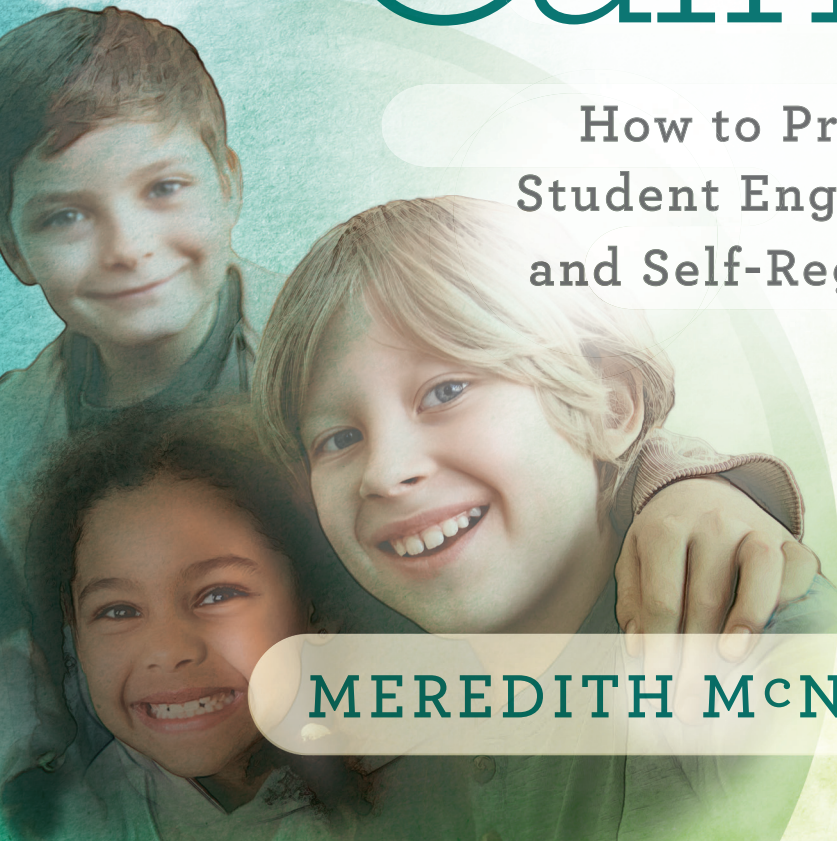




Cultivating a Classroom of Calm

How to Promote
Student Engagement
and Self-Regulation



MEREDITH McNERNEY



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Preface

From an early age, my daughter dreamed of becoming a teacher. With hope in her eyes, she imagined being the type of teacher who would change lives and become a champion for students who needed her most. I worried that the profession would ultimately let her down and strip her of the innocent joy she experienced when fantasizing about the kind of classroom she would create. After 25 years in public education, I have seen a lot. I had reason to worry because I had lived experience, which told me this was not a decision to take lightly.

Serving in various roles across two districts, most recently having served as principal of a large Title I school, I have witnessed the struggle felt by many teachers. I have felt that struggle myself. We give so much because we care, but there is a cost to caring. The truth is, this work can take a toll on every aspect of our lives because it is the work of the soul. Not only are we emotionally invested in the students we serve, but we also often face unreasonable demands. Many of us are tired of the constant pressure, from parents to politicians, and we are fighting a complex system that needs major repair. So, when my daughter insisted on becoming a teacher, I would look into her hopeful eyes and worry. My husband, Mark, is a Title I middle school teacher and is in the thick of the work every day. We asked ourselves the same tricky question: “Is this the life we want for our daughter?”

I know the 2020s, especially, have been absolutely chaotic for many teachers, and as a result, we are losing teachers every day. But I still believe in our profession. I wrote this book to provide a message of hope to young teachers like my daughter, Kaitlyn, and to veterans like my husband, Mark. I wrote this book for you. Thank you for being a champion to our youth, even when some do not appreciate you. Thank you for staying when you could easily leave. I hope to provide professional and personal lived experiences to encapsulate hopeful messages while offering practical strategies to support our most precious professionals. I believe it is an honor to be a teacher. And I also think it is the most demanding job out there. This book is not meant to sugarcoat the truth. Instead, you will be met with tools and strategies to reignite your spark and honor your work each day. I hope you will find it to be presented in an honest yet hopeful way.

In her senior year of high school, Kaitlyn applied to become a Maryland teaching fellow, which meant she would commit to serving in a Title I school upon graduation. Her application essay moved me. It reminded me of how I felt when I decided to become a teacher. Her young voice caused me to take a deep breath, a long pause, and reflect on what I really believed about the profession. It was her young voice that inspired the idea for this book. Her face lights up when she thinks about becoming a teacher, and I never want that spark to diminish. Mark and I are thrilled for her and her future students. We need teachers like Kaitlyn, and my job is to inspire others to love this profession.

When I was young, my parents used to play teacher with my sister and me. My dad played “Mr. Wilson,” a fun, carefree, humorous teacher. My mother played “Mrs. Lynda,” a passionate, well-organized, uncompromising instructor. Mr. Wilson’s classroom was chaotic. There were science experiments on the floor, sticky notes that labeled objects in different languages throughout the room, and posters of educational memes hanging on the walls. His room was full of life and movement. Mrs. Lynda’s room was neat and well-mannered. We wrote poems and personal narratives,

learned how to multiply fractions, and memorized the bones in the body. Interrupting discussion was punishable, and movement was rare. The two rooms could not have been more opposite of each other. Yet, I looked forward to attending each. I liked when my dad would pause our work to tell us funny stories. I loved when my mom would explain the moon's phases in a much too complicated yet fascinating way. The characters created by my parents to keep two energetic children entertained unintentionally shaped me into the teacher that I am becoming today.

In my classroom, I will have the joyful spirit of Mr. Wilson with the expectations of Mrs. Lynda. I will connect with my students by sharing silly stories and asking them about their hobbies. I will push them to work hard and fight against the barriers before them. I will teach them that it is better to fail than to not try. I will be their role model, their light, their biggest supporter. With every opportunity I have had to learn about teaching and the education system, my dedication and passion for this profession have only grown wider. What started as a fun game with my parents led to a commitment toward a career that I am learning more about each day.

During my sophomore year of high school, I had the opportunity to become a Faith Formation Teacher for my local church, St. Ignatius of Loyola. This volunteer role was exciting yet intimidating. I questioned my capability to control a classroom of young elementary-aged students at just 15 years old. I then realized that teachers learn by doing. I could read about the different strategies teachers use to create an engaging classroom environment. I could take notes on the things my teachers do to make class enjoyable, but I could never truly learn about this profession by watching; I had to jump in. Each week, my co-teacher and I created a one-hour lesson plan based on the curricula given to us by the church. We made sure each lesson would teach our young

students about the Lord in an exciting and understandable way to fuel their curious minds. Every student learns differently. We took this into account when creating our lessons. Visual learners enjoyed when we drew a scene from the Bible, auditory learners thrived when watching educational videos, and our kinesthetic learners worked best when completing hands-on activities.

One of the most prominent challenges teachers face is classroom management. I saw firsthand how difficult it can be to control a classroom filled with life, energy, and distractions. To encourage positive behavior, the students came up with a list of shared expectations and were reminded of them daily. In some instances, I had to pull a child aside to discuss their inappropriate behavior. We would come up with solutions together for how the child could have better handled the situation. By doing this, they learned self-control strategies they could use the next time they encountered a frustrating situation. We would also reward the students with a game, free draw time, or a dance party at the end of each class if they proved they earned it. We would give shout-outs throughout the day that encouraged them to keep working hard and stay on task as they worked toward their reward. On the days when they did not earn the reward, the students would openly discuss the areas they felt they needed to improve on. This taught them that mistakes are inevitable but growth happens when we reflect on and learn from those mistakes.

Throughout this experience, I grew a greater understanding of the need to effectively communicate with families outside of the classroom. When a classroom involves families in their students' education, it helps build a strong support system for every learner. To achieve this, I sent weekly emails to families regarding the classroom agenda and important updates, along with positive messages detailing their students' success in the classroom. For the next year, I continued as a Faith Formation Teacher and adjusted to fit the online schedule as the pandemic temporarily

shut down our church. I had to learn how to do what all teachers do best; adapt to change. I found new, creative online tools to teach our students. I was lively and silly through the screen. I made sure we created a classroom environment where everyone felt welcomed, even in a virtual setting.

Dedicated teachers jump at the opportunity to learn more about the profession. They do not let their fear of failure stop them from becoming the teacher they wish to be. I have a passion for teaching, and through experience, I am continuing to learn about the ins and outs of this complex, hectic, and rewarding profession.

One of the biggest lessons I have learned is that all students are capable of success. Most of our 2nd graders are below grade level. Many of them are English language learners, and a handful of them have learning disabilities, such as ADHD. I have also seen some of my students struggle with anxiety and fear of failure. Trauma outside the classroom, such as losing their house to a fire and inappropriate contact with adults, has affected my students firsthand. Even while facing heavy battles, my students are capable. They are capable of improving their reading and writing skills. They are capable of scoring high on their math tests. They are capable of believing in themselves. We give our students accommodations and scaffolds, but we never water down the content. We encourage and expect our students to try their best, even if that leads to an incorrect answer. We teach them self-regulation strategies, such as deep breathing, when they feel overwhelmed. Teachers should be a positive light for their students. They should be the ones to encourage their class to work hard and achieve their goals. I always tell my students that the words “I can’t” are not allowed in our classroom. I encourage them to ask questions, but I allow them to struggle. I want them to take a few minutes to work out the problem before immediately asking for help. When they do this, they discover they know more than they thought they did.

As a student who was once insecure and unsure of myself, I understand how it feels to sit in class confused. I tell my students this. I relate to them. I also push them to fight against the voice in their head that tells them they are not smart enough, because they are smart enough. Every child deserves a fair and equitable education. With this mindset, I plan to be an advocate for all of my future students, no matter their ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, gender, sexual orientation, etc. I will push them to work hard and never give up on themselves. I will do the same. I will never give up my passion for inspiring and educating our youth.

I will be the first to admit that teaching in a 50 percent or more FARMS school is a daunting task. I grew up with two parents who have worked in the education system and in Title I schools for most of their professional lives. I grew up watching the great effort and determination it takes to be a teacher in a Title I school. But I also grew up watching my parents connect with students who sometimes feel disconnected from the outside world. All teachers are superheroes, regardless of where they teach. However, teaching in a Title I school places extra pressure on teachers to pull every child out of an unfair system. I am willing to take on that task.

I cannot be naive. Most of my students will struggle to fight against the unfair challenges set up against them, and some may never come out on the other side, but I will be their lead commander in the fight. I will create a classroom environment that praises risk takers and does not shame wrong answers. I will ask them about their dreams because I am genuinely curious. I will set up a food drawer for students to grab snacks when they are hungry. I will do everything in my power to help them believe in themselves. I will write them encouraging notes and tell them to repeat positive affirmations to themselves, because if they do not believe in themselves, it does not matter how much I believe in them. I will not be a perfect teacher. I will make mistakes, and I will fail.

My students will not be perfect. They will make mistakes, and they will fail. Both of these things are perfectly OK. Failure is not negative; rather, it is the stepping stone to success. My students, rich or poor, above grade level or below, confident or insecure, will have a teacher who supports them in all of their endeavors.

From playing teacher with my parents to volunteering as a Faith Formation Teacher to earning an internship in a 2nd grade classroom, my passion for teaching has been a constant in my life. I want to be a changemaker. I want to make a difference in the world of education. I want to inspire the younger generation to attack their dreams. My determination and work ethic will help guide me along the way, but it is the success stories of my students that will keep me fighting.

—Kaitlyn McNerney,
Maryland Teaching Fellow, Towson University

1

What Is a Calmer Classroom?

Mrs. Finch stands outside her classroom greeting students like it's the first day of school, every day, with the same energy in February as she had in September. She welcomes each student by name, greeting them with a fist bump or high-five, repeatedly using language such as "I am happy to see you, Amyia!" or "So glad you are here, Diego!" Students light up around her, and in her room everyone belongs. The adults who enter her room feel this energy too. She is unapologetically kind and genuinely concerned about fostering a culture of calm.

She is not quiet; that is not what makes her calm. In fact, her voice is filled with so much energy, she can often be heard down the hallway. No, calm is not about silence in her room. Calm is an internal feeling that penetrates anyone in her presence because, in her room, you know you belong. Mrs. Finch's calm classroom is active, lively, fun, and intentionally structured. But most of all it is safe and inclusive.

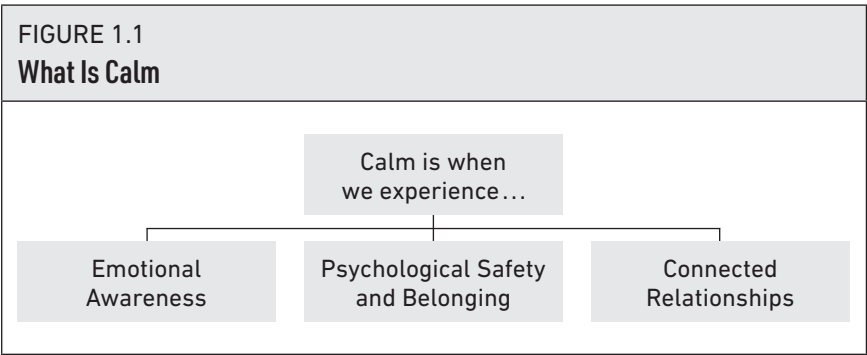
In a calmer classroom, students are engaged; trauma-informed practices are applied; there is a balance between empathy and accountability; and adults and children apply strategies to stay emotionally regulated.

Intentionally cultivating a classroom of calm begins within. Calm is a choice. It requires us to be emotionally aware of what is within our locus of control and what is not. You cannot eradicate poverty in the school community or change a poorly managed school. In fact, in many cases,

there is a lot that is out of your control. There will always be a lot of hallway chatter. It is often negative and toxic. Empower yourself by clarifying what is within your control and barricade yourself from the rest of the noise around you.

What Does It Mean to Cultivate a Classroom of Calm?

To begin with, we will define what it means to *feel* calm (see Figure 1.1). Calm is a state of feeling relaxed, at ease, or without stress. In order to achieve this feeling, we must be aware of our own feelings and understand how to manage our emotions. We need to feel a sense of belonging and experience human connection. Without having these basic human needs met, it is impossible to remain calm at school or in our personal relationships (Won et al., 2018).



Keep in mind, our sense of calm is constantly changing. We can go from feeling calm one minute to feeling completely overwhelmed the next. Some days we feel calmer than others, and in some environments, it is easier to remain calm, while in other spaces, it is almost impossible to feel calm. What feels calm to me is different from what feels calm to you. Therefore, cultivating a calmer classroom is not achievable without

practice. Calmer classrooms are cultivated through intentional teacher moves. We cannot remove stress from our schools entirely, but we can intentionally work to cultivate calm by using specific tools and strategies inside our classroom walls (see Figure 1.2). In this way, we practice cultivating calm to create classrooms that are conducive to learning.

Throughout this book, we will further examine what it means to *feel* and *practice* calm. We will examine various strategies and tools to help you choose calm and cultivate calm among your students. Calm students equal calm educators.

FIGURE 1.2
Toolbox for Calm



Anything but Calm

If many of us agree that a calmer classroom is ideal, why is it so hard to maintain a sense of calm in our schools? All too often educators are expected to show up and teach in environments where staff mental health

is not prioritized and student mental health is not taken seriously. Our profession is often unpredictable and filled with chaos. The demands placed on educators are at an all-time high, and many of us have experienced burnout over the last few years (Kasalak & Dagyar, 2022). Now we are seeing record numbers of teachers quitting the profession or counting down their years until retirement.

One of the things that we know about the human brain is that when pushed too far, performance suffers. If we want to cultivate calmer classrooms, we have to be aware of how detrimental it is to remain in a state of frustration. “When we pile more on, we falsely believe more will be accomplished” (Thomas et al., 2019). All too often we place new initiatives, new programs, and new requirements on teachers. It builds up and piles on in a way that interrupts the sense of calm. We know that there is a direct correlation between a teacher’s sense of calm and the creation of a calmer classroom.

When you open your email and feel inundated with more to-dos or unwanted invites to meetings, when you find yourself unexpectedly engaging in a frustrating conversation with a colleague, or when a student disrupts your lesson, a physiological reaction in your body occurs. Your brain literally secretes hormones to tell your nervous system to fight, flight, or freeze. What we do next has a lot to do with our ability to return to calm. Without strategies, a plan, or an understanding of why we feel this way, we can suffer for a much longer time.

How do teachers possibly cultivate calm within their classrooms when it feels like many schools are falling apart? In this book, we will not diminish burnout felt by teachers (Kasalak & Dagyar, 2022), but we will focus on what we can manage inside any classroom. Let’s begin to examine the science behind calm and the best approaches for maintaining a calm classroom.

Emotional Awareness Cultivates Calm

Right now, take a moment to select two words that describe how you’re feeling as we begin to explore what it means to cultivate a classroom of

calm. This self-awareness practice is essential in order to notice what it feels like when we are calm and when we are not. By simply naming how we are feeling, we begin the process of regulating our emotions (Kopelman-Rubin et al., 2020). Not only is it an important tool for reflection, but being able to name our emotions helps us realize that we can often feel two opposing emotions at the same time—such as calm and unsure, happy and nervous, or sad and hopeful. When we realize that our emotions are normal, we are better able to manage them, which is the first step to cultivating a calm classroom.

When we talk about creating calmer classrooms, we really need to understand the connection between calmer classrooms and social emotional learning (SEL). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social emotional learning as “an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals” (CASEL, 2015). This also requires an ability to feel and show empathy for others, which comes from our own emotional awareness.

Emotional awareness specifically refers to our ability to recognize and manage emotions. When we are self-aware, we are able to name our strengths and understand our challenges and therefore check in with ourselves to assess how we’re feeling. Inside a calm classroom, we are able to support students through a big emotion and help them reflect on their feelings in a way that validates their experience.

We can all relate to the experience of something happening to us that causes our bodies to feel an uncomfortable sensation. When I am triggered by an unwanted comment, an unfavorable criticism, or a student behavior that is disruptive, my body takes the emotion inward and creates a sensation I feel in my neck and shoulders. Children and adults need to understand that when our bodies suspect a threat, we react by releasing stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline (Rosanbalm et al., 2021). Even if we are not in physical danger, our body immediately goes into protective

mode, and our thoughts, emotions, and physical reactions are just as strong as if we were being harmed. Simply put, our initial reaction is often followed by subsequent emotions, referred to as meta-emotions (Gottman et al., 1996). It is important to understand that this initial sensation is not your fault; it is your body's natural response to an unwanted event.

Without managing our body's response system, elevated stress hormones can affect our ability to sleep, cause us headaches and stomach pains, and even increase feelings of anxiety and defensiveness (Rosanbalm et al., 2021). This reaction also greatly affects our ability to concentrate, and we may find ourselves feeling more impulsive or forgetful. We can apply strategies when we first experience a reaction to a perceived threat, but this requires us to be emotionally aware of our triggers and big feelings. Intentionally pausing when a trigger occurs helps us begin to settle the elevated hormones so that we can return to a state of calm.

When we get angry, a group of cells in our brains are activated, but new research has helped us understand that it takes only 90 seconds for that circuit to relax if we choose calm (Bolte Taylor, 2021). Taking a meta-moment is an intentional pause that allows us to think before reacting; the key is to notice how you feel and become more self-aware as to why you are upset (Brackett, 2020). When you stop and apply intentional strategies, you are more likely to reclaim your sense of calm rather than spiral into a dark place. Our bodies feel this reaction for extended periods of time because we are choosing to repeat the thought or ruminate on what is upsetting when we should be intentionally choosing to let it go.

In order to cultivate calm, we must understand that safe and supportive learning environments are not free of frustrating moments. At times, student behavior will disappoint you and potentially rob you of your sense of calm. School policies may frustrate you and rob you of your sense of calm. Parents may criticize you and rob you of your sense of calm. Instead of wishing for your body to stop reacting when you are triggered, embrace your body's response system because it is a signal that you feel unsafe. Then apply an intentional strategy to regulate yourself and choose calm. We can use intentional strategies to cultivate emotional awareness.

1. Q-TIP

We have to give ourselves space and validate that we all have feelings and experiences that can be frustrating when working with students who display unfavorable behavior. We must learn to not take it personally. There is a great acronym for this, Q-TIP, which is “Quit Taking It Personally.” If the end goal is to cultivate calm, even in difficult situations, we need to recognize when we are taking something personally.

2. Know Your Triggers

We have all been in situations where we started the day feeling calm and then a trigger happens. If we know the types of behaviors, interactions, or situations that tend to upset us the most, then we can overcome our initial reaction because we know what to expect from ourselves.

Pencil tapping, destroying property, eye rolling, or interruptions are all behaviors that have the potential for us to lose our sense of calm. The more our feelings escalate, the more our students around us can become escalated (Burgess et al., 2018). It’s important to understand that when unwanted behavior occurs, we have to think about intervening in a way that is safe and calm. Avoid getting in a student’s face or engaging in arguments or sarcasm or humiliation techniques as a way to deal with your frustration. If we’re being overly defensive or shouting and raising our voice, then we’re going to inevitably escalate behavior and lose calm in our classrooms.

Instead, we must think about our nonverbal cues, our tone, and our word choice. All students, regardless of behavior, deserve dignity. Remember to take a deep breath when you feel triggered so that you can respond with brief and consistent strategies rather than react in a way that causes further damage. Something as simple as remembering to breathe at the first sign of getting agitated will help you gain present-moment awareness and restore balance (Metz et al., 2013).

3. Body Scan

When we as humans are emotionally escalated, our prefrontal cortex is unable to do its job (Kopelman-Rubin et al., 2020). The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain in which we do our best thinking. When we are upset, our emotions take over and our emotional center, the limbic system, is activated. When this happens, we can lose our ability to respond, think, or act rationally and calmly.

A body scan is an effective way to calm ourselves when we are emotionally escalated. Notice how you're feeling in the present moment from the top of your head down to your toes in order to connect with the present moment (Schure et al., 2008). This practice is a popular and effective form of guided meditation. When I engage in a body scan, I start at the top of my head and work slowly down to my toes to understand how I'm feeling and connect with the sensations in my body. I notice tension being held in my neck and shoulders. In order to release it, I intentionally put breath into the area of tension, without judging myself for how I am feeling.

4. Rose, Bud, Thorn

One strategy to build emotional awareness is “Rose, Bud, Thorn,” which is a popular tool in many education circles to reflect on areas of “success, potential growth, and opportunities for improvement” (University of Colorado–Boulder, 2022, para. 1). A *rose* is essentially a success or something that you're excited about or proud of. A *thorn* is a challenge in your life. It is something that you are currently struggling with, or it is a perceived difficulty. A *bud* is a potential that you see—whether it is something that you feel hopeful about or a belief that a particular situation will get better. This strategy is helpful for teachers who want to engage in reflection and create a sense of inner calm; it acknowledges that we can be both proud and anxious or hopeful and worried at the same time. This is also useful when working with students to help them cultivate their own emotional awareness.

Psychological Safety and Belonging

Psychological safety and belonging are basic human needs, and they lay the foundation for a calmer classroom (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Studies show a sense of belonging is an important factor in students' learning and academic attainment. "When students do not feel accepted and connected at school, they are more likely to drop out of school" (Won et al., 2018). In order to open students up to learning, they must feel psychologically safe at school, which comes from our need for relatedness (Won et al., 2018). Students' perception of the classroom culture, which is often based on their relationship with their teacher, is strongly correlated to student self-esteem and mastery of goals (Patrick et al., 2007). Therefore, being accepted and feeling valued affects motivation.

Self-regulated behavior fosters a sense of calm. Students' efforts to regulate their behavior are closely linked to their perception of how much they are included and valued in the classroom (Won et al., 2018). Therefore, if we want to cultivate calm, we must prioritize psychological safety and belonging.

There is a significant correlation between educator beliefs and expectations and how students perform (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). What we believe about our students directly correlates with what students believe about themselves, which affects their self-efficacy. Rosenthal and Jacobsen first introduced this as the Pygmalion Effect in 1968 to demonstrate the impact of teacher expectations on student performance. Researchers at an elementary school measured teacher beliefs about students and student performance, and they used a pretest to measure actual student achievement. Then, without actually using the results of the test, they randomly told teachers which of their students were potentially gifted. Teachers believed they were high scoring, regardless of their score on the pretest. Several months later, data revealed that those students scored significantly higher on the posttest compared to their peers. According to Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968), success can be attributed to their teachers' belief in their potential.

This experience still holds value today. It is no surprise that teachers have a great influence over their students. Therefore, it is essential to approach this work with an asset-based mindset. Our students can sense how we feel about them, and their performance is positively or negatively affected as a result.

Engaging in hallway chatter or griping about students fosters negativity. While everyone needs to vent or get things off their chest at times, staff who engage in conversations that reflect negativity toward students are essentially establishing a culture of failure. Focusing on what is not working fosters more negativity. This lack of asset-based thinking disrupts our sense of calm.

The language we use with students matters too. Our word choice, body language, and overall affect translates into messages received by students. Students are empowered when their teachers tell them that they are capable and valued. But they can also feel it when these words are no longer genuine. It is important to set high expectations for students rather than focusing on what they cannot do yet.

We can use intentional strategies to cultivate psychological safety and belonging.

1. Model Vulnerability

Resilience is built during times of uncertainty. We learn more about strengths, skills, and abilities during times of stress. This is an opportunity for us to model how to handle stress, change, and challenges. It is OK to not be OK all of the time. It is not practical to think that you will always remain calm. Be willing to speak to people who make you feel safe about the areas in life in which you are struggling. Without oversharing, it is OK to tell your students when you are feeling a little off or having a bad day. You can model this form of emotional awareness and build bonds in the meantime. This will help them to see you as a human with emotions just like them.

2. Celebrate Multilingual Learners

I once overheard a teacher say, “I do not let them speak Spanish in my room. I have no idea what they are saying, and we cannot have that.” While this teacher did not mean harm, she was essentially denouncing the students’ culture and placing a higher value on the dominant language rather than celebrating the linguistic gifts of her students.

Teachers do not need to be bilingual in order to affirm linguistic differences. Instead, allow language differences to be an asset in the classroom. This can be done in various ways, and any effort to honor a student’s first language is a step in the right direction. Teachers can allow students to share their ideas in their first language first before writing or speaking in English. Student translators can help with this too. Students should be offered opportunities to write in their first language as a way to process information and as a way to further develop their linguistic gifts. Most important, students should be comfortable using their first language to converse with other students or speak in the language that feels socially comfortable and safe.

There is no evidence to support an English-only mindset. In fact, research shows bilingualism improves executive functioning skills like attention, increases creative problem solving, and improves working memory (Grote et al., 2021). The evidence for maintaining and further developing a student’s first language not only improves memory and learning but also demonstrates the value placed on a student’s culture and identity (Vue et al., 2017).

When I was a principal, 78 percent of my students spoke English as a second language. There was a long-standing tradition to teach English only at the school. Over time, students lost their ability to access their first language, eventually making it hard to communicate within their own families, who primarily spoke Spanish. Our data reflected the need for change, but more important, from an equity standpoint, our students deserved a different approach.

As a result, we started a bilingual/biliteracy program and began to honor their first language rather than diminish it. While it is not always

possible to make programmatic changes in your school—to move from monolingual teaching to bilingual teaching—each teacher can make small changes that make a huge impact. It is important to reflect on your current mindset and practices to ensure that students’ linguistic assets are seen as a gift rather than something that they need to hide.

3. Affirm Identity Differences

While tolerance of one another is important, it is not enough. Tolerance implies a willingness to put up with someone who is different from us. Affirming someone’s identity requires empathizing, engaging, and connecting with a person who is different from us. It is impossible to create a sense of belonging for all students if only some students are valued (Won et al., 2018).

Race, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and disability status are part of our identity. Identity also includes how we see ourselves, what we think of ourselves, our beliefs, personality traits, how we express ourselves, and more. It is important to understand our own identity. In order to genuinely foster belonging in our classrooms, we must be emotionally engaged adults (Arslan & Allen, 2021).

First, we must understand our own positionality: our social position and power. Our positionality affects how we view the world and how we interact with others. We diminish a sense of belonging if we utilize our positionality as educators to control our students, engage in a power dynamic, or subconsciously determine who belongs based on our own personal identity, beliefs, and preferences (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

If we truly want to create a culture of inclusivity, we must also consider how our own biases have the potential to affect our beliefs about students (Vue et al., 2017). Most people are scared to talk about biases because they think their biases make them bad people. This is untrue. Even good people have biases, but instead of shying away from our biases, we need to be honest about them so that we do not engage in harmful actions as a result.

Our brains like patterns, and it is often these patterns that have the potential to cultivate a bias. For example, as a child I was sick a lot and

required the medical care of several doctors. Based on the pattern of my experiences, I developed a mental picture of a “doctor” as an old white man. As I have intentionally sought to diversify who I receive medical care from today, my mental picture of a doctor has evolved quite a bit.

We might have mental pictures of “Advanced Placement” students or “disruptive” students based on a limited view or lack of experience. Being blind to our biases will only perpetuate racism and discriminatory practices. “Beliefs alone do not result in disparate outcomes” (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). It is our actions based on our beliefs that cause harm. Simply put, if we do not examine how our biases may be negatively impacting typically marginalized students, we will continue the cycle of discrimination in our schools. Antibias education is an enthusiastic acceptance of all children and their families. This includes how we interact with one another with the intentional effort to eradicate prejudice and “the harmful emotional and psychological impacts on children from societal prejudice and bias” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2021, para. 1).

If we cannot admit our biases, we fail to work on understanding how these biases are shaping our judgments—often unintentionally. If we open ourselves up to exploring the biases we have and how they may have been formed, we can widen our lens and reduce narrow thinking toward others. The key is to ensure we are not acting on our biases or further perpetuating them.

Connected Relationships

Have you ever stopped to think about how your interactions with one student may be affecting another? Both positive and negative interactions elicit a ripple of emotions, but it’s not just between the two people interacting. A positive interaction between you and another student is felt by all students because of something called social contagion (Burgess et al., 2018). In fact, social contagion also explains why we might feel upset while witnessing an argument or negative interaction even if the incident has nothing to do with us.

Every child deserves to have a positive, trusting relationship with at least one adult at school. Human connection is a basic need, and without it, it is impossible to experience calm (Zhang et al., 2022). We need human connection in order to be whole. The culture inside a classroom has a lot to do with achievement as well. If a student believes their teacher likes them, they perform better (Burgess et al., 2018). If they believe their teacher enjoys teaching, they will perform better (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). If the class community is built on human connection, all students will perform better (Li & Lerner, 2013).

The research goes further to note that teachers who are under an enormous amount of stress will pass that stress on to their students (Burgess et al., 2018); therefore, negative connections can be created. It is reasonable to conclude that teachers' emotions toward teaching have a profound effect on students' emotions and readiness to learn. Contagion plays a huge role in our schools and classrooms. As adults, if we are constantly around negative teammates or we are spending time engaging in damaging hallway chatter, we lose our sense of calm and we pass that negativity on to our students. In order to cultivate calm, we must be careful about who we are spending time with inside and outside school. As humans we are influenced by one another, and our moods are directly translated to our students (King, 2020).

Connected positive relationships—that is, the staff-to-staff, staff-to-student, and student-to-student relationships—are responsible for our ability to experience calm. However, many teachers wonder how they will have time to connect with every student every day. There is good news! Social contagion teaches us that we do not have to have a personal connection to every student every day for a positive connection to be felt (Perry, 2002). For example, correcting a student with dignity will have a positive influence on the rest of the students in the classroom. Small interactions like smiling at a student from across the room will be enough to send a message that they are seen. Your facial expressions and body language can also have a positive influence on the connected relationships in your classroom. Cultivating connected relationships cultivates interdependence in

the classroom and plays a large role in the success achieved by the entire class as a whole (Perry, 2002).

We can use intentional strategies to cultivate connected relationships between staff and students and between peers.

1. The Power of Being Seen

When I initially read the article “The Power of Being Seen,” I realized the concept of “seeing” all students is simple (Korbey, 2017). We need to know our students, and that goes beyond knowing about their academic achievements or the scores they received on the latest assessment. If emotion and learning are truly connected, then we must understand our students as real people with real interests, backgrounds, and emotions. During a staff meeting, during a team meeting, or on your own, turn your student roster(s) into a checklist. Check off which students the members of your team know by name. Go further to identify three things you want to know about every student, such as their personal interests and their family dynamic. You can consider information such as the following:

- Do we know this student’s favorite type of music?
- Does this student have any siblings?
- Is this student involved in any clubs or sports?

Using a checklist format, mark off which questions you can answer about your students or find out who in your department knows that personal information about each student. It is fascinating to see which students are well known and which are not. Compare notes with people who also teach your students. The power of being seen is about intentionally noticing our students, understanding who they are as people outside the academic setting, and creating meaningful connections.

2. Greeting Students at the Door

It’s not abnormal for us to feel overwhelmed by the lack of time we have each day or the imposing to-do list that never seems to end. As a result, we may want to catch up on everything that feels urgent. While that

is certainly understandable, this often means we are at our desks sending that one quick email rather than setting up the conditions for engagement.

Something as simple as greeting students at the door (i.e., greeting each student by name, with a high-five or a handshake) produces incredible results (Lynass & Walker, 2021). Teachers can expect an increase in engagement by 20 percent between students who are greeted each day compared with those who are not. The data also points out a 9 percent reduction in disruptive behaviors as a result of making this one change (Cook et al., 2018).

Students need to develop a sense of self. Teach them the power of affirming statements that build confidence and self-awareness. For younger students, I would suggest greeting students outside the classroom each morning. Hold up a full-length mirror for students as they enter the classroom and ask them to verbally commit to a kindness affirmation while looking at their reflection. Affirmations might include “I am kind,” “I am ready to learn,” “I am a good friend,” or “I am ready to listen.” Of course, these will need to be modeled and practiced. This will set the tone for the day.

With all students, it is important that they are greeted by name. Make eye contact with your students as they enter and consider a nonverbal greeting such as a high-five or fist bump. Insert words of encouragement such as “Ryan, great to see you!” This simple shift does not take time away from your lesson—it will buy you time on your task in the long run. The act of setting the tone at the door will yield surprising benefits. This simple strategy creates a culture in which young people feel valued.

3. Community Circles

Cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham (2021) argues that teachers should focus more on using questions. He describes how questions light up our brains and help us get curious about what we are learning. Too often, we start class with something that sounds like this: “Come in, take out your notebook, and write ‘warm-up’ at the top.” While we need routines

and structure, this approach instantly strips the fun out of learning (Willingham, 2021).

Community circles offer opportunities to build connections among students by making the learning personal. For younger students, it is important to start with simple questions such as “What is your favorite food?” This will get students familiar with the process of taking turns and listening to each other. As your class becomes more familiar with the process, you can ask empathy skill-building questions such as “What do you do when someone gets hurt?” For older students, asking questions related to pop culture, their preferences, or their interests will get them talking.

4. Correct with Care

Throughout every part of your day, be mindful of how you correct students when they make mistakes. If they understand that mistakes are a part of learning and risks are celebrated, then being called on will not feel so scary.

One of the most effective ways to develop a growth mindset in students is to affirm students with positive statements rather than overcorrecting (Bauer et al., 2009). Giving students opportunities to reflect on what they did well is a powerful way to open up a student’s brain to feedback and learning. Students are motivated when their past successes are affirmed, which leads to higher self-efficacy when compared to students who receive critical feedback without ample praise (Chung et al., 2021).

As much as possible and as often as possible, allow students to edit, revise, and upgrade their work so that they stay motivated during the learning process. If every assignment is for a grade, or if grades are definitive, it can be hard to bounce back and remain engaged. Students will not see the value in the learning process if a grade remains final and there is never an opportunity to learn from feedback.

When we feel calm, we are at ease. But we know that classrooms are complex and complicated, and oftentimes we are expected to perform under pressure. That is why we have to intentionally cultivate calm. There are

times when being upset is warranted, and we cannot expect ourselves to remain calm at all times. That would be an unfair and unrealistic expectation placed on us. However, we can learn to be calm under pressure.

Throughout the next four chapters, we will examine ways to practice cultivating calm in your classroom. We will examine the research necessary to empower us to remain calm or return to calm when we feel escalated. We will learn practical strategies to help cultivate calmer students. With intentional practice, we can create calmer classrooms and schools to make teaching and learning enjoyable again. Classrooms can be places of healing if we choose calm.



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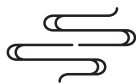
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About the Author



Meredith McNerney is a former principal, speaker, author, and teacher. She formerly served as the principal of a Title I school of nearly 900 students in Montgomery County, Maryland, where 85 percent of students qualified for free meals and 78 percent spoke English as their second language. Before taking over in 2016, her school was among the lowest performing across 134 elementary schools in the district. Under her leadership, her school was ranked as a 4-star school according to the Maryland School Report Card, most notably due to student achievement and growth data.

Meredith and her team utilized an integrated approach to school reform to maximize structures and processes, including accountability frameworks and best practices for promoting social-emotional health while raising student achievement. Reform efforts included teaching students in their first language through a Spanish bilingual/biliteracy program.

As a trained mindfulness coach, Meredith led her school to implement in-person and online mindfulness practices, including mindful spaces and daily schoolwide habits. Today Meredith works with schools and businesses across the country to teach others how to cultivate calmer environments by implementing trauma-informed care. She also teaches

courses for educator recertification on mental health literacy, creating a trauma-informed school culture and climate, and welcoming newcomers with a trauma-sensitive mindset.

Meredith earned a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from East Carolina University and completed her Master of Education as a reading specialist at Towson University. She is currently in a doctoral program at Northeastern University, where she studies the mental health of Black and Brown educators. Meredith lives in Ijamsville, Maryland, with her husband Mark, who is a middle school teacher, and two children, Danielle and Kaitlyn. Visit her website at www.choosecalm.com.

Related ASCD Resources

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers in parentheses).

Amplify Student Voices: Equitable Practices to Build Confidence in the Classroom by AnnMarie Baines, Diana Medina, and Caitlin Healy (#122061)

Better Behavior Practices (Quick Reference Guide) by Dominique Smith, Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and Lee Ann Jung (#QRG120049)

Building a Positive and Supportive Classroom (Quick Reference Guide) by Julie Causton and Kate MacLeod (#QRG120098)

The Classroom Behavior Manual: How to Build Relationships with Students, Share Control, and Teach Positive Behaviors by Scott Ervin (#122033)

From Behaving to Belonging: The Inclusive Art of Supporting Students Who Challenge Us by Julie Causton and Kate MacLeod (#121011)

From Stressed Out to Stress Wise: How You and Your Students Can Navigate Challenges and Nurture Vitality by Abby Wills, Anjali Deva, and Niki Saccareccia (#123004)

Research-Based Strategies to Ignite Student Learning: Insights from Neuroscience and the Classroom, Revised and Expanded Edition by Judy Willis and Malana Willis (#120029)

Teach for Authentic Engagement by Lauren Porosoff (#123045)

We Belong: 50 Strategies to Create Community and Revolutionize Classroom Management by Laurie Barron and Patti Kinney (#122002)

Why Are We Still Doing That? Positive Alternatives to Problematic Teaching Practices by Pérsida Himmele and William Himmele (#122010)

For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to www.ascd.org. You can search the complete archives of *Educational Leadership* at www.ascd.org/el. To contact us, send an email to member@ascd.org or call 1-800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600.