

JUNE 2026 • ISSUE 172

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.

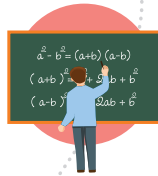
This issue also includes a curated book list focused on social-emotional learning, offering educators additional tools to support reflection, resilience, and meaningful connections in the classroom while introducing students to a range of voices, perspectives, and lived experiences.

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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TEACHmag

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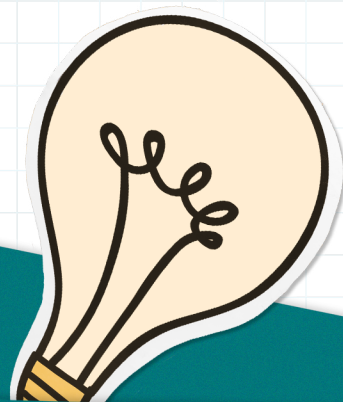
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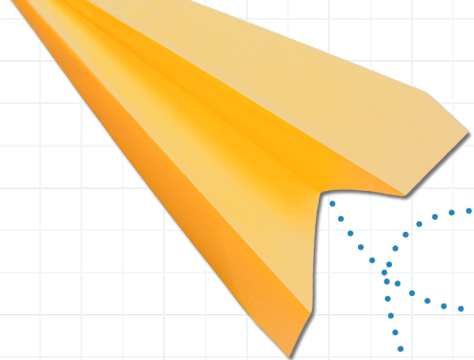


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WAYS TO BUILD **A CREATIVE CLASSROOM**

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.

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.

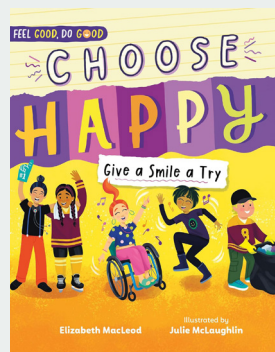


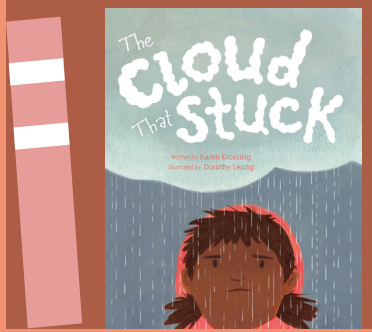
CHOOSE HAPPY: GIVE A SMILE A TRY

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.

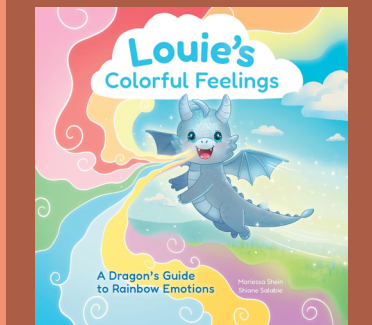


LONELY ME

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.

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



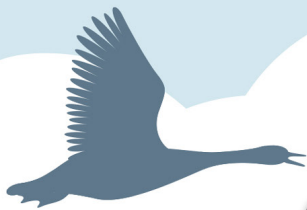


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THE RCMP FROM THEN TO NOW

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Our new digital resource offers a deeper look into the organization's past, while encouraging students to consider what it could look like in the future. This resource can also serve as a great starting point for introducing students to the RCMP's impact on cultures and communities across Canada.



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