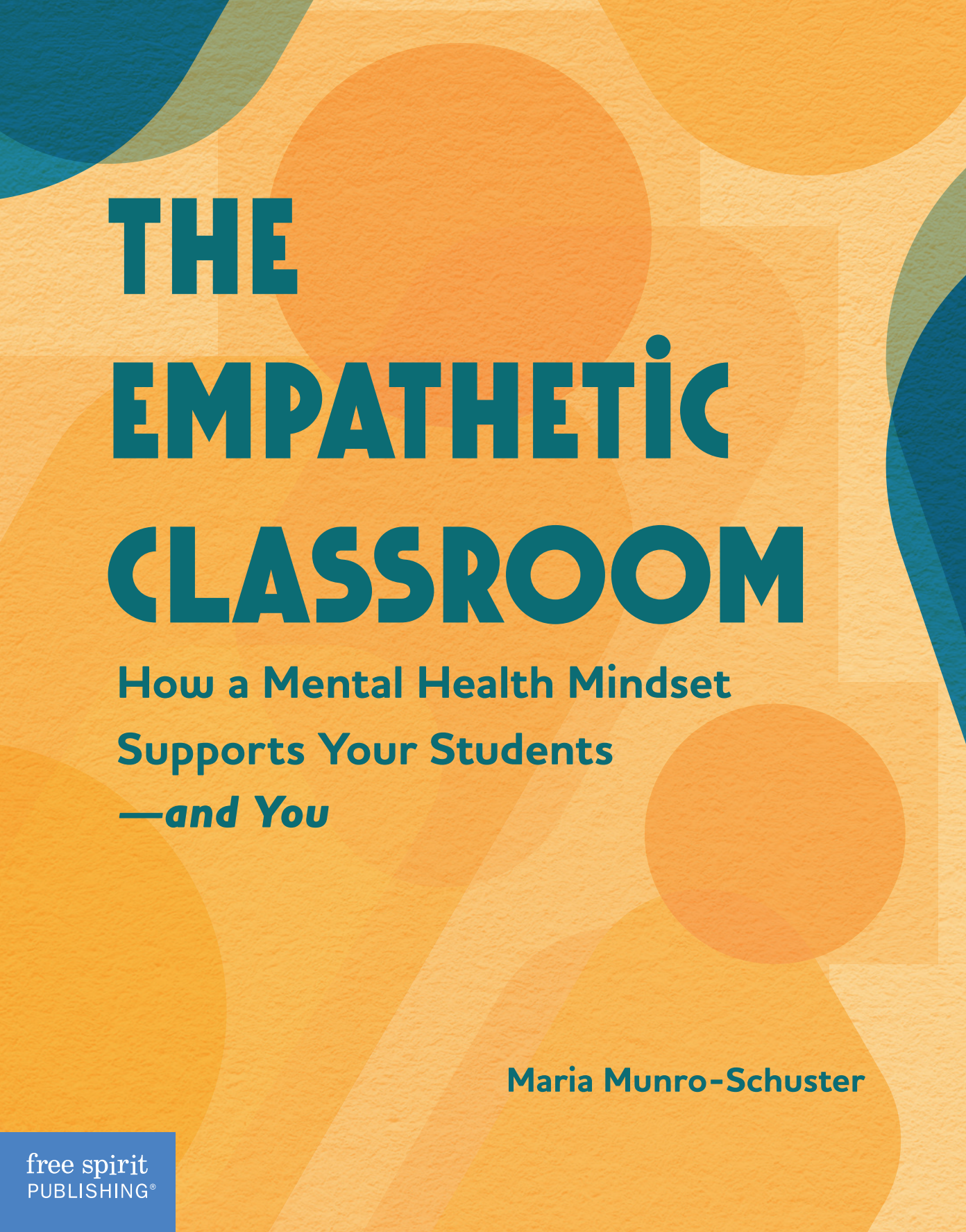




THE EMPATHETIC CLASSROOM

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

Maria Munro-Schuster

PRAISE FOR *THE EMPATHETIC CLASSROOM*

“The Empathetic Classroom is a refuge for educators. Supporting mental health in the classroom starts with the teacher, and this well-researched, comprehensive guide belongs in every educator’s library. It takes readers on a thoughtful journey to understanding emotions while providing practical, actionable activities to create an emotionally healthy environment—for both teachers and students!”

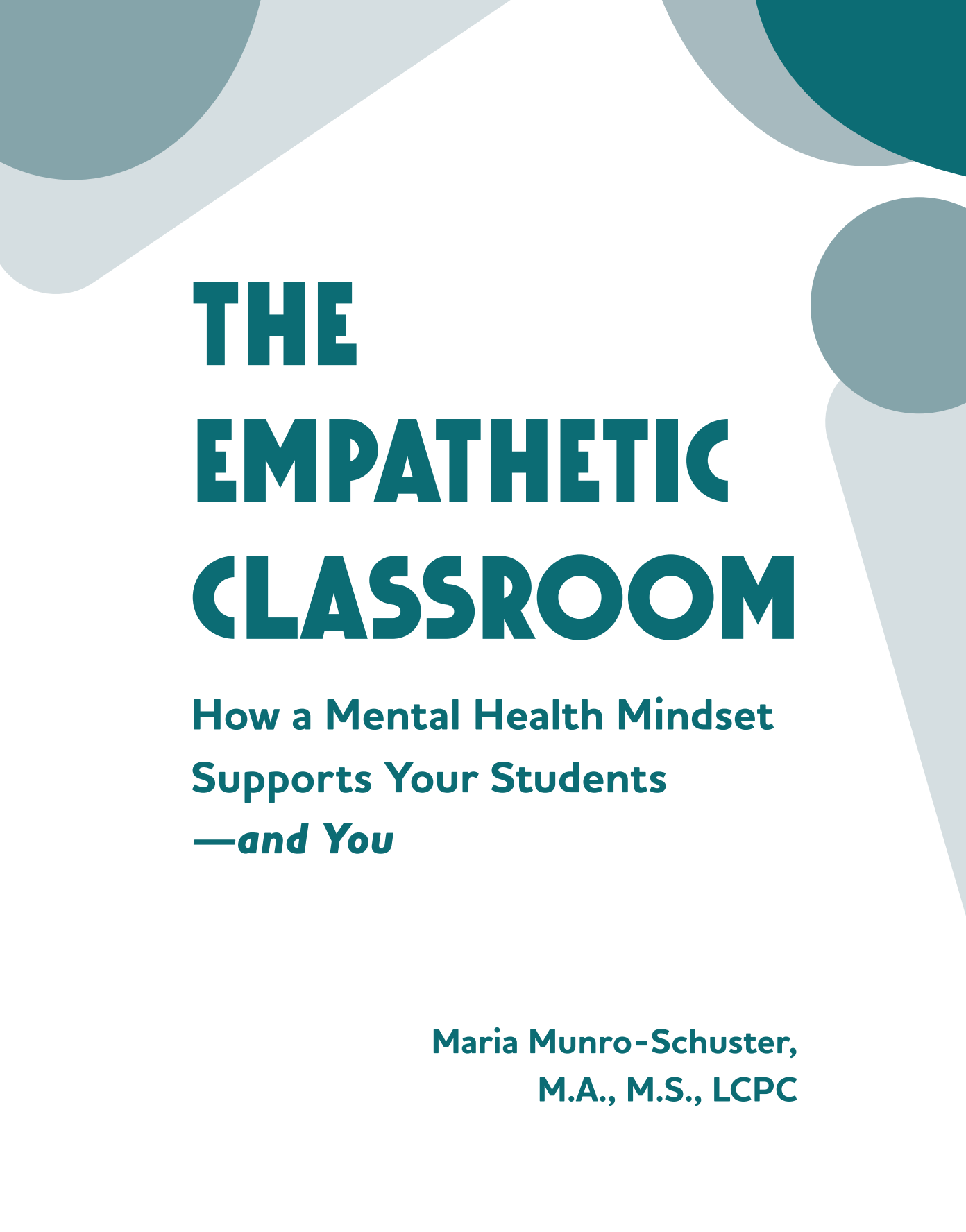
—**Kelley Peel**, author, teacher, and counselor

“As a psychologist specializing in emotional regulation for parents and caregivers, I am thrilled to see these principles and strategies applied to educational settings. This book is an invaluable resource for teachers and school administrators, offering practical tools to create emotionally safe learning environments and responsive curricula for students. I’m excited to witness the innovative ways education will evolve with this essential resource at hand.”

—**Dr. Amber Thornton**, clinical psychologist and author of *A Parent’s Guide to Self-Regulation*

“The Empathetic Classroom is a roadmap for creating classrooms rooted in empathy and care that support both student and educator mental health. Munro-Schuster highlights practical strategies teachers can use to foster student growth, mental health, and positive classroom dynamics—approaches that are simple and effective for educators at any level.”

—**Kiran Bhai**, program director of Making Caring Common at Harvard Graduate School of Education and former school counselor



THE EMPATHETIC CLASSROOM

How a Mental Health Mindset
Supports Your Students
—and You

Maria Munro-Schuster,
M.A., M.S., LCPC

Copyright © 2025 by Maria Munro-Schuster

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior written consent of the publisher, except for purposes of review, in which brief passages may be quoted, or to photocopy dedicated reproducible pages for single-classroom use.

Free Spirit, Free Spirit Publishing, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Teacher Created Materials. A complete listing of our logos and trademarks is available at freespirit.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Munro-Schuster, Maria author

Title: The empathetic classroom : how a mental health mindset supports your students-and you / Maria Munro-Schuster, , M.A., M.S., LCPC.

Description: Minneapolis, MN : Free Spirit Publishing, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024045257 (print) | LCCN 2024045258 (ebook) | ISBN 9798885549431 paperback | ISBN 9798885549448 ebook | ISBN 9798885549455 epub

Subjects: LCSH: Teachers--Mental health | Students--Mental health | Empathy--Study and teaching | Educational counseling

Classification: LCC LB2840 .M86 2025 (print) | LCC LB2840 (ebook) | DDC 371.1001/9--dc23/eng/20250404

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024045257>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024045258>

Free Spirit Publishing does not have control over or assume responsibility for author or third-party websites and their content. At the time of this book's publication, all facts and figures cited within are the most current available. All telephone numbers, addresses, and website URLs are accurate and active; all publications, organizations, websites, and other resources exist as described in this book; and all have been verified as of January 2025. If you find an error or believe that a resource listed here is not as described, please contact Free Spirit Publishing.

Disclaimer: The content of this book is intended for consultation purposes only. This book is not meant to be used, nor should it be used, to diagnose or treat any psychological condition. As a licensed professional, you are responsible for reviewing the scope of practice, including activities that are defined by law as beyond the boundaries of practice in accordance with and in compliance with your profession's standards.

Edited by Alison Behnke

Cover and interior design by Mayfly book design

Free Spirit Publishing

An imprint of Teacher Created Materials

9850 51st Avenue North, Suite 100

Minneapolis, MN 55442

(612) 338-2068

help4kids@freespirit.com

freespirit.com

Dedication

To SB, for all the small details that make life good.

CONTENTS

List of Activities	viii
Foreword by Cassie Nastase, Nick Covington, and Chris McNutt, Human Restoration Project	ix
Introduction: Taking a Leap	1
Chapter 1: Before All Else, Attune	19
Chapter 2: Know Your Unique Triggers	32
Chapter 3: Build a New Relationship with Emotions	51
Chapter 4: Validate the Emotion, Understand the Behavior	66
Chapter 5: Your Classroom as a Refuge	82
Chapter 6: Form a Secure Attachment	97
Chapter 7: Support the Change Process	113
Chapter 8: You Can Play	124
Chapter 9: Trauma Awareness	138
Chapter 10: All About Power in Schools	161
Chapter 11: How to Navigate Boundaries	184
Chapter 12: Responding to Your Intrusive Thoughts About Teaching ..	194
Conclusion: Finding Solid Ground	209
Acknowledgments	223
Appendix	225
Warning Signs of Suicide	225
How to Find Your Own Mental Health Professional	226
Recommended Resources	231
References	233
Index	237
About the Author	244

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.*

For Teachers and Students: Self-Attunement	22
For Students: The Classroom System	29
For Teachers: Identifying My Triggers	45
For Teachers: The Observation Point	49
For Teachers: Emotional Mapping	61
For Students: The Empty Chair	80
For Students and Teachers: Re-Envisioning Our Spaces	92
For Students: Self-Care Jar	95
For Teachers: Identifying My Attachment Tendencies at School	110
For Students: Insight Survey	112
For Teachers and Students: Visualizing Change	122
For Teachers: Explore Your Playful Side	134
For Students: Gifting Improv Game	136
For Teachers: Noticing Cues	155
For Students: Getting to Know My Nervous System	157
For Teachers: My Power Associations	176
For Teachers: Noticing My Communication Patterns	178
For Students: Role Cards	181
For Teachers: What Are My Priorities?	192
For Teachers: Working with My Intrusive Thoughts	205
For Educator Groups: Discussion Questions	219

FOREWORD

by Cassie Nastase, Nick Covington, and Chris McNutt,
Human Restoration Project

What does it mean to live a good life?

What does it mean to live in a thriving community?

How would you want others to describe you when you're thirty years old?

If you asked these questions of the young people in your life, in your classroom, what do you think they would say? When we talk to students in the course of our work with schools, here's what they tell us:

"A happy life is one where most days are enjoyable. Of course, there will be tough days, but overall, you find joy most of the time."

"Being surrounded by people you love and who love you makes life fulfilling. With love, life feels pretty good."

"I want to be someone kind and trustworthy, someone people feel comfortable turning to when they need to talk."

Yet as powerfully as young people communicate their goals, ambitions, and visions of the future for themselves and for their communities, when we really listen, we also hear that they don't always see how school fits in:

"Most of what we do in class doesn't really prepare us for our future."

"I feel like I've just coasted through school my whole life. I'm lucky I could do that, but I've never really been excited to go to school—ever."

"School should be a place that helps people grow and become functional members of society. I'm not saying it's completely failing at that, but it often feels like it is. We're just living to be a percentage, chasing a grade."

When we ask these same young people to use one word to describe school, *boring*, *okay*, and *mid* top the list. In fact, it turns out that the majority of the words students use to describe school are negative. A national survey of over 21,000 students found that the most common words they used to describe their feelings at school were *tired*, *stressed*, and *bored* (Moeller et al. 2020). And these challenging feelings are not harmless. The childhood risk of suicide increases dramatically during the school year (Black 2022). Not only are teachers more likely than ever to have students in their classrooms diagnosed with anxiety and depression, they are more likely to be diagnosed themselves (Agyapong et al. 2022). Among U.S. professions, teachers report the highest rates of burnout—even higher than healthcare workers (Marken and Agrawal 2022).

There's clearly something in the educational environment that kids and adults alike are responding to, and it's taking a physical, mental, and emotional toll. It can feel as if small fires are breaking out everywhere. Some of them are immediately seen and felt, while others quietly smolder. Extinguishing these fires is a necessary and sensible first step, but it's not enough on its own, and the fatigue of constantly fighting each new outbreak is a serious contributor to teacher burnout. As educators—and as humans—we are at a point where we must courageously explore the root causes in our school communities in order to find sustainable preventative practices and long-term solutions.

The Empathetic Classroom is a guide for those seeking to chart this course. At its heart, this book reminds us of the central humanity that connects us all. Through an honest examination of the effects of measurement, control, and competition in education, a more humane path emerges. Beginning with introspection and building toward authentic integration in the classroom and beyond, Maria Munro-Schuster provides layered strategies for connection. She offers therapeutic self-reflection activities and prompts for educators and colleagues, the psychological theories underpinning these practices and mindsets, guidance for applying them to your work with students, and scalable activities for classroom implementation. And throughout, she aligns classroom strategies with the mantra “I must put on my own oxygen mask before I can help you with yours.” True and lasting connection begins with reconciling our own humanity—our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; our past; and the experiences of everyday life that

fuel our classroom purpose. By building a practice of self-reflection, we are better able to foster meaningful connections with others.

This path requires courage and vulnerability. Delving into our personal histories, understanding our cognitive biases, and investigating our response to triggers are not tasks most people eagerly take on. However, those who do will reap significant benefits: improved mental well-being, stronger relationships, and greater job satisfaction (Keng et al. 2011). And as neuroscientist Mary Helen Immordino-Yang's research on learning, emotions, and the brain reveals, not only do emotional connections play a crucial role in fostering deep learning and engagement, but "when educators fail to appreciate the importance of students' emotions, they fail to appreciate a critical force in students' learning. One could argue, in fact, that they fail to appreciate the very reason that students learn at all" (Immordino-Yang 2016, 40).

Maria Munro-Schuster's call to consider the mundane over measurement is essential to improving the current state of education. This proactive approach acknowledges that we are all learners and that all of humanity has something to gain from this mission. We can create school climates that are no longer so arid that a single spark or gust of wind sets everything ablaze. And in doing this, we may find that the fires are less frequent, more manageable, and less destructive.

At Human Restoration Project, our hope is that this becomes a collective movement among educators, striving to create oases of understanding that prioritize thriving communities and good lives built around our shared humanity. As one insightful student shared with us:

"I think what makes a thriving community is a general sense of empathy, at least trying to understand what something looks like from somebody else's perspective. Because you're looking past what you don't agree with in that person and finding things that you can connect with so that you can collectively push toward something better."

Let's build a more connected classroom and a more empathetic future. Together, we can restore humanity to education.

Note: All student quotes have been paraphrased from actual focus group conversations.

References

- Agyapong, Belinda, Gloria Obuobi-Donkor, Lisa Burbach, and Yifeng Wei. 2022. "Stress, Burnout, Anxiety and Depression Among Teachers: A Scoping Review." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19 (17): 10706. doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191710706.
- Black, Tyler. 2022. "Children's Risk of Suicide Increases on School Days." *Scientific American*, August 22, 2022. scientificamerican.com/article/childrens-risk-of-suicide-increases-on-school-days.
- Immordino-Yang, Mary Helen. 2016. *Emotions, Learning, and the Brain: Exploring the Educational Implications of Affective Neuroscience*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Keng, Shian-Ling, Moria J. Smoski, and Clive J. Robins. 2011. "Effects of Mindfulness on Psychological Health: A Review of Empirical Studies." *Clinical Psychology Review* 31 (6): 1041–1056. doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2011.04.006.
- Marken, Stephanie, and Sangeeta Agrawal. 2022. "K–12 Workers Have Highest Burnout Rate in U.S." *Gallup*, June 13, 2022. news.gallup.com/poll/393500/workers-highest-burnout-rate.aspx.
- Moeller, Julia, Marc A. Brackett, Zorana Ivcevic, and Arielle E. White. 2020. "High School Students' Feelings: Discoveries from a Large National Survey and an Experience Sampling Study." *Learning and Instruction* 66: 101301. doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2019.101301.

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

worthy of love. When clients say to me, “My problems must seem so silly to you,” I always reply that no, they are not silly to me, and that the small things are the stuff of life. If we give the small things attention, the big things are less likely to crop up.

Finally, I will show you how to make some well-informed leaps to what your students may be experiencing internally. This is a tenuous dance that occurs between teacher and student: *I get you, and I will also misunderstand you*. The methods in this book will help you meet the challenge in a way that gives room for you to be human and for authentic respect to grow between you and your students.

There’s a good chance you’re already showing up therapeutically for your students in some ways. My aim here is to remind you of that, to provide additional vocabulary and structure that help you continue doing what’s already going well, and to highlight opportunities for internal or external growth. Teaching is like doing an eight-hour improv show 180 days of the year! Moments happen and then they are gone before you know it. You have had to learn to adapt to survive.

The Risks of Working with Emotions

There is risk in practicing the mental health thinking and doing suggested in this book. When you are more aware of your feelings and those of your students, you will undoubtedly face moments of uncertainty about what to think, do, or say. You might find yourself not knowing how to react or respond. That is okay. You are human if you don’t have all the answers, and it is essential that students see that in their teachers as well as themselves. This book will guide you through these uncertain moments.

You might also have strong opinions about emotions. You might even be wrinkling your nose at some of the ideas presented here—and you may also see your students do the same. That is okay. Many people have formed an idea that feelings are problematic. Maybe you had a parent who seemed “overly emotional” yet didn’t really seem to care about *your* feelings. Maybe emotions were a weakness in your household. Experiencing or expressing feelings may not have been safe or okay for you or your students at some point. Even how our brains are wired can impact our ability to process feelings. These are all realistic situations that can cause a person to dislike having or talking about feelings. As you work through this book’s ideas,

you can notice if such resistance arises, be curious about it, and remember that feelings are just another point of information among the many points we gather on others and ourselves. Having feelings is biological; knowing how to process and understand them is a skill learned with and from other humans.

Adopting a mental health mindset can affect your relationship with your students in ways you may not expect at first. I've noticed that with some students, and even my clients, using therapeutic language can have the opposite effect from what I intend. Statements like "be kind to yourself" or "practice self-compassion" can seem to gloss over very real and difficult experiences and can come across as invalidating. Words and phrases from psychotherapy are also now used more widely and more casually. Sometimes when we overuse language, students can grow tired of it. I've heard classes protest "mindfulness" attempts and joke about the "pointlessness" of social-emotional lessons. In our attempt to draw closer to our students, we can inadvertently push them away.

If emotion-oriented language does not work with your students, don't use it. It's not the language that can make your teaching more therapeutic—it's how you are showing up! As you're already aware, students are smart cookies and quick to read what seems genuine and what seems forced. You can use many of the ideas within this book without changing the language you use with your students, or even letting on that you are teaching therapeutically. Much of what I suggest is about aligning with your true self so you can show up genuinely with students. In the end, this just means that your students see and understand that you like yourself and you like them.

Do not feel alone in confronting your own messy emotional identity. An underacknowledged truth is that, as humans and teachers, we are all in recovery. We have all experienced the endless barrage of physically and psychologically harmful events and realities that have seemingly become routine: school shootings, the epidemic of suicide and self-harm, hate and violence toward human identities, our students' and coworkers' mental health crises, and feeling unheard, unwelcomed, and unvalidated—all while being underpaid. It is a well-studied idea in psychology that harm that occurs to us *from* relationship can be healed *through* relationship. This means that the journey of healing your own emotional wounds begins with surrounding yourself with a safe and supportive community.

A slow but sure decrease in stigma around acknowledging the complexity of mental health—as well as increased conversation about mental health topics as a society—has enabled us to become better versed on these health issues than we were in the past. You may have your own therapist, or have friends who do. You may have contact with your school counselor and may even have social-emotional lessons happening in your classroom. These are all welcome changes.

About This Book

This book is written for educators in any setting, as well as pre-service teachers. It is meant for individuals whose time and energy need respect. Therefore, this is not an academic text. It is not professional mental health training. You do not need to read it from front to back. I try to balance practicality with details and examples that provide clarity to a subject for which teachers are afforded little time.

Each chapter opens with a vignette to help illustrate the main idea of that chapter. My examples may not apply directly to your teaching environment. If that's the case, know that the concept is of greater importance than the specifics of my examples. You may adapt the suggestions to be appropriate for the age and needs of your students.

The stories about teachers and students in this book allow you an opportunity to observe the dynamic emotional environment in the classroom from a bit of a distance. Some of these moments demonstrate our imperfections as humans. And some of the classrooms you read about might even look like your own. However, my intention in sharing these vignettes is not to suggest anyone is “bad” or “wrong,” but to show how we all experience less-graceful moments, especially as educators under time and energy constraints, and that these experiences are opportunities to grow rather than feel shame. For many of these examples, I have created fictional scenarios, which open some chapters and begin with an asterisk. For others, several educators from around the country have graciously contributed their stories to this work to demonstrate how embracing therapeutic teaching, without changing who you are, can look. These true stories include the real first and last name of the educator and do not begin with an asterisk.

Throughout the book you'll also find reflections and activities for your own use and for use with students. These are opportunities to put the