Building Your Learner Identity & Belonging

Adapted for students from Zaretta Hammon's Newsletter, "What Math Renaissance is Teaching Us About Learner Identity"

When school starts, you're not just learning subjects - you're also learning about yourself as a learner. Here are three tips to help you grow a strong learner identity and feel like you belong in your classroom:

Tip #1: Watch your words.

- Elementary: The way you talk to yourself ("I can't do this" vs. "I'll keep trying") shapes how you see yourself as a learner.
- Middle School: Pay attention to the messages teachers and friends give you. Are they lifting you up or putting you down about your abilities?
- High School: Think critically about the story you tell yourself about each subject - don't let one tough day define who you are as a learner.

Tip #2: Rewrite your Story

- Elementary: If you ever think "I'm bad at math," change it to "I'm learning math step by step."
- Middle School: Notice when you say "I always mess this up." Try rewriting it: "I can improve if I practice differently."
- High School: Your "explanatory story" (the story you tell yourself about why things happen) matters. Reset it: instead of "I failed because I'm not smart," try "I didn't do well yet because I need new strategies."

Tip #3: Notice and Name Your Growth

- Elementary: Instead of just hearing "Good job," listen for details - like "I saw how you tried a new way to solve that problem!"
- Middle School: Learn to name your own progress. Say, "I used to get stuck here, but now I know how to…"
- High School: Build a habit of reflecting: What did you do that showed growth today? Naming your own effort strengthens your learner identity.

Remember: Our brains focus more on mistakes than successes. To build confidence, pause for 90 seconds on something positive you did—this helps your brain see you as a capable learner.

Your learner identity is built every day: through the words you hear, the stories you tell yourself, and the progress you notice. The more you practice this, the stronger your sense of belonging and confidence will grow.

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