



Mindful Educator Tips

Topic 4: Building Relationships With Students That Challenge Us

“Children must have at least one person who believes in them. It could be a counselor, a teacher, a preacher, a friend. It could be you. You never know when a little love, a little support will plant a small seed of hope.” – Marian Wright Edelman

- Mindfulness is a practice where we learn how to be aware of our thoughts, emotions and actions. We take a step back and try to notice without judgement what is happening in our mind and body.
- As educators, it is vital that we gain understanding of how our internal chatter impacts our external interactions with students. Our moods as we enter the school building can often set the tone for how we will nurture or fracture relationships with students that we encounter in the hallways or the classroom. As well, the school day brings so many challenges. Exhaustion and frustration may lead us down a path of talk and action that take on a reactive and toxic tone towards students. This does not bode well for building students up that might need us the most to be in their proverbial “corner”.
- Instead, we can choose to fully listen to students and their concerns. We can do our best to discover what is causing the suffering that triggers them to act out. We can try to gain insight to what has happened to them instead of jumping to conclusions about what is wrong with them. These situations are ripe opportunities to set our ego aside and engage skillfully with students. We can be patient instead of demanding. We can be kind instead of angry. We can also be playful or humorous instead of sarcastic.
- A key element to mindfully building relationships with students that challenge us the most is understanding how to best embody patience and compassion. Students need us to be consistent and fair in our actions. This takes mindfulness to check-in with our internal state and be intentional about the values we are trying to model during difficult situations. We can tell students in our own way that we are concerned about them. In turn, we are going to let them know when they are stepping over the line. This is caring.



- In these moments, we have an invitation to share with students in a direct and decent manner how their behavior/actions impact their own learning and the learning of others. This message is digested best when it comes from the heart; we let students know that we are trying our best to lessen the difficulties facing them in the moment.
- This kind of talk takes hold when we have put many coins in the relationship bank. This means we have been intentional in catching students doing the right thing, be it a small or mighty act. We have spent time just getting to know students without conditions and contingencies in place. We notice simple aspects of their lives such as the music they listen to or perhaps hobbies/school activities of interest. We do so without judgement.
- This is mindfulness in action. We intentionally build and nurture safe, respectful and trusting relationships with students that might not have experienced such interactions much in their own past. We are their lighthouse that guides them during their most turbulent times. Our inner goodness shines bright. Our calm, reassuring self invites students to engage with us, because they know we will provide them safe passage while still honoring their dignity as human beings.



Mindful Exercises

- Reflect on your current state of mind or belief around how to create and nurture fulfilling student relationships. What thoughts and/or actions do you engage in that draw students to you? What thoughts and/or actions do you engage in that perhaps alienate you from building positive student relationships?
- Pick one student that could benefit from a positive relationship. Consider practical, doable times during the school day that you could have a 2-3 minute conversation with that student? The topics can most definitely be student driven but may need some guidance/support from you. Spend time just listening, asking questions and simply noticing the student. Try to do this anywhere from 5 to 10 days in a row if you can. Notice how this feels inside you. Notice any changes you might see/hear in the student.
- Try to use simple “I notice” statements with students that you consider difficult to reach. Some examples would be: “I notice your friends really listen to you.” “I notice you like to eat (...) or listen to (...) or read (...).” Simple comments work as well such as, “Hey, new pair of shoes.” You can just share your comment, nod your head, smile and then walk away. Or just give the student a thumbs up to quickly honor on-track behavior in class. Be authentic. Use your own wording or natural style while using this approach.
- Smile. Take three slow, deep breaths. Smile some more. Repeat as necessary when working with a student that would thrive with your patience and compassion.