

The New Rites of Passage: Regulation and Relationships

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Abstract

Today's teenagers face a myriad of factors that impact their brains. From technology to trauma, the current brain of a teenager is physiologically altered by factors outside themselves. In order for today's educators to support their students, they require a foundational understanding of how technology and trauma impact the teen brain. Teenage students today are reporting record high levels of stress in their young lives. For the first time ever, students are reporting stress levels equal to those of their parents and other adults. Teachers are trying to work with classes in which a majority of students report that they have had to deal with trauma and other kinds of stress in school and online. To mitigate these issues, teachers must assist students by fostering self-regulation skills. Further, teachers must help students by buffering the effects of trauma and stress by nurturing strong and caring relationships with students. When teachers understand the interrelationship between regulation and strong relationships, students will be provided with vital skills needed for their success. As foundational skills, regulation and relationships are the new rites of passage for today's teenagers. This paper examines current research literature associated with the brain, self-regulation, and relationships.

Keywords: brain development, relationships, self-regulation, teen brains, trauma, allostasis

THE NEW RITES OF PASSAGE: REGULATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

In the past, the teenage years were marked with understood rites of passage: attending a first school dance, starting high school, getting a driver's license, and applying to college, military, or a first job. In addition to the typical rites of passage, today's teens face tremendous stressors—academic, social, and emotional—both inside and outside the classroom. To be successful, today's teens require a substantive school support system that engages “all” adults (teachers, paraprofessionals, tutors, social workers, guidance counselors, psychologists, cafeteria staff, administrators). 21st century teens require new rites of passage to effectively navigate adolescence; they need regulation skills and strong relationships with school staff. These elements can ultimately foster teens' development into thriving young adults. To help their teenaged students, educators require a foundational and comprehensive understanding of trauma and stress effect the teenage brain.

The Current Teenage Brain

Rewired

Understanding the current teen brain is paramount. Today's teens are extensively exposed to various technologies, with far-reaching impacts. While accessing information is conducted with ease, technology over-exposure and over-use readily associates with today's teens. Rideout and Robb's (2018) survey results published by Common Sense Media revealed 89% of teens ages 13–17 have a Smartphone, which increased from 41% in 2012. Seventy percent of 2018 teens use social media daily, reflecting a 36% increase from 2012, and texting was identified as teens' preferred communication method. Given its pervasive daily influence, examining technology's impact on teen brains is imperative for adults working with teenaged students.

As a direct result of technology over-exposure at young ages, teen brains experience “rewiring” (Sousa, 2016, p. 23). Research indicates the brain can reshape its circuits based on environmental input; this concept of neuroplasticity beneficially allows people to continue to

learn throughout their lives (Sousa, 2016). Teenagers' continual exposure to technology divides their attention (Sousa, 2017) and negatively impacts their social interaction skills (Sousa, 2016). Technology's drawbacks have begun to overwhelm and negatively affect teens, both physiologically and socially. Additionally, many teens' brains are further affected by trauma's pervasive impact.

Trauma-Affected

Throughout research literature, childhood trauma is pervasive (Crosby, 2015; Tough, 2016). Trauma among school-aged children is considered "a public health epidemic" (Craig, 2016, p. 28). In fact, more than 25% of children experience physical, sexual, or emotional trauma (Crosby, 2015). Additionally, one half to two-thirds of children have experienced trauma, (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). In North Carolina, 68% of 16-year-old students had experienced trauma, with 37% experiencing two or more incidents (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). Continuing, the National Survey of Children's Health in 2011-2012 indicated nearly 35 million U.S. children experienced at least one type of childhood trauma (Souers & Hall, 2016). With 60% of students having experienced 3–4 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Nealy-Oparah & Scruggs-Hussein, 2018), schools must respond to trauma's prevalence to support students. Certainly, these staggering statistics demonstrate trauma's prevalence.

Childhood trauma, which negatively impacts brains, has been explored by researchers. The 1998 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study (Felitti et al., 1998) categorized trauma as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction, connecting childhood trauma exposure with significant negative health outcomes including heart disease, obesity, and early death. The ACEs study depicted trauma's prevalence (Felitti et al., 1998) which continues (Souers & Hall, 2016).

Given ACEs' prevalence, considering how trauma alters teen brains is important. Trauma physiologically changes a teen's brain; first, trauma exposure affects the prefrontal cortex's ability to filter out unrelated information. Information enters the thalamus and moves to

the amygdala and the frontal lobes. When reaching the amygdala, the received information is assessed to determine its level of threat to survival. If information is (mis)perceived as a threat, the brain emits cortisol and adrenaline, causing a whole-body response to follow— before teens can consciously evaluate the threat’s validity (van der Kolk, 2014). Reactions to classroom environmental factors within trauma-affected teens often result in a fight, flight, and/or freeze response (Souers & Hall, 2016). Given the overwhelming influence over the brain and body reactions, it is no surprise that a teen’s “emotional brain” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 57) trumps their focus on academics.

Further, exposure to stress can result in physiological brain reactions, particularly with the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala. In the human brain there is a process of maintaining balance called allostasis. According to McEwen and Wingfield (2007), “Allostasis is the active process that leads to adaptation to a stressor, and mediators of allostasis include stress hormones as well as the autonomic nervous systems and pro-inflammatory cytokines and metabolic hormones” (Abstract). Under constant or severe traumatic pressure, the allostatic process becomes overloaded. Consequences of allostatic overload include many of the common diseases of modern life (e.g., obesity, cancer, heart disease, ADHD, asthma, diabetes).

While adverse childhood experiences and trauma increase difficulties for children to respond to changes in life in a regulated manner, allostasis provides the brain stability to adjust responses (Karatoreos & McEwen, 2013). Teachers can help students by utilizing the natural systems of the brain (Caine, 2018). Understanding how the brain works when under stress can assist teachers with creating experiences that foster the allostasis process through helping students become effective and efficient in utilizing their self-regulation skills. Thus, adults working with teens need to understand how teen brains react to technology and trauma influence, so teens can be supported.

The Brain, Self-Regulation, and Relationships

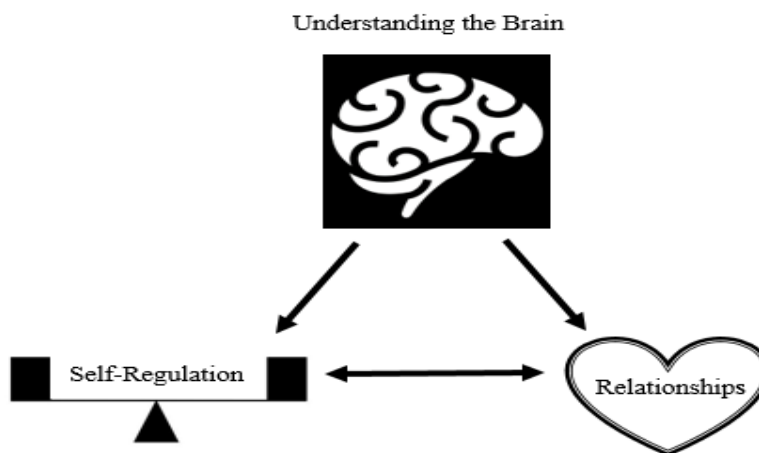
Schools can play an important role providing safety and stability to trauma-affected students (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). Often trauma “masks itself in classroom behaviors that can easily be interpreted erroneously” (Sitler, 2009, p. 120). Research reveals childhood trauma affects students’ stress regulation and results in students’ attention focusing on survival, as opposed to content instruction (Craig, 2016). Stress causes the body to generate cortisol, produces an adrenaline rush, and increases the heart rate. Supportive adult responses can buffer such physiological responses (Schwartz-Henderson, 2016). School-based supports can benefit students who have experienced trauma.

Tough (2016) outlines research that demonstrates biological changes in children’s growing brains; these changes “impair the development of an important set of mental capacities that help children regulate their thoughts and feelings” (p. 4). Moving beyond acknowledgment to comprehending root causes of students’ behaviors (i.e., they are biological responses and not active choices) allows teachers to fundamentally understand many students’ “misbehaviors” are physiological stress responses (Schwartz-Henderson, 2016). These responses often present as fight, flight, or freeze (Souers & Hall, 2016). Instead of disciplinary actions, these students need understanding and assistance from the school. Recognizing the positive impact teachers can have for students exposed to trauma, educators’ roles within students’ lives are essential.

To support teens, educators must recognize that understanding the brain, fostering self-regulation, and nurturing strong teacher-student relationships interrelate, as demonstrated by Figure 1. Educators’ understanding of how a teen’s brain reacts and responds sponsors a heightened awareness regarding self-regulation strategy instruction and implementation, represented by the balance. When teachers offer self-regulation instruction and reflection opportunities, to achieve self-balance, they foster stronger relationships as students will sense support and care from educators. Further, students will gain essential strategies to apply beyond adolescence.

Figure 1

Brain, Self-Regulation, and Relationships Interrelate.



Understanding the teen brain ultimately influences educators' approaches with students, including trauma-sensitive strategy integration. After all, "[o]ur brains were wired to survive—not thrive" (Souers & Hall, 2019, p. 153). Comprehending how teens are likely to respond and react affords teachers opportunities to plan educational approaches proactively. Students can be taught how to be attuned to their personal reactions (Souers & Hall, 2019). Further, teachers can select strategies including affective statements and questions, conferences, or restorative circles (Watchel, 2016) as a means to shape students' actions and reactions. Additional trauma sensitive strategies include teaching with student strengths in mind (Zacarian et al., 2017) so that students may successfully connect with content. Further, teachers can provide students with sensory-based activities (Craig, 2016) such as playing catch (Souers & Hall, 2019), which can assist with regulation. Finally, teachers can view lesson elements through a trauma lens and create ways to support students (Schwartz-Henderson, 2016). Incorporating trauma sensitive strategies will yield stronger relationships with all students—extending beyond trauma-affected students. Specifically, self-regulation serves as a significant trauma-sensitive skill that can bolster student-teacher relationships.

In turn, self-regulation skills mutually influence nurtured, strong relationships. When educators model self-monitoring skills and explicitly teach self-regulation skills, educators' compassion can emerge. Established student-teacher relationships serve as relationship models; teachers demonstrate how relationships can endure, especially while managing challenging emotions presented by students (Craig, 2016). Teaching and modeling self-regulation skills further nurtures strong student-teacher relationships.

Ultimately, teens need adults in their lives who thoroughly understand actions and behaviors may result as trauma-affected responses. Understanding the physiological nature of the brain's reactions to trauma provides a comprehensive lens, absent of the often (mis)perceived belief that teen's reactions are their voluntary choice. While teens need to be responsible for their (re)actions, a supportive and understanding approach through self-regulation and relationships will assist teen students in the development their abilities to critically think and take more responsibility for their lives.

Self-Regulation

Most educators can remember a time when a student reacted unexpectedly. Perhaps the student presented an emotional outburst that disrupted the classroom, abruptly barged out of the classroom, or even threw a punch. Regulation can be defined as "[t]he ability to take in stimuli and manage emotional and behavioral responses accordingly" (Souers & Hall, 2019, p. 66). When students are unable to manage their reactions, they act in a dysregulated manner. Dysregulated students can benefit from self-regulation strategies; their reactions reflect the body's stress response, emitting cortisol and adrenaline.

Teaching self-regulation strategies so students can self-modulate their emotions is a vital predictor of academic and social success (Cole et al., 2005). Trauma's impact on student brains affects their abilities to regulate their emotional reactions. With an associated physiological response to stress, the brain response produces cortisol, activating the amygdala; this interferes with students' abilities to attend to lessons (Holmes et al., 2015). Schwartz-

Henderson (2016) stated toxic stress limits self-control and self-regulation development, negatively impacting these important skills. As a result, self-regulation skills are imperative.

Self-regulation strategies allow teen's bodies to "organize sensory input, modulate arousal levels, and mediate responses to sensations" (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2015, p. 4). One important system of helping students in mindfulness; these activities can include music, yoga, deep breaths, songs, circle games, short bursts of exercise (Brunzell et al., 2015). Mindfulness activities result in increased emotional self-regulation, resulting in more focused learners. Further, establishing self-regulation opportunities allows adults to model responses for teens, which further bolsters strong teacher-student relationships.

Relationships

Strong relationships are recognized as supporting trauma-affected students (Crosby, 2015). These established relationships benefit *all* students, especially trauma-affected teens. As synthesized by Tough (2013), researchers in Minnesota contend that relationships change throughout childhood when considering the degree to which attachment occurs, fostering reliable relationships. Dependable relationships are vital for teens—and can be beneficial when both parties actively engage. Teens need teachers and staff to be willing and able to establish personal relationships with them.

Recently, Souers and Hall (2019) defined relationship as "[a] meaningful connection with another human being—in particular, a student's healthy-enough, safe-enough relationship with a teacher" (p. 66). Establishing meaningful connections, especially between students and teachers, can also influence students' abilities to thrive as learners. Walberg et al. (2004) state that "[c]aring relations between teachers and students foster a desire to learn and a connection to school" (p. 210). Thus, establishing meaningful relationships with teachers can benefit students both personally and as learners.

Relatedly, research indicates "relationships [are] the key" (Lane, 2006, p. 44) to unlock student success. Strong classroom relationships require empathy, genuineness, (Brunzell,

Waters & Stokes, 2015) and unconditional positive regard (Crosby, 2015; Brunzell et al., 2015) despite behaviors students present in the moment. Further, teachers demonstrate that they value their students holding students to high yet realistic expectations and offering students active roles within the classroom (Crosby, 2015). Lane (2006) outlines restoring student/teacher relationships through language; her study indicated relationships “were a critical factor” (p. 43) in student success. Relationships may sponsor students’ successes.

When students establish a strong relationship with a caring adult, they perform better. When the SaferSanerSchools trauma-sensitive restorative pilot program was implemented in a Pennsylvania district, a school leader stated: “You cannot separate behavior from academics. When students feel good and safe and have solid relationships with teachers, their academic performance improves” (Mirsky, 2007, p. 6). Strong relationships benefit students’ social, emotional, and academic needs. Establishing strong, positive, supportive relationships is not only in students’ best interests but the entire school as well.

Students profit from classroom environments where they feel safe and cared about by teachers. Tough (2016) references evidence that the best “lever” to be accessed to improve children’s lives involves “the behaviors and attitudes of adults those children encounter every day” (p. 26). Relatedly, teachers’ approaches with students may have vital, direct influence on students’ progress. Viewing students with care and compassion allows the emphasis to be placed on “What happened to this student?” rather than “What’s wrong with this student?” (Nealy-Oparah & Scruggs-Hussein, 2018, p. 12). Forging strong relationships provides all students a chance to meaningfully connect with an adult with whom they will interact throughout an entire year (at least).

What Is Still Needed

Trauma’s extensive prevalence indicates that as educators, we *all* interact with trauma-affected students daily, despite not knowing exactly who they are. In reality, we do not need to know who they are; all students will benefit from self-regulation opportunities and strong,

nurtured teacher-student relationships. Since trauma “masks itself” (Sitler, 2009, p. 120), teaching in supportive ways supports *all* students—whether they have experienced trauma (yet). Reframing approaches with students can assist teachers when striving to meet students’ physical and emotional needs (Sitler, 2009). Adopting an approach that supports all students can be beneficial.

Today’s teens anxiously wait for educators to understand how the teen brain functions. They anticipate teachers will teach them how to manage their emotions, modeling self-regulation strategies by providing brain breaks or mindfulness activities. Finally, today’s teens yearn to forge strong relationships with their teachers. To permeate today’s schools, all educators (teachers, paraprofessionals, tutors, administrators, social workers, guidance counselors) must be willing to be open minded; they must learn about teen brains, be willing to try new activities (e.g., mindfulness, brain breaks) since they benefit students, and they must show honest compassion towards their students.

When these elements are integrated within each classroom, students will be able to feel supported in safe learning environments; it is then that teachers can move students towards emphasizing content. Until teens’ social and emotional needs are addressed, content must wait. Yet, content cannot wait for too long. Regulation and relationships, simply put, must be accepted and embraced as all teenagers’ new rites of passage.

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ELL Does Not Equal Special Education

English Language Learners (ELL) Does Not Equal Special Education

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Abstract

This article aims to highlight the challenges faced by schools when addressing a wide range of learning needs—specifically English language learners (ELL) and students with exceptionalities. Both populations of students have a history of being isolated rather than included with same-aged peers due to non-traditional learning profiles. Many educators are overwhelmed with the idea of providing services to diverse learners and have limited knowledge of ways to include all learners with brain-based research practices. Both ELLs and students with exceptionalities can benefit from teaching that promotes learning that lends itself to utilizing the whole brain and triggering transfer of knowledge from short-term to long-term memory. This article highlights the issues faced by ELL educators, special educators, and classroom teachers and provides concrete teaching strategies that support and include all learners.

Keywords: English Language Learner (ELL), special education, brain research, language, inclusionary practices

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ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER (ELL) DOES NOT EQUAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

Public school education and educators are consistently in the spotlight. With a significant emphasis being placed on high stakes testing scores and graduation rates, the need for understanding how to teach all learners is increasingly important. Tarbutton (2018) emphasizes the importance of providing a more diverse classroom to increase student success, specifically important is student-centered learning, integrating technology, and setting high expectations for all learners. The pressures of today's society have also placed a great deal of pressure on teachers to address the emotional and social aspects of learning (Burke Harris, 2019). Transfer, "the ability to learn in one situation and then use that learning, possibly in a modified or generalized form, in another situation" (Sousa, 2017, p. 153), has long been recognized as fundamental in brain research, but are educators placing enough emphasis on its relevance for student learning? This article focuses on two specific groups of learners who are being identified more frequently in our public schools: English Language Learners (ELL) and students with special education needs.

According to the United States Department of Education (2018), an ELL is identified as, "A national-origin-minority student who is limited-English-proficient. This term is often preferred over limited-English-proficient (LEP) as it highlights accomplishments rather than deficits" (p.1). Dual language proficiency or progress towards proficiency should be seen as a strength instead of a weakness, yet researchers have found that ELL students' sense of belonging in school is directly connected to their perceptions of how they are viewed by peers, teachers, and administrators (Harklau, 2000). Shapiro (2014) documented how students engaged in public protest over what they experienced as deficit discourse at school and in the community.

Special education is a broad umbrella including students with specific learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, dysgraphia), emotional disabilities, hearing and vision impairments, autism, and more severe cognitive delays (Butrymowics & Mader, 2018). When considering neuroscience research, one must consider that the brain of students with disabilities processes

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information differently and teaching practices must take this into account (Butrymowics & Mader, 2018).

Although the United States has come a long way since the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975, students identified with special education needs continue to struggle in public schools and beyond. In 1997, the reauthorization of IDEA set the stage for schools: “. . . lawmakers made their intent clear: Students are presumed to be educated in a general education class unless their disability prevents that” (Constantinescu & Samuels, 2016, p.10). The law supports special education students to be placed in the least restricted environment (LRE), and it is estimated that 90% of students should be able to graduate from high school meeting the same standards as general education students (Butrymowics & Mader, 2018); and yet students in special education are less likely to go to and complete college and earn nearly four dollars less per hour than former general education students in the workforce (Sanford et al., 2011).

Most schools continue to struggle with what is best for all students when it comes to addressing unique learning and behavioral needs. Zhao (2009) explains, “All children should be accepted and be provided with equal opportunity to help realize their potential” (p. 47), but this can be a difficult goal to achieve. It is time for the seven million students in special education to be served with the same respect as those in general education, through innovative practices that meet their unique learning needs. As regular education has embraced new ways of thinking about neuroplasticity, such as growth mindset (Dweck, 2006, 2016) and other innovations, special education has remained stagnantly focused on diagnostic categories and remedial and corrective approaches (Armstrong, 2017).

Inclusive Practices

Inclusive practices are one way to enrich the learning environment for all students. Aside from helping challenged learners to rise to higher standards, the school culture can be positively affected. A study conducted by the University of Kansas found of student experiences in

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inclusive schools: “Many (also) pointed out the positive aspects of the arrangement, including being able to help their peers academically, receiving more help themselves, and learning to socialize with others different from themselves (The University of Kansas, 2016, para. 10). The research supports the idea that inclusion must be considered as a critical piece of building positive school experiences for all students.

This idea of inclusive practices does not extend only to special education students but to emergent bilinguals as well. In many US public schools, English proficiency is considered a prerequisite for accessing rigorous academic content (Shapiro, 2014). This belief that proficiency in English is required prior to accessing content knowledge has led to what Valdés (2001) refers to as linguistic isolation, which can lead to academic and linguistic stagnation (Callahan, 2005). Ultimately, the goal for all educators would be to include all students in the school learning community while simultaneously challenging them academically and socially. This could be achieved through continual collaboration among mainstream, ELL specialists, and special educators with students and parents/guardians.

English Language Learners (ELL) are among the fastest-growing population of students in America’s public schools today (English Language Learners in Public Schools, 2019). Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, an ELL who has been in the United States for less than one year will need to take standard assessments with their English-speaking peers, but the test scores will not count towards the school’s rating. In the second year, the scores will be publicly reported, and by the third year in the country, all ELL’s assessment results in both math and English will be treated like their native-born peers (Klein, 2019). Latino students now represent the second largest population of students within the United States with 26% of the population age five years or younger, as well as 23% of the population 18 years or younger being of Latino descent (Hemphill et al., 2011). Although improvements were seen in reading performance of Latino students between 1992 and 2009, the gap between Latino and White students has remained constant (McFarland, 2019, p.5). It is important for teachers to

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understand the impact that development in a student's first language (L1) can have on their second language (L2) development.

Transfer

Researchers have been able to demonstrate that students are able to “transfer” language skills from their L1 into their L2, but this transfer does not occur automatically. According to Cummins' (1978) developmental interdependence hypothesis (DIH), a student's ability to develop competence in L2 depends on their competency in their L1 at the time of exposure to L2. Effectively, transfer will only occur if a child has had sufficient exposure to their L1 prior to exposure to L2. Building upon this idea, Cardenas-Hagan et al. (2007), determined that Spanish speaking students with a strong foundation in letter name and sound identification in their L1, performed better at transferring that recognition into English or L2. When looking at phonological awareness and oral language skills, it was suggested that providing explicit instruction in these foundational skills in a student's L1 could help the student transfer their reading skills in English (L2) (Cardenas-Hagan et al., 2007, p. 256).

Transfer is both essential for students to apply new learning and extremely challenging to achieve (Sousa, 2017). Failure of transfer can present in a number of ways, and it can be challenging for teachers to identify the root of the problem. When considering ELL students and students with learning disabilities, both profiles can share characteristics including weak oral language skills, poor motivation, and low self-esteem (Ortiz et al., 2006). These similarities can often lead to a disproportionately represented ELL population in special education programs (Linan-Thompson et al., 2006). While a student with a learning disability in reading may have difficulty with reading comprehension and literacy skills due to a language processing issue, ELLs can typically learn to read in their native language but lack exposure to spoken and written English, and that can adversely affect their development of English literacy skills (Perras, 2017). These differences require teachers to look deeper into the learning issues students present. Rather than focusing on deficits, teachers servicing students with language needs must be open

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to new findings in the field of neuroscience. Brain research now suggests rather than working around areas of learning weaknesses, that educational practices aim to strengthen pathways to potentially change the brain processes of learners (Boaler & LaMar, 2019).

Ultimately, recommendations that are made for ELL students or students with special education needs (e.g., presentation of content in a variety of ways; engaging in multiple methods and media; avoiding disconnecting facts; and finding ways to connect learning) must be considered as best practices rather than specialized teaching approaches (Boaler & LaMar, 2019). Other brain researched teaching approaches to consider include: explicitly teaching content-specific vocabulary in context; using direct and explicit reading comprehension strategies (e.g., making predictions, monitoring and asking questions as they read, and summarizing after reading); increasing exposure to print resources including oral readings and discussion; and increasing focused academic discourse (Francis and Rivera, 2006). By refocusing efforts on teaching all students inclusively using effective classroom strategies, educators can finally help guide all learners to achieve academic success in America's public schools.

Emily Kapln (2019) describes six strategies for teaching ELL students gathered from interviewing experienced teachers of ELL students. They suggest that teachers should:

1. Cultivate relationships and be culturally responsive.
2. Teach language skills across the curriculum.
3. Emphasize productive language.
4. Speak slowly and increase wait time.
5. Differentiate—use multiple modalities.
6. Incorporate students' native languages and do not be afraid of using technology.

Utilization of these six strategies ultimately creates an environment that is conducive for supporting all learners across the spectrum in a culturally responsive way. By creating a space

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that the brain perceives as safe and nurturing, Hammond (2015) argues students can relax and be more apt to learn, leading to better outcomes for all.

Conclusion

Creating a learning environment that is both emotionally and physically safe is probably more important than ever for the health of the overall child. Thankfully, the strategies included in this article are good for all students. Implementation of these and similar strategies is crucial for students who are frequently marginalized by the current public-school structures. While the focus of this article has been on ELLs and those who have special education needs, the ideas here are based on an anti-racist and inclusionary philosophy. Lack of equity in our public schools has been an issue for too long and without overcoming this issue, society as a whole will suffer. The world can no longer afford to have students fail, underachieve, or be isolated. The world is seeing firsthand what happens when schools are not allowed to fully educate students. Our nation is at a crossroads, and education and equity must progress hand-in-hand. Teachers, principals, parents, and community members must demand and assure, to the greatest extent possible, that all our students will be successful in school. There are no legitimate excuses for anything less.

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