

## Make It Radical: Ideas For Your Most Welcoming Classroom Ever

*As your students come back to the classroom, investing in relationships and fostering a sense of belonging should be at the top of your list of to-dos. Here are some ways to start radically welcoming students in your classroom.*



By Megan Cave

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A few weeks ago, I caught up on the season finale of [SongAssociation on Terrell Grice's YouTube channel](#). This channel has changed my Spotify, for real. Terrell plays a game with his guests – he gives them a word and they have 10 seconds to sing a song with that word either in the lyrics or

the title. The game is good, but the reason I keep coming back to this channel is Terrell and the instant camaraderie he has with everyone on that blue wall.

He has a passion for music and musicians. It doesn't matter if his guest is an Instagram star, a former reality show competitor, or a whole signed-to-a-label singer, he has a way of making everyone feel comfortable. He brings an effervescence to each interview and a genuine interest in every story told. Whether he knows a person before they got there or they showed up as a stranger, everyone...and I mean EV-ER-Y-ONE leaves lifted, refreshed, and seen.

If only all of us could experience this welcoming spirit.

Well...

In July, the Lincoln Center kicked off its [Activate Series](#). The theme of this year's event is radical welcoming, which they define as "the intentional and extraordinary effort to make people feel welcome." Dr. Christopher Emdin gave a keynote. You remember Dr. Emdin, right? He is a scholar, a hip-hop educator, and the author of *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* – the book we used to guide our series last year on culturally responsive practices in PBIS. During the July event, Dr. Emdin partnered with folks from the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts to reimagine what a classroom might look like in a post-pandemic world – a space he calls [The Ratchetdemic Classroom](#).

It's beautiful!

It was in this space where Dr. Emdin moderated [a conversation with five educators from across the country exploring what radical welcoming means to them](#). He asked them how they felt sitting in a room designed to make students feel welcome. They commented on how the green grass gave their eyes a place to rest and invited them to sit on the ground. They loved the diversity available in the seating options and their eyes kept coming back to a piece of art on the wall that said, "Imagine the person you could be if you let someone love all of you." One aspect of radical welcoming is creating a physical space that's inviting, comfortable, and allows students to engage their imaginations while they learn.

Beyond the physical elements of the space, I couldn't help but focus on the way Dr. Emdin led the conversation and made the hour comfortable enough for everyone to share some vulnerable perspectives. One example happens around the 13:26 mark in their conversation. Meghan Sullivan shares her perspectives teaching in Standing Rock reservation. She makes a

distinction between “teaching in” vs “teaching on” the reservation. Dr. Emdin picks up on this, acknowledges the significance, amplifies it for the group, asks others to offer their thoughts, and ultimately takes the conversation to a place where later another aspect of Meghan’s identity can be celebrated and shared. In a conversation where he is considered an expert, he continuously tells participants how he’s learning from them and building on their experiences. [When you have some time, watch the conversation, soak up the lessons, and pay some attention to the way Dr. Emdin elicits ideas from everyone in the room.]

See, the physical elements of the Ratchetdemic Classroom created the space where everyone was comfortable and allowed to share confidently; the physical aspect of a space is a piece to the puzzle.

You are another.

*Your students would probably say they want to be acknowledged for their efforts. They want to feel like they can share their opinions openly, to know they will be heard, valued, and cared for as a member of your class, and that the things that matter to them also matter to **you**.*

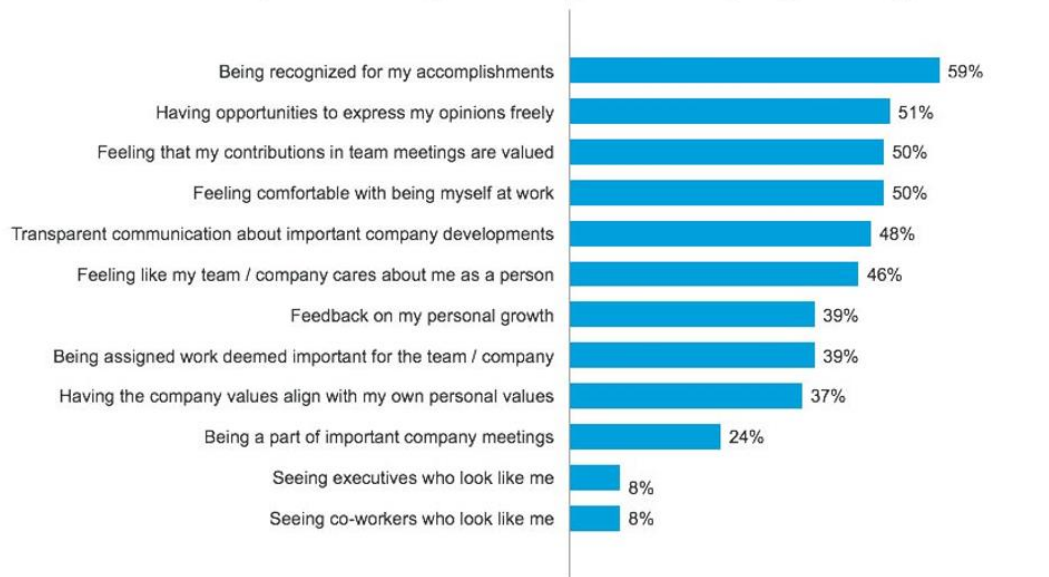
You Have Active Presence

The way people feel when they’re around you is what researchers call your affective presence. They define it as the “tendency to invoke either positive or negative feelings in others in a consistent and stable manner.”[1] When you have a positive affective presence, people usually feel happy, enthusiastic, or inspired when they’re around you.[2] A negative affective presence tends to make folks feel sad, bored, or stressed. Researchers also found affective presence is significantly related to how likely someone is to share their ideas openly.

The way guests feel on *The Terrell Show*, the way participants openly shared their perspectives during Dr. Emdin’s moderated conversation, the way your students engage in your classroom, it hinges on whether your affective presence is positive or negative. Research is fuzzy on what contributes to an overall positive affective presence, but we can get some clues by looking at what people say makes them feel like they belong in a place.

LinkedIn surveyed more than 14,000 professionals from around the world to learn more about their experiences working for a company.[3] They asked respondents what would make them feel like they belong at the company where they work. This list they generated might feel familiar.

### What would make you feel like you belong at the company where you work?



To my eye, their answers are not so dissimilar from what you might expect to hear from your students if you asked them a similar question on the [School Climate Survey](#). Your students would probably say they want to be acknowledged for their efforts. They want to feel like they can share their opinions openly, to know they will be heard, valued, and cared for as a member of your class, and that the things that matter to them also matter to **you**.

I emphasize the word “you” because research tells us that even more than their peers or their parents, teacher support has the most significant impact on a student’s sense of belonging at school.[4] “Students who believe that they have positive relationships with their teachers and that their teachers are caring, empathic and fair and help resolve personal problems, are more likely to feel a greater sense of belonging than those students who perceive a negative relationship with their teachers.” And! It’s that sense of belonging that keeps students motivated academically, reduces absences, and makes it more likely they will stay in school.

### Make Your Classroom Radically Welcome

As your students come back to the classroom – some of them in-person for the first time in a long time – investing in relationships and fostering a sense of belonging should be at the top of your list of to-dos. Here are some ways to start radically welcoming students in your classroom.

### **Popcorn Goals**

This idea comes from a 5th grade teacher named Josh Monroe. At the beginning of the year, he hands each student two index cards. On one they write a goal they have for 5th grade; on the other they write a goal they have for their lives. The goals are anonymous, so no one gets to know who wrote it. Students crumple up the cards and throw them around the room. One by one, everyone picks up a card and reads it aloud. They decide as a class whether that sounds like a goal for 5th grade, a goal for life, or maybe it could be a goal for both. Mr. Monroe says the game generates important discussions as students find similarities they have with each other and think about how they can work together to create the kind of classroom where everyone can achieve their goals.

### **Snail Mail Shoutouts**

Who doesn't love getting something special in the mail? Last year, Elkins Park School in Elkins Park, PA, [started sending postcards in the mail to their students' homes](#). They did it as a way to encourage students during distance learning and to acknowledge the efforts their teachers saw in class. Of course, students thought it was great to get the personal note, but the school started hearing from families, too. The handwritten messages meant so much to them they put the postcards on their refrigerators. Positive, unprompted, personalized acknowledgements include families in the community you're trying to build.

### **Welcome Students At the Door...**

Greeting students as they come into your classroom is a simple and effective way to start class. TUMS at the Door is an acronym to help you remember the pieces of the greeting that matter most.

- **T** is for **Touch**. In the before times, this would mean a handshake, a hug, or a high five. These days, physical touch isn't always safe, so you'll need to improvise. Fist bumps, elbow bumps, toe taps, hip checks, or even a synchronized dance are all good ways to incorporate physical movement in your welcome that's safe and appropriate.
- **U** is for **Use Their Name**. Calling students by their name demonstrates you know who they are. Be sure you use the name they prefer and you pronounce it correctly. If you're unsure how to pronounce their name, ask and keep practicing until you get it right.
- **M** is for **Make Eye Contact**. Looking someone in the eye as you welcome them shows them you are focused on them and how they're doing. Even if for that brief moment, they have your undivided attention.
- **S** is for **Smile**. Ever notice how hard it is to say an angry word with a smile on your face? A smile lifts your words and makes them sound more inviting.

### **...No Matter When They Arrive**

I get annoyed when people are late to something we scheduled together, so I try to be a person who shows up on time. This last year and a half has also taught me a lot about how life is unpredictable. The same way I would hope someone would find grace and understanding when I can't make it on time, I'm now trying to extend the same to other people.

Your students will show up late to class for any number of reasons. Based on their previous experiences, they might walk in late expecting irritation from you. What would happen if you extended a welcome to students even when they show up late? Josh Monroe came through with an example, again.

### **Show Some Love**

When it comes to your school-wide expectations, typical expectations might be: Safe, Respectful, Responsible. What if you added some love to the matrix?

What would that look like in your classroom? On the playground? How would your students feel knowing they could expect to find love in your space? Does it feel awkward or maybe impossible? Well...

Among the core values of respect, integrity, and perseverance, [in her welcome message](#), Allika Thompson-Young, the principal at MAST High School in Queens, NY says, "The greatest legacy that you have left is that of LOVE. Make sure to demonstrate love in action throughout your tenure at MAST."

What if you added "love" to your behavioral matrix and asked your students to help you define what that might look like, what it might sound like, how it would feel in your classroom?

Our kids start school in a few weeks. I'm excited, they're excited, and I hope their teachers are excited. I think we're all a little anxious, too, about what it's all going to be like. One way to start things off on a positive note is to embrace the concept of radical welcoming. Set up a physical space where everyone feels comfortable and then focus on ways to improve your positive affective presence. How can you acknowledge your students' efforts a little more? How can you celebrate the things they love and create a community that shares openly? The tone you set, the relationships you build, and the way your students feel when they're around you matters. Start creating the kind of classroom where everyone wants to be.

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4. Allen, K., Kern, M., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J. and Waters, L., 2016. What Schools Need to Know About Fostering School Belonging: a Meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30(1), pp.1-34.  
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