THE EMPATHETIC CLASSROOM

How a Mental Health Mindset Supports Your Students —*and You*

Maria Munro-Schuster

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LIST OF ACTIVITIES

Note: *These reflections and activities are for your own use—alone, with students, or with fellow educators. None are intended to be handed out to students for their independent use.*

INTRODUCTION: TAKING A LEAP

I had no plans to become a teacher. Similarly, I had no intention of becoming a counselor. As is the case for many people, there was already a seed growing within me long before I took notice. My own odd introduction to the teaching world was as a moose.

Consider the scene: I was a shy thirteen-year-old, and I had heard through the grapevine that there was a moose costume available to anyone who wanted to talk about the risks of smoking to grade-schoolers. Having long given up hope of winning the popularity jackpot, I threw caution to the wind. Something compelled me to order the moose. I was a gangly kid weighing less than a hundred pounds, and this moose arrived in a box the size of a golf cart. From the moment I put the bobbling brown head on my shoulders and looked in the mirror at my massive brown snout, cartoonish eyes, and floppy antlers, I knew I could do anything as a moose.

I spent weeks perfecting my loping moose-like walk, saying "Hello, everybody!" in my deep moose-y voice, and learning how to blow my nose like any good health-conscious moose would. And yet, when it came time to walk into my first classroom of second graders as "Mo," I initially felt as if I might pass out from sheer terror or heat exhaustion.

"A moose!" said two dozen little voices at once. Someone asked if they could hug me. Another kid gently pulled my tail. Little fingers reached out to touch my fuzzy brown tufted fur. I didn't realize I would be such a tactile experience! All eyes were on me as they waited for me to speak. After what felt like a long beat of silence, my new moose voice emerged. "Hello, everybody! My name is Mo," I said.

Almost instantly my fears disappeared. I felt something I'd never experienced before—I began to connect with both the whole group *and* each individual, all at once. There was so much I noticed from behind my big goofy eyes—who smiled, who looked terrified, who was curious yet

cautious. I soon realized I couldn't just go on autopilot and teach my lesson. I had to consider *who* I was teaching. If what I was going to say or do would make any difference, I would have to focus not only on the lesson but on the individuals.

Twenty years later, sans moose costume, I sat in a circle with my eighth grade English class, waiting for someone—anyone—to speak. All eyes were downcast, as if counting the gray flecks in the carpet. School had just started a few weeks ago, and something about this year felt different. I didn't know if it was me, my students, or pretty much everything about life as we knew it. It was 2019, and my students looked at me with the exhaustion of a bunch of sixty-year-olds.

Though I could identify with many of the stressors my soon-to-be high schoolers were experiencing—parents, peer interactions, social pressures, concerns about the future—their burdens were also unique to their generation. Many of them grew up as digital natives, habitually exploring a world apart from the physical one, often on their own. As well-meaning as many of their caring adult figures were, these kids had exposure to sights, sounds, and feedback that most of us "elders" were unprepared to address. In part because of this, my students were keenly aware of the boiling tension of a world that was experiencing seismic political shifts; they were navigating differing views on identity and culture; they were witness to violence captured on the phones of teens like themselves—and sometimes directed at their fellow teens; and they were trying to figure out what the future meant for them if the climate changed. Little did we know that we were also mere moments away from a global pandemic.

Not to mention, amidst all of this, their fourteen-year-old human brains were still using the amygdala (an emotion-oriented region of the brain) for much of their processing rather than the planning- and decision-oriented prefrontal cortex. No wonder the world beyond the classroom—the one I *thought* I was preparing them for—looked like an awful lot to handle.

And so I finally decided to pose a question that had been sitting in my gut. It was not related to the text we were supposed to be discussing.

"Raise your hand if you feel unseen."

A few chairs squeaked as bodies shifted. Several hands started to cautiously slide up, and some eyebrows arched in surprise at seeing a hand raised across the circle where they hadn't expected it. Even the one kid who talked all the time had his hand up.

In that moment, I faced a choice: address this monumental need and wade into an unknown depth of muddy water with my students, or keep on keepin' on. I was feeling my own anxiety creep up that year, so keeping to the playbook felt safe and convenient. But I also realized that encountering the unknown together might help us all live more freely.

Why We Need a Mental Health Mindset in Classrooms

I was not alone in facing a mounting crisis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Division of Adolescent and School Health was among the first to report what I believe many teachers were already feeling deep in their bones: students were drowning. The CDC's *Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary and Trends Report 2013–2023* found that in 2023, more than 40 percent of school-age individuals experienced feelings of sadness or hopelessness for at least two weeks. Students reported decreased interest in familiar activities, increased use of alcohol and drugs, and increased experiences of violence. Two in ten students considered attempting suicide, and one in ten students did make an attempt. Groups that were most affected included LGBTQ+ students and girls. Prevalence was high in students across all racial and ethnic groups.

The glimmer of hope within the CDC's report came as a call to action: Student hopelessness decreases when they feel connected to the adults in their schools (Steiner et al. 2019). That's an easy fix, right? Teachers tend to be naturally caring individuals, after all, so the solution is already at work. We simply need to connect *more*. The flawed assumption here, though, is that to *care* about someone is to know how to *connect* with them. Caring is the output of one. Connection, on the other hand, requires maintained output and reception from a whole community of people.

While care and connection are not identical, they are closely related. The trait of caring about others is foundational for learning the concrete skills and constructive strategies inherent in connection. These are the skills that mental health professionals learn so they can create a safe and secure relationship with their clients, and they are the skills this book guides you to practice in your classroom so that both you and your students can find your feet on steadier ground.

Your Mental Health Responsibilities as a Teacher

You are not alone in addressing student mental health. Developing a mental health mindset and implementing it in the classroom does not (and must not) equate to providing therapy, and it does not replace the need for trained mental health professionals. Educators and the mental health community must work collaboratively in our current high-need environment.

Educators and parents are on the front line of children's mental health, so deepening our own understanding of human connection is of the utmost importance to providing access to the support students may need. Prominent scholarship on teachers' mental health responsibilities suggests an emphasis on teachers as *promoters* of mental health, *collaborators* with other mental health professionals to implement targeted interventions, and *supporters* who refer students who indicate higher levels of need (Franklin et al. 2012). If and when issues arise that go beyond your role, it's crucial to seek the support of a counselor at your school or another mental health professional.

In most states, educators are mandatory reporters. This means it is your legal responsibility to immediately report any indication of a child's abuse or neglect, by any person, to the authorities. You do not need to see evidence of these acts; you only need to suspect them. Review your state's requirements and laws and visit childwelfare.gov for more information on how to report child abuse and neglect.

A New Way to Teach

It was that school year in 2019, with that class of eighth graders, when I decided I would consider mental health—that of my students and myself—above all. I couldn't see the point in discussing a beloved book if students couldn't feel their own heartbeats or notice the warmth in their own hands. They were disconnected from their own minds and bodies, and from each other. Their expressions exposed their constant fear of judgment at the slightest misstep. They were afraid to laugh too loudly or to accidentally

let a tear roll down their cheek. How could we learn and grow if we did not address our humanity?

That year of teaching also brought to the surface something else I couldn't ignore anymore—a desire to dig deeper into the world of mental health. To me, it seemed something had been missed in my foundational education courses, and I wanted to know how mental health training could change my experience of teaching and interacting with young people. I returned to the classroom, this time as a student in a two-year graduate counseling program.

When I reflect on my years as a teacher, I can now see the towering stack of mental health issues I faced every day. I remember ten-year-old Cade standing on his desk, crying and screaming like a tiger. The time I felt a hot slap across my face from eight-year-old Buck. Finding fourteen-year-old Sarah's artwork in my grading pile with black and red tears on a girl's face. Reading an essay about the death of a beloved dad by twelve-year-old Micah. Noticing my most talkative student fall silent when another classmate brought up suicide—and knowing his older brother died by suicide at the age the student is now. And I can remember feeling helpless.

The State of Mental Health Training for Teachers

Training for US teachers to address the skills of connection tends to fall short. On average, higher education teacher training programs require courses in child psychology and child development. They occasionally offer additional elective courses addressing topics such as trauma and student mental health. Even within pre-service training specific to mental health, the content often covers mental health concepts in broad terms rather than providing practical relational skills and practice (Brown et al. 2019). Think about what might look different in schools if educators were trained in what to do when a student believes they are a failure, or how to work with a student who has difficulties at home, or how to connect to a student who doesn't seem to care about school. All these situations have a significant impact on a teacher's ability to teach and on all students' abilities to learn.

More recent efforts to train teachers have been focused on suicide or crisis-related mental health concerns. Within US schools, it was only in 2007 that the nation's first model for suicide prevention training for teachers

began in Tennessee after the Jason Flatt Act passed. With support from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, as of 2024, twenty-one states had passed a version of the act, which requires two hours of youth suicide awareness and prevention training each year. Since 2008, courses such as Mental Health First Aid have provided training for educators to "recognize and respond to signs and symptoms of mental health and substance use challenges as well as how to provide initial support until they are connected with appropriate professional help" (National Council for Mental Well-being, n.d.), and continuing education offerings now include a variety of well-being-related courses.

All these efforts are steps in the right direction. But while a crisis does need timely and skillful attention, focusing *only* on mental health crises can lead us to miss everyday interactions at school that also deserve our attention. A holistic mental health mindset is about how we take care of ourselves as teachers, how we regard our students, how we talk to and about them, how we address "problems," and how we manage our classrooms. These seemingly mundane aspects of a school day impact our students' and our own well-being in significant ways. Mental health awareness is not just for a crisis but about the details of everyday living.

Clearly, the work to make school environments sustainable and healthy places to go about being human is far from done. A 2017 report published in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review* showed that 85 percent of educators surveyed from both rural and urban schools felt they needed more mental health training (Moon, Williford, and Mendenhall). Specifically, they wanted to learn more about mental health disorders, behavior management, and social skills.

Teacher Mental Health Needs Attention Too

We've been made more aware of our students' needs, but there is also no shame in saying "What about me?" The 2023 RAND State of the American Teacher (SoT) survey asked teachers to report on indicators of well-being, including frequent job-related stress, burnout, lack of resilience, symptoms of depression, and difficulty coping with job-related stress. Out of the 1,439 K–12 teachers surveyed, 78 percent said they experienced at least one indicator and 52 percent reported two or more (Doan et al. 2023).

As educators, we have been impacted by similar forces as our students—our own personal histories, current challenges at home, health and

financial stressors, and the larger social, cultural, and political systems that affect our lives. On top of all of this, we feel the weight of expectations to hold space for our students' emotional needs *and* adhere to high curriculum standards. As if teachers have superhuman capabilities!

The response to these challenging conditions can be seen in the ever-mounting reports of teacher shortages. The 2023 SoT survey also reported that one in four teachers were considering leaving the profession, a higher rate than other types of adult employment at the time. Black and African American teachers were even more likely to leave the profession. Rates of depression for teachers were higher than among the general population (Doan et al. 2023).

Much of this exodus has happened silently. The stigma around leaving runs deep in education, where "we do it for the children" is a rallying cry. Mere thoughts of pursuing a different life can bring feelings of shame and guilt, and such thoughts seem dangerous to voice for fear of falling from a pedestal teachers never asked to be on in the first place. And this is not to mention the grief that can occur alongside feelings of failure. Yet it is only natural to consider what one has given up to teach—nights, mornings, and weekends; the ability to provide for oneself and family beyond basic necessities; opportunities to experience other passions.

Foundational Relationship Skills

Today's teachers need a mental health toolbox to serve both themselves and their students. What I learned in my counseling program became the most valuable advice I could receive as a teacher. In training as a counselor, I discovered that many of the relationship skills and concepts from contemporary psychotherapy fit seamlessly into best practice teaching methods. And they make teaching more sustainable and enjoyable.

This book will walk you through foundational therapeutic concepts that you can use in your classrooms beginning today, including attunement, attachment, validation, play, power, emotions, and change. To learn how to become a counselor is to learn how to be in relationship. This is a significant part of what teachers do too. The moment to connect with our students and ourselves has never been so critical. I will show you how.

Increasing Self-Awareness

First, to learn to connect with another person is to learn to be skillfully aware of *yourself*. This means you not only notice something, but you also know how to go about understanding and caring for it. For example, I might be *aware* that I feel anger starting to creep into my chest when a student loudly announces how stupid they find the assignment I just spent all weekend excitedly concocting. What do I *do* with this emotional information, though? If I practice skillful awareness, I can see that what appears to be anger might be rooted in embarrassment, and I can respond more helpfully. Had I just stopped at "I feel angry," I would have missed something valuable.

To practice using awareness skillfully is also to notice that judgments or voices from your past may act as critics, telling you a thought, feeling, or reaction is bad or wrong. For example, in the scenario above, I might reflexively tell myself, *You shouldn't be feeling anger about a comment a student made!* If I do find my inner dialogue becoming critical, I have learned how to remind myself of why this judgment is showing up: *My past tells me anger is not a good emotion, but adult Maria knows that anger is a part of normal human emotions. I'm not bad because I feel anger.* It's amazing how this part of me quiets down when it feels heard!

In connecting with one or many students, you will need awareness of what is going on inside yourself at the same moment that you have awareness of what you observe in your students. Our interpretation of what is going on for someone else will always be colored by our own history. Maybe, when I reassess the student's critical comment, I realize I would never have been brave enough to openly criticize my teachers. So maybe I could try approaching my student with curiosity to better understand why they chose to give feedback in this way. After all, I do want to welcome feedback. Maybe I'll even provide some new opportunities for students to offer me feedback.

My intention in this book is to support curiosity about your own self-awareness. One way I do this is by showing you what awareness looks like for me, especially as it pertains to my role as teacher. Feel free to borrow my ideas, but don't feel there is only one way to go about it. I am suggesting you find your own rhythm. And know that it's not always tidy or pretty. In your bid for connection with your students, there will be missteps. I have my own fair share. As we remind our students, our mistakes can also be our opportunities to learn.

Taking Action

I will also show you what to *do* with this awareness as a teacher. Whatever you choose to do in a given instance, you'll benefit from knowing yourself better. This will require further introspection into yourself—your personal history of relationship to self and other humans, your thought and behavior patterns, what your emotions tell you, how your body feels, and what feedback you get from others about how you present in the world. This can seem overwhelming and uncomfortable at times, but I encourage you to not shy away. I've included activities in each chapter to support your exploration and to support your students in theirs.

Doing this self-work can dredge up things you'd rather keep from the light of day. When I begin work with new clients, I remind them that things might feel like they are getting worse before they get better. This may happen for you as you encounter and engage with the concepts in this book. The memories, hopes, traumas, and feelings we hold most closely have been tucked away deep inside for a reason. Sometimes, we do not like the parts of ourselves that we see when we inspect them closely, so we'd rather pretend they're not there.

If any of this sounds like you (and by the way, it is true of many people), I recommend keeping these ideas in mind:

- **Go at a pace that works for you.** If it feels overwhelming, pause. There is no reason to rush work on the self or to compare your progress to others. Some of the best realizations can come when we step away from something for a while and come back to it—something you have probably recommended to your students!
- **Be gentle with yourself.** Remind yourself that, while you are really experienced at some things, you may be a newbie at this work. When we are new to things, we tend to make more mistakes. So, prepare yourself for going through the emotion cycle that can come with mistake making—frustration, embarrassment, anger, annoyance, disappointment. When I was a new teacher and a new counselor I did not always say or do the right things, but I have learned that I am capable of *repair*.
- **Allow yourself to acknowledge your true feelings during this process.** Maybe you think something "should" make you happy or "should" make you sad—but try to ignore the

"should" and to instead listen closely to what comes up in you when you encounter new or old parts of yourself. Our authentic emotions, no matter how out of place they might seem, are what we most need to hear from.

- **Reflect before sharing.** When we do work on the self, we sometimes want to tell others what we have learned. Be aware that sharing personal realizations with others can result in unexpected consequences. Some people might offer opinions, advice, or their own histories, or even respond in unsupportive ways to your introspection. I always ask my clients to think about what they are hoping for before they share an insight with others, and then I ask them to check back in with themselves on how they think a negative or unclear reaction might impact their perspective on what they wanted to share. When we are feeling more vulnerable, the chances to feel hurt also increase.
- **Keep in mind *why* you are on this journey.** Gaining comfort with our internal workings provides us with a path to be more resilient humans. You will learn to better interpret your body's cues. You will see how processed feelings can provide you with insights. Knowing your patterns and triggers will help you feel more prepared and less surprised. Feeling more settled with how you function can allow you to show up as you want in the world. This just feels better. And others will notice too.
- **Seek support if you need it.** In case the work suggested in this book or the circumstances of your own life lead to more questions or concerns, I've provided a guide in the appendix on how to go about finding a quality mental health professional who can support you in this process. I want you to find someone you feel comfortable with! And know this—you don't have to be at your lowest point in life to seek the support of a trained professional. There are many good reasons to talk to someone in a confidential setting, including the desire to learn more and make valuable connections about yourself; to better understand your role and patterns in relationships; to process old memories, thoughts, and feelings; or to work on skills that may have been missed earlier in life. Sometimes we need to just talk to someone to understand how we fit into the world, or we need someone to tell us we are