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TEACHmag

YOUR TEACHING COMMUNITY

How a **YEAR OF**



*Allowed Me to Be My
Best Teacher Self*

NOTES

As educators, there is often talk about preparing students for the future, but one of the most important skills to nurture today is something many already possess naturally: creativity. In this issue, we explore what it means to build classrooms where curiosity, experimentation, and out-of-the-box thinking are encouraged at every age and stage of learning.

Jessica Migueis reminds us that school shouldn't always be about finding the "right" answer in the "right" way. When students are given opportunities to approach problems creatively, the pressure surrounding grades can ease. Creativity is a cognitive skill that can be developed like any other—but only if students are given the chance to practice it. In doing so, they also build confidence in themselves, their ideas, and in learning.

But creativity and growth aren't only challenges for students. Sometimes educators themselves need permission to step back. In what she calls "a year of no," university music director LaDonna Tyson reflects on the burnout that came from spending years saying yes to everything: committees, mentoring, extracurriculars, and so much more. Her year-long experiment with saying no wasn't about disengaging from work she loved, but about reclaiming time, energy, and joy. What she discovered was unexpected: more connections, healthier boundaries, and a renewed sense of purpose.

Sometimes, the creative challenges in the classroom look very different. We examine what happens when a student already knows all the answers before the lesson even begins—and is starting to check out because of it. Middle school teacher Sidney Shirley shares how she approached this dilemma. Instead of handing out extra homework or making the student the unofficial class tutor, she began

with a simple follow-up: "Explain why." For the first time, the student was stumped. Solving the equation came easily. Finding the words to explain did not. What began as a math lesson turned into one about communication and confidence.

That idea of finding the right words carries into our next story, which explores a question many educators have likely asked themselves: why do some students who are articulate, funny, and insightful in conversation struggle so much when asked to write? Alexis L. Hamlor realized that the issue often wasn't a lack of ideas or ability, but fear. Writing can feel permanent and exposing. By building trust, modelling vulnerability, and offering more creative forms of expression, she found ways to help students express the same charisma in person and on paper.

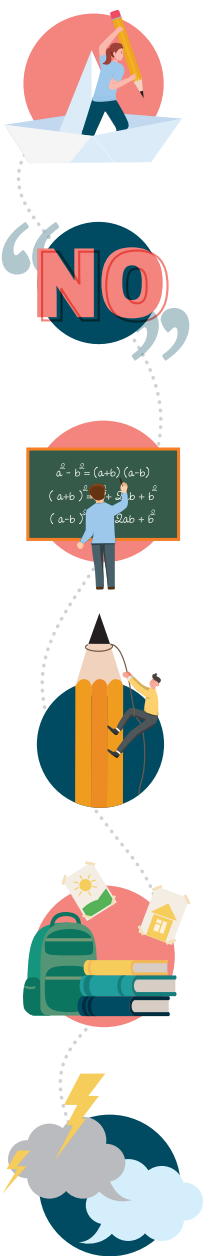
This issue also includes a curated book list focused on social-emotional learning, offering educators additional tools to support reflection, resilience, and meaningful connections in the classroom while introducing students to a range of voices, perspectives, and lived experiences.

Building on these themes, we feature a lesson plan centred around mental health and empathy, encouraging students to examine the impact of stigma, build understanding and compassion for others, and explore how supportive communities can foster belonging, trust, and well-being.

Each story in this issue reminds us of what can happen when students and educators are given room to create, take risks, and grow. We hope they leave you with ideas worth carrying forward.

Thanks for joining us. Until next time,

LISA TRAN
MANAGING EDITOR



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WAYS TO BUILD **A CREATIVE CLASSROOM**

By Jessica Migueis



W

hat does it mean to be “smart”? Traditionally, schools have always valued students who fit the conventional model: those who think procedurally and arrive at the “right” answer. However, over the past seven years that I’ve spent in kindergarten classrooms, I have increasingly seen the benefit of supporting out-of-the-box thinking—something that comes naturally to my young students.

The classroom should be a space where students are encouraged to come up with new and unique ideas, explore multiple ways to solve problems, and embrace creativity so they can innovate and discover, rather than simply follow a prescribed path. Building an environment where these skills are practiced gives students an avenue to reduce stress, express their emotions, connect with others, find joy, and work towards goals in ways that are intrinsically motivating.

Despite the vibrancy of my classroom, creativity doesn’t just happen, it must be intentionally prioritized. This can look different for every teacher, but for me, it means creating a space where children are free to imagine. Together, we make art, tell stories, sing songs, and experiment—these are all play-based opportunities that support young learners as they make sense of the world around them.

However, cultivating a creative classroom isn’t limited to kindergarten. Although it can feel more challenging, especially for older grades, there are still plenty of ways to transform your space into one that values and encourages creativity. Here are eight practical strategies for doing so.

1

BRAINSTORM WITH YOUR STUDENTS

Brainstorming encourages fluidity in thinking by allowing students to share their ideas and build off those of their peers. Kindergarten students can create lists of suggestions for the next symbolic play centre transformation, for instance. Lower grades can learn to visually represent their ideas using mind maps, while upper grades can try free-writing as a brainstorming strategy.

2

TAKE A TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Creativity often takes a backseat because teachers are overwhelmed with curriculum targets and students’ diverse needs. But being creative is not separate from this. A transdisciplinary approach—that is, exploring curriculum concepts through creative projects—can be transformative. For example, you can target a literacy skill by making a class alphabet book. This focuses on vocabulary and initial sounds, while also promoting flexible thinking skills and art exploration. Basic math concepts can be reviewed by designing a pizza parlor. Alternatively, try ditching the history test and challenge students to represent a historical scene through a piece of artwork or a 3D model instead.

3

BE MINDFUL OF YOUR WORDS

What you say matters. Prioritize encouragement over compliments. Instead of telling your students that their work is nice, offer specific, motivating feedback (such as that you like the colours they used). This can also look like focusing on the student’s effort rather than their ability. For instance, tell your students that you noticed how hard they worked on their project, rather than telling them how smart they are to be able to complete it. While compliments make students dependent on your judgment, encouragement hands the power over to them and increases their confidence. Better yet, if a student asks you what you think of their work, flip the question back to them. This is an easy way to indicate that their opinion is what matters most.

4

OFFER OPEN-ENDED, COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

Proposing projects with broad objectives can ensure that students don't feel limited in their creativity. Try keeping instructions minimal and offering options. For example, ditch the traditional book report and allow students to choose how they want to demonstrate their understanding in a way that they connect with—by preparing a presentation, making a mock interview with the characters, creating a painting, writing a summary, or filming a commercial, for example.

Tip: Offering students the chance to work in groups on these projects allows for the exchange of ideas before, during, and after the process to ensure the inclusion of different perspectives.

5

PRIORITIZE IMAGINATIVE PLAY (FOR ALL AGES!)

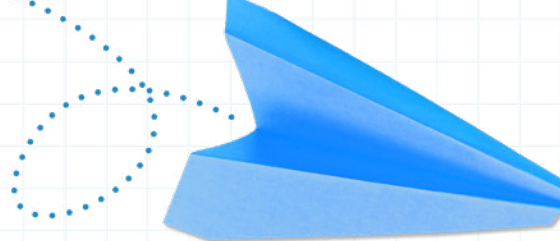
Play isn't only for our littlest learners, and it isn't separate from learning. In fact, symbolic play is a vector for creativity. Students explore and invent situations that do not exist in their everyday lives, while real-world norms and roles take a backseat.

For younger students, this might look like traditional pretend play, whereas older students may be more interested in group improvisation games, board game design, and risky play. Keep in mind that older students are still kids, and all kids love to play.

6

CURATE A MAKERSPACE IN YOUR CLASSROOM

A makerspace is an area of your classroom reserved for creating. It contains a selection of diverse, versatile materials



without instructions on how to use them, such as cardboard, rocks, and pipe cleaners, as well as tools like scissors, glue, paint, and different types of paper. Here, students can transform objects and explore the potential of different materials.

For younger students, this might look like a permanent centre that gets restocked. For older students, on the other hand, a makerspace is a great way to engage early finishers in productive, motivating, and meaningful work. It may give older students the chance to explore simple, real-world problems by focusing on the process rather than the product, such as working together to build a boat that can both float and carry weight.

7

OFFER INSPIRATION, NOT MODELS

At the start of any creative project, be sure to offer your students inspiration rather than models for them to copy and reproduce. While models limit creativity, inspiration helps students craft their own mental images that then guide their work. This can come from books, websites, classroom objects, and even nature. The more representations they see, the more diverse and imaginative their own ideas will be.

8

ORGANIZE A SCHOOL-WIDE CREATIVITY FESTIVAL

Once your students have had ample opportunities to explore and express their creativity, showcase it by organizing a school-wide creativity festival! This should be a way to share and celebrate their unique ideas with their peers, while also giving them the chance to act as trailblazers, encouraging others to develop their own imaginative skills too.

ASSESSING STUDENT CREATIVITY

Assessing creativity is different from assessing curriculum. In fact, the use of evaluation tools for these kinds of tasks can actually undermine the important work you put into prioritizing them in the first place. Instead, try to focus on guiding your students toward their full creative potential. The following questions can help with this:

- Is the student curious? Creative students ask lots of questions, make hypotheses, and challenge assumptions.
- Does the student persevere? Creative students don't give up easily. They dare to be different.
- Does the student collaborate well? Creative students share their work and offer feedback to their peers.
- Is the student reflective? Creative students think critically and are willing to improve.
- Does the student imagine? Creative students play with possibilities and make connections in their learning. They have unique ideas to offer.

While your evaluation is important, it is, arguably, even more pertinent for students to make these assessments for themselves. Consider making a student-friendly version of this list and attaching it to various projects, encouraging students to evaluate their own development. After all, creativity isn't about what the adult thinks, but about what the students experience!



Creativity is not innate—it is a cognitive skill that all students can develop with time and the right opportunities. While cultivating a creative classroom may seem intimidating, it doesn't have to be. With a blend of hands-on learning, collaboration, and genuine curiosity, any classroom can become a space where imagination and innovation can flourish. This not only deepens student engagement, but also helps learners build confidence, resilience, and a lifelong love of learning.



JESSICA MIGUEIS is a passionate kindergarten teacher with seven years of experience teaching French as a second language in Montreal. She is dedicated to supporting the global development of young children through play-based, early learning pedagogy in inclusive environments to ensure a positive and supportive first school transition.



14 SEL BOOKS FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

BY KELSEY MCCALLUM



The world of emotions can be complex, especially for young learners who are still developing self-awareness and their own sense of identity. One moment they're brimming with joy, the next they're filled with nerves or frustration. Emotional literacy helps students understand that feelings are normal, important, and something everyone experiences.

We've gathered a selection of 14 books for students in kindergarten to middle school that explore emotions and other social-emotional learning (SEL) themes, including empathy, social awareness, relationship skills, and resilience. These stories help create a supportive space where children can better understand themselves and the world around them.

THE CARING CLASSROOM: A NOT SO PERFECT START

BY TRUDY LUDWIG, ILLUSTRATED BY MARIBEL LECHUGA

Knopf Books for Young Readers (June 2026) | Grade Level: K-2

Developed in consultation with elementary school teachers, the Caring Classroom is a new series of books designed to help kids develop kindness both in and out of the classroom. This first book follows Thea, a young perfectionist who learns to make the most of an imperfect situation, thanks to a little help from her teacher and fellow classmates.

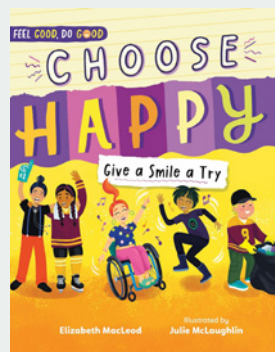


CHOOSE HAPPY: GIVE A SMILE A TRY

BY ELIZABETH MACLEOD, ILLUSTRATED BY JULIE MCLAUGHLIN

Orca Book Publishers (April 2026) | Grade Level: 4-7

Explore the science and history of happiness, along with some obstacles that make it difficult to be happy, in this non-fiction book for middle-grade readers. Be sure to try out the accompanying [activity](#) with students as well.





THE CLOUD THAT STUCK

BY KAREN KROSSING, ILLUSTRATED BY DOROTHY LEUNG

Charlesbridge (April 2026) | Grade Level: K–4

When a rain cloud blows over Tansy’s head one day and refuses to budge, she begins to forget what sunshine looks like—until she puts on a raincoat and boots, and discovers how much fun it can be to play in the puddles. Inspired by the author’s own experiences with mental health, this picture book is the perfect introduction for young readers to resilience and embracing your emotions. The accompanying [hard topics discussion guide](#) can help further such conversations in the classroom.



FEELING YOUR FEELINGS: THE HEAD-TO-TOE SCIENCE OF EMOTIONS

BY TANYA LLOYD KYI, ILLUSTRATED BY PHIL NICHOLLS

Kids Can Press (October 2025) | Grade Level: 3–7

Take a fascinating head-to-toe tour of the body in this approachable guide to emotions. Learn about the science behind nervousness, embarrassment, and the roles that different parts of our bodies play when it comes to feeling our feelings. For middle-grade readers who are becoming more aware of their bodies and their “out-of-control” emotions, this book also offers suggestions for how to practice self-regulation.

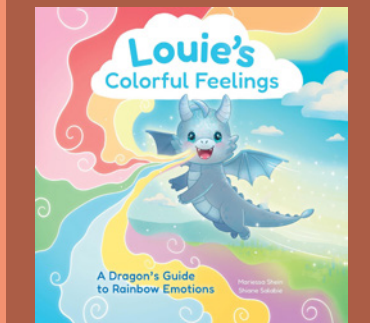


LONELY ME

BY SANDRA V. FEDER, ILLUSTRATED BY ASHLEY BARRON

Groundwood Books (September 2026) | Grade Level: K–1

The newest installment in the Emotions and Me series, *Lonely Me* explores loneliness through the perspective of a young child: all the times she feels lonely throughout the day, as well as the actions she can take to reconnect with the people around her.



LOUIE'S COLORFUL FEELINGS: A DRAGON'S GUIDE TO RAINBOW EMOTIONS

BY MARIESSA SHEIN, ILLUSTRATED BY SHIANE SALABIE

Albatros Media (July 2026) | Grade Level: K–2

Join Louie for a colourful journey as he experiences a rainbow of emotions. In this vibrant picture book, young readers will begin to recognize, name, and understand different types of feelings, helping them develop emotional literacy, self-awareness, and empathy—the foundational building blocks of SEL.



RULES FOR LIARS

BY DEBRA GREEN AND APRIL PATTEN

Kar-Ben Publishing (February 2026) | Grade Level: 3–7

Two girls learn valuable lessons about grief, guilt, and the value of telling the truth in this tender middle-grade novel. Nikki Davis is using increasingly desperate lies to cover up her family’s changing circumstances. Then she meets Rebecca Weiss, who is struggling to prepare for her upcoming bat mitzvah and doesn’t have time for anyone trying to deceive her. Despite everything, the two strike up an unlikely friendship, but when the truth finally comes out about Nikki’s family, will she be able to make things right? *Rules for Liars* focuses on important SEL skills such as responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship building.

SAD, MAD, GLAD: A DAY FULL OF FEELINGS

BY JOHN MICKLOS JR., ILLUSTRATED BY LILIBETH M. JIMENEZ

Penguin Workshop (August 2026) | Grade Level: K

In this simple introduction to emotions for young readers, follow along with a young boy as he describes his feelings throughout the day, from sad to glad to mad. Told through a combination of rhyming prose and detailed images, this story perfectly illustrates the myriad of feelings children can experience in a day.

SHRINKING VIOLET

BY LAUREL SNYDER, ILLUSTRATED BY LEUYEN PHAM

Chronicle Books (March 2026) | Grade Level: K–3

A young girl learns to face her fears in this magical fairy tale. Violet is used to feeling small—literally. Any time she gets worried or anxious, she shrinks. But when her best friend is suddenly in danger, Violet discovers that she's bigger than her fears, and brave enough to save the day after all!

SOME DAYS I'M THE WIND

BY REBECCA GARDYN LEVINGTON, ILLUSTRATED BY DINARA MIRTALIPOVA

Barefoot Books (September 2025) | Grade Level: K

This lyrical picture book offers a gentle reminder to the youngest learners that it's OK to feel different each day, whether they're a cyclone, giddy and wild, or a breeze, gentle and mild. It teaches kids that there are no such thing as good or bad emotions—just different kinds—and encourages them to explore all the different sides of their personalities.

SOMETIMES I FEEL THAT WAY TOO

BY HANNAH BEACH, ILLUSTRATED BY REBECCA BENDER

Plumleaf Press (January 2026) | Grade Level: K–3

Follow along with a young child throughout the day as they encounter different objects that each incite a particular emotion. From a reluctant leaf clinging to a branch to a lonely orange left over at the end of snack time, each acts as a reminder that these feelings are a normal part of life.

WHAT TO DO WHEN IT'S NOT FAIR: A KID'S GUIDE TO HANDLING ENVY AND JEALOUSY

BY JACQUELINE B. TONER AND CLAIRE A. B. FREELAND, ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID THOMPSON

Magination Press (May 2026) | Grade Level: 2–5

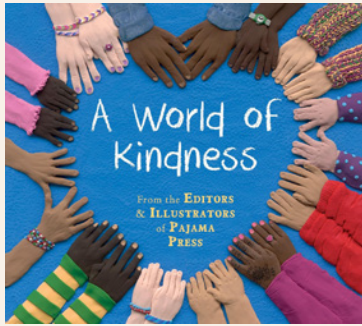
The newly revised edition of this interactive self-help book empowers students to cope with feelings of envy and jealousy, using strategies based on cognitive-behavioural principles.

For additional SEL resources, check out the rest of the [What-to-Do Guides for Kids series](#).



A WORLD OF KINDNESS

BY ANN
FEATHERSTONE,
SUZANNE DEL
RIZZO, ET AL.



Pajama Press (April 2026) | Grade Level: K-1

Celebrate the many different forms kindness can take with this timely picture book. The updated best-seller uses new original images to showcase kindness in a kid-friendly way and remind young readers of the impact that everyday actions and words can have on the people around them.

THE WORRIED BOOK

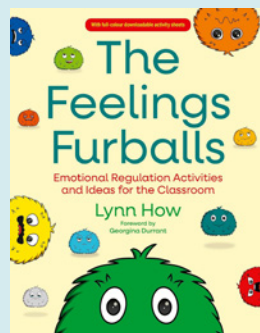
BY HOWARD
PEARLSTEIN,
ILLUSTRATED BY JAMES
MUNRO



Red Comet (April 2026) | Grade Level: K-2

In *The Worried Book*, kids are invited to acknowledge the “what-if” scenarios that make them worried or nervous, and then to try imagine what could go right instead. Full of reassurances that it’s normal to be anxious sometimes, this book also shares ways to manage that anxiety and tame those runaway thoughts.

TEACHer's Corner



THE FEELINGS FURBALLS: EMOTIONAL REGULATION ACTIVITIES AND IDEAS FOR THE CLASSROOM

BY LYNN HOW

Jessica Kingsley Publishers (May 2026)

Looking for even more ways to bring SEL into the classroom? Check out this handy guidebook of emotional regulation activities from Special Education Needs Coordinator Lynn How.

How a
“**YEAR OF**
NO”
*Allowed Me
to Be My Best
Teacher Self*

BY LADONA TYSON



his year is a “Year of No” for me. Actually, it’s my very first Year of No. My entire career has always been “Yes.”

Yes to professional development opportunities that sometimes yielded ideas and new teaching techniques, but often the days away just added more stress once I returned. Yes to career opportunities that were valuable in networking, but required more personal time to prepare and often meant delegating my favorite parts of the job. Yes to clubs, committees, and organizations that were excellent and needed and that would only “take a little bit of time here and there,” but often left me hustling to get it all done every day.

The Road to Burnout

The pressure on educators (in my case, music educators) to stretch ourselves, even with the best of intentions, is all too prevalent. We go out of our way to sponsor clubs, demonstrating our commitment and showing that we are “on board.” We host extra events and fundraisers to support our classrooms and activities. And we all know how to balance these endeavours with our side hustles, earning a little extra money in order to combat often-inadequate teacher compensation.

My burnout came to a head at the end of the last academic year. In my yearly evaluation with my department chair, I became a weepy mess. For two years, I had taken on an extra ensemble (my idea, no one forced me) to provide some additional opportunities for a group of young men. This ensemble was calculated as an overload course, which was *great* because it meant I made a little extra money each semester—but the two years of stretching myself too thin had come to a head.

When my department chair asked how I felt the year had gone, I couldn’t hold back the tears. I was overwhelmed, overloaded, and, most importantly, I knew I wasn’t the best version of myself in the classroom.

This year, I am practicing “no.” Mind you, this isn’t a disrespectful, hands thrown in the air, uncaring “no.” Instead, it’s the most mindful and caring “no” that I can muster. It is understanding that the “yes” version of myself is often not my best (for me or others).

In 2025, the [NEA reported](#) that 53% of teachers stated they experienced burnout. Even more concerning, a [Merrimack College 2023 survey](#) concluded that among K-12 educators, 42% say their mental health is affecting their job. The same study also noted that 35% of respondents expressed a desire to leave the profession entirely within the next two years. This burnout leads to not only psychological, but also physical health issues.

[A 2023 study](#) suggests that teachers frequently experience headaches, gastrointestinal issues, and other health problems associated with inflammation



and stress. Perhaps most notable is a [study](#) that concludes teachers who experience burnout negatively impact the academic success and motivation of their students.

The Benefits of Saying “No”

With this research and my personal experience in mind, I committed to a Year of No. And I can honestly say that it has made such a difference. I’ve noted improved connections with students and colleagues, a better quality of teaching, and enhanced personal wellness.

Within the first month, I noticed a change in my daily rhythm. My morning schedule suddenly allowed ample time to prepare for each class and rehearsal. I had more space to greet students as they entered rehearsal and to visit with them after class, instead of rushing back to my computer or off to the next meeting.

I also began to leave my office door open at least once or twice a week before and in between classes. Several students started dropping by, and soon my office was filled with chatter and laughter. One student even remarked that he “loved coming to my office to hang out before class with everyone.” I felt immediate joy, but also a tinge of regret at having missed that opportunity for the past few years.

The most significant difference has been the time allocated for one-on-one “check-ins” with the students in my choir. Even ten minutes spent getting to know each of them (where they’re from, where they want to continue their education, how their classes are going, and if they are socially well) can create a meaningful connection.

Rehearsals for choir and other ensembles have been more enjoyable and efficient because I have the time to properly prepare and integrate more creative teaching strategies. I also have a greater sense of balance. I can be fully present at work *and* at home. I’ve been able to carve out time for personal hobbies, such as reading, that I usually have to save for a holiday or summer break. I’ve also started leaving my computer at work more often.

Still, there are things my ensembles and I are asked to do that we can’t refuse, even if they come at inopportune moments. However, I’ve learned to let go of some control and allow the students to handle those opportunities without me. For example, an administrator recently asked one of my ensembles to sing at an on-campus event at noon on a busy day. This particular administrator is always generous and kind, and singing on campus is part of our service. Unfortunately, I already had two rehearsals scheduled for that day, as well as a meeting with a prospective student and her mother.

I couldn’t say no, but I also couldn’t be in two places at once. So, I gave the students instructions and alerted the administrator that the ensemble was prepared and excited to attend, even though I wasn’t able to join. This helped to take some pressure off of me and



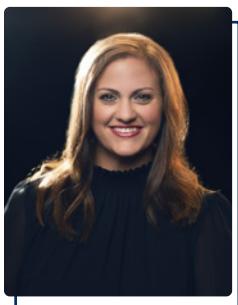
had the added benefit of allowing my students to practice professionalism. It was also a reminder that there are always compromises that can make life a little easier.

Quality Over Quantity

I'm sure you're thinking, 'Well, of course!' Saying no to things allows for better teaching and a better work-life balance. But it's important to remember that I'm not just saying no to the things I don't want to do. I am also saying a "hard no" to some things that I do enjoy, so I can make room for what truly matters most.

I am frequently asked to adjudicate choral events or participate in professional development opportunities, which I like and which also provide some extra income that we use for family vacations. However, I can't erase nine months of overwhelming hustle and stress in just one week of vacation. I think it's more important that I am present with my family the entire year.

In general, the Year of No has been an exercise in discipline and reminding myself that fewer commitments do not equal less value. As a typical teacher overachiever, I tend to equate my professional success with the amount of work I do. I'm ashamed to admit that I often wear hustle and stress as a badge of honour. I am rediscovering the joy and fulfillment of the "less-is-more" and "quality-over-quantity" approaches to teaching.



DR. LADONA TYSON is in her 18th year as Director of Choral Groups at Pearl River Community College, where she directs the PRCC Singers chamber choir and the contemporary a cappella groups The Voices and Currents, whose ensembles have performed at regional and national ACDA conferences. She holds degrees from William Carey College and the University of Southern Mississippi and is an active leader in choral education, currently serving as Past-President of the Mississippi chapter of ACDA.

Tips for Your Very Own Year of No

1.

Put your non-negotiable dates in your calendar. These are days that I will not accept any extra obligations (no matter how tempting they may be). Example: birthdays, children's sports days, a free day in the calendar with nothing. Don't fill those up—we need them to reset.

2.

Tell a colleague about your plan. We all need some encouragement and accountability.

3.

Write down what your ideal day at work would look like. Maybe an early start with time to slowly get into the day? Perhaps you'd like to leave in an extra hour to cook dinner at night? Maybe you want to have a 15-minute quiet office at some point in the day to catch your breath? Once you have that down, set goals for how you will achieve it. What can you say no to?

The point is not to abolish every commitment, but to be more mindful of our obligations and priorities so that we can be our best at what we love. Sometimes saying no leads to a more meaningful yes.

Thank You, Teachers: Inside the Real Front Lines of Education

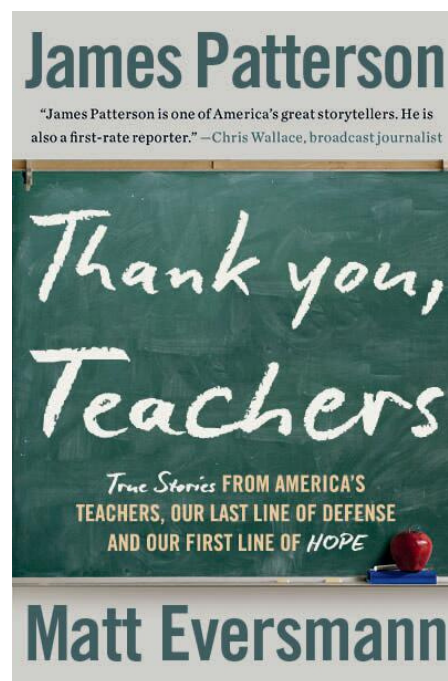
A new collection of real stories from American classrooms reveals what teachers are carrying—and why they keep showing up.

In most schools, there's at least one moment in every day when a teacher steps far outside their job description. It might be the quiet talk in the hallway with a child who hasn't eaten, the extra hour spent rewriting a lesson to reach a struggling reader, or the decision to call a parent not with a complaint, but with a word of encouragement.

Thank You, Teachers, by #1 bestselling author James Patterson and combat veteran Matt Eversmann, is built entirely from those moments.

Drawing on firsthand accounts from classrooms across the United States—urban and rural, public, private, and alternative—the book offers an inside look at what teaching really demands today. Readers meet a science teacher who transforms his own history of poverty and ADHD into a lifeline for kids on the edge of dropping out. A Brooklyn fifth-grade teacher shepherds her students through 9/11 and its aftermath, then spends the year defending her Muslim students from rising hostility. A Florida elementary teacher becomes the mandated reporter who will not give up until a child is safe.

Other stories highlight the less visible, but equally profound, work of teachers.



For parents, *Thank You, Teachers* is a window into what it takes to sustain that kind of work amid burnout, book challenges, staffing shortages, and the emotional toll of student trauma.

For educators, it offers something rarer: recognition. The book doesn't romanticize teaching; it names the exhaustion honestly, while insisting that the daily, incremental victories still matter.

**"Teachers are heroes.
Let's join them on the front lines
as they show us just what it
takes to teach kids day in and
day out, what it takes to foster
future generations of lifelong
readers and lifelong leaders.
Teachers will show us the way."
-James Patterson**

Ultimately, these stories remind us that behind every child who finds their footing in school, there is almost always a teacher who refused to stop believing in them.

Thank You, Teachers by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann
• Available Now •

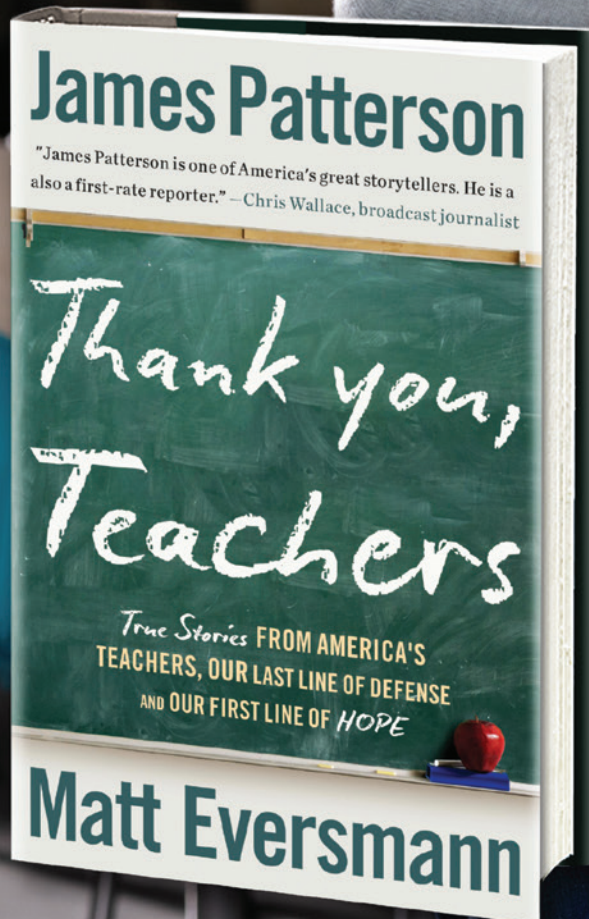


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are talented, hardworking,
and just plain amazing.
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my mother showed me.
My mother was a
fourth-grade teacher
in my hometown of
Newburgh, New York.”

— **James
Patterson**



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What to Do When Your Student Already (*Knows the Answer*)

BY SIDNEY SHIRLEY



I hadn't taken my first lap around the room to check for understanding. In fact, I hadn't even finished *explaining* the warm-up instructions. But already, there was a hand in the air. For me, that hand belonged to Justin.

Justin wasn't just fast. He was thinking far beyond sixth-grade math, solving problems in his head before I could even write them down. He spotted patterns most students don't notice without guided instruction. If I wrote a multi-step problem on the board, he'd already reached a solution before his classmates had copied the first number.

But there was a catch. While his mental math was light-years ahead of his peers, his desk was a disaster zone, and he struggled to put his thoughts on paper or explain his thinking. His work was either incomplete or impossible to follow. The answer might be correct, but the reasoning was difficult to see.

Usually, when teachers encounter a "Justin," we grab the standard toolkit. We try the enrichment packet or the logic puzzle. We tell them to "go help a neighbour." I tried those things. They failed. He didn't need more math. He could already do the math. He needed a teacher who could handle the fact that he was advanced and figure out how to teach him anyway.

{ (THE EGO CHECK) }

Let's be honest. It is terrifying when a twelve-year-old has better math skills than you do.

Sixth-grade teachers are used to being the authority. In math, specifically, we are the keepers of the answer. When a student jumps straight to the solution, it's easy to feel that authority fade and to wonder why you're even there if he already knows it. But that mindset assumes teaching is just about transferring information. If that were true, Justin could simply watch YouTube and be done with it.

I had to realize that my value wasn't in knowing more than him. My value was in teaching him how to be a mathematician. Justin had the ability, but he lacked discipline. He didn't need me to teach him how to multiply or divide. He needed me to teach him how to communicate, organize his thoughts, justify his reasoning, and slow down long enough for others to follow. Once I let go of the need to be the "smartest person in the room," I wasn't intimidated by his intelligence anymore.

{ (MOVING BEYOND THE "EXTRA WORKSHEET") }

Teachers often mistake differentiation for "more work." At first, I gave Justin extra worksheets. I assigned him IXL lessons from the eighth-grade curriculum. He could complete them faster than I could find ones to assign, and he got bored. It was busy work. He knew it was busy work. He would finish early and then disrupt his peers, not because he was defiant, but because he had nothing meaningful to do.

I had to pivot. Instead of asking him for answers, I started asking for explanations. One day, I gave the class a problem:





A rectangle has a length of 12 units and a width of 8 units. If both dimensions are increased by 25%, what is the new area?

Most students worked step-by-step:

- Increase 12 by 25% $\rightarrow$ 15
- Increase 8 by 25% $\rightarrow$ 10
- Multiply $\rightarrow$ 150 square units



Justin raised his hand almost immediately and said, “It’s 150.”

Normally, I would have said, “Show your work.” This time, I said, “Explain why.”

He paused. For the first time, he had to put his quick mental math into words, and that was difficult for him. After much deliberation, he eventually said that increasing both dimensions by 25% doesn’t increase the area by 25%—it increases it by more, because both factors are growing. He described it as “stretching in two directions.” With some prompting, we turned that idea into a clearer explanation.

Justin’s struggle in that moment was a good thing. He had to slow down and turn the ideas in his head into clear sentences. He had to communicate. That was the work he actually needed.

{{ THE POWER OF “I DON’T KNOW” }}

The most freeing moment of the year came one Tuesday when Justin asked a question I didn’t know the answer to. In my early teaching days, I would have panicked or brushed it off. I might have redirected the conversation or given a vague answer just to maintain control. Instead, I said, “I don’t know. Let’s figure it out.”

The room didn’t fall apart. I didn’t lose the class’s respect. In fact, the opposite happened. All of the students became curious. The question became a shared challenge instead of a test of authority. We explored it together, made guesses, tested ideas, and revised our thinking.

Suddenly, I wasn’t the answer key. I was a model of curiosity. And Justin noticed. He stopped seeing me as the gatekeeper

holding him back and started seeing me as a partner in thinking. That shift mattered more than any worksheet I could have given him.

{{ FLIPPING THE SCRIPT }}

So I decided to start using his strengths more intentionally and gave him a new role: coach. He couldn’t write. He couldn’t take over. He could only communicate with his words, using the power of speech to guide his fellow peers towards the answers that came so easily to him.

At first, this frustrated him. He was used to solving everything himself, quickly and efficiently. Now he had to slow down, explain each step, and respond to questions from his peers. But over time, something changed. He became more patient. His explanations became clearer. He started anticipating where others might get confused.

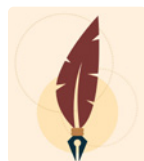
His classmates, in turn, became more engaged because they were doing the work themselves rather than merely copying his answers. He wasn’t just the fastest thinker in the room anymore. He was becoming a communicator. That role gave him purpose.

{{ THE TAKEAWAY }}

By the end of May, Justin hadn’t just learned more math. He had learned how to explain a complex idea to others. He had learned how to organize his thinking. He had learned that being right isn’t the same as being understood.

And I learned something too. I learned that teaching isn’t about hoarding knowledge. It isn’t about always having the answer or maintaining the illusion of authority. It is about creating a space where all students—including the advanced ones, who may think they already know everything—are still able to learn and grow.

When you have a student who is smarter than you, don’t try to cap their ceiling to match your own. Admit what you don’t know. Shift the goal from getting answers to building understanding. You don’t have to be the smartest person in the room to be the best teacher for the student who is.

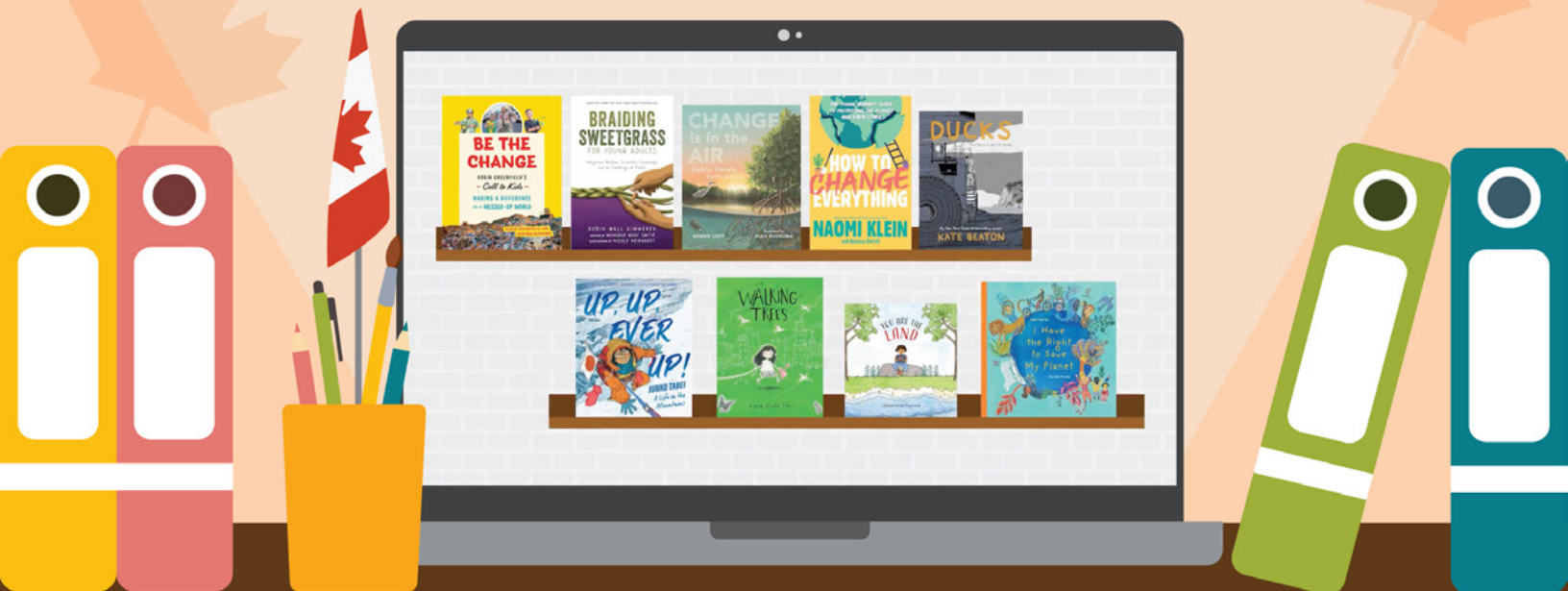


SIDNEY B. SHIRLEY, MEd, is a middle grades STEM educator and EdD candidate at Brenau University.



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STUDENT WELL-BEING:

Mental Health and Empathy

By Rebeca Rubio

GRADE LEVEL:
MIDDLE (7-10)

THEME:
STUDENT WELL-BEING

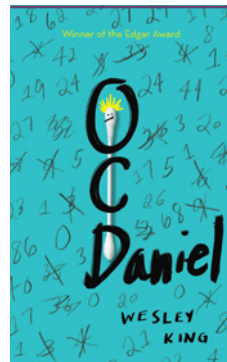
SUB-THEME:
MENTAL HEALTH
AND EMPATHY



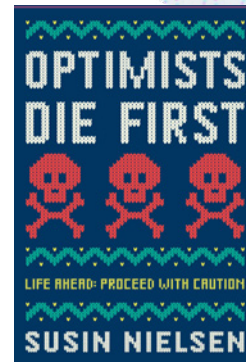
FEATURED BOOKS



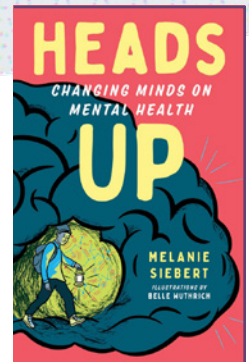
Fire Song
by Adam Garnet Jones
(Annick Press, 2018)



OCDaniel by Wesley King
(Paula Wiseman Books, 2016)



Optimists Die First
by Susin Nielsen
(Tundra Books, 2017)



Heads Up: Changing Minds on Mental Health
by Melanie Siebert,
illustrated by Belle Wuthrich
(Orca Book Publishers, 2020)



LEARNING FOCUS

Removing Mental Health Stigma and Developing a Culture of Empathy. The focus of this unit is to develop a broader understanding of the impact of mental health on youth and to use literature as a vehicle for deepening our collective empathy.



LEARNING EXPERIENCE

MINDS ON PROVOCATION

Students will begin by activating prior knowledge and perceptions about mental health issues in current society. This can be done as a carousel, with questions on paper posted around the room and students moving in groups from question to question.

- What is wellness? What are the many aspects of being healthy?
- What words have you heard (positive or negative) that are commonly used to describe mental health? What is the impact of this language?
- What are some stigmas or stereotypes around mental health?
- How can youth with mental health struggles be supported? What helps them? What resources are available online or in your community?
- Generate questions that you have about mental health and wellness.

These posters will remain in the room for the duration of the study, as they will be referenced and added to throughout.

In their same groups, students will then explore a variety of narratives and videos from [Bell Let's Talk](#). Students are invited to select 3-5 narratives/videos and consider the following questions:

- What common experiences, themes, or ideas do you see repeating in the narratives?
- What information can you extract from the narratives to answer the questions in the initial brainstorm?
- What new questions can you add to the initial brainstorm?

READ, PLAN, AND PRACTICE

This book study will be done as literature circles. Inviting students to choose from selected novels allows all members of the class an entry point into the big ideas to be explored. It increases engagement because it allows students to select novels that match their reading level and interests. It also allows for smaller, more intimate discussions about the texts, the themes, and the literary elements. The class will work together to develop big ideas and conceptual understandings, and students will do smaller discussions and novel work in their literature circle groups.

Unit Guiding Questions:

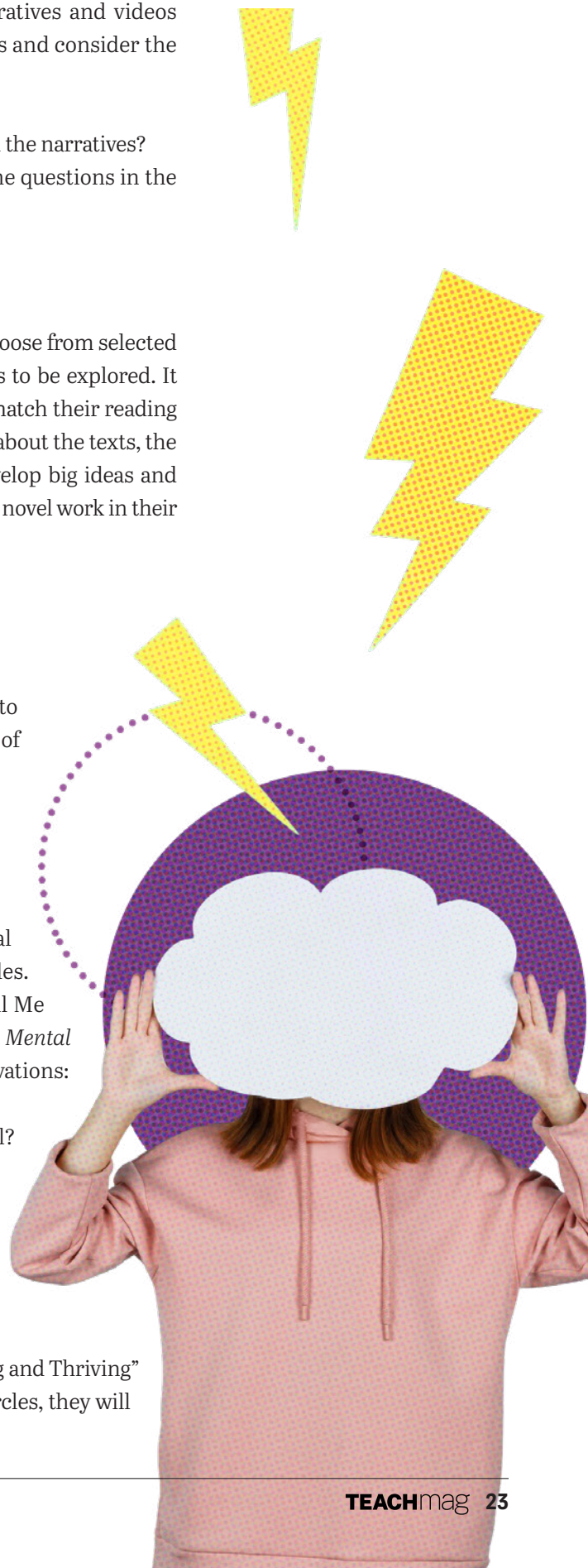
- What is well-being?
- How can we overcome stigmas associated with mental health?
- What would be the short- and long-term effects of all of us striving to understand each other? How can we develop and sustain a culture of empathy?
- How can one individual's experience reflect the struggles of the community? How can literature deepen our understanding of others and develop our collective empathy?

Pairing fiction and non-fiction is a good strategy to gain both factual knowledge and personal insight into wellness and mental health struggles.

In their literature circle groups, students will read the chapter “Tell Me What’s Wrong: Common Diagnoses” from *Heads Up: Changing Minds on Mental Health*. They will discuss the following questions and chart their observations:

- What have you learned about the disorder highlighted in your novel?
- How does this new information challenge or confirm the stereotypes, narratives, and hurtful language explored in the Minds On Provocation?
- What parallels can you find between this new information and the experiences of the protagonist in your novel?

Next, students will read the chapter “The Road to Wellness: On Surviving and Thriving” from *Heads Up: Changing Minds on Mental Health*. In their literature circles, they will discuss the following questions and chart their observations:



- 
- A young woman with long brown hair, wearing a pink hoodie, is holding a large, light blue speech bubble with both hands. The speech bubble has a dotted line trailing from its tail. In the background, there are other smaller, light blue speech bubbles and a large purple circle. The overall theme is communication and mental health.
- What strategies for wellness are presented in this reading?
 - Does the protagonist of your novel make use of any of these strategies? Why or why not?
 - What role does empathy play in supporting mental health? You may draw from either the novel or the chapters from Heads Up.

MAKE, TINKER, AND MODIFY

The focus of this unit of study is to have a broader understanding of the impact of mental health and to use literature as a vehicle for developing and deepening our collective empathy.

Students are now invited to consider the following question: How can you create awareness and understanding of mental health challenges and how can you be an ally to those with mental health struggles?

Students can select from several options to demonstrate their understanding in the following ways:

Advocate: There has been a surge of advocacy to increase mental health awareness, reduce the stigma and provide support (i.e. Bell Let's Talk, HeadsUpGuys.org, etc.). Create your own public service announcement to educate youth about the importance of wellness and mental health, and to provide local and national resources to support youth struggling with their mental health.

- A print announcement (in paper, poster, or digital form).
- A video announcement, perhaps using the [green screen app](#) by Do Ink.
- A social media campaign to educate others about the challenges of dealing with mental health disorders.

Share: Write a reflection of your own personal experiences with mental health struggles in your life. How have your understandings of mental health and wellness shifted through your own experiences and through this study? What insights can you provide to others who also struggle?

Create: Write a short story that develops the themes of wellness, mental health, and empathy as seen through the novels and class discussions. You may choose to add a “missing chapter” in the novel, emulating the writer’s style and developing the character’s story and growth.

Write a spoken word poem that develops the themes of wellness and empathy as seen through the novels and class discussions. Resources can be found at [MasterClass](#) and [League of Canadian Poets](#), or from TED Speaker and Poet [Shane Koyczan](#).

Research: Research one of the mental health disorders highlighted in the novels: OCD, depression, trauma, etc. Select reliable sites that provide the medical understandings, but also real-life testimonials. Create a podcast where you share the

reality of the disorder as well as the stereotypes that often accompany it. Shed light on the truth. Do you have another idea? Share it with your teacher.



REFLECT AND CONNECT

What have you learned about youth mental health and the power of empathy? Students will select one of the following quotes and write a short journal entry connecting it to their own experience and this unit of study:

I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it.
—Maya Angelou

Empathy is about standing in somebody else's shoes, feeling with his or her heart, and seeing with his or her eyes.

—Daniel H. Pink

Empathy has no script. There is no right way or wrong way to do it. It's simply listening, holding space, withholding judgment, emotionally connecting and communicating that incredible healing message of 'You're not alone'.

—Brené Brown



BOOK LISTS

- CBC provides comprehensive lists of YA and adult resources to support mental health. For example: “15 Canadian books to read about mental health” and “17 Canadian books to read for World Mental Health Day”
- The Canadian Children’s Book Centre has curated a [list](#) of books for K-12 on the theme of kindness and empathy.
- 49th Shelf has curated [fiction](#) and [non-fiction](#) book lists about mental health.

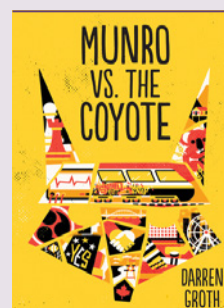


MORE RESOURCES

- Melanie Siebert, author of *Heads Up: Changing Minds on Mental Health*, speaks about mental health and finding your voice on [Bibliovideo](#).
- Mental health resources for youth and teachers:
 - [MentalHealthLiteracy.org](#) is a site that provides understanding, networking, and support to teens, their families, and their educators.
 - [Anxiety Canada](#) contains resources of simple, step-by-step instructions on how to deal with symptoms related to specific anxiety disorders as well general strategies for anxiety management.

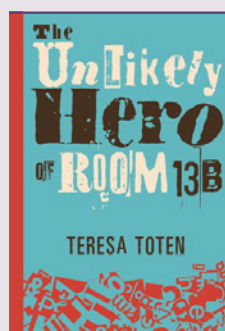
ADDITIONAL CANADIAN BOOKS TO SUPPORT THIS SUB-THEME

Junior (4-6)



Munro vs. the Coyote
by Darren Groth (Orca Book Publishers, 2017)

Middle (7-10)



The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B by Teresa Toten (Doubleday Canada, 2013)

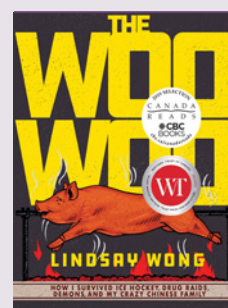


Everything Beautiful Is Not Ruined by Danielle Young-Allman (Viking, 2017)

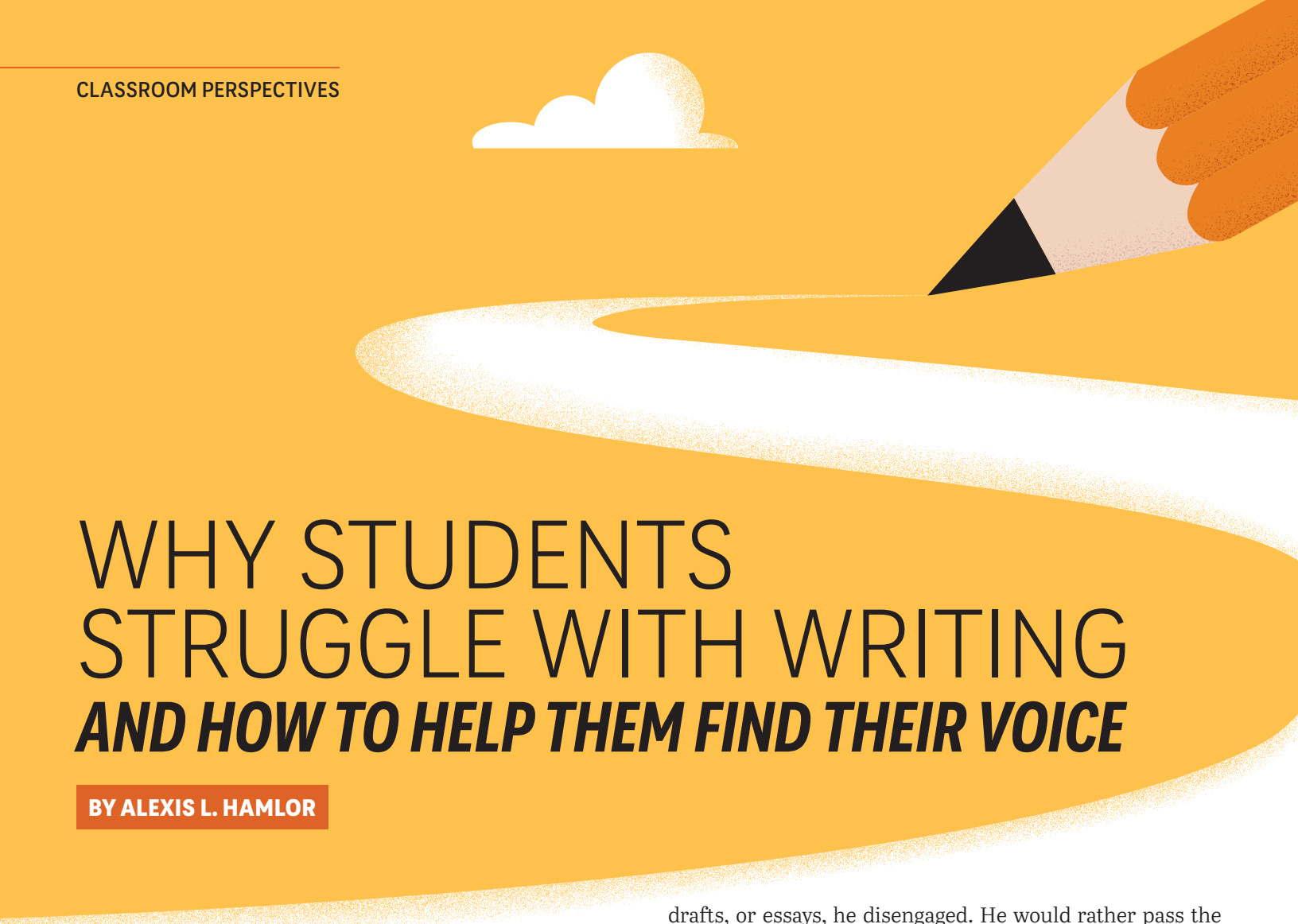
Secondary (11-12)



Calvin by Martine Leavitt (Groundwood Books, 2015)



The Woo Woo: How I Survived Ice Hockey, Drug Raids, Demons, and My Crazy Chinese Family by Lindsay Wong (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018)



WHY STUDENTS STRUGGLE WITH WRITING *AND HOW TO HELP THEM FIND THEIR VOICE*

BY ALEXIS L. HAMLOR

In my years as an educator, I've watched some of the most charismatic students captivate their peers—turning into straight-up comedians, reading the room, and shaping their stories in real time. Yet, during writing assignments, when I ask for that same expressiveness on the page, the confidence disappears. This is typically misread as a skill gap or lack of effort, but in my experience, it's often self-protection.

For many students, writing can feel permanent and risky. Words travel. They get repeated, misinterpreted, and used against you. Students understand this long before adults name it, and they bring that awareness into classrooms, guarding their language carefully because they know their words carry weight.

WHEN WRITING FEELS TOO PERSONAL

I had one particular high school student who was athletic, funny, and a natural storyteller. In class discussions, he could hold the room with ease, offering sharp observations and perfectly timed humour. But when it came to outlines,

drafts, or essays, he disengaged. He would rather pass the ball—or even be benched—than take the winning shot.

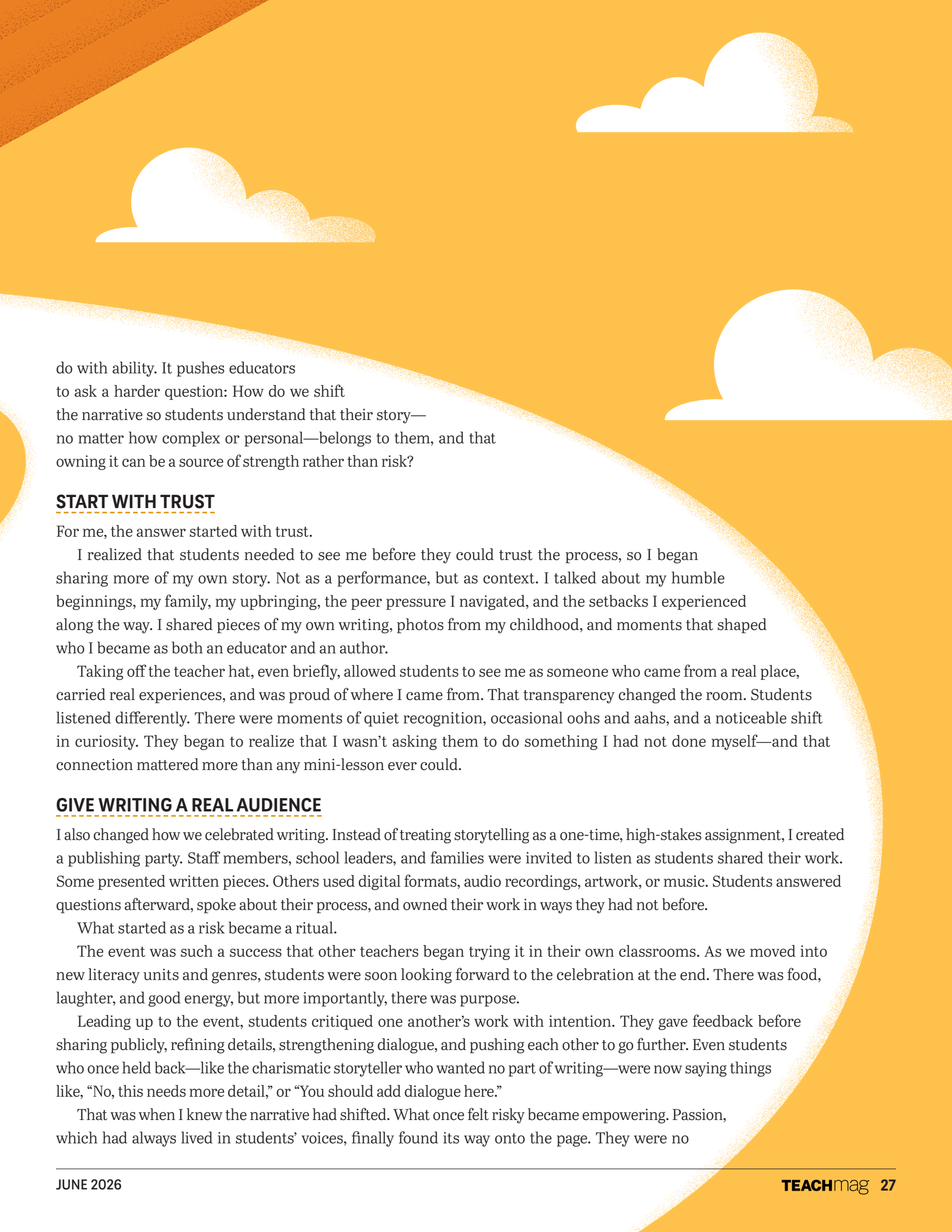
I still remember his response when I pushed: “Nah, Miss, chill. I ain’t trying to have people all up in my business.”

He wasn’t avoiding work. He was protecting himself.

That moment clarified something I don’t think we say often enough in writing instruction: resistance is often self-protection. The issue wasn’t effort or ability. It was control—who gets to decide how much of a student’s inner world becomes public. Once I understood that, my approach to teaching writing had to change.

The realization didn’t happen in isolation. It became a recurring conversation during planning meetings with colleagues. Across classrooms and content areas, we kept returning to the same question: How do we help students translate their feelings, passions, and perspectives onto paper without watering down their ideas, especially when many are not comfortable being that vulnerable on the page?

When writing feels like exposure, I’ve found that students tend to guard their language. This often shows up as hesitation, restraint, and self-editing that have nothing to



do with ability. It pushes educators to ask a harder question: How do we shift the narrative so students understand that their story—no matter how complex or personal—belongs to them, and that owning it can be a source of strength rather than risk?

START WITH TRUST

For me, the answer started with trust.

I realized that students needed to see me before they could trust the process, so I began sharing more of my own story. Not as a performance, but as context. I talked about my humble beginnings, my family, my upbringing, the peer pressure I navigated, and the setbacks I experienced along the way. I shared pieces of my own writing, photos from my childhood, and moments that shaped who I became as both an educator and an author.

Taking off the teacher hat, even briefly, allowed students to see me as someone who came from a real place, carried real experiences, and was proud of where I came from. That transparency changed the room. Students listened differently. There were moments of quiet recognition, occasional oohs and aahs, and a noticeable shift in curiosity. They began to realize that I wasn't asking them to do something I had not done myself—and that connection mattered more than any mini-lesson ever could.

GIVE WRITING A REAL AUDIENCE

I also changed how we celebrated writing. Instead of treating storytelling as a one-time, high-stakes assignment, I created a publishing party. Staff members, school leaders, and families were invited to listen as students shared their work. Some presented written pieces. Others used digital formats, audio recordings, artwork, or music. Students answered questions afterward, spoke about their process, and owned their work in ways they had not before.

What started as a risk became a ritual.

The event was such a success that other teachers began trying it in their own classrooms. As we moved into new literacy units and genres, students were soon looking forward to the celebration at the end. There was food, laughter, and good energy, but more importantly, there was purpose.

Leading up to the event, students critiqued one another's work with intention. They gave feedback before sharing publicly, refining details, strengthening dialogue, and pushing each other to go further. Even students who once held back—like the charismatic storyteller who wanted no part of writing—were now saying things like, “No, this needs more detail,” or “You should add dialogue here.”

That was when I knew the narrative had shifted. What once felt risky became empowering. Passion, which had always lived in students' voices, finally found its way onto the page. They were no

longer consumed with saying too much or too little. They were focused on telling their stories—on paper, with purpose.

THREE EXERCISES TEACHERS CAN TRY

There are a few lessons I carry from that experience:

- ➊ **Don't rush to label writing resistance as laziness or defiance.** Sometimes students are protecting something tender. When we misread that, we risk pushing harder when what they really need is safety, choice, and trust.
- ➋ **Model without oversharing.** Students do not need a performance from us, but they do need to see that writing is human work. When teachers share thoughtfully—showing students that risk, identity, and voice are part of the process—trust deepens.
- ➌ **Give writing a real audience.** When student work is written only for a grade, it can feel transactional. When it's written for a real audience, it becomes purposeful. That audience does not have to look the same for every student. Some may want to read aloud. Others may prefer recorded audio, artwork, slides, or music. The point is not to force one format, but rather to help students communicate in ways that still honour their boundaries.

WAYS TEACHERS CAN START SMALL

As educators, you don't need to overhaul an entire writing curriculum to start shifting the narrative around student writing.

- **Start by offering students more choice in how they share their work.** A final product doesn't always have to be a traditional written piece that gets read aloud in front of the class. Some students may be more willing to share through audio, visuals, spoken word, slides, or mixed media.
- **Build in small moments of teacher modelling.** That might mean sharing a short personal reflection, a rough draft, or a piece of writing that shows revision in progress. The goal is not to overshare, but to make the writing process feel more human and less performative.

- **Create peer feedback routines that feel supportive instead of high stakes.** Students are more willing to take risks when the classroom culture makes revision feel normal, collaborative, and safe.

- **And when possible, create a moment of celebration at the end of a unit.** It does not have to be elaborate. A small showcase, gallery walk, recording station, or class publishing day can give student writing a purpose beyond just a mark in the gradebook.

LET STUDENTS OWN THE PAGE

Changing the narrative around student writing doesn't require a new curriculum or a scripted program. It requires a mindset shift—one that recognizes vulnerability as something to be supported, not demanded.

Students don't need to be pushed to "open up." They need structures that protect them, choices that honour their boundaries, and opportunities to share in ways that feel purposeful rather than performative. When students know their story belongs to them, they write differently.

The passion was always there. The stories were always there. What changed was the space we created for them to exist.

And when that space is built with care, writing stops being something students fear, and instead becomes something they own.

DR. ALEXIS L. HAMLOR, EdD, is an educational leader, a writer, and a scholar-practitioner with more than a decade of experience across New York City public and charter schools. A former special education teacher, mentor, instructional coach, and Dean of Special Education, she supports inclusive instruction, compliant service delivery, and educator development. Her work in the U.S. and internationally focuses on co-teaching, culturally responsive teaching, differentiation, and research-based inclusive supports for students with disabilities and multilingual learners. She is also the author of multiple books, including a teen title on mental health and self-care. Connect with her on [Substack](#) and [Medium](#).



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