance, Liz’s acceptance of students’ limitations and her attribution of their underdeveloped writing to a universal developmental spectrum suggest the pervasive influence of fixed theories of intelligence/ability on how she views her students’ mindsets toward writing, their actual writing skills, and her own potential for impact as an educator.

In fact, although Liz seems to view grade-based affirmation as necessary for students to “like” writing, her curriculum and instructional design already contain ample opportunities for students to enjoy writing even if the task is challenging, does not receive a high grade, or goes entirely unrecognized or unrewarded. She has thoughtfully designed creative, open-ended assignments that students can personalize and use to cultivate their authorial voice; these should motivate students to exert effort and want to improve, even in the face of critical feedback. With peer review, independent work time in class, and mandatory one-on-one writing conferences in office hours, she has numerous structures in place to deliver impactful critical feedback to students in formative learning situations, before they receive a
summative grade. She also introduces students to the rhetorical triangle, a framework that could help them contextualize the feedback they receive and provide a visual heuristic for their ongoing writing improvement. The design and intent underlying curriculum and pedagogy, however, are distinct from the details of enactment and implementation (Sun, 2018b). In many cases, such as with the rhetorical triangle, Liz does not take full advantage of these opportunities that she herself has structured into her class that could help her push students harder and help them self-assess their own progress. Consequently, while some students seem to have engaged in the spirit of Liz’s course design and acquired a sense of personal responsibility for their writing growth by the end of the semester (“you are the only one who can improve your writing skills by practicing more and more throughout your life”), others still seem to view academic writing as a one-on-one negotiation to please an outside evaluator and are unable to fully own their failures (“I prefer the teacher evaluating…quality instead of quantity. That’s why I did not do well”).

The mixture of growth and fixed mindsets held by the students as well as Liz herself, and the parallels between Liz’s mindsets about teaching and the mindset messages about writing that she conveys to her students, are consistent with literature on the fluidity of mindsets in classrooms. That mixed mindset messages are so prevalent in classrooms, however, reinforces the need for more holistic studies of classroom instruction that help educators go beyond pat recommendations to “reward student effort” and help them with the far more difficult work of enacting growth mindset-supportive intentions through specific implementation decisions (Schmidt et al., 2015; Sun, 2018b). Implementation is especially challenging because students’ incoming theories of intelligence—the same mindsets that may be feeding negative self-perceptions toward writing and/or the class—as well as prior history and other individual factors can influence their interpretation of
mindset-supportive practices (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). In other words, an educator may enact seemingly “textbook” strategies to promote growth mindset that students still interpret through a fixed perspective.

Collecting data on students’ evolving interpretations of class activities could therefore be a critical component in continually assessing the efficacy of teaching practices on student mindsets. This is another area in which Liz’s teaching already contains the seed of opportunity. Liz incorporated far more student reflection into her curriculum than any of my other participants; indeed, her portrait is richly imbued with student perspectives precisely because she herself possesses this wealth of student data that she was able to share with me. As discussed in the previous chapter, metacognitive reflection can be an important tool for developing growth and other mindsets, but again the specifics of implementation matter. Liz herself muses to me in an interview that it “might be a really good idea” to assign reflections earlier in the writing process, rather than only at the end of units and at the end of the semester. However, given her overall reluctance to modify her course—again perhaps reflecting a fixed mindset toward teaching in that she is disinclined to take risks—she may need additional guidance and encouragement to adopt curricular revisions. Her department could be a key resource and partner for this work, as they have their own unfulfilled seed of potential in the form of a growth mindset intervention masquerading as a placement exam that instructors could build on in class—if they knew anything about it. A rich opportunity therefore exists to enact growth mindset at multiple levels in the Mayfield writing program: with the students, the instructors, and in departmental leadership.
Chapter 7

Mastering the Game: “I can succeed at this”

The goal structures that educators create in their classrooms convey important messages to students about the definition of success and whether students can achieve that success. Colin Zimmerman’s portrait reveals a thoughtful and intentional educator who centers his classroom goal structure on skill mastery as the definition of success and strives to provide students with a “game manual” and numerous practice opportunities to build that mastery and support their efficacy mindsets. However, his portrait also shows us that combatting students’ preconceptions about what “game(s)” they are playing and what “winning” means may require a deeper understanding of the tenacity of performance-oriented beliefs about success in both students and educators.

Understanding the Rules

“Awkward grammar appals a craftsman. A Dada bard as daft as Tzara damns stagnant art and scrawls an alpha (a slapdash arc and a backward zag) that mars all stanzas and jams all ballads (what a scandal)…” Katarina stumbles occasionally as she reads aloud from the PDF displayed on her MacBook screen. Her instructor, Colin Zimmerman, has given the class a scanned excerpt from the book Eunoia as “an example of the kind of game we could play today,” and Katarina volunteered to read the first section aloud—a choice she may be regretting now as she struggles through the tongue-twisting words that sound almost like a different language.

The room where Colin convenes his section of English 101, Abbott University’s first-year writing course, is on the first floor of a building that feels like a converted

residence. A door on one wall leads to a front porch; the opposite wall features an inactive fireplace where some of the students pile their belongings because of the limited space around the large seminar-style table in the center of the room that Colin has the students create by pushing four smaller tables together. The 16 students who sit around this table seem to me a fair cross-section of Abbott, other than international students being slightly underrepresented; English 101 is mandatory for all first-year students except those with exempting scores on the AP, International Baccalaureate (IB), or British A-Level exams deemed to assess analogous skills, but English language learners are placed in a different track. Among the roughly 1300 students in a first-year cohort at Abbott, around 12% are international students, while 22% are domestic student of color and 13% are Pell Grant recipients.

Colin, a tall and lanky White man in his 30’s who is teaching this course for the fifth straight year, sometimes pulls up a seat with the students around the table, but at the moment he is standing at the lectern where his laptop is connected to the classroom audiovisual system so that the enormous flat-screen monitor on the wall behind him mirrors his computer display. Dressed in his usual teaching attire of an untucked plaid button-down and slacks, he leans slightly forward on one hand as his eyes scan his laptop screen to follow along with Katarina. At the seminar table, the other students do the same, but nobody is reacting much to the gibberish she is gamely continuing to recite except for Kyle, who breaks into a slow smile about halfway through.

“What?” Katarina gasps when she finally reaches the end of the page, which

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25 Students must score at least a 4 on the AP English Literature exam, a 6 on the IB Higher-Level English exam, or a B on a British A-Level Language exam to place out of English 101.
seems to break the ice for the other students to make similar noises of amusement and consternation.

“There’s an A in every word!” Kyle bursts out triumphantly. With a hint of playfulness creeping into his typically quiet, even speaking style, Colin adds that not only does every word contain an A, “A is the ONLY vowel used in the whole piece.” This pronouncement sparks a flurry of new noises and side conversations as the students scurry to verify it for themselves; Margaret cackles loudly in delight and then apologizes for the outburst, but continues to grin at her screen.

Kyle volunteers to finish reading the A chapter and another student reads a bit of the next, which follows the same rules but with the letter E. Colin then directs the students to the author’s note at the end, which explains that, inspired by a French avant-garde coterie renowned for its literary experimentation with extreme formalistic constraints, the author intended his text to make a Sisyphean spectacle of its labour, wilfully crippling its language in order to show that, even under such improbable conditions of duress, language can still express an uncanny, if not sublime, thought.

“Even when you impose strict rules,” Colin translates to the class, “you can get something interesting out of it.” Sometimes rules have the benefit of getting us to “think creatively” and push our arguments in ways we might not otherwise think of. “Rules don’t have to be limiting,” he says. “They can be enabling.”

The enabling power of rules forms the organizing principle of Colin’s class. In our very first interview, he tells me that his approach to teaching draws on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of language wherein “learning a language involves…” He pauses briefly, and then continues with what I assume is a vast oversimplification for my benefit: “learning to play a game, basically.” Colin is about to complete his doctorate in English at
Abbott, with a focus on modernism and language philosophy, and he connects Wittgenstein’s “language-game” to the goal of a first-year writing course. “So much of what people in their freshman year of college are doing,” he says, “is coming into college and figuring out, what is this all about? How is this different from what’s come before? What are the things that I need to do to succeed in this new culture, in this new discourse?”

Recognizing the relationship between success beliefs and feelings of belonging, he wants his students to “start to be aware that there’s a conversation happening, and have some ideas about how they can engage with it and respond to it in a meaningful and appropriate way.”

Learning this new academic discourse is like learning any language—which is to say, like learning a game. “I think that when I’m teaching, a lot of what I’m doing is just showing how I play games,” Colin says, helping his students to “see some of the moves that I make in those games…and then giv[ing] them a space and opportunity to try it themselves.”

Ultimately, he hopes his students gain enough mastery that they “feel like they have a place in this discourse community.”

Mastery experiences are a critical component of the efficacy mindset, and for Colin, mastering a complex game involves recognizing not only the existence but also the purpose of the game’s rules. “When you’re young and you learn to play a game,” he says, “you learn the rules and you follow them.” But as an older student of the game, “you have to start to understand why the rules exist the way they do…In basketball, it’s to produce competition or difficulty that’s just manageable enough. The free-throw line is 15 feet from the hoop, it’s not 30 feet from the hoop. There are particular reasons why things are the way they are.”

For Colin, understanding the underlying purpose of a game’s parameters is critical to being able to play the game well. “I feel like high school writing is sort of like learning some rules but not always having a good handle on why the rules exist that way,” he says. To develop as
effective writers in college, students need to learn that the rules exist “to facilitate 
communication, to help deepen your thoughts, and to help improve or sustain or further 
some line of research or inquiry for discussion.” Novice writers see rules as arbitrary 
limitations to follow blindly, but expert writers can recognize the opportunities that rules 
enable.

In the context of academic discourse, though, Colin recognizes that understanding 
these rules is challenging because “academia is particularly opaque about its own 
expectations.” A major component of Colin’s role as a first-year writing instructor is 
therefore to make those rules and expectations more transparent to his students—to provide 
a kind of game manual—so that students know what they are striving to master. “Belonging 
in the academic community means that you just learn to play a particular kind of game,” he 
says. Colin illustrates this for students on the first day of the semester by having the class 
play the party game Apples to Apples, in which players creatively justify bizarre pairings of 
words to win points from a judge. “I make it pretty explicit on the first day that what we do 
at college and what we do in this class in particular is a lot like playing the game of Apples to 
Apples,” Colin says. “I talk about how there are rules and expectations, how there are ways 
that you can win.”

Apples to Apples is also meant to show students that they “have an intuitive sense 
already of how to make an argument,” affirming their baseline competence before Colin sets 
out to teach them the “rules” of academic argument that will help them “win” more often or 
more convincingly. In a class that otherwise features few absolutes and little rote learning, 
Colin clearly designates each set of writing rules as foundational principles, writing them on 
the board and explicitly telling students to internalize them. In just the third class session, he
begins asking students to recall from memory the four parts of an argument they learned in the previous class, groaning softly in mock horror when students need to refer to their notes. Later in the semester, when Colin teaches students four principles of clarity and cohesion adapted from Joseph Williams’ work, he again explicitly states his expectation that students learn the new set of rules and seizes the opportunity to check students’ mastery of the previous set:

“I would like you to memorize these four things,” he tells the class. “I’ve asked you to memorize one other thing in this class, the components of an argument. Can anyone remember them?” Several students offer attempts, and eventually, all four components are named as Colin scribes them on the board: 1) context; 2) problem/question/disruption; 3) stakes/significance; 4) thesis/solution. (“Whew!” someone says. “That took effort.”) Colin shifts back to the four principles of clarity and cohesion written in a parallel list on the board and repeats them, and now several students start copying them down, though they had not been taking notes before. When one student re-enters from having gone to the bathroom, he surveys his classmates writing, figures out what’s going on, and also starts copying from the board.

Despite his frequent memorization directives, Colin never formally tests the students on the writing frameworks he gives them; the collective recitations are the main accountability check. Beyond simply being able to parrot them back to him, though, Colin’s students need to understand and master the rules, which Colin works toward by integrating them into multiple facets of students’ coursework. Reinforcing the central metaphor of the course, he has populated his syllabus with readings about “rules or games or learning how to do specific behaviors,” or readings in which the authors are playing stylistic or rhetorical “games,” and he asks students to make the author’s game transparent by identifying the four components of an argument or evaluating the thesis using the criteria they’ve memorized. Students also perform these tasks with each other’s work in peer review and are consistently

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asked to apply the frameworks in their own writing—whether in the opening essay in which they use *reasons and observations from your own educational experience* to justify whether Carol Dweck, John Taylor Gatto, Paulo Freire, or Annette Lareau *offers the best solution for improving education*; in a Letter to the Editor responding to a course reading; in a free-choice MLA-formatted research paper; or in the *translation* of that research paper into *public writing*...to appeal to *non-experts who need to learn what you know*. One student’s in-class reflection at the end of the semester acknowledges the role of these multiple opportunities in furthering a sense of mastery as both a consumer and producer of writing: *After reading articles and writing responses then writing and peer editing, I learned how to spot good writing which also helped me write better.* Other students likewise use their reflections to show Colin that they have indeed internalized the “rules,” especially around argumentation (emphasis added):

*The most useful lesson we had was one of the first lessons talking about the parts of an Argument. **Stakes, Problems, Scope, context evidence.** Will never forget.*

*The most important thing I learned in this class was how to really set up my introduction with the **problem, stakes, and thesis.** I think this was really helpful for me in forming an argument for the papers. I also learned the thesis should not just state what you are going to talk about, but also contain a greater **significance.***

*Learned about how to structure an argument in a non-5 paragraph simple essay. This means C[ontext]-P[roblem]-S[takes]-T[heis], anticipating counterarguments, anticipating readers’ questions.*

In a direct contrast to the natural “opaqueness” of academia, Colin’s game metaphor provides him with a meta vocabulary to talk to his students in an accessible way about how he is trying to develop their mastery and foster their belief that they can succeed “in this new culture” and “feel like they have a place in this discourse community.” Critically, though, Colin’s vision of college as a “discourse community” requires not just teaching students to master the discourse through the “rules” and frameworks of writing. Like the three other
educators in this study, he recognizes the intersection of the efficacy mindset with a feeling of belonging to a community that nurtures and affirms students’ success potential, providing students with the social motivation to keep playing the game.

Assembling the Players

Having finished discussing *Eunoia* with the students, Colin explains the game he has devised for them: each student will invent two rules to constrain their writing and compose a short piece using those rules; they will then divide into groups, share their work, and elect one representative to compete against the other groups. The students settle into nearly silent individual work time, with only minimal conferring and reacting (“This is gonna be hard,” Katarina says to no one in particular), but the noise level spikes when Colin directs them to form groups. He has stated that the winning composition will exempt the nominating group members from their next homework response paper—a prize that prompted a brief fizz of excitement—but it does not seem to me that the students are thinking of that now as they turn to their groupmates. “I really liked mine,” I hear from a few voices. Kyle’s explanation of his piece catches the ear of Tony, who is in a different group, but the two young men swap laptops to read each other’s work anyway. Kyle bursts into a full-throated belly laugh when he finishes. “Tony and I aren’t talented writers,” he says as he hands back the laptop, “so we wanted to make them funny.” Tony nods in agreement as he passes his device over to Margaret, who has also asked to read it. At the other end of the table, Ariana is realizing she missed the opportunity to invent “a rule where you had to swear every other word!” Lena points at her, nodding and laughing in agreement.

Colin, who circulated briefly during individual writing time but otherwise has stayed largely out of the process, reconvenes the full class and asks each group to read out the piece
they have nominated for the class competition. He notes that the author of the piece does not have to be the one to read it, although all four authors choose to. Ariana goes first:

A nonstop array of gold, on blue, on green, an ocean to be cleaned. A nonexistent boat of future, on wood, on planks, a flank to be thanked. A nonrecurring dream of West, on pillows, on hay, a prey gone astray. A nonsignificant head of curls, on beauty, on grace, a place to be erased. A nonobservant strip of shore, on red, on yellow, a dead to be unsaid. A nonacceptable voyage of money, on bursar, on cash, a precursor of crashed.

“Soooo good!” Margaret says, making muted little golf claps in appreciation. Ariana smiles modestly. Colin later tells me that “when we do these writing activities” in class, he finds Ariana’s “poetry” consistently “really good…really impressive. It’s really creative, it’s sort of serious, and interesting—and I would vote for it every time,” he chuckles.

Edwin is the reluctant nominee for the next group. “I didn’t have anything better,” he warns before he reads:

Sipping on the red cup, scooping the ball up, throat burns from the liquid. Feeling the senses lifted, bend the arm up, loosen the muscle rigid. The projectile landed, hitting the target death cup, opponent’s face livid. Crowd builds, watch me pull my pants up, Watch me do my dance, yup.

The class howls with delight, Margaret freely clapping with her whole hands this time. “Is this about beer pong?” Colin asks, arching an eyebrow. “Water pong,” Edwin replies innocently, which generates more laughter from the class.

“I like it,” Colin says, in a measured tone that conveys bemused tolerance more than whole-hearted admiration. “Very strong entries this year.”

After Katarina reads her quite lengthy composition, which Colin praises as “very good, very vivid” but she twice laments is “corny compared to the others,” it’s Tony’s turn. Margaret is squirming with anticipation. Glimpsing the opening line, Colin jokes, “Is this personally insulting to me? Because otherwise I’ll just let you vote without having you read.”
Tony grins slyly but commences reading without comment:

I went to English class today
A game is what we got to play
The game is kind of cool
But id rather just hit my juul
Drugs are bad is what critics say
But it just makes a better day
This game we play is kind of fun
I hope were close to being done
Im hungry so I want some food
Maybe that will better my mood
I took my good friend out to eat
But supposedly she hates meat
Practice today is gonna suck
Hopefully I get out with some luck

“I LOVE it,” Katarina gushes when he finishes, applauding along with Margaret.

“I’m unfamiliar with ‘juul,’” Colin says, which prompts snorts of amusement but no explanation forthcoming from the students. “Is this something for the young people these days?”

“I thought you were young,” Ariana says. “Aren’t you like in your 20’s?”

“Nooo,” Colin says slowly, shaking his head wryly but good-naturedly before turning away to set up the chalkboard for the class vote.

Although Colin is not as far removed from his 20’s as his response to Ariana would suggest, I can see that he feels a generational gap with his students. He often speaks to me about them with the same blend of amusement and mystification that he adopts toward

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27 After Colin dismisses the students, he follows up with Tony about juul: “I assumed it was something smokeable?” he jokes. Tony explains that “it’s like a vape,” to which Colin replies, “Well, that’s much cleaner than I thought.”
them in class; his tone sometimes evokes a field biologist encountering a group of fascinating but perplexing creatures. I can understand why: the students embody contradictions befitting their literal and figurative transitional stage. They summarize Plato from memory, rail against Marxism, and overall demonstrate what Colin calls “impressive” intellectual insight one minute and then lapse into endearing—or frustrating—childishness the next. They laugh uproariously at thinly veiled references to drugs and alcohol, but some of them also make charmingly quaint efforts to sanitize their more colorful language in front of Colin and me (“er, I mean ‘fudge,’” Margaret self-censors on one occasion). A few are in the habit of propping a foot on the seminar table and tilting their chair onto the two back legs at a precarious angle that I recognize as a favored position from my own childhood. One student regales Colin with a dramatic story before class about being device-less that day after upending a bottle of iced tea all over her laptop in her dorm room the previous evening. “Sometimes it feels like they’re still in high school,” Colin sighs during one of our interviews.

“They WERE in high school three months ago,” I reply.

“Yeah, that’s true,” he says reflexively, then pauses to truly consider my comment and laughs, reiterating his response with merriment this time. “That’s true. They talk about things like senioritis and AP classes like they were VERY important.”

Colin recognizes first-year classes—especially writing classes—as critical spaces for students’ concurrent academic and social transition to college, a perspective seemingly shared by Abbott’s placement policy, which renders the course effectively a shared experience for the majority of incoming students; they are all in it together. Within his class, Colin seeks to build community from day one of the semester, again by leveraging games.
Apples to Apples is actually the second game Colin’s students play in class; the first is a name game where each member of the class must remember and recite everyone else’s name in order. Colin himself cheats a bit in this game by practicing beforehand with the photos in the online class roster, but his own grasp of student names and faces is only partly the goal: he also wants to be sure that students know each other’s names as soon as possible, to set the foundation for their collaborative work. “In the class, I try to have them work in groups a lot,” Colin says, “and when they do peer reviews, they really need to know who another person is, or they may end up giving some really scathing critique, which isn’t helpful for anyone.” Knowing names is the necessary first step to “feeling comfortable” with each other as “human beings” and eventually coming to “respect each other.” Colin acknowledges that Abbott’s placement policy facilitates his work in this domain: the fact that most Abbott first-years take the course but international students with extra language needs are filtered into a separate class means that “there are no non-native speakers in the class, there’s nobody who has a serious learning disability, there’s nobody with an age difference—it’s a pretty homogenous group,” he says. However, Colin does not assume that “homogeneity” automatically translates into feelings of comfort and mutual respect; he continues to enforce community-building throughout the semester by mixing up how he groups students for collaborative work: he alternates between assigning partners, letting students choose, or counting off to randomize groupings.

Indeed, this establishment of a trusting classroom community is so important to Colin that he requests that I not begin observing until he has had a chance to play these introductory games and ask the students about their comfort level in participating in the study. Thus, I do not witness the first-day games, but Colin’s care with names and community-building is still evident to me in my first observation. Though it is only the third
session of the semester—and there are actually four new students that day who have just added the class—the students’ energetic pre-class chatter is audible from the hall as I approach the classroom. Students refer to each other by name frequently during class discussions and more informal moments. The large central table helps to bring classmates literally closer together, but the students also change seats constantly of their own accord. While friendships do form over the course of the semester, the students seem to hold no strong attachments to particular seats or neighbors and instead will claim whatever empty seat is available as they filter in, seemingly content to sit next to different people every day.

Interestingly, while the room set-up seems conducive to the students befriending each other, Colin feels that it sometimes leaves him the odd man out. Though he spends a good amount of time sitting with the student around the table, he also often needs to stand to control the laptop or write on the chalkboard, bringing him outside of the circle and making eye contact with every student difficult. “It’s like this weird sort of tight molecular structure that I’m talking at,” he says, gesturing with his hands to demonstrate the words emanating from his mouth toward the seminar table. “It’s hard to feel like it’s a cohesive group that I’m included in.” This distance is relational as well as physical; despite Colin emphasizing names from day one and telling students to call him by his first name, it is seven weeks into the semester before I hear a student do so. In total I only ever hear two students use his name; the others seem to take great pains to avoid hailing him verbally, contorting their bodies in their seats to make eye contact from across the room or waiting until he is near enough for them to simply launch into their question without preamble. Even in conversations amongst themselves before Colin arrives, students simply use the pronoun “he” in a tacit communal understanding of the antecedent.
When I share this observation with Colin in our last interview, he attributes his decision to be on a first-name basis with students in part to his desire not to claim an honorific he has not yet earned (“I don’t have a Ph.D. I’m not ‘Professor Zimmerman,’ I’m not ‘Dr. Zimmerman’”), but also to his intentional acculturating of students to college norms. “I take it seriously that ‘collegiality’ is related to ‘college,’” he says. “Like there’s a sense of being a peer and sort of rising to the level of the people who are your seniors,” in contrast to high school, which Colin says he “hated…I want to make sure that the experience of college is NOT like high school.” In his view, once students reach college, they become cohabiters of an academic community with their instructors and should begin learning how to interact accordingly.

However, Colin is not surprised by my observations of some students’ seeming discomfort with the new dynamic; he recognizes that relationships with college instructors can be “confusing” and “fraught” for students—and instructors as well—because the college culture is simultaneously “collegial” and hierarchical. Colin wants students to address him as a “peer” but still respect and defer to his “senior[ity]” and expertise. “A lot of times [students] want to argue with me and they want to push me on things, and I’m like, ‘No. You’re wrong. Like, you can call me Colin, but I’m still your teacher—and I’m still gonna grade your paper,’” he chuckles. Colin acknowledges that being on a first-name basis with an instructor is new to many of his students and may “contribute to a general confusion about their role in the class and my authority. But at the same time,” he says, “I don’t feel like I should have to reinforce my authority constantly” by demanding that students use a title to address him. His authority should be tacitly understood, no matter how students address him; they have to learn to accept that duality.
Yet this tension around negotiating authority is also salient to the development of students’ efficacy mindsets because authority—like the judge in Apples to Apples—often determines what success looks like and whether students have achieved it. But while the authority in Apples to Apples rotates so that everyone gets a chance to be the judge, Colin is always the ultimate judge of his students’ formal writing in this class, even as he tries to coach students’ mastery of the rules in order to build their capacity to self-assess independently of him. Like Diane, Colin has to enact his classroom authority through multiple roles: he is both coach and referee for the larger “game” of academic communication that his students are learning, and he is also a gamemaker in his own right. He designs the classroom-level “game” that plays an important role in the messages students receive about their own success potential “in this new discourse.”

Leveling Up

At the beginning of her TED talk “The Power of Yet,” psychologist Carol Dweck introduces the audience to “a high school in Chicago where students had to pass a certain number of courses to graduate, and if they didn't pass a course, they got the grade ‘Not Yet,’” she says, drawing out the two words for emphasis. “And I thought that was fantastic! Because if you get a failing grade, you think, I’m nothing, I’m nowhere. But if you get the grade ‘Not Yet’, you understand that you’re on a learning curve.” Dweck traces an arc through the air with her right hand. “It gives you a path into the future.”

Colin assigns Dweck’s TED talk to his students—it is, in fact, the first “text” in his syllabus—and it is fitting that they discuss her growth mindset theory on the same day that

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Colin introduces the four components of an argument. In addition to making the rules of the game transparent to students, Colin recognizes that students need to perceive and embrace the challenge of writing in order to understand how and why mastering the rules will help them succeed; efficacy and growth mindset have complementary and mutually reinforcing dimensions. The realization that “writing is hard, and it takes time” is something Colin “didn’t encounter as a writer until I was well into grad school,” and he wants his students to understand it much earlier in their academic careers. “Good writing is revised writing. It’s writing that’s been seen by other people, almost always. Unless you’re like a brilliant, amazing wunderkind or something,” he chuckles. “To make good writing, you have to try and try and try.” Thus, from the beginning of the semester, Colin seeks to blend the development of students’ efficacy mindsets with the development of growth mindsets and motivation that will sustain them through the inevitable challenges of college-level writing.

Colin views these challenges as inevitable not only because of the inherent difficulty of the skill but also because “I have rarely met high school students who were well-prepared for college writing,” he tells me. “Some students are, but it’s very few. Like one student per semester MIGHT be already there. The rest have very little awareness of the kind of depth of thinking and complexity and just the general expectations of the kind of communication that is necessary for college.” Likewise, “they’re terrible readers. They don’t know how to read. I mean that in a sort of literal sense,” he chuckles. “They don’t think while they read, they just like look at every word and pronounce it; I think that’s how they’ve learned to read. But the readings that we look at in college are more difficult, and require a lot more thinking.” At the same time, he readily compliments Abbott students as “very conscientious, very quick, and very good at picking up new things. They have a lot of confidence, and a lot of potential.” Abbott students have also successfully negotiated an undergraduate admissions
process that rates among the most competitive in the country: the acceptance rate is 16% and average math and verbal SAT scores for incoming students are in the 700s. Yet Colin maintains that even most of these students’ skills are “not yet” adequate for the increased difficulty level of college.

Unlike the Chicago high school praised by Dweck, though, Colin has to operate within a traditional grading scheme; although Abbott undergraduates have pass/fail grading options, they must take first-year writing for a letter grade. Accordingly, the writing program communicates the idea of “not yet” through two interrelated policies: a two-semester writing requirement for most students and some pointed advice to instructors to be stingy with their grades. The very first reference to letter grades in the writing program’s instructor handbook is a reminder about the departmental policy that an A grade signals mastery and should be given sparingly:

*Whatever strategy you choose, remember that an A or A- in English 101 exempts the student from English 102. In recent years, our colleagues have reported many students in their classes who did not take English 102 but should have. Moreover, a poll in [the student newspaper] a few years ago named English 101 as an easy course to get an A in. We may be giving too many high grades. Please think twice before giving an A or A- in English 101, remembering that only exceptional students should be exempted from the two semesters of First-Year Writing instruction specified in the Abbott requirement.*

Colin tells me he hasn’t looked at the handbook in years, but his description of his grading philosophy strongly parallels the departmental criteria; his own assessment of students’ incoming skill level and needs seems aligned with the institution’s, and he does not seem conflicted in enacting a grading policy that demands excellence. He “tries to lower [students’] expectations on the grades” when he reviews the syllabus on the first day and is

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29 The only Abbott students who are automatically exempt from English 102 are those with top scores on the eligible qualifying exams (a 5 on the AP, a 7 on the IB, or an A on the A-Level) and engineering students.
“pretty harsh” on grades at the beginning of the semester. By the end of the semester, he tells me that typically “maybe like 10 percent, roughly, would get an A, like the top one or two” students in each section, calling it his “personal philosophy” that students “have to really be ready to take on all kinds of papers” for their other college classes to receive an A from him. “Most people I think will get like a B or a B+, and generally they’re OK with that?” Colin chuckles a little, as if conceding some uncertainty over this point. He adds, though, that he believes a first-year writing class is “the place” to adjust students’ expectations about grades in college. “I think they’re sort of ready for a new challenge. And they understand on some level that their college work is going to be tougher.”

Critically, Colin supplements his exacting final evaluation standards with some flexibility in grades that allows him to communicate improvement to students. His “harsh” early-semester grades function partly as a signal to students that they have leveled up in academic difficulty, but also as a low baseline that gives Colin room to create an upward grade trajectory for each student over the course of the semester. While he thinks students’ writing genuinely does improve, he “also sort of ‘let[s]’ them get better” by occasionally “let[ting] things slide” in later papers that he might have critiqued more heavily early on. “I don’t know if that’s bad,” he says, “but it seems to me like it’s more important to help boost their confidence as they go than it is to have absolutely objective grading policy. I don’t even know what that would be.” He also allows students the option to revise one paper after receiving their grade so that they can see the direct translation of their additional targeted effort into an improved grade. Thus, while the vast majority of students will not earn A’s as their overall course grade, Colin exercises discretion with specific assignment grades to try to reward student effort and improvement.
Colin also communicates messages to students about effort and process engagement through what he does not grade. Leading up to the final graded paper for each unit, Colin grades almost none of the smaller individual assignments, which include reading responses, occasional reading quizzes, preparatory notes for class discussions, the discussions themselves, paper drafts, and peer review exercises (other than two more formal peer response papers that he does grade). Instead, he factors their completion and general quality into the three categories of his semester grade breakdown that are not the final paper grades. He hopes this approach helps to show students that “the point is not always to get a grade from me, but to have them go through the effort” of working through authentic interim steps in the long and rigorous process of writing well. While he gives “fairly copious amounts of feedback” on students’ graded essays to help them understand what they can do to improve, he has increasingly scaled back his commentary on the smaller homework assignments that students post to the class website, realizing that the website—a minimalist Google+ page that Colin set up himself—provides its own kind of accountability because postings are public to all invited members. “That’s a change for me,” he laughs. “I used to think that I had to judge everything, all the time.” As a more experienced teacher now, Colin recognizes that he has influence not only through what he does but also what he does not do; removing himself from the equation as an evaluator can shift students’ focus from trying to please him for a grade to doing the actual work necessary to improve.

This shift in thinking is important not only for fostering students’ growth mindset in Colin’s particular class but also because it is authentic to the “game” of advanced academic writing, where students have to increasingly exercise their own authorial judgment and not rely on the verdict of an external authority. As a doctoral candidate, Colin can model the self-directed, effortful advanced writing process by being transparent to students “about my
own experience of writing, which is that it’s painful and awful,” he laughs to me in an interview. I see him do this in class through spontaneous responses and anecdotes, such as when he opens class one day by inviting students to reflect briefly on their experiences writing the Letter to the Editor assignment that they have just turned in:

Quinn raises her hand and says she struggled to find her argument: she was trying to apply the idea of “stupid games” described in a course reading to an analysis of Pokémon Go, but ultimately she “had to rewrite [the assignment] three times.”

“Oh NO!” Colin says in his gently theatrical manner. “That sounds like MY writing process!” Several students laugh at this, and Colin elaborates by estimating that he re-wrote the first chapter of his dissertation three times, “and it was like 35 pages.”

I hear “woah”s and other shocked reactions around the table. Milking the response a bit, Colin spells out the arithmetic for them: three full-blown rewrites adds up to “writing 100 pages and only getting 30 good ones out of it.” (“GEEZ,” someone mutters.) Colin explains, though, that the process of rewriting ultimately makes any piece better.

In this and similar exchanges, Colin affirms the importance of effort by showing students that even their teacher, the authoritative expert who evaluates them, has to work hard at his craft. Success and expertise does not mean that the work gets easier—if anything, it gets harder and requires more effort.

The co-development of growth and efficacy mindsets is therefore critical for students as they advance in their academic careers, starting with their current transition to the rigorous and elite academic space of Abbott University. When Colin talks to me about lowering his students’ expectations about grades, he explains:

I don’t know if I say this to them, but because it’s such a highly selective pool, to be the student who really shines, you have to work really hard and sort of be exceptional. So, being in this place, you’re going to succeed, that’s fine, and I still have to make some distinctions between the people who are doing an exceptional job and the people who are doing a good job. I don’t want to have to make those distinctions, but I mean, some people put in a lot more time on their papers than others.
Colin voices some passing discomfort at essentially having to rank students through grades, but this is assuaged by his belief that exceptional effort leads to an exceptional product and should be rewarded accordingly, especially among such a “highly selective” group.

However, the selectivity of the group poses its own challenges in enacting Colin’s approach to the efficacy and growth mindsets. For Colin, the highly selective educational context seems to lower the stakes of grading; because his students are invariably “going to succeed…being in this place,” he is simply demarcating relative degrees of success within a fairly narrow range. But Colin admits through his disclaimer (“I don’t know if I say this to them”) that he is not sure how transparent he is to students about his philosophy, opening up the possibility of alternative understandings on the students’ part. At a highly selective private undergraduate institution, attempts to recalibrate students’ expectations and definitions of success, failure, and effort can run up against a substantial barrier: the possibility that the students themselves are playing quite a different game from the one their instructor has designed.

How to Win

On my way to Colin’s classroom, I pass a few of his students sitting in a nearby lounge area, all silent and staring at their laptop screens; the final drafts of their second papers are due today and I suspect there is some last-minute work happening. When I reach the classroom, Erika and Quinn are the only people inside. Quinn is regaling Erika with a description of a Teaching Associate for one of her other classes who is the “harshest grader I’ve ever had.” Knitting her brows together, Quinn deepens her voice to play-act the TA lecturing her class that the grades indicate that their work does not meet the quality standard
for graduate students. “Well, no fucking kidding!” she exclaims in her own voice—though she whispers the curse word, the only indication that she is aware of my presence. She estimates that she’s slept seven or eight hours total over the past two nights: “I’m drowning.”

“That’s the word,” Erika agrees, along with “defeated.” Quinn proposes “drained.” As the room starts filling up shortly before noon, they invite their classmates to join the game: “We’re brainstorming words that start with a D that describe our mental state,” Quinn says, since “we’re all getting D’s on this essay” that is due for Colin today. “Dead,” someone offers. “Dumb.” “Doomed.”

As far as I know, nobody in the class ever received a D on any essay; the grading scheme in Colin’s syllabus, which is adapted from the sample in the department handbook, only goes down to a C-, and Colin tells me the average grade on each essay “is probably a B.” But this pre-class exchange is not novel to me; in similar situations, the students have also articulated unrest over the syllabus criteria that begin with C’s as the baseline, “satisfactory” grade. “We’re all getting C’s,” one student announces before class on the day their first papers are due. “Did you see what it said for B/B-?” another asks, alluding perhaps to the syllabus’s framing of B papers as “exceed[ing] expectations” (A’s are reserved for “exceptional” work).

While the Abbott writing program handbook gives instructors plenty of guidance on how to make sure that only “exceptional” students earn A’s and tells instructors that the idea that a B is a ‘bad’ grade must be shed, it does not provide any concrete guidance on how to alter students’ meaning-making around grades. In fact, it seems to take some pride in Abbott students’ achievement orientations, acknowledging that most of our students are used to receiving
A’s and A’s in high school. They would not be at Abbott if that were not the case! The department suggests that seeing B’s as “bad” grades is a delusion that “must be shed”—but it is a delusion that has been reinforced by Abbott’s own highly selective admissions process; the students would not even be at Abbott if they had been content with mostly B’s in high school.

Nor does the institutional reinforcement end at the admissions process; both Colin and the university continue to leverage the extrinsically motivating power of grades and achievement culture for their students while simultaneously articulating a desire for students to be less fixated on grades. In one interview when Colin initiates a conversation about pass/fail grading policies and I tell him about the mandatory pass/fail first-semester policy at my alma mater, Swarthmore College, he initially exclaims that he “would have loved that!” before backtracking to admit that he “never would have opted for that” as an undergraduate student himself. Though Colin did not attend a college as selective as Abbott, instead splitting his undergraduate years between the University of Denver and the state university where Liz earned her MFA, he empathizes with the “pressure to get high grades all the time” that he believes his students have internalized. Yet in his teaching, Colin takes advantage of this very same internalized pressure; in concluding his comment justifying the distinctions he makes between the “exceptional” and the good, Colin observes that at Abbott, “if [students] want higher grades, they’ll work for them…like they’ll try to earn them.”

The paradox in Colin’s approach reflects the balancing act that the Abbott writing program asks its instructors to perform, essentially dangling the prospect of an A as an eternal carrot for their achievement-oriented students:

*It does not beat our students down to create grading standards that reward hard work yet still insure that all but a few of them will go on to English 102. It does, however, beat students down—make*
them feel their efforts are pointless—if you announce that no one, or only a few people, can or will receive an A or A- in your English 101 class. **Please do not do that.** Explain your grading policies and standards but do not announce that there will be no or few A’s. That, understandably, makes students frustrated and hostile, which of course does not contribute to their ability to learn. (emphasis in original)

The writing program encourages Colin and the other instructors to leverage grades as an extrinsic reward for “hard work,” but with a ceiling; the next page of the handbook directs instructors to *be sure that you do not allow* class participation to count for more than 10% of the semester grade, which could *trap you in giving too many A or A- final grades*. Colin weights participation at 5%, although his largely completion-based grades in other categories give him some flexibility to reward student effort and engagement in other ways; students’ paper grades, however, still count for 75% of their overall course grade. Colin is expected to engage essentially in a dual act of obfuscation: first, students should be “rewarded” for hard work with grades, but not the grade the department believes/knows they want; and second, the unattainability of that reward should never be made transparent because it will “understandably” upset them—suggesting that such a reaction would be justified.

Colin faces a steep challenge in enacting this departmental directive, especially because it drastically underestimates student resourcefulness and capacity for conspiratorial thinking. He never tells his students that there is a ceiling on their grades, but he does not need to. Either through word of mouth or from adding up the English 102 exemption policy—which is publicly stated—and the “lowered expectations” about grades, they already know. Katarina vents her frustration over the policy in another pre-class conversation, telling a classmate, “You might deserve an A from all the work you do, but they don’t want you to get an A because then you place out of English 102.” The lack of transparency gives the students’ knowledge an illicit tinge that seems to inflame their perception of injustice. On
another occasion when I arrive before Colin does, the students who are present are uncharacteristically quiet as they review their homework reading for the scheduled reading quiz, but they break the silence before long:

“Is it bad that I don’t care what I get on this quiz?” Quinn asks.

“No,” says Lena.

Rachel observes that Quinn won’t even know what she gets “because he doesn’t tell us.”

“Or like that last one when he was like, ‘it’s just an exercise to make you think,’” says Lena in a mocking tone.

“I’m just always gonna get a bad grade in this class,” Rachel sighs, “no matter what I do.” Lucas and a couple others nod or otherwise agree with Rachel’s assessment that Colin has “picked one person to give an A to” and that’s it; Lucas, however, shrugs off the injustice, saying that he wanted to take English 102 anyway.

Though they never do so in Colin’s sight and hearing, the students seem to me to be exhibiting the “frustrated” and “hostile” attitudes the Abbott writing department is seeking to avoid. I wonder, then, what impact the not-so-secret-after-all departmental policy is having on students’ mindsets and attributions related to their own effort and success.

I pause here to acknowledge that there is a performative element to these student conversations occurring in Colin’s absence. I do not think the students were performing for me, but I suspect they may have been performing for each other, with varying degrees of self-awareness. I recall the “misery poker” culture I perceived (and occasionally participated in) at Swarthmore—another highly selective college that, like Abbott, pools high achievers and explicitly tells them on day one to adjust their expectations. In these environments,

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30 All of Colin’s reading quizzes are announced on the syllabus.
31 During first-year orientation, my cohort was instructed to repeat the Swarthmore mantra that we were to invoke when we inevitably performed below expectations (our professors’, or our own): “No matter what you say or do to me, I am still a worthwhile person.” The campus bookstore also sold a t-shirt bearing another popular slogan: Anywhere else, it would’ve been an A.
there is cultural capital in academic martyrdom, as students broadcast their onerous workloads and brag about their all-nighters, seeking to one-up each other on sleep deprivation and stress levels:

Rachel asks her classmates how many of them are taking the option to revise their first essay. Several students respond in the affirmative, with Kyle saying he already turned in his rewrite. Rachel recounts her experience of revising and seeing the essay get “longer and longer and longer” until she decided, “fuck it” and “started over” from scratch.

“You STARTED OVER?” Tony repeats in disbelief.

“At 1 am,” she confirms, with a touch of pride.

Ariana chimes in that her own long revision experience culminated in her declaring, “Fuck it, I give up” and deciding to turn in what she had.

For students, having their superlative efforts go unrewarded grade-wise (“I’m always gonna get a bad grade in this class, no matter what I do”) potentially only adds to the narrative. Their outrage at being “played” by the institution feeds their own game of belonging: performing struggle is their way of performing membership in a rigorous and demanding academic community. There are multiple overlapping and embedded games occurring here—all of which instructors like Colin have to contend with as they try to build students’ writing mastery.

These overlapping games being played can also lead to genuinely mixed messages being sent and received among the various players about what grades reflect and how students should interpret them. It seems to me that some of the students’ frustration over the reading quizzes stems less from a competitive desire for a certain grade, but rather from a lack of specific feedback and transparency about the assessment criteria—the opposite of Colin’s very explicit and recurring articulation of what he is looking for in their essays. When Rachel says “he doesn’t tell us” how they do on the reading quizzes, she is not being
hyperbolic. Earlier in the semester, Colin told the students one day that they all did “fine” on their first reading quizzes but then paused when the students asked if and when they would receive the quizzes back, as if he had not anticipated the question. He eventually answered that he “mostly just skims” them and doesn’t write comments, but that the students were welcome to pick them up from his office, or else, “I can keep them as handwriting samples,” he joked. To Colin, the quizzes truly are “just an exercise to make you think,” a low-stakes check on whether students have understood key points from their homework readings. In fact, when I ask him in our first interview what strategies he uses to promote the mindset, “I can succeed at this,” Colin names the fact that he gives the students “pretty easy” reading quiz questions. “I think?” he adds, acknowledging that he and the students might have different assessments of the level of difficulty. “They’re all doing fine. Maybe I need to, like, put smiley faces on their papers and give them back or something,” he says; because we are speaking by phone, I cannot see if he is rolling his eyes, but his tone certainly conveys that sentiment. “But yeah, I’m not sure if there’s a whole lot built into the course that gives that sense of success. I don’t know, maybe they should develop the mindset without getting rewards constantly.” He pauses, repeating the mindset phrase softly to himself. “‘I can succeed at this.’ Does that require rewards?”

Turning my interview questions back around on me to tap into my pedagogical knowledge is a habit I will come to expect in my conversations with Colin. “I’m always curious what I’m doing wrong,” he tells me on another occasion, “because I don’t really have pedagogy training.” He explains that Abbott is “not a really super prestigious research university, so the people who graduate often go into teaching jobs,” rather than pure academic research, but also that he is “more interested in the teaching side” of higher education anyway. “I’m interested in making classrooms work,” he says. “That’s one of the
things that really excites me about this kind of job…I see myself as a teacher as much as—or more than—a researcher.”

Early in our research relationship, though, I am hesitant to say too much. “It might depend on how you define ‘reward,’” I say.

“Mm,” he muses. “Mhmm.” When he does not immediately offer further thoughts, we shift to another topic.

This is one example of students and an instructor viewing the feedback, evaluation, and “reward” structures of a class differently, potentially leading to mutual frustration. Colin sometimes seems mystified or slightly annoyed when students don’t always understand or appreciate his aims; he describes to me in our last interview how long it took one student to let go of the anxiety over “getting it right,” something Colin himself views as a holdover from more formulaic writing in high school and antithetical to the complexity and nuance of college-level writing. Yet it does not seem strange to me that the students, presented with a guiding metaphor of gameplay and mixed messages about success from multiple institutional actors, stubbornly cling to the idea of a master algorithm that will unlock the secret to victory. As Colin himself tells them on the first day of the semester, in the game of academic writing, “there are rules and expectations…there are ways that you can win.”

The students are also being asked to trust that the new writing game they are learning from Colin is the real, true game that will set them up for success in the future, even as they are simultaneously told that the writing game they learned in high school—which, at the very least, did not impede their acceptance to Abbott—is flawed and obsolete. Although in interviews Colin describes the progression from high school to college as a shift in meta-awareness of the same game—following the rules as a young player, understanding the rules
as an older player—in class he more often than not implies that the college game is completely different from the high school game. When working on thesis statements on two separate days, he mocks a formula that he calls “typical…I don’t know why” of high school writing instruction, which is “to start with some comment about history,” such as:

“Throughout the course of human history,” he intones in a dramatic movie-trailer voice, drawing giggles from some of the students. “Or, Since the dawn of time…” When discussing the principles of clarity and cohesion, he tells the students that using many different synonyms is “a tendency that high school teachers promote…but in general it’s not good for readers—at least not THIS reader,” he says, indicating himself. Finally, in setting up the *Eunoia* activity, Colin tells the students that the theme of today’s class is rules:

“I’m sure you learned a lot of rules in high school,” he says, “such as: every good essay has five paragraphs?”

“Eww,” someone says.

“Three body paragraphs, and then an intro and a conclusion?” Colin teases, before continuing: “We’ve learned lots of new rules in this class.” He asks the students to name some as he scrawls *Rules* across the chalk board as a heading for the brainstorm.

“The five-paragraph essay is dead?” Rachel offers.

Although this echoes something Colin himself wrote on the Unit 1 assignment sheet (*The five-paragraph essay is dead, dead, dead!*), I sense this is not quite what he was looking for in this context—he’s again asking the students to recite some of the frameworks they’ve learned—but he also does not disagree with it, so he obligingly writes *5P* on the board and then emphatically draws a big X over it.

Later in this same class period is when Colin tells the students that “rules don’t have to be limiting. They can be enabling.” It seems, though, that he applies this principle only to certain kinds of rules—a distinction that the students must ultimately discern for themselves in a game that is constantly changing around them. As Colin’s “stupid games” course reading points out:
Games tend to reflect the societies in which they are created and played. Monopoly, for instance, makes perfect sense as a product of the 1930s—it allowed anyone, in the middle of the Depression, to play at being a tycoon. Risk, released in the 1950, is a stunningly literal expression of cold-war realpolitik. Twister is the translation, onto a game board, of the mid-1960s sexual revolution.  

In other words, games are a product of our context and culture. But culture is like the water we swim in: it can be hard to see. “Having never taught high school,” Colin tells me, “I never really know what students have learned. I don’t know where they came from.” Yet he also adamantly “want[s] to make sure that the experience of college is NOT like high school” and tells me he is trying as an educator to be less “heavily invested in a particular outcome” for his students. “Because it’s more just about the process,” he says. “It’s about playing the game.” I wonder, though, how far educators can go in developing their students’ mastery of a game without a deeper understanding themselves of not only “the rules of the game” but the multiple, sometimes contradictory objectives and rules of the multiple games that students—and the educators themselves—are playing.  

Reflections on Promoting an Efficacy Mindset  

Mastery goal structures help students feel motivated by the task (versus themselves and their abilities), by skill development (versus achieving with little effort), and by improvement over past performance (versus demonstrating competence or competing with peers) (Kaplan et al., 2002; Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Colin’s metaphorical framing of academic writing as a game is infused with these mastery-approach principles. He focuses all of his students on learning the “rules” of this game, portraying writing as a complex and challenging task that students can master—with practice and effort. He periodically checks their retention and understanding of the rules to monitor their progress, and he has students  

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practice their skills multiple times and in multiple contexts so that they have numerous opportunities to build their mastery.

As he works to promote students’ mastery-approach to writing, Colin also tries to coach students away from performance goal orientations by shifting students’ focus away from grades as the external assignation of success that motivates them. When the students themselves try to raise the issue early in the semester by asking about their reading quizzes, he declines to comment specifically on students’ performance other than to say that “everyone did fine.” Many of the students’ other assignments are likewise ungraded, at least in terms of the normative grade scale that students expect, with Colin relying on other sources of accountability (such as public posting of homework response papers) to motivate students, rather than merely the threat of a failing grade, which could reinforce performance-avoidance behaviors. Although he is ultimately required to give students letter grades, he still tries to use these in more of a mastery-approach focus on individual improvement by allowing everyone the option to revise one graded paper and “letting” each student’s grades improve over the course of the semester to “build their confidence” even while most of them will not earn the mark of success they are hoping for.

In keeping with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997), Colin also attends carefully to the social dimensions of the classroom that are known to promote students’ efficacy mindsets. Recognizing the first year of college as a vulnerable transition period for many students, he works from day one of the semester to help students feel a sense of belonging in his classroom and to view each other as learning supports and near-peer success exemplars. The Eunoia-inspired writing game illustrates the power of the social learning environment; as far as I can see, the students all but forget about the extrinsic reward that
Colin dangles in front of them and become much more engaged at the prospect of sharing their work with their peers. Two of the nominated students downplay their writing efficacy in various ways (Edwin saying “I didn’t have anything better,” Tony nodding in agreement at Kyle’s assessment that they both “aren’t good writers”), and yet both receive enthusiastic social validation for their compositions—the class actually votes Edwin’s ode to beer pong the overall winner. Although goal orientation literature generally advocates against competitive structures in a classroom, the Eunoia game is a playful riff on competition: it is unconnected to students’ overall achievement in the class and actually seeks to reinforce a mastery approach by allowing students to generate and master their own criteria for excellence, rather than perform to an external normative standard.

However, while the social relationships in classrooms can support an educator’s mastery goal structure, they can also contribute to an alternative set of social goals that may not align with the intended design. Patrick et al. (2002) identify “social status goals” that can interact with students’ perceptions of mastery versus performance goal structures, with the desire for status—as its own kind of competitive performance—potentially interfering with students’ ability to focus on mastery goals. As a counterpoint to Colin’s planned writing games, we see his students literally inventing and playing their own alternative game (“words that begin with D to describe our mental state”) that hints at a metaphorical alternative game as well: a kind of achievement misery poker where the players try to one-up each other on having their superlative effort go unappreciated. In addition to fulfilling social goals, the students’ game operates on an external locus of control that is also consistent with performance orientations (E. Jones, 2008). When students view success as normative and externally defined, their efficacy mindset may look less like, “I can succeed at this,” and more like, “I can’t succeed at this…but it’s not my fault.”
Studies suggest that the overall mastery versus performance culture at a school may be more influential on students’ perceptions than individual classroom goal structures, especially starting in secondary grades when students divide their time among many individual instructors and learning experiences within a school (Deemer, 2004). It is certainly plausible that Abbott’s undergraduate selectivity and its specific school-wide and departmental policies around grading and course exemptions play an outsized role in framing students’ beliefs about performance that Colin’s classroom goal structure cannot fully overcome. These elements of institutional culture may also shape Colin’s own belief system and his subsequent enactment of those beliefs to students, as when he describes to me the miserly distribution of A’s as his “personal policy”—when it is also the writing department’s policy. It is important to remember, however, that performance goals are not unequivocally negative. The fact that Colin seeks to shift students’ thinking away from grades but still accepts grades as markers of quality and even actively leverages students’ grade-based motivations (“if they want higher grades, they’ll work for them”) is not necessarily a paradox; it may reflect a hybrid emphasis on mastery and performance that is authentic to this particular institutional environment.

The question that remains, however, is whether there are untapped opportunities for Colin to balance mastery and performance goals more effectively for students, perhaps by clarifying the seemingly contradictory or mixed messages around individual growth versus standards-based performance and evaluation. I wonder, for example, whether Colin’s non-discussion of grades or performance in class—while intended to shift students’ focus to mastery—actually contributes to at least some students’ continued obsession with grades because they do not receive explicit guidance in an alternative way to think. Colin himself is deeply reflective and intentional in his teaching, but he does not always make his intentional
design transparent to the students. The exchange over reading quizzes exemplifies this disconnect between Colin’s understanding and the students’. For Colin, it is entirely natural that he would not return the reading quizzes, because his intention behind the assignment does not require them to be graded or commented on in any way. He has skimmed them and is generally satisfied with the students’ demonstrated mastery of basic concepts from the readings; my sense is that if he saw any concerning patterns in a particular student’s quizzes, he would approach that student individually. However, this mental calculus stays in Colin’s head, never spoken aloud. I can see Colin’s off-hand joke about keeping the papers as handwriting samples potentially further inflaming students’ frustration and confusion over the purpose of the task. Meanwhile, Colin is frustrated by what he perceives as students’ immature need for validation when he sarcastically suggests that he could “put smiley faces on their papers and give them back.” The two sides’ mutual misunderstanding could lead to students perceiving the reading quizzes not as a check on mastery, as Colin intends, but rather a performance task where their performance level is concealed from them.

Such a misalignment between the teacher’s intent and students’ interpretation would be consistent with other studies finding that students report significantly lower use of mastery-promoting instructional practices than do their teachers: Deemer et al. (2004) speculate that the variation may arise from teachers “not always enact[ing] their reported beliefs” about mastery (p. 84), but it is also possible that teachers were teaching for mastery but students failed to interpret the practices as such. Studies have also found that students in the same classroom perceive the same goal structure messages differently (Urdan, Kneisel, & Mason, 1999) and that there is more variation in student perceptions within classrooms than between classrooms (Wolters, 2004). While some scholars interpret these findings to mean that educators have limited influence on students’ perceptions and mindsets, an alternative
interpretation is that educators need more support in how to make mastery goals transparent in their classrooms and how to scaffold students’ uptake of those mastery goals and positive efficacy mindset messages. In other words, paralleling Colin’s approach to academic writing with students, educators could use a kind of game manual themselves to help them master the rules of the motivational teaching game. With that thought in mind, I pivot now to a synthesis of the four portraits in the next chapter before concluding with implications for practice and research.
Chapter 8

Synthesis & Discussion

In the preceding four chapters, I illustrated how each participant enacted their understandings of a focal mindset—Diane and the belonging mindset, Zachary and the value mindset, Liz and the growth mindset, and Colin and the efficacy mindset—and discussed how these educators’ particular enactments of those understandings might impact the student experience and mindset development in their respective classrooms. However, the four chapters are more than a collection of narratives on individual educator-mindset pairings; together, they comprise a group portrait of the complex work of promoting positive mindset development in secondary and postsecondary classrooms. Rather than weaving a tapestry (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), I feel I have stitched a quilt, with four quilt squares that are elaborate and intricate in their own right but that also reveal larger patterns when sewn together and viewed as a whole. In this chapter, I step back from the individual portraits to highlight two sets of these larger quilt patterns.

First, I revisit my conceptualization of educator “understandings” as a blend of theory and practice in the context of their approaches to mindset development. I describe patterns in the practice-based understandings of mindsets that we saw across all four portraits: understandings that often converged with extant theory but that were also more holistic than the psychological constructs described in scholarship, reflecting the educators’ experience with the complexity of student mindset manifestations in classrooms. I also discuss the educators’ understandings of the salience of certain mindsets in certain contexts, which played out in their prioritization of some mindsets over others and led to my analytic decision to hone in on a focal mindset for each participant. Yet despite the fact that each
portrait featured a focal educator’s unique understandings of a focal mindset, patterns still emerged across the educators’ enactments of those understandings. Specifically, I generalize across the reflective conclusions in each of the preceding chapters to identify two main growth edges for educators in supporting student mindset development: greater transparency about instructional intent and more comprehensive metacognitive scaffolding to bridge students’ growth across a mindset zone of proximal development.

The second quilt pattern is subtler than the first but contributes important texture and nuance to the main findings of this study. Specifically, I describe the emergence of parallel mindset processes in the portraits: the educators’ efforts to promote positive mindset development in students often illuminated characteristics of their own mindsets toward teaching. Recognizing these parallel mindset processes is an important intermediary step to helping educators target their pedagogical growth edges, and therefore provides a bridge to my summary of study implications in the final chapter.

**Mindset Understandings and Enactments**

**Practice-based, holistic understandings.** The four educators’ practice-based understandings of the mindsets—acquired through varying combinations of personal schooling experiences, prior teaching, and formal education or training—were often consistent with theory and reflected the educators’ overall conception of good teaching. Though I highlighted one focal mindset per participant, all of the educators enacted practices supportive of all four mindsets. All four educators aimed to engage students in an authentic process of skill development and improvement through practice, feedback, and revision, consistent with recommendations in the literature on growth mindset and self-efficacy; both Colin and Diane, for example, allowed students to revise essays after they had
been graded. They all tried to incorporate some degree of student choice in their coursework—most often through students choosing their own paper topics—and tried to make the work relevant and personally valuable to students. For example, the first essay in both Liz and Colin’s class allowed students to use their own personal experience as evidence. Belonging was a particularly important mindset to all four educators; they all devoted considerable thought and effort to building positive relationships with students and also helping students build positive relationships with each other through group work and interactive learning tasks.

The ubiquity of the belonging mindset underscores the way in which the mindsets blended together as part of each educator’s holistic approach to instruction. We saw in Chapter 5 that relatedness with Zachary could be a dimension of the value that students perceived in his coursework. Diane’s portrait showed her understanding of the inverse relationship between the two mindsets: helping her students feel a sense of belonging to the achievement culture at Riverside was part of the mechanism for acculturating them in certain educational values. All four educators also recognized a reciprocity between students’ belonging and efficacy mindsets: they leveraged classroom relationships as emotional support as students developed mastery and positive expectancy beliefs in writing, and they were also aware that students’ efficacy mindsets influenced their sense of belonging. For example, Liz characterized first-year college students as feeling like “no one knows them, and they don’t know anything,” while Colin likewise combined the belonging and efficacy mindsets in his description of his students trying to figure out what they “need to do to succeed” in order to “have a place in this discourse community.” The two college portraits also demonstrate how closely intertwined the efficacy and growth mindsets were, as both instructors searched for ways to show students how much they still had to grow as writers.
while not crushing their belief in their own potential to succeed. Finally, both Liz and Zachary articulated a belief that perceived value and relevance could stimulate students’ growth mindsets by motivating their efforts to improve.

**Mindset salience and prioritization.** Although all four educators fostered all four mindsets and in many cases blended the mindsets conceptually, the focal mindset for each participant was not merely an authorial convenience. As I explained in Chapter 3, the choice to focus on one mindset per participant arose from the data. Part of the educators’ practice-based understandings included their understanding of which mindsets were most salient in their particular teaching context, leading them to prioritize certain mindsets over others. Yet even similar perceptions of salience and prioritization decisions were enacted in different ways by the individual educators.

Diane and Zachary were both highly aware of serving what they considered a “disadvantaged” student population, for whom school served as an important experience of acculturation into White middle-class norms and expectations. This awareness informed their prioritization of the belonging and value mindsets, as they viewed these mindsets as essential precursors to students being able to “do school” successfully, both now and in the future. Diane, for example, enforced many Riverside rules that she questioned in large part because she believed that they taught students a specific way of belonging and a valuation of achievement that they needed to learn in order to be successful in college—even though she also recognized that having less structure in college actually enabled some students to enact the habits that Riverside sought to “hammer home” through institutional structures and policies. Even before his dramatic curriculum restructuring, Zachary understood one dimension of the value mindset as giving students “little things to latch onto” that would
give his students “social legitimization,” especially in college spaces where they might be combating other people’s “misconceptions” about them; he offered the example of his former student teaching her Middlebury class about the wandering uterus as an illustration of his approach succeeding. However, like the two teachers profiled in Green’s (2002) expectancy-value study, Diane and Zachary held different understandings of what constituted valuable learning for college: as mentioned above, Zachary saw relevant content as key to motivating students’ higher-order skill development, whereas Diane distinguished between the college preparatory skills of her AP curriculum and “focusing on life issues.”

Meanwhile, Colin and Liz perceived the students at their highly selective private colleges as achievement-oriented, goal-driven, and self-motivated; like many college faculty, they assumed their students had reasons for being in college (Dja’far et al., 2016; Wallace, 2014), even if those reasons did not necessarily extend to first-year writing as anything more than a transcript line. While both Colin and Liz did try to promote students’ value mindsets toward writing, primarily through assignment design and positive affective experiences, they did not explicitly talk—either to me or the students—about trying to convey the value of their course content as much as the high school teachers had. Instead, both instructors’ mindset prioritization was driven by their perception of the academic transition from high school to college-level work as the most salient experience for their students. The two instructors therefore targeted the growth and efficacy mindsets, striving to engage their students in a learning process focused less on an A as the only acceptable grade and more on mastery and personal improvement as the students encountered heightened academic expectations in their first semester of college. They also struggled with similar challenges in achieving this goal, even though the strategies they used to promote positive growth and efficacy mindsets were—fascinatingly—nearly polar opposites. The contrast is neatly
encapsulated by their essentially inverted course grade distributions: almost no one got an A in Colin’s class, whereas a majority of Liz’s students did, partly because Colin weighted paper grades more in his semester grade (75% versus 40% for Liz), and partly because he was a deliberately “harsh” grader on those essays, whereas Liz saw “encouragement” as a better motivator of sustained effort.

The college instructors may also have emphasized the growth and efficacy mindsets as part of the corrective work they saw themselves doing to counteract the mistakes or shortcomings in their students’ secondary education. In interviews, both Liz and Colin demurred that they knew little about high school writing instruction, but they both made inferences about it based on their students’ writing, as well as anecdotal evidence from students (e.g. a student telling Liz in a writing conference that he had been taught never to use first person). Based on this information, the college instructors surmised that high school had given students limited or misleading information about writing (“the five-paragraph essay is dead!”), under-prepared them (“they aren’t taught to trust themselves”, “I have rarely met high school students who were well-prepared for college writing”), and contributed to their obsession with grades (“They’re very focused on their grades…which is a little bit of like a high school mentality”). Thus, in addition to recognizing the first year of college as a natural step up in difficulty, Colin and Liz’s belief that many of their students had previously been taught the “wrong” things about writing further strengthened the urgency of working on the growth and efficacy mindsets, including combatting the “high school mentality” of working primarily for external validation and reward.

The tendency to blame those who came just before you in the educational pipeline is not unique to higher education, but it is especially fraught at a sector transition, where the
communication gap and paradigm shifts make it difficult for educators to disprove their assumptions about the other side (Crank, 2012). Colin and Liz’s understandings of mindset salience might be predicated on a “mythical high school” experience (Hjortshoj, 2009), but Diane and Zachary’s emphasis on the belonging and value mindsets likewise stemmed in part from their lack of faith in college instructors. Diane talked to me about high school as a setting where grade-level colleagues would “pick up” where the preceding teacher left off, whereas after 12th grade, “there’s nobody after me to help fix it up”—a prospect she found “really scary.” She perceived a yawning chasm between the secondary and postsecondary sectors—and accompanying pressure to prepare her students for that future unknown. Since relevance connections by definition span space and time—students connect what they are learning in the classroom to something abstract, outside the classroom, or in the future—the value mindset is the only mindset that can include students’ perceptions of both their current secondary experience and a prospective postsecondary experience, which may make it particularly salient for high school teachers who see themselves poised at the edge of this “scary” handoff. At the same time, the high school teachers viewed postsecondary faculty as dictating the terms of students’—and, indirectly, their own—success. In all of Zachary’s reflection about how to change his own practice and OBS’s to “legitimize school to students,” he never suggested that colleges needed to undertake a similar process. To both him and Diane, the pressure was squarely on them as high school teachers to give students “a product that is going to help them when they walk out of here,” in the form of a comprehensive academic and mindset toolkit.

**Growth edges in mindset-supportive practices.** The portraits also show that specific features of individual educators’ understandings of the focal mindset manifested in their enactment choices, and the tradeoffs and tensions that followed. Diane understood
sense of belonging through an achievement culture lens; her belief that cultivating a unified sense of community needed to serve a “competitive” purpose within the educational system fueled the tension in whether and how she enforced school policies that she questioned. Zachary understood perceived relevance as a process that, ideally, would arise organically and autonomously, making him reluctant at times to direct his students’ learning experiences in ways that might ultimately have helped them recognize that relevance. Liz understood growth mindset through her “brute force practice” philosophy, which contributed to her incentivizing and rewarding a definition of effort that was closer to repetition/time spent instead of deliberate practice or mindful effort. Colin understood success as achieved through learning the rules of the game in pursuit of mastery, but his focus on his game sometimes left him less aware of the alternative game(s) his students may have been playing.

Although the tensions described throughout the portraits were specific to each educator’s understandings of the focal mindset, patterns emerged across the enactment challenges that all four educators encountered. In many cases, the educators were able to provide me with an extensive rationale for their pedagogical choices; they were generally quite intentional about their learning environment design. The main challenges they faced, however centered on consistently ensuring that their intentional design was transparent and recognizable to students, and then providing sufficient metacognitive scaffolding to help the students themselves build a bridge between the external learning experience and their internal mindset development.

**Transparency.** Greater transparency from educators about their instructional design and intent can facilitate better alignment between educator actions and student interpretation of those actions. Kaplan et al. (2002) note that classroom goal structures are
…primarily a subjective construction. The power of environmental goal messages to influence the personal goals that students adopt and, by extension, their motivation and performance, probably depends more on how students perceive the various policies and practices in the school or classroom than on the objective reality of the policies or practices themselves. (p. 25, emphasis in original)

Being more transparent is one way that educators can try to preempt students’ misperceptions of classroom activities. This sentiment motivates the conceit of “wise feedback” (Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, et al., 2014)—in which teachers explicitly mark feedback as a sign of high expectations and confidence that students can meet—and the use of assessment rubrics (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013; Wollenschläger et al., 2016).

All four educators admitted to me at times that their pedagogical intent was probably not as clear to students as it could be. The trend was particularly evident in the college instructors’ attempts to promote the growth and efficacy mindsets concurrently through feedback and grading practices; as Liz said, “there isn’t as much transparency in the grading process as I think [students] would like and as I would like.” Both instructors characterized the evaluation of student writing as a subjective internal process; as such, they struggled to consistently make transparent to students exactly what the criteria for success were. Liz did not give her students any sort of rubric or grading guidelines; Colin did, but was aware that he thought about grades in ways that he did not always convey to students (“I don’t know if I say this to them…”). He was also far less transparent with smaller course assignments than he was with students’ essays, such as the ungraded and unreturned reading quizzes.

The high school teachers also confronted classroom tensions that stemmed from a lack of transparency. For example, Diane sat down of her own accord one day to talk with her students explicitly about some of the rules that governed their belonging in the Riverside community, but it was unclear how common or sustained this practice was. The rules
themselves were highly transparent at Riverside, but less so were the complex dynamics around race and culture, the intersection of in-school and out-of-school identities, and the teachers’—and students’/families’—potential questions, discomfort, or resistance. Meanwhile, Zachary was able to discuss with me at length the design and intent behind his curriculum restructuring, but because he also believed that “no one likes being told why something is important, you gotta come to it yourself,” it was unclear both to me and to him how much of his intentional design was visible to students and how much remained an “invisible force” that he merely hoped to channel, rather than actively worked to influence.

Metacognitive scaffolding. Zachary’s portrait also introduced the crucial role that metacognitive scaffolding could play in promoting students’ value mindsets; Zachary may not want to have to tell students what is important, but merely being exposed to stimulating learning experiences does not necessarily guarantee that students’ mindsets will change. Likewise, transparency of learning goals is insufficient on its own to ensure that students will respond in adaptive ways (Wollenschläger et al., 2016). Motivation, like learning or any other cognitive process, has a zone of proximal development (Brophy, 2008); students need scaffolds to help them do the cognitive work necessary to reach their next level of development.

Along with inconsistent transparency, the four educators were likewise inconsistent at providing scaffolding for student mindset development. Zachary and Colin both recognized the importance of transparency and scaffolding when it came to developing students’ academic skills like reading and writing, but backed off when it came to mindset development, in part from a belief that mindsets would develop on their own. Zachary wanted students to “come to” a perception of value themselves, while Colin seemed to view
certain kinds of formative feedback as equivalent to “rewards” and mused at one point that “maybe [students] should develop the [efficacy] mindset without getting rewards constantly.”

However, teacher talk or feedback is not the only way to scaffold and influence student mindset development—nor is it likely sufficient to do so—and Diane and Liz both tried to facilitate students’ metacognitive meaning-making in promising ways, though they both could go further to strengthen and extend that scaffolding. Diane’s note-taking packet for the activism expedition included reflective questions that could have helped students process the guest speakers and prepared them (and teachers) for a critical dialogue around the perceived conditions and benefits of Riverside community membership—if that had been identified as an appropriate focus of their “activism.” The newness of the expedition and sprawling focus on “national issues” made it difficult for Diane to build in some of those linkages more deliberately. As noted in Chapter 6, Liz incorporated the most reflection into her class out of any participant and therefore had a strong foundation already in place for metacognitive work. With students’ meaning-making around grades and failure being a particularly salient concern in her class, however, the students might have benefited from more reflective opportunities that specifically targeted those areas. Neither Liz nor Zachary engaged students in revising essays after receiving a grade, which would present another metacognitive reflective opportunity—one that Colin and Diane could also incorporate into their existing revision policies by having students write metacognitive “process memos” (Parrott & Cherry, 2015), or a similar type of assignment. In many cases, minor modifications to the educators’ existing assignments would optimize them as metacognitive scaffolds for students’ mindset development.

Illuminating these possible modifications and pedagogical growth edges, however,
may not automatically prompt changes to educators’ practice. Thus, before proceeding to implications, I discuss a second quilt pattern that emerged from the portraits and provides an important lens on my study findings.

The Role of Teaching Mindsets on Student Mindset Development

The original goal of this study was to explore educators’ understandings of student mindsets, but I quickly discovered that in describing their approaches to promoting students’ positive mindsets toward writing, the educators often reflexively revealed clues about their own mindsets toward teaching. In each portrait, the focal mindset that we saw the educator working to promote in students was also at play in a parallel process for the educator him- or herself in relation to teaching. Diane’s feelings of belonging as a teacher at Riverside were instrumental in her willingness to enact the institutional mission, even as it changed over the years. Zachary’s curriculum restructuring also helped him feel a greater sense of relevance in his own teaching and built on his strengths and interests as a teacher, just as he hoped it would for students’ mindsets toward school. From the first class of the semester, Liz drew a parallel between the growth mindset she wanted students to adopt toward writing and her own teaching, explaining that she “gets better every time” she teaches her class. As Colin sought to help students master the “rules of the game” to help their efficacy mindsets toward writing, he turned to me to help him feel more efficacious at a teaching game whose rules were not always transparent to him.

However, just as practices supporting all four mindsets in students were present in each educator’s classroom, evidence about all four mindsets in each educator’s teaching emerged across the portraits. In particular, because I was constantly asking the educators to reflect on instructional design and enactment decisions—which inherently included their
responses to non-ideal student behavior or imperfect student work, challenges they perceived in achieving their pedagogical intent, and their ideas for future modifications—our conversations over the course of a semester yielded rich information about their growth and efficacy mindsets toward teaching. Consistent with literature connecting perceived teaching efficacy and locus of control to pedagogical strategy use (Deemer, 2004; Henson, 2002; Lai, 2018; Midgley, Anderman, & Hicks, 1995), including motivational strategies specifically (Hardré & Hennessey, 2013), the manifestations of the educators’ growth and efficacy mindsets were particularly salient factors in their approaches to student mindset development and therefore implicate the potential for future changes to teaching practice.

All four educators demonstrated growth mindset through their belief that they could always improve as teachers and that strategic effort was the main mechanism for that improvement. For example, even after nearly two decades teaching in Connecticut, Diane had been willing to “learn to teach all over” again at Riverside, acquiring pedagogical strategies “I had never even heard of” and essentially learning “a new language.” Despite the effort this required from her, she found working at Riverside more fulfilling than the years she had spent not being challenged in her previous school. Diane, Zachary, and Colin also enacted growth mindset through their willingness to take risks and experiment with their curriculum. During the semester of my data collection, they were all teaching at least one unit that they had never taught before that school year: Colin’s opening unit on education was new, Zachary had created two entirely new courses, and Diane was teaching AP for the first time and had also co-created the new activism expedition. In line with growth mindset principles, these educators embraced the intellectual challenge of designing new curricular units and willingly put forth the effort in order to become better teachers and achieve their goal of improving student learning.
Zachary, Liz, and Colin also explicitly used their participation in my study as an opportunity to learn and grow professionally. Zachary took my interview question to him about students’ reading strategies—which I had asked genuinely in a spirit of inquiry, not as a veiled recommendation—and turned it around on his students, acknowledging that it was important information for him to have. Liz told me that she “would love to have more meetings with other teachers” to discuss and reflect on teaching, and said that our interviews were in some way a substitute for that kind of collegial, professional learning community. Colin was especially interested in my feedback on his teaching; I frequently had to deflect his questions about how I thought class had gone or alternative approaches he could take. “What would you do?” he often asked me.

Yet just as the educators’ mindset work with their students was “messy,” so too were the educators’ own mindsets toward teaching: while all of them acted in ways that reflected positive mindsets toward their teaching ability, they also all contradicted or undermined those same mindsets at times, often by adopting an external locus of control toward a perceived constraint. Colin’s game metaphor and his stance that “rules don’t have to be limiting; they can be enabling” is an apt frame here, as are the tensions he experienced with getting his students on board with this philosophy. Like the Abbott students’ external attributions of classroom or institutional structures that impeded their growth and efficacy mindsets (“I’m just always gonna get a bad grade in this class, no matter what I do”), the educators’ perceptions of external limitations suggest that even experienced and reflective practitioners still struggle at times to overcome fixed mindsets, performance orientations, and/or low efficacy.

For example, despite Diane’s many enactments of growth mindset, her expansive
pedagogical toolkit, and her philosophy of teaching as activism that she invoked during the expedition, she simultaneously perceived herself and her school as largely powerless within the overall educational system, viewing it as “not possible” for testing companies to lose legitimacy and seeing the source/direction of meaningful change as “having to start from the top down.” Her perception of the inequitable system fed her acceptance of Riverside’s increasing conformity and of certain constraints on what she as an educator could do. To her, achieving the desired student outcomes justified squelching her own innovation and creativity as an educator. Additionally, while teaching at Riverside had strengthened her efficacy toward teaching, she was still developing her efficacy related to the kind of equity work around race, class, and culture that she sensed might surface some uncomfortable school conversations (“I wonder why urban schools feel the need to tighten up so much? And does it help or does it make things worse?”).

Meanwhile, Zachary identified time constraints—especially with the shift to the semester elective system that he himself precipitated—as an obstacle to incorporating more reflection in his class, telling me, “I only have this short amount of time to get through all this content, so I can't spend as much time doing self-reflective stuff.” The use of “can’t” is interesting coming from a teacher who had already implemented much more drastic changes to his curriculum in order to address a different perceived need: the need to “legitimate school” to students. Zachary does not actually have no time for more reflection and revision in his classes, but he would need to shift his external perception of “can’t” to an internal locus of control that recognizes his ability to make time for those activities by reallocating it from his self-imposed imperative to “get through all this content.” Zachary recognized that his new courses played to his strengths as an educator and his natural tendencies (“I’m much more suited to, can we find relevancies in our world today…”); there may be opportunities
to engage him in more deliberate development around his pedagogical growth edges.

Overall, though, both high school teachers expressed much stronger efficacy mindsets toward their teaching than did the college instructors; even as they were asking for my insight or self-deprecatingly describing a lesson gone astray, it was clear that Diane and Zachary’s growth and efficacy mindsets gave them resilience to talk freely about their mistakes and areas for improvement as an authentic part of the work, even for veteran educators. By contrast, when Colin invited my feedback, he often asked me what he was “doing wrong” pedagogically, using the very kind of language that he did not want students using about their writing. Just as he described his students’ experience with academic writing, he seemed to find some aspects of teaching “opaque” and mystifying. While he was more than willing to put in the effort to improve, he also at times resembled his students in searching for the “right” path or algorithm to “win” the puzzling and complex pedagogical game in which he found himself.

Similarly, Liz’s own mixed growth and fixed mindsets about her teaching ability mirrored her students’ mindsets toward writing. Though she had the same amount of experience as Zachary and Colin, Liz was the one participant who had not made substantial changes to her class curriculum, precisely because she was worried about making mistakes in front of students if she moved out of her comfort zone (“I would undermine myself and stumble”). In her two years at Mayfield prior to this study, she had never acted on her curiosity about the students’ writing placement exam, and a key reason why she did not develop rubrics or frameworks for students’ writing was because she found it challenging and difficult to “put everyone’s effort on the same map.” Although she welcomed our interviews as opportunities to reflect on and consider new possibilities in her practice,
through her words and inaction she also often conveyed more of a fixed perspective on her own teaching efficacy and potential impact.

The parallels between the educators’ “messy” growth and efficacy mindsets and what we saw from the students in the portraits also directs us to a parallel implication from the portraits: the influence of the surrounding goal structure on mindsets. Just as these educators try to supply learning experiences to help students develop positive mindsets toward and skills in academic writing, the educators themselves need professional learning experiences to cultivate their positive teaching mindsets and the skill set to enact mindset-supportive instruction for their students. What would it take to help educators like these strengthen their teaching mindsets in order to react instructionally to the identified patterns and growth edges in their approaches to student mindset development? I address this question in the final chapter.
Chapter 9

Implications & Conclusion

I began this dissertation by musing over how my colleagues and I may have influenced our student Damian’s attitudes toward school, and framed my study as an exploration of the relationship between educators’ understandings about academic mindsets and their classroom practices that may promote or inhibit student mindset development. However, my findings draw attention to the factors that may contribute to influencing educators, with downstream effects on students like Damian. Undoubtedly, I and other teachers could have done better by Damian. But what could have supported us in our efforts to support him?

In the drive to translate mindset research into practice, many are searching for ways to “change classrooms on a broad scale” and develop “instructional practices that could be readily employed by teachers in a variety of school settings” (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 37). But my portraits show that educators’ understandings and enactments of positive mindset development are complex, deeply contextualized, and influenced by the educators’ own mindsets. Achieving the goal of meaningfully “changing teachers’ instructional practices [to] improve students’ academic mindsets” (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 36) will therefore require changing educators’ understandings and mindsets as well, with specific considerations of the contextual characteristics of the secondary and postsecondary sectors. This is where I focus my recommendations for practice and research in this concluding chapter.

Implications for Practice

I have already identified transparency and metacognitive scaffolding as two growth edges for educators to take on in their practice, but my findings also point to the need to
develop educators’ understandings of mindsets (to help them recognize how transparency and scaffolding would aid in student mindset development) and their own mindsets toward teaching—specifically, their growth and efficacy mindsets. Finally, the goal of better supporting students’ positive mindsets as a protective factor in the college transition requires greater efforts to facilitate cross-sector communication, as academic alignment initiatives have argued.

Supplement educators’ practice-based understandings with training on mindset theories. While my participants’ practice-based understandings were often consistent with theory and comprised valuable holistic awareness of how mindsets intersect in students’ classroom experience, there were also variations, inconsistencies, and misconceptions in some of their understandings that can only be addressed by directly engaging educators with theoretical and empirical work on the relevant constructs. There is a limit, in other words, to what even experienced and reflective educators can intuit or learn through hands-on practice. For example, literature on belonging for students of color with White teachers versus teacher of color, the uptake of value perceptions through reflective writing, the distinction between time spent and mindful effort, and mastery versus performance goal structures would enrich the teaching practice of all of my participants, and would be valuable to any educator.

Instructional coaches, department chairs, and faculty developers could play a key role in designing programming that takes an asset-based approach to what practicing educators already know but that extends and deepens that understanding; Diane’s portrait shows the power of intentionally designed professional development experiences for educators who want to learn and improve. (Her school’s next level of work might be to use that existing
structure to facilitate critical conversations on race and culture.) Case-based professional development could be a productive approach here (Gravett, de Beer, Odendaal-Kroon, & Merseth, 2017; Merseth, 1991; Moje & Wade, 1997), as it could promote educators’ perceptions of relevance and value in the work by introducing theoretical principles in the context of authentic problems of practice—similar to what I aimed to do with my portraits.

Moving further upstream, mindset-related theories could be addressed in K-12 teacher education programs or instructor training initiatives in higher education. In keeping with arguments for better integration of “foundational” and “methods” courses in teacher education (Grossman et al., 2009), part of any clinical experience could include explicit instruction in the theories underlying the academic mindsets. Such a move would also fulfill calls for more robust applied psychology and human development work in both K-12 teacher education (Battle & Looney, 2014; Leibbrand & Watson, 2010; Pianta, Hitz, & West, 2010) and faculty development in higher education (Destin, 2018).

Given the absence of formalized or systematic training in pedagogy at many institutions of higher education, college instructors may need more comprehensive foundational work in which to contextualize their learning about mindsets. The recent proliferation of university teaching and learning centers and increased public and political scrutiny of college student outcomes have brought greater attention to student-centered teaching in higher education (Menges & Weimer, 1996) and could help drive institutional commitments to this foundational work. Additionally, many colleges and universities are far better positioned than K-12 schools to tap into existing institutional resources—in the form of resident psychology and education scholars—for relevant content for these professional learning opportunities. Thus, the exact format of these trainings would vary depending on institutional context both within and across sectors, but new or refined understandings of
mindsets would be valuable learning for educators at all levels.

**Build teaching efficacy through mastery experiences and opportunities for professional collaboration.** As with students and new academic content, imbuing educators’ understandings of mindsets with a stronger theoretical base is a necessary but likely insufficient step to improving their support for student mindset development. Educators are unlikely to incorporate new conceptual knowledge into their teaching without direct scaffolding and support in the practical applications of that knowledge (De Hei, Strijbos, Sjoer, & Admiraal, 2015; Fisher, Dufault, Repice, & Frey, 2013), meaning hands-on practice with feedback so that educators can master the strategies and build a sense of teaching efficacy (Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006). Teacher educators can embed this work as part of clinical preparation: models of clinical practice in K-12 teacher education such as “microteaching” (Allen & Eve, 1968) or “pedagogies of enactment” (Grossman et al., 2009) offer pre-service teachers a lower-stakes context to practice mindset-supportive strategies in front of a peer audience and participate in reflective debriefing afterwards.

In higher education, finding the space and time for instructors to build this pedagogical mastery may require more of an institutional commitment to improving teaching and learning through faculty development. Liz’s state university seemed to have made such a commitment to its undergraduate writing instructors, and Liz was still citing what she had learned from that training program years later. Such existing programs could be strengthened by looking to K-12 models of teacher education and incorporating similar kinds of microteaching or simulation experiences for novice instructors. Faculty development programming and initiatives in graduate student teaching certifications through university teaching and learning centers provide additional opportunities for instructors to accumulate
mastery experiences and gain a stronger sense of teaching efficacy.

The absence of more formal structures in higher education for practicing instruction with peers and mentors illuminates another key implication for building educator efficacy. In addition to mastery experiences, vicarious learning and social persuasion from peers are key contributors to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The focal educators in my study expressed this connection through their merging of students’ belonging and efficacy mindsets, and the same relationship held for the educators’ own teaching efficacy. Working in small high schools, Diane and Zachary experienced both a culture and the accompanying institutional structures—professional development, department and grade-level meetings—to promote collaborative professional learning. Their frequent use of the pronoun “we” signaled both their feelings of belonging at their schools and the fact that they felt part of a teaching collective; they experienced social persuasion and support in their teaching, which in turn helped their growth and efficacy mindsets.

By contrast, both colleges in my study had made a commitment to first-year writing as a valuable class for their incoming students—indeed, the portraits show the richness of writing class as an environment for mindset development—yet paradoxically, neither institution invested much in the training and ongoing development of its writing instructors. Neither college’s writing department had a particularly strong professional culture or structures in place to help instructors feel a sense of belonging, learn from colleagues, and build their own efficacy. Liz wanted to collaborate with other instructors at Mayfield but received no institutional support in making those connections and likely felt ill-equipped to reach out on her own in a place where “no one knows my face.” As a baseline, an administrative email soliciting instructors interested in a light-touch, opt-in peer observation
program could be a starting point for higher education departments that lack the norms around and structures for professional collaboration more commonly found in K-12 schools. All four of my participants volunteered for my study through a very similar process, and all four spent as much time—or more—with me over the course of a semester as they might have devoted to professional development, with a token honorarium the only tangible incentive. Especially for the college instructors who were otherwise quite isolated, the desire to reflect with someone else about their work, to grow professionally, to contribute to knowledge in the field, to feel more confident, and to be demonstrably better at their jobs were their main rationales for participating: powerful motivations that—fittingly—map onto the mindsets.

Facilitate or provide cross-sector perspectives in secondary and postsecondary educator training and development. Finally, educators could benefit from cross-sector collaboration and dialogue to inform their conceptions of their role in the P-16 pipeline. In my study, neither the high school teachers nor the college instructors had a systematic way of learning about the other sector; in addition to their own personal experience and memories, all four educators relied heavily on student report, which may have been slanted both in terms of which students were doing the reporting—who returns to visit their high school teachers, who is most outspoken in a college class—and students’ ability to recognize and articulate what they have learned. Both pairs of educators held assumptions about the other sector based on these data sources that were not reflected in my data: the college instructors were far more attuned to students’ needs than the high school teachers feared, neither college required undergraduates to take an English class in which the
“New Criticism” skills that Diane describes would directly apply, and neither high school teacher ever assigned a five-paragraph essay or outlawed the use of first person. All four of my participants would have benefited from cross-sector partnerships to learn directly from each other with the goal of greater alignment and a more generous and appreciative perspective on their counterparts’ efforts. Organizations like the National Writing Project that span both sectors can be instrumental in bringing writing instructors together (Cook & Caouette, 2013); similar initiatives have proven fruitful in math and science as well (Alford, Rudolph, Olson Beal, & Hill, 2014; Frost, Coomes, & Lindeblad, 2012).

Independently of structural efforts to bring educators physically together, teacher educators and developers can also play a key role in bridging the secondary and postsecondary sectors by leveraging their pedagogical expertise to facilitate work on alignment issues in teaching and learning. The licensure process for public school K-12 teachers and norms of staff-wide, departmental, and/or grade-level professional development or collaborative learning are logical places to situate work on teaching for college readiness and success, including the role of academic mindsets. In the postsecondary sector, analogous work examining secondary perspectives could at least start within first-year writing programs (Crank, 2012). Guidance on how to gather data more systematically on students’ prior learning experiences—so as not to rely so heavily on selective anecdotal evidence—would also be a welcome faculty development initiative. Mayfield included a questionnaire about students’ prior literacy experiences in its writing placement test but then never shared it with instructors; making that information available and/or supporting instructors in creating their own student learning inventories and analyzing the responses

However, both colleges accepted a score of 4 or above on the AP English Literature exam as some form of course exemption, so Diane was not totally off-base.
would be a quick way of introducing cross-sector perspectives without ever leaving campus.

**Implications for Research**

I included specific recommendations for research on each mindset in the conclusions to the individual portraits. Here, I focus on two broader recommendations: more research overall on educators’ nuanced, practice-based understandings of mindsets and on specific enactment strategies, in order to support the practical recommendations described above.

**Study educator expertise and understanding in context.** Current theoretical and empirical literature insufficiently documents and supports educator expertise. The largely individualistic focus of mindset intervention research has inadequately considered educators’ understandings of student mindsets, educators’ instructional choices in light of those understandings, and possible structural, institutional, and systemic influences on both educators’ and students’ mindsets. Traditional mindset and motivational interventions target the student; for example, the utility value intervention asks students to write about why the material they are learning in class is important to them, while the teacher’s ability to influence students’ responses or meaning-making in this activity remains largely unexplored (for exceptions, see Kafkas et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2018).

My portraits reveal the complexity of the focal educators’ relationships with students, including the pervasive influence of multiple institutions and systems of power in both the students’ and educators’ lives. We must view the educators’ understandings and enactments of positive mindset development through the lens of this complexity. Educators do what they can to work with the specific students in front of them, but students and educators are always a product of other ecosystems, past and present. These ecosystems might sometimes contradict or undermine positive mindset development in spite of an individual educator’s
best efforts, but they also provide multiple other targets for intervention. All four of my focal educators are working in specific settings, sectors, and systems that offer them different constraints and opportunities, which filter through their perceptions of and interactions with students. We cannot fully consider these educators’ practice—or its effectiveness relative to “research-based interventions”—without considering it in context. The traditionally individualistic focus of mindset research stems from the disciplinary traditions that inform it. However, motivational researchers are starting to recognize the value in bridging their work with other perspectives, particularly sociocultural and teacher education perspectives, which share the goal of promoting students’ academic motivation but do it through an awareness of the complex systems at play in seemingly simple teacher-student interactions (Kumar et al., 2018; Pintrich, 2003). This work needs to continue.

**Consider new approaches to enactment research.** As Grossman et al. (2009) argue, however, fortifying conceptual understandings is insufficient to help educators learn or change their practice. Educators, and those working with them in teacher education and development, need research to spotlight specific enactment strategies that give them concrete models and ideas to adapt to their own classrooms. Research in classrooms, examining authentic instruction and problems of practice, is a baseline need that is surprisingly difficult to find fulfilled in current empirical studies. As mentioned in Chapter 6, such work would be especially useful for complicating educators’ understanding of growth mindset, which has been sufficiently popularized that educators know that they are “supposed” to embrace it, and yet they lack models for what promoting mindful or strategic effort looks like in daily instructional decisions, or how different students might receive different mindset messages from the same practice. Without detailed, situated research to illuminate educators’ subtle and ongoing mindset implementation decisions in classrooms, it
is unsurprising that oversimplified or misguided enactments of growth mindset, such as simply “rewarding effort,” persist among educators. All four of my participants expressed, on numerous occasions, their interest in reading the other participants’ portraits to learn from the strategies used by their counterparts in similar and yet also very different contexts; they understood intuitively that reading portraits of other educators would lead them to a deeper understanding of their own teaching context and would contribute to their toolkit of possible strategies to use in the classroom. Researchers can provide more of these kinds of rich teaching narratives, helping educators see daily teaching practice through a theoretical lens and within a broader empirical landscape.

It is important to note that such enactment studies may not look like conventional empirical research. As motivational psychologists seek to bridge their work with other perspectives, they must also accept new methodologies and new sources of knowledge and expertise, which in this case include the practical wisdom of educators. The prevailing attitude in much of the scholarly literature privileges researcher knowledge over educators’ existing understandings and everyday efforts to promote student motivation and positive mindsets. Developing a new kind of knowledge base of mindset-promotive practices will require new collaborations between researchers and practitioners to produce research that is conversant across the theory-practice divide. As a methodology that specifically aims to speak to audiences beyond the academy, portraiture offers unique affordances for portraying the complex goodness of teaching practice through a theoretical and interpretive lens in ways that resonate with scholars and educators alike. Such portraits of practice could also be especially powerful in translating across the secondary-postsecondary divide and shining much-needed spotlights into the “black box” of higher education teaching. I hope that my study provides a model for this kind of multi-dimensional, translational work.
Conclusion

As an educator, I have always been highly critical of my own practice because, at the end of the day, I want to know that I have done my best for students like Damian, and I know that my “best” is an elusive goal; there is always room to improve. I bring this critical perspective to my work as a teacher-researcher as well. But I am also a staunch defender of educators because I know there is also goodness to be found in every classroom, a goodness that is complex and by no means synonymous with perfection. Like asset-based approaches to students, supporting educators’ growth and improvement (as a mechanism for supporting students’ growth and improvement) must begin with an assumption of that goodness and a willingness to explore its complexity.

When I first submitted my dissertation proposal, the authorizing committee asked me to clarify whether I was looking to sample “teachers who actively support the development of academic mindsets” or “typical teachers.” This question perplexed me. Over my eight years of working in public and independent high schools, I had always had colleagues who “actively support[ed] the development of academic mindsets.” Even in that tempestuous 2007-08 academic year when we inherited Damian’s cohort and collectively struggled with them all year long, I always had colleagues who were as interested as I was in questions of student motivation and who tried to foster positive mindsets in their classrooms. Perhaps not everyone did—or knew how to—but neither were these mindset-supportive educators some rare exception. They were in plain sight. It had never occurred to me to consider them “atypical.”

Since then, I have attended numerous research conferences where educators’ skills and knowledge have been subtly (or not-so-subtly) maligned. At one session, a participant
bemoaned the number of college writing instructors she knew who “hate writing” and were resistant to adopting research-based practices that challenged their own intractable and incorrect theories of writing development. I heard these messages so often that I began to wonder if I had been living in a bubble, unable to see that the educators I knew were the exceptions, rather than the rule. I came to question whether my dissertation sample was unusual, biased, the dreaded “ungeneralizable”—and yet my own experience suggested otherwise.

I am willing to accept that I may live in a bubble, but I am not willing to accept that there are people out there who somehow do not, people who are privy to some objective reality, Liz’s truth-with-a-capital-T. Should I accept at face value the assertions about broad swathes of the teaching population who hate their jobs, hate their content, do not support student mindset development, and cannot be made to see research-based reason? Am I to deny all the evidence of my own lived experience in the face of what these “experts” say? Why should their truth count more than mine?

Instead, I choose to believe that there is more to those educators’ stories than how they are represented to me by third parties, just as I have sought in these portraits to illuminate Diane, Zachary, Liz, and Colin in their fully human complexity. And what I have discovered from writing about them is that all four of these educators are both exceptional and typical. They are exceptional in their willingness to open their classrooms to an outside researcher for a semester, to share their teaching, their thinking, and their imperfections. They are exceptional in their ability to reflect on their flaws as well as their successes, all in the interest of contributing to a broader conversation about good teaching and student support across the college transition.
Yet these educators are also typical, and their very ordinariness is heartening. They are not products of specialized training. They have not won any awards or even been particularly recognized or acclaimed within their own schools. They arrived at their current positions through multiple pathways and life experiences. There are educators like them to be found in secondary and postsecondary institutions across the country, already using some strategies to support students’ positive mindset development and eager to do more—if they knew what else to do or how to do it. Just as their students need them, they need us—researchers, teacher educators, faculty developers, program directors, school administrators—to commit to understanding them, their diverse teaching contexts, and their authentic problems of practice, in order to develop their mindsets and teaching efficacy to their fullest potential.
## Appendix A

### Demographic Data on Focal High Schools, Compared to District and State Data (2016-17 School Year)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oak Bridge School</th>
<th>Oak Bridge District</th>
<th>Riverside Academy</th>
<th>Riverside District</th>
<th>State public schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total enrollment</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(grades 7-12)</td>
<td>(grades 6-12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of enrollment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First language not English</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language learnerb</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disadvantagedc</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed Spring 2016 grade 10 English state exam</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed Spring 2016 grade 10 math state exam</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed Spring 2016 grade 10 science state exam</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Numbers are approximated to mask school identity
*b Defined as unable to perform ordinary class work in English
*c Defined as participating in one or more state food assistance programs, foster care, or Medicaid
Appendix B

Demographic Data on Focal Colleges (2016-17 School Year Unless Otherwise Noted)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mayfield University</th>
<th>Abbott University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total enrollment, degree-seeking students</td>
<td>3,200 %</td>
<td>11,000 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree-seeking undergraduates (day college)</td>
<td>2,200 %</td>
<td>5,000 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>39 %</td>
<td>45 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>61 %</td>
<td>55 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>14 %</td>
<td>12 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic students of color</td>
<td>22 %</td>
<td>22 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average retention rate</td>
<td>89 %</td>
<td>97 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-year graduation rate</td>
<td>77 %</td>
<td>87 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receive financial assistance</td>
<td>89 %</td>
<td>50 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pell Grant recipients(^b)</td>
<td>22 %</td>
<td>13 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year undergraduates</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions rate</td>
<td>55 %</td>
<td>16 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live in campus housing</td>
<td>96 %</td>
<td>70 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year average high school GPA</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-year average critical reading / math SAT scores</td>
<td>600 / 610(^c)</td>
<td>700 / 710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate tuition(^d)</td>
<td>$44,000</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate room and board</td>
<td>$8,000-$11,000</td>
<td>$13,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Numbers are approximated to mask school identity
\(^b\) From Forbes (2017), using 2015-16 school year information
\(^c\) Mayfield University has a SAT/ACT-optional admissions policy
\(^d\) Tuition and fees are for the 2017-18 school year
Appendix C

Overview of Participants and Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Diane Bauer (Riverside Academy)</th>
<th>Zachary Kaplan (Oak Bridge School)</th>
<th>Liz Cartwright (Mayfield University)</th>
<th>Colin Zimmerman (Abbott University)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal background</td>
<td>- M.A. in Teaching, Ed.D. from Fairfield University</td>
<td>- M.A. in Teaching from Mayfield University</td>
<td>- M.F.A. in fiction from “State University”</td>
<td>- Ph.D. candidate in English at Abbott University</td>
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<td>- 29th year teaching (10th at Riverside)</td>
<td>- 5th year teaching (all at OBS)</td>
<td>- 5th year teaching (3rd at Mayfield)</td>
<td>- 5th year teaching at Abbott</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Previously taught at comprehensive public high school in Connecticut</td>
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<td>- Taught analogous course at “State University”</td>
<td>- Concurrently teaching same course at “Barton College”</td>
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<td>Focal class</td>
<td>- AP English Literature and Composition</td>
<td>- Superheroes in World Literature</td>
<td>- First-year writing (“Expository Writing”)</td>
<td>- First-year writing (“English 101”)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- 22 students</td>
<td>- 25 students (11th and 12th graders)</td>
<td>- 18 students</td>
<td>- 16 students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Met on rotating schedule (57-65 min sessions), 5x/week</td>
<td>- Met from 12:23-1:23 pm, 4x/week</td>
<td>- Met from 9:00-10:15 am, 2x/week</td>
<td>- Met from 12:00-1:15 pm, 2x/week</td>
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<td>- Feb-June 2017</td>
<td>- Feb-June 2017</td>
<td>- Aug-Dec 2017</td>
<td>- Sep-Dec 2017</td>
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<td>- 5 interviews</td>
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<td>- course documents</td>
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*Participant and focal institution names are pseudonyms, as are “Barton College” and “State University” because of potentially identifiable information in the data when participants discuss their experiences at these institutions.*
Appendix D

Initial Phenomenological Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me a little about what you teach and how you came to be teaching here.
2. As a 12th grade English teacher/first-year college writing instructor, what goals do you have for your students?
3. What do you think your students need in order to be successful beyond your class?
4. I’m interested in the beliefs, attitudes, and self-perceptions that students have about themselves and their learning. Can you tell me what this description makes you think about in regards to your own students?
5. The student beliefs that I’m interested in are commonly referred to as “mindsets.” I have sticky notes here that articulate four such mindsets (1) “I belong in this academic community”; 2) “My ability and competence grow with my effort”; 3) “I can succeed at this”; 4) “This work has value for me”). I want to invite you to reflect on these four student mindsets and what you do in your classroom that promotes them. Then, create a concept map or visual representation of how students develop these mindsets in your classroom. You can either feel free to think and diagram individually first and then I’ll ask you to explain your thinking after, or we can talk as you diagram. I’m most interested in your thinking around these mindsets, not the map itself.
6. Talk to me about what you’ve done here / what you’re doing.
   Possible follow-up prompt / prompts while participant creates the concept map:
   a. How do you try to promote these mindsets in students?
   b. How do you communicate these mindsets to your students?
   c. How do you think about these mindsets during your planning for the course?
      i. …at the beginning of the year?
      ii. …on a weekly/daily basis?
   d. Do the different mindsets manifest in different classroom or instructional features?
   e. Do the mindsets have equal importance to you? Why or why not?
   f. Do you collect information or feedback about these mindsets from students?
   g. Would you add anything to these mindsets?
7. Where and how did you develop your ideas about how to support these mindsets in students?
8. How does your school context influence your approach to supporting mindsets?
9. What are some challenges you’ve encountered in trying to promote these mindsets?
10. What would help you be more effective at promoting these mindsets in your students?
Appendix E

Preliminary Etic Codes Derived from the Literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mindset</th>
<th>Etic codes for interviews, observations, and document analysis</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I belong in this academic community” (Belonging mindset)</td>
<td>• Teacher involvement and immediacy with students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Verbally or physically acknowledging students</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Demonstrating personal knowledge of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Use of (correctly pronounced) student names</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Expectations of and opportunities for student participation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Representation of different demographic groups in the classroom and curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Statements of inclusiveness and diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My ability and competence grow with my effort” (Growth mindset)</td>
<td>• Teacher verbal and nonverbal recognition and affirmation of student progress, improvement, strategy, focus, persistence, etc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Teacher language around effort, ability, potential for growth, and the value of challenge/struggle</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Time for students to practice independently</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Assessment that includes effort and improvement/progress</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Feedback on student work that encourages continued effort</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I can succeed at this” (Efficacy mindset)</td>
<td>• Teacher uses strategies to check for student understanding</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery (e.g. revising work)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Success exemplars with whom students can identify</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Peer groups and class community encourage individual striving for success</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Praise and affirmation of student competence</td>
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<tr>
<td>“This work has value for me” (Value mindset)</td>
<td>• Explanations of relevance/applicability of learning</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Use of real-world examples and connections</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Support for students’ individual goals, aspirations, and interests</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Opportunities for student choice, self-direction, and reflection</td>
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Appendix F
Emic-Etic Code Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mindset</th>
<th>Etic codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **[B]**elonging “I belong in this academic community” | • Teacher (involvement) with students  
  o Verbally or physically acknowledging  
  o Demonstrating personal knowledge of  
  o Use of (correctly pronounced) names  
• Expectations of and opportunities for student (participation – current/future/past)  
• (Representation) of different demographic groups in the classroom and curriculum  
• Statements of (inclusion) and diversity |
| **[G]**rowth “My ability and competence grow with my effort” | • Teacher verbal/nonverbal (recognition) and affirmation of progress, improvement, strategy, focus, persistence, etc.  
• Teacher (talk) around effort, ability, potential for growth, and the value of challenge/struggle  
• Time for students to (practice) independently  
• (Assessment) includes effort/improvement  
• (Encouraging) continued effort through feedback |
| **[E]**fficacy “I can succeed at this” | • Teacher uses strategies to check for (monitoring) student understanding  
• Multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate (mastery) (e.g. revising work)  
• (Vicarious) success exemplars with whom students can identify  
• Peer groups and class community provides social (persuasion) for individual striving for success  
• (Praise)/affirmation of student competence |
| **[V]**alue “This work has value for me” | • Explanations of (relevance)/applicability of learning  
• Use of real-world examples and (connections)  
• Support for students’ individual (goals)/aspirations, and (interests)  
• Opportunities for student (choice)/self-direction and (reflection) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zachary</th>
<th>Liz</th>
<th>Colin</th>
<th>Diane</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. product [E-praise] [E-persuasion]</td>
<td>c. High grading</td>
<td>c. “Hand-holding” [B-involvement] [E-</td>
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</table>

Zachary  
Liz  
Colin  
Diane
<p>| | | |</p>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>“Fun &amp; inspiring”</td>
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<td>[B-participation]</td>
<td>[V-interest]</td>
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<td>Say anything</td>
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<td>[B-participation (current)]</td>
<td>[V-interest]</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>“Lenience”/flexibility</td>
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<td>[E-monitoring]</td>
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<td>College</td>
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<td>[V-relevance]</td>
<td>[V-goals]</td>
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<td>7.</td>
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<td>[V-relevance]</td>
<td>[V-connections]</td>
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<td>Sharing personal experience/personality</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Circulating/support/un-divided attention</td>
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<td>[G-praise]</td>
<td>[E-praise]</td>
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<td>Student independence/responsibility/trust</td>
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References


Bryson, S., Smith, R., & Vineyard, G. (2002). Relationship of race, academic and nonacademic information in predicting the first-year success of selected admissions


