



LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY
CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools

Empathy in Education: Three Steps to Shift from Overwhelmed Teacher to Engaged Educator



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Teaching is an incredible journey filled with the opportunity to foster joy, growth and connection in our students. However, it also comes with its fair share of challenges, especially when it comes to navigating behavioural outbursts in the classroom.

Recognising that emotions are a fundamental aspect of the human experience is crucial in the context of teaching. Emotions play a pivotal role in shaping how individuals perceive and interact with the world (Hickey & Riddle, 2021). This acknowledgment is especially vital for students, as, like adults, they are navigating a complex landscape of new experiences, relationships, physical and emotional development, and academic challenges.

By emphasising empathy, teachers establish a foundation that encourages open communication and a supportive learning atmosphere, creating a psychologically safe environment that allows students to express themselves authentically, without fear of judgement. As a result, students nurture an intrinsic emotional safety that provides a strong foundation for personal and academic growth, fostering a positive and enriching educational experience (Demetriou, 2018).

These three essential steps will empower you as a teacher to navigate challenging moments in the classroom with confidence and compassion. By allowing space for your students' emotions to surface, acknowledging their feelings, and addressing their emotional experiences in collaborative problem-solving, you'll establish a nurturing classroom environment where both the students' head and heart can thrive (Ladak, 2023).

The initial step in teaching with empathy involves, "Allowing". Allowing emphasises the importance of respecting students'

emotional experiences. It prompts teachers to believe in the authenticity of students' narratives when they share their feelings and experiences. Empathy serves as the foundation for effective classroom management during moments of heightened emotions (Cooper, 2013). Contrary to traditional belief, it doesn't mean standing in the students' shoes, instead it entails believing them when they share their story and emotional experience. This step is an introspective process for educators, reminding ourselves that the students' emotions are not directed personally at us, and there may be underlying factors affecting their behaviour. Creating a mental space for this understanding is crucial. It involves reminding ourselves that students are allowed to feel and express their emotions, though their expression must not cause harm to others in the classroom. Striking this delicate balance requires a thoughtful approach, ensuring a supportive environment for students while maintaining a safe and respectful atmosphere for everyone in the classroom.

The second step is to "Acknowledge" students' emotions. This means recognising and validating their emotional experience, without passing judgement, shaming or discounting. Simply believing them, it involves understanding their lived experiences and how those experiences manifest in their reality. It requires dropping any preconceived notions we may bring with us in the moment and instead truly paying attention to and attuning to the emotional experiences of our students. Each student comes into the classroom with their own set of experiences, backgrounds, and challenges. These experiences shape their emotions and reactions in the classroom. As teachers, it's vital to recognise that what may seem trivial to us could be deeply significant to a student based on their unique circumstances.

Acknowledging students' emotions means being present and attuned to their emotional cues, whether it's through body language, tone of voice, or verbal expression. It means taking the time to listen actively and empathetically, without rushing to judgement or solutions. By doing so, we validate their feelings and show them that their emotional well-being matters. "Empathy is feeling with people." (Brené Brown, 2015), letting our students know they are not alone in this experience and we see them is a powerful and often overlooked tool. This sense of validation fosters trust between teacher and student, creating an

atmosphere conducive to growth and learning. When students know that their emotional well-being is valued, they are more inclined to engage actively in the learning process, feeling seen and heard in the classroom community (Rogers, 2009).

The third crucial step in this process is “Addressing” the situation in a manner that invites the student to actively participate in finding solutions. While this step may not always delve into the deeper underlying causes, it involves creating a space where the student feels empowered to navigate the immediate circumstances within the boundaries of the school environment. Rather than adopting a traditional disciplinary approach where the teacher solely dictates the resolution, addressing the situation entails inviting the student to consider what actions would be most beneficial and how they can best navigate the challenge at hand. This approach cultivates a sense of autonomy and responsibility within the student, encouraging them to take ownership of their emotions and actions.

Whilst emotionally containing the student, and supporting them to attune to their own needs and determine the most effective way to regulate themselves in the moment, teachers foster a culture of self-awareness and accountability. This empowers students to develop essential skills in emotional regulation and problem-solving, equipping them with the tools they need to navigate future challenges independently. As a teacher, you can guide the conversation by posing open-ended questions that encourage critical thinking and reflection. Ultimately, the “addressing” step in collaborative problem-solving within the student-teacher relationship shifts the focus from teacher-led intervention to student-driven empowerment.

This is particularly beneficial during moments of emotional flooding, as it enables students to engage both the emotional and rational faculties of their brains to address the situation effectively (Siegel, 2020). By integrating the functions of the whole brain, students develop a holistic approach to problem-solving and emotional regulation, equipping them with valuable tools for navigating various challenges both inside and outside the classroom (Siegel & Bryson, 2012).

Embracing the Three Steps to Shift from Overwhelmed Teacher to Engaged Educator involves integrating emotional attunement and

empathy into your pedagogy and practice. This fosters a culture of empathy and understanding that not only enhances learning outcomes and strengthens relationships but also reduces emotional and behavioural issues within your classroom community. It's a holistic approach that enriches the educational experience for both you and your students.

Cheat Sheet:

Step 1: Allow - Allow the Emotion First - Allow the student to express their feelings, by creating a safe container for emotional release and understanding.

- Listen without judgement, justification or defensiveness.
- Our student's perspective may not match ours, but it's their truth.
- Don't try to dismiss, suppress or fix the emotional experience.

This could sound like:

- **This feels hard**
- **I hear you**
- **I see what you are saying**

Step 2: Acknowledge - Acknowledge how It's Impacting them - Validate your student's emotions by acknowledging their feelings without judgement.

- Demonstrate understanding and empathy towards what they're experiencing
- Be open, regardless of whether their emotions seem rational or not, it's essential to respect their perspective
- Use nonverbal signals like facial expressions and tone of voice to create calm and attunement.

This could sound like:

- **I understand that this situation is making you feel overwhelmed**
- **It must be tough for you, this seems like it's frustrating you**
- **I see that you're feeling sad. It's completely normal**

Step 3: Address - Problem-Solve Together to Address the Issue - By involving them in the problem-solving process, you empower them to develop their emotional intelligence and coping skills.

- Ask questions to help resolve the issue and engage the logical part of their brain
- Support the student to attune to their own needs
- Empower students to problem solve and find a way to meet their needs in the given moment.

This could sound like:

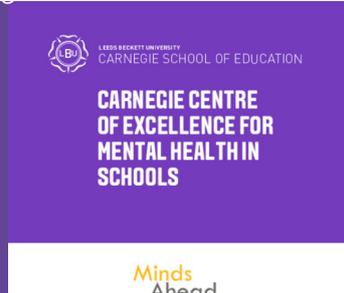
- **What do you need right now?**
- **How can we make things better for you right now?**
- **What do you think we can do to make this situation easier for you?**
- **I value your ideas. Let's brainstorm together on how we can handle this situation differently.**

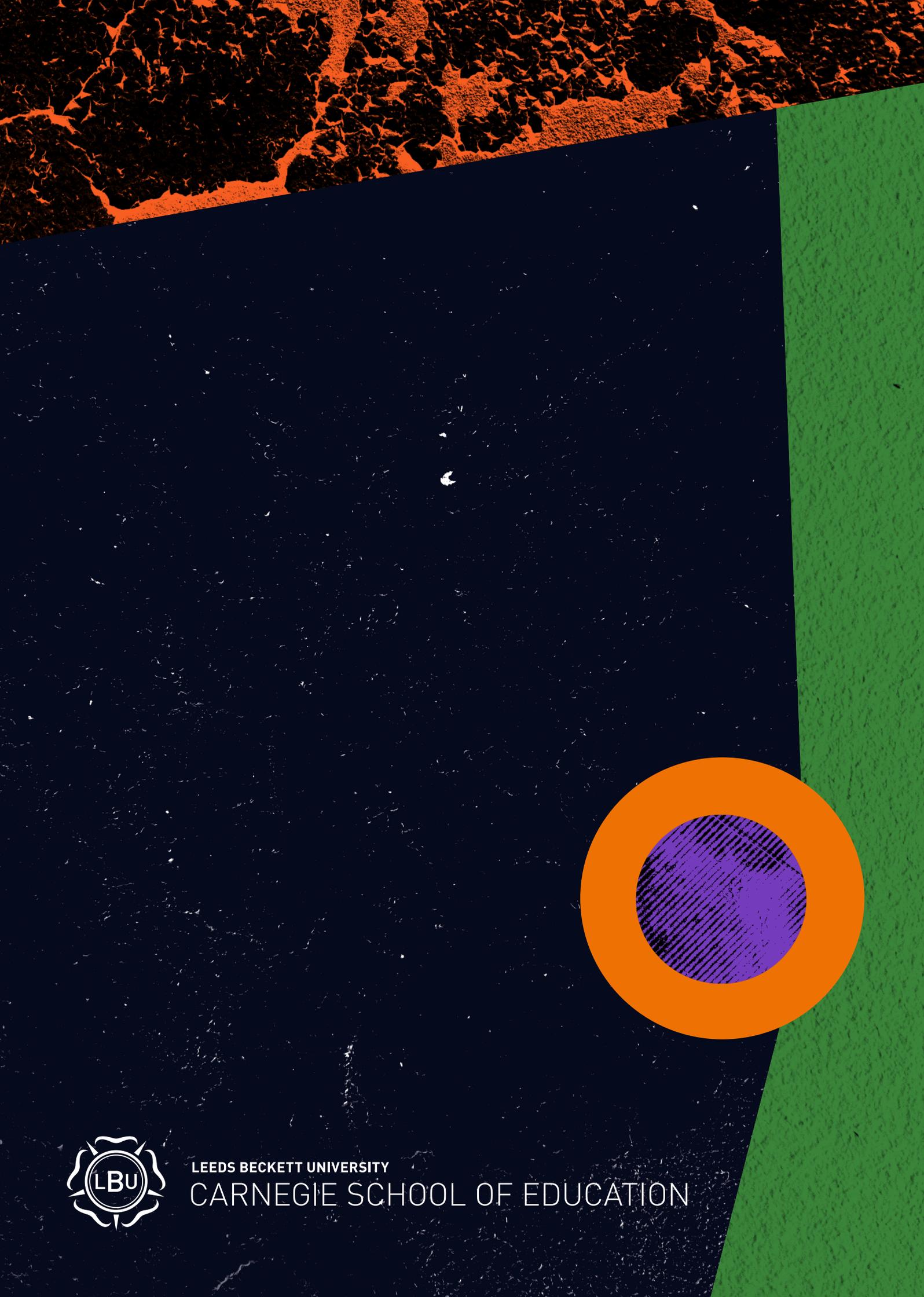
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