Developing Learner Profiles

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To effectively meet the learning needs of students, classroom teachers must begin with an understanding of the needs of the learners, both collectively as a classroom unit and as individual students.

A classroom is a community of learners, each with unique learning preferences, interests, strengths, needs and potential. Planning instruction that acknowledges and honours these differences means providing each student with opportunities to learn in different ways so that each can reach his or her maximium potential. It means thoughtfully selecting learning and teaching strategies, materials and supports that will maximize student achievement. Learner profiles and class profiles offer a starting point for this planning.

What is a learner profile?

A learner profile describes the ways in which a student learns best. A comprehensive learner profile includes information on student interests, learning preferences and styles, and differences related to gender, culture and personality. It also might include information on student learning strengths, needs and types of supports that have been successful in the past. A learner profile needs to be dynamic, as individual learners are constantly growing and changing.

Learning preferences and styles
Learning preferences typically refer to the general environment in which a student learns best. This may include preferences for:
- a quiet versus noisy room
- a busy room with lots to look at and interact with versus a bare room with few distractions
- a movement friendly room versus one in which sitting still is valued
- a flexible schedule versus a fixed schedule
- a warm versus a cool room to work in.

Learning styles typically refer to how a student tends to use senses to learn. Rita and Ken Dunn (1987) identify three types of sensory learning styles.

- **Auditory learners**—like to hear directions aloud, discuss what they are learning, use word games, puzzles, riddles and songs, work with partners, do choral reading, teach others for clarification.

- **Visual learners**—like to draw pictures to represent ideas, use games and puzzles, use visual clues to remember, go on field trips for a "being there" experience, use visualization to see pictures in their minds, use graphics and flowcharts, use videos for review, look at books, watch others to see what to do.

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- **Kinesthetic learners**—like to have opportunities to move around, trace and outline, act out concepts and stories, make models or do experiments, write or draw while listening, walk while talking, imagine themselves in the situation, examine and manipulate material.

Closely related to learning styles are thinking styles. These typically describe how a student organizes information and solves problems. Based on the work of Gregorc (1982), Judith Dodge presents four general thinking styles.[1]

- **Concrete random thinkers**—are creative, make intuitive leaps, enjoy unstructured problem solving, like choices, are self-motivated, see the big picture and not the details.

- **Concrete sequential thinkers**—like order, respond to step-by-step instruction, enjoy learning with concrete materials, attend to details, work within a time line, appreciate structure.

- **Abstract random thinkers**—are guided by emotion and interest, seek environments that are active, busy and unstructured, like to discuss ideas and interact with others.

- **Abstract sequential thinkers**—enjoy theory and abstract thought, focus on knowledge and facts, thrive on independent investigation and research, usually prefer to work alone to prove things for themselves.

Learning preferences and learning styles develop and change over time in response to ongoing experiences. One style or preference is not better than another. What does matter is the fit between the individual learner and the learning task and/or material. The way in which we respond to different preferences and styles can vary across tasks and situations. For example, one learner may prefer to study on his or her own at home, but prefer to work with a small study group in the classroom.

Individuals also differ in the strengths of their preferences and styles. Some learners also can shift easily between different kinds of learning, while others cannot be as flexible.

The goal of a learner profile is to find out as much as possible about how an individual learns. The goal is *not* to label students as certain kinds of learners but rather to help them develop multiple pathways for learning. When working on unfamiliar and/or challenging tasks, students will be more confident and motivated if they are able to work in their areas of strength.

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1. Adapted from Judith Dodge, *Differentiation in Action* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 2005), p. 11.

Students need frequent opportunities to work in their preferred sensory and thinking styles. At the same time, it also is critical to ensure that students have learning opportunities that stretch them beyond their preferences and allow them to develop a wider repertoire of learning skills. This will help them become more confident learners who can work through challenges.

Types of intelligence

Another framework for reflecting on how individuals learn is examining different types of intelligence. An intelligence can be defined as a brain-based predisposition to excel in a particular area. Howard Gardner (1994) identified eight intelligences that individuals possess in varying combinations. Thomas Armstrong (1994) came up with student-friendly terms for each intelligence:
- verbal-linguistic intelligence (or word smarts)
- logical-mathematical intelligence (or number smarts)
- interpersonal intelligence (or people smarts)
- intrapersonal intelligence (or self smarts)
- spatial intelligence (or picture smarts)
- musical-rhythmic intelligence (or music smarts)
- bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (or body smarts)
- naturalistic intelligence (or nature smarts).

Similarly, Robert Sternberg (1985) identified the following three intelligences that he suggests exist in varying combinations and strengths in each individual.

- **Analytic intelligence** (or schoolhouse intelligence) involves the linear type of learning found most often in schools.

- **Practical intelligence** (or contextual intelligence) involves seeing how and why things work as people actually use them.

- **Creative intelligence** (or problem-solving intelligence) involves making new connections and seeking innovation.

Sternberg argues that recognizing where each student's strengths lie and teaching to those strengths, particularly when introducing a new concept, can maximize student learning. At the same time, your goal should be to develop all intelligences as fully as possible in every student, so that he or she can succeed in a variety of contexts.

Influences based on gender, culture and personality

Learning patterns can be influenced by student gender and culture, as well as unique personality. Some of these influences include:
- being expressive *or* reserved in class interactions
- preferring competition *or* collaboration
- preferring to work individually *or* in a group
- approaching learning with a creative *or* practical way of thinking
- preferring part-to-whole *or* whole-to-part learning
- preferring contextual and personal learning *or* learning that is discrete and impersonal

- viewing time as fixed and rigid *or* fluid and flexible
- being more impulsive *or* more reflective in one's thinking and actions
- valuing creativity *or* conformity.

Interests

Students are most motivated and engaged when they are learning about something they are interested in. Having areas of interest identified as part of learner profiles helps you to regularly consider these interests in your instructional planning to vary projects, themes and examples used in your instruction.

Gathering information for learner profiles

Students often know which ways of learning are most effective for them and what things get in the way of their success. Listening to what students have to say about their own learning can be a great starting point for creating learner profiles. Inventories and other assessment tools also may provide you with valuable information.

Inventories

Consider the following types of inventories. Samples of these inventories are included at the end of this chapter. Additional strategies and tools for getting to know your student are available in the Alberta Education resource, *Building on Success: Helping Students make Transitions from Year to Year* (2006), available at http://education.alberta.ca/media/352661/build.pdf.

Learner preference inventories provide students with ongoing opportunities to reflect on and talk about their learning preferences. These opportunities help students to develop the self-knowledge, vocabulary and confidence to tell you what works best for them. See Tool 6: What Works for Me Inventory.

Each new unit of study provides a useful opportunity to explore individual learning preferences. For example, at the beginning of a unit on classroom chemistry, you may ask students to order the following choices based on their favourite way to learn.

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> The best ways for me to learn about classroom chemistry would be to (number from 1 to 6):
> ____ read a book about chemistry
> ____ visit a chemist working in a lab
> ____ do a chemistry inquiry at school
> ____ research a famous chemist
> ____ create a display about chemistry to share with the class
> ____ look for examples of chemistry in my home.

Reading inventories are typically given at the beginning of the year. They provide an opportunity for students to share information about the kinds of reading they enjoy, as well as their understanding of themselves as readers. Used again at the end of the year, a reading inventory can reveal how student perceptions have changed and can generate new information to share with the next year's teachers. See *Tool 3: A Reading Interview*, *Tool 4: Reading Attitudes Interview*, *Tool 5: Reading Stategies Survey*.

Social inventories provide valuable information for assessing social competence. Understanding how a student gets along with others and functions in group situations can be helpful for both you and the student. See Tool 7: Getting Along with Others Inventory.

Interest inventories, including general interest and "All About Me" inventories, should be administered at the beginning of the year. They offer a variety of insights into student likes and dislikes, interests, affinities and lives. You can use these insights to plan learning activities that engage and motivate students. See *Tool 1: 20 Questions About Me* and *Tool 2: Interest Inventory*.

Assessment information

Assessment and diagnostic information is an important part of a learner profile. You can gather this information from a variety of sources, including:
- cumulative records
- report cards
- individualized program plans (IPP)
- standardized assessments
- parents
- previous teachers and other school staff involved with the student.

Assessment information helps you to identify each student's developmental level and particular challenges, so that you can plan accordingly.

Helping students identify and understand how they learn best and how they can use this information can help students learn-to-learn throughout their lives.

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Recording learner profiles

Individual learner profile information can be recorded in a variety of formats. Many teachers find it most practical to use individual file cards that can be kept close at hand for reference. One way to organize the information on the cards is as follows.

Interests books sports–hockey, soccer music	Thinking style concrete random	Learner and sensory preferences kinesthetic hands-on movement
	Caleb	
Intelligences practical creative	Other individualized reading goals	Other preferences group work

What is a class profile?

The information gathered about each student can be compiled to create an overall picture of the class as a community of learners. A class profile identifies the strengths and challenges of all students as well as the stage each student is at in his or her learning. It is a resource for planning that conveys a great deal of critical information at a glance. It is a living document that can be added to and revised throughout the year based on your observations or other information that you receive.

The class profile is developed at the beginning of the school year or semester. It is a tool for recording and summarizing information gathered through diagnostic assessment that happens prior to instruction and through formative assessment that happens during instruction. For additional information on assessment, see *Chapter 4: Differentiated Assessment*. Class profiles can be organized in a few different ways. The class profile helps you:

- collect, sort, categorize and summarize classroom data
- identify patterns of similarities and differences among students
- plan assessment and differentiated instruction on a daily basis
- form flexible groupings
- monitor student progress by noting results of ongoing assessments
- share information among educators and parents.

Overall academic profile

An overall academic profile for a class can be compiled in a chart for quick reference. This type of profile indicates, at a glance, any current assessment information for each student, additional supports a student requires or is receiving, and other relevant information as determined by you or the school. An overall academic profile might look like this.

Class/Teacher: Mrs. Cromwell		Grade: 2	Year: 2008–2009
Student name	Joanne	Marc	Sunita
Reading level 1 – below 2 – grade 3 – above	1	2	3
Math level 1 – below 2 – grade 3 – above	2	2	2
IPP Y/N	Y	N	N
In-school support	buddy reading	none	none
Out-of-school support	none	none	Big Sister mentor
Technology	dedicated word processor	none	none
Learning preferences	enjoys partner work; responds well to feedback	enjoys partner work; needs to move around	prefers quiet
Social/ emotional	persistent; cheerful; cooperative	cooperative; hardworking; confident	persistent; independent
Interests	horses; soccer; swimming	soccer; hockey; nature programs	piano; drawing; singing

Subject or unit specific class profile

Using information from various inventories, assessments and observations, you can create class profiles specific to a subject (e.g., language arts, mathematics or science) or a unit of study (e.g., poetry, sky science or a novel study).

A class profile for a language arts class might start like this.

Grade: 9	Teacher: Mr. Benson	Subject: Language Arts
Strengths	**Challenges**	**Preferences**
Amanda – extensive repertoire of reading strategies **Mary** – understands relationships between ideas **Marcus** – understands the use of literary devices **Sisi** – extensive vocabulary **James** – communicates ideas clearly **Beth** – makes connections between self, text and the world around her **Marcel** – loves poetry **Kara** – enjoys challenge **Lorne** – loves talking about what he reads	**Suki** – beginning to learn English **Ben** – difficulty expressing understanding **Fiona** – difficulty identifying main ideas **Nora** – difficulty discerning key concepts when reading **Brianna** – impulsive when responding **Oscar** – needs constant encouragement **Petra** – often loses focus	**Rhiannon** – nonfiction **Stephen** – anything to do with computers **Tabitha** – listening to books on tape

Literacy or numeracy class profile

A class profile focused on literacy or numeracy can be developed using a checklist format. Use a system of "met/not yet met" to record information in the profile, or make a more descriptive note for each student. You can use the information in the profile to inform planning, determine groupings for various learning activities, and assist in tracking and reporting growth.

Using learner and class profiles

Knowing your students—intentionally reflecting on who they are and how they learn—is what makes differentiated instruction possible. Learner and class profiles help you to identify the individual and collective strengths, needs, challenges and interests of the students in your class. This information is vital to selecting effective instructional strategies, supports, resources and interest-based topics for individual students and the class as a whole. Most, if not all, of the assessment and instructional strategies described in the following chapters either depend on or can be enhanced by considering learner and class profile information. By using both individual learner and class profiles as living documents, you can do more thoughtful and supportive planning throughout the school year.

Developing your own learner profile

To maximize the value of student learner profiles, you may want to better understand your own learning preferences and how they influence your planning and teaching.

You can use the information and inventories in this resource to think about your own learning. Other adult-focused inventories related to learning and communicating are readily available on the Internet, and many are free.

Take time to do some self-reflection and ask yourself questions about your own learning strengths, how they have changed over time, and what the implications are for teaching and learning with your students. Consider questions such as the following.

- What are my learning strengths?
- How have I developed these particular strengths over the years?
- How do my strengths and preferences affect my teaching?
- What types of intelligences and preferences do I want to more consciously incorporate into my teaching?

Developing your own learner profile puts you in a better position to see when student learning is being hindered by your preferences. For example, a teacher who is a concrete random thinker likely enjoys unstructured problem-solving situations, opportunities for divergent thinking and big picture ideas. If all of his or her instruction and classroom organization reflects these preferences, those students in the class who are concrete sequential thinkers (e.g., who like order, step-by-step instruction and detail) will most likely find learning difficult.

Likewise, a teacher who is a strong visual learner may plan instruction that focuses primarily on using graphic organizers and visual representations. Those students who learn best through small group conversation (auditory) or movement (kinesthetic) may be challenged by not having opportunities to learn in their preferred ways.

Recognizing and respecting the differences that exist between you and your students is the first step to intentionally adjusting instruction and valuing different kinds of learning in the classroom.

As you find out more about your own learning strengths and preferences, it is useful to share this information with your students. Talk with them about how knowing this information will help you to learn and teach more effectively.

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Tool 1: 20 Questions About Me[2]

Student Name _____   Date _____

1. What is my favourite activity to do at school? _____
    _____

2. What is my favourite subject? _____
    _____

3. What is my favourite activity outside of school? _____
    _____

4. What sport do I like to watch? _____
    _____

5. What sport do I like to play? _____
    _____

6. What would I like to learn more about? _____
    _____

7. What kind of books do I like to read? _____
    _____

8. What is the best book I ever read? _____
    _____

9. How much time do I spend reading for fun every week? _____
    _____

10. What is my favourite television show? _____
    _____

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2. Reproduced from Alberta Education, *Building on Success: Helping Students make Transitions from Year to Year* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education, 2006), pp. 26–27.

20 Questions About Me (continued)

11. What kind of music do I like? _____

_____

12. What is my favourite activity to do on the computer? _____

_____

13. What kind of technology do I like to use? _____

_____

14. Who are my best friends? _____

_____

15. What do I like to do with my friends? _____

_____

16. What makes me smile? _____

_____

17. What makes me laugh? _____

_____

18. What part of the world interests me the most? _____

_____

19. What do I plan to do after high school? _____

_____

20. What kind of career do I want when I'm an adult? _____

_____

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Tool 2: Interest Inventory[3]

Student Name _____   Date _____

1. My most interesting subject is _____

2. My most challenging subject is _____

3. What I enjoy most about school is _____

4. What I find most challenging about school is _____
    _____

5. Books I read recently _____

6. Activities I do outside of school _____
    _____

7. Three words to describe me _____

8. Careers that interest me _____

9. An ideal job for one day would be _____

10. My favourite television programs are _____

11. My favourite Web sites are _____

12. My questions about next year are_____
    _____
    _____

13. School situations that are stressful for me are _____
    _____

14. I deal with stress or frustration by _____
    _____

15. Some interesting places I've been to are _____

16. If I could travel anywhere, I would like to go to _____

17. If I can't watch television, I like to _____

18. I would like to learn more about _____

_____

3. Reproduced from Alberta Education, *Building on Success: Helping Students make Transitions from Year to Year* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education, 2006), p. 28.

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Tool 3: A Reading Interview[4]

Name _____

1. Do you like to read? Why or Why not?

2. Do you think you are a good reader? Why?

3. What was the last book you read?

4. What kinds of books do you like to read?

5. Do you think it is important to be a good reader? Why?

6. What do you do when you come to a word you can't read?

7. Do you read at home?

8. What do you usually do after school when you get home?

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4. Adapted with permission from Patricia Pavelka, *Create Independent Learners: Teacher-tested Strategies for all Ability Levels* (Peterborough, NH: Crystal Springs Books, 1999), Reading Inventory.

Tool 4: Reading Attitudes Interview[5]

Name _____   Date _____

1. How do you feel about reading?

2. What kinds of books do you like to read?

3. Who are your favourite authors?

4. How do you decide what book to read?

5. a. Who do you know that is a good reader?

   b. What makes _____ a good reader?

6. If you knew someone who was having trouble reading, how would you help him or her?

7. Do you think you are a good reader? Why or why not?

8. What would you like to do better as a reader?

_____

5. Reproduced with permission from a form by Christa Svenson, Lawton Junior High School, Edmonton Public Schools, Edmonton, AB.

Tool 5: Reading Strategies Survey[6]

Name _____   Date _____

		Usually	Sometimes	Never
1.	I use the title and pictures to predict what the selection is about.	❏	❏	❏
2.	I try to predict what is going to happen next in the selection.	❏	❏	❏
3.	I break new words into familiar chunks.	❏	❏	❏
4.	I think about movies, TV shows or books that might be similar in some way.	❏	❏	❏
5.	I study the illustrations, photographs or diagrams for information.	❏	❏	❏
6.	I reread when I don't understand.	❏	❏	❏
7.	I imagine myself right in the story.	❏	❏	❏
8.	I talk to others about confusing parts.	❏	❏	❏
9.	I think about how the story is like something I have experienced.	❏	❏	❏
10.	I try to figure out the main idea of the selection.	❏	❏	❏
11.	I try retelling the story in my head.	❏	❏	❏
12.	I look up new words in the dictionary.	❏	❏	❏
13.	I correct myself when I mispronounce a word.	❏	❏	❏
14.	I ask questions about what I read.	❏	❏	❏
15.	I change my reading rate for different tasks or texts.	❏	❏	❏

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6. Reproduced with permission from Edmonton Public Schools, "AISI Middle Literacy Project" (Edmonton, AB: Edmonton Public Schools, 2001).

Reading Strategies Survey (continued)

16. How has your reading changed this year?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

17. What strategy helps you the most when reading?

_____

_____

_____

_____

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18. What skills or strategies do you need to continue to work on?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Tool 6: What Works for Me Inventory[7]

Name _____   Date _____

A. How I look after myself:
- How much sleep do I need? _____
- What kind of food makes me feel the most alert? _____
- What snacks are good energy sources? _____
- What times of the day do I need to eat? _____
- What time of the day do I have the most energy? _____
- What time of the day do I have the least energy? _____
- What type of exercise makes me feel energized? _____
- What kinds of activities help me relax? _____

B. Tools that help me learn:
- What writing tool works best for me; e.g., type of pen, pencil, colour of ink?
  _____
- What kind of paper helps me keep organized; e.g., wide-ruled, unlined, wide margins, prepunched? _____
- What colour of paper do I find the easiest to read? _____
- What binder system works for me? _____
- What other supplies help me keep organized; e.g., white-out, post-it notes, ruler?
  _____
- What calculator works best for me; e.g., size, features? _____
- What spellchecker works best for me? _____
- What is my favourite dictionary? _____
- What other reference books help me learn? _____
- What computer programs are helpful to my learning? _____

C. In the classroom:
- What seat in the classroom works best for me? _____
- What do I read best from?
  ____ chalkboard   ____ overhead   ____ projector   ____ chart paper
  ____ my own copy   ____ interactive white board
- Does the colour of ink (or chalk) make a difference? _____
- Does the type of print; e.g., printed, handwritten or typed, make a difference?
  _____
- Does the size and spacing of print make a difference? _____

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7. Reproduced from Alberta Education, *Make School Work for You: A Resource for Junior and Senior High Students who want to be More Successful Learners* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education, 2001), pp. 85–86.

D. Rank in order from 1 (being the most useful) to 12 (being the least useful) which type of learning experiences work best for me:

    ___ teacher explains aloud

    ___ teacher writes directions on the board

    ___ teacher does example on the board

    ___ teacher asks another student to demonstrate

    ___ teacher asks all students to try a sample at their desks

    ___ I read the directions while the teacher reads them

    ___ I read the directions on my own

    ___ teacher shows me at my desk

    ___ another student explains a second time and answers my questions

    ___ I watch what another student does

    ___ I try it on my own and then check with teacher

    ___ I try it on my own and then compare with another student.

E. Tricks I use to keep myself organized:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

F. Tricks I use to keep myself focused and on task in class:

_____

_____

_____

G. Special things that teachers can do to help me learn:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Tool 7: Getting Along with Others Inventory[8]

Name _____   Date _____

In class	always	usually	sometimes	not yet
• I arrive to class on time.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I bring needed books and supplies.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I say hello to other students as I enter the classroom.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I answer questions with a few sentences.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• When I start a conversation, I check that the other people appear interested.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I keep small talk to before and after class.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I sit up straight.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I remove distracting hoods and hats.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I make eye contact with others.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I show active listening by nodding my head and turning to the speaker.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I volunteer at least two answers per class.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• If I've missed directions, I look to other students for clues.	❑	❑	❑	❑

With partners and in small groups

	always	usually	sometimes	not yet
• I am willing to work with a variety of partners.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I try to make others feel comfortable by talking to them.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I show that I'm willing to work with others by moving closer.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I am polite to people even if I would rather not work with them.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I listen carefully to directions.	❑	❑	❑	❑

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8. Reproduced from Alberta Education, *Make School Work for You: A Resource for Junior and Senior High Students who want to be more Successful Learners* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education, 2001), pp. 95–96.

Getting Along with Others Inventory (continued)

	always	usually	sometimes	not yet
• I check directions with my partners.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I make a rough plan.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I check the time lines.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I use a quiet voice.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I stay with my group and focus on the task.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I try tasks even if I don't really feel like it.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I do my share of the work.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I volunteer ideas.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I show good listening.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I encourage others to contribute their ideas.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I don't put down other people's ideas.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I am willing to try new roles, even if I'm uncomfortable.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I support my partners in group presentations.	❑	❑	❑	❑

Solving problems

	always	usually	sometimes	not yet
• I use all my skills to build a positive working relationship with partners.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I let partners know when I think we have a problem.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• I am willing to make a new plan and start over.	❑	❑	❑	❑
• If necessary, I'll share my concerns with the teacher.	❑	❑	❑	❑

Getting connected

	always	usually	sometimes	not yet
• I participate in at least one extracurricular activity each term.	❑	❑	❑	❑

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