

CHAPTER 1

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ACADEMIC IDENTITIES

“It is important for teachers to understand the impact of the instructional decisions that they make, and the social and academic norms that they create, on a child’s [academic] identity.” –Aguirre, Mayfield-Ingram, Martin, The Impact of Identity in K-8 Mathematics

One of the greatest inequities I experienced as a teacher was using an instructional model that supported a checklist mindset, thinking of math as facts and procedures to be memorized. I often wonder how would an equity lens among my teachers have shaped my learning experience differently? Rather than teaching one way of solving a problem, what would my learning have been like if my teachers encouraged me to find different solution methods? I wonder what type of student I would have been in a math classroom where curiosity and questioning are encouraged, where getting the wrong answer is expected along the learning journey (and not always penalized), and various ways of thinking are celebrated. In this environment, the teacher would have a mindset that all students are capable of learning and I, as a student, would have faith in my own intellectual capacity. I would have a healthy, empowering academic identity. This is growth mindset at its best.

Cultivating a healthy academic identity and mindset is an ongoing process. If you reach the point where you feel that you can’t grow any further, then you’ve restricted the intellectual spaces to which you and your students can go. In this chapter we will begin to unpack your academic identity, which will reveal some of the contributing factors to what you choose to teach, how you teach it, and what you believe about the students that you teach. This chapter will help strengthen your self-reflective techniques and unearth your academic identity by focusing on four key questions:

1. Why do you teach?
2. Why do you teach what you teach?
3. What's your academic identity?
4. What's your dominant academic identity?

academic identity: The dispositions and beliefs that make up a person's relationship with teaching, learning, and educational topics or subjects

WHY DO YOU TEACH?

Why do you teach? You want to impact lives. You love teaching others how to learn. You want to change the educational system for the better. You live for the lightbulb moments in the classroom. The joy and innocence of youth inspires you to teach. You teach to make a difference. Most educators can tell you why they engage in the profession of teaching and the reason is usually connected to a purpose bigger than themselves. Our *why* for teaching usually details the impact and influence we can have on students. Our purpose for teaching is often to cultivate young minds.

The key to sustainability in this profession is to be driven by your *why*. It is acceptable for your *why* to include extrinsic factors such as the benefits of teaching that enhance your professional growth, financial supports teaching provides for you and your family, or systemic ways teaching allows you to make a difference, such as volunteering or leading community events. Equally important are the intrinsic factors that add value to your *why*, such as the beliefs you hold about teaching and your expectations of what teaching should entail. These intrinsic factors are directly connected to your mind-set, which is our first entry point for equity.

Here is a story about a teacher who's *why* was strengthened by her students:

"I had an overwhelmingly positive academic identity as a student, but unfortunately that had a negative impact during my first few years of teaching. I entered the profession with the assumption that because I had such a healthy academic identity I was best positioned to develop that in my students. I thought it would be easy because my intentions were good and I was in it for the right reasons. I quickly saw that I had to empathize with students who had negative academic identities and work to help them see the possibility of a more positive identity. It was a team effort, though,

because the impact of another teacher’s mindsets and/or actions could carry over into my classroom and vice versa. This is another reason this work is important: one teacher may be able to make ripples, but it takes a team to change the tide.”

Teaching is a profession that could benefit from a shared value proposition, or an agreed upon promise of what will we do for and with students. Doctors take the Hippocratic Oath, swearing to uphold medical standards for patients. Police officers’ oath of honor details how to serve and protect communities. Teachers? Well, we’re getting there—from making sure no child is left behind (NCLB, 2002) to ensuring that every student succeeds (ESSA, 2015), students seem to be the reason and *why* that drives education reform. However, we don’t take an oath when we start teaching and there is no shared upon agreement to drive our work.

Perhaps one of the reasons we don’t have a shared value proposition in education is because we misconstrue the essential terms that define our work. According to Sir Ken Robinson, Ph.D and Kate Robinson, we often conflate and confuse the terms learning, education, training, and school. “Learning is the process of acquiring new skills and understanding. Education is an organized system of learning. Training is a type of education that is focused on learning specific skills. A school is a community of learners: a group that comes together to learn with and from each other. It is vital that we differentiate these terms: children love to learn, they do it naturally; many have a hard time with education, and some have big problems with school.” (Robinson, K. 2022, March).

Does this distinction change your response above to the question *why do you teach?* If so, record your enhanced response below:

Why do you teach?

Insert your answer here: _____



► It’s easy for me to give the typical answer—“I want to make a difference.” But, in all honesty, I got into teaching originally to support my family and specifically pay for my children’s education. After a few years, I discovered that I had an inner calling to pursue this vocation. I never call teaching my profession or career.

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► When thinking of teachers' academic identities and often how I perceived their identities, especially in times of frustration around damaging words or actions that lacked sensitivity and/or promoted inequities, I often had to remind myself that all teachers got into teaching because they care about kids. We know, teachers aren't in it for the money or the great hours. They truly got into it because of their love of kids. With that in mind, I also had to remember that teachers' academic identities were fluid and that I could have a positive effect on kids by helping change their biases.

WHY DO YOU TEACH WHAT YOU TEACH?

You've identified why you teach, and now I want you to consider why you teach the subject(s) that you teach. Understanding how our subjects connect to the various dimensions of learning gives us greater purpose in our teaching. Former middle and high school teacher Julia Marie Aguirre, et al., in *The Impact of Identity in K-8 Mathematics* “[encourages] all teachers to reflect on three questions: What mathematics? For whom? For what purposes?”. The authors “contend that deep meaningful reflection on these questions will require teachers to examine their beliefs about learners, learning and mathematics content as well as their everyday teaching and classroom practices.” (Aguirre, Martin, Mayfield-Ingram) Let's consider other subjects. For example, why do you teach science? For what purpose are students learning history? What's in it for the students to learn art? Why do you teach math? Who is math for?

As you think about those questions, keep in mind that the purpose of schooling has changed with society. What was once an institution for instilling American values, then transformed to one designed to keep our nation on the cutting edge of math, science and technology. The changes in society have illuminated the need for schools to be an avenue through which we give all students equal opportunity to thrive as citizens. While the role of school is constantly changing, keeping students at the center of teaching, learning, and schooling appears to remain constant.

Let's examine your beliefs on teaching through the lens of what academic and author Geneva Gay calls **culturally responsive teachers**. More specifically, Dr. Gay says that “Culturally responsive teachers have unequivocal faith in the human dignity and intellectual capabilities of their students. They view learning as having intellectual, academic, personal, social, ethical, and political dimensions, all of which are developed in concert with one another...” Take about 15–30 minutes to complete the table below, capturing your initial reactions in rapid-fire form and then revisiting each section with deeper consideration.

Why Do We Teach Specific Subjects?

Identify 1–2 reasons explaining how, in your opinion, each dimension connects to the subject listed. For example, you might say that the social dimension connects to history because it helps students understand other cultures and develop cultural tolerance.

	Science	Math	Reading	ELA	History	Music	(Insert Your Subject Here)
Academic							
Personal							
Social							
Ethical							
Political							

WHAT'S YOUR ACADEMIC IDENTITY?

What does it mean to learn? To be a student? How does one acquire knowledge? The answers to all these questions comprise the ideas and beliefs you hold about teaching and learning, which become evident in how you teach, what you teach, and the expectations you hold for students; all of which impact the way students perceive themselves as learners. The ideas and beliefs you hold about teaching and learning were likely formed when you were a young student. The way teachers and adults responded to your schoolwork, reactions you got from peers about the way you think, and grades you received are all examples of things that impacted your disposition toward school, and toward specific subjects. When we help students become more aware of their academic identities, we can better affirm their ways of thinking about academic content and their ways of demonstrating what they know and don't know.

Now, let's begin to unpack your academic identity. Set aside up to 20 min, per sitting, to respond to the following questions. Allow yourself time and space to process the answers that come up for you and revisit the questions later if needed. The purpose of this reflection activity is to capture your experiences, ideas, and beliefs about learning. Answer the questions that you feel most passionate about. You'll also practice exercising empathy for your students' experiences. Completing your academic biography is an empowering exercise. It can validate your experience and affirm your learning needs.

Your Educator Biography

As a K-12 Student--

1. How did you feel about school? Did you like or dislike it? Why did you feel that way?
2. What did it mean to be a successful student when you were elementary school? Middle school? High school?
3. What types of grades did you get in school? Why?
4. What do you remember teachers or other adults saying about your capabilities as a student?
5. Who were the successful students in your classes? How did you know they were successful?
6. Describe your most memorable good experiences in learning, inside or outside the classroom.
7. Describe your most memorable bad experiences in learning, inside or outside the classroom.
8. What factors are essential in helping students learn about and connect with academic content?
9. How have you seen students learn best?

After responding to the questions, imagine your younger self being asked “Who are you as a learner?” If you probed your younger self to explore their academic identity and define the type of learner they are, what I AM statements would your younger self make? Jot down the first ten I AM statements that come to mind for you.

My younger self, as a K-12 student, would say:

1. I am _____.
2. I am _____.
3. I am _____.
4. I am _____.
5. I am _____.
6. I am _____.
7. I am _____.
8. I am _____.
9. I am _____.
10. I am _____.

REFLECTION

In what ways has the academic identity you had when you were a student impacted who you are as a teacher?



Teacher commentary: This activity was very eye opening! From kindergarten through eighth grade my family moved every two years, so I was always new in school. My teachers said that I was so quiet, and they wished that I would talk more. School made me feel judged and monitored. I was not super fond of other kids and found them mean and unreasonable. The kids who were successful were boys who learned quickly. I didn't like school and thought that it was boring, frustratingly repetitive, and somewhat nonsensical. I hated math but loved reading; it was an escape for me. It wasn't until I got to high school that I actually, sort of, liked school. I went to a small, private high school that was very rooted in the arts. Because of the small size of the school and the classes we had a much better sense of community. Each year our history, literature, and art history classes focused on the same eras and cultures. We had discussions, did class projects, and wrote constantly. I spent two to four hr every night doing homework, but I never had to work that hard academically again in my life. Our teachers liked us, were experts in their subject matter, and were excited to teach us about it.



Teacher commentary: I grew up in foster care. People told me I was Jewish, but I lived in a Christian home. My personal and academic identities were always in conflict. I don't think any teachers knew what to do with me. I could read and memorize a book, but then would fail all the exams. I didn't want anyone to know I was smart, yet I always wanted to prove that I could be smart. My behavior in school was often antithetical to my performance. My academic identity is a walking contradiction. I don't think I've grown out of that. I've started at the very bottom of any role in my career. I seem to lack all pedigree for success. I belong and also know I never will. There are moments where I'm thankful for the teachers I had, but also incredibly frustrated with the system that allowed me to move forward without being properly challenged or tended to. It's helpful to know that the systems we're working to redesign and retrain are ones that allow academic identities to be shifted in powerful and meaningful ways.

Reflecting on your experience as a student can be an affirming exercise if you access good memories and experiences. It can also bring up feelings of inadequacy, or trigger memories that you tucked away because they were too painful to retain. Most importantly, your heightened awareness of the experiences that shaped you as a learner, coupled with insight on how that impacted your teaching helps you build empathy and greater understanding for your own students' learning experiences.

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UNDERSTANDING OTHER'S ACADEMIC IDENTITIES

A teacher's academic identity is akin to their **pedagogical beliefs**, which can influence how and what they teach, their beliefs about students, and what they deem appropriate and necessary in relating to and working with colleagues and administrators. Understanding different academic identities is how we begin to address equity.

“The perspective that teachers embrace has an impact on their view of their role and their effectiveness as educators (teacher identity) and subsequently governs the content that they teach and the instructional practices that they employ. Simply put, what teachers believe is important influences the decisions that they make about what content to teach, how to teach it, and in many cases, who should receive the content. In this way, teaching is no

different from many other areas in life. We make decisions on the basis of what we believe.” (Aguirre, et. al., 2013, p. 58)

Let’s explore the academic identities of four teachers based on things they believed when they were a young learner and what they believe now as educators. View the profiles from the mindset that there is no good or bad teacher profile; no right or wrong way of thinking. A person’s academic identity is not fixed, and it changes over time as new thoughts and ideas come into the person’s knowing.

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Teacher Profiles

ELISE PATTON	
As a student, in the past:	If I liked a subject, then I enjoyed learning about it. My teachers made math fun.
As a teacher, today:	I think all students should experience a mix of conceptual understanding and procedural skill in mathematics.

PAMIR GALAGATE	
As a student, in the past:	I had a teacher call me stupid because of a mistake I made in class. I always tried to get the right answers.
As a teacher, today:	Students need to know and stick to the facts. Conceptual understanding and knowing why or how to apply the concepts is a waste of time.

DARNELL BOYD	
As a student, in the past:	Doing things on my own would cause me to get stuck in my head. I learned best when I was part of a group.
As a teacher, today:	Acceleration should come within the current grade level and teachers should differentiate and scaffold in order to meet students at their level of readiness.

AISHA WILLIAMS	
As a student, in the past:	I was a good student and I liked learning new things. I could do work without having to ask an adult for help.
As a teacher, today:	Students should be allowed to skip a grade if it meets their learning and development needs.

REFLECTION

Select one of teacher profiles and answer the following questions. Repeat the process for a different teacher profile.

1. How might this person have behaved in the classroom as a student? What might you see them do or say as a young student in the classroom?

2. What connections can you make between their beliefs as a student and beliefs as a teacher?

3. What impact might their learning experience as a student have on their teaching style or instructional model?

4. Describe how you think each teacher's classroom looks like and sounds like on a typical day.

Let's look at how some fellow educators' feel about how their academic identities have changed during their teaching career, and about growth as professional educators overall.



- ▶ My academic identity as a teacher has shifted greatly from when I started teaching over 10 years ago. When I first started, I definitely had a foundational academic identity in basically everything. I was super focused on compliant students, a strong “I do, we do, you do” lesson structure, and mastery as shown by test scores. As I’ve moved to a firm academic identity, especially in elementary education, I now am focused on teaching the whole-learner especially their social-emotional learning, creating engaging lessons, empowering the student to lead their learning and really focus on the learning (rather than the teaching).
- ▶ When I first began teaching, I was more of a “learner manager” because that was the model I was most familiar with. Over time, with a lot of help from mentors, I shifted into becoming a “learner empowerer.”
- ▶ I see that I really tried to work the “secret rules of school” by being a well-behaved student with good relationships with teachers that focused on participation, group work, and homework for my grades that would make up for my poor mastery as shown in my test scores. As a teacher now, I know that students connect to relevant, engaging, and experiential content that gives process and problem-solving time. I realize that the factors that I now see as essential in helping students learn about and connect with academic content were not accessible to me in my classes. The academic environments that I was a part of were very lecture-based and focused on rote memorization.
- ▶ I become very sad when I see how “fixed” some teachers’ identities are because my academic identity certainly has not been fixed! I’ve been in education for 31 years and all of the roles I’ve held have immersed me into very different student demands and teaching practices. I’ve been a preschool teacher and elementary reading teacher in a southern state, a Title 1 and a middle school language arts teacher in a fairly affluent district near a major city, and then went on to become a district-level curriculum coordinator. Each experience demanded from me very

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different things, and I chose to grow from every experience, rather than let it get me down or stuck.

► It is interesting that many of my teacher training experiences geared me up to be the “factory model, compliance-oriented” teacher, even when they claimed to be doing the opposite. Or, they’d still have policies and procedures that promote factory, compliance-based thinking. If this is the norm, then teachers doing equity work will be going against the grain. If this is the case, it’s important to keep going because the end goal is to deliver an equitable education for students.

► Students assume that teachers enter the field because they were once good students (and, yes, many do for that reason). But not me! I once shared with my students how I struggled as a student, and was often distracted, unmotivated, and underperforming. And, as a result, I was the perfect candidate for a middle school teacher. I brought a level of empathy for the student experience that many of my colleagues did not.

THE TEACHER BECOMES THE STUDENT

I encourage you to continue reflecting on your current practice and assess how you might strengthen your academic identity to better influence student learning, which is one way we can put equity in the context of teaching and learning. Equitable instruction can create **student agency** and student motivation to facilitate success. Student agency is ownership of the learning. It’s what gives students voice in how they learn, which empowers them to influence their own path to mastery.

Here is an account from a high school math teacher that models the expansive opportunity for growth that can result from self-reflection. I sat down with Win Rodriguez, a high school math teacher, and asked her “What experience as an educator impacted how you think about teaching and learning math? Why?” Below is Win’s response:

My name is Win Rodriguez, and I’m a high school math teacher. I loved math classes as a high school student, but I didn’t feel affirmed as a student of math. Very few people in my classes (teachers and students) looked like me, and I struggled to solve problems following the methods taught in class. I didn’t feel smart. Although I wanted to pursue a career as a math educator, my lack of confidence led me to study marketing instead, then accounting. After a while, I became more confident in my abilities, and I obtained higher degrees in math along with a teaching certification. Twenty years of teaching high school math

assured me that I had sound pedagogical content knowledge. I embodied the stereotype that high school math teachers had a deeper understanding of math. I prided myself on my ability to help students make sense of their mathematical thinking.

One day, while working with a group of math coaches on the topic of fractions, a colleague asked me to help her with the division of fractions. I completed a problem using the standard algorithm: inverting the second fraction and multiplying both terms. My colleague affirmed that my answer and solution method were both correct, but she asked me why “invert and multiply” actually works. I was stumped and couldn’t provide an answer! That was a pivotal point in my career as an educator because my level of conceptual understanding had been challenged. Up until that point, I had never questioned why things worked.

Win didn’t have a very healthy academic identity as a student because she struggled to perform in class and didn’t feel smart. She was discouraged that none of her peers or teachers looked like her. Over time Win became self-empowered as she learned about marketing and accounting, and experienced success in those fields. Win was feeling better about her intellectual capabilities and went on to be a successful math teacher of 20 years.

Then, Win experienced a third major shift in her academic identity. The shift occurred when she was challenged to have a greater conceptual understanding of her content area. Win had acquired a deep understanding of her subject matter, and when asked to explore her conceptual understanding she discovered a gap in her knowledge. Without an in-depth understanding of why the algorithm worked, Win might have missed opportunities to help students make connections to bigger ideas and concepts. While she had strong subject matter expertise, Win’s lack of in-depth conceptual understanding could prevent her from supporting students’ possible misconceptions, or from affirming her students’ different ways of thinking about the math.

Although she had developed a healthy academic identity, an opportunity presented itself for Win to strengthen her pedagogical content knowledge; to “transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students”. (Veal, 1999) “**Pedagogical content knowledge** includes an understanding of what makes learning specific topics easy or difficult; the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them to the learning of those frequently taught topics and lessons.” (Aguirre, Zavala, 2013, p. 9) Win was presented with an opportunity to grow her pedagogical content knowledge and provide room for more student discourse, sharing of thinking, and productive struggle by gaining conceptual understanding of the math. Whether or not Win made a shift to grow in her practice or was resistant to change is unknown, but it all hinges on her

ability to be open and receptive to learning and growing. What path do you think Win chose? If she chose to deepen her conceptual understanding, how might that influence the way she teaches?

WHAT'S YOUR DOMINANT ACADEMIC IDENTITY?

Examining your academic identity from the time you were a young learner up until now will help you better understand your instructional style and who you are as a teacher. I posit that your academic identity can vary depending on the subject matter and grade level being taught. For example, a person might have a very firm academic identity in teaching 3rd- 5th grade math due to their extensive continuing education in math instruction (such as additional certifications, coursework, or professional development), but also have a foundational academic identity in teaching phonics and word recognition. A teacher can have a different type of academic identity based on the subject area, grade level being taught, or a variety of other factors.



A teacher with a firm academic identity exhibits actions, behaviors, and decisions in the classroom that reflect the belief that all students learn differently, and that everyone can learn because everyone can think. Their teaching is centered on student thinking and promotes an asset-based approach to guide instructional decisions. The students in this teacher’s classroom are active, valuable partners in the learning journey. On the contrary, a teacher with a foundational academic identity may run a compliance-oriented classroom where students are passive participants in the learning.

Here is a broad look at how we can classify the development of one’s academic identity:

TYPES OF ACADEMIC IDENTITIES		
FOUNDATIONAL	FORMING	FIRM
Positions the classroom experience for “instruction” rather than “teaching and learning”; acts as learning manager rather than learning empowerer	May or may not take a holistic approach to student engagement, focusing more on academics and less on factors such as physical, social, and emotional well-being	Uses a strengths and assets-first approach, referencing students’ strengths, interests, funds of knowledge, and needs to build learning paths with students

Now let’s apply this spectrum from foundational to firm to the math teacher’s classroom learning experience:

TYPES OF ACADEMIC IDENTITIES FOR MATH TEACHERS			
	FOUNDATIONAL	FORMING	FIRM
Content Knowledge	Not secure in math knowledge; knows shifts (conceptual, procedural, application) in superficial manner, devoid of practice for oneself	Secure in math knowledge; might be stronger in one area of the shifts than the other: conceptual, procedural, application	Strong math knowledge; balanced strength in all three key shifts: conceptual, procedural, and application
Classroom Discourse T = Teacher S = Student	Typical cadence might be: T-T-T-T-T-T-S-T	Typical cadence might be: T-S-T-S-T-T-T-T	Typical cadence might be: T-S-T-T-S-S-S-T
Questioning as Discourse	Asks mostly yes-no questions of students; students rarely ask questions	Believes teacher should ask most, if not all, questions in class	Develops questions during lesson planning and is comfortable asking and being asked cognitively demanding questions
Instructional Planning	Plans or actions are applied to students	Students may or may not be included in planning	Responsive planning is done with students

REFLECTION

How would the three types of academic identities apply to the content area(s) you teach?

It's important to remember that your academic identity is not fixed. Where you are on the spectrum from foundational to firm will vary depending on the subject matter, grade level, concept being taught, point in your career, time in your life, or a myriad of other factors. Moving from foundational to

firm requires a shift in perspective, for example believing that learners should be active, valuable partners in the learning journey, instead of passive participants in a factory model, compliance-oriented, or **deficit-based** perspective. As your mindsets and beliefs shifts, so will your instructional practices.



I think moving along the spectrum to a firm academic identity gives us the opportunity to let students teach us. It allows us to empathize with students, learn where our biases may be accentuated, and adjust because our identity is built on learning. When we design with the students' they can create a strong feedback loop that informs how we interact with them and encourages their engagement in learning.