

I'm Listening

How Teacher-Student
Relationships Improve Reading,
Writing, Speaking, and Listening

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What Makes This Book Different

This book draws inspiration from writers, psychologists, and educators about the importance of relationships and belonging, and intertwines these philosophies and applies them to the classroom. Each chapter provides strategies and resources for immediate use, along with reflective questions at the end to help you consider how to implement these ideas in your classroom. Also, educational research supports each strategy and approach. They are linked to common state standards and modeled through my own teaching practices along with those of other teachers, which helps you visualize how you might incorporate similar moves into your practice. Each strategy and approach is supported by educational research.

This book is not about giving students stickers and trophies for just showing up or offering meaningless praise for a job not particularly well done. You don't need to be a certain kind of teacher in order to adopt these approaches. The purpose for working to create a student-centered classroom founded on strong relationships and a sense of belonging is so students will work hard and persist through the often difficult work of becoming a more proficient reader, writer, speaker, and listener. It is so students know it's OK to make mistakes, failure is part of learning, and there is no such thing as a stupid question. It is so teachers can offer feedback to students that may be hard to hear, but students will listen because they know our primary mission is to further their personal and academic growth. Feedback improves learning only if it's acted upon, and these relationships enable students to accept feedback that is critical to learning.

In This Book

This book offers ideas and approaches to grades 6–12 teachers for reading, writing, speaking, and listening—skills that apply across disciplines—to consider as they shift the way they deliver content while honoring the curriculum integrity and course expectations. This book identifies the critical components that work together to create a synergy to advance learning: build relationships and establish a sense of belonging, so students will feel secure enough to engage in the kind of deep and meaningful learning with the potential to result in transfer to their lives beyond school. We'll explore these components throughout the book, and each chapter slowly unfolds to show how relationships and belonging support literacy development.

Each chapter offers research-based activities and reproducibles for immediate use to build relationships and belonging as well as to teach reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills across the disciplines and grade levels. Each chapter also offers insights and strategies designed to inspire teachers to make small changes in their classroom to enhance students' interest level and motivation. Reflective questions at the end of

each chapter help teachers consider how to implement and adapt these approaches to improve the classroom experience for students as well as for themselves. Throughout the book, student voices from across grade levels will show teachers how relationships and belonging impact their educational experiences. Similarly, K–12 teachers have shared their ideas to illustrate how teaching strategies and ideas designed to build relationships and belonging transcend grade levels and can inspire teachers to make subtle changes that make a real difference in student learning.

The book has two parts: (1) “Building the Foundation for Where Learning Begins” and (2) “Supporting the Development of Literacy Skills Built on the Foundation of Relationships and Belonging.” Part I focuses on why strong relationships with students and establishing a comprehensive sense of belonging are foundational to learning. It also includes strategies and ideas that show how to seamlessly incorporate these elements into your teaching practice and lesson design. Part II’s literacy strategies reflect the paradigm shift to a more student-centered classroom. To make this necessary shift, we need to first lay the groundwork for this intricate support system of relationships and belonging. In accordance with American psychologist Abraham H. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, this kind of classroom culture meets students’ basic and psychological needs and empowers students to envision the possibilities of who they can become.

Part I holds chapters 1–3; part II holds chapters 4–6. The chapters break down as follows.

- Chapter 1 shares how the intersection of my teaching experience, backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), and research led me to conclude the approaches discussed in this book empower teachers to have the greatest impact on students’ lives.
- Chapter 2 offers strategies for building relationships with students in a professional capacity as well as suggestions for classroom activities and routines to support relationships. This chapter will also discuss how relationships with students enable teachers to have difficult conversations and offer critical feedback to enhance student performance.
- Chapter 3 demonstrates how teachers create a sense of belonging by establishing classroom routines and designing activities to foster students’ connection to the class, themselves, others, and the work. Research from Maslow (1943) to University of Houston professor Brené Brown (2010, 2017, 2018) supports each strategy and shows how a carefully designed classroom culture can fulfill students’ basic human need to belong, which is a prerequisite for learning.
- Chapter 4 focuses on how reading is the great unifier—and how proficient reading across the disciplines leads to success. Included are close reading

activities for immediate use across texts. It also shows how teachers can enable students to identify and adopt the specific reading strategies they need.

- Chapter 5 examines the difficulty of teaching writing and offers methods for motivating students to invest more deeply in their writing by offering choices and writing for authentic purposes and audiences. Suggestions for making feedback more manageable and effective are here as well.
- Chapter 6 discusses why speaking and listening should get more attention from teachers, and how to encourage student voice. It offers ideas and strategies teachers can immediately use to foster speaking and listening skills.
- The epilogue reinforces the research that says a student-centered classroom built on strong relationships and belonging has the capacity to impact literacy development and positively affect student learning.
- In the appendix, read stories from teachers across grade levels and disciplines who seamlessly integrate relationships and belonging in their lesson design, and listen to their students' triumphs.

You certainly won't find all the answers here, but I do believe listening to the research, our students, and our colleagues is a good place to start. We all need supportive colleagues to offer us new ideas and insights whether we find them in the faculty room, the classroom next door, or inside the pages of a book. I hope this book offers you renewed excitement about the possibilities of our profession to impact students and learning. I also hope the strategies and stories in this book inspire you to share your insight and wisdom with me, because . . . I'm listening.