



AVID: A Successful Approach to College and Career Preparation

by Michelle Robinson

While the achievement gap is a global issue, it also has local implications (New Hampshire Department of Education, 2014). In one high school in the heart of New Hampshire, the gap manifested itself due to socioeconomic disparities (Murphy, 2009; New Hampshire Department of Education, 2014). The high school principal observed that students of lower socioeconomic status were not equally represented in high school honors and advanced placement courses, possibly discouraged by an “elitist” mentality within the educational system or as a result of their own limiting beliefs about themselves (P. Murphy, personal communication, April 12, 2005). Could AVID help students overcome limiting beliefs about themselves?

What is AVID?

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) is a college preparation program that 4,837 K–12 schools adopted to help close the achievement gap by preparing all students for college and career readiness (AVID Center, 2015). AVID provides an intervention for students it describes as “in the middle”: students with low grade point averages, with Cs and even Ds, whose aptitude tests indicate they are capable of higher achievement; first generation college students; and/or students who receive free and reduced cost lunch.

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A Typical Week in AVID

The AVID elective teacher follows a weekly schedule set forth by AVID, composed of the following:

- Monday: AVID curriculum in the Cornell note-taking system, SAT/ACT test preparation, organization
- Tuesday: Tutorials using the Socratic method
- Wednesday: AVID curriculum in the Cornell note-taking system, SAT/ACT preparation, organization
- Thursday: Tutorials using the Socratic method
- Friday: Collaborative activities, motivational guest speakers, college field trips (AVID Center, 2015).

Designated AVID Days and Focus

<i>Mondays & Wednesdays</i>	<i>Tuesdays & Thursdays</i>	<i>Fridays</i>
<i>Focus: AVID Curriculum in</i>	<i>Focus: Tutorials for Inquiry,</i>	
<i>Writing, Reading, Organization,</i>	<i>Review of Concepts in all</i>	<i>Focus: Collaboration through</i>
<i>College Preparation</i>	<i>Academic Courses</i>	<i>Activities, Speakers, Field Trips</i>

The AVID elective is taught by the AVID elective teacher, who helps students create a collaborative learning group (AVID Center, 2015). The teacher is a liaison to the students' other teachers, oversees students' grades in all courses, and makes daily contact with the students

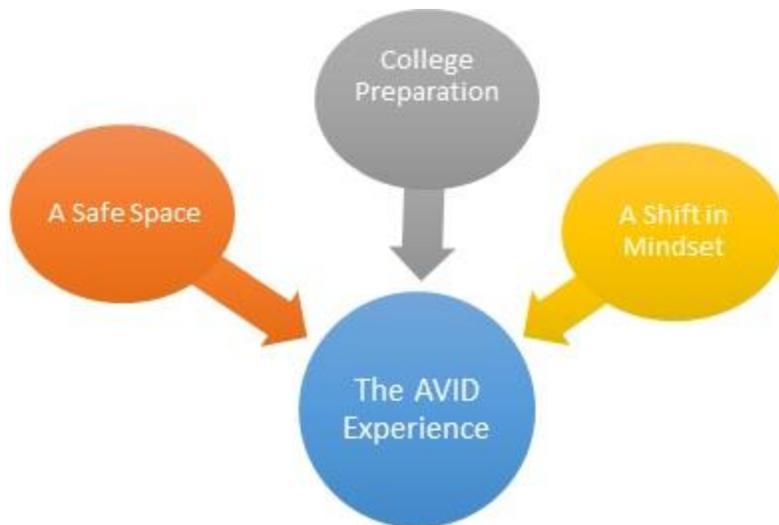
about their progress and struggles (Merrow, 2003). In the 2003 *60 Minutes II* interview entitled “Making the Grade,” AVID founder Mary Catherine Swanson identified some of the fundamental needs of students and explained the role of the AVID elective teacher in meeting these: “What they need is stability. They need family. They need somebody to whom they are responsible, and that’s what the AVID teacher becomes.” What begins in the AVID classroom has the power to influence the school culture. In the same interview with Swanson, an advanced placement English teacher shared that because of the support AVID students receive, they actually set the curve for the entire class (Merrow, 2003). Students with potential are not simply placed in honors or advanced placement courses without support; they are simultaneously enrolled in AVID where they use the WICOR strategies to revise the way they take notes, engage in tutorials on the subjects they are learning, and learn new ways to study/interact with the material (Merrow, 2003).

AVID’s Impact

AVID alumni in New Hampshire shared that AVID had a positive impact in their lives (Robinson, 2017). In articulating how and why, students cited various components of their academic and personal development experienced in AVID. AVID consisted of a warm classroom community that allowed them to feel emotionally safe and nurtured, college preparation through curriculum and tutorials, and a shift in mindset that brought about a change in how they viewed learning and themselves. Students shared that a positive classroom community was created through student-centered projects designed with students’ backgrounds and interests in mind and demonstrating a sincere interest in students’ well-being. Students discussed the AVID classroom environment as paramount to their AVID experience. One student shared, “It’s getting as close to a comfort zone in a classroom as

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you can,” describing the student-centered environment as one where students were comfortable with themselves and each other. Students discovered that feeling trust and safety in the AVID classroom contributed to a positive classroom community. One student expressed, “I felt very welcomed. I felt like the people in there were very much like me and working towards a common goal of self-discovery.” Students confessed they felt deeply connected to one another and to the adults throughout their AVID experience, which contributed to a positive classroom community. One student shared the uniqueness of this connection: “With AVID, they knew my struggles with academics. They knew all the different sides of me, or at least as many as I had at the time—the whole person. Honestly, I don’t think anything else is offered like that.”



What are the experiences of students who participated in the AVID program in a NH high school?

Students expressed that the AVID elective course allowed for a positive, transformative experience that built confidence, helped them feel connected to other students, and prepared them for college. They discovered that developing trust to build a strong bond with others in AVID contributed to a positive classroom community that they experienced as a safe space described their experience as one of belonging, friendship, and support. They articulated changes they underwent and the understanding of themselves and others they experienced. Students said they felt they could be respected for their authentic selves in AVID. They portrayed the environment in the elective class as welcoming and unique. One participant described the connection as atypical of her experiences in high school: “It wasn’t anything like a classroom setting. I didn’t have anything like that again. I didn’t connect with any other teacher that way. I didn’t connect with any other group of people that way.” Students used words like “family” to convey their deep connection and bond to others during their lived experience in AVID. Students conveyed that the classroom was student centered, an approach that allowed for a focus on students’ backgrounds, needs, and interests. This allowed for personalization of the curriculum and validation of students’ lives. Furthermore, students described a deep connection that was unique in their school day and allowed for “life-changing” experiences.

Students articulated that even though college may be expected by society, school, and/or family, they did not exactly know how to prepare and did not know how to, or did not feel comfortable with, accessing the resources to help them determine a path. They shared that they experienced stress at not knowing how to achieve something they were expected to (i.e., going to college) and that their experiences with AVID included support to achieve this goal. One former AVID student disclosed the pressure from family to attend college even when family members were not able to help navigate the process: “The whole family has been, like, ‘Want you to go to college. Want you to go to college.’ My parents...to this day they’re not able to help financially. My mom even said, ‘I didn’t do this. I don’t know how to help you go to college. You’re going to

have to do this on your own.’ Another student elaborated on how AVID helped her see herself as capable of achieving college:

I know just from going to school and growing up here my whole life there were some other students in the class that were probably more set up in their life to go to a college in the future or to get a good job. Someone like me, who came from a small family with not a lot of money, no one’s ever gone to college. Neither of my parents actually finished high school; my brother was the first one to finish high school. Having that push for me was crazy. I didn’t have parents who could tell me what it’s like after high school. They didn’t know what senior year was like. That was big...it meant a lot to me to learn that stuff. It’s a thing almost expected of everybody to go to college or get an education. Seeing that I may have to work a little harder for it, but we all have to go through the same process to get there. It doesn’t matter if you have a lot of money or if you don’t or how hard you have to work to get there, you still have to get accepted into the college. You still have to do what you need to do through high school to prove yourself.

There were academic and personal hurdles to overcome, particularly for those students with low grades and grade point averages, lack of knowledge in effective study habits and learning strategies, and personal issues holding them back (such as lack of financial resources at home, the loss of a parent, or bullying). Students cited support in the AVID elective in regard to the college application process, SAT/ACT test preparation, note-taking skills, and study skills that helped them navigate the college preparation process.

What do students believe contributed to their experiences in AVID and why?

Students attributed their positive experiences to collaborative activities and personal projects they shared in helping them build confidence and feel connected to one another and said college visits and tutorials were key to their college preparation. Students reported that AVID provided necessary support through high school and the college application process. Students shared a range of examples of the support AVID provided, including assistance with testing and the college application process. They articulated this support in various ways. One explained it as an epiphany: “I wanted to go to school. I would be the first in the family to go to college. I knew I wanted to go, but I didn’t know how to do it. Then, hey—AVID!” Other students’ voices echoed thinking their academic goals were planned and supported in the AVID elective course. There was something for each participant in the AVID program deemed the “best” or most meaningful to him/her, and it wasn’t necessarily the same component of the program for each participant. However, they overwhelmingly cited the collaborative activities, field trips to colleges, and guest speakers as the best aspects of the AVID elective course.

How did AVID influence students’ high school and post–high school experiences?

The impact that resonated with AVID students the most throughout high school and college involved transformations with their personal and/or academic lives and their mindsets. Students cited such personal transformations as improved happiness, contentment with being who they genuinely are as people, acceptance of themselves and others, finding their passion, and increased confidence that manifested in multiple areas of their lives. Students cited academic

transformations that took place as a result of a shift in mindset. Behaviors that students demonstrated post-AVID—e.g., sitting in front in the classroom, raising their hands to ask questions, studying in groups, using Cornell notes and reviewing information multiple times, organizing their school materials, reaching out to teachers when they needed help, utilizing resources in high school and on college campuses—were revealed by students to have contributed to their academic transformations in high school and in college. One student explained how AVID not only helped through high school and the college application process, but also in college now: “I’m not afraid to study with people now. I always feel like that was a struggle for me because I always wanted to study my way because I thought my way was the most effective way. But studying with other people is definitely effective because everybody brings different ideas to the table. Definitely not [being] afraid to work in groups has really helped me post-AVID.” Students also revealed changes in their mindsets—how they viewed themselves as learners and how they looked at learning itself. All three shifts (personal, academic, and mindset) contributed to the transformations that impacted participants throughout high school and in college.

Personal Transformation. Students shared their experiences and what was most meaningful for them. They divulged personal anecdotes of overcoming adversity (such as bullying and the death of a parent), finding their voices, and ultimately believing in themselves as students and people. The aspects of their experiences they attributed this transformation to include feeling deeply connected to others, receiving the support and preparation they needed to succeed, and shifting their views of themselves as people and their abilities as students. Additionally, much of what students recalled involved personal, emotional activities and projects. This speaks to what resonates deeply with students.

Students discussed particular assignments or projects they could point to as having a significant impact on the way they perceived themselves and their lives. They articulated that hearing others’ life stories and what their peers had lived through gave them lessons about hope, resilience, and perseverance that they incorporated into their own lives. They shared fears about revealing their personal history with the small group and the vulnerability they felt, which evolved into trusting the group members once their struggles were received with compassion and admiration for all they had overcome. Students expressed a source of pride and courage they experienced after presenting personal projects. It appeared to stir something within them, a lighting of a fire that they did have what it takes to make it not only in school but in life. Students expressed a need to find this strength during their adolescence in order to feel successful in high school and college. Many students expressed that prior to AVID they had “shut down” or stopped reaching out to others for fear of ridicule or bullying. It seems this course and the projects within it helped them emerge from their middle school years, which were filled with self-doubt and pain for some students, with a newfound confidence to reach out to others again in high school as well as in college. This confidence manifested in the students persevering and putting themselves out there to pursue goals and participate in sports and clubs in college.

Academic Transformation. Students referred to a shift in their way of thinking about themselves as people and learners. This shift can be understood as a changed mindset. Carol Dweck (2007), professor of psychology at Stanford and author of *Mindset*, conducted research that shows how beliefs impact lives. She claims that how we view our learning can drastically

alter our potential and that cultivating a growth mindset allows for effort to influence intelligence or achievement. AVID students described areas where they experienced a changed mindset. Some experienced this change in mindset about themselves as people. Students noted finding their voice and developing a stronger sense of self and identity. Some experienced the shift in mindset through their views of themselves as learners. Others experienced the shift in mindset about their abilities and what they could accomplish. Students revealed that shifting their mindset was key to opening up their capacity to learn. This is pivotal not only for performance in AVID but for all learning.

Improved Confidence. AVID students claimed their newfound confidence and skills prompted them to enroll in more challenging coursework. They cited strategies for learning and studying as still beneficial to them in college. They noted increased confidence as their efforts were redirected through a changed mindset with the AVID program. One student explained that she thought she should at least try AVID “because I knew that I was someone who didn’t work as hard as I could have.” She later shared that she had to “accept” that she was intelligent and had to “put the time into it because my grade will reflect that.” Another student reported, “What comes to mind [with AVID] is overcoming confidence issues.”

These shifts in beliefs and mindsets impacted students in high school and in college. In high school, students shared that after taking the AVID elective course, they enrolled in honors or advanced placement courses they most likely would not have taken otherwise. They also cited a shift in behavior from increased effort and attention to studying to an improved work ethic in classes and outside of school. Students additionally noted that seeing college as an attainable possibility and understanding a plan of action to apply to and attend college impacted their high school experience.

In college, students cited applying the lessons AVID taught them about creating deep relationships and seeking out resources as having an impact. Students cited having organizational skills, note-taking skills, learning strategies, and interpersonal skills as a result of their AVID experience. Students shared that presenting learning as an opportunity or gift for themselves was effective in shaping a new mindset that they still utilize in college. Looking back at her entire high school career, one student asserted, “Hands down, most helpful class I took. It’s learning how to learn. I still use the same skills I learned in AVID now.”

Implications for Educators

Students described how AVID helped them learn how to learn, appreciate learning, and utilize skills. Students reflected on what impacted this shift in perspective and cited metacognition, inquiry-based discussion or tutorials, and focusing on their passion, all of which educators could incorporate into any course. Students’ voices also offer insight into the value they experience when learning is personalized. Students cited researching their college and career interests, recognizing their particular learning styles, and sharing their personal life experiences as highlights of their experience with AVID. Allowing space for this kind of personal work in classrooms or at some point in the school day is significant, even for high school students, to nurture emotional connections. This suggests that educators who create learning opportunities

that meet the specific needs of their students can impact students' academic and emotional lives positively.

Recognizing students' identities and helping them pursue their personal goals can have lasting impact. The knowledge gleaned from students' voices about what helps make learning experiences meaningful for them could be useful for educators in regard to validation for just how impactful collaboration can be in students' lives. Students' voices validate how critical these activities are for social-emotional development. In fact, all educators could incorporate such activities whenever possible to provide transformative experiences for, and facilitate meaningful connections between, students.

These students' experiences revealed that an apparent disinterest in college could actually be masking fear of financial or academic limitations. Students discussed financial barriers as a contributing factor in their limiting beliefs about their ability to pursue college. Their voices are validated by research. In the last 50 years, income gaps have increased achievement gaps. Additionally, "family income is now nearly as strong as parental education in predicting student achievement" (Duncan & Murnane, 2011, p. 92). For schools looking to diminish the impact family income can have on achievement and students' beliefs about themselves, these students' experiences reveal that feeling deeply connected and supported in school, coupled with explicit teaching in how to learn, how to apply for college, how to finance their education, and how to change their mindset, can be a vehicle for overcoming the odds. Surrounding oneself with positive, like-minded people can be the impetus to transformative change.

Final Considerations

Students' compelling responses about what made them feel valued and capable of achieving their personal and academic goals may prompt educators to reconsider strategies for engagement. Students revealed that when they were seen for who they were as whole students, their educational experience was transformed. In fact, students transcending their own limiting beliefs and others' preconceptions of them is what participants cited as making the greatest impact in their lives. Their personal and academic transformations are what they carried with them through high school and into college.

The most powerful aspect of their stories is that they reveal this shift can be taught and nurtured; it is within our reach as educators. In "Redesigning American High Schools for the 21st Century," Patrick Cook-Deegan (2016) asserts, "Almost nothing in the current system speaks to developing the voice of young people, their own dreams, and a sense of what's really important to them" (p. 4). Students' voices reveal that there is in fact something in the current system that speaks to developing the voice of young people, their dreams, and what's really important to them: AVID. And while many schools do not have AVID, they may have programs, classes, or events that can elicit the same positive results that participants in this study revealed they experienced through AVID.

It turns out that when former AVID students were asked what made a difference in their lives, their responses correlated to what the research on achievement gaps tells us: students can and do

overcome obstacles to college when provided with an environment where they are emotionally safe and academically challenged, supported by caring, competent adults. Students talked about how they *learned* to shift their mindsets about their potential, feel deeply connected to others in a collaborative learning environment, and engage in authentic experiences that inspired and motivated them. If our students are open to learning this way, then we can listen, nurture, and empower them to achieve in ways that matter most to them by teaching this way. Students shared how they internalized the achievement gap and how it manifested itself in their lives, how they learned to overcome their limiting beliefs rooted in the negative consequences associated with the achievement gap, and how they are now in college changing their own lives.

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