THE EMPATHETIC CLASSROOM

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

Maria Munro-Schuster

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BEFORE ALL ELSE, ATTUNE

*By October, Ms. D had finally found her rhythm in the new school year. It was her second year of teaching, and at least this year she wasn't feeling the same urge to vomit before school each morning. Her sixth grade class was larger than last year—twenty-eight minds and personalities to get to know. But so far, she hadn't needed to meet with a single angry parent. She felt more excited now than she had expected. She was even able to enjoy the fall colors on the drive into school, mug brimming with her second cup of coffee, snuggling into the knit of a well-loved sweater.

As her mind started to transition to the plan for the day, she recalled it was a presentation day. Finally, a chance to take a breath! She envisioned sitting back in her rarely used chair, soaking in her students' discoveries. They were finishing a month-long study of their community's water systems. She was quite proud of herself for putting this unit together, complete with demonstrations, guest speakers, and even a facilities tour. This day would really be a celebration of everyone's efforts.

> As she walked through the halls toward her classroom that morning, passing by her usually chatty students, she was met instead with silence and whispers. At the bell, students sauntered into her classroom in a far-too-orderly single file. Her attempt at a corny joke about a talking pumpkin fell flat and was even met with a glare by Cam, who always laughed at her jokes. Jackson, getting up to sharpen his already-sharp pencil, knocked over an open and newly filled water bottle all over Lily's packet of handouts for her presentation. "Damn it!" Lily screamed, turning tomato red and bursting into tears before throwing the whole stack into the air. Sammy fell out of his chair dramatically. Laughter erupted, and suddenly everyone was chatting like a million little starlings. Just as Ms. D was yelling at the class to quiet down, Principal Riley popped her head in to discuss a drawing she had found in the bathroom that morning. Ms. D felt her cheery morning float away like a distant dream.

As educators, we often develop finely tuned barometric pressure gauges that can sense when something is up. After a traumatic news event, the heaviness is clear in an unusual quietness and tired faces. When a blow-up occurs in the hallway between students, glances shoot across the room and little comments are passed just below your hearing abilities. Even when you don't know what is up, you know.

This is attunement. You are tuning into your students. You're getting on the same radio wave. This is an initial step for mental health professionals in working with clients too. In therapy, attunement is used to understand what clients are feeling—first to validate that what they are feeling is real, and then to support a shift in what they are feeling when they are ready. If we don't go there with them in their feelings, even just briefly, we are simply external critics. When we are viewing another human with judgments about their emotional state, we often miss opportunities to increase our understanding of why they feel the way they do.

We All Want to Be Wanted

In psychotherapy, empathetic attunement is a concept that came from the observations of a practitioner named Heinz Kohut in the 1970s. Originally, Kohut was a good old Freudian—he grew up in Vienna during Freud's significant work on psychoanalysis, and he couldn't ignore the appeal of the "talking cure." It was the early days of therapy as we know it, when clients would lie on long velvet couches and explore their unconscious thoughts and desires aloud to their psychoanalyst, who would do a lot of listening and note-taking.

At one point in his career, Kohut's therapeutic perspective was shaken by a client who wasn't afraid to offer him some much-needed advice: She noticed that he kept trying to offer an intervention each time she expressed a strong feeling. She didn't want an intervention—she wanted him to understand her! A valid point. But for Kohut, this was a revolutionary idea, and he began to try to see his clients' experiences through their perspectives rather than his own.

Through his no doubt very thick clinical goggles, Kohut (1984) established the theory that sometimes humans need what are called "corrective emotional experiences." For all of us to develop a sense of self, he suggested, we needed someone in the world to help us feel unique and wanted. He noticed that children who did not receive cues of empathy from their parents—smiles, hugs, nods, an open body posture—often landed on his therapy couch as adults, seeking the very emotional experience they craved from their parents. By empathetically attuning, he found that the foundations of a relationship could be rebuilt to be able to address the missing parts of self-development that are critical to experiencing well-being. Today we may not need a psychoanalyst to tell us why cues of empathy are so critical, but at the time, it was a significant shift in how patients were viewed and treated.

We now know that lack of empathetic cues from others can affect all people at all stages of life, no matter their upbringing. As adults, we can so easily be thrust right back into middle school when someone turns their back on us to talk to another person. Or we might feel our cheeks turn bright red if we are scolded in front of our peers. For students—even those who display what seems like a solid sense of confidence—a teacher's body language, facial expression, or tone of voice can increase a sense of belonging or instill a feeling of exclusion or abandonment.

Cues of Connection

When we teachers notice that something feels off in our classrooms, we can respond with empathetic attunement. This means we are attentive and responsive with our whole body—our eyes are checking in with all eyes in the room; our body language says, "I'm here to stay"; and even the tone of our voice becomes warm and steady. We might get quieter to show we are calm. We might sit in a desk at the same level as our students rather than stand above them. These are all cues to a student that no matter how they feel, we can handle it.

As a counselor, another way I provide attunement is to create *space* for my clients in the room. This is not just physical space—it is emotional space. That means I must quit talking! This includes not asking questions—which, to a dysregulated child or adult, can send signals of danger. Asking "why" creates an accusatory dynamic, even if this is not what you intend. If I am busy talking as a counselor, my mind is focused on myself and the "important" things I need to say. And as a teacher, if I am talking, my students are likely trying to decipher (or tune out) what I'm saying. In this common scenario, there is little room for cognitive or emotional processing. Most students only experience moments of quiet during the school day when they are focused on completing a task. But this type of quiet does not allow for processing either.

If you provide room for your students to process, even if just for two minutes, they will be able to integrate some of their earlier experiences (*I fought with my brother at breakfast this morning*) into their present (*now I feel tired and a bit sad*). By prioritizing students' internal attunement, you help students avoid feeling that they must attempt to attune to *your* needs. Often, students are masters of doing what they think their teachers want, rather than being their true selves. As one of my young clients shared with me, "I'm really good at smiling for adults, even when I don't feel good." You can support students in attuning to their own emotions by giving them the time to do it. Then *you* can attune to how they are really feeling.

For Teachers and Students

SELF-ATTUNEMENT

It's essential to support yourself and your students in checking in with the emotions that you bring to school. This activity allows for practice in noticing the connection between thoughts and emotions, and then provides an opportunity to care for the emotions. Your work is not to try to "fix" what is coming up for you or your students but to allow space to process it.

Essentially, this is a reflection activity. As such, if you are doing this with students, they may want their processing to be private. School can be a difficult place to maintain privacy. To help protect privacy, I like to ask the following questions aloud and suggest that students answer them internally. If you have the time after students reflect, you can welcome *optional* sharing with a few ground rules, including not commenting on what others share. You want to emphasize that the role of others is to listen.

I begin by asking students to find a way to sit or stand that allows them to relax. Some may want to close their eyes. After you ask each question, let students know you'll be quiet for some time so they can think, and allow at least thirty seconds. Reassure them that if nothing comes to mind or their mind wanders, that is okay. This is not an assignment.

- What's on your mind right now?
- What do you feel right now?
- Where do you notice the feeling in your body? It might be more than one feeling and more than one place in your body.
- What color or shape does the feeling have? What texture does it have?
- Imagine taking the feeling outside of your body and holding it gently in your hands. What do you notice about it now? Is it heavy or light? Did it change shape? Does it look bigger or smaller? Is there

anything about it that is different from what you expected?

- What is one thing you could do today to care for this feeling?
- Before putting the feeling back inside yourself, if you choose, let the feeling change color or shape. Now let it go back into you in whatever way you would like it to. Maybe you imagine breathing it in, drinking it, or letting it soak through your skin.

Note: Students may need examples to help them answer some of these questions, especially when it comes to "caring for a feeling." You may suggest that we can care for sadness by listening to music, making art, or talking to a friend. We might take care of anger by telling the anger it's okay to be there. Maybe we'll yell when we get outside. We can take care of happiness by laughing more or doing something we love. We might take care of anxiety by making a list to keep in mind what we need to do or cleaning out our desk or locker. Give some ideas, then let students be creative. What they choose must work for them. By doing this you are showing them how to validate their feelings and identify helpful coping mechanisms.

In concluding this reflection, thank your students for taking the time to check in with themselves. Remind them that feelings can change over time, sometimes getting stronger, sometimes getting softer. You can provide a visual such as ocean waves to describe how we can observe our emotions changing. It can also help to think about letting ourselves ride the waves rather than trying to swim against them. This is also a good time to remind them that they can come to you with anything. From here, you can support students by listening to them or by providing a referral to an appropriate in-school resource.

Attuning to a System

Of course, you don't just have one student to attune to. You might have three dozen. How do you attune to a whole classroom with so many individual thoughts, feelings, and perspectives? And how can they learn to attune to each other? First, recognize that this group of individuals functions as a system when under your care. Just as families are a system, student bodies are a system. And systems are interconnected. You can help students explore and understand this idea using the Classroom System activity on page 29.

Now it's your turn. The next time you are about to start teaching, take a moment to attune to the whole system. To be able to attune to a group, you must begin by grounding yourself. This means pausing, noticing your belly breath moving up and down, and opening all your senses. Then find a spot in your classroom to step back and observe. Take a whole minute. If thoughts come to mind, or to-do lists, just ask them to step back for a moment while you are doing this.

- What do you see and hear?
- How did students enter the room?
- What does their posture tell you?
- Who is talking, and who is sitting quietly?
- Are they looking at you or away?
- How are they interacting with one another?
- Is there anything you are aware of that might impact the group's mental well-being today?
- Is there anything that may have impacted yours?
- Does your mood feel misaligned with that of your students?

While there may be individual outliers, there is almost always a general momentum to a group.

Next, locate your emotions. Using a feeling wheel like the one provided in figure 1.1 on page 31 can expand emotional awareness. Some people use feeling wheels like this one by starting in the center and then moving outward to more specific emotional experiences. I notice that many of my clients identify with the more specific emotions on the outer edge of the wheel, and then I ask them to follow the emotion to the

center so they can familiarize themselves with their core emotions. It's sometimes surprising to see that a feeling might be rooted in something like *fear* or *love*, big ideas we tend to avoid.

You can interact with this wheel in whatever way works for you. I keep a laminated copy of it on my desk so that I can quickly look at it for myself or hand it to a client. The wheel is often a helpful tool to use with students because sometimes they can become overwhelmed by noticing feelings and this is something they can easily point at rather than having to talk.

Choose a feeling or two that most closely aligns with how you are feeling at the moment. Now locate one or two feelings that the group might be experiencing. Don't overthink it. Listen to your gut, or whatever part of you is intuitive. If you are wrong, you can adjust.

Is there a general sense of anxiety, excitement, anger, sadness, confusion? Name it internally and go there within yourself for a moment. How does this emotion tend to affect you? How is your own emotional state interacting with that of the group? For example, you might ask, *If I am feeling elated and the group is sending out signals of anxiety, how might this incongruence affect the day?*

Here's an idea of what Ms. D's internal dialogue might be as she uses a feeling wheel, reflects on what she's seeing in her classroom, and checks in with herself:

I'm picking up on some anxiety this morning, a bit more than usual. I know presentations are today, but they've had a whole month to prepare. I don't like what anxiety does to my students when they present. It feels like they become robots and just say what they think I want them to say instead of all the really interesting stuff I've seen them learn in the past month. I wish they could relax and have fun with their presentations and not worry about their grades.

Okay, so she's identified anxiety. And maybe some frustration. She's making progress attuning to her students and herself in this moment. But her mind's initial response is to wish the feelings away. Wouldn't that be nice! She also knows that wishing something away doesn't work, and it won't serve her if she continues to wish for something to be different than it is. That mindset will create a disconnect between her and her students, as she'll likely experience and then express frustration as each presentation becomes more and more anxiety-ridden as students observe each other's fears modeled. But as Ms. D gets more practice attuning, she can learn, instead, to take a moment to *feel* her students' anxiety

before responding. To feel greater empathy for her students' anxiety, she can also investigate her own relationship to anxiety.

Connect to Your Past

Speaking of anxiety, what do *you* remember about being a student? When I think back, I remember how challenging it was to figure out what my teachers really wanted. It felt like a guessing game. Sometimes I got it right, sometimes I got it wrong. I also felt like my performance might be judged on whether my teacher liked me. And I hated standing up in front of my classmates with my hand-me-down wardrobe—all-too-often a matching sweatsuit with cat print—on full display. What a helpless feeling! I now recognize that, in part, these were stories I was telling myself, rather than necessarily being truths, but my feelings were real. Becoming a robot sometimes felt like the only way I could survive presentation day.

When I take a moment to check in with my experience with anxiety, I also feel sadness. My fear was rooted in my desire for approval from others. Anxiety was the most obvious symptom of a deep fear that my teacher might not approve of the work that I had done (and had usually put a lot of effort into), a fear that my peers would think my clothes were weird (something I had no way to change), and a fear that the presentation would impact my grade, and therefore, the rest of my life.

That's a lot resting on little Maria's shoulders when she walks in the classroom that Tuesday morning. Her hands are cold and sweaty, and her stomach doesn't like the feeling of breakfast. To make it even worse, her friend was talking to someone else when her dad dropped her off, so she stood alone looking down at her feet and counting the minutes until the bell rang. It's in this state that she encounters her teacher, who's just hoping Maria will have some fun with her presentation and not worry about things so much.

By touching our own experiences of specific feelings and times in our life, we can remember that those feelings are as solid and as real as our hands. Students need support in validating the reality of their feelings so that they don't have to work even harder to suppress them. Letting anxiety come to the surface can allow it to begin to release.

Here's how Ms. D might address the mood in her classroom after reflecting on her own relationship to anxiety:

It seems like there might be some anxiety today about presentations. I can totally understand. I'm asking a lot of you in this work today. Getting

up in front of everyone can be challenging. I feel anxious when I get in front of a group too. Even right now! Let's tell our nervous systems that everything is okay by getting up and shaking it off.

Ms. D might even crank up some tunes to get students out of their minds and into their bodies. By doing this, she is engaging with the natural energy that anxiety is so good at creating and putting it to work in a new and more helpful way. It's like finding a new role for anxiety rather than getting rid of it. Also, a tired body has a lot less energy for the effort that is needed to be anxious.

Another approach is to embrace your students' emotions with open arms. You go to the emotion with them and sit in it for a while rather than try to change it. If the emotion is anger, maybe you even "get mad" about something with them... after all, some things can be truly frustrating. As long as you can genuinely identify, it is okay to validate their emotional experience. When I am working with younger clients (and adults too), many find it relieving if I admit, "Yeah, being ignored at lunch really sucks" or "I'm feeling excited for you and your new puppy today! I totally want to see photos!" You might ask what is helpful to them when they are feeling anxious, angry, or sad. The point is not to suggest there is a one-size-fits-all approach to emotions but to expand their awareness of the options that are out there.

You can also let real emotions come to the surface in your classroom by showing your own humanity. In Ms. D's shoes, I might share a story about a time I was nervous and had to get up in front of a big scary group of people. I might talk about the time I was a moose and almost passed out from my nerves and heat. Or the time when, as a new teacher, I accidentally caught my shoe heel on my skirt and pulled it down in front of a class of my students and adult observers. (The adults laughed the hardest, by the way.) The key here is to help students avoid the assumption that everything was easy or went perfectly for you. When you share your experience, students can see that you, too, have your limitations and your fallibility, and in turn they will experience less pressure to perform perfectly.

Students can never have enough reminders that you accept and value them however they're showing up that day. We may often think that we have told or shown our students that we value them, but the nature of being human is to always test for and seek security. We can provide this through showing that we see them by attuning to them, even if we don't fully understand everything about them.

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