
Why Collaborate With Students? 1

What do people say when the following questions are asked: Why are students not motivated or involved in their own education today? Why are teachers not collaborating more with students in teaching and decision making? Members of the community, such as business owners, might say, “Do you mean students would come out of school knowing how to be cooperative and collaborative employees?” School board members and parents might say, “Students in my school just are not mature enough to know what and how they should be learning.” School administrators might say, “Students need to focus upon achievement and meeting state standards for graduation that help keep our school a Blue Ribbon school and off of the D and F school improvement list.” Teachers might say, “We have to focus on helping students learn the core curriculum so they can pass high stakes tests. We just don’t have time to include them in decisions about what and how to learn.” Students might say, “Huh, are you serious? Teachers and administrators really will listen to what we think is important to learn or how we want to be taught? Sounds like a great idea for a *fantasy* rather than a *reality* TV show to me!”

As the responses above suggest, various constituents of the community have preconceived notions about why *not* to collaborate with students in educational endeavors. In this chapter, you will learn why teachers should collaborate with their students. Several questions are offered to guide you in discovering your own answers to why collaborating with students is desirable and valuable.

1. How does student collaboration fit with 21st-century goals of education?
2. How does student collaboration interface with or support notions of democratic schooling?
3. How does student collaboration enhance student self-determination?
4. How does student collaboration unleash student potential and enhance achievement of academic and social goals?
5. How does student collaboration influence teachers, Response to Intervention (RTI), and other school reform efforts?
6. How does student collaboration fit with the limited fiscal and human resources now facing public schools?

RATIONALE #1: STUDENT COLLABORATION FACILITATES 21ST-CENTURY GOALS OF EDUCATION

What are the priority goals and outcomes we desire for our children and youth for the present and the future? Over the past two decades, the authors have had the opportunity to ask this question of numerous teachers, administrators, students, university professors, parents, and concerned citizens across North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Listening to the answers to this question, we have noted that regardless of the divergent roles, locales, perspectives, or vested interests of the individuals questioned, their responses are very similar. In fact, typical responses, shown in Figure 1.1, tend to fall into one or more of the four categories borrowed from Native American culture known as the Circle of Courage (see Figure 1.2).

Traditional Native American education is based upon the culture's main purpose of existence; namely, the education and empowerment of its children. The educational approach is holistic, with the central goal being to foster the four dimensions of self-esteem—*belonging*, *mastery*, *independence*, and *generosity*. Collectively, these four dimensions are referred to as the Circle of Courage (Van Bockern, Brendtro, & Brokenleg, 2000). As already noted, these four dimensions correspond with the educational goals articulated today by citizens worldwide (see Figure 1.1). Thus, it would appear that we have a clear and compelling vision of the desired outcomes

Figure 1.1 Circle of Courage and Goals of Education

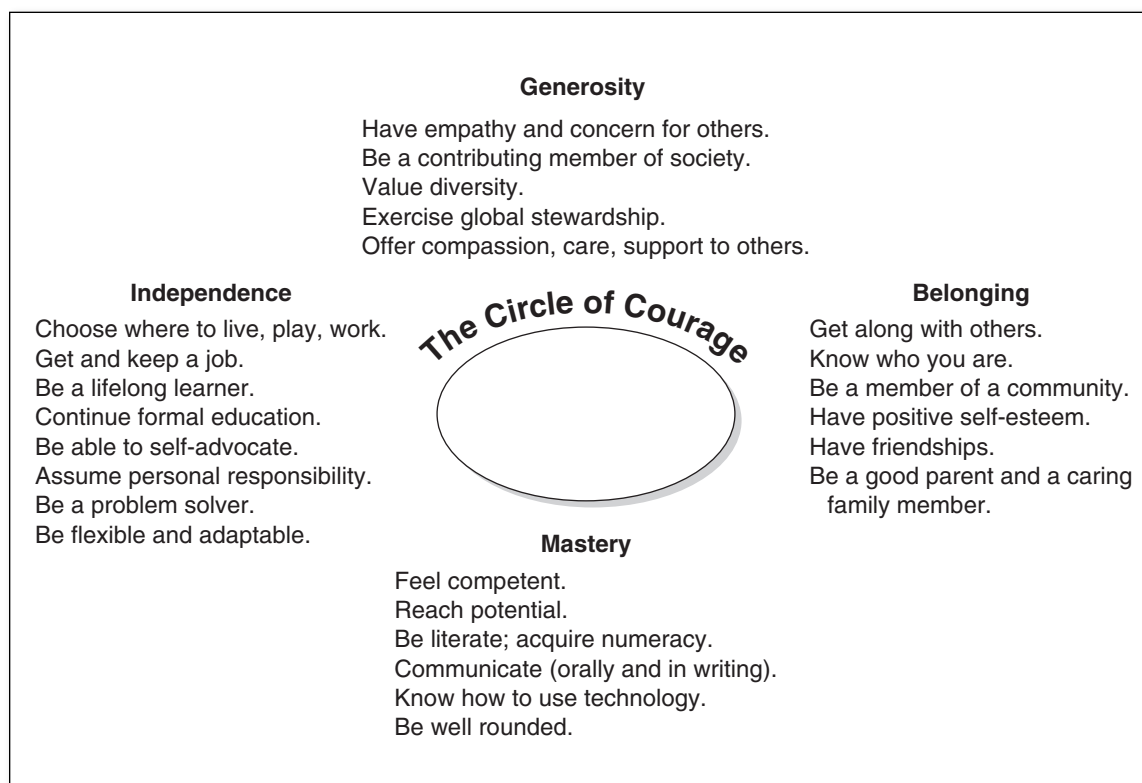
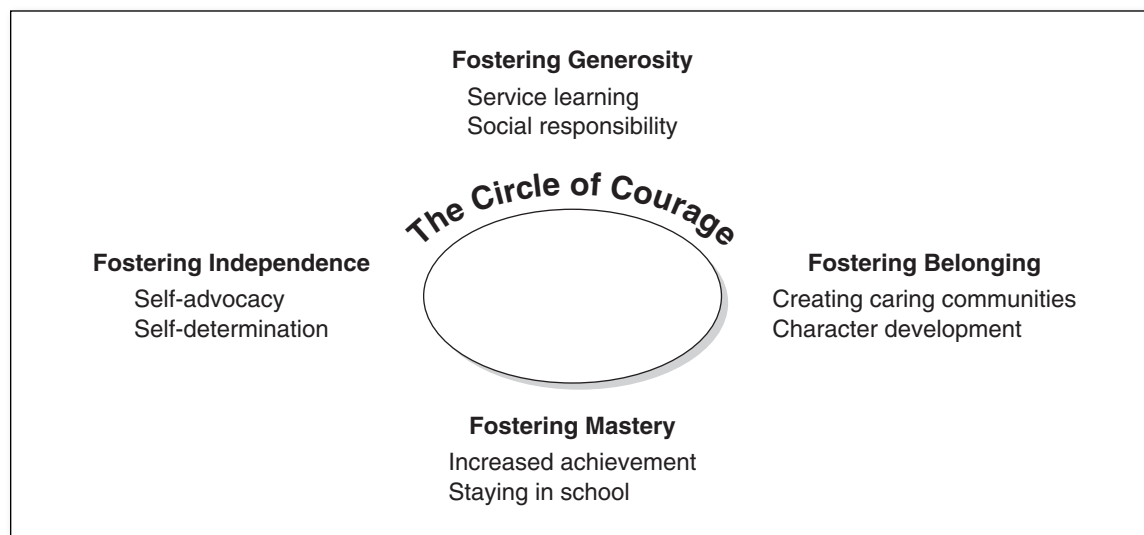


Figure 1.2 Circle of Courage and Collaboration Techniques

of education—courageous, well-rounded youth who have the dispositions and skills to create belonging, strive for mastery and independence, and be generous.

How might student collaboration support or help yield these Circle of Courage outcomes? Figure 1.2 shows various techniques that facilitate achievement of these outcomes.

For example, belonging is fostered when students collaborate to create caring communities through circles of friends (Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, & Rosenberg, 2002) and same-age or cross-age buddy activities, class meetings, and school-wide community-building activities (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000). Students' mastery is enhanced when they collaborate with their teachers to teach their peers in cooperative group and partner learning arrangements. In fact, students note that they actually learn more when they teach others than when they learn alone (Alexander, Gomezllanos, & Sanchez, 2008). Independence is fostered when students collaborate to support one another in self-advocacy, such as when they engage in person-centered futures planning (Falvey et al.). Student generosity is exercised when students collaborate on service learning projects that positively enhance their communities (Kesson, Koliba, & Paxton, 2002; Noddings, 1992). For example, Van Bockern and colleagues (2000) report on a study of middle and high school-aged students in over 500 high-risk communities showed a reduction in risk indicators for students who volunteered community service an hour or more a week.

RATIONALE #2: STUDENT COLLABORATION IS DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLING

Democracy is the hallmark of the United States. The United States purports to be a democratic society with democratic values and democratic schooling, or universal

access to K–12 educational opportunities. For many Americans—women, Native Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, and people with differing abilities and perceived disabilities—to gain access to the same educational opportunities afforded others has been a hard-won struggle. This struggle may not be over. Yet today, students with all of their diverse learning, language, and cultural differences do share common learning environments and experiences. They have access to and are held to the same high curriculum expectations. In other words, students are experiencing a measure of democratic schooling. Apple and Beane (1995), in their writings, have illuminated the principles and characteristics of democratic schooling. They described democratic classrooms as

comprised of students and teachers who see themselves as participants in communities of learning. By their very nature, these communities are diverse, and that diversity is prized, not viewed as a problem. . . . While the community prizes diversity, it also has a sense of shared purpose. . . . The common good is a central feature of democracy. (p. 10)

Teachers, deliberately or inadvertently, influence students' social and ethical development (Solomon et al., 2000). Teachers who deliberately collaborate with their students to share responsibility for instruction, decision making, and advocacy offer their students a democratic voice to make choices, solve problems among themselves, and deal with conflicts of ideas. Teachers who collaborate with their students to give them choice, power, and control prevent problematic behavior and promote higher levels of learning or mastery (Apple & Beane, 1995; Glasser, 1998), as well as the belonging, independence, and generosity dimensions of the Circle of Courage. So why not embrace student collaboration as a key feature of schooling in this democracy? Or, paraphrasing the words of the great democratic schooling author Maxine Greene (1985), the question might be, "In a democracy, is it not an obligation to empower the young to participate and play an articulate role in the public place?" Of course, for students that public place is school!

RATIONALE #3: STUDENT COLLABORATION INCREASES SELF-DETERMINATION

Related to the goals of education and the principles of democratic schooling is the concept of self-determination—an individual having the freedom, authority, responsibility, and support to be in charge of his or her life (Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithaug, & Stancliffe, 2003). As defined by Marks (2008), "Self-determination is simply the idea of being a 'causal agent' in one's life, being able to make things happen" (p. 56). As with democratic schooling, it involves participation in the community in order to influence community decisions. As with the goals of education represented by the Circle of Courage (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2), essential skills associated with self-determination include problem solving, decision making, goal setting, self-knowledge, and self-regulation (Mithaug, 2003).

Proponents of self-determination, including Marks (2008), argue that although some children may develop self-determination without formal instruction, it involves a critical set of skills all students should acquire as part of their schooling experiences. Thus, teachers are compelled to structure opportunities for students to collaborate in instruction, decision making, and self-advocacy. How else do students learn about who they are (i.e., self-knowledge), what they like and don't like, and what the consequences are of the choices they make (i.e., self-regulation)? How else do children take the first steps on the lifelong journey of developing self-determination skills tied to each of our differing and ever-changing life priorities, such as securing a desired education, raising a family, pursuing career goals, or achieving financial security for retirement?

RATIONALE #4: STUDENT COLLABORATION INCREASES ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE

The fourth rationale for educators to collaborate with students spotlights achievement. What if each child were expected to become an expert in something? This book is about students becoming experts in strategies that help them to achieve academically and socially. As students become experts in the strategies offered in each chapter (i.e., cooperative group learning, peer tutoring and partner learning, the mediation of conflict and controversies, co-teaching, self-discipline and self-determination, and the planning of their own futures), their achievement expands beyond mere mastery of academics to mastery of self-conduct. Further, students who collaborate with their teachers to transcend self-concern by caring and taking responsibility for what happens to their classmates in school and in their neighborhoods (e.g., being a dependable peer tutor or a responsible peer advocate) acquire dispositions of social responsibility as well and richer and broader reasons for staying in rather than dropping out of school (Solomon et al., 2000). Finally, more than two decades ago, Benjamin (1989), a well-known educational futurist of the time, predicted collaboration would be the essential skill for 21st century citizenship. We agree with Benjamin's prediction of the importance of collaboration. We argue that, by collaborating with students, educators can model and support students to achieve competence and confidence in essential collaborative skills for living responsibly in 21st-century society. Stated otherwise, achievement through student collaboration embraces the whole of the Circle of Courage and yields academic and social achievement across the breadth of the goals of education—mastery, independence, belonging, and generosity.

RATIONALE #5: STUDENT COLLABORATION FACILITATES OTHER SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS

A constant concern of administrators and school boards is the quality of teachers who are teaching. Professional development and teacher preparation

programs are implemented with the purpose of improving the quality of instruction. When teachers collaborate with their students, they are also showing their competencies in meeting state standards for teacher certification. All general and special educators can celebrate the fact that, when they collaborate with their students, they are demonstrating at least three sets of standards¹—Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) for beginning general and special educators, Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) for beginning special educators, and National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) for veteran teachers at all levels), as shown in Table 1.1.

When students and teachers collaborate with each other, teachers often experience a new appreciation for what their students actually can do. This shifts the teachers’ attention from the typical focus on deficits and deficiencies toward a strengths-based perspective, which opens up new roles and responsibilities. For example, when students are trained to work as peer tutors, they can often be tapped to provide extra tutorials to their classmates, who may benefit from that support. In fact, classwide peer tutoring has been found to be an effective method to increase reading and math achievement. Thus, teachers and administrators

Table 1.1 Analysis of Professional Standards Demonstrated When Teachers Collaborate With Their Students

Classroom Teachers INTASC (2006)	Special Educators CEC (2003)	Both (Veteran) Teachers NBPTS (2006)
Standard 3 requires teachers to understand <i>how learners differ</i> .	Knowledge and skills in understanding characteristics of learners with <i>different cognitive, physical, cultural, social, and emotional needs</i> .	Teachers adjust their practice according to <i>individual differences in their students</i> .
Standard 4 requires teachers to use a variety of instructional strategies.	Competencies related to <i>knowledge and skills for instructional content and practice</i> .	Teachers show multiple methods to engage student learning and to enable students to reach goals.
Standard 10 asks teachers to <i>collaborate and communicate</i> with parents, families, and colleagues to support student learning.	Competencies related to <i>communication and collaborative partnerships</i> .	Teachers <i>collaboratively work with others</i> and coordinate services.

¹ Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). (2003). *What every special educator must know: Ethics, standards, and guidelines for special educators* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: Author.

Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC). (2006). *Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium standards*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State Schools Officers. Retrieved November 16, 2009, from http://www.ccsso.org/projects/Interstate_New_Teacher_Assessment_and_Support_Consortium/Projects/Standards_Development

National Board Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). (2006). *Performance-based teaching assessments*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Services.

often turn to peers when they implement Response to Intervention (RTI) approaches in their schools, sometimes at every tier of the RTI pyramid (general education classroom, extra personnel support, and specialized personnel support). Working with students as collaborators is a capacity-building process that strengthens the general education classroom instruction for all students.

Several other school reform efforts can be facilitated when students and teachers collaborate. High-stakes testing and the movement to establish communities of practice are two examples. There are even some long-term benefits to those who learn to be generous and generative—they tend to live a longer and happier life. In fact, recent research shows that generosity and gratitude are both big contributors to happiness, according to Dr. Todd B. Kashdan (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009; Froh, Kashdan, & Yurkewicz, 2009), director of the Laboratory for the Study of Social Anxiety, Character Strengths, and Related Phenomena at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

RATIONALE #6: STUDENT COLLABORATION IS AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE IN TIMES OF LIMITED FISCAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES

Even in better economic times or at schools with vast economic and human resources, it is unlikely that school personnel will tell you that they have all the resources that they need to educate our students effectively and facilitate the attainment of the desired outcomes of education (i.e., belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity).

Unfortunately, in the current economic situation, many schools are losing precious resources, and school personnel, families, and students are frustrated at the quality of education being provided. But there is one resource that they will never take away from educators: that is the *students* themselves. Regrettably, this precious resource is wasted every single day in many of our nation's schools and classrooms.

What is it that students say at the end of the day when parents ask, “What did you do in school today?” You likely answered, “Nothing!” You might think this answer represents students not wanting to share their day with parents and others. However, our interviews with students suggest that “nothing” is an accurate summation of many students' daily experience of being passive learners in teacher-directed classrooms.

In contrast, in schools where educators collaborate with students in instruction, advocacy, and decision making, students' answers to the “What did you do in school today?” question are quite different. Rather than “nothing,” they respond with descriptions of exciting, engaging, and self-determined experiences. At any time, but particularly during difficult economic times when human and fiscal resources are limited, we are compelled to collaborate meaningfully with our students and tap into the untapped and most valuable educational resource of all: the students themselves.

CONCLUSION: SO WHY *NOT* COLLABORATE WITH STUDENTS?

We hope that after reading the rationales for student collaboration provided in this chapter, you agree with us that rather than asking, “Why collaborate with students?” the question that educators, parents, and students should be asking is “Why *not* collaborate with students?” What is there to lose? What are the potential gains? What rationales can you envision? If there is a big enough reason to do something, you will be more motivated to create the procedures necessary for doing it. We invite you to read on and learn how to teach and support students to join educators and other adults as teachers, decision makers, and advocates.