Adolescent Development Convening: Extended Learning Support
Final Report Narrative

Name of Person Submitting Report: Emi Iwatani (Digital Promise), Cortney Simmons (Yale University) & Adrian Bustillos (Aldine Independent School District)

Title of Project Supported: Teacher Learner Connect project (TLC project)

Dates (if applicable): April 2022 - March 2023 (with the collaborative conversations happening in November 2022)

Name of Collaborators:
Research team: Tiffany Leones (Digital Promise) & Fiona Hinds (Mahogany Assessment Partners)

TLC conversation participants - youth: Ashley (Grade 12, Aldine ISD), Denasha (Elm City College Prep MS), Faraji (Elm City College Prep MS), Julius (Grade 10, Aldine ISD), Priscila (Grade 12, Aldine ISD) & Ruby (Grade 12, Aldine ISD)

TLC conversation participants - adults: Ms. Desiree Bright (Special Education Inclusion Teacher, Blanson CTE High School, Aldine ISD), Ms. Kirby Pollard (Department Chair for Special Education, Blanson CTE High School, Aldine ISD), Ms. Silvia Scheirman (Opportunity Culture Coordinator, Office of Transformation, Aldine ISD) & Mr. Trevor Thomas (ELA Teacher, 7th Grade Chair, Resident Advisor, and Head of Adult/Student SEL, Achievement First Elm City College Prep Middle School)

Background and Context: *What practice did you want to change/improve and what was your intended outcome/impact? What area of research did your collaboration focus on: Learning, Contribution & Belonging, or Exploration & Risk-taking?*

Our collaboration focused on exploration & (healthy) risk-taking in the classroom, and aimed to gain initial insights to improve three types of practices:

(1) **Negative impacts of testing on adolescent exploration** and (healthy) risk-taking in the classroom and beyond. Specifically, answering questions such as: (i) How might a test or assessment in the teacher's classroom might be redesigned so that everyone in the class will feel successful in it; (ii) What are the barriers and promotive factors of

adolescents taking healthy risks in the classroom (e.g., giving a shot at learning a subject they dislike or lack confidence in)?

(2) **Lack of authentic student perspectives and student-teacher conversations** regarding this important topic, and more generally. Whether this type of informal conversations can be a model of strengthening relationships and mutual respect between teachers, students and other adults in our communities.

(3) **Lack of research-practice partnerships and involvement of student voice** in developing solutions about how to support healthy adolescent development.

Our exploratory project was learning-focused (vs focused on direct intervention or change), so the intended outcomes for each were ***initial insights*** that could lead to concrete proposals for research and/or practice.

Project Description:

The project team organized three teams of four (a teacher, 2 high school students, and a non-educator-facilitator) to have dinner or lunch together and discuss ideas for how a test or assessment in the teacher's classroom might be redesigned so that everyone in the class will feel successful in it. The grant funding was used to pay for the meals, and for the project team's efforts to organize these and surface key findings.

Dr. Bustillos and Dr. Simmons arranged the conversations. After the conversation, each participant scheduled a 30 minute conversation with one of the project team members to share their perspectives and insights based on the conversation. Drs. Iwatani and Simmons, with support from Ms. Leones and Dr. Hinds, conducted the interview data collection, analysis and reporting, with thought-partnership from Dr. Bustillos & Ms. Scheirman.

Was Collaboration a Success: *Why or why not?*

Yes - we've come upon some answers to our key research questions, and the adults and teens involved in the conversation spoke positively about their experience.

RQ1. How might a test or assessment in the teacher's classroom be redesigned so that everyone in the class will feel successful in it?

- Try to **make the content, topic, and/or purpose of the assessment feel relevant and important** to students and their future.
    - Consider whether/how the topics and outcomes of any assessment are in fact important to the student
    - Consider ways to improve how to communicate the purpose of the assessment, in ways that students would understand its importance
    - Lowering stakes of the assessment (e.g., ok not to get everything right in the beginning when you're still learning) can help exploration
    - Consider spending more time on review/learning, and less time on testing, especially if the students are not succeeding in the tests, and if the tests do not seem to be contributing to learning.
    - Consider providing choice on how students can demonstrate their knowledge
- **Address the emotional aspects of testing**

- ○ Try to address the anxiety involved, including attending to how scores are received by and communicated to students and families. Impacts at home need to be considered because parental pressures may add extra layers of stress that adults may not recognize.
  - ○ Support students' social emotional learning so that they will take academic risks.
  - ○ Peer support can help students feel less alone in struggle, and provide an opportunity to be asset-based (e.g., I can demonstrate one piece and another student can address another piece).
  - ○ Relationships and support from teachers can help improve student motivation and willingness to engage in challenges.
  - ○ If test anxiety is caused by the lack of understanding of the expected skills and knowledge, it is important to attend to those through more preparation (see section below).
- **Help students better prepare for the tests**
  - ○ Provide more structures & supports to review and prepare for tests, including making it clear to students the level or type of understanding that is expected of them.
    - ■ Compelling example of expectation mis-match: The teacher wanted their students to know transferable skills related to ELA, while their students thought they were expected to memorize the details of specific texts.
  - ○ Provide more depth in instruction, and more time and opportunities for learning and practice.
- **Examine external factors (i.e., factors outside of the classroom) that impact students' experiences and beliefs about testing**
  - ○ District-level participants may consider examining the assessments they have in place - scope and sequence - with regards to implications and timing.
  - ○ What are other external influences, opinions, usage of tests that impact what teachers and students believe about it?   (E.g., how do parents' perspectives)

RQ2. What are the barriers and promotive factors of adolescents taking healthy risks in the classroom (e.g., giving a shot at learning a subject they dislike or lack confidence in)
- **Promoters of exploration**
  - ○ Interactive, student-driven assignments
  - ○ Assignments that are relevant to students (e.g., student was excited to learn about Chicago race riots - I want to continue to understand how these dynamics persist and influences people in her family)
  - ○ Students feel heard and seen, especially when change is made based on their experience
  - ○ Students envisioning a desirable end goal / future, and perceive that assignment/task is relevant towards that
- **Barriers to exploration**
  - ○ Concerns around performance

- Behavioral distractions in the classroom (can't focus on the test), which may limit what the teachers feel they can do within the classroom (e.g., can't act out some of the readings that they do)
- Disconnect regarding the purpose of learning "Why am I doing this, how is it going to benefit me?" This isn't important to me because I don't understand what I will get out of it"
- Perceived restrictions from society: Time & "things that need to be covered by X date" (industrialized approach to education)

<u>Looming Questions Around Adolescent Development</u>: *What practice has changed as a result of this collaboration? What questions do you still have about adolescent development?*

Practices that have changed
- While our project was focused on learning rather than change, one teacher was glad to be able to learn what knowledge/skills students do and do not hold on to, and has already shifted their teaching practice to better support their students in light of this new understanding. The teacher made changes to testing and preparation based on the conversations (e.g., intentionally naming transferable skill/standard, to help students focus on that rather than on the text), which has resulted in improvements on tests.
- In training teacher-coaches, as a result of participating in this study, one education leader is starting to raise new questions about how the district/schools are assessing and including student voice. However, the teacher-coaches currently perceive that concrete change is difficult to enact because there is not a lot of room in the curricular pacing.

Questions we still have about adolescent development
- What are long-term effects of brief conversations on students' sense of <u>belonging</u> and <u>agency,</u> particularly if changes are made in current classrooms? Might <u>peer coach studies</u> be relevant? (Simmons)
- What barriers and promotive factors would students identify, if we used a more comprehensive approach? Could those surface areas that could be addressed through brief interventions? (Simmons)
- How can we, in partnership with students, build an assessment and broader classroom educational experience for adolescents that respect the following tenets by Dr. Henry Jenkins and Dr. Sangita Shresthova (rationale for the importance of civic imagination, summarized by Sam Ford) (Iwatani)
  - People (students) can't work toward a future if they can't see it first.
  - People (students) don't want to design a future that they aren't in.
  - People (students) need to feel a sense of agency or permission to help shape that future.
- How can we reevaluate the way we are assessing currently, especially the one that educators have control over (vs standardized assessments that are outside of control)? How can we utilize student voice etc more - and reevaluate how we're assessing, and

how that is affecting our students and practice? I think there will be educators & district leaders who would be very interested in that. (Scheirman/Bustillos)

<u>Lessons Learned or Reflections</u>: Lessons learned? Reflections?
- Providing busy teachers with substantial time where they step out of their day, provide them with lunch, and commune with their students was extremely valuable. It allowed for the teachers and students to feel that "I matter, my voice matters. I'm doing something that matters and this is really meaningful." **It's important for us at the district to know how teachers and students are feeling** about the format of assessments and content of what they are being assessed. (Scheirman & Bustillos)
- **Importance of student voice**
  - This reaffirmed the view that we have to put students and youth at center. (Simmons)
  - Any time there's an opportunity to give students a voice, that is powerful. Their experiences are not considered in so much of the decision making around assessment. Any time, when we get a chance to listen to students that's powerful in and of itself. (Hinds)
  - +100 on the power of student voice and potential for impact (Leones)
- I realized that **seemingly small interventions like this can be very impactfu**l - one of the teachers interviewed made substantial changes to their teaching practice, based on what their students shared. (Simmons)
- This project's emphasis on student voice and exploration made me think about *why* assessments and exploration seem opposed to one another -- especially for those who do poorly in assessments. And this **helped me see that Jenkins and Shresthova's rationale for civic imagination (see above) may exactly explain** why large scale assessments have NOT delivered on the promise of education equity. (Iwatani)
- This project was very worth it - very valuable because teachers don't have that time to step out -- and so having a substantial time where they can commune with their students … and providing protected time and lunch -- that's a really big deal -- teachers are chained to their buildings and cannot go out. **It made both teachers and students feel "I matter, my voice matters, I'm doing something that matters and this is really meaningful."** It's important for us at the district to know how teachers and students are feeling about the format and content of assessments, and what thoughts if any goes into it. The idea of student choice and voice - all are very important. (Scheirman/Bustillos)

<u>Data</u>: *Was there any data that relates to this collaboration? If so, please share.*
We have a set of notes from the participant interviews. The results are summarized in the slides which presented on March 8.

<u>Next Steps/Commitment to Action:</u> *Did your experience with the ELS grant generate a next step/commitment to action?*

We are newly interested in a collaboration between Aldine district leaders, educators, students, and researchers, to pursue the following types of questions:

- How can we reevaluate the way we are currently assessing students?
- How can we transform the way we assess students?
- What is the impact of our assessment practices on students and teachers?
- Is there a measure or survey, collaboratively created with the school community, that could be used to monitor and promote exploration, healthy risk-taking and other positive developmental indicators for adolescents?