

Creating the Peaceable Classroom

A 21st-Century Wellness Guide for
Teachers, Students and Parents



Sandy Bothmer

Illustrations by
Jan Mercuri Grossman

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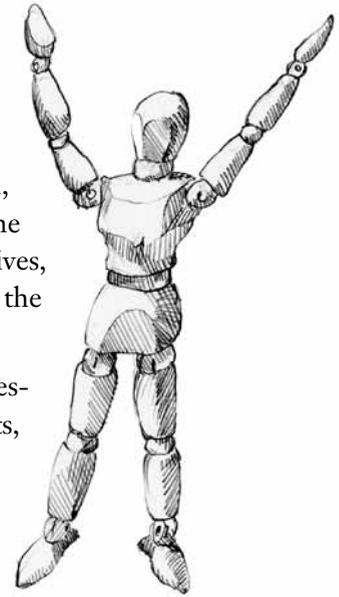
Introduction

Since the first edition of *Creating the Peaceable Classroom* appeared in 2003, virtually all of the same conditions and factors that create stress in the classroom and at home still exist, and new ones have arrived. The scenarios that make students, teachers, and others distracted, uneasy, and unable to focus on doing their best work have only grown. The success of the first edition, along with the increasing complexity of our lives, and an increased receptivity to the techniques presented in this book are the impetus for a new edition.

This book is intended to assist *you*, the community of teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, psychologists, school nurses, administrators, students, and parents, in creating calm within yourselves and your environment.

You will find this new edition richer and fuller than the first. I have included more information in the feng shui chapters along with new charts. In many cases, I have included **Hints**, suggestions on how to help your students do a particular technique or a way to increase their understanding. In some chapters, there is a **Special Education** section with thoughts and ideas addressed directly to those teachers' situations or students. The **Parent Connection** section, found in most chapters, offers parents possibilities for using the techniques at home. By engaging in some of these techniques, parents will be improving their own well-being and that of their family, and at the same time strengthening the home-school connection. A complete list of the Special Education and Parent Connection sections can be found in the index. Also included are an expanded **Resource List** and **Reference List** at the back of the book. In short, *Creating the Peaceable Classroom* is brimming with more ideas to help you create an inner and outer environment that will support and nurture optimal teaching, learning, and living. It's a win-win situation for all.

Though the techniques presented in this book come from many cultures and traditions, there is no attempt to explain the deeper context of these traditions or any spiritual component. I have chosen them because of their efficacy and proven success. Those who are interested in delving deeper into these techniques are encouraged to do so, but that is not my purpose here.



What's Inside

This book is divided into three parts, addressing the classroom space, the teacher, and the student. In *Part I*, I offer you techniques to increase the nurturing and supportive environment within your classroom so your students feel safe and at home, ready to learn. You will discover how the ancient Chinese practice of feng shui—with its three tenets of connectedness, balance, and vitality and five elements of fire, earth, metal, water, and wood—can provide simple, commonsense guidance to enhancing the learning spaces in your classroom. Creating a peaceable classroom is all a matter of assessing what is already present and then making adjustments according to the fluctuating needs of your students. For thousands of years, the people of China have brought peace and harmony into their homes through these practices, and now you can realize the same benefits in your classroom.

Part II is for you the teacher, and the other adults in the school-wide community mentioned above. In it, I introduce you to techniques that will help you

The brain stays alert and relaxed for learning in a safe and positive learning environment.

—Eric Jensen,
Super Teaching (p.26)

relax or energize your body and mind. I explain and discuss different breathing patterns, meditation, mindfulness walking, a relaxation sequence, yoga postures (some modified for the classroom setting), qigong, acupressure, Reiki, aromatherapy, and movement experiences to help you release emotions and ignore distractions that make it difficult for you to be fully present to focus and do your best work each day. You can use these techniques at school when needed or at home if you wish.

Part III, the student section, can help you tune in to the emotional temperature of your students so you can help them individually or collectively change their state-of-being, allowing them to focus and do their best work. Breathing patterns, centering activities, yoga postures, movement experiences, and different types of music are strategies you can use to help your students feel more relaxed or energized. Use them with the entire class during transition times, as pick-me-uppers when lethargy appears, or during your class meeting time. You can also help an individual student who needs calming or energizing by using an appropriate technique. As you guide your students in these techniques, you will be helping yourself as well.

Using this Book

How should you go about using this book? I would suggest that you read through the chapters in order because they are organized on a continuum that starts with the classroom space in Part I, creating a comfortable and inviting,

nurturing and supportive environment where optimum teaching and learning can take place. In Part II, you look at how you can remain in a good state-of-being within that space, fully focused and able to give your best to your teaching efforts. Finally, in Part III, you are provided with lessons and activities that will assist your students in maintaining or regaining their focus so that they, too, can do their best work. My hope is that you and your students will internalize some of the techniques and transfer them to many aspects of your daily living, for they are just plain “good medicine” for living a peaceable, balanced life.

Slow, deep breathing is probably the single best anti-stress medicine we have.

—James Gordon,
Clinical Professor of Psychiatry
Georgetown University School of Medicine

Before teaching techniques to your students, I would recommend that you first determine which techniques you connect to yourself and want to learn for your own well-being. Try them and decide if they work for you. If they are helpful to you, your enthusiasm will spread to your students. Always consider the complexion of your class when deciding which techniques to teach them. You will certainly need a number of options to meet the needs of a classroom full of students. The book will offer you a myriad of ideas to explore, for as you know, the same technique doesn’t always work every time.

When introducing your students to a technique, you will want to explain what it will do for them—how it will assist them in relaxing or energizing so they can do their best work. (For example, “Today, we are going to learn a breathing technique that will help us to relax and calm down.”) Later when you suggest that they use a technique during the course of the day, remind them of its purpose. (For example, “I can see that some of you are nervous about this test. Let’s all do some deep breathing so we can feel calmer. Sit up straight. Breathe in . . .”)

You might introduce these techniques during your class meeting time, when a “teachable moment” arises, or during a transition time. Eventually, having a menu of techniques for your students to choose from will empower each student to use the technique that works best for him or her. Some students may spontaneously use techniques on their own when needed. That would be the ultimate outcome!



As you read, you will notice questions with a journal and pencil illustration next to them. This icon suggests that you pause to write your thoughts or observations about the questions in a journal. You may want to refer to your journal from time to time as you reassess your classroom environment.

Why Should I Use These Techniques?

Now, if you are as busy a teacher as I was, you are probably asking yourself, “How can I spend time on these techniques when I have so little teaching time to begin with?” Let me assure you that most of these strategies take only a few minutes once your children have learned them. The extra time you spend initially will go a long way toward improving your students’ abilities to focus on their work. Using these techniques, they are likely to accomplish more work in less time and improve the quality of their work as well. So check off the time element as a non-issue!

At the New England Regional Gifted Conference in 2003, James T. Webb, Ph.D. said in his address, “Don’t try to teach navigation skills in the middle of a hurricane” (Webb 2003). Gifted or non-gifted, our students are not going to learn or do their best work when they are in inner turmoil. Using the techniques described in this book will help your students create an inner climate of calm and vitality, which is essential for focus, concentration, clear thinking, confidence and self esteem. These qualities influence your students’ ability to think, create, problem solve, and produce. They impact your ability to be an effective teacher as well.

The strategies I offer in *Creating the Peaceable Classroom* increase learning success and empower you and your students to adjust your state-of-being as

needed, and the academic and social results have the potential of exceeding your expectations. It has been done in Murfreesboro, Tennessee at the Black Fox Elementary School. According to Principal Zane Cantrell, who implemented a program called “The Breathe System,” relaxation techniques resulted in improved test scores and fewer arguments between students (“Technique” 2001). Physician James Gordon, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University of Medicine and director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in the District

of Columbia, teaches deep abdominal breathing to most of his patients, including children who have been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. He reports that deep breathing helps to reduce anxiety and calm the mind (Krucoff 2000, 11).

Improving test scores and student performance is still a concern, just as it was when the first edition of this book came out in 2003. I have found that

Benefits

The strategies I offer in *Creating the Peaceable Classroom*:

- require minimal investment of time
- improve well-being
- improve attention and focus
- improve concentration
- increase teaching success
- increase learning success

finger-walking on a spiral or labyrinth can help reduce test anxiety. One fourth grader I worked with told me that he was scoring 40 to 50 percent on math quizzes and tests. Once he started finger walking a spiral before starting a test, his scores improved into the 80 percent range. Why? He was more relaxed, focused, and could think more clearly. Music has been shown to regulate stress, promote creativity, and energize the body and mind (Jensen 2000). Yoga has proven beneficial too. Studies done of the Yoga Ed and the Tools for Teachers programs showed promising results for children with ADHD. (Tools for Teachers is a yoga curriculum with techniques for teachers to use in their classrooms.) Students showed improved self-esteem, academic performance, and an increased ability to relax (Tomasko 2006).

I see greater confidence and more relaxation in my students as they approach and go through the state testing process. I attribute this in part to their use of deep breathing and affirmations. Many of my students do better as well.

—Third grade teacher

In my work with children on the autistic spectrum, I have found that teaching them relaxation and rejuvenation techniques, combined with yoga and energy balancing, has made them better able to manage their emotional state, with and sometimes without adult reminders. This, of course, depends upon the child, his or her age, and the extent of the condition. It is clear to me that “calming the hurricane inside” is essential for our students’ optimum performance.

By adopting these techniques, you will enhance your own well-being and teaching success. As you take care of yourself, you will improve your students’ well-being and learning success. You will launch your students on a path of self-empowerment, for as they internalize these techniques and make them a part of their daily lives, they will grow into adults who are well equipped to face the challenges and stressors in their lives, both personal and professional. Parents, if you adopt these techniques, you, too, will be preparing yourself and your children for facing life’s challenges in a more relaxed and thoughtful manner.

I have never had a parent take issue with the relaxation and energizing techniques I have taught to their children. In the unlikely event a parent expresses concern to you, I suggest you simply explain how and why these techniques are beneficial. You might invite the parent into your classroom to observe the techniques in action, or perhaps, to participate in them during a class meeting. Seeing and doing is believing. Such a visit will reassure the parent that these techniques are, indeed, worth learning.

Now, it’s time to sample the diverse menu of techniques for creating a peaceable classroom.

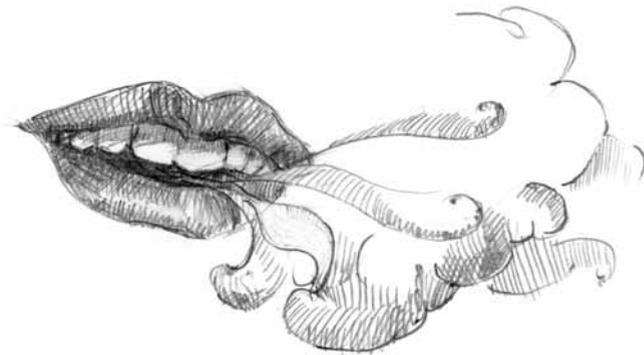
Part 11

Relaxing or Energizing Yourself for Optimum Teaching



You have created a supportive and nurturing classroom environment. You smile from the inside out when you walk in the door. You're ready to go! But it doesn't take long before you start to feel overburdened and stressed with paperwork, assessments, meetings, and unforeseen, incredibly important must-have by 3:30 four-page surveys, not to mention the challenges of your personal life. None of this emotional clutter disappears in a puff of smoke just by wishing it away! So what can you do when stresses and challenges in your life cause emotional upsets that distract you from your teaching? Read on for some answers.

The Breath



To my way of thinking, the most important technique you can learn to help yourself move through your emotions and distractions is the regulation of the breath. It is part of your every moment, day in and day out, wherever you are. The breath is your anchor to life, bringing you energy, vitality, clarity, and good health. By learning to work with it, you are able to change your state-of-being so you can function in a more balanced, efficient, and productive way.

Not only will improved breathing help to change your state-of-being, it has physical benefits as well. Julie T. Lusk writes about the physical benefits of deep abdominal breathing in her book *Desktop Yoga* (1998), citing these changes:

- » slowed heart rate
- » increased lymphatic flow and transfer of oxygen from the blood into the body's tissues
- » improved return of blood to the heart through the veins
- » normalized flow of blood to the lungs
- » increased blood and oxygen flow to the brain and the heart
- » reduced tension and stress in the muscles
- » pain reduction

How Do You Breathe?

Breathing is something we do automatically, day in and day out. Because it is automatic, we don't generally pay attention to it unless we are out of breath for some reason or have an illness that causes labored breathing. So take a few moments to notice how you breathe. You may do this sitting or lying down. If you choose to sit, make sure that you sit toward the front of your chair with your spine straight and your feet planted firmly on the floor. Sitting with a straight spine gives the lungs room to expand fully. If you choose to lie down, you may wish to bend your legs at the knees to put less strain on your lower back and place a rolled towel under your neck to support it, especially if you have neck problems.



Now close your eyes and relax in this position. Breathe normally. Quiet your mind and pay attention to the sensations inside your body. Feel the breath going in and out, in and out, in and out . . .

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