

# Classroom Culture: Stories of Empathy and Belonging

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## **Executive Summary**

*This chapter uses three stories of schools and students to explore the concepts of emotionally responsive teaching and mentoring. The stories suggest a need for teachers to engage students by creating higher senses of school connectedness. Teachers are encouraged to understand their students and demonstrate a transformational leadership approach suggested by Burns in his seminal work on leadership. Finally, the chapter urges teachers and educational leaders to see themselves as cultural architects, tasked with listening and creating spaces for belonging. Through an approach that engages students on an emotional level through empathy, educational leaders will increase the engagement and success of students.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

It was a brisk fall day with the sun shining and the winds calm. Another school day was over. I walked out of the building, got into my car, and reflected that today had been a good day. Students were engaged, the lessons were valuable, and I was able to connect with a few students and listen to them talk about their lives. As I started my short drive home, I asked myself why today had been a good day. I had an unfinished to-do list that was growing. Papers still needed to be graded, lesson plans were unfinished, and I needed to connect with my colleagues and principals about a few ideas. The list kept growing in my mind, but I was resolute that today was a successful day of teaching because my classroom was a place where students felt safe and special enough to engage in the coursework and share their stories with me. Teaching can be an overwhelming task; there is often no way to get everything accomplished. So what creates those truly meaningful classrooms? What separates those special classes with life-giving teachers?

Great classrooms and great teachers come in many forms with varying personalities, but the singular component that creates these special environments for learning is culture. Highly effective teachers, great educators, create a positive classroom culture that is engaging, inclusive, and loving. A teacher's first thoughts must go into creating this culture. Teachers must intentionally develop the skills of creating

positive culture, for that is the difference in great educators. Covey (1989) argues that great leaders put “first things first” (p. 91). Life-giving teachers put developing a positive classroom culture first. These teachers understand that there will always be an unfinished to-do list, but they evaluate successful teaching by creating a classroom culture that enhances student learning for all students.

The following stories are three examples from my own teaching experiences: using poetry to help students after a school shooting, watching students embrace a culture of inclusion, and creating space for students to belong. The successes in these stories were only possible because of the vibrant culture already created in the classroom. Without that first step, a step that is foundational for emotionally responsive teaching and mentoring, very little can be accomplished. However, with a strong classroom culture, life-giving teaching is a daily reality.

## **NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY**

*Nature’s first green is gold,*

*Her hardest hue to hold.*

*Her early leaf’s a flower;*

*But only so an hour.*

*Then leaf subsides to leaf.*

*So Eden sank to grief,*

*So dawn goes down to day.*

*Nothing gold can stay.*

Robert Frost, the great American poet, first published “Nothing Gold Can Stay” in 1923. In 2012, this poem formed the centerpiece of my hardest and most thoughtful days of teaching.

I started teaching at a small private school in Portland, OR. After three years of teaching 7th and 11th grade Language Arts, I moved with my wife and two sons to Oklahoma, near my hometown. I taught 8th grade Language Arts for one year in a town about 45 minutes away from our home. Then, for my 5th year of teaching, I accepted a position teaching 8th grade Language Arts at our local junior high. I loved the school, the students, and my colleagues.

I taught in a two-room portable just outside the back doors to the school. My portable-mate became a good friend, and we collaborated extremely well throughout the entire year. We started the year with the quintessential Oklahoma junior high novel, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. It is a captivating text with limitless possibilities for Language Arts—but also an incredible text for valuable discussions about the complex social dynamics of junior high life. I loved starting the year with this text because the class was able to talk about relevant and important social concerns. Within just a few short weeks of school, my students were already engaging in real discussions about caring for one another, the dangers of hateful

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