

# Personalized Learning

Children are more likely to see value in formal learning, put energy into it, and increase their skills and knowledge when school experiences are personalized enough to meet their fundamental needs: relationship; a safe, inclusive community; a sense of competence and autonomy; and some fun now and then. How can we address these needs as we work to build skills with individual children and with small groups?

**RELATIONSHIP:** Children do better when their teachers know them well personally, developmentally, and culturally, and we demonstrate this knowledge. They do better when we show that we care about them and are available for them academically, emotionally, and socially. They know we care and can sense our connection to them through verbal and nonverbal cues we give them: we are attuned to each other. They do better when we hold a growth mindset—we believe in their capacity to grow and succeed. “This growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things that you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience.”<sup>1</sup>

**COMMUNITY:** Children do better when we provide an orderly and safe community so the energy and focus of each child is not diminished by distraction, irritation, or loss of control. They do better when we establish and maintain structures and routines that are inclusive and equitable, so each child’s commitment to learning is not diminished by loneliness, frustration, or anxiety.

**COMPETENCE:** Children do better when we share with them accurate information about the skills and knowledge they have, and we plan for future growth together. We decide together

whether and when a student is ready for the introduction of new skills and knowledge, so s/he can grow from success to success, and we confirm their growing competence by sharing accurate assessments of continuing progress. We understand the crucial importance of the child's being aware of his or her progress in order to sustain a growth mindset, a belief that effort will bring proficiency.

**AUTONOMY:** Children do better when we challenge them to take a leading role in their own development: setting goals, making choices about how to achieve those goals, and then assessing growth. They do better when we maintain a relationship of mutual respect and reciprocity in our journey together of teaching and learning.

**PLAY:** Children do better when we notice and enjoy light moments, perhaps moments of playfulness, that add pleasure and energy to the work of education. They do better when we take time for a quick game or move a bit or sing a song together to lighten the mood.

### Creating "real teaching"

I was talking with a teacher about how the school day had gone. She said it had been great, one of the best days she'd had. "Today," she said, "I did *real* teaching." I asked what she meant by "real" teaching, and she said, "I worked a lot with individual children, helping each one wherever they were—a stuck place, excited about a new project, heading the wrong way on an assignment, or frustrated over a drawing. I could step in wherever a child was at the moment and help him or her move forward. And they did—all of them!"

She was generating personalized learning. She was a partner with each student as s/he moved along the learning route from first exposure to skill or content, to attempting the skill or reaching for the understanding but needing help, to the end point, when the child is able to handle the skill or apply the knowledge independently. Developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky called the "needing help" stage the zone of proximal development, or the ZPD. He described it as the area of learning that is close to emergence in a child and will emerge in

collaboration with the teacher or another child.<sup>2</sup> In my friend's classroom, the students experienced success and growth. Every student made progress, and everyone—children and teacher alike—knew it.

Of course students are most likely to move from success to success when the learning is orchestrated just right for each one. And without steady growth, when academic demands seem to exceed their reach, of course they get discouraged and begin to lose belief in their capacity to learn—sometimes even their teachers begin to lose faith. Personalized learning through *Elementary Designs* practices offers the opportunities students need every day to engage in learning within their reach. In this chapter, we focus on personalized learning with individuals and small groups that keeps all learners—the ones we're working with at a particular moment, as well as the rest of the class—engaged and on a growth trajectory. Chapter Five provides further support for fostering the student self-management and independence necessary for a personalized learning environment.