



LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY  
CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

# Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools

## Somatic Strategies for Cultivating Psychological Safety in the Classroom



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# Somatic Strategies for Cultivating Psychological Safety in the Classroom

Somatic teaching examines the intricate dynamics between educators and their responses to their environment, exploring the internalisation and manifestation of these responses within their own bodily experiences. This approach takes into account the reciprocal and often unspoken exchanges that occur between educators and students. Our gestures, body language, and emotional states are continuously sensed by our students, influencing their own somatic experiences. By fostering our own emotional regulation and self-awareness, we can positively impact the classroom atmosphere, promoting a more constructive and nurturing learning environment.

Somatic teaching, in this context, goes beyond traditional pedagogical methods. It recognises how we physically feel and respond to our surroundings contributes significantly to the learning environment we create for our students. By being attuned to our bodily responses and emotional reactions in the classroom, we can better understand how these cues affect our teaching and, ultimately, our students' experiences.

This pedagogical approach delves into interpersonal biology, examining how the human body is fine tuned to pick up on the emotional and physical signals in its surroundings. Drawing from neuroscience research, it reveals emotions are not just ephemeral experiences but have a profound impact on the brain's structure and function.

Highlighting the significance of nurturing a positive emotional climate within the classroom, as it directly

influences the neural pathways of students and their ability to learn. Recent findings in the field of neuroscience reinforces the idea that emotions are contagious. Revealing the existence of mirror neurons—neurons that fire both when we perform an action and when we observe someone else performing the same action.

Interpersonal Neurobiology centres on viewing the mind as both embodied and relational, signifying that the mind extends beyond the confines of the head to encompass the entire body. In essence, students remain constantly attuned to the emotional states, body language, and gestures of their teachers. Educators who exhibit emotional regulation and self-awareness not only manage their own emotions adeptly but also assist students in regulating theirs, fostering an emotional climate that nurtures psychological safety and emotional wellbeing

Incorporating somatic teaching involves introspection into how our bodies respond to the stimuli in our classrooms. It's about acknowledging how these experiences manifest within us and reflect in our interactions with students. By understanding our emotions and their physical manifestations, we gain insight into how they influence our engagements and shape the overall emotional atmosphere of our classrooms.

To cultivate this awareness, establish regular “check-ins” before, during, and after lessons. Take a moment to observe your body's reactions—tension, relaxation, or in-between. Do you need to release tension, drop your shoulders, or take a breath? These physical cues provide valuable insights, enabling real-time adjustments for a more balanced and grounded teaching experience.

Once attuned to your body's response, the next pivotal step involves sharpening your awareness of body language and purposefully using it to create an environment of openness

and emotional safety for your students. This involves taking note of how you physically express your somatic experience and carry yourself in the classroom.

Here are eight tangible somatic actions to actively enhance psychological safety with your students.

- 1. Open and Welcoming Posture:** Intentionally adopt an open and approachable stance by cultivating a relaxed demeanour and posture, encompassing subtle adjustments like relaxing your jaw and dropping your shoulders. Purposefully steer clear of closed-off gestures, such as crossed arms, as these can inadvertently signal distance. Your posture becomes a visual dialogue, creating an atmosphere where students feel you are receptive and open to genuine interaction.
- 2. Maintain Eye Contact:** Establishing and maintaining eye contact conveys attentiveness and engagement. It fosters a sense of connection and assures students that you are present and interested in their thoughts and contributions. Each shared moment of eye contact becomes a silent affirmation, reinforcing the foundational importance of being genuinely seen within the classroom.
- 3. Gesture with Intention:** Elevate the influence of non-verbal communication by cultivating awareness of the cues you project and thoughtfully considering the intent behind your gestures. Steer clear of movements that might inadvertently convey defensiveness or create distance, such as crossing arms or displaying facial expressions like pursed lips or furrowed brows. Recognise that each gesture carries a potential message, making strategic use of body language a potent tool for expressing accessibility and approachability. For instance, during a student's sharing, a subtle nodding of your head as they share can make them feel heard and validated, fostering a connection beyond spoken words.

- 4. Mirroring and Matching:** Subtly mirroring and matching the body language of your students can create a sense of rapport. This non-verbal synchronisation can foster a feeling of understanding and connection. As you engage with students, subtly observe their body language. If a student tends to use expressive hand gestures or maintains a relaxed posture, consider mirroring these cues in a natural and unobtrusive manner. For example, if a student leans forward during a discussion, you might lean in slightly as well.
- 5. Physical Proximity:** Consider matching your level to that of the students, avoiding standing over them. This adjustment can help mitigate a subconscious power dynamic. Additionally, when contemplating your physical proximity to students, it's essential to strike a delicate balance between approachability and respecting personal space.
- 6. Tonality:** Consider how your tonality influences the learning environment, for example being aware of the volume, ensuring it's audible without being overpowering. Explore the effectiveness of lowering your voice, as this can have a soothing effect on students and create an environment of calm. Intentionally adding variation in your pitch and tone to emphasise energy when needed.
- 7. Pace of Speech:** Pay attention to the pace of your speech. Keep a steady and clear speaking pace, avoiding overly rushed or monotonous delivery. Allow for natural pauses and breaks to give students time to process information. Vary your pace to emphasise key points, maintaining a balance that accommodates different learning styles. Be open to adjusting your speaking rhythm based on the visual cues students are presenting.
- 8. Slowing Down Movement in the Classroom:** Mindfully consider the pace of your physical movements, opt for

purposeful and deliberate actions, steering away from rushed or abrupt gestures. Slowing down your body movements aligns with our innate biological responses, signalling safety and calmness. This intentional pace speaks to the intricate connection between movement and our nervous system, fostering a feeling of safety within the learning environment. By attuning to the natural rhythms of the class and adjusting your movements accordingly, you create a space that promotes concentration, comfort, and a sense of security for both you and your students.

It's crucial to approach these suggestions with a thoughtful and individualised perspective, recognising that each classroom and every student is unique. Filter these strategies through their own lens of experience and deep understanding of your specific classroom dynamics. When implementing such approaches, mindfulness is key, especially when considering students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and those who are neurodivergent. It's crucial to be attuned to the varying comfort levels and sensitivities of students and adapt your approach accordingly. Flexibility and an awareness of neurodiversity ensure that the strategies aimed at fostering connection and psychological safety are inclusive and supportive for all students, creating an environment where each individual can thrive.

In essence, somatic teaching is a journey of self-discovery and attunement between the educator, their environment, and the students. It acknowledges that the classroom is more than a setting for intellectual exchange; rather, it serves as a dynamic container where emotions, sensations, and experiences come together to shape both the teacher, and student .

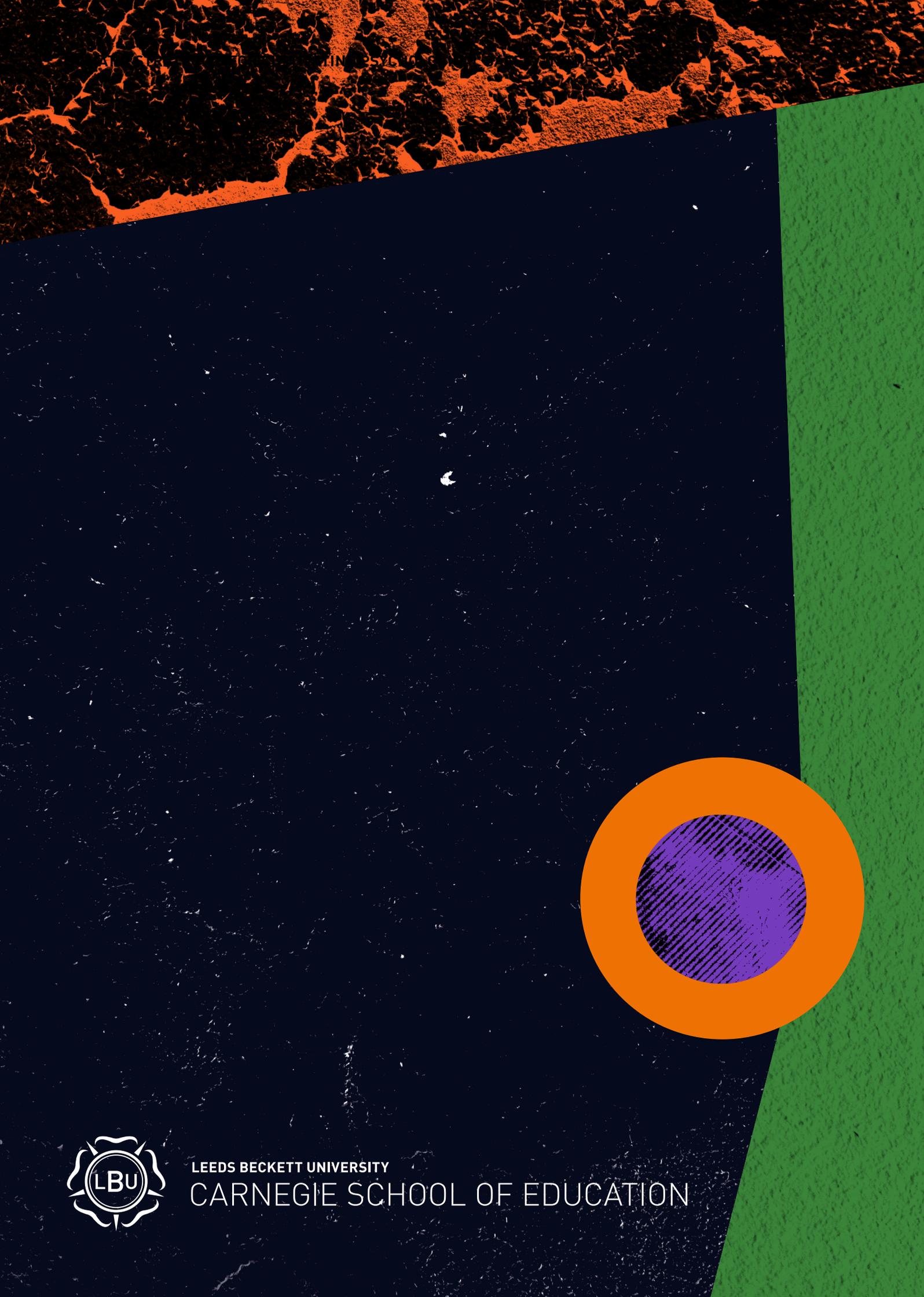
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