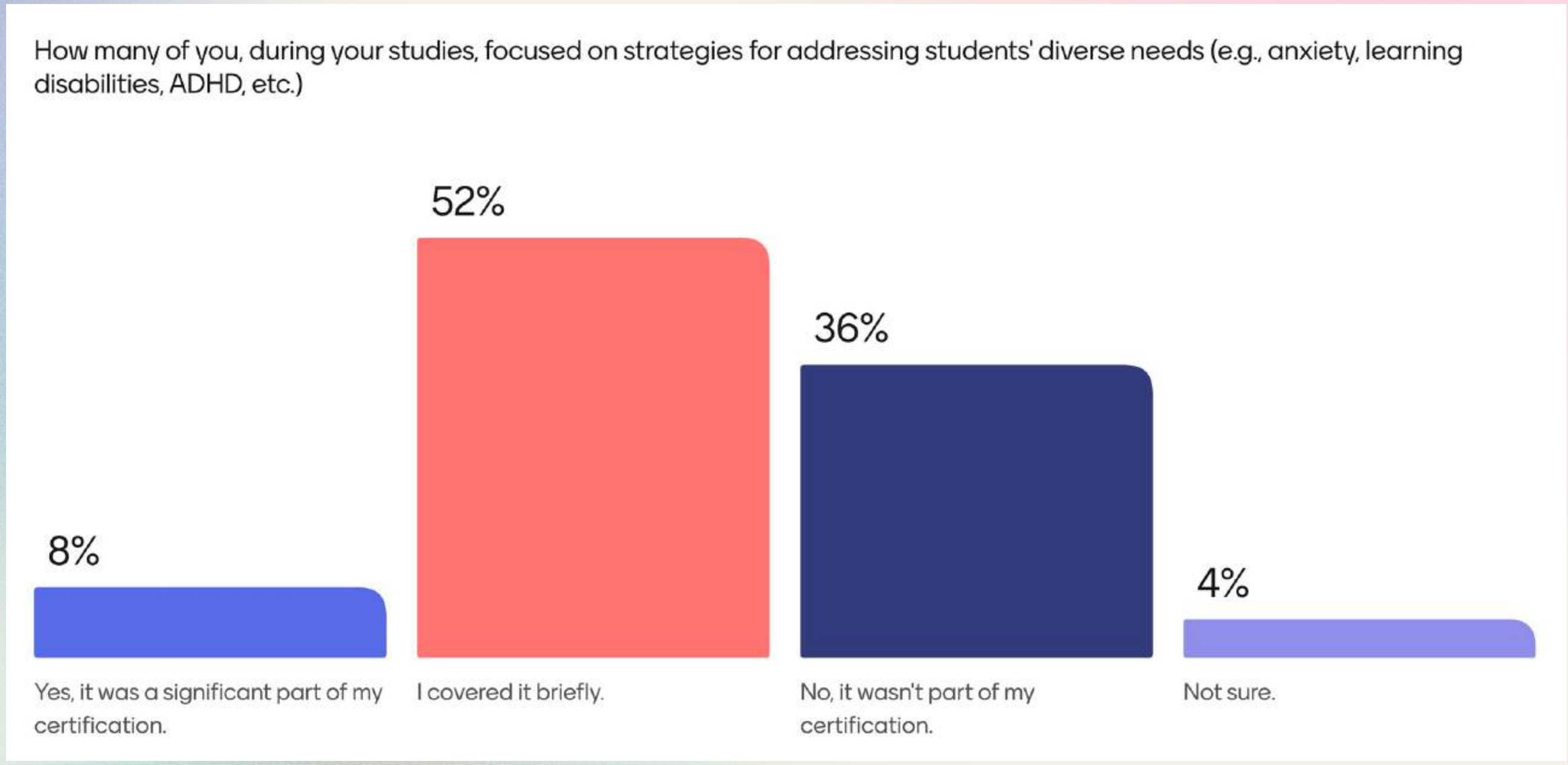
ACADEMIA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL March 24, 2025 Bern

Empowering every student: strategies for overcoming anxiety in the classroom

CINDY PORTER

Your feedback



Your feedback

What feelings arise when you think about supporting students struggling with special educational needs?

52 responses

ANXIETY

DYSLEXIA/
DYSCALCULIA

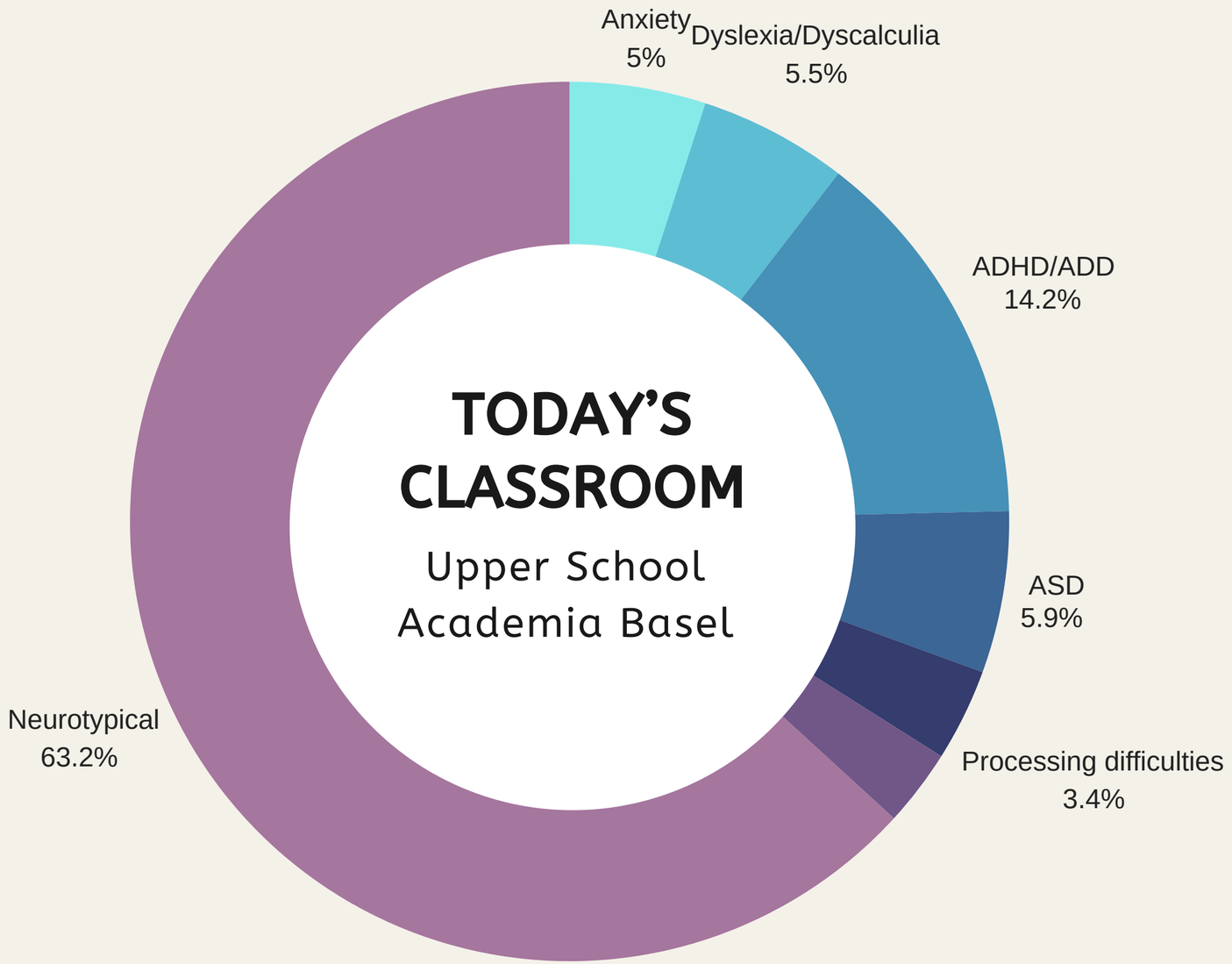
ADHD/ADD

ASD (AUTISM SPECTRUM
DISORDER)

LEARNING/
PROCESSING DIFFICULTIES

OTHER

NEUROTYPICAL



190 STUDENTS
63 SEN (SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS) = 33%

HAVE YOU EVER ASSIGNED WORK TO A STUDENT AND LATER NOTICED THEM JUST SITTING THERE, NOT GETTING STARTED?

SHOULD A TEACHER BE EXPECTED TO IMMEDIATELY KNOW WHY A STUDENT IS NOT ENGAGING WITH THE WORK?

NO

SHOULD A STUDENT ALWAYS BE ABLE TO EXPLAIN WHY THEY ARE STRUGGLING TO ENGAGE?

NO

ACTION VS FEELING

HOW DOES A STUDENT TYPICALLY ACT WHEN EXPERIENCING FEELINGS SUCH AS ANXIETY, FRUSTRATION, OR INSECURITY IN THE CLASSROOM?

HOW STUDENTS ACT VS. HOW THEY REALLY FEEL

BEHAVIOR	UNDERLYING FEELING/EMOTIONS
Talking out of turn or interrupting	Feeling anxious, eager to express themselves, or seeking attention due to fear of being ignored or misunderstood. (Minahan, 2016)
Refusing to participate or complete tasks	Fear of failure, anxiety about being judged or making mistakes. Students may feel inadequate or worried about their abilities. (Perry, 2013)
Defiance (arguing or challenging authority)	Feeling out of control, overwhelmed, or frustrated. This can stem from feeling misunderstood, or from a need to assert control in a situation that feels threatening. (Kauffman, 2005)
Physical aggression or impulsive outbursts	Overwhelmed by emotions, struggling to regulate feelings. Often a reaction to stress, frustration, or sensory overload. (Barkley, 2015; Grandin, 2011)
Not engaging in group work or avoiding collaborative tasks	Feeling insecure, anxious, or fearful of being judged. Might feel they are not good enough, or worry about others noticing their difficulties. (Lindsay et al., 2013)
Overreacting to minor incidents (crying, becoming very upset)	Feeling easily overwhelmed or triggered, possibly due to previous unresolved emotional stress or sensory sensitivities. (Barkley, 2015)

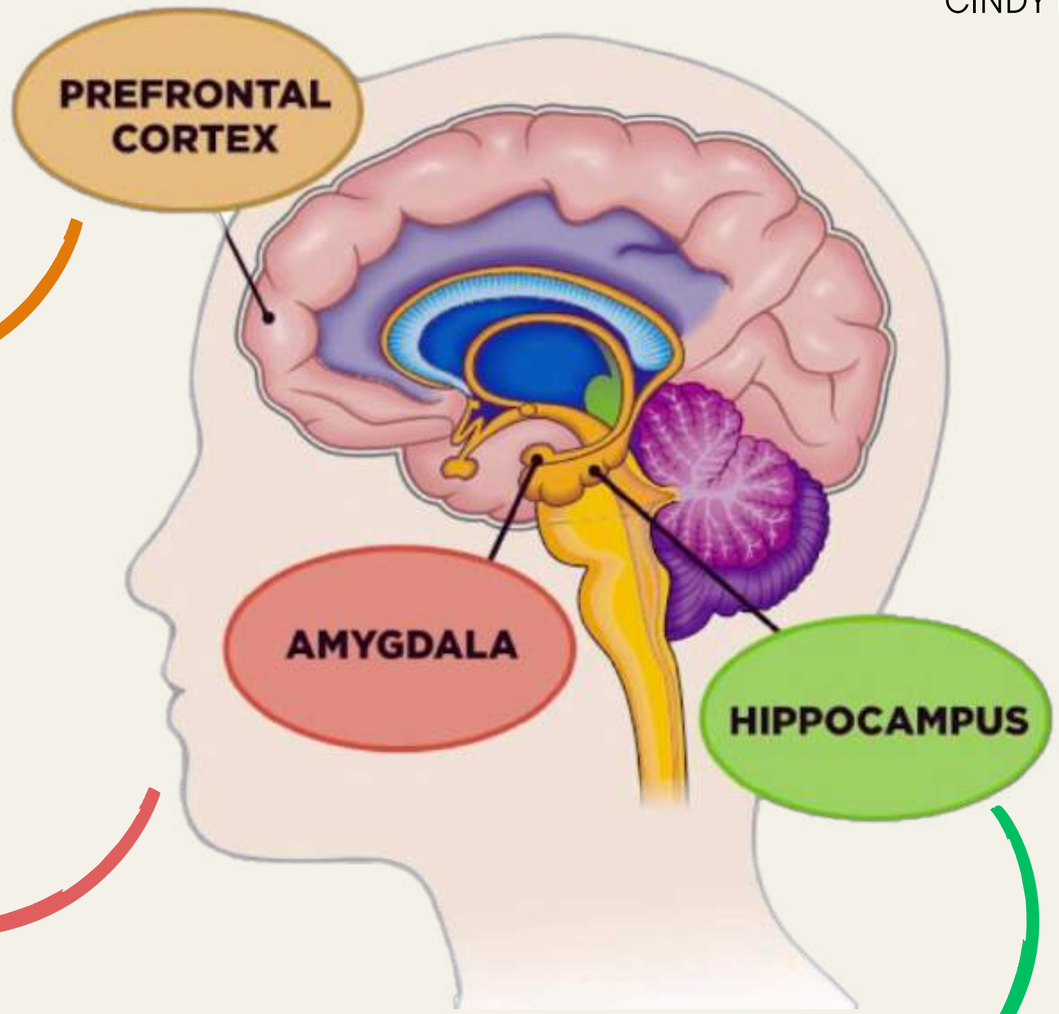
In "*The Behavior Code: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students" (2012)*: Jessica Minahan discusses how students with behavioral challenges (often those with underlying emotional issues like anxiety, ADHD, or learning disabilities) may act out as a defense mechanism to avoid being perceived as **"stupid" or incapable**. Disruptive behavior often serves as a mask for deeper feelings of insecurity about academic performance and social acceptance.

KEY POINT: STUDENTS WITH ANXIETY OR LEARNING DIFFICULTIES OFTEN CHOOSE TO ACT OUT OR DISENGAGE RATHER THAN BEING PERCEIVED AS “STUPID” OR INCAPABLE .

THE SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION

HOW DO EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL CHALLENGES IMPACT A STUDENT'S BEHAVIOR AND DECISIONS FROM A SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE?

Decision making circuit



3. Prefrontal Cortex (PFC):

Analyzes emotional responses, makes reasoned decisions, and controls impulsive reactions by using logic and critical thinking.

1. Amygdala:

Detects emotional stimuli (e.g., fear or anxiety) and triggers quick emotional responses.

2. Hippocampus:

Provides context by recalling past experiences and memories to help interpret the emotional situation

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Example
Trigger: A test question

1

WITHOUT STRESS

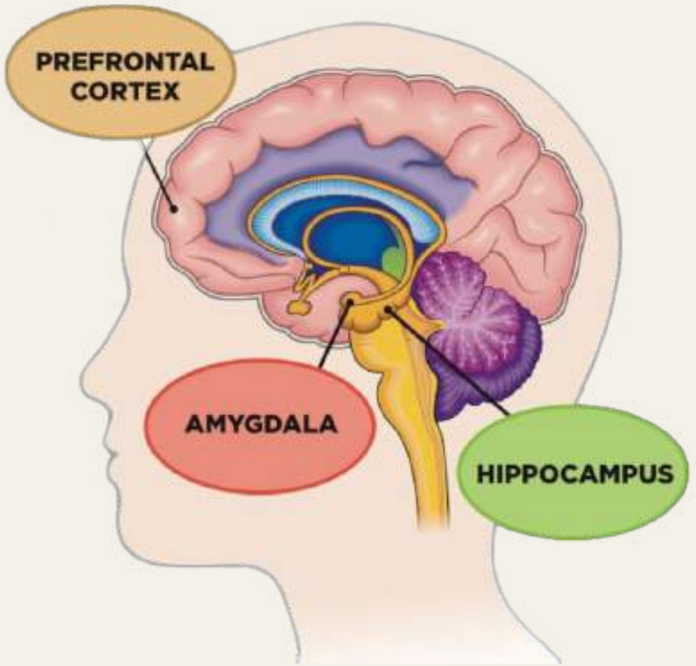
Amygdala: Detects emotional stimuli and assesses potential threats. ("Is this dangerous?")

↓

Hippocampus: Retrieves relevant memories (I've studied this before, I know how to solve it.)

↓

Prefrontal Cortex: Analyzes the situation rationally and regulates emotional responses (It's just a test—I can handle it.)



2

WITH STRESS

Amygdala: Overreacts, perceives a threat (This is too hard—I might fail!)

↓

Hippocampus: Struggles to retrieve information under stress (I can't remember what I studied.)

↓

Prefrontal Cortex: Reduced control—emotions overpower logical thinking (I can't focus or think clearly.)

ANXIETY AND THE PREFRONTAL CORTEX: UNDERSTANDING DECISION-MAKING UNDER PRESSURE

VIDEO

JOKING ABOUT HER EDUCATION (BEFORE SEEING THE QUESTION)
BEFORE HEARING THE QUESTION, PATRICIA HEATON JOKES ABOUT HER EDUCATION, IMPLYING IT DIDN'T PREPARE HER.
THIS IS A DEFENCE MECHANISM—SETTING LOW EXPECTATIONS TO PROTECT HERSELF IF SHE STRUGGLES.

EMOTIONAL REACTION TO THE MATH QUESTION
WHEN THE MATH QUESTION APPEARS, SHE IMMEDIATELY SAYS, "I CAN'T DO THIS," PANICKING BEFORE READING IT.
HER PREFRONTAL CORTEX IS BYPASSED, AND THE AMYGDALA TAKES OVER, TRIGGERING AN AVOIDANCE RESPONSE.

ASKING HER HUSBAND FOR HELP
INSTEAD OF PROCESSING THE QUESTION, SHE INSTINCTIVELY TURNS TO HER HUSBAND.
THIS REFLECTS LEARNED HELPLESSNESS—BELIEVING SHE CAN'T SOLVE MATH PROBLEMS AND SEEKING EXTERNAL SUPPORT.

THE HOST'S ENCOURAGEMENT
THE HOST REASSURES HER, SIMILAR TO HOW TEACHERS ENCOURAGE ANXIOUS STUDENTS WHO SHUT DOWN.

STRUGGLING AND DELAYING
SHE REPEATEDLY SAYS SHE'S BAD AT MATH AND AVOIDS LOOKING AT THE QUESTION.
THIS SHOWS COGNITIVE OVERLOAD AND ANXIETY-RELATED EXECUTIVE FUNCTION BREAKDOWN.

RECEIVING HELP AND WORKING THROUGH IT
THE HOST SIMPLIFIES THE PROBLEM, OFFERING EXTERNAL SUPPORT (SCAFFOLDING) TO REDUCE HER COGNITIVE LOAD.
WITH GUIDANCE, SHE EVENTUALLY ATTEMPTS THE QUESTION, THOUGH HER BODY LANGUAGE STILL REFLECTS SELF-DOUB.

SHE EVENTUALLY WORKS THROUGH IT - AFTER INITIAL HESITATION, SHE BEGINS ATTEMPTING THE MATH.

COMMON SKILLS GAPS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO LEARNER ANXIETY

THE SKILLS STUDENTS ARE OFTEN LACKING FOR WORK ENGAGEMENT

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Accurate thinking

The ability to look at an assignment or situation and accurately judge its difficulty, the time it will take to complete, and one's own ability to engage in and complete it.

Common comments: "I hate math" vs "I struggle with multiplication" = Creates defeat before the student even begins

Initiation

The ability to organise one's thoughts and start engaging in a task.

Persistance

The ability to sustain effort, even when faced with a mistake or difficulty (perceived or real).
"every time you push out of your comfort zone to learn hard things, your brain grows new connections and you get smarter" (Dweck, 2006)

Help-Seeking

The ability to ask for help when difficulty drive (rather than avoid the task or feel defeated).

E.g. Students saying "what do I do" right after you gave instructions

(Minahan, 2016)

WHY DOES THIS FEEL SO PERSONAL?

YOUR FEELINGS ARE VALID

The emotions you shared at the beginning are a natural response to the weight of caring about student outcomes.

RESPONSABILITY

Teachers often feel a personal responsibility for every student’s progress.
When a student struggles, it’s easy to feel like it’s your burden to solve. Remember that that’s not the whole picture.

WHAT CONCRETE TOOL CAN WE USE IN THE CLASSROOM TO REDUCE ANXIETY AND WORK WITH EVERYONE ?

TRADITIONAL TEACHING METHODS
VS
MODERN TEACHING METHODS
EXAMPLE OF MODERN TEACHING METHODS

MOVING FROM TRADITIONAL TEACHING/LEARNING

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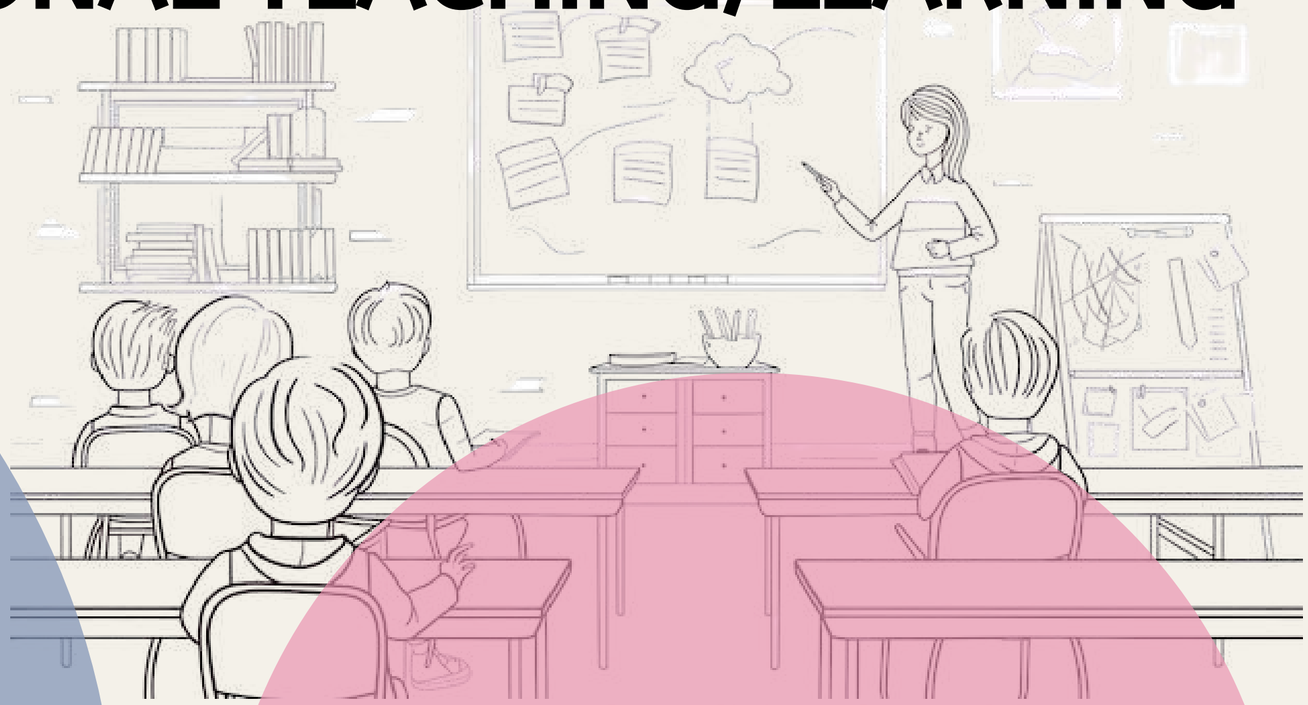
Teacher-Centered: The teacher is he central figure, delivering information to passive students.

Lessons are **teacher-driven**, often using lectures, textbooks, and rote memorization.

Emphasis on delivering a **fixed curriculum** and assessing students' ability to recall facts.

Origins: Traditional teaching has its roots in the industrial age (19th century), when schools were designed to prepare students for standardized roles in society.



Purpose of Traditional Teaching:

Efficient Knowledge Transfer: Designed to cover a set curriculum in a structured and time-efficient manner.

Standardized Learning: Ensures that all students receive the same core content and are tested in the same way, aiming for uniformity.

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TRADITIONAL teaching methods

Teacher-Centered
Teacher as the main authority

Passive Learning
Lecture-based with limited interaction.

Rote Memorization
Focus on memorization and recall.

Fixed Planing and Assessments
High-stakes testing to measure success.

Teacher as Expert
Teacher controls all content and discussions.

Direct feedback to students
teacher-driven feedback

MORE CONTROL

VS

MODERN teaching methods

Student-Centered
Students actively engage and take responsibility for their learning.

Active Learning
Collaborative activities, discussions, and problem-solving.

Critical Thinking & Problem-Solving
Emphasis on creativity, analysis, and application of knowledge.

Ongoing Feedback & Formative Assessments
Regular, low-stakes assessments that guide learning progress.

Facilitator of Learning
Teacher supports students in exploring and discovering knowledge

Encourage students to reflect
encouraging students to reflect on and regulate their own learning.

LESS CONTROL

EXAMPLE OF MODERN TEACHING METHODS NON-EXHAUSTIVE

V.A.K. LEARNING (VISUAL, AUDITORY, KINESTHETIC)

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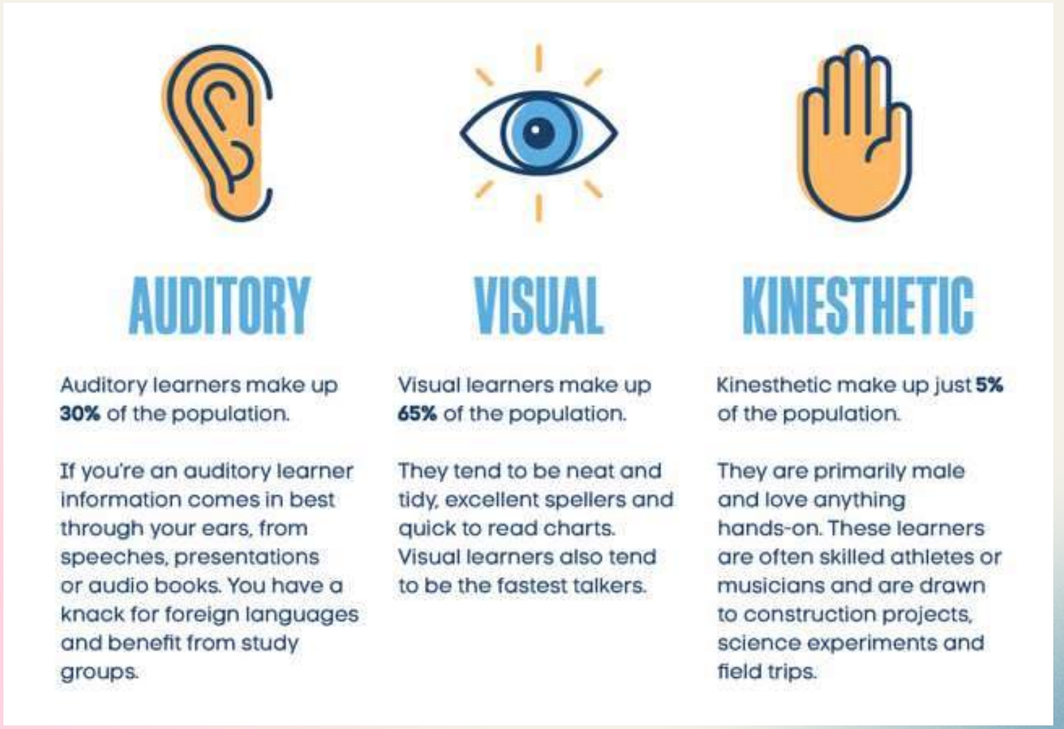
Caters to different learning styles—visual (images, charts), auditory (listening), and kinesthetic (hands-on activities).



Science: Use diagrams and models (visual), experiments and demonstrations (kinesthetic), and discussions (auditory).

Language: Use visual aids like flashcards, auditory activities like listening exercises, and kinesthetic activities like role-playing.

Humanities: Present historical events through documentaries (auditory), maps and timelines (visual), and interactive projects (kinesthetic).

V.A.K. ensures that all students feel comfortable, improving engagement and reducing stress for those who might struggle with traditional lecture-based learning.

FLIPPED CLASSROOM

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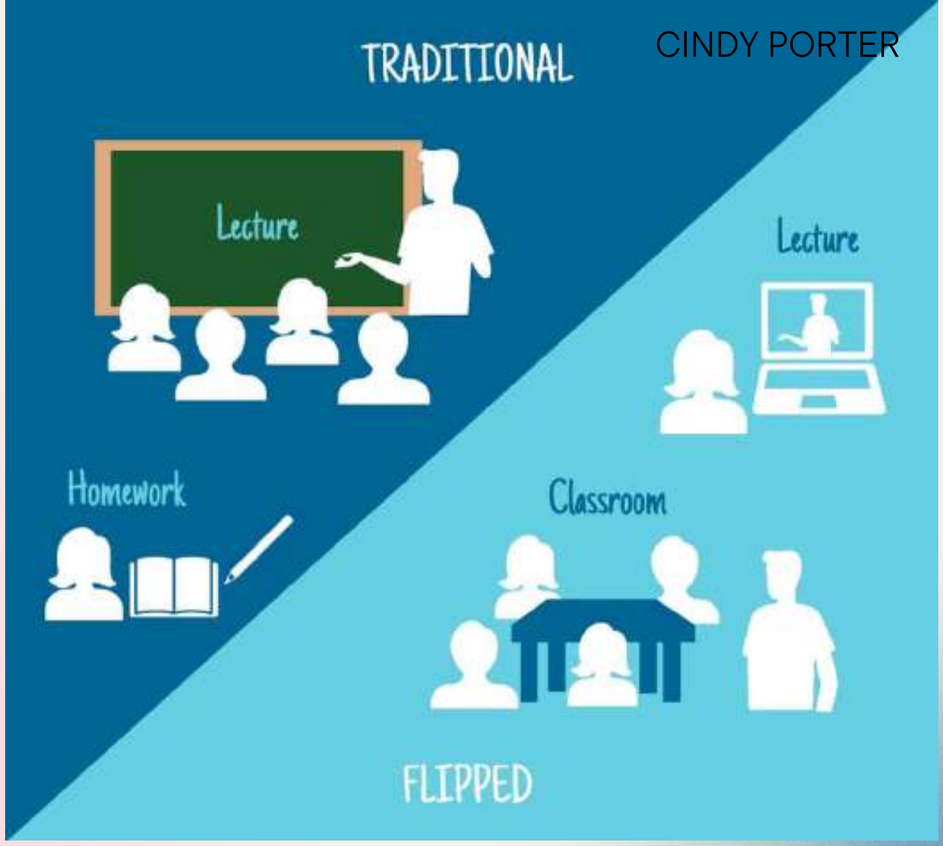
Students learn the core material at home (via videos or readings), and class time is used for active, hands-on learning.



Science: Assign reading on theoretical concepts and use class time for lab experiments or problem-solving exercises.

Language: Language: Students can watch language lessons online and practice conversation in class.

Humanities: Assign video lectures on historical topics for homework, leaving class time for group discussions or debates.

Students can learn at their own pace and review material as needed without the pressure of keeping up with the class. In-class time is more interactive, giving students opportunities to ask questions in a less stressful environment.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING (JIGSAW METHOD)

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students are divided into groups, each responsible for learning and teaching a specific part of a topic to their peers, promoting collaboration and shared understanding.

Science: For a topic like "The Human Body," one group studies the circulatory system, another the digestive system, etc. Each group researches and explains their section with diagrams or experiments..

Language
Example of activity: Divide a short story or text into sections. Each group analyses a portion (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, cultural context, main ideas), then teaches their findings to the rest of the class.

For a historical event (e.g., World War II), assign each group a perspective (political causes, key battles, social impact). Groups present their findings to create a comprehensive timeline.

The Collaborative method reduces anxiety by fostering a supportive environment where students work in small groups, share responsibility, and gain confidence through structured, collaborative learning.

GAME-BASED LEARNING

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uses games or game-like experiences as a primary tool to teach specific knowledge or skills, making learning more engaging, interactive, and meaningful.

- **Science Jeopardy: A quiz game where categories reflect different scientific concepts (e.g., physics formulas, biology processes).**
- **Lab Mystery Game: Students become detectives, using scientific methods to solve a "crime" through experiments and analysis.**
- **Ecosystem Builder: A strategy game where students design and maintain a balanced virtual ecosystem while solving real-world challenges.**

Language

- **Escape Room – Language Edition: Students solve grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension puzzles to "escape" a themed scenario.**
- **Story Cubes: Use dice with images to prompt students to create and tell collaborative stories in the target language.**
- **Guess Who – Vocabulary Challenge: Adapt the classic game to describe people, objects, or historical figures using specific vocabulary.**

- **Historical Role-Playing Game: Students take on historical roles, debate major events, and make decisions that impact the course of history.**
- **Geography Treasure Hunt: Students follow geographic clues, using maps and landmarks to find a hidden "treasure" while learning about regions.**
- **Ethics Dilemma Game: Present real-life ethical scenarios where students must debate and justify their decisions from various philosophical viewpoints.**

Game-Based Learning helps reduce anxiety for students by providing a supportive, engaging environment where they can learn at their own pace, focus on progress rather than perfection, and engage in low-pressure, interactive activities.

GAME-BASED LEARNING

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Interactive ideas

Languages

Duolingo

- Gamified language learning app with short, engaging lessons that track progress through levels and points.

Blooket

- Customizable quiz games in various formats, allowing students to learn language content while having fun with competitive gameplay.

Memrise

- Video-based language learning with gamified exercises that reinforce vocabulary and sentence structure through real-world content.

Humanities

- **Seterra**

Interactive quizzes on countries, capitals, and historical regions worldwide, including Europe.

- **iCivics**

Provides free educational games and lessons on government, civic rights, and political systems.

Science

- **GeoGebra:**

An interactive platform that combine geometry, algebra, and calculus, allowing students to visualize and explore mathematical concepts dynamically.

- **Polymath**

An educational app designed to make learning math enjoyable for children, featuring an adaptive algorithm that personalizes learning experiences to cater to each child's progress.

- **Phet Interactive Simulations**

Free, virtual simulations for maths and science topics (e.g., forces, energy, algebra) that allow students to experiment and explore.

Or other tools like :

- **Kahoot**
- **Quizlet**
- **Quizizz**

- **Mindflight7 (VR)**

Game-Based Learning helps reduce anxiety for students by providing a supportive, engaging environment where they can learn at their own pace, focus on progress rather than perfection, and engage in low-pressure, interactive activities.

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PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Students work on long-term projects that require them to apply knowledge to real-world problems.

Language: Have students create a magazine or podcast in the target language.

Science: Encourage students to design experiments or create models to demonstrate scientific concepts.

Humanities: Students can work on a project to simulate a historical event or create a cultural exhibition.

PBL allows students to explore topics deeply at their own pace, rather than cramming for tests. The focus on collaboration and problem-solving reduces the stress of memorizing facts and encourages creative thinking.

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DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Teachers adapt lessons to meet the diverse needs of students, including varying levels of ability and different learning styles.

Language

Choice-Based Assignments: Offer students options (e.g., writing a story, recording a dialogue, or creating a comic strip) to demonstrate their understanding.
Multimodal Resources: Use videos, audio, and texts to accommodate visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners.

Science:

Scaffolded Inquiry: Provide different levels of support in investigations—some students receive structured steps while others explore more independently.
Flexible Content Depth: Provide extension tasks for advanced students (e.g., researching real-world applications) while others focus on core concepts.

Humanities:

Primary Source Analysis: Offer different source complexities—simplified texts for emerging readers and original documents for advanced learners.
Creative Outputs: Offer a range of final projects (e.g., a documentary video, a museum exhibit, or a persuasive essay).

Differentiated instruction benefits anxious students by providing personalised learning experiences that match their strengths and comfort levels, reducing performance pressure, fostering a sense of achievement, and allowing them to engage at their own pace in a supportive environment.

IN CLASS STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS

IN CLASS CONCRETE TOOLS

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Relationship with students
Understanding & Connecting with Students

Know Your Students

Why it's important: Knowing your students allows you to identify their triggers, strengths, and interests, helping you tailor your approach. A student's anxiety may stem from fear of failure, social challenges, or past experiences.

How to do it: Build relationships through small conversations, surveys, or questionnaires to learn about their preferences, challenges, and hobbies. You could also try "check-ins" with simple mood scales or journal prompts where students rate how they're feeling.

Observe What Works for Students

Why it's important: Some strategies may work well for one student but not for another. Being adaptable is key to supporting all learners.

How to do it: Keep track of which strategies seem to help reduce anxiety for individual students (e.g., some may respond better to visual aids, while others might benefit from movement breaks). Use informal feedback sessions or ask students for suggestions about what makes them feel comfortable.

Create a Bond

Why it's important: Building trust creates an emotionally safe space where students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of judgment. Students who feel seen and understood are more likely to engage and less likely to experience heightened anxiety.

How to do it: Start each lesson with a quick, informal greeting or an activity that allows students to connect on a personal level (e.g., "What's something fun you did this weekend?"). Be consistent and empathetic, showing that you care about their well-being, not just their academic progress.

IN CLASS CONCRETE TOOLS

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Actions to reduce anxiety

Be Predictable

Why it's important: Predictability provides structure, reducing uncertainty. Students with anxiety feel more comfortable when they know what to expect, and a clear structure gives them a sense of control.

How to do it: Start each class by outlining the **day's objectives** and activities, and try to maintain a consistent **classroom routine**. If changes are necessary (e.g., a lesson plan adjustment), give students advanced notice. Visual schedules, countdown timers, or simple agenda outlines can help.

Validate & Normalize Feelings

Why it's important: When students feel like their emotions are acknowledged, they're less likely to bottle up their anxiety. Validating their feelings normalizes stress and helps students understand that everyone experiences it, which can be reassuring.

How to do it: If a student expresses anxiety, acknowledge it. For example, you could say, "It's completely normal to feel nervous before a big test. Let's take a deep breath together and focus on one small step at a time."

Reduce Public Pressure

Why it's important: Putting students on the spot can escalate anxiety, especially for those who are self-conscious or fear failure. Reducing public pressure promotes a safe space for students to express their thoughts without fear of judgment.

How to do it: Give students the option to participate in alternative ways, such as answering questions in pairs or small groups.
If a student misbehave, go an quickly speak privately with the studnet, (have tools like discretly tapping on his/her shoulder)

IN CLASS CONCRETE TOOLS

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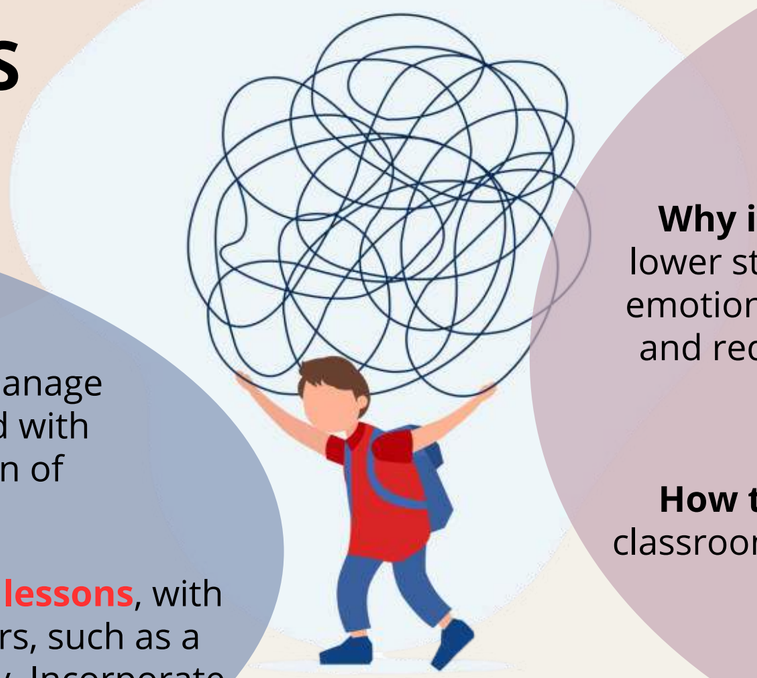
Concrete Classroom Tools & Structures



Establish Consistent Routines

Why it's important: A predictable routine helps students manage their expectations and reduces the cognitive load associated with new and unfamiliar tasks. Consistency creates a foundation of safety.

How to do it: Develop **a predictable start and end to your lessons**, with transitions that students can anticipate. Use visual reminders, such as a "Today's Schedule" board, that outline the activities of the day. Incorporate transitions like a brief signal to indicate the change in activities.

5 minutes preparation/ organisation
5 miniutes cleanup /closure

Create a Calming Atmosphere

Why it's important: A relaxing environment can lower stress hormones and foster an atmosphere of emotional safety. This can help calm students' minds and reduce physical manifestations of anxiety (e.g., fidgeting, racing hearts).

How to do it: Create a calm and inviting physical classroom environment with soft lighting, comfortable seating, and minimal distractions.

Visual Support for Materials

Why it's important: Visuals provide students with clear, accessible reminders of what is expected, which can reduce uncertainty and anxiety.

How to do it: Use visual aids like checklists, diagrams, or slides that outline the steps students need to follow. You can also display key materials or concepts visually to make them easier to reference during the lesson.

For younger learners: display a photo of what they should have on their table

Set Clear, Achievable Goals

Why it's important: Clear, bite-sized goals reduce feelings of overwhelm. When students understand exactly what is expected of them, it's easier for them to stay focused and avoid anxiety about unstructured tasks.

How to do it: Break large tasks into smaller, manageable steps and clearly articulate each one. For example, for an essay, you might say: "Step 1: Brainstorm your ideas. Step 2: Write a thesis statement. Step 3: Organize your main points," and so on. Encourage students to track their progress on a checklist.

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IN CLASS CONCRETE TOOLS

Scaffolded Tasks: Providing Gradual Support

What is it?

Scaffolding helps break down complex tasks, reducing cognitive overload. It allows students to tackle challenges step by step, which fosters a sense of achievement and builds confidence.

With gradual release of responsibility, students have time to master skills before performing them independently, leading to less anxiety about failure.

Gradual Release:

Start with full teacher guidance (e.g., "I do"), move to guided practice (e.g., "We do"), and finally allow independent work (e.g., "You do").

Prompts & Cues:

Rather than giving students the answer, provide hints, questions, or cues that guide them toward finding the solution independently.

Modelling

The teacher demonstrates the thought process or steps involved in completing a task, which students can then imitate. For example, in writing, the teacher may model how to analyse a text before asking students to try on their own.

Chunking:

Large tasks are broken into smaller, more manageable sections. For example, when writing a research paper, students could first focus on research, then outline, then draft, etc.

IN CLASS STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS

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IN CLASS CONCRETE TOOLS

Students are in charge

Reflection Prompts

After tasks, ask students reflective questions such as “What worked well today?” and “What could I do differently next time?” This encourages students to identify strengths and areas for growth, fostering a growth mindset and reducing the fear of failure.

Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive strategies involve teaching students how to be aware of their own thinking processes. By guiding students to reflect on their learning, teachers can help them manage their learning better, leading to increased confidence and reduced anxiety.

Exit Tickets

At the end of a lesson, have students complete a short reflection, such as “What did I learn today?” or “What do I need more help with?” This helps students process the material and identify what still feels unclear, reducing anxiety about upcoming tests or assessments.

Pre-Test Reflection

Encourage students to reflect on their understanding. Questions like, "Do I understand this?" or "What strategy can I use to tackle this task?" help students recognize where they may need help and what they can do next. This increases awareness and reduces feelings of being overwhelmed.

Goal Setting /After tests reflection

After a test or major assignment, encourage students to reflect on their performance. Ask questions like, “What worked well during the test?” and “What can I improve on next time?” This helps students process their experience, adjust their strategies, and focus on growth rather than stress, reducing future test anxiety.

IN CLASS CONCRETE TOOLS

Students are in charge

Self-Monitoring Strategies

(Jessica Minahan - *The Behavior Code: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students*

the goal is to help students, especially those who struggle with anxiety or executive functioning issues, to manage their thoughts and emotions when they face difficulties in starting or completing tasks. These strategies empower students to recognize and challenge their negative thought patterns, break tasks into manageable chunks, and build self-regulation skills.

What am I worried about ?	*What strategy can I use?*	*Did I use it?*
INITIATION **My thoughts might be:** **This looks difficult** **I can't do this**	•Chunking/ Start Small •I will work for _____ minutes and then pause •Use a wipe off board •Pair Pleasant with Unpleasant	
PERSISTENCE **My thoughts might be:** **This is too hard. I'm tired.** **I am not making progress**	•Skip the hard problem and do the easy problem first •Work with a Buddy •Check all the problems/ tasks I have finished	
HELP-SEEKING **My thoughts might be:** **I don't know how to do this** **I am stuck**	•Hand the teacher a note •Read the directions 3 times •Make eye contact with the teacher	

CONCLUSION

HOW CAN WE EVOLVE OUR ROLE AS EDUCATORS TO PREPARE STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE?

Conclusion: Evolving Roles in Education

The Teacher's Evolving Role:

We now guide and **assist** students, with the **student at the centre of the classroom.**

Adapting to Students' Needs:

As generations evolve, we must understand and **adapt to students' changing needs.**
It's important to **get to know our students** to help them grow.

Preparing for the Future:

We are not just teaching for today, but for the future, helping students build the skills they'll need.
It's essential to **anticipate** what they'll need in tomorrow's world.

Shared Responsibility:

The teacher's role is to provide tools and guidance, while **students take an active role in acquiring and applying the knowledge**.
This requires **flexibility and trust** in the process.

Emotional Intelligence Matters:

As technology and AI evolve, **emotional intelligence remains essential**.
Emotional intelligence, including empathy, self-awareness, and social skills, is a key aspect of learning that we nurture in students, and it plays a crucial role in today's classroom and in the world.

Q&A

Shared Resources

For more insights and resources from today’s session, scan the QR code to access the conference content and additional materials.