

## Characteristics of High School Learners

There are a range of characteristics for high school students, as they enter into 9th grade and leave at the end of 12th grade. This transition from middle to late adolescence (approximately ages 14-19) is a time full of exploration into who they are as young adults, and what they believe in, value, and desire for their future. Through EL Education's commitment to crew, compelling topics, collaboration, and relevant and authentic work, the needs of high school learners are supported and lifted up in order to support engagement, empowerment, and challenge.

### **High School learners need to understand the purpose and relevance of what they're learning.**

Any educator of a high schooler knows the question “why are we learning this?” High school students have an intense need to understand the value and importance of what they are learning. As high school students are starting to consider the trajectory of their lives, they are working to make sense of what they are learning and how that fits into their own personal goals. Only when students understand the purpose of their work and their work has relevance, are they able to dig in and engage deeply. As stated in *Learning that Lasts*, “engagement is fueled by curiosity and connection. When students feel that their learning has purpose and is connected to the real world, they become more engaged—their curiosity about and connection to their academic content is heightened.” Compelling topics, authentic tasks, and lessons nested intentionally within the content making learning purposeful, relevant and engaging for students.

### **High School learners are beginning to develop a heightened sense of agency.**

As students transition into and through high school, they are able to make more connections between their actions and the impact of those actions. As this sense of cause and effect deepens, high school learners start to develop a sense of agency in that they can control what happens to them. This manifests in how students change in their relationship to their goal setting, sense of responsibility, and ownership. The focus on habits of scholarship and what it takes to be an effective learner support students in their growth. Authentic tasks and service also help students see their agency not just in school but also in the world.

### **High School learners explore their multiple identities in ways that enable a varied and nuanced sense of self.**

Throughout middle to late adolescence, young people are developing their sense of self and who they are. As young people grow older, they often experiment in self-expression in trying on different possible ‘selves’. This can also manifest in them taking a stand based on their identity. According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the fifth stage happens during adolescence, during which teenagers are developing a sense of self and personal identity, through an intense exploration of personal values, beliefs, and goals. During this time, high school students often rely on friendships and peers to affirm “who they are” - or various adults to say who they are “not.” Through this time of experimentation, they are trying out who they want to be. Curriculum that supports exploring identities and how others create identities will provide a lens for students in their own explorations. A focus on relationships and restorative practices in the classroom support students with room to grow, make mistakes, and learn from their words and actions.

### **High school learners develop their capacity for abstract reasoning and creative problem-solving.**

As the brain develops, students have increased capacity for abstract and hypothetical problem solving. During adolescence, there are dynamic changes in the brain structure and function that lead to this ability to problem solve and think critically--most notably in how the prefrontal cortex is developing--as it controls reasoning and helps us think before we act. “Creative problem solving typically requires divergent thinking (generating ideas by exploring many possible solutions), and flexibility in terms of restructuring and manipulating problem information” according to a study (Kleibeuker et al., 2013, p. 203) done on the teenage brain which found that this kind of thinking happened as there was increased activation in the prefrontal cortex during adolescence. As this part of the brain activates, this new skill allows students to consider multiple perspectives, try on new problem solving skills, and engage in topics and texts that are different from what they have done before. A focus on tasks that ask students to take on the heavy lifting of problem solving and grappling with complex ideas will engage and challenge students.

### **High School learners have a desire for autonomy, freedom, and respect.**

Through middle and late adolescence, students’ desire for increased autonomy, freedom and respect grows. According to Erikson’s framework, young people are exploring the roles they will occupy as adults and examining what it takes to get there. Not only are they ‘trying on’ various aspects of being an adult, but they are also pushing on boundaries to see what is possible. They will push back on anything that seems to infringe on their freedom, which often leads to power struggles. During this time, young people are looking for less reliance on their families, and more autonomy in taking on new responsibilities and progress towards goals. Providing choice for students in the classroom, in their work and in crew empower students to take on autonomy and freedom. Respect becomes a priority in the teacher-student relationship, which is supported through restorative classroom and crew practices.

### **References:**

- Berger, R., Woodfin, L., Vilen, A., & Kushner, T. (2016). *Learning That Lasts, with DVD: Challenging, Engaging, and Empowering Students with Deeper Instruction* (1st ed.). San Francisco, California
- Hartley, C. A., & Somerville, L. H. (2015). The neuroscience of adolescent decision-making. *Current opinion in behavioral sciences*, 5, 108–115. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2015.09.004>
- Kleibeuker, S. W., Koolschijn, P. C. M. P., Jolles, D. D., Schel, M. A., De Dreu, C. K. W., & Crone, E. A. (2013). Prefrontal cortex involvement in creative problem solving in middle adolescence and adulthood. *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience*, 5, 197–206. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcn.2013.03.003>
- Notes Hq, P. (2020, May 22). Erik Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development. Retrieved May 22, 2020, from <https://www.psychologynoteshq.com/erikson-stages/>
- TEDxYouth. (2013, February 13). Insight Into the Teenage Brain: Adriana Galván at TEDxYouth@Caltech. Retrieved May 27, 2020, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LWUkW4s3XxY>