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Reimagining Responses to Classroom Behaviors

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Introduction

Reimagining Responses to Classroom Behavior is a course designed to help educators shift their understanding and responses to student behavior in a way that promotes learning, emotional growth, and a sense of belonging for all students. In many classrooms, behavior is often still seen as a problem to be managed or corrected, but this course invites you to explore a transformative perspective. Student behavior is not merely a challenge to overcome; it is an important communication tool, revealing emotional, developmental, and neurological needs that require our understanding and compassion. Throughout this course, we will explore the foundational principles of how student behavior functions, emphasizing its role as a form of communication rather than a disruption. You will learn how relationships with students are at the core of shaping positive behavior, how trauma and stress influence behavior, and how we can use restorative and trauma-informed practices to create environments where students feel seen, heard, and supported. By the end of this course, you will not only have a deeper understanding of student behavior but also a toolkit of strategies to help foster an inclusive, compassionate classroom where students thrive.

Section 1: Understanding Student Behavior

To effectively support student learning and well-being, educators must first understand the why behind student behavior. Far from being arbitrary or purely disciplinary in nature, behavior is a window into children's internal worlds—a reflection of their emotions, developmental stage, neurological makeup, and the context in which they live and learn. This section explores how behavior functions as a form of communication, often signaling unmet needs or emotional distress that students may not yet have the words or skills to express.

Understanding student behavior requires a shift in mindset: from reacting to behaviors as problems to be managed, to interpreting them as messages to be understood. When teachers adopt this perspective, they are better equipped to respond with empathy and insight rather than frustration or punishment. This foundational shift is especially important when working with students affected by trauma, stress, or neurodivergence, whose behaviors may look different from their peers but are no less meaningful.

In this section, we begin by examining behavior as communication and explore the common signals students use—intentionally or not—to express their needs. We then turn to the role of brain science, highlighting how trauma and brain states influence student behavior in ways that are often misunderstood. Finally, we consider the importance of developmental and neurodivergent factors in shaping behavior, and how educators can adjust their expectations and supports to meet students where they are. By grounding our understanding of behavior in emotional, developmental, and neurological realities, we set the stage for more responsive, compassionate, and effective teaching practices.

1.1 Behavior as Communication

Behavior as communication recognizes that a student's actions—whether cooperative, disruptive, withdrawn, or aggressive—are not simply random or defiant, but meaningful expressions of their internal experiences, including both physical and emotional states. These behaviors serve as a form of communication, especially when students lack the language, emotional regulation, or coping skills to express their needs directly. Behavior is shaped by a complex interplay of emotional (e.g., anxiety, stress, trauma), developmental (e.g., age, cognitive maturity, social-emotional skills), and contextual (e.g., classroom environment, peer interactions, home life) factors. When interpreted through this lens, behavior

becomes a signal that educators can use to better understand and support the student's underlying needs (Morin).

Functions of Student Behavior: What Behavior is Telling You

Understanding why a student is behaving in a certain way is key to supporting them effectively. According to Morin (2025), identifying the function behind a behavior—what the student is trying to achieve or avoid—can guide educators in crafting supportive interventions and in preventing future incidents. When teachers can determine the purpose a behavior serves, they are better equipped to respond with empathy and intention rather than frustration or consequence. Learning for Justice introduces the helpful acronym EATS, which outlines four common functions of behavior: Escape, Attention, Tangible gains, and Sensory needs (Morin). These categories can serve as a guide for decoding what a student might be trying to communicate through their actions.

Escape

Some students engage in behaviors to avoid something they find challenging—this could be academic work, a social interaction, a sensory experience, or even a specific adult or peer. Escape behaviors can be overt, like yelling or refusing to follow directions, or more subtle, like frequently asking to go to the nurse or bathroom. In some cases, students may even engage in behaviors they know will result in being removed from the classroom, such as using inappropriate language or throwing objects, because their ultimate goal is to escape the situation altogether. These behaviors are not necessarily about being defiant—they are often a form of self-protection when the student feels overwhelmed, unsafe, or unsupported.

- **Classroom Example:** During math time, Elijah suddenly complains of a stomach ache and asks to go to the nurse. He's done this several times over

the past week, always during independent work. Upon closer observation, the teacher realizes that Elijah often shuts down when he's asked to complete multi-step problems without help.

- **What it's communicating:** Elijah might be using the nurse's office as a safe escape because he feels overwhelmed or lacks confidence in his math skills. His behavior is not about manipulation—it's a signal that he may need scaffolding or reassurance to feel capable in this subject.

Attention

Many students seek attention in both positive and negative ways, particularly if they're unsure when or how they'll receive it. Behaviors like calling out, hovering near the teacher, or even acting out can be attempts to connect and feel seen. For some students, this need for attention may stem from feeling overlooked—either at home, at school, or both. In these cases, any attention, whether positive or negative, can feel better than being ignored. As a result, students might alternate between clinginess with trusted adults and disruptive behaviors that quickly draw eyes and reactions.

- **Classroom Example:** Lila frequently shouts out answers during group discussions. Even after being reminded of the rules, she interrupts others and insists on having the teacher's eyes on her. When she doesn't get a response, she might pout, tap her pencil loudly, or disrupt her peers. On other days, she follows the teacher around during transitions and asks for help she may not truly need, just to stay close.

- **What it's communicating:** Lila may be craving connection and validation. Her inconsistent behavior—from clinginess to disruption—suggests she may not feel certain about when or how she will receive attention. She might need more structured opportunities for positive reinforcement, predictable adult interactions, and consistent acknowledgment throughout the day.

These supports can help her feel more secure and reduce her need to seek attention through disruptive means.

Tangible Gains

Sometimes students act out because they want access to something—whether it's an object, a preferred activity, or simply information. This is especially common in students who have difficulty with impulse control, emotional regulation, or who haven't yet developed the skills to wait, ask appropriately, or negotiate for what they need. When they don't know how to express these needs in a socially acceptable way, the behavior becomes the communication. These behaviors are not necessarily about being greedy or manipulative—they often stem from a student's need for predictability, control, or reassurance that their needs will be met. Without the ability to self-advocate effectively, a student might act out as a way to "fast track" their request.

- **Classroom Example:** Isaac gets frustrated when he can't use the class tablet during center time. He yells, "It's not fair!" and grabs the tablet from a peer. When the teacher intervenes, Isaac argues, "You always let other people go first!"
- **What it's communicating:** Isaac may not have the tools to express his preferences or to be able to cope with waiting. His behavior reflects a desire for fairness and immediate access. Rather than punishing him for being aggressive, this moment offers a chance to model and practice skills like turn-taking, using respectful language, and recognizing that everyone gets a fair chance—even if it's not right now. It's also an opportunity to reinforce routines and predictability around access to shared resources, which can help reduce anxiety and impulsive behavior over time.

Sensory Needs

Students who are either under- or over-responsive to sensory input may behave in ways that help them manage their environment. Sensory-seeking behaviors include touching, moving constantly, or making noise, while sensory-avoidant behaviors might include covering ears, avoiding crowded spaces, or acting out when overwhelmed. But sensory needs aren't just about external input like sound, touch, or light—they also include *internal* physical states such as hunger, fatigue, thirst, or pain. These are known as **interoceptive signals**—your body's way of communicating what it needs to stay balanced and comfortable. When students don't yet recognize or know how to express these internal needs, their behavior may reflect discomfort or distress.

- **Classroom Example:** Harper frequently spins in her chair, taps her feet on the desk legs, and chews on her sleeves. During transitions, she often becomes distressed, covering her ears and shouting when the room gets loud.
- **What it's communicating:** Harper is likely trying to self-regulate. The movement and oral input help her stay focused, while the loud transitions may trigger sensory overload. In addition, students like Harper may also struggle when they are hungry, tired, or physically uncomfortable. For instance, a child who hasn't eaten enough might become irritable, unfocused, fidgety, or seem withdrawn. Rather than viewing this behavior as simply disruptive, the teacher can explore supportive strategies like offering quiet zones, access to fidgets, sensory breaks, noise-canceling headphones, or checking in about basic needs like snacks or rest.

Recognizing the functions of behavior reframes it as a form of communication. Rather than asking, *"How do I stop this behavior?"*, educators can begin asking,

"What is this student trying to tell me?" That shift opens the door to proactive, compassionate, and meaningful support strategies.

Tools to Identify Behavior Functions

Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) are often used in more formal settings—typically as part of a special education process or behavior intervention plan—to identify the underlying purpose, or *function*, of a student's behavior. These assessments involve collecting data, observing patterns, and collaborating with a team to determine what triggers a behavior and what reinforces it. However, many of the tools and strategies used in an FBA can also be used informally by educators in everyday classroom settings. You don't need to be a behavior specialist to start identifying patterns and root causes. *Informal* tools like ABC charts (Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence), behavior logs, teacher reflection forms, and student interviews can help teachers collect meaningful information about a behavior and make informed, compassionate decisions about how to respond (Bhargava, 2025.)

ABC Charts

An ABC Chart—short for Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence—is a simple yet powerful tool used to observe and understand student behavior. It helps educators break down incidents of concern by identifying what happens *before*, *during*, and *after* a behavior (Bhargava, 2025). This structured approach allows for clearer analysis of patterns and possible triggers.

- **Antecedent:** What occurred right before the behavior? This might include an instruction given, an environmental change, or interaction with another person.
- **Behavior:** What exactly did the student do? The behavior should be described specifically and objectively.

- **Consequence:** What happened immediately after the behavior? This could be a response from peers, adults, or a change in activity or attention.

By consistently documenting these three components, teachers can collect organized data over time. This makes it easier to identify patterns and draw conclusions about why a behavior may be happening.

For example, if a student consistently shouts out after a teacher asks a question and receives laughter from classmates or correction from the teacher, it might suggest the student is seeking attention. Recognizing these patterns can help educators form a hypothesis about the function of the behavior and begin to develop strategies that address the underlying need, rather than just the surface behavior. ABC Charts are very simple to create and to use - there is an example template below. To use an ABC Chart, educators should record incidents with as much detail as possible—such as the setting, time, and any relevant notes. Over time, this data becomes a valuable resource for tailoring support and guiding more informed behavioral interventions.

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Example ABC Chart:

ABC Form		
Date:		**Duration of Incident:**
Location:		
Individuals Involved:		
Antecedent *(What happened before the behavior?)*	**Behavior** *(Describe in as much detail as possible)*	**Consequence** *(What happened after the behavior?)*

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Functional Analysis

Functional Analysis (FA) is a structured, research-based process used to determine the *why* behind a behavior. Unlike informal observation tools, FA involves intentionally changing parts of the environment—like what happens before or after a behavior—to see how these changes influence the behavior itself (Bhargava, 2025). This experimental approach is considered one of the most reliable methods for identifying behavioral function.

The process begins with forming a hypothesis based on prior observations (such as ABC charts), interviews, and informal assessments. The goal is to narrow down potential reasons for the behavior—often attention, escape, tangible access, or sensory needs. Next, the analysis takes place in a controlled environment where distractions are minimized and specific elements can be adjusted systematically. This could be a quiet corner of a classroom, a dedicated observation room, or a

home setting arranged for this purpose. During the analysis, educators or specialists test different scenarios (known as conditions), such as (Bhargava, 2025):

- **Attention**: Does the behavior increase when attention is removed or provided?
- **Escape**: Does it occur more when demands or tasks are introduced?
- **Alone**: Does it continue when the student is alone, possibly suggesting self-stimulation? Each of these conditions is tested against a **control condition**, where everything remains neutral to serve as a baseline.

Throughout the process, detailed data is collected on how often the behavior occurs, how intense it is, and how long it lasts. This data helps confirm or refine the original hypothesis and supports more targeted interventions.

Responding to the Needs, Not the Behaviors

Once the root cause or function of a student's behavior has been identified, the next step is shifting your response from reacting to the *behavior* itself to addressing the *need* behind it. This is a crucial mindset shift in creating supportive, student-centered learning environments. When we focus only on stopping or punishing behaviors, we risk missing the opportunity to teach skills, build trust, and support long-term growth. For example, a student who continually calls out in class may not be trying to disrupt—they might be seeking connection or recognition. Responding with immediate correction alone won't meet that need. Instead, offering structured ways to gain positive attention (e.g., a classroom job or regular check-ins) helps the student feel seen and reduces the need to act out (Michigan Alliance for Families, 2021).

Similarly, a student who shuts down during math instruction might be overwhelmed or trying to escape an academic challenge. Rather than simply redirecting the student back to work, consider what supports might help them engage more comfortably—scaffolded tasks, movement breaks, or one-on-one support. This approach emphasizes *proactive support*, not just reactive discipline. It involves (Terada, 2019):

- **Teaching replacement behaviors:** Help students learn more appropriate ways to get their needs met (e.g., raising a hand instead of calling out).
- **Creating supportive environments:** Adjust classroom routines, seating arrangements, or sensory tools to meet individual needs.
- **Strengthening relationships:** Build trust through regular, positive interactions—especially with students who struggle the most.
- **Reinforcing skill development:** Recognize progress, however small, and give students the tools they need to navigate challenges.

Ultimately, the goal is not to eliminate behaviors but to *understand* them—and to build systems that support students in expressing themselves in ways that are safe, productive, and developmentally appropriate.

1.2 Brain Science and Behavior

Not all behaviors are choices—many are the result of how the brain is functioning in a given moment. When students are regulated and feel safe, their brains are in a *learning state*, open to instruction, problem-solving, and connection; but when students experience stress, fear, or overwhelm, their brains may shift into a *survival state*, where the priority becomes safety—not learning (Berringer, 2020). It is important for educators to remember that Maslow is greater than Bloom, meaning that if a student's basic needs aren't met or they feel unsafe, they will

not be able to engage in deep learning experiences. Let's look a little closer at the learning brain versus the survival brain.

The brain is constantly scanning for safety through a process called neuroception, primarily driven by the amygdala; when the brain perceives safety, the amygdala relaxes, allowing students to access the brain's executive functioning system—sometimes referred to as the "creative brain" (Bindreiff, 2023). This area is crucial for higher-order thinking, such as problem-solving, focused attention, and self-regulation. In fact, much of schooling is designed to develop and strengthen this part of the brain. Executive functioning supports key learning processes: it helps students sustain attention (with support from the neocortex), process and encode information through active engagement, and apply knowledge in meaningful, creative ways. However, when students feel unsafe—physically or emotionally—their survival brain takes over. This part of the brain prioritizes self-protection, is reactive rather than reflective, and is driven by emotion and impulsivity. In this state, learning becomes far more difficult, as the brain is not wired for exploration or reflection when it is focused on staying safe (Bindreiff).

Because the brain is wired to prioritize survival above all else, it won't allow access to higher-level thinking until it first feels safe. That means before we can support a child in developing executive functioning skills like focus, problem-solving, or self-regulation, we need to calm their survival system (Bindreiff, 2023). In simple terms, a child's brain needs to be convinced that it's safe before it will open the door to learning and creativity. By understanding how the brain reacts to threats—real or perceived—educators can better recognize when a student's behavior is a stress response rather than defiance or disengagement. We'll also look at how trauma can shape a student's ability to regulate emotions, form relationships, and participate fully in the classroom. With this foundational knowledge, teachers can begin to respond more effectively to challenging

behaviors—not by asking “What’s wrong with this student?” but instead, “What might this student need right now?”

Impacts of Trauma on Behavior

Trauma is often thought of as the result of a single frightening or upsetting experience. However, many children experience trauma not just from isolated incidents, but from ongoing exposure to harmful circumstances such as abuse, neglect, homelessness, domestic violence, or persistent community violence. This kind of chronic trauma can deeply affect a child's brain development, behavior, and ability to learn (Miller, 2024). One of the greatest challenges for educators is that trauma doesn’t always present in obvious ways. Children often don't express their distress openly—instead, they may act out, withdraw, or display behaviors that seem oppositional or disruptive. Recognizing the symptoms of trauma is essential, especially because these symptoms can resemble other conditions like ADHD or behavior disorders, potentially leading to misdiagnosis. When children have experienced trauma, they may exhibit the following (Miller):

- Struggle to form trusting relationships with teachers
- Have difficulty managing emotions or calming themselves down
- Exhibit negative or hopeless thinking patterns
- Remain constantly on edge, scanning for danger (hypervigilance)
- Experience challenges with executive functioning, such as planning, organizing, or shifting focus

Understanding these behaviors as responses to trauma—rather than as willful defiance—can help educators respond with compassion and implement supports that truly meet students' needs.

Impacts in the School Setting

Trauma, especially when it stems from abuse or neglect, can deeply affect a child's development, relationships, and behavior—particularly in school settings. As Miller (2024) highlights, these children often carry invisible emotional wounds that impact how they engage with adults, regulate their emotions, and respond to everyday challenges. Teachers and school staff need to understand these impacts in order to respond with appropriate support, rather than punishment. Below are some of the key ways trauma influences a child's behavior in the classroom (Miller):

1. **Difficulty Forming Relationships:** Children who have experienced trauma often struggle to form trusting relationships with teachers and other adults. Because they may have been betrayed, ignored, or hurt by the very people who were supposed to care for them, they've learned to be cautious—even with supportive adults. They may not know how to ask for help or accept kindness, and often push others away before trust can develop.
2. **Poor Self-Regulation:** Traumatized children frequently have trouble managing strong emotions. In early childhood, emotional regulation is learned through being soothed by caregivers. If those caregivers were absent or harmful, these children missed that foundational learning. As a result, they may become easily overwhelmed, quick to anger, or shut down. In the classroom, they need support in learning how to identify their emotions and practice calming strategies with the guidance of a caring adult.
3. **Negative Thinking Patterns:** Many children affected by trauma internalize the belief that they are "bad" or undeserving of good things. This mindset can lead to low motivation, poor self-esteem, and an expectation that others will treat them poorly. They may also interpret neutral interactions—

like a teacher giving directions—as angry or hostile, reacting with defiance or irritability. These children need help recognizing and reframing these distorted thinking patterns.

4. **Hypervigilance:** A classic sign of trauma is hypervigilance, where the child is constantly on high alert for danger. This state of heightened arousal can cause them to be jumpy, anxious, and reactive. It can sometimes be mistaken for ADHD. These children may have difficulty concentrating, sitting still, or responding calmly when upset. What looks like misbehavior is often the result of a nervous system stuck in "fight or flight" mode.

5. **Executive Function Challenges:** Trauma can impair a child's ability to focus, plan, remember instructions, and control impulses—skills that fall under the umbrella of executive function. This can make academic work and classroom behavior especially difficult. For example, a child may have trouble completing multi-step tasks or calming down before reacting impulsively. Unpredictable routines can also increase anxiety. These children benefit from repeated practice, clear expectations, and help with self-talk and planning skills.

6. **Attention-Seeking Through Misbehavior:** Children who have experienced chronic neglect often become skilled at getting adult attention through negative behaviors. That's because negative attention—like being scolded—is fast and predictable. To counter this, educators should offer positive attention just as consistently. This includes not only praise for good behavior but also moments of warmth and kindness that aren't contingent on performance. Even small, spontaneous gestures of care can help build trust and reduce acting out.

By understanding the deep and varied impacts of trauma, educators can shift their approach from reacting to behavior to responding to unmet needs. Through

connection, structure, empathy, and consistent positive attention, school staff can create an environment where traumatized children feel safe enough to heal, grow, and succeed.

1.3 Developmental and Neurodivergent Factors

When considering student behavior, it's essential to ask: *Is this behavior developmentally appropriate?* Children and adolescents grow and mature at different rates, and what may seem disruptive or challenging could simply reflect where a student is on their developmental journey. At the same time, some students experience the world through the lens of neurodivergence—conditions such as ADHD, autism, or sensory processing differences—which can shape how they communicate, learn, and respond to their environment. Understanding both developmental stages and neurodivergent perspectives helps educators respond with empathy and appropriate support, rather than frustration or punishment. This section explores how development and neurodivergence influence behavior and highlights the importance of adjusting expectations and interventions to better meet the individual needs of all students.

Understanding Neurodiversity and Behaviors

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in how children's brains function and process information. Students who are neurodivergent—those with conditions such as learning disorders, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, or sensory processing differences—often experience the world in ways that differ from their neurotypical peers (Garey, 2025). These differences can bring unique strengths, such as strong memorization skills or the ability to hyperfocus. However, they can also present challenges in academic, social, and behavioral contexts. Below are common types of neurodiversity and how they might lead to behavioral challenges (Teaching Technics, 2025):

- **ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder):** Students with ADHD often struggle with attention regulation, impulse control, and staying organized. They may seem distracted, frequently move around, or interrupt unintentionally. Problematic behavior might include calling out during lessons, difficulty staying seated, or appearing to ignore instructions. These behaviors often stem from a need for stimulation or a lack of executive function, not defiance. Providing clear, step-by-step instructions, breaking tasks into smaller parts, and offering movement breaks can help these students stay engaged and better manage their energy.

- **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):** Autism affects communication, social interaction, and sensory processing. In the classroom, students with autism may have difficulty understanding social cues, prefer predictable routines, or become overwhelmed by sensory input like bright lights or loud noises. Problematic behavior might include meltdowns, withdrawal, or rigidity around rules and expectations. These behaviors are typically stress responses, not deliberate disruptions. Visual supports, consistent routines, and sensory-friendly spaces can make a significant difference in their success at school.

- **Emotional and Behavioral Disorders**: Students with emotional and behavioral disorders may experience intense emotions or have difficulty regulating their behavior. This can manifest as outbursts, defiance, or withdrawal. These students may struggle to build relationships, and their behavior can often be misunderstood as disruptive. Teachers can support these students by offering consistent emotional support, providing a structured environment, and using de-escalation techniques to help them navigate emotional challenges.

- **Learning Disorders (e.g., Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia):** Learning disorders are neurological differences that impact how students process and express information. Dyslexia affects reading and language processing, dyscalculia impacts mathematical understanding, and dysgraphia interferes with writing and organization. These students may need additional time on assignments, access to assistive technology, or alternative ways to demonstrate their understanding. When frustrated, they may act out, shut down, or avoid tasks that make them feel inadequate. Using multisensory teaching methods—like combining visual, auditory, and hands-on strategies—can help make learning more accessible and reduce avoidance behaviors.
- **Processing Disorders:** These conditions affect how the brain interprets auditory, visual, or sensory information. A student with an auditory processing disorder might struggle to follow verbal instructions, while one with visual processing challenges may find it difficult to interpret visual materials. Misunderstandings can lead to behaviors such as non-compliance, task avoidance, or frequent questions that may seem repetitive. In the classroom, these students benefit from clear, concise communication, visual aids like charts or diagrams, and opportunities to interact with content in multiple ways.
- **Sensory Processing Differences:** Some students have heightened or reduced sensitivity to sensory input, which can affect behavior and attention. For example, a noisy classroom might be overwhelming, leading to distraction, irritability, or emotional distress. Students might cover their ears, refuse to participate in activities, or lash out when overstimulated. These reactions are often protective rather than oppositional. Sensory breaks, noise-canceling tools, or quiet areas can help students regulate and refocus without feeling punished for their differences.

Recognizing these differences through a neurodiversity-informed lens helps educators shift from managing behavior to understanding the underlying needs—ensuring all students feel supported and included in the learning environment.

Supporting Neurodivergent Students

To effectively support neurodivergent students, educators must look beyond the behavior itself and consider what might be causing it, as discussed earlier in this course. Behavior is often just the visible sign of deeper challenges related to sensory processing, emotional regulation, or communication. Instead of reacting to behavior as a discipline issue, teachers should aim to understand what the student is experiencing and work with them to address it.

Validation and Problem-Solving

One powerful way to support students is to validate their feelings—listen without judgment and acknowledge how they feel. Once the student has had a chance to calm down, work with that individual to identify more effective ways of handling similar situations in the future (Garey, 2025). This not only supports emotional regulation but also builds trust and communication.

Preventative Supports

Creating an inclusive and supportive classroom can help prevent behavioral challenges before they begin. Many neurodivergent students thrive when the environment is predictable, welcoming, and responsive to their needs. Helpful strategies include (Garey, 2025):

- **Visual schedules and cues** to outline the structure of the day and reduce anxiety around transitions. Using icons or images alongside words can be especially helpful for students who process visual information more easily than verbal instructions.

- **Daily calming routines**, like breathing exercises, mindfulness activities, or gentle stretching, can help students feel centered and regulated before academic tasks begin.
- **Sensory tools and quiet areas** offer students a place to regroup when they feel overwhelmed. These spaces should be designed with calming colors, minimal stimulation, and comfort items such as weighted blankets, noise-canceling headphones, or textured objects.
- **Safe adults students can turn to**—such as a designated teacher, counselor, or paraprofessional—can be life-changing. Knowing they have someone to go to when they feel dysregulated helps students feel supported and more in control of their emotions.
- **Movement breaks and flexible seating** give students opportunities to release excess energy and refocus. This might look like short walks, stretching between lessons, or using alternative seating options like stools or cushions.
- **Fidgets or wiggle seats** provide a socially appropriate outlet for physical restlessness. These tools help students stay engaged during instruction without disrupting the learning environment.

Implementing these supports benefits not only neurodivergent students but often the entire class, fostering a calm and respectful learning environment for all.

Executive Functioning Tools

Many neurodivergent students struggle with executive functioning skills—such as initiating tasks, staying organized, managing time, and breaking larger tasks into smaller steps. These skills are crucial for academic success, and building scaffolds into classroom routines can make a meaningful difference. Teachers can offer tools like (Garey, 2025):

- **Visual checklists and schedules** to help students understand multi-step tasks or daily routines. These tools also provide a sense of accomplishment as students check off completed steps.
- **Timers** offer a concrete visual or auditory cue to help students manage time, stay focused, and transition between activities.
- **Dedicated binders or folders** for each subject can reduce the chaos of loose papers and help students find materials more easily. Color-coding subjects also helps with organization.
- **Planners or digital calendars** give students a visual tool to track upcoming assignments, projects, or test dates. Teachers can also model how to break larger assignments into manageable parts.
- **Reward systems**, like sticker charts or positive reinforcement logs, can encourage students to stay on task, build self-monitoring skills, and feel a sense of progress.
- **Explicit instruction** on organizational strategies (e.g., how to use a planner, clean out a backpack, or prepare for homework) teaches lifelong habits that students can apply across contexts.

Pairing executive functioning supports with regular check-ins helps students internalize strategies and build independence over time.

With thoughtful supports and a willingness to understand students beyond their behaviors, educators can create learning environments where all children can thrive.

Section 1 Conclusion

When we reframe student behavior as meaningful communication rather than misconduct, we create the conditions for deeper understanding, stronger support,

and more compassionate responses. Whether the behavior stems from neurological differences, emotional struggles, developmental factors, or environmental stressors, what matters most is how we choose to respond. By shifting from reactive discipline to proactive support—and by viewing behavior through a developmental and brain-based lens—we open the door to more equitable, effective teaching practices that benefit all students. Recognizing that every behavior has a story behind it empowers educators to become curious rather than judgmental, and intentional rather than impulsive. With this foundation in place, the next step is to explore one of the most powerful tools educators have to support behavior: relationships. In the following section, we'll examine how trust, connection, and emotional safety play a critical role in helping students regulate, engage, and thrive.

Section 1 Key Terms

ABC Chart - A tool used to observe and understand student behavior by documenting the Antecedent (what happens before the behavior), Behavior (what the student does), and Consequence (what happens after the behavior).

Attention - A function of behavior where students engage in actions to gain attention, either positive or negative, from peers or adults.

Antecedent - The event or situation that occurs immediately before a behavior, often influencing the student's response.

Behavior as Communication - The concept that student behaviors are meaningful expressions of their internal experiences and emotional states, serving as a form of communication.

Developmental Factors - Aspects of a student's emotional, cognitive, and social development that influence their behavior, such as age, maturity, and social-emotional skills.

Escape - A function of behavior where students engage in actions to avoid challenging situations, such as academic tasks, social interactions, or sensory stimuli.

Executive Functioning - The brain processes involved in planning, organizing, focusing attention, and regulating emotions, essential for learning and problem-solving.

Function of Behavior - What the student is trying to achieve or avoid.

Functional Analysis (FA) - A structured, research-based process used to determine the cause or function behind a behavior by systematically manipulating different environmental factors.

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) - A formal process used to identify the underlying causes of a student's behavior through data collection, observation, and collaboration.

Neurodivergence - A term that refers to students whose brain functions differ from the typical pattern, such as those with autism, ADHD, or other developmental conditions.

Neuroception - The brain's subconscious process of detecting safety or danger, primarily driven by the amygdala, which influences the brain's ability to engage in higher-order thinking.

Sensory Needs - Behaviors driven by the need for sensory input or the need to avoid certain sensory stimuli, which can manifest as sensory-seeking or sensory-avoidant behaviors.

Sensory-Seeking Behaviors - Actions students engage in to seek sensory input, such as moving, making noise, or touching, often driven by the need to regulate sensory experiences.

Sensory-Avoidant Behaviors - Actions students take to avoid overwhelming sensory input, such as covering ears, avoiding crowded spaces, or acting out in response to sensory overload.

Survival Brain - The part of the brain that prioritizes self-protection and is reactive rather than reflective, often taking over when a student feels unsafe or threatened.

Tangible Gains - A function of behavior where students act out in order to obtain something they want, such as an object, activity, or information.

Trauma - Emotional and psychological distress resulting from harmful or distressing experiences, often leading to lasting impacts on behavior, emotional regulation, and relationships.

Trauma-Informed Teaching - A teaching approach that recognizes the effects of trauma on behavior and prioritizes compassion, support, and understanding in response to students' behaviors.

Validation - A process of acknowledging and understanding students' emotional experiences and needs, helping them feel seen and heard.

Section 1 Reflection Questions

1. How does your current approach to student behavior align with the idea of behavior as communication? Can you recall a recent example where a student's behavior reflected unmet needs or emotional distress?

2. Reflect on a time when you responded to a student's behavior with frustration or punishment. How might that situation have played out differently if you had responded with empathy and a focus on understanding the student's underlying need?
3. Think about the EATS acronym (Escape, Attention, Tangible gains, Sensory needs). Which of these categories do you most often see in your classroom, and how do you respond to them?
4. When considering brain science and behavior, how does understanding the survival brain versus the learning brain change how you approach student behavior in your classroom?
5. How do you ensure that your responses to student behavior are not solely reactionary? What strategies do you use to proactively address behaviors before they escalate?
6. Reflect on how your understanding of brain science influences your approach to teaching. In what ways do you modify your instructional strategies to help students who may be experiencing stress or emotional dysregulation?

Section 1 Activities

1. **Behavior Function Analysis:** Conduct an informal functional behavior assessment (FBA) in your classroom using an ABC chart (Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence) to analyze a student's recurring behavior. Identify patterns and hypothesize the underlying need behind the behavior.
2. **Peer Observation:** Observe a colleague who effectively handles challenging behavior in the classroom. Take note of the strategies used to support students and adapt these methods to your own practice.

3. **Behavior Reflection Journal:** Keep a journal for one week, documenting instances of challenging student behavior and reflecting on the possible underlying causes. Consider whether these behaviors might be communicating unmet needs.
4. **Behavior Intervention Resource Creation:** Create a set of resources or visual supports for your students to help them identify and express their feelings (e.g., emotion charts, behavior expectation posters).
5. **Mindfulness Practice:** Introduce daily or weekly mindfulness activities to help students regulate their emotions. Reflect on how these practices impact student behavior and make adjustments as needed.
6. **Trauma Impact Education:** Attend a webinar or read a research article on the effects of trauma on student behavior. Summarize the key points and discuss how this information could change your approach to supporting students.

Section 2: The Role of Relationships in Behavior

In the classroom, student behavior is not solely the result of individual actions, but also the product of the relationships students have with the people around them, particularly their teachers. Research consistently shows that strong, positive relationships between teachers and students are key to fostering an environment where students feel safe, valued, and understood. In this section, we explore the integral role relationships play in shaping student behavior, emphasizing that when students feel connected to their teachers and peers, they are more likely to engage cooperatively and demonstrate positive behaviors. This section explores how a strong foundation of connection influences student motivation, emotional well-being, and classroom culture. It also provides practical, research-informed

strategies for building and sustaining meaningful relationships with students—strategies that help shift classrooms from places of compliance to communities of care.

2.1 Building Connection in the Classroom

Research confirms what many educators instinctively know: relationships matter—deeply and developmentally. Studies show that students who feel connected to their school and their teachers are more likely to show up, stay engaged, and succeed academically; they're also less likely to act out or struggle with feelings of sadness and hopelessness (Stone, 2024). In fact, studies have found that a solid sense of school connection can have lasting effects, even contributing to better health and well-being well into adulthood. Students' sense of connection to school is deeply shaped by their relationships—with both adults and peers—and whether they feel seen, valued, and accepted for who they are.

The way individuals relate to others is shaped by their earliest experiences with caregivers. When those early relationships are insecure or inconsistent, it can lead to ongoing patterns of disconnection or mistrust in future relationships; students who lacked secure attachments early in life may be more likely to struggle with building healthy connections in the classroom and beyond (Cacciatore, 2021). But here's the hopeful part: these patterns aren't permanent. With awareness and intentional support, they can be changed. This means educators are in a powerful position—not only to foster a safe and supportive classroom climate, but to actively help rewire the relational patterns students carry with them.

When teachers model secure, responsive, and empathetic relationships, they create a blueprint for students to form healthier, more secure connections with others throughout their lives. As Cacciatore notes, even one caring, consistent relationship can promote healing, re-shape the developing brain, and lay the

foundation for learning. When educators are equipped with the skills and self-awareness to build these relationships intentionally, they don't just manage behavior—they help transform lives.

2.2 Practical Strategies for Building Relationships

Strong educator-student relationships are essential for student success and well-being. These connections don't happen by accident—they require intentional effort from educators to ensure every student and family feels seen, heard, and valued in the classroom. Positive relationships between educators and students are a core component of effective Tier 1 practices, helping to create supportive and inclusive learning environments for all (Office of the State Superintendent of Education [OSSE], 2021). In addition, trusting relationships are a foundation for trauma-informed approaches, which emphasize emotional safety and connection. When students feel genuinely supported by the adults around them, they are more likely to stay motivated, believe in their own abilities, and succeed academically. These relationships can also have a ripple effect, strengthening peer interactions and improving overall classroom culture. Below, we'll explore specific strategies educators can use to build strong, meaningful relationships with students and foster a sense of belonging in their classrooms.

Relationship Mapping

Relationship mapping is a reflective strategy schools can use to ensure that every student is meaningfully connected to at least one trusted adult (OSSE, 2021). Ideally conducted early in the school year—such as in October—this process begins by listing all students' names on a large chart or whiteboard that is visible to staff. Then, each staff member reviews the list and marks a yellow dot next to the names of students they feel they have a positive, trusting relationship with. If any staff member believes a student may be at risk—either personally or

academically—that individual adds a red dot on the opposite side of the name. Once the mapping is complete, the group reflects on the results. Are there students without any yellow dots? Are there students with red dots but no trusted adult connection? These are the students who need intentional outreach. Staff then develop a plan to build or strengthen relationships with those students, considering what kinds of support or connection might help them feel more seen and supported.

About a month later, the group reconvenes to check in on progress. Have staff made new connections with the students who needed them? Have any additional concerns come up? This ongoing, reflective process not only helps students feel more connected but also fosters a schoolwide culture of care and accountability.

Relationship Mapping in Real Life

At Colleyville Middle School in Texas, staff have taken a strategic and relationship-driven approach to supporting students by using a variation of relationship mapping. As described by Stone (2024), the school has created a “data wall” in a secure room used for staff professional development. On this wall, each of the school’s 600+ students is listed, along with key academic and attendance information going back to third grade. What makes this wall unique is the personal touch added next to each student’s name: the initials of staff members who have built a meaningful connection with that student. These connections could be anything from regular lunchtime check-ins to informal mentorships or shared interests. If a student’s name has no initials beside it, that signals to staff that the student may not yet feel connected—and prompts someone to step in and build that relationship.

According to Principal David Arencibia, this process helps the school proactively identify students who may be at risk of feeling isolated or disengaged (Stone, 2024). Staff make a concerted effort to reach out and build those essential bonds,

not just as a supportive gesture, but as part of a broader strategy to rebuild community and belonging—particularly important after the disconnect many students experienced during the pandemic. This intentional approach to relationship mapping is helping to address chronic absenteeism and rebuild a culture where all students know they are seen, valued, and supported.

2x10 Strategy

The 2x10 Strategy is a simple yet powerful tool for building relationships with students who may seem difficult to reach. As described by the *Office of the State Superintendent of Education* (OSSE, 2021), this approach involves spending two minutes a day for ten consecutive school days engaging in a casual, student-centered conversation. These interactions are not tied to performance or behavior—they are purely about connection. This strategy is grounded in the understanding that challenging behavior often signals an unmet need for trust or adult attention. By consistently offering a student positive, non-contingent time, educators can begin to meet that need, creating a foundation for trust and improved behavior. The 2x10 approach also reflects function-based thinking, as it directly addresses the need for adult attention that may be driving certain behaviors.

In practice, educators can build in these short conversations before or after class, during transition times, or during breaks in instruction. Choosing which students to focus on can be based on behavioral data, observations, or teacher instinct. Importantly, the conversations should focus on the student's interests—sports, hobbies, pets, favorite shows—anything that helps the student feel seen and valued (OSSE, 2021). In virtual settings, the same principles apply. A quick check-in via chat or a private message before or after class can be just as meaningful. The goal is consistency and authenticity—two minutes a day may seem small, but

when practiced intentionally, it can make a big difference in student connection, engagement, and behavior.

2x10 Strategy in Real Life

The 2x10 strategy has shown promising results in real school settings, particularly in one Philadelphia school district where both teachers and administrators embraced it as a relationship-building tool. This district is part of a professional network led by Partners in School Innovation (PSI) (2025), geared toward improving outcomes for students, and that is how they learned about the 2x10 strategy. In one case, a 7th and 8th grade math teacher used the 2x10 model to reconnect with a student who had previously been difficult to engage. By committing to two-minute, non-academic conversations each day for ten days, the teacher noticed a rapid shift in the student's behavior and engagement in class. These short but consistent conversations helped create trust, making it easier for the teacher to redirect off-task behavior and tie the student's personal interests into math lessons. A telling moment came when the student gave the teacher a handmade piece of art—clear evidence of a deepening relationship.

Administrators also found success. One assistant principal, recognizing the need to strengthen student-teacher connections, piloted the 2x10 strategy with four enthusiastic teachers. After seeing positive changes in students—including increased responsiveness and improved behavior—those teachers not only continued with their original group of students but also began using the strategy with new ones (PSI, 2025). The assistant principal observed that students began to initiate conversations with teachers, showing they valued these moments of connection. Notably, she also discovered an unexpected benefit: the strategy was having a positive emotional impact on teachers themselves. Encouraged by this momentum, she expanded the initiative to include more staff across grade levels, ultimately involving eight teachers. With guidance from a PSI coach, she tracked

the initiative's progress weekly and used those insights to refine and scale the effort.

Greeting Students at the Door

Greeting students individually at the door might seem like a small act, but it has a big impact. According to Bruhn (2022), saying hello by name, making eye contact, and offering a warm, specific greeting helps students feel seen and valued right from the start. A simple statement like, “I’m glad you’re here today, Eli,” or a gentle reminder like, “Hey, Mia—don’t forget your notebook,” can set a positive tone and reinforce expectations. These door greetings aren’t just about kindness—they’re backed by research showing improved student engagement and reduced disruptive behavior (as cited in Bruhn). Likewise, saying goodbye can help students feel a sense of closure and continued connection. Whether it’s a handshake, a smile, or just a “see you tomorrow,” these small rituals can significantly strengthen relationships and classroom culture.

Honoring Name Pronunciation and Pronouns

One of the most powerful ways educators can build strong relationships with students is by honoring their identity—starting with correct name pronunciation and the use of preferred pronouns. Taking time to learn and consistently use students’ names as they pronounce them sends a clear message: *you matter here*. Similarly, respecting and using correct pronouns creates an affirming classroom environment where students feel seen, valued, and safe to be themselves. Alongside this, getting to know students on a personal level—their interests, strengths, and stories—helps foster trust and belonging. These small but intentional actions lay the groundwork for deeper connections and a more inclusive school culture.

Connecting Through Shared Interests

Building authentic relationships with students means showing genuine interest in what matters to them—and letting them see what matters to you. Asking students about their extracurricular activities, hobbies, or weekend plans is more than small talk—it's a way to demonstrate that you care about who they are beyond academics (Bruhn, 2022). Attending a student's basketball game or school play, or simply asking, "How did your robotics competition go?" can go a long way in building trust. Equally powerful is sharing your own interests with students. Whether it's your favorite movies, hobbies, or a personal story, students appreciate seeing the human side of their teachers. These small, authentic moments help form the kind of reciprocal relationships that support deeper classroom engagement. As Bruhn notes, "When you let them in, they will begin to let you in, too."

2.3 Co-Regulation and Emotional Literacy

Co-regulation is a dynamic process in which caring adults help children manage their emotions, attention, and behavior by providing external support, structure, and guidance (Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, 2022). Unlike self-regulation, which relies on an individual's internal ability to control impulses and stay focused, co-regulation involves intentional actions from adults to scaffold those skills and meet students where they are developmentally. This begins in early childhood, where caregivers help regulate everything from sleep to emotional responses, often syncing physically with infants during moments of stress or calm. As children grow, the form of co-regulation changes, but the need for it remains just as critical—especially in classroom settings.

In a school environment, co-regulation allows students to feel physically and emotionally safe, which quiets the brain's stress response and makes space for

learning. Teachers who engage in co-regulation are attuned to students' needs and model calm, focused behavior (Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, 2022). They provide predictable structures and responsive strategies that help students learn how to navigate emotions, sustain attention, and manage executive functions. Co-regulation in action might include adjusting the classroom lighting to shift energy levels, using a calm tone of voice during a tense moment, or offering students choices when they're overwhelmed. Rather than striving for strict compliance or control, co-regulation invites students into a shared responsibility for learning and community. It helps build the foundation for self-regulation and personal accountability, all within a trusting and supportive relationship. Through co-regulation, educators not only manage behavior more effectively but also nurture the long-term emotional and cognitive development of their students.

Teaching and Fostering Emotional Literacy

One of the most impactful ways educators can support students' well-being and development is by helping them build emotional literacy—the ability to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate emotions. Emotional literacy is foundational for strong relationships, effective learning, and mental health. By intentionally weaving emotional learning into everyday classroom interactions, teachers empower students to better navigate their inner experiences and respond thoughtfully to the world around them.

Strategies to Teach Emotional Literacy

Teaching emotional literacy is essential in helping students develop the skills to understand, express, and regulate their emotions effectively. This empowers them to navigate both social and academic challenges, fostering a positive and supportive classroom environment. Below are several strategies that teachers can use to build emotional literacy in their students (Gonser, 2022):

- **Building Emotional Vocabulary:** Developing a robust emotional vocabulary is crucial for students, especially at a young age. Teachers can use tools like picture books or emotion charts to introduce students to different feelings, such as happiness, sadness, anger, or frustration. For example, using flashcards or visual aids, students can be shown images of facial expressions and asked to identify the emotions being portrayed. Over time, this helps students expand their emotional vocabulary and enables them to better recognize and communicate their emotions. For younger children, visual aids and books with relatable characters can help normalize emotional experiences and make it easier for students to express their feelings in words.

- **Clear Communication of Emotions:** One of the fundamental strategies for teaching emotional literacy is helping students learn to communicate their feelings in words. Instead of reacting impulsively—such as pushing or shouting—students can be taught to express themselves using clear and respectful language. For example, if a student feels frustrated or hurt by another's actions, that student could say, "I don't like it when you push me; will you please stop?" This simple communication technique helps defuse tense situations and offers a constructive way to address conflicts. By expressing their feelings verbally, students not only convey their emotions but also develop the ability to articulate their needs and boundaries.

- **Incorporating Mindfulness and Gratitude Practices:** Mindfulness exercises, gratitude sharing, and quick emotional check-ins are effective ways to create a positive emotional climate in the classroom. These activities allow students to pause, reflect, and center themselves before engaging in learning. Starting the day with a brief mindfulness exercise or a moment of gratitude can set the tone for the rest of the day, making students feel more grounded and emotionally secure. When students are given the time to

focus on their feelings and emotions, they develop greater emotional awareness and are better equipped to manage challenging situations.

- **Regular Opportunities for Emotional Expression:** Creating regular opportunities for students to express their emotions fosters a classroom environment where feelings are validated and understood. Morning circles, “rose and thorn” check-ins, or other emotional reflection activities give students a chance to share their feelings in a safe space. These routines not only help students identify their emotions but also encourage them to empathize with their peers. For instance, during a “rose and thorn” check-in, students share something positive (the rose) and something challenging (the thorn) they are experiencing. These discussions allow students to practice emotional vulnerability, which builds trust and strengthens relationships among classmates.

- **Teaching Emotional Regulation and Self-Management:** Alongside expressing emotions, it’s essential for students to learn how to manage and regulate their emotional states. Strategies such as taking a break, asking for help, or using calm-down techniques (like breathing exercises) are vital skills that support emotional self-regulation. Teachers can model these behaviors and encourage students to use them in moments of stress or frustration. For example, if a student is upset, teachers can guide that individual to step away from a situation, take a deep breath, or count to ten before responding. Over time, students develop a greater sense of self-awareness and learn to handle their emotions more effectively in a variety of settings.

- **Practicing Empathy and Perspective-Taking:** An important component of emotional literacy is the ability to understand and empathize with others’ emotions. Teachers can engage students in activities that help them see situations from different perspectives. For instance, during a read-aloud or a

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storytelling session, teachers can ask students to “flip the story” by considering how another character might be feeling and why. This not only deepens students' understanding of emotions but also encourages them to practice empathy. Additionally, reflective listening exercises—where students take turns expressing their emotions and then mirror each other’s feelings—can help build empathy and improve communication. These activities allow students to practice listening, validating, and responding to others' emotions in a thoughtful and caring manner.

- **Promoting Self-Awareness through Identity Projects:** Self-awareness is a key aspect of emotional literacy. Teachers can encourage students to explore their own identities through creative activities like identity portraits. These projects help students reflect on their own unique experiences, characteristics, and emotional responses. By understanding their own emotions and identities, students can better relate to others and develop greater respect for differences. Activities like these promote emotional growth and encourage students to embrace who they are while fostering inclusivity in the classroom.

2.4 Reflecting on Bias and Perception

Implicit bias refers to the unconscious attitudes and associations we hold about others. These biases often come into play when we’re under pressure, tired, dealing with incomplete information, or managing multiple responsibilities—all common experiences for educators. In such situations, teachers may unknowingly rely on automatic judgments rather than thoughtful reflection, influencing classroom decisions and interactions with students.

Implicit Bias and Teacher Expectations

A teacher's expectations can profoundly affect how a student performs. Research has shown that implicit—not explicit—biases can influence how educators perceive student potential (Staats, 2022). For example, teachers might unknowingly expect less academic success from certain students based on ethnicity, language background, or socioeconomic status—even if they consciously believe all students can succeed. These lower expectations can limit the opportunities, support, and encouragement that students receive, which in turn can shape academic outcomes.

Extensive research in education and psychology has demonstrated that students often perform in line with what their teachers believe is possible. This phenomenon is known as the self-fulfilling prophecy or the Pygmalion effect. In a classic study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), teachers were told that certain randomly selected students were likely to show significant academic growth that year. Those students—chosen entirely at random—actually did outperform their peers by the end of the school year. The researchers concluded that the teachers' beliefs, conveyed through subtle cues like tone of voice, feedback, or level of challenge, had a measurable impact on student performance (Brooks, 2024).

Follow-up studies have found similar patterns across grade levels and subjects. When teachers expect high achievement, they are more likely to (Brooks, 2024):

- Provide more rigorous learning opportunities
- Offer positive reinforcement and encouragement
- Give more detailed and constructive feedback
- Spend more instructional time with the student
- Ask higher-order thinking questions

In contrast, lower expectations can result in fewer academic challenges, limited feedback, and reduced teacher attention—ultimately reinforcing underperformance. This underscores the importance of regularly reflecting on personal expectations, checking for bias, and actively working to hold high and equitable expectations for all students, regardless of background. Students thrive when they feel that their teachers believe in their abilities and are invested in their success.

The Role of Subjectivity in Discipline

Many disciplinary decisions in schools are not as clear-cut as they may seem. Infractions like “disruptive behavior,” “disrespect,” or “excessive noise” are often open to interpretation. While some student behaviors may clearly violate rules, many situations are more nuanced. Teachers must assess the intent and context behind a behavior—and this opens the door for subjective judgment. Without realizing it, educators may interpret ambiguous behavior differently depending on the student involved. For instance, research shows that students of color are more often disciplined for subjective offenses, while white students are more likely to be cited for clearly defined infractions such as vandalism or smoking (Staats, 2022). This disparity suggests that unconscious biases may shape how teachers perceive and respond to student behavior.

Deeply rooted societal stereotypes—such as the false association of Black boys with aggression or defiance—can subtly influence educators’ decisions. Even if teachers do not consciously hold these beliefs, they may still react more harshly to Black students exhibiting the same behaviors as their white peers. One Stanford study illustrates this point. Teachers were asked to evaluate identical student infractions, but some were led to believe the student had a stereotypically Black name, while others saw a white name. Results showed that teachers were more likely to escalate punishment for the “Black” student and view the behavior as

part of a pattern, even though both students had committed the same minor offenses (Staats, 2022).

Confirmation Bias in Student Evaluation

Another way bias shows up is through confirmation bias—the tendency to notice and focus on information that supports what we already believe. This can influence how teachers assess student performance. A study involving law firm partners found that when they believed a legal memo was written by a Black author, they found more errors and rated it as lower quality—even though the memo was identical in every case (Staats, 2022). This suggests that expectations based on perceived identity can unconsciously shape evaluations. In the classroom, similar patterns may emerge when teachers grade essays, interpret student participation, or form impressions of a student's capabilities.

Strategies for Addressing Implicit Bias

Implicit bias may be automatic, but that doesn't mean it's beyond our control. Once educators become aware of their own unconscious associations, the next step is to take action. The following research-based strategies can help reduce the influence of implicit bias in meaningful, everyday ways.

Becoming Aware of Implicit Associations

Because implicit biases operate unconsciously, the first step to addressing them is to become aware they exist. One tool that helps is the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which measures how quickly people associate different concepts—such as race and positive or negative words. The IAT has been widely used to uncover unconscious associations in areas such as race, gender, age, and sexuality (Staats, 2022). Taking this test can help educators identify hidden biases and begin the process of addressing them.

Bridging the Gap Between Intentions and Impact

Becoming aware of bias is only the beginning. The goal is to align one's internal associations with the values of fairness, respect, and inclusion. Researchers have identified several strategies for doing this, and they often involve intentional, ongoing practice (Staats, 2022).

- **Engaging in Intergroup Contact:** One effective approach is intergroup contact—developing authentic relationships with people from different backgrounds. When interactions occur under the right conditions, such as equal status and shared goals, they can help break down stereotypes and shift unconscious associations. For educators, this might mean forming genuine connections with colleagues, students, or families who differ from themselves in race, religion, or culture.
- **Exposure to Counter-Stereotypical Role Models:** Another approach is exposure to counter-stereotypical exemplars—people who challenge traditional stereotypes. Seeing women in science, male nurses, or Black judges, for example, can help rewire associations and create new mental links. In classrooms, educators can support this process by intentionally featuring diverse role models in posters, classroom décor, literature, and lesson content.

Even small changes, such as the images and stories shared in learning materials, can contribute to breaking down stereotypes and reducing implicit bias.

Section 2 Conclusion

Building authentic connections in the classroom isn't just about creating a warm atmosphere—it's about laying the foundation for emotional safety, academic success, and positive behavior. When students feel that they matter, they are more likely to engage with learning, form healthy relationships, and respond

constructively to challenges. By intentionally fostering belonging and significance through strong teacher-student relationships, educators set the stage for deeper cooperation and classroom-wide success. In the next section, we'll build on this foundation by examining trauma-informed teaching practices—approaches that center emotional safety, healing, and resilience for all students, especially those impacted by adverse experiences.

Section 2 Key Terms

Co-regulation - A process in which a caring adult helps a child manage emotions, attention, and behavior by providing external support, structure, and guidance.

Cultural responsiveness - The practice of interpreting and responding to student behavior in a way that acknowledges and respects their cultural background and identity.

Emotional literacy - The ability to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate one's emotions, which is crucial for strong relationships and effective learning.

Emotional regulation - The ability to manage and control one's emotional states, especially in stressful or challenging situations.

Empathy - The ability to understand and share the feelings of another, often promoted through perspective-taking and emotional expression.

Equity - Fairness in educational practices, ensuring that all students receive the support they need to succeed, regardless of background.

Implicit bias - Unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect decisions and behavior, particularly in how teachers perceive and respond to students.

Mindfulness - A practice involving focusing on the present moment, which helps students manage their emotions and remain emotionally grounded.

Pygmalion effect - The phenomenon where higher expectations lead to an increase in performance, and lower expectations result in underperformance, often influenced by implicit bias.

Relationship mapping - A strategy for visualizing and understanding the dynamics of relationships within a classroom or school community.

Self-awareness - The ability to recognize and understand one's own emotions, which is a key component of emotional literacy.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) - A framework that focuses on developing the emotional and social skills necessary for success in school and life.

Subjective judgment - The interpretation of student behavior based on personal perceptions, which may vary depending on the student's identity and the context.

Trust - The foundation of strong teacher-student relationships, enabling students to feel supported and motivated to succeed.

Section 2 Reflection Questions

1. How do you incorporate relationship-building activities into your daily routines? Are there any practices that have proven particularly effective or ineffective in your context?
2. Consider your own teaching style and emotional regulation. How do you model emotional literacy for your students, and what have you learned about its impact on classroom dynamics?

3. Reflect on how emotional check-ins, like “rose and thorn” or mindfulness exercises, are implemented in your classroom. How do these routines support students’ emotional well-being and learning?
4. How do you handle situations where students are struggling emotionally in the classroom? What strategies do you use to co-regulate and provide emotional support during these moments?
5. Reflect on how your classroom policies or disciplinary strategies may be influenced by your perceptions of students. Do you think there are areas where bias might unintentionally shape how you interpret student behavior?

Section 2 Activities

1. **Implicit Bias Reflection:** Complete an Implicit Association Test (IAT) to become aware of your unconscious biases - you can find IATs via Google. Afterward, complete a reflective journal about how these biases might influence classroom decisions and interactions.
2. **Relationship Mapping Exercise:** Create a relationship map for each student in your class, identifying key connections, areas of strength, and opportunities for improvement in building relationships. Use this map to guide your intentional relationship-building efforts.
3. **Student Feedback on Relationships:** Gather feedback from your students on their perception of the teacher-student relationship and the overall classroom environment. Use the feedback to create a strategy for improving engagement and connection.
4. **Emotional Check-In Implementation:** Introduce a daily emotional check-in routine (e.g., "How are you feeling today?") and assess its impact on

students' emotional engagement and classroom atmosphere over a period of two weeks.

5. **Peer Feedback on Emotional Literacy:** Collaborate with a colleague to observe and provide feedback on each other's emotional literacy practices in the classroom. Discuss how to improve the emotional vocabulary and expression used in student interactions.

Section 3: Restorative and Trauma-Informed Practices

In Section 3, we explore Restorative and Trauma-Informed Practices, crucial frameworks for fostering inclusive and supportive school environments. Trauma-informed practices help educators understand the lasting impacts of traumatic experiences on students, particularly how these experiences can affect learning and behavior. When implemented thoughtfully, these practices not only support the healing of students but also promote a sense of safety and belonging within the classroom. Building on this foundation, restorative justice offers an approach that shifts the focus from punitive discipline to relationship-building, accountability, and community healing. Both frameworks aim to address the emotional, psychological, and social challenges faced by students, ensuring that all individuals are empowered to learn and grow in a compassionate, resilient environment.

3.1 Understanding Trauma and Trauma-Informed Practices

As discussed in section 1, trauma is more than just a difficult experience—it is the lasting emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical impact of an overwhelming event or series of events that disrupt an individual's sense of safety and well-being. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

Administration, trauma can deeply influence a person's beliefs, relationships, and worldview. Its effects are complex and often manifest differently from one person to the next (National Center for School Safety, 2021).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Learning

One widely recognized framework for understanding trauma in children is the concept of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These experiences include forms of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, such as witnessing violence or experiencing parental separation. Research has consistently linked ACEs to long-term health and mental health challenges, including substance use disorders and chronic illness. Importantly, ACEs are not isolated to any one group—they are common across all demographics, cultures, and regions of the United States (National Center for School Safety, 2021). As our understanding of trauma continues to evolve, so too has our definition. Experts now recognize that trauma can also stem from poverty, food insecurity, systemic discrimination, and racism. Historical trauma—such as the generational effects of slavery, forced assimilation, and other mass traumas experienced by marginalized communities—also plays a critical role in shaping the emotional and cognitive development of students today. The impact of trauma on learning is both neurological and emotional.

Despite the far-reaching impact of trauma, there is hope. The development of resilience—the ability to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity—can mitigate the effects of trauma and help students succeed academically and socially. Resilience is not an inherent trait, but a skill that can be nurtured through strong relationships, supportive environments, and targeted interventions. When schools recognize the signs of trauma and respond with empathy and structure, they create spaces where all students have the opportunity to heal, grow, and learn.

Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Schools

At the heart of a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented approach is a commitment to embed key principles into every aspect of the school environment—from classroom instruction and discipline policies to staff interactions and leadership decisions. These six foundational principles help guide school communities in creating safe, supportive, and equitable spaces for students and staff alike *(National Center for School Safety, 2021)*.

1. **Safety:** A trauma-informed school prioritizes safety in all forms—physical, emotional, social, behavioral, and academic. This means creating predictable routines, clear expectations, and environments where students and staff feel secure, respected, and protected from harm or judgment.

2. **Trustworthiness:** Building trust within the school community involves being clear, consistent, and transparent. Educators and school leaders can foster trust by following through on commitments, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and communicating with honesty and care.

3. **Student Voice and Empowerment:** Trauma-informed schools actively seek out and honor student and family perspectives. This principle emphasizes choice, autonomy, and shared decision-making. When students feel heard and involved in shaping their learning experiences, they are more likely to engage and build resilience.

4. **Collaboration:** Rather than making top-down decisions, trauma-informed schools work together—educators, students, families, and community members—to co-create solutions. This collaborative spirit ensures that power is shared and diverse perspectives are valued in school improvement efforts.

5. **Peer Support:** Encouraging students and staff to support one another builds community and reduces isolation. Peer mentoring, buddy systems, and staff collaboration are just a few ways schools can promote a culture where people feel connected and cared for.

6. **Inclusion and Engagement:** True trauma-informed practice means actively working to eliminate exclusion and discrimination. Schools must be places where every student—regardless of identity, background, or ability—feels welcomed and celebrated. Inclusive policies and culturally responsive practices help nurture belonging and trust.

By using these six principles as a foundation for decision-making and daily practice, schools can create environments that not only respond to trauma but also build the protective factors and resilience students need to thrive *(National Center for School Safety)*.

3.2 Rethinking Discipline and Consequences

Traditional disciplinary approaches in schools often overlook the underlying experiences that shape student behavior—especially trauma. Rethinking discipline through a trauma-informed lens involves more than just managing student conduct; it requires creating an environment that prioritizes healing, safety, and connection. The Kentucky Department of Education (2021) outlines how the six essential elements of trauma-informed care can guide schools in shaping more supportive and effective discipline strategies.

Prioritizing Safety

Trauma-informed discipline begins with ensuring both physical and psychological safety for students. Physically, this means avoiding practices that may re-trigger trauma—such as restraint or seclusion—and choosing settings for disciplinary

conversations that feel calm and non-threatening (Kentucky Department of Education, 2021). Psychological safety is just as important. A respectful tone, open body language, and thoughtful listening can help students feel secure, even during difficult conversations. If students are dysregulated, giving them time and space to calm down—perhaps through a quiet activity, deep breathing, or a short walk—can significantly reduce stress responses and make it easier to engage in a productive dialogue.

Classroom Example

Imagine a student, Joshua, who has a history of trauma and becomes visibly upset when asked to stay after class for a discussion about recent disruptive behavior. Rather than immediately bringing him into a small, enclosed space where the conversation could feel intimidating, the teacher chooses to have the discussion in a quiet area of the classroom, away from the group, with plenty of personal space. The teacher also maintains a calm tone and uses open body language to convey that Joshua is safe and valued.his

When Joshua starts to show signs of dysregulation, such as clenching his fists or becoming tearful, the teacher doesn't push to have the conversation right away. Instead, a moment of time to cool off is offered—suggesting a short walk in the hallway or some deep breathing exercises. This allows Joshua the time needed to de-escalate before returning to the conversation, creating a safe environment where both physical and psychological needs are met. By prioritizing safety first, the teacher can guide Joshua through a more productive and supportive discussion about the behavior without triggering additional stress.

Building Trust and Practicing Transparency

Trust is essential to a trauma-informed environment. Students, families, and staff should clearly understand behavioral expectations and the process for addressing

challenges. Consistency in how discipline is handled—especially when it's explained step by step—can create a sense of predictability that helps students feel more in control. Even when consequences are necessary, such as in serious situations, treating students with dignity and clarity helps build long-term trust and promotes a more cooperative response (Kentucky Department of Education, 2021). Many people mistakenly believe that trauma-informed educators avoid giving students consequences for misbehavior. In reality, it’s important to distinguish between consequences and punishment. Consequences are meant to guide and teach students, while punishment focuses more on causing discomfort or distress.

Classroom Example

Joanna is a student who frequently interrupts during a class discussion, speaking out of turn and disrupting the flow of the lesson. A punitive response might be immediately removing her from the room or assigning detention without explanation. In contrast, a trauma-informed consequence would involve a calm, private conversation to help understand why Joanna is struggling to follow expectations, followed by a structured plan to support self-regulation—such as creating a signal the teacher can use to remind the student to pause before speaking, or giving the student a leadership role to share ideas at a more appropriate time. This approach maintains accountability while helping the student build skills and remain connected to the classroom community.

Encouraging Peer Support

Positive peer relationships can be critical when preventing and responding to behavior challenges. Rather than isolating students who struggle, schools should encourage safe and supportive peer engagement. Restorative justice practices, such as healing circles, allow students to experience accountability within a community context and foster empathy, compassion, and a sense of belonging

(Kentucky Department of Education, 2021). These approaches not only address behavior but also build social-emotional skills and resilience.

Classroom Example

In a middle school classroom, two students, Sarah and Maya, have had a history of conflicts that sometimes lead to disruptions during group activities. Instead of isolating either student or assigning punitive consequences, the teacher decides to implement a restorative circle to address the issue. The teacher gathers a small group of students, including Sarah and Maya, and facilitates a conversation where all students share their feelings and perspectives on what happened. The goal is not to place blame but to understand the impact of their actions on each other and the class as a whole. Sarah and Maya are given the opportunity to express how they felt during the conflict, and their peers are encouraged to listen and empathize.

Through this circle, Sarah and Maya begin to understand the emotional triggers behind their actions and are supported by their peers in acknowledging the harm done. In turn, their classmates express how they can help create a more supportive environment, fostering a sense of community and belonging. The teacher helps Sarah and Maya develop a plan to restore their relationship, which includes practicing active listening and offering a friendly gesture of support during class activities. By utilizing peer support in this way, the teacher not only addresses the immediate behavior but also cultivates a stronger, more empathetic classroom community. The students involved learn valuable social-emotional skills, and the group as a whole becomes more resilient in managing future conflicts collaboratively.

Fostering Collaboration and Mutual Respect

Students are more likely to take ownership of their behavior when they are included in conversations about expectations and consequences. This collaborative approach invites them to reflect on their actions, understand their impact, and help identify appropriate responses (Kentucky Department of Education, 2021). It's especially effective when students and families are involved in creating individualized support or behavior plans that include trauma-informed strategies. Listening without judgment and valuing student input supports meaningful partnerships and shared responsibility.

Classroom Example

In a high school classroom, Dan, a student who often disrupts the class, has been consistently late with assignments and exhibits disengagement during lessons. Rather than imposing an arbitrary consequence, the teacher takes a collaborative approach. Dan is invited to a one-on-one conversation, where the teacher begins by listening to his perspective on why he's struggling. Dan shares that he's been dealing with personal challenges at home, which affect his ability to focus and complete assignments. Recognizing the importance of collaboration, the teacher then suggests involving Dan's parents and the school counselor in creating a support plan that addresses his specific needs. Together, they identify strategies that could help, such as allowing Dan some flexibility with deadlines and providing him with a designated quiet space for independent work to reduce anxiety. They also agree on how Dan can communicate when he feels overwhelmed, rather than resorting to disruptive behavior in class.

By actively involving Dan in the process and listening to his needs without judgment, the teacher ensures that Dan feels valued and empowered in his own behavioral development. The collaboration between the teacher, Dan, his family, and the counselor fosters mutual respect, and Dan takes greater ownership of his

actions, becoming more motivated to meet the expectations that were collaboratively established. This approach not only addresses the behavior in a supportive, trauma-informed way but also strengthens the partnership between school and home, ensuring that Dan has a consistent network of support.

Empowering Students Through Voice and Choice

Trauma often strips individuals of control. Reintroducing a sense of autonomy in disciplinary situations—through small but meaningful choices—can be deeply empowering for students. Whether it's choosing where to sit, what order to discuss events in, or which adult to work with, these options allow students to re-engage in the process with agency and dignity. Even when firm boundaries are needed, offering choices wherever possible helps restore a student's sense of control and fosters a more cooperative relationship.

Classroom Example

In a middle school setting, Alex, a student known for frequently acting out during group work, has just been caught interrupting others during a class discussion. Instead of imposing an immediate consequence, the teacher takes a moment to offer Alex some choices. Recognizing that trauma can leave students feeling powerless, the teacher understands that restoring a sense of control in a respectful way can help Alex re-engage in the situation. The teacher says, "Alex, I need you to reflect on what happened, but I also want to give you a few options for how we can work through this together. Would you prefer to talk with me first about what happened, or would you like a few minutes to calm down before we discuss it? You can also choose whether you'd like to sit with me in the corner of the room or in the front so we can have a more private conversation."

Alex chooses to take a few minutes to calm down. Afterward, he decides to sit at a desk near the front of the room to have the conversation. During their discussion,

the teacher listens attentively, respecting Alex's perspective and guiding him through reflecting on his actions. The teacher reinforces the importance of class participation and respectful behavior but does so in a way that recognizes Alex's autonomy. By offering Alex choices, the teacher not only helps him regain a sense of control but also maintains firm boundaries in a compassionate way. This approach empowers Alex, enabling him to feel respected and involved in the disciplinary process, which in turn makes him more willing to cooperate and work toward positive change.

Addressing Cultural, Historical, and Gender Factors

Finally, a trauma-informed disciplinary approach must also be culturally responsive and sensitive to students' identities and lived experiences. This includes recognizing how factors like race, gender, history, and community background influence how students perceive and respond to authority. Culturally responsive discipline avoids one-size-fits-all reactions and instead seeks to understand each student's context, promoting fairness and reducing disparities in disciplinary outcomes (Kentucky Department of Education, 2021).

Classroom Example

In a high school classroom, Lanie, a student from a marginalized community, has been consistently late to class. The teacher, understanding the importance of addressing cultural and historical factors, recognizes that Lanie's tardiness might not be due to a lack of effort or disrespect, but could be influenced by factors such as transportation issues, family responsibilities, or a history of negative interactions with authority figures. Instead of assuming Lanie's tardiness is simply a sign of disinterest, the teacher takes the time to have a conversation with her. "Lanie, I've noticed you've been late to class recently. Is there something going on at home or with transportation that's making it hard to get here on time?" the teacher asks with genuine curiosity and empathy.

Lanie shares that she has to help care for her younger siblings in the morning because her mother works two jobs, which sometimes causes delays in her arrival. The teacher listens carefully and acknowledges Lanie's responsibility and the challenges she faces. Together, they come up with a plan to address the tardiness—such as arranging for her to notify the teacher if she's running late so that she isn't penalized or left feeling frustrated. By considering Lanie's personal circumstances, the teacher shows a responsiveness and understanding of the broader challenges she faces. The teacher avoids a punitive approach and instead focuses on providing support tailored to Lanie's specific needs. This not only fosters trust and respect but also ensures that the discipline is equitable and considers the historical and cultural contexts affecting Lanie's behavior.

In sum, trauma-informed discipline is not about removing accountability—it's about delivering it with compassion, clarity, and care. When schools intentionally integrate the six elements of trauma-informed care into their disciplinary practices, they foster safer, more inclusive learning environments that promote healing and growth for all students (Kentucky Department of Education, 2021).

3.2 Restorative Approaches to Behavior

Restorative justice offers a powerful approach to addressing behavior challenges by focusing on repairing harm, rebuilding trust, and fostering accountability within a supportive community context (Schultz, 2024). This approach contrasts with punitive methods, emphasizing relationship-building, understanding, and healing. Restorative practices not only address behavior but also aim to restore the social fabric of the school community by encouraging empathy and personal growth.

The Principles of Restorative Justice

Restorative justice in schools is grounded in three main principles (Schultz, 2024):

1. **Accountability:** Ensuring that students take responsibility for their actions.
2. **Involvement of the Victim/Survivor:** Giving those harmed a voice in the resolution process.
3. **Community Engagement:** Engaging the wider school community in the healing and conflict-resolution process.

These principles guide the development of restorative practices that foster mutual respect, responsibility, and repair of harm, ensuring that everyone involved has an opportunity to reflect, learn, and grow.

Creating a Restorative School Community

A key feature of restorative justice in schools is the transformation of the school community. The shift is not just about changing disciplinary policies; it's about cultivating an ethos of care, respect, and collaboration among students, teachers, and the wider community. This involves creating spaces where students feel loved and supported, where beauty is evident in the physical environment, and where joy and trust are present in the relationships between people (Schultz, 2024). In the Oakland Unified School District, a pioneer in restorative justice in schools, this transformation is evident through initiatives like talking circles and peace circles. These circles are not just for addressing harm, but for building community, promoting open communication, and fostering empathy. Students are trained as circle keepers, helping to lead these discussions and ensure that everyone's voice is heard. This approach aims to prevent conflict and harm before it happens by nurturing relationships and addressing issues as they arise.

Restorative Strategies: Talking Circles and Peace Circles

One of the most prominent restorative strategies used in schools is the talking circle, which provides a space for open dialogue where everyone has an equal

voice. In this type of circle, a talking piece is passed around, and only the person holding the piece is allowed to speak. This promotes active listening and ensures that all participants feel heard and respected. Talking circles are often used to discuss issues such as conflict, behavior, and feelings, with the aim of finding solutions and promoting understanding (Schultz, 2024). Peace circles are another strategy commonly used in restorative practices. These circles are used specifically to address incidents of harm and conflict, where both the wrongdoer and the victim are present. The focus is on healing the harm, repairing relationships, and creating agreements for how to move forward. By involving everyone in the process, peace circles ensure that the needs of all parties are met and that the community is strengthened rather than fractured (Schultz).

Rebuilding Trust and Repairing Harm

Restorative justice practices are centered around the idea of repairing harm rather than punishing behavior. When students engage in harmful actions, the focus shifts from punishment to rebuilding trust and addressing the root causes of the behavior. (Schultz, 2024) For example, in Oakland, the district has moved away from suspending students for "defiance" and now focuses on understanding the underlying reasons for such behavior. This could involve providing emotional support, developing skills for managing conflict, and engaging students in meaningful reflection about their actions. The goal is not to remove students from the school environment but to provide them with the tools and support they need to re-engage with their peers, teachers, and the community in a positive and productive way. By doing so, restorative justice helps to break the cycle of exclusionary discipline, reducing the likelihood that students will end up in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Challenges and Considerations

While restorative justice practices have shown promise in fostering a more supportive school environment, there are challenges to full implementation. A significant challenge is the need for a comprehensive overhaul of school policies, moving away from punitive measures like detention and suspension and toward a system that prioritizes healing and community-building (Schultz, 2024). This requires significant investment in training educators, hiring additional support staff, and shifting the entire school culture. Furthermore, the success of restorative justice is often linked to the community's willingness to embrace these practices. Without broad support from educators, administrators, parents, and the wider community, restorative justice initiatives may struggle to gain traction. Additionally, schools must be prepared to address issues of racial disparity in discipline, as research shows that Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline practices.

Restorative justice offers a transformative approach to school discipline, one that values healing, accountability, and community. By focusing on repairing harm and rebuilding trust, schools can create environments where all students feel safe, respected, and supported. However, the full implementation of restorative justice requires a deep commitment to rethinking disciplinary practices and building a culture of care and connection within the school community. As more schools adopt restorative practices, the hope is that they can create more equitable and supportive environments for all students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized.

Section 3 Conclusion

Integrating restorative and trauma-informed practices into schools represents a transformative shift toward understanding and supporting the whole child. By

recognizing the deep impact of trauma and responding with empathy and structure, educators can create an environment where all students feel safe, respected, and capable of thriving. Through restorative practices, such as talking circles and peace circles, schools can foster accountability, rebuild trust, and strengthen community connections. While challenges in full implementation remain, particularly in addressing systemic barriers and ensuring cultural responsiveness, the potential benefits of these approaches are profound. As schools continue to embrace trauma-informed care and restorative justice, they lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and equitable educational experience for every student, promoting not only academic success but also emotional well-being and resilience.

Section 3 Key Terms

Accountability - The process of taking responsibility for one's actions and their impact on others, often central to restorative practices.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) - Potentially traumatic events in childhood, such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction, that can have long-term effects on health and learning.

Cultural Responsiveness - An approach that respects and acknowledges students' diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences, especially in discipline and support strategies.

Empowerment - Providing students with choice, autonomy, and voice in decision-making, helping them regain a sense of control.

Executive Functioning - A set of cognitive skills including memory, focus, and problem-solving that can be impaired by trauma.

Historical Trauma - The cumulative emotional and psychological harm experienced by groups across generations due to major collective traumatic events like slavery or forced assimilation.

Hypervigilance - A heightened state of alertness and fear often experienced by individuals with trauma exposure, impacting their ability to focus or feel safe.

Inclusion - Creating environments where all students feel valued and accepted, regardless of identity, background, or ability.

Peer Support - The encouragement and care students and staff offer each other, which helps reduce isolation and foster community.

Psychological Safety - A sense of emotional security where individuals feel safe to express themselves without fear of humiliation or harm.

Resilience - The capacity to adapt and thrive despite adversity; a skill that can be developed through relationships and support systems.

Restorative Justice - A practice focused on repairing harm, rebuilding relationships, and restoring community through accountability and empathy.

Restorative Practices - Tools and approaches (like talking circles or mediation) used to build community and resolve conflict in a supportive, inclusive manner.

Safety - A trauma-informed principle emphasizing the need for physical, emotional, and academic security in school environments.

Student Voice - A practice of including students in decision-making and honoring their perspectives to promote engagement and empowerment.

Toxic Stress - Chronic and intense stress caused by trauma that can alter brain development and emotional functioning.

Trauma - A lasting emotional, psychological, or physical response to deeply distressing events that disrupt a person's sense of safety and well-being.

Trauma-Informed Practices - Approaches that recognize the impact of trauma and prioritize safety, trust, and healing in school settings.

Trustworthiness - A trauma-informed principle focused on building trust through consistency, honesty, and transparency.

Section 3 Reflection Questions

1. Think about a time when a student's behavior challenged you. Reflecting on trauma-informed practices, what might you do differently now?
2. Which of the six trauma-informed principles (safety, trustworthiness, student voice, collaboration, peer support, inclusion) do you believe your school currently embodies well, and which ones need more attention?
3. Consider a specific school policy that may conflict with trauma-informed or restorative practices. What alternatives could better support healing and student development?
4. Which restorative practice—such as circles, peer mediation, or conflict resolution conferencing—are you most interested in implementing? Why?
5. How does your school currently support the emotional well-being of educators? How might staff support systems impact the effectiveness of trauma-informed and restorative practices?
6. How do you currently create a sense of safety—physical and psychological—for students in your classroom? What else might be added or improved?

7. In what ways can restorative and trauma-informed approaches help reframe "problem behaviors" as opportunities for connection and healing rather than control or punishment?

Section 3 Activities

1. **ACEs Audit:** Review and reflect on the ACEs framework. Conduct a personal learning audit by identifying how many ACEs you were previously familiar with and how they may present in your classroom context.
2. **Environment Walkthrough:** Assess your classroom's physical environment for trauma-informed elements like calming spaces, predictable routines, and visual supports. Identify one area to improve.
3. **Discipline Policy Review:** Analyze your school's current discipline policy. Identify any language or practices that may conflict with trauma-informed principles and prepare suggestions for improvement.
4. **Resource Curation:** Curate a list of age-appropriate books, videos, and online tools that explain trauma, emotions, and coping strategies for students. Share it with your school counselor or team.
5. **Observe with a Trauma Lens:** Conduct a peer classroom observation focusing solely on how trauma-informed principles appear in practice. Record what strategies the teacher uses and debrief afterward. Alternatively, record your own classroom and reflect on these practices.
6. **Student Voice Inventory:** Evaluate how student voice and choice are represented in your classroom. Identify three ways to increase student autonomy or shared decision-making.

Conclusion

As we conclude *Reimagining Responses to Classroom Behavior*, it's important to reflect on the transformative journey we've undertaken together. We've explored how student behavior is not just an isolated set of actions but a complex communication of unmet needs, emotional distress, and developmental realities. Through shifting our perspectives, we can move away from punitive responses and instead approach behavior with empathy, understanding, and insight. We've also seen the powerful role relationships play in shaping behavior. By building meaningful, supportive connections with students, we create an environment where students feel safe to take risks, learn from mistakes, and grow emotionally. The restorative and trauma-informed practices we've explored give us the tools to nurture students in a way that helps them heal, take responsibility for their actions, and become active participants in their learning communities. The tools and frameworks you've learned in this course will empower you to respond to student behavior in ways that support both academic success and emotional well-being. As you put these strategies into practice, remember that all students are unique, and their behavior is always an opportunity for connection, growth, and understanding. By fostering a classroom where students feel respected, cared for, and understood, you help create a community where everyone can thrive.

Classroom Example

Mrs. Blanco, a dedicated middle school history teacher, has always focused on creating an inclusive and engaging classroom environment where all students feel respected and valued. Recently, however, she has been grappling with how to better address classroom behaviors that disrupt the learning experience. Mrs. Blanco believes in fostering a supportive and positive environment, but she has

encountered several challenges along the way as she works to reimagine how to respond to classroom behavior in a way that is both effective and nurturing.

Challenges

1. **Behavioral Disruptions Impacting Class Engagement:**
   Mrs. Blanco is noticing an increase in behavioral disruptions in her classroom. Some students frequently talk out of turn, distract others, or disengage during lessons. She recognizes that these disruptions are taking away from valuable instructional time, and she feels conflicted about how to address them. Traditional disciplinary measures, like sending students to the principal's office, don't seem to improve the behavior, and she wonders if there are more effective, long-term strategies she could employ to reduce disruptions and re-engage students.

2. **Lack of Knowledge on Trauma-Informed Practices:**
   Mrs. Blanco is aware that some of her students may be struggling with emotional or social challenges, but she lacks a deep understanding of how trauma and emotional distress can manifest in the classroom. She has students who appear withdrawn or who have extreme emotional reactions when faced with frustration. While she is sympathetic, she is uncertain how to address these behaviors in a way that supports the child while still maintaining classroom order. She feels unsure about how trauma-informed practices could help her navigate these situations effectively.

3. **Implementing Restorative Practices Effectively:**
   Mrs. Blanco is interested in incorporating restorative practices to create an environment where students can take responsibility for their actions and repair harm caused by conflicts. However, she is unsure about how to initiate these practices in a way that is meaningful and impactful. She wants

to foster accountability but worries that without proper structure or guidance, restorative practices might be ineffective or misunderstood by students.

Considerations for Support and Improvement

- How can Mrs. Blanco integrate restorative and trauma-informed practices into her classroom while maintaining a positive and structured learning environment?
- What professional development opportunities might help Mrs. Blanco become more comfortable with trauma-informed teaching and restorative practices?
- How can her school support Mrs. Blanco in implementing restorative practices effectively and ensuring they are meaningful and impactful for her students?
- What strategies could Mrs. Blanco use to create a more empathetic classroom culture and proactively address behavioral disruptions before they escalate?

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