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Jennifer Abrams

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Creating Identity Safe Classrooms for All Students

Session 2

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Creating Identity Safe Classrooms & Schools for All Students

Stereotype Threat
Identity Safety
Checking One's Equity Systems
TESA Behaviors
Growth Mindset

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In Palo Alto USD (Palo Alto, CA), Jennifer led professional development sessions on topics from equity and elements of effective instruction to teacher leadership and peer coaching and provided new teacher and administrator trainings at both the elementary and secondary level. From 2000-2011, Jennifer was lead coach for the Palo Alto-Mountain View-Los Altos-Saratoga-Los Gatos Consortium's Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program.

In her educational consulting work, Jennifer has presented at annual conferences such as Learning Forward, ASCD, NASSP, AMLE, ISACS and the New Teacher Center Annual Symposium, as well as at the Teachers' and Principals' Centers for International School Leadership. Jennifer's communications consulting in the health care sector includes training and coaching work at the Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula and Stanford Hospital and Clinics.

Jennifer's publications include *Having Hard Conversations*, and the Corwin Press e-course by the same name, "Planning Productive Talk," her article for ASCD's *Educational Leadership (*October 2011), her chapter, "Habits of Mind for the School Savvy Leader" in Art Costa's and Bena Kallick's book, *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind: 16 Essential Characteristics for Success*, and her contribution to the book, *Mentors in the Making: Developing New Leaders for New Teachers* published by Teachers College Press. Her book, with co-author Valerie Von Frank, *The Multigenerational Workplace: Communicating, Collaborating & Creating Community* was published by Corwin Press in November of 2013. Jennifer also writes a monthly newsletter/blog, *Voice Lessons*, available for reading at and subscribing to on her website, www.jenniferabrams.com.

Jennifer has been a featured interviewee on the topic of professionalism for ASCD's video series, *Master Class*, hosted by National Public Radio's Claudio Sanchez, and in the lead article, "Finding Your Voice in Facilitating Productive Conversations" for Learning Forward's *The Leading Teacher*, Summer 2013 newsletter; as a generational expert for "Tune in to What the New Generation of Teachers Can Do," published in *Phi Delta Kappan*, (May 2011), and by the Ontario Ministry of Education for their *Leadership Matters: Supporting Open-to-Learning Conversations* video series.

Jennifer considers herself a "voice coach," helping others learn how to best use their voices - be it collaborating on a team, presenting in front of an audience, coaching a colleague, supervising an employee, and most recently in writing for the stage, as she did in her tenure as a Board Member of the National New Play Network. Jennifer holds a Master's degree in Education from Stanford University and a Bachelor's degree in English from Tufts University. She lives in Palo Alto, California. Jennifer can be reached at jennifer@jenniferabrams.com, www.jenniferabrams.com, and on Twitter @jenniferabrams.

Purple

In first grade Mrs. Lohr
said my purple teepee
wasn't realistic enough,
that purple was no color
for a tent,
that purple was a color
for people who died,
that my drawing wasn't
good enough
to hang with the others.
I walked back to my seat
counting the swish swish swishes
of my baggy corduroy trousers.
with a black crayon
nightfall came
to my purple tent
in the middle
of an afternoon.

In second grade Mr. Barta
said draw anything,
he didn't care what.
I left my paper blank
and when he came around
to my desk
my heart beat like a tom-tom.
He touched my head
and in a soft voice said
the snowfall
how clean
and white
and beautiful. **Alexis Rotella**

Equity/Inclusivity Barriers

Age	Ethnicity
Intellectual Ability	Power and Privilege
Sexual Orientation	Ancestry
Gender	Religion
Socio Economic Status	Culture
Gender Identity	Physical Ability
Race	Language

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Creating Identity Safe Classrooms – Becki Cohn-Vargas

Introduction

Identity safety is a concept introduced in 2003 that recognizes the need for students to feel their identity is valued.

> *Identity safe classrooms validate students' experiences, backgrounds, and identities. These classrooms are free from negative relationships and teaching practices that implicitly, or explicitly, link students' identities (e.g., race, gender, religion), to academic performance.* (D. M. Steele)

The premise stresses the need for schools to provide the appropriate conditions for students to discover or strengthen their identities and understand their uniqueness. In an identity safe classroom, each child's identity is viewed as an asset with which they may make life-long contributions to their culture and society as a whole. School environments need to assure that all students feel validated for who they are, because of and not in spite of their backgrounds and identities. In an identity safe environment, differences in identity are acknowledged and celebrated. The negative influences of stereotyping are averted. This leads to a climate that builds empathy and intercultural understanding, and makes it possible for all students to achieve.

Stereotype Threat Undermines Safety

Often the term "colorblind" is associated with an environment that is free of racism and bias. The sad reality is that racial divisions have not gone away, and neither children nor adults are blind to our differences, nor should they be. Colorblind practices are neither possible nor constructive for students who feel, and may have experienced, their own difference as a barrier to inclusion. When teachers ignore racial, ethnic and other student differences, stereotypes go underground.

We all have many different aspects or contingencies that make up each of our identities: our age, race, religion, and gender, to name a few. According to Claude Steele, renowned Social Psychologist "If you have to deal with things in situations because you have a certain identity, that identity will be important to you. Most psychologically impactful identity contingencies are those that in some way threaten the individual." These contingencies have a tremendous hold over people's psyches, so strong that the person who is stereotyped is adversely affected even by being afraid to confirm a negative stereotype. This fear of possibly confirming a negative stereotype is what Steele dubbed "stereotype threat."

Stereotype threat (Steele 2009) is a theory that suggests people whose race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or other immutable aspects of one's identity have been negatively stereotyped are affected even when the stereotype is not overtly mentioned. Negative stereotypes are so pervasive that the people fear that they are being viewed through this negative lens. In hundreds of studies, *stereotype threat* has been shown to negatively impact student achievement and attitudes (see www.reducingsteroetype.org).

As an antidote to the colorblind environment where stereotypes continue to manifest in both spoken and unspoken ways, an identity safe classroom creates a space where student differences are not ignored. Students feel valued and appreciated as they bring their whole identity into the classroom

Creating Identity Safe Classrooms, an Integral Part of Student Success

An identity safe environment is intentional. Characteristics of identity safe classrooms and schools have been shown to have a positive effect on student learning and their enjoyment of school, in spite of real stereotypes and powerful social inequalities operating in the outside world.

Characteristics of identity safe classrooms include building positive accepting relationships and creating a sense of belonging for students. Such classrooms are meaning-centered and challenging curriculum combined with a teacher's high expectations convey the belief that students will succeed. Teachers honor the different backgrounds of students and incorporate them into the curriculum. Students see themselves reflected on the walls of the classroom and learn about each other's cultures and backgrounds.

In an identity safe classroom, students feel accepted and have positive relationships both with their teacher and fellow students. They feel emotionally comfortable in a warm and caring environment. Pro-social behavior is taught as part of the curriculum and practiced through specific and meaningful activities where students can engage each other. Bullying or hurtful comments are reduced and students learn empathy and are taught positive ways to communicate and interact.

By providing opportunities for autonomy, students experience that their decisions matter and they take responsibility for their learning and behavior. To develop autonomy, they are given opportunities to exercise choices within the classroom and leadership in the school setting. Students have a voice in the life of the classroom.

These characteristics or elements identified above, when combined together, promote social and academic competence and belonging. These strategies of identity safety are doable in any classroom and work in powerful ways to improve student performance and create positive environments. The goal is to "unhook" the relationship between racial or gender group membership and school achievement by creating a classroom environment that reflects and makes use of the lived experience and perspectives of the different children—an *identity safe* classroom.

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(Becki Cohn-Vargas, Ed.D. (2012) Excerpt from *Not In Our School, Video Action Kit*)

CHECKING MY SYSTEMS FOR EQUITY
By Enid Lee

"I check my systems for equity every time I enter my classroom "

Grade 2 teacher reflecting on her practice in an equity workshop.

What does this teacher actually do in order to check her systems for equity?

She frequently checks the assumptions she is making of students and their families on the basis of their culture, language, race, and class; and how those assumptions are shaped by her own, language, race and class among other aspects of her identity at stages of preparing, instructing and reflecting on her teaching.

Those assumptions are apparent in the following areas:

During the preparation stage, she asks herself

Activities & Resources for Instruction

A. Which students in terms of gender, culture, race, immigration status, socioeconomic background can relate to these activities and this material?

B. How can I connect these activities to the experiences, prior knowledge, and goals of all the students?

C. What examples/illustrations, historical information can I use to connect the key concepts to students' lives?

Nature of the Learning Tasks

A. What do I want students to learn from these tasks?

B. Have I included a range of tasks to engage the realities of experiences in the room?

C. Will the purpose of the task be clear to all students?

D. Will the task be challenging to all students ?

E. Is there a pattern in terms of gender, culture, language background race, seating arrangements, status in the classroom among those who are typically on-task and those who are not?

As she teaches she asks herself:

Student Talk

A. Which students are talking while I am teaching?

B. Is there a pattern among those who are talking and among those who appear to be listening? (Proximity to me, their relationship to the topic I am teaching about, race, language background)?

C. How do I incorporate student talk into my teaching?

D. What are the agreements we have in place for listening to and learning from everyone in the room who is part of our learning community?

E. How can I use student behavior to understand what is taking place and to redirect the students' attention to the subject at hand?

Student Participation

A. Which individual students are not participating?

B. Which groups of students are not participating?

C. What is the nature of the participation I am expecting?

D. What strategies have I put in place to encourage whole class discussion or to create opportunities for many voices to be heard during the class?

E. Is there opportunity for students who speak classroom English as a second language or a second dialect to practice their answers in pairs before speaking in a big group?

F. Are "mistakes" and partially correct answers opportunities for learning in this climate?

G. Am I allowing appropriate wait time for different students depending on their needs and strengths?

H. How much am I talking in comparison to the amount of time students are talking?

I. What opportunities and support have I created for students to lead the discussion and ask some of the questions?

As she responds to her students she asks herself:

Teacher Attention

A. Where do I seem to direct my questions?

B. Do I seem to get the answers from the same students most of the time?

C. What is my proximity to those students who seem to be engaged and those who do not?

D. Do I move around the room and make contact with different group of students in terms of their seating arrangements, their familiarity with the language of instruction, racial backgrounds?

E. Do I address my questions or attention to the students who are not raising their hands?

F. Do I ask questions that allow students to think creatively and critically and not have one correct answer?

Teacher Tone

A. What words and tone of voice do I use to express my expectations of the class?

B. Do I begin by threatening, highlighting the negative consequences that will ensue if the students don't comply with my expectations?

C. Do I stress the positive intrinsic outcomes that will be experienced through their participation?

D. Do I express high expectations of all students in terms of my knowledge of them as individuals who are capable of demonstrating their best effort?

E. Do I redirect students to the task at hand by finding out what has taken them away from it?

F. Do I redirect their attention by reminding them of an instance when they did good work and made a sincere effort?

Teacher Directions

A. Which individual students and which groups are following my directions?

B. Which ones are not?

C. Is there a pattern with either group?

D. What strategies have I used to ensure that my directions are heard, understood and that the logic of my directions is clear?

E. Do I attract the attention of the students before I began giving the directions?

F. Do I give directions in both spoken and written form?

G. Do I give a chance for questions and clarifications after the directions have been given?

H. Do I sometimes build in an opportunity for a student to review the directions with the class so that I can see if they are understood and whether they reflect my intentions?

I. Do we have agreements in the class, which encourage students to help each other in the spirit of a learning community to work on the activities at hand?

J. What are the students doing when they are not following directions?

K .How can I use this information to change the situation?

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TESA Behaviors

* **Equitable Distribution of Response Opportunity:** The teacher learns how to provide an opportunity for all students to respond or perform in classroom learning situations.
* **Affirmation or Correction:** The teacher learns how to give feedback to students about their classroom performance.
* **Proximity:** The teacher learns the significance of being physically close to students as they work.
* **Individual Helping:** The teacher learns how to provide individual help to each student.
* **Praise for the Learning Performance:** The teacher learns how to praise the students' learning performance.
* **Courtesy:** The teacher learns how to use expressions of courtesy in interactions with students.
* **Latency:** The teacher learns how to allow the student enough time to think over a question before assisting the student or ending the opportunity to respond.
* **Reasons for Praise:** The teacher learns how to give useful feedback for the students' learning performance.
* **Personal Interest Statements and Compliments:** The teacher learns how to ask questions, give compliments or make statements related to a student's personal interests or experiences.
* **Delving, Rephrasing, Giving Clues:** The teacher learns how to provide additional information to help the student respond to a question.
* **Listening:** The teacher learns how to apply active listening techniques with students.
* **Touching:** The teacher learns how to touch students in a respectful, appropriate and friendly manner.
* **Higher-Level Questioning:** The teacher learns how to ask challenging questions that require students to do more than simply recall information
* **Accepting Feelings:** The teacher learns how to recognize and accept students' feelings in a nonevaluative manner.
* **Desisting:** The teacher learns how to stop a student's misbehavior in a calm and courteous manner.

LEARNED OPTIMISM

	Optimistic View	Pessimistic View
Success	**Long Term/Global** **Due to Hard Work** **Meaningful/Global**	**Short Term/Narrow** **Due to Accident/Fate** **Not Meaningful/Local**
Failure	**Short Term/Narrow** **Due to my Lack of Work** **Not Meaningful/Local**	**Long Term/Global** **Due to Others** **Meaningful/Global**

Based on work by Martin Seligman (Learned Optimism) as well as 6seconds.org, an emotional intelligence organization
The idea is that when a kid gets a paper back in which he/she didn't do so well you want to make it that it was "just one paper" (short term), that it was something they can work on (lack of work) and that it doesn't globalize to me anything other than this moment and this academic experience didn't achieve the result you wanted – it doesn't make you a bad person, a bad student or a bad student of English – it was just one paper (not meaningful, localized).

This is how to have an Optimistic View when failure happens. We need to try to get kids into the mindset that perseverance and persistence, reflection and revision are good things and are the intelligent thing to do…

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Giving Students Meaningful Work Pages 16-20

Even Geniuses Work Hard

Carol S. Dweck

Let's give students learning tasks that tell them, "You can be as smart as you want to be."

We can all agree that meaningful schoolwork promotes students' learning of academic content. But why stop there? I believe that meaningful work can also teach students to love challenges, to enjoy effort, to be resilient, and to value their own improvement. In other words, we can design and present learning tasks in a way that helps students develop a *growth mindset*, which leads to not just short-term achievement but also long-term success.

Why Foster a Growth Mindset?

During the past several decades, my colleagues and I have conducted research identifying two distinct ways in which individuals view intelligence and learning. Individuals with a *fixed mindset* believe that their intelligence is simply an inborn trait—they have a certain amount, and that's that. In contrast, individuals with a *growth mindset* believe that they can develop their intelligence over time (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Dweck, 1999, 2007).

These two mindsets lead to different school behaviors. For one thing, when students view intelligence as fixed, they tend to value looking smart above all else. They may sacrifice important opportunities to learn—even those that are important to their future academic success—if those opportunities require them to risk performing poorly or admitting deficiencies. Students with a growth mindset, on the other hand, view challenging work as an opportunity to learn and grow. I have seen students with a growth mindset meet difficult problems, ones they could not solve yet, with great relish. Instead of thinking they were failing (as the students with a fixed mindset did), they said things like "I love a challenge," "Mistakes are our friends," and "I was *hoping* this would be informative!"

Students with a fixed mindset do not like effort. They believe that if you have ability, everything should come naturally. They tell us that when they have to work hard, they feel dumb. Students with a growth mindset, in contrast, value effort; they realize that even geniuses have to work hard to develop their abilities and make their contributions.

Finally, students with a fixed mindset tend not to handle setbacks well. Because they believe that setbacks call their intelligence into question, they become discouraged or defensive when they don't succeed right away. They may quickly withdraw their effort, blame others, lie about their scores, or consider cheating. Students with a growth mindset are more likely to respond to initial obstacles by remaining involved, trying new strategies, and using all the resources at their disposal for learning.

Creating a Culture of Risk Taking

Teachers who strive to design challenging, meaningful learning tasks may find that their students respond differently depending on the students' assumptions about intelligence. Students with a growth mindset may tackle such work with excitement, whereas students with a fixed mindset may feel threatened by learning tasks that require them to stretch or take risks.

To prepare students to benefit from meaningful work, therefore, teachers need to create a growth-mindset culture in the classroom. One way to create such a culture is by providing the right kinds of praise and encouragement. My research has shown that praising students for the process they have engaged in—the effort they applied, the strategies they used, the choices they made, the persistence they displayed, and so on—yields more long-term benefits than telling them they are "smart" when they succeed.

Teachers should also emphasize that fast learning is not always the deepest and best learning and that students who take longer sometimes understand things at a deeper level. Students can learn about many historical figures who were not regarded as "fast" learners in childhood. Albert Einstein swore that he was slow to learn and that's why he pondered the same questions year after year—with, as we know, excellent results.

Some teachers teach their students about the different mindsets directly. (To learn about a growth mindset curriculum that my colleagues and I have created, go to www.brainology.us.) Teachers may illustrate the concept of the growth mindset by having their students write about, and share with one another, something they used to be poor at and are now very good at.

In one class, for example, the students were astounded to learn that the school's baseball star used to be inept at baseball and only became proficient after much practice. Such discussions encourage students not to be ashamed to struggle with something before they are good at it.

Teachers can also ask their students to choose an area in which they would like to improve and then to establish a personal goal that would be a big reach for them. For example, a student who is typically afraid of criticism might decide to seek critical feedback on her next art project; an algebra student struggling to understand absolute values might commit to watching a YouTube video on how to solve linear absolute value equations, and then teach the process to his classmates; a student who lacks physical confidence might join a sports team; or a shy student might approach other students she would like to befriend. Students can share their plans and even help one another enhance their skills and reach their goal.

Another strategy is to have students write a letter to a struggling student explaining the growth mindset, telling the struggler not to label himself or herself, and giving the student advice on improvement strategies to try.

Through such exercises, teachers are transmitting crucial information— telling students that they view them all as having intelligence that they can choose to develop. The teachers are also communicating that their role is not to judge who is smart and who is not, but to collaborate with students to make everyone smarter.

Building a Growth Mindset

Within a classroom culture that supports a growth mindset, teachers can design meaningful learning tasks and present them in a way that fosters students' resilience and long-term achievement.

Emphasize Challenge, Not "Success"

Meaningful learning tasks need to challenge every student in some way. It is crucial that no student be able to coast to success time after time; this experience can create the fixed-mindset belief that you are smart only if you can succeed without effort.

To prevent this, teachers can identify students who have easily mastered the material and design in-class assignments that include some problems or exercises that require these students to stretch. This way, the teacher will be close at hand to guide students if necessary and get them used to (and ultimately excited about) the challenging work. Some teachers have told me that after a while, students begin to select or create challenging tasks for themselves.

When presenting learning tasks to students, the teacher should portray challenges as fun and exciting, while portraying easy tasks as boring and less useful for the brain. When students initially struggle or make mistakes, the teacher should view this as an opportunity to teach students how to try different strategies if the first ones don't work—how to step back and think about what to try next, like a detective solving a mystery.

Suppose that a student has attempted a math problem but is now stuck. The teacher can say, "OK, let's solve this mystery!" and ask the student to show the strategies he or she has tried so far. As the student explains a strategy, the teacher can say, "That's an interesting strategy. Let's think about why it didn't work and whether it gives us some clues for a new path. What should we try next?"

When, perhaps with the teacher's guidance, the student finds a fruitful strategy, the teacher can say "Great! You tried different ways, you followed the clues, and you found a strategy that worked. You're just like Sherlock Holmes, the great detective. Are you ready to try another one?" In this way, the teacher can simultaneously gain insight into what the student does and does not understand and teach the student to struggle through knotty problems.

Give a Sense of Progress

Meaningful learning tasks give students a clear sense of progress leading to mastery. This means that students can see themselves doing tasks they couldn't do before and understanding concepts they couldn't understand before. Work that gives students a sense of improvement as a result of effort gives teachers an opportunity to praise students for their process. That is, teachers can point out that the students' efforts were what led to the progress and improvement over time.

Some teachers make students' progress explicit by giving pre-tests at the beginning of a unit that purposely cover material students do not know. When students compare their inevitably poor performance on these pre-tests with their improved performance on unit post-tests, they get used to the idea that, with application, they can become smarter.

Homework is an especially important component of an instructional program that enhances students' sense of learning and progress. Homework assignments should not feel like mindless, repetitive exercises; rather, they should present novel problems for students to solve, require them to apply what they've learned in new ways, or ask them to stretch to the next level.

For example, suppose that students are learning about the rise and fall of civilizations. Their homework assignment might be to apply their learning by designing a civilization that would either thrive (by building in positive factors) or implode (by building in risk factors). They can write the story of their civilization and what happened to it. Or suppose students were studying Shakespeare's sonnets. For homework, they could write a sonnet to the person or animal of their choice in the style of Shakespeare.

Grade for Growth

The way teachers evaluate their students' work can also help students develop a growth mindset. At one high school in Chicago, when students don't master a particular unit of study, they don't receive a failing grade—instead, they get a grade of *Not Yet*. Students are not ashamed of that grade because they know that they're expected to master the material, if not the first time, then the next time, or the next.

The word "yet" is valuable and should be used frequently in every classroom. Whenever students say they can't do something or are not good at something, the teacher should add, "yet." Whenever students say they don't like a certain subject, the teacher should say, "yet." This simple habit conveys the idea that ability and motivation are fluid.

Some teachers my colleagues and I work with tell us that they've shifted their grading system to consider more growth-mindset criteria, so that no student can coast to an *A* and students who struggle and improve get credit for their effort. One school bases one-fourth of each student's grade on growth-mindset factors, thus rewarding students who challenge themselves, are resilient in the face of difficulty, and show clear improvement over time. Other schools give a separate grade for challenge-seeking, effort, and resilience. Of course, for that grade to be effective (and not just a consolation prize), teachers need to have reinforced the value of these qualities daily throughout the school year.

What if a student puts in great effort but does not improve? The teacher needs to factor in the effort but then work with the student to figure out what the impasse was and how the student can break through that impasse.

Long-Term Success

Meaningful work not only promotes learning in the immediate situation, but also promotes a love of learning and resilience in the face of obstacles. This kind of meaningful work takes place in classrooms in which teachers praise the learning process rather than the students' ability, convey the joy of tackling challenging learning tasks, and highlight progress and effort. Students who are nurtured in such classrooms will have the values and tools that breed lifelong success.

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www.reducingstereotype.org

Books

Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman – Nurture Shock: New Thinking About Children

Denise Clark Pope - Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students

Carol Dweck – Mindset: The New Psychology of Success – How We Can Learn To Fulfill Our Potential

Martin Seligman – Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being

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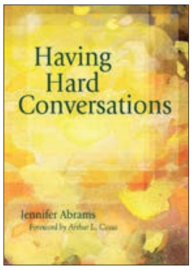

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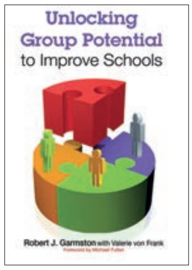

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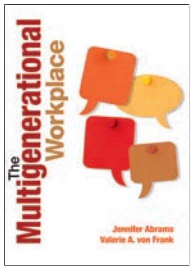

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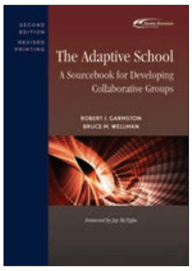

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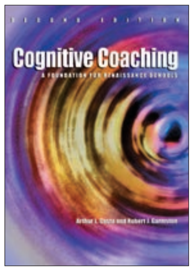

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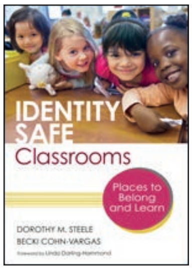

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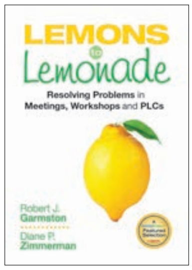

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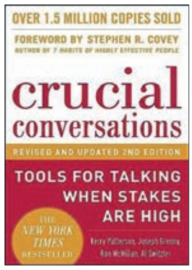

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