

# It's Safe to Be Smart

## Strategies for Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment

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**Abstract:** Gifted teenagers in middle and high school benefit from classroom environments that support their social and emotional development. Teachers of gifted adolescents may create classroom environments in which young people know it is safe to be smart and where they feel valued and respected for their intellect, creativity, and passions. By utilizing available strategies for creating such environments, teachers enhance the psychosocial well-being of gifted adolescents.

**Keywords:** classroom environments, adolescence, social and emotional needs

### Introduction

As gifted elementary schoolchildren move on to middle school and later high school, they mature intellectually and develop a rather sophisticated knowledge base. Teachers work closely with these students to address their intellectual needs and provide them with an appropriate degree of academic challenge. Students' intellectual development is accompanied by social and emotional growth; thus teachers are also responsible for nurturing the social and emotional development of young people.

Educators throughout the K-12 school experience confront the challenge of addressing both the intellectual and psychosocial dimensions of gifted student development. As children leave emotionally supportive elementary schools and transition to middle and high school classrooms where the focus shifts to immersing students in academically rigorous courses, they may struggle to adjust to the demands of these classrooms while navigating the complex challenges of adolescence. As with all adolescents, bright students need support with social and emotional issues throughout middle and high school (Rakow, 2005).

The importance of addressing the social and emotional development of intelligent teenagers becomes evident when considering the contextual influences that shape the experience of adolescence today. Growing up in a fast-paced society that may seem increasingly hostile to young people increases the need for schools to provide a safe environment for adolescents. Some students may arrive at school every morning after escaping a difficult or even violent environment in their home or community. In light of the challenging economic stressors

confronting many families, other teenagers must grow up far too quickly, robbed of their childhoods and expected to shoulder adult responsibilities long before they are prepared to do so. The dictates of teenage culture within some schools may themselves accelerate how quickly young people are expected to become adult-like.

These challenges are even more significant in light of the developmental changes adolescents undergo during middle and high school. The emotionality of young adolescents during the middle school years may be especially

pronounced. Life is a roller coaster ride of emotions and middle school "high drama" often overwhelms the classroom, the school grounds, and the lunchroom. Adolescents may yearn to be cared for as though they are still children while simultaneously demanding to be treated as adults. During this stage of adolescence, relationships with peers are often the highest priority in a teenager's life (Rakow, 2005). Moreover, students search for a place to belong within the culture of their school. Gifted students must work hard to become comfortable

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with who they are as intelligent young teenagers among their peers. During this developmental stage, such students also begin making serious attempts to develop a value system that aligns with their emerging identities (Hébert & Kelly, 2005).

In high school, these same bright young people may experiment with self-expression. They may try on multiple identities—of the athlete, the artist, and the academic. They may devote time to determining their place within the cliques, crowds, or groups that comprise their high school. As they approach the end of high school they begin a transition into the next phase of their lives that may involve angst over college choices and career plans. Throughout the high school journey, they are bombarded by expectations for high performance (Shaffer, 2008).

We recognize these challenges of adolescence and our work with gifted teenagers over the years has reinforced our conviction that classrooms must provide psychologically safe places in which gifted young people can feel comfortable being themselves. In this article, we discuss theoretical literature that has influenced our belief in the importance of designing supportive gifted education classroom environments. We also offer a rich menu of pedagogical strategies to use in creating such classrooms for middle and high school students.

### Related Theoretical Literature

Schaps (2007, 2009) described the importance of creating caring school communities with supportive, respectful relationships among and between students and teachers. In such communities, teenagers are encouraged to pose and reflect on complex questions, individual differences are celebrated, ostracism does not occur, and young people know that it is safe to be smart. Being part of such a classroom is “being a valued, contributing member of a group dedicated to the shared purposes of helping and supporting all members as they work together, learn and grow” (Schaps, 2007, p. 75). This approach is consistent with the philosophy of *invitational education*, which originated in the work of counselor educator William Purkey. The purpose of invitational education is to create learning environments where people choose to be and where they want to learn. Paxton (2003) succinctly describes this approach as “a theory of practice based on trust, respect, a belief in cooperation, empathic understanding and genuineness” (p. 23).

Invitational education is focused on four guiding principles: respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality (Purkey & Novak, 2008; Purkey & Strahan, 2002). The cornerstone of invitational learning is *respect* for the unique value and integrity of each and every individual. Respect is evident when teachers accept teenagers as they are, recognize their unlimited potential, invite them to take responsibility for their lives and make appropriate decisions about their learning. *Trust*, the second key principle acknowledges the interdependence of human beings and guides teaching as a collaborative and cooperative activity in which process is celebrated as much as product.

The third principle, *optimism*, is the belief that human potential is endless and waiting to be discovered and realized. Optimistic teachers working with teenagers have a vision of what is possible for their students to achieve and to become. *Intentionality*, the fourth principle, refers to the ability to align our perceptions with our overt behaviors. Intentionally inviting educators consistently demonstrate integrity in their practice and remain dedicated to their reason for becoming teachers: an authentic appreciation of others and a desire to help students grow. They uphold personal dignity and self-respect alongside their respect for and trust in others and they are deeply committed to caring for people (Hébert, 2011).

Tomlinson (2002) summarized this philosophical approach eloquently in describing the many ways teachers might extend learning invitations to their students:

I have respect for who you are and who you can become. I want to know you. I have time for you. I try to see things through your eyes. This classroom is ours, not mine. There is room for what you care about in what we learn. Your peers and I need you here as a partner in learning. I will help you understand yourself and your world through what we learn . . . Your success is central in this classroom . . . When one route to learning doesn't work, we'll find another. I am your partner in growth. We are on a mission to learn. There is great support for you here but no room for excuses . . . You're growing but you're not finished growing. There is no finish line in learning. (p. 10)

### Translating Theory Into Practice

Teachers who successfully deliver the invitational messages described by Tomlinson begin on the first day of school and remain consistent in providing appropriate emotional support throughout the academic year. The pedagogical strategies described below incorporate Purkey's four components of respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality. We begin by introducing several strategies that may be used to establish relationships within the classroom at the beginning of the school year. These are followed by additional methods to support teachers in maintaining a sense of community throughout the year. Finally, we offer several strategies to help teenagers to engage in self-reflection and manage stress. These instructional methods will support teachers in creating an emotional climate in the classroom that demonstrates to adolescents that they are valued for their intelligence and creativity and respected as individuals by both their teacher and classmates, and that they can therefore feel comfortable being themselves.

### Two-Word Poems

“Getting to know you” introductory activities are common place during the first few days of school. Writing two-word poems to introduce classmates is one very easy strategy for

opening day (Frank, 2011). Teachers pair students and give them the time to get to know each other through quiet conversation. After gathering information about each other's lives beyond the classroom, each student writes a two-word poem describing their new friend, with each line limited to only two words. After students have shared the poems and introduced one another to their classmates, these poems can be displayed on a class bulletin board or website. The following two poems are examples of what evolves from this activity:

**Chantal Jamison**

Sensitive girl  
 Pretty eyes  
 Beautiful smile  
 Loves gymnastics  
 Math superstar  
 Chocolate lover  
 Facebook fan  
 Great friend

**Tony Rebollo**

Great smile  
 Rowdy laugh  
 Rugged build  
 Rugby teammate  
 Tech-savvy guy  
 Yankees fan  
 Harvard bound  
 Awesome guy

**Avatars**

"Getting to know you" activities also allow students to learn more about each other's personalities and interests as they begin developing friendships. Teachers can make introductory activities engaging for 21st century students by recognizing the important role of technology in the lives of today's teenagers. For example, using an avatar—a graphical or digital personification of an individual's identity or self-image (Annetta, Klesath, & Holmes, 2008)—is an increasingly popular way for students to make themselves known within the classroom.

Avatars allow students to define their classroom presence. Students involved in online learning were some of the first to use avatars, often using them to interact with each other and simulate a social classroom-like environment within a virtual setting (Elkin, 2011). But avatars are not just for virtual classrooms any longer. Through programs such as Voki, avatars are helping teachers bridge technology and *social and emotional development* in the classroom. Through Voki, teenagers can create their own avatar; a text-to-speech feature allows the avatar to introduce the student to the class and share

with the group their hobbies, interests, and life goals. Athletes can represent themselves with their athletic uniforms and equipment, thespians can depict themselves in their favorite dramatic role, artists can include their brushes and sketchpads, and literary buffs can portray themselves with their favorite novel. In this way, the class website becomes the year-long home for displaying the avatars—including the teacher's.

When students create their avatar, they also give it personal characteristics such as eye color, hair color, and facial expressions. In many instances, avatars are a direct representation of the student, but for others, the avatar represents the student's ideal self. In either case, educators have found that creating such avatars opens the door to healthy discussions about self-image (Boss, 2009). The following is a list of websites students can use to create avatars; Figures 1 and 2 below provide two examples of avatars designed by teenagers.

- Voki: <http://www.voki.com/>
- Portrait Avatar Maker: [http://avatarmaker.abi-station.com/index\\_en.shtml](http://avatarmaker.abi-station.com/index_en.shtml)
- Portrait Illustration Maker: [http://illustmaker.abi-station.com/index\\_en.shtml](http://illustmaker.abi-station.com/index_en.shtml)
- Doppel Me: <http://doppelme.com/>

**Word Clouds**

Designing "word clouds" is another way for teenagers to provide a representation of themselves and get to know each other better. In this activity, inspired by Rao (2012), teachers provide a writing prompt in which they ask students to describe themselves including details such as their hobbies, values, goals in school and life in general, and something interesting about themselves or something funny that happened to them. Using these written descriptions, students then create their own word clouds using one of the digital tools available online. Students can choose various shapes, colors, and themes to personalize their word cloud and express their personality using larger fonts to highlight major themes. This activity allows teenagers to present themselves creatively and provides an enjoyable opportunity for the class to celebrate being together as friends through their collection of word clouds. Figures 3 and 4 present examples of visualized word clouds created with one of the online tools. These two figures present variations of the same teenager's story, using different shapes and colors.

**Mission Patches**

As a new school year begins, some teenagers may feel anxious about the unknown. Others may view the beginning of a school year as a fresh start and an opportunity to become better in various aspects of their lives as students. One way to help young people feel more comfortable about the new school year and motivate them to make a fresh new start is to have them design a symbolic representation of their interests and hobbies, and long-term personal goals for the future. Reflecting



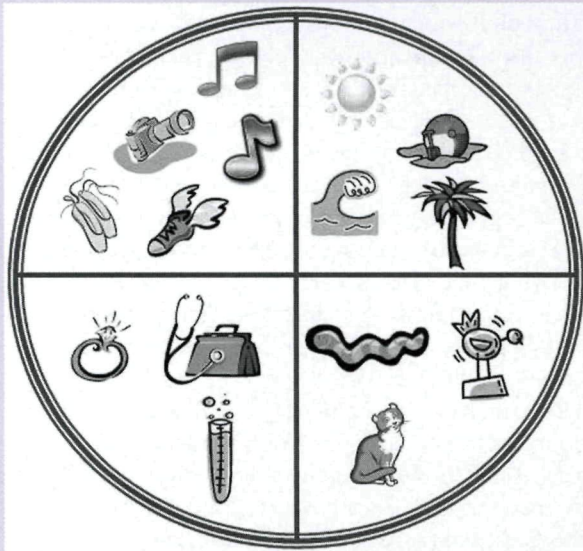


Figure 5. A student's mission patch.

*Note.* My mission patch represents my interests and my lifelong dreams. It is circular in shape and divided into four quadrants. In the first quadrant, I have placed music notes to represent my love for music. I play the piano and the cello and my music brings me a calming peace. The ballet shoes depict my love for dance. Along with my music, dance provides me an opportunity to share another form of my artistic abilities. The camera represents another artistic outlet—my love for photography. The track shoes represent my love for running. When I run, I am also able to clear my mind.

Quadrant Two illustrates my love for home. I live in one of the most beautiful regions of South Carolina. I spend summer days on the beaches of Hilton Head and in the marshes of coastal Bluffton. In my opinion, there is no place more beautiful than my hometown. Quadrant Three presents several of my future goals. My hope is to attend college, major in biology and eventually attend medical school to become a pediatrician. I love children and deeply want to make a difference in their lives. I also hope to marry and raise a family. Quadrant Four represents my love for the many pets in my home who are an important part of my extended family.

their artistic talents to design their patches, while others may enjoy using technology and incorporating favorite software programs into their creative process. Students must also provide a written explanation of the significance of the words and symbols chosen for their patches, just as the designers of the NASA patches do. The written explanation is submitted with the design and the final patches are prominently displayed in the classroom. With each student's mission for a great school year on display teachers can incorporate the patches as motivators year round. Figure 5 features a mission patch designed by a middle school student along with her explanation of the significance of the items featured on the patch.

### Photo Sharing Applications

Using student photography to build community can be an effective way to make connections and foster creativity among

teenagers. The proliferation of photo sharing applications available online and on Apple and Android devices has made photography, photo editing, and photo sharing more enjoyable and easier than ever. With appropriate adjustments to privacy settings, applications such as Hipstamatic, Instagram, Snapseed, and Flickr can provide teenagers with the tools they need to create and share beautiful images that previously would have required expensive cameras and photo-editing software to produce.

Photography and photo sharing applications have a place in a gifted education classroom throughout the year. As school begins, students may curate an exhibit of photographs they have taken that illustrate what is most salient to them in their lives. Possible photo shoots for students might include photographs of people, places, or events that have influenced them, photographs capturing inspirational moments, or representing aspects of their daily lives as intelligent teenagers. Using photo-editing applications they can manipulate their photos in meaningful and aesthetically pleasing ways. Asking students to share their work and prompting them to reflect on the photographs they select for their exhibit offers a comfortable way to create a safe space in which students can present their authentic selves.

As the year progresses, teachers may want to incorporate a collaborative photojournalism assignment into the curriculum, asking students to work in small groups with their peers to explore an issue that is personally meaningful to them through the medium of photography. This assignment encourages students to think deeply about how to convey the intricacies of an issue or problem being examined in class. Students are encouraged to select topics that are powerful, controversial, and have personal significance for teenagers. Completing such an assignment with a group of like-minded peers fosters connections around a shared interest or passion. Finished exhibits are eventually displayed in the school, a local museum, or a gallery. Examples of photojournalism projects might include infusing photography in an oral history project, creating a photographic montage or collage to capture multicultural tensions in their community, a photo essay of student involvement in local political issues, or a photographic exposé capturing the plight of homeless individuals in the community.

### Social Action Projects

Middle school and high school classrooms are ideal places for collaborative projects with a social action focus. Collaborative learning engages young people in working toward a shared goal. Patrick, Bengel, Jeon, and Townsend (2005) found that collaborative learning techniques are effective with gifted students when the project's design incorporates accountability for group members and when the activities lead to positive interaction among students. Accountability helps ensure that gifted students will not become bored or disengaged and facilitates positive academic and social interactions with their peers.

Projects with a social action focus require students to engage in work they have deemed important maintaining their sense of accountability and responsibility for engendering change in their school or local community (Hart, Atkins, & Donnelly, 2006). Collaborative projects centered on social action offer outlets for such important qualities as moral maturity, sensitivity, and empathy often characteristic of gifted students (Terry, 2003). For intelligent teenagers, involvement in work focusing on community service and social outreach addresses the strong need for consistency between their values and their actions (Piechowski, 2006; Terry, 2003). Pro-social activities also provide teenagers with evidence that choices matter, effort and perseverance do make a difference, and adults value what young people do with their talents (Hébert, 2011). Moreover, involvement in such collaborative work resulting in tangible products or performances builds a sense of group accomplishment and success. Two examples of this approach from one author's classroom are provided below.

High school juniors enrolled in a Theory of Knowledge class as part of their school's International Baccalaureate program decided to work with a self-contained class of 15 special needs students within their school. Together the two groups of students planned a garden, built compost bins using rubberized containers, and filled the bins with food scraps, newspaper, and earthworms. Each month the students engaged in a variety of tasks together. Each work session began with a visit to their compost bins, followed by working on nature walks, planting seeds in their garden, measuring and marking a green house area for future planting, building birdhouses, creating pinecone ornaments to feed birds, and transferring young plants to a garden bed with fresh compost. All of the students benefited from this work by learning about composting and gardening. More importantly, the students grew personally from the significant relationships they developed with one another. Teachers reported that both groups of students would greet each other in the cafeteria with big hugs and high-fives throughout the school year.

Another group of teenagers became involved in a collaborative campaign when one student shared with her classmates that a family member had been diagnosed with neuro-myelitis optica (NMO), a degenerative disease often misdiagnosed as multiple sclerosis. She explained that little is known about the disease and much more research is needed. She asked her classmates to help her increase awareness of the disease and raise funds to support NMO research.

The class agreed to join the effort and organized a silent auction and dessert benefit. The group met monthly and worked to make the event a reality. Students collected gently used items from their homes and asked local businesses to donate gift certificates. They baked desserts to share and organized their talents to provide entertainment for the evening that included a skit, a string quartet, a jazz band, and a dance team performance. Parents, community members, and students enjoyed the evening, learned about the debilitating disease, and raised nearly \$2,000 to support research toward a cure.

## Blogging

The term *blog* is an abbreviation for "web log," an Internet service that allows individuals to post journal entries online. Blogs have reshaped how we communicate our ideas and share information and blogging is becoming a significant classroom activity through which young people reflect on their learning and express their views. Blogging benefits gifted teenagers by providing opportunities for reflection, a space to share their voices, an authentic audience, and the chance to engage in rich conversations and debates. Quiet or reticent students may be more likely to express themselves through blogging than to speak up in class. Moreover, blogs help teachers build community in the classroom.

Classroom blogs may be posted on online social learning platforms such as Edmodo, Edublogs, Wordpress, or Blogger, popular outlets for students and teachers. These free web tools allow educators to design a private restricted space for use only by the teacher and students in a particular class. These tools create safe spaces for young people to hold important classroom conversations. Educators have found it helpful to introduce this approach by teaching young people the art of blogging before creating a classroom blog. Providing teenagers with guidelines for reflection and providing feedback to classmates insures a positive experience for all. Incorporating blogs into gifted education classrooms serves teenagers well in today's wired world and offers teachers another method for creating a psychologically safe classroom environment.

## Journaling

Gifted adolescents are often inundated with stress in multiple aspects of their lives; this is particularly true for older teenagers as they prepare for life after high school. The pressure to succeed both academically and socially can be draining for young people but teachers who recognize these stressors and can offer students outlets for coping with stress. Journaling is one approach to helping gifted teenagers reflect on the issues that may induce stress.

Flack (2003) proposed that "journals are the notebooks of the mind" (p. 15) and provide safe spaces for reflection, problem solving, and communication with the self. Journals may also serve as nonjudgmental friends for adolescents. Psychologists have long maintained that journaling helps individuals reduce stress and anxiety, strengthen coping skills, increase self-awareness, and produce genuine psychological insights (Purcell, 2006; Ulrich & Lutgendorf, 2002).

Teachers of gifted students might also consider incorporating dialogue journals in their practice. A *dialogue journal* is a written conversation through which a student and teacher communicate regularly over the course of a semester or school year. They may take the form of a traditional notebook or a private blog. Students write as much as they choose and the teacher responds to their questions, comments, and concerns and asks questions in return. With an understanding that journal entries will be read only by the teacher and the individual student, teachers are able to build trust

and provide guidance and emotional support through their feedback. The teacher's role in this conversation is that of a participant, not an evaluator, providing students with a regular opportunity to reflect on their sources of stress and think through these issues with the help of a supportive adult.

## Summary

Gifted teenagers in middle and high school benefit from classroom environments that support their social and emotional development. Teachers of gifted adolescents must create classroom environments in which young people know it is safe to be smart and where they feel valued and respected for their intellect, creativity, and passions. By utilizing available strategies for creating such environments teachers enhance the psychosocial well-being of gifted adolescents.

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