

Calm, Clear, and Kind: What Students Want From Their Teachers



Researchers asked students what makes a caring teacher—and these same qualities may help support your well-being as an educator.

BY JENNA WHITEHEAD | APRIL 18, 2022

There has never been a more challenging time for teachers than in recent years. Educators have been persistently worried about caring for not only their students' academic learning, but also their students' social and emotional well-being.



The pandemic, climate crises, and global conflicts have left teachers with so much more to shoulder for their students—while they themselves try to cope with everything that is happening. Yet, while many teachers are barely able to stay afloat in these turbulent times, we often hear them lamenting that they feel like they are not doing enough for their students.

But what do students really need?

Years of research in the field of social-emotional learning (SEL) has demonstrated that when students have supportive relationships with their teachers, they experience better well-being and success in school. And this remains true beyond just the early years of school—with middle and high school students showing more positive outcomes when they are surrounded by caring and supportive teachers.

What does it mean to be a caring, supportive teacher? Despite the growing interest in studying this question, there still remains a lack of consensus across both research and practice. And even less is known about how students themselves think about

what it means to be a caring teacher.



My colleagues and I recently published a study in the *Journal of Adolescent Research* in which we went directly to students to ask what makes a caring teacher. Their responses aligned with an emerging perspective from education researchers: that the most authentic, wholehearted educators are calm, clear, and kind. The good news is that these characteristics may not only help students but also support teacher well-being during these difficult times.

What do students say about caring teachers?

According to education researchers, one crucial but ill-defined aspect of educators' expertise are the skills that allow them to teach mindfully and bring their whole selves to the classroom. In a recent chapter by Kevin J. Hulburt and his colleagues, they propose three characteristics to be key: being “calm in body, clear in mind, and kind-hearted.” The Calm, Clear, and Kind (CCK) framework combines decades of research regarding the emotional labor of teaching, SEL, and contemplative approaches to education.

The significance of being calm, clear, and kind makes intuitive sense to many educators. *But are these qualities the things that students feel they need from their teachers? And what do these qualities really look like in the classroom?*

In early 2020 (pre-pandemic), we posed a question to a diverse group of approximately 200 sixth- and seventh-grade students at public middle schools in British Columbia, Canada: “What are three things that teachers do to show they care?”

What we learned from our analysis of students' responses is that their characterizations of caring teachers were reflected in the three categories of calm, clear, and kind.

The Greater Good Science Center has joined an editorial partnership with **SSIR**, **The Wellbeing Project**, **India Development Review**, and **The Skoll Foundation** to explore the important, but often

Be calm. In the CCK framework, “calm in body” refers to a teacher’s ability to remain calm and regulate their own stress in the face of the challenges inherent in teaching. In doing so, teachers are less

overlooked, connection between inner well-being and effective social change. This article is part of that partnership.

reactive and better able to support students with their own emotion regulation.

Many students described a caring teacher using themes that represented both teachers' tendencies to themselves be calm, not reactive, and patient, as well as a teacher's ability to foster a calm atmosphere among students in their classroom. Specifically, they described a caring teacher as one who "does stuff calmly like not yelling" and "take[s] time to explain the work" and "creates a calming environment to work in." Some other comments from students were "be patient when someone doesn't understand the material," "they don't yell," and "they help you calm down."

Be clear. The CCK framework describes "clear in mind" as a teacher's capacity to remain present with their students and to stay curious and in tune with their needs. It also emphasizes the importance of teachers listening and maintaining clear, democratic communication with their students.

Almost half of the students we surveyed emphasized the importance of qualities such as being clear ("They explain the work well") and democratic communication ("They listen to your ideas"), active listening ("They listen with their eyes"), presence ("notice your feelings even if other people don't"), and good classroom management skills ("resolve a problem before it gets big"). Other examples from this category included "talk to the students as if they're her friend," "listen to you when you talk," and "they are open-minded," which highlights the ever-present need of early adolescents to feel heard.

Be kind. According to Hulburt and his colleagues, "kind in heart" encompasses more than just having a nice personality. It includes practicing non-judgment and expressing warmth and connection, cultivating trust and respect, and attending to the needs of students.

This aspect of the framework is grounded in teachers' compassion, both toward their students' experiences and backgrounds (which includes trauma-informed practices), and with themselves. Practicing self-compassion for themselves is highlighted as an important component of building a compassionate approach with their students.

Almost all students we surveyed used at least one kindness-related theme to describe a caring teacher. Students generated a wide range of kind themes, from friendliness and warmth (“They say hi to you in the morning”) to deeper expressions of empathy, compassion, and trustworthiness, such as “They understand how you are feeling” and “They help you when you[’re] sad.” Students also frequently mentioned helpfulness as a signal of teacher caring—from helpfulness in school (“helps me when it looks like I don’t understand”) to help with personal problems (“help with friends”)—which emphasizes the importance of not only being attuned to students’ needs but also attending to them.

Mindful teaching and teacher well-being

Despite students’ suggestions being relatively intuitive and “simple,” we all experience ourselves that it is not always easy to be calm, clear, and kind in every moment. Particularly when we ourselves are stressed or busy.

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

Mindfulness for Teachers: A book by Patricia Jennings that outlines mindful teaching in terms of “simple skills for peace and productivity in the classroom.”

MindUP: A series of programs and resources (many free), grounded in neuroscience and mindfulness research, for students, adults, and a course specifically for educators.

Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE): A professional development program that aims to help teachers and administrators handle their stress and rediscover the joys of teaching. CARE was developed by Patricia Jennings, Christa Turksma, and Richard C. Brown with support from the Garrison Institute.

Fortunately for teachers, there is an inextricable link between being *calm, clear, and kind* and your own well-being.

The CCK framework emerged from the field of *mindfulness in education*. Work in this field has included investigating the role of contemplative practices (for example, loving-kindness meditation) in cultivating compassionate and resilient classrooms. The CCK framework is grounded in the two major tenets of mindfulness—self-awareness and non-judgment—and outlines the ways these practices and skills are particularly relevant for educators. For example, *calm-in-body* starts with teachers’ awareness of their own emotional triggers, followed by approaching students’ behaviors with curiosity instead of judgment.

The Mindful School: Transforming School Culture through Mindfulness: This book was edited by leaders in the field of education and mindfulness and presents both research and practical applications. Note: A copy of the CCK chapter (chapter 5) can be found in this book.

Mindful Breathing: A simple, guided five-minute mindful breathing practice.

Heart-Mind Online: This website, put forth by the **Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education**, provides a wealth of evidence-informed resources—both for developing students' SEL as well as educators' own well-being.

Exploring Self Toward Expanding Teaching, Teacher Education and Practitioner Research: The complete chapter that outlines the CCK framework can be found in this book (volume 34, chapter 2).

Practicing mindful teaching not only leads to better relationships with students (which in turn reduces external stressors for teachers), but also seems to benefit teachers' own health and well-being.

For instance, a 2016 study by Tori L. Crain and her colleagues showed that teachers in Canada and the U.S. who participated in a mindfulness training program experienced improvements in mood, quality of sleep, and satisfaction both at work and home. What's more, a study by Summer S. Braun and her colleagues demonstrated that more mindful teachers had lower levels of job stress, burnout, depression, and anxiety and, at the same time, more emotionally supportive interactions with their students.

In essence, what students say they need from their teachers may in fact be exactly what teachers need, as well. So, what can teachers do to show they care?

- 1. Ask students directly for what they need.** Much can be learned by listening to students' own voices—in research and practice.
- 2. Feel empowered in what you are already doing.** So many teachers naturally show up in the ways their students need, in part by knowing the importance of truly listening to them. Students did not identify complicated teaching strategies or skills. Instead, they admit to needing their teachers to be present, warm, kind, and helpful, and to listen to them. So many teachers already put this at the forefront of their teaching and should feel empowered that they are already doing exactly what their students need.
- 3. Attend to your own well-being.** This will increase your capacity to be more intentional about a mindful and compassionate approach with your students.

4. Explicitly try out some mindfulness practices. Incorporating personal practices throughout the day, and also actively modeling some mindfulness activities with students in the classroom, can help positively shift the classroom culture. For example, try doing some mindful breathing as you brush your teeth or commute to work, or experiment with a morning body scan with your students to become more aware of what you (and they) are bringing into the classroom each day.

5. Be kind to yourself. It is not easy to be calm, clear, or kind all the time. Note: That's where the self-compassion piece comes in! It is OK to not get it right all the time.

In the end...try to do your best to be *calm, clear, and kind* with your students *and* yourself. For many, this may just mean committing to be more intentional about trying to be mindful throughout the day. Or it could mean seeking out additional training or resources to help you build and strengthen your mindfulness muscles!

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