



10 Soft Skills Activities

"TRAIN THE SEN SPECIALIST"



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SEN Toolkit Project

The SEN Toolkit aims at improving provision of inclusive practices and identification strategies for teachers in mainstream classrooms in Europe that include learners with category B special educational needs.

The project involves 6 European partners including experts in special education needs, learning design and teacher training.

Our aim is to build a better world for everyone to live in, one classroom at a time.

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The partners



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Introduction

The SEN Toolkit “Soft Skills Guide & Activities” has been mindfully created as a key part of the project.

The skills this area of The SEN Toolkit deals with are both necessary, and overlooked in the world of SEN. Individual experience, anecdotal evidence, the in-depth work of the focus groups contributing to the creation of the Toolkit, and a wealth of independent research demonstrates beyond any doubt that while teacher acquaintance with phonological awareness, sensory overload, executive function, and student focus (as just a few examples of SEN-specific knowledge) may be the “engineering science” behind accommodating for SEN, it is only half the story. It may be the seeds of the help SEN students require, but without watering, no flowers will ever grow.

The soft skills guide is the watering that students need. Where teachers may be equipped with knowledge of phonological awareness, the students will almost never flourish if they feel confused or humiliated by the schooling system, if they feel they aren’t able to learn as well as other students, if they feel they have no one to talk to and school becomes a lonely place, or if they feel that learning is “not for them”, and they lack motivation. Students themselves, when asked about what they need in order to succeed in school, almost never reply “a deeper knowledge of phonological awareness from my teachers”. They reply that they don’t want to feel alone, they want to feel included and motivated, they want to feel that they can be amazing. And that they don’t want to feel like failures.

The statistics on personal and interpersonal failure of SEN students are shocking. While it may be tempting to think of neurodiversity as a mechanical issue – that is, as an issue relating mainly to phonological processing, or to sensory overload, or to executive functioning difficulties – this would be to make the cardinal error of removing the dyslexia from the dyslexic, the autism from the autistic, and the

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inattention from the inattentive. In other words, neurodiversity should never be seen as a processing issue: it should be seen, always and everywhere, as a human issue. And if educators forget that the most important skills for dealing with humans are human skills rather than engineering science skills, they will always and everywhere put the students they work with at risk.

The causes of neurodiverse trauma in the education context are complex, but research has shown that negative teacher-peer perception of neurodiversity leads to measurably lower academic achievement and self-perception, learned helplessness leads to feelings of worthlessness, and bullying leads to shame. There is even some research to suggest that certain neurodiverse people have lowered dopamine levels, and are therefore biologically more prone to depression.

Studies demonstrate that negative perceptions of SEN coming from teachers and school peers (friends and classmates) leads to negative psychological consequences, and this is not simply focused on the abuse that often accompanies a child's educational needs, it even comes as a consequence of the very labels they and their peers use about them. Where an early label of neurodiversity allows a child to understand her- or himself as experiencing certain differences in the way she or he learns and processes information, then feelings of worthlessness and unhappiness are often noticeably less; however, when that understanding comes late, or worse, where it leads to the neurodiverse student feeling that they have a deficiency of some kind, the opposite is true and the child is more likely to emerge from school with low educational, psychological, and emotional outcomes.

Furthermore, studies have shown that such students are far more likely to be bullied than their neurotypical peers. In fact, dyslexic students are reported as somewhere between three or four times as likely to experience bullying as their school friends – and that this bullying remains constant throughout their entire education experience. Throughout much of the European Union, overall bullying rates are somewhere between 10-25%. According to Britain's All Party Parliamentary Group for SpLDs, 48% of parents said their children had been bullied because of their dyslexia. And these are only the parents who know about their child's difficulties.

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The soft skills guide enables teachers and other educators to engage positively with their SEN and non-SEN students alike. It provides a handy set of ideas and activities to develop the skills and the mindset to understand people's communication challenges, to uncover their hidden blockages, to motivate in difficult situations, or simply to open the dialogue. It can be adapted and developed to suit need and context. It is to be used by teachers, educators, parents, and even the students themselves, to help create an environment where everybody is encouraged to communicate and flourish. And as such, it acts as the perfect skillset to be able to apply the knowledge from the Digital Learning Course with the maximum sensitivity, self-awareness, and understanding.

We believe that the Digital Learning Course will provide the necessary grounding for educators to improve the lives of their SEN students; but we are convinced that the Soft Skills Guide will provide the interpersonal competencies for how to engage positively with them.

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The Iceberg of Empathy

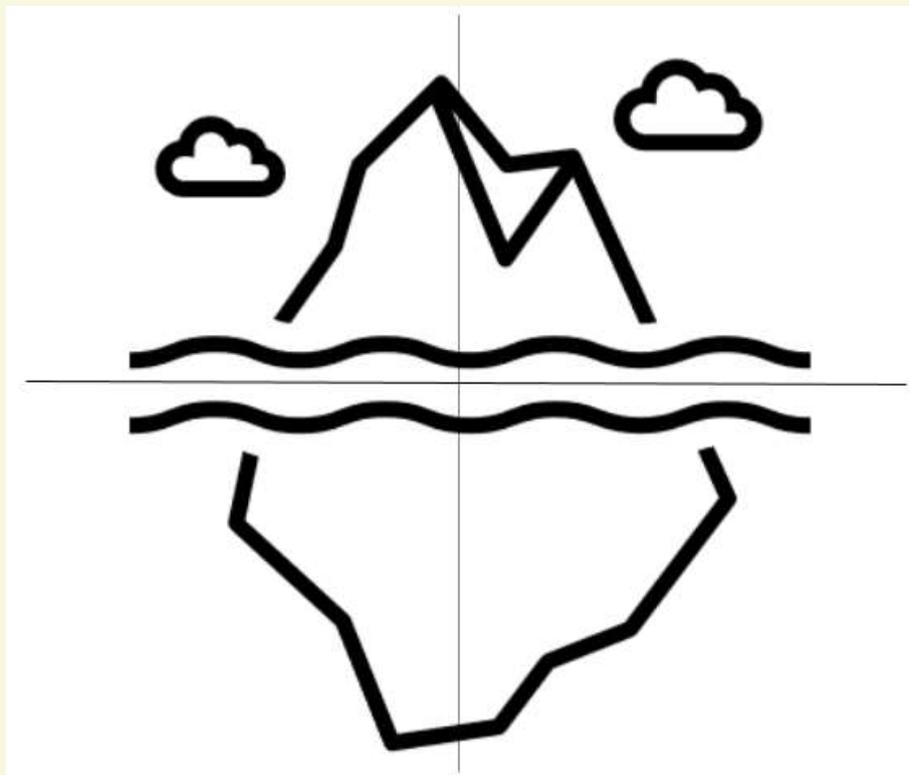
What is the Iceberg of Empathy?

The idea behind this exercise is to build a deeper rapport with those around you by understanding them and gaining a clearer perception of how our students understand themselves.

Every single one of us has complexities, hidden depths, and motivations that nobody else – and often not even we – can see. The Iceberg of Empathy seeks to uncover these depths in a fun and communicative way.

How to play:

Take a look at the “Iceberg” template below:



The iceberg is divided into four quadrants (top left, top right, bottom left, and bottom right). This is “your iceberg”.

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In the top left quadrant, write one thing that you are good at. And then, in the same quadrant, write three skills or abilities that this involves. So for instance, if the thing you write that you are good at is “playing guitar”, the other three things could be: “keeping rhythm”, “manual dexterity”, and “patience” (to be able to become skilled, a learner needs patience).

Now, underneath this, look at the bottom left quadrant. In this bottom left quadrant, start noting down some of the reasons you can play guitar. In other words, note down how you practice becoming better at manual dexterity, some of the barriers you have to overcome to become more patient, etc. Go as deeply as you can. Ask yourself, what happened in your life to make you want to become better at these skills? Did you have a role model? Was there a moment in your childhood when you saw a skilled guitar player and thought to yourself that you would love to be like him or her? These truths are all part of your guitar playing, but they are the things that most people cannot see.

Now write in the top right quadrant of the iceberg template. But this time, write down one thing you feel you are not so good at. Perhaps this is “learning languages”. Then, in the same quadrant, write down three associated skills that you feel you lack to be able to become good at learning languages. These could be: “memorising grammar rules”, “speaking freely when you are not certain of your skills”, or “having an interest in other languages”.

Then, underneath this, look at the bottom right quadrant. In this bottom right quadrant, start noting down some of the reasons you are not skilled at language learning. In other words, note down why you think it’s not interesting to learn a language, add down why you don’t feel comfortable speaking freely if you’re not certain you’ll get it right, etc. And then write down some of your personal history behind these reasons. Was there a moment in your school life when you tried to speak a foreign language but felt embarrassed or humiliated by an unkind teacher? Did you find learning rules boring as a child? Why was this? What was boring about it? These truths are all part of your struggles with languages, but they are things that most people cannot see.

Now find a partner.

Show this partner your iceberg. Explain to her both sides – the left and the right

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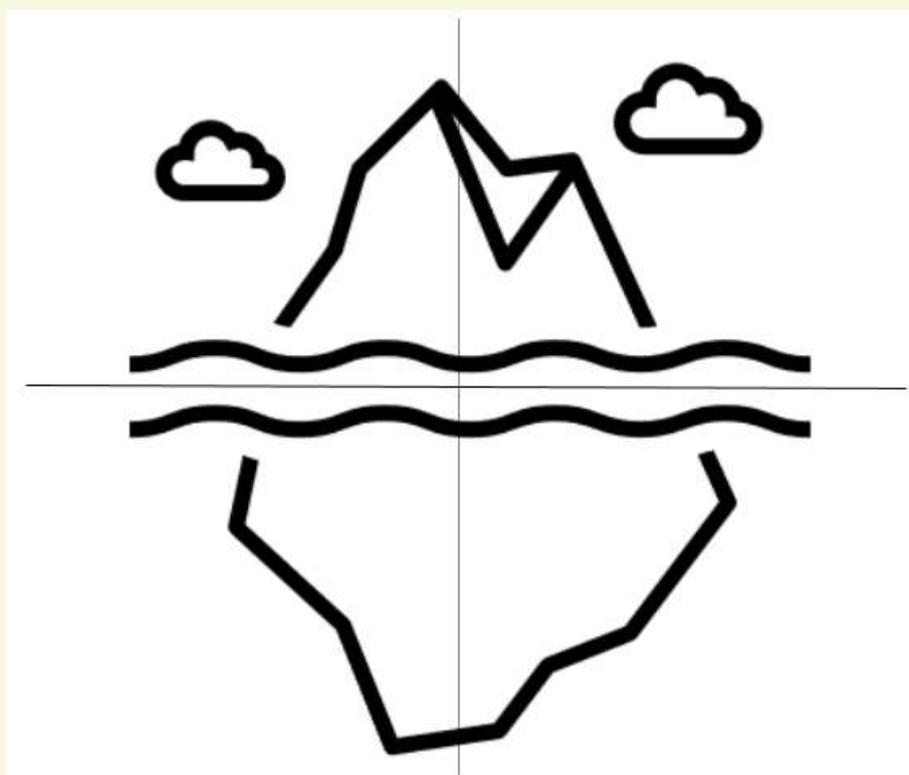
side – of the iceberg. Encourage this partner to ask you questions about the lower quadrants on each side. Encourage her to ask questions that are relevant, searching, and – importantly – based on the answers that you give her. So, instead of a conversation that goes like this:

- “Why did you find that embarrassing”
- “My friends thought I was clever, and when I made a mistake the teacher laughed, and I was afraid my friends wouldn’t think I was clever anymore”
- “Why is learning rules boring?”...

You are aiming towards a conversation that goes more like this:

- “Why did you find that embarrassing”
- “My friends thought I was clever, and when I made a mistake the teacher laughed, and I was afraid my friends wouldn’t think I was clever anymore”
- “And did your friends behave differently towards you after that?...”

Now take a new iceberg template, like the one below:



Ask your partner to do the same as you did. They can take as much time as she likes, it doesn't have to be immediate, but it works better if replies are not too far apart in time.

Once they have filled out the template, with one thing they are good at and three skills this involves in the top left quadrant, and some deeply-considered reasons behind this in the bottom left quadrant; and one thing they are not so good at (with three accompanying skills they believe contribute to this) in the top right quadrant, and some deeply-considered reasons behind this in the bottom right quadrant, begin to ask them questions.

These questions should be:

- Interested
- Relevant
- Based on the responses she gives to you
- Gentle
- Helpful (perhaps you can help her gain some insights into her own life)
- Non-judgemental

Do not talk about yourself. You are focused on your partner's answers. The final part of the exercise is to swap your completed iceberg templates. Take them away. Look at them, and remember the answers your partner gave you to the questions you had asked. Then think of the connections between those answers they gave you, and experiences from your own life. Note these down.

Return, and find time to sit with your partner. Tell them stories that create connections between their iceberg and your own life experiences. Invite them to do the same.

These stories must be:

- Non-judgemental
- Understanding
- Meaningful (try not to give superficial examples and stories)
- Relevant
- Non-competitive (try not to show how you benefited from a situation similar to

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one she suffered from)

- Considered (your partner will know if you haven't given this part of the exercise much thought, and it may hurt her)
- Authentic and genuine
- Sensitive to the experiences your partner has had
- Previously unknown (or containing aspects that were previously unknown to them)
- Connection-building

This exercise may be extended to a wider audience. Colleagues, students, parents, and friends should all be encouraged to take part in this, aware from the very start that they are dealing with sensitive truths, and it is important that they handle these truths sensitively.

For SEN students especially, this can help to form connections between themselves and other non-SEN students, sharing experiences and showing that while they have "educational needs", so do all children.

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Learned Helplessness, Seligman

Introduction

American psychologist Martin Seligman began research into **learned helplessness** in 1967 at the University of Pennsylvania

Definition

Learned helplessness is the behaviour displayed by a subject after enduring repeated aversive stimuli beyond their control. Upon demonstrating such behaviour, the subject was said to have acquired learned helplessness. In humans, learned helplessness is related to the individual's belief in their innate ability to achieve goals.

Learned Helplessness, Seligman's Theory

In 1965, Martin Seligman and his colleagues were doing research on classical conditioning, or the process by which an animal or human associates one thing with another. In the case of Seligman's experiment, he would ring a bell and then give a light shock to a dog. After a number of times, the dog reacted to the shock even before it happened: as soon as the dog heard the bell, it reacted as though it'd already been shocked. But, then something unexpected happened. Seligman put each dog into a large crate that was divided down the middle by a low fence. The dog could see and jump over the fence if necessary. The floor on one side of the fence was electrified, but not on the other side of the fence. Seligman put the dogs on the electrified side and administered a light shock. He expected the dogs to jump to the non-shocking side of the fence. Instead, the dogs lay down. It was as though they'd learned from the first part of the experiment that there was nothing they could do to avoid the shocks, so they gave up in the second part of the experiment. Seligman described their condition as learned helplessness, or not trying to get out of a negative situation because the past has taught you that you are helpless.

How to use it

Create a worksheet with the questions and the responses that students give in certain situations are analysed in order to reflect their limiting learned helplessness. Teachers can analyse the student's response for indications of learned helplessness.

Conclusion

The motivational effect of learned helplessness is often seen in the classroom. Students who repeatedly fail may conclude that they are incapable of improving their performance, and this keeps them from trying to succeed, which results in feeling helpless, continued failure, loss of self-esteem and other social consequences. This becomes a pattern that will spiral downward if it continues to go untreated. People with learned helplessness can overcome it. The most common treatment is therapy, especially cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT helps people overcome these types of challenges by changing how they think and act.

Learned Helplessness, Seligman

Questions for Learned Helplessness:

Below are two questionnaires. One is for students to help them identify situations of learned helplessness. The second one is for teachers to aid them to recognise and analyse cases of learned helplessness.

Parent SEN Questionnaire

Survey Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neutral 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE Do you agree with these statements?		Agree	Disagree	Not sure
1	I feel helpless when doing language exercises.			
2	If I put in enough effort I can succeed in learning.			
3	I'm not very good at using grammar correctly.			
4	Sometimes the course material is too hard.			
5	Sometimes I am just unlucky.			
6	I suffer from low self-esteem.			
7	I don't feel motivated.			
8	I don't feel that I can succeed.			
9	I feel like giving up.			
10	I don't want to ask for help.			
11	I often feel stressed.			
12	I do not want to get better or make an effort.			

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Parent SEN Questionnaire

Survey Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neutral 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree

TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE Do you agree with these statements?		Agree	Disagree	Not sure
1	They feel helpless when doing language exercises?			
2	They think that they can succeed in learning if you put in enough effort?			
3	They think they are good at using grammar correctly?			
4	They feel the course material is sometimes too hard?			
5	They think that sometimes they are just unlucky?			
6	They suffer from low self-esteem?			
7	They feel motivated?			
8	They don't feel that they can succeed.			
9	They feel like giving up.			
10	They do not want to ask for help.			
11	They are often stressed.			
12	They have no goals or commitment towards improving.			

Note: In childhood, learned helplessness often presents at school. If a child studies hard in order to do well in their schoolwork, but ultimately does poorly, they may feel helpless and hopeless.

A 2004 study examined the effects of learned helplessness on test taking in students. Each child involved took one of two tests. The first began with very difficult questions and the other with easier questions.

Students who took the first test seemed to become frustrated, doubted their academic ability and missed the easy questions. The authors suggest that learned helplessness affected their test scores. Those who took the second test did not experience these effects.

Children may avoid learned helplessness by building resilience. Among the many factors that can contribute to resilience are a positive attachment to caregivers, humor and independence.

Source: Medical News Today

<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/325355#in-children>

Powerful questions

What is the aim of a powerful question?

- Powerful questions are thought-provoking.
- They stimulate creative thinking.
- This leads to new ideas.
- And new ideas can lead to innovation.
- The thought process is what is important.

Powerful Questions can encourage....

- making sense of something, particularly a complex issue
- getting different points of view or reaching agreement
- generating ideas
- connecting with other people and building relationships
- solving problems or working out how best to approach them
- showing hidden issues or unintended consequences of our actions
- searching for opportunities
- identifying risks
- reaching decisions

Powerful questions are...

- Short and clear. A powerful question is usually a short one. It is easy to remember and easily understandable. The most important thing is that it is clear.
- The question is open-ended. A powerful question is never a closed one but an open-ended one.
- The question is provocative or a little unsettling.

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- Sometimes, the question is slightly unclear or ambiguous. In some circumstances, it is helpful when a question is unclear or ambiguous in some way as it provokes thought around the nature of the question itself.
- The question does not contain any assumptions. Most questions we pose include assumptions to one degree or another. A powerful question does not normally have any embedded assumptions.
- The question is not a leading one. A leading question is a question that subtly prompts someone to answer in a particular way.
- The question focuses on action and personal behavioural change. Questions that focus on action and personal behavioural change rather than academic or theoretical issues are excellent as they help keep the conversations grounded in reality.
- The question is a real issue and one that is of importance to the participants.

Powerful Questions Cards (Rapport building in class)

Introduction to the activity:

Some people find it difficult to ask questions. They rather assume they know what the other person means then ask further to really understand them.

In this activity we will practise to keep asking and get as much information as possible from the person we speak to, and thus understand them better.

This activity will equip teachers with the skills to ask powerful questions and analyze how powerful they can be.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Put students in pairs, A & B.
2. Divide the cards into 2 sets: "Opening" questions" and "Follow up" questions.
3. Person A picks a "1st question" and asks person B.
4. Then, depending on person B's answer, person A chooses a 2nd question from the "Follow up" cards.
5. After that, person A chooses a 3rd, 4th, 5th, etc question. Questions chosen should be coherent. It's important to ask as many questions as possible.
6. When person A feels there are no more questions to be asked, they should finish by giving a resume of person B's answers by completing the phrase: "so, what you mean is....."

The idea of the game is that you try to keep on asking as many questions as you can. This will help you understand the other person even better thanks to the depth of the answers that you get from person B by using these powerful questions opposed to the (non powerful) questions you normally ask...

(Opening)

What do you like most about school?

(Opening)

What is frustrating you at school?

(Opening)

What strengths do you bring to the classroom?

(Opening)

What made you curious today?

(Opening)

When do you feel you're being listened to?

(Opening)

What about your thinking, learning, or work today brought you the most satisfaction?

(Opening)

What inspires you at school?

(Opening)

When do you feel most safe/unsafe?

(Opening)

Where did you encounter a struggle today?

(Opening)

What lessons were learned from failure today?

(Follow up)

Why?

(Follow up)

Why not?

(Follow up)

**What does it
look like
from over
there?**

(Follow up)

**What do you
think about
that?**

(Follow up)

**How do/did
you deal
with it?**

(Follow up)

**What would
you like to
see
changed?**

(Follow up)

**How
does/did
that make
you feel?**

(Follow up)

**How do you
know this?**

(Follow up)

**What makes
you think
that?**

(Follow up)

**How do you
plan to deal
with that?**

(Follow up)

**What
questions do
you still
have?**

(Follow up)

**What do you
mean by
that?**

(Follow up)

**Who might
benefit from
that?**

(Follow up)

**What are
your next
steps?**

(Follow up)

**Can you tell
me more?**

Parent Questionnaire

Introduction

We consider it important for parents of pupils with Special Educational Needs to complete a questionnaire in order to include them in their child's educational development. This questionnaire, which is based on the SEN Toolkit Five Core Values manifesto, will help you to understand them better. (Link: <https://sentoolkit.com/manifesto/five-core-values/>).

Rapport

Why is it important for teachers to create rapport with parents?
Positive relationships between teachers and parents are essential for all areas of a child's development. Positive relationships with parents depend on communication and building trust. This is especially important in the cases of teaching SEN students.

Parent Questionnaire

A questionnaire for teachers to give to parents of SEN students.

How to use it

The questionnaire can be sent out to parents of schoolchildren with SEN. Working closely with families is essential in supporting children's education.

Conclusion

The responses to this questionnaire will help to improve relations between teachers and parents of children with SEN and also reinforce our Five Cores Value manifesto.

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Parent SEN Questionnaire

Survey Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neutral 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree

	QUESTION	Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree	
		1	2	3	4	5
1	I am aware that my child has SEN.					
2	I have spoken to my child's teacher about their progress this school year.					
3	I feel that my child is making good progress at school.					
4	I feel that I have sufficient information and communication about my child's progress.					
5	I know what my child is working on at the moment.					
6	I feel that I have been given suggestions of ways to support my child at home, when I have asked.					
7	I know who to approach about any concerns that I have regarding my child.					
8	All children are valued at school and pupils understand each other's needs.					
9	I am informed about my child's progress and receive regular reports.					
10	Homework set for my child is appropriate to their needs					
11	My child has the opportunity to be involved in all extra-curricular activities.					
12	My child feels safe and happy at school.					
13	My child feels they have someone to talk to if they need to.					
14	The school's policy on SEN (on the website) is clear and accessible to me as a parent.					
15	The school website contains useful and essential information about SEN.					

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Nonviolent Communication

What is nonviolent communication?

Nonviolent communication was a communication technique pioneered by the American psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, and is a technique for understanding ourselves and interacting with others compassionately, empathically, collaboratively and openly. Its aims include win-win communication, conflict avoidance, mutual understanding in challenging situations and increased harmony, leading to better future cooperation.

Its components include:

- Observation (self and others)
- Reduction of stereotypes and generalisations
- Feelings
- Needs
- Requests

What are the three primary modes of nonviolent communication?

1. Self-empathy
 - where we sympathetically connect with our inner thoughts, needs, fears, and feelings
2. Receiving empathically
 - where we connect with what's alive in the other person, and what would make life good for them, rather than "trying to see them out as objects"
3. Expressing honestly
 - where we communicate what we are feeling, the observations that stimulated that emotion, what we then need, and if we have any consequent requests

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Nonviolent communication is designed to:

- Create mutual empathy
- Reduce judgementalism
- Meet the needs of all parties in a communicative setting
- Encourage active listening
- Develop greater empathy
- Create a space for learning how to make requests without demanding
- Help communicators take responsibility for their feelings
- Solve conflicts without creating winners and losers

Nonviolent Communication Activities for the Classroom – Three Exercises

Observations vs Judgements

We all make judgements about others (and ourselves) that can have an effect on how we behave, and on how we look at people and the world around us. The object of this activity is to transform those judgements into observations, to enable us to take a step back from labelling people negatively.

1. Think of somebody (or something) you've made a positive judgement about. This could be: "she's so smart", "he's such an entertaining person", or "our school is better than theirs".
2. Now try to rephrase this judgement into statements of the observed facts that caused it. So, the judgements in our examples could be rephrased as: "she generally gets top marks in her tests", "he's skilled at remembering and telling jokes", or "our school came out higher in the league table than theirs".
3. Once you have done this, discuss how these factual observations allow you to be more dispassionate about the people (or things) you had made your original judgement about. What are the advantages of being dispassionate?
4. Now think of somebody (or something) you have made negative judgements about. This could be "he's so stupid", "she's ugly", or "that political party is immoral".
5. Now try to rephrase this judgement into statements of the observations that caused it. So, the judgements in our examples could be rephrased as "he struggles to remember instructions", "she has acne", or "that political party believes in..."

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6. Once you have done this, discuss how these observations allow you to be more dispassionate about the people (or things) you had made your original judgement about. How does being dispassionate about something you had previously felt negatively about change? Is it comfortable or uncomfortable? If it's uncomfortable, why is this?
7. Now discuss: how might it be possible to have a less conflict-informed relationship with that person or thing, after you have replaced the negative judgement with the observation? Can you relate the observation to something about yourself? So, for instance: "she has acne" could relate to yourself by observing: "I have a scar under my eye", or "he struggles to remember instructions" could relate to yourself by observing: "I'm not so good at playing music".
8. Now reflect upon why having a scar under your eye, or not being so good at music, is not a bad thing, especially when compared with others in your social group. Observing that everybody has many facets to them, including their looks, their abilities, and their interactions, can make the world a richer – and less boring – place!
9. Repeat the exercise, but this time, think of one negative judgement you often make about yourself. This could be anything.
10. Now rephrase that judgement into an observation that is less preconceived. Can you find that you are able to be less negative about yourself?

Check Your Intentions

Much of the time, when we perform actions, there is an intention lying behind this. For example, if I shout at my neighbour my true intention might be to equalise a power imbalance I've felt has been present ever since she built a shed that blocked my sunlight last year. My action might or might not help fulfil my need for equality, but without understanding *why* I act in the way I act, it can be difficult to ensure this.

This exercise helps us uncover the hidden intentions that often lie behind our actions – intentions we are seldom aware of. In uncovering these intentions, we can understand and value our needs, as well as the needs of others, and make some progress towards meeting those needs.

To help check your intentions, try the following exercise:

1. Remember something you've done in the past (or something you omitted to do). This could be something you said, something you refused to do, or a time that you could have acknowledged somebody but did not do so.
2. Write down on a piece of paper what this action (or lack of action) was.
3. Now think deeply. Can you remember the intention behind it? Write it down if you can. If you honestly cannot, put the piece of paper to one side so you can come back to it later, and try thinking of another action (or lack of action), and begin the exercise again.
4. Now, ask yourself honestly: were there deeper layers of intention underneath the one you have just identified? If so, write these down.
5. When you became aware of your intentions, ask whether they were intentions you are truly happy with. Would you have acted the same way, given the knowledge you now have?
6. Ask: how would you / how could you have acted differently, being aware of your intentions? How do you feel about the actions you did take? Write down your feelings about this.
7. Now think about a current interaction you are having. This should be an ongoing interaction, perhaps with a colleague, perhaps with somebody at school, perhaps with a family member.
8. Now ask yourself honestly: what are the true layers of intention that lie behind your actions? Write these down.
9. Reflect on these layers of intention. Are they intentions you are truly comfortable with? Might you rethink your actions in light of your awareness of your intentions? What other intentions might better achieve a harmonious outcome?
10. Are the actions you are undertaking the best actions to achieve these harmonious intentions? If not, what other actions could you take instead? Write these down and reflect upon them.

Five Chairs

This is a fun exercise intended to reflect on our feelings and our reactions to the behaviour of others. The Five Chairs exercise is drawn from Louise Evans, who gave a TED Talk and has published a book (5 Chairs 5 Choices) using five chairs representing five animals.

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Line up five chairs. To make it more fun, take a piece of coloured paper and attach it to each chair. The colours should be:

1. Red
2. Yellow
3. Green
4. Blue
5. Purple

On each piece of coloured paper, draw an animal. These animals should be:

1. Red: Jackal
2. Yellow: Hedgehog
3. Green: Meerkat
4. Blue: Dolphin
5. Purple: Giraffe

If these animals can be altered to fit a national cultural context, it may be a nice idea to discuss which animals you can use instead.

Then, on each piece of coloured paper, write the following:

1. On the red “jackal” paper, write: “attack”
2. On the yellow “hedgehog” paper, write: “self-doubt”
3. On the green “meerkat” paper, write “wait”
4. On the blue “dolphin” paper, write: “detect”
5. On the purple “giraffe” paper, write: “connect”

The red “jackal” chair is associated with judgement. Sadly, the more we judge people, the less we are open to them as equal, vulnerable human beings.

The yellow “hedgehog” chair is also associated with judgement, but this time with merciless self-judgement and self-blame. The more we blame ourselves, the more we doubt ourselves, the harder it is to contribute to the lives of others.

The green “meerkat” chair is associated with reserving judgement, holding back, becoming mindful, and cultivating a curious mindset so that we try to understand

what is happening around us, rather than simply labelling. It is associated with questioning, and then questioning our answers. Questioning leads to understanding, and understanding is the bedrock of intelligent action.

The blue “dolphin” chair is associated with self-knowledge. It moves from merely questioning to mindfully detecting and answering. The green chair can sometimes become stuck in questions; the blue chair seeks answers. Crucially, it seeks answers to questions about ourselves. Self-knowledge is the goal.

The purple “giraffe” chair is associated with empathy. The giraffe has the longest neck and the biggest heart of all animals, and so can see things others cannot see, and (metaphorically) feel things others cannot feel. Seeing the bigger picture and expanding our hearts allows for empathy, which is key to good communication and effective action.

The Five Chairs Exercise:

1. Now think back to an event in your life that made you uncomfortable (or watch a short YouTube video that has made you react badly in the past). Now describe this event while sitting in the red, “jackal”, attack chair. What sort of judgements are you making? How do you think these judgements might affect your responses and actions? Write your answers down.
2. Now do the same, but this time, do it while sitting in the yellow, “hedgehog”, self-doubt chair. What are the judgements like now? How do you think you are judging yourself? How might these self-judgements affect your responses and actions? Write your answers down.
3. Now repeat the exercise, but this time sitting in the green, “meerkat”, wait chair. What sort of questions are you now asking about what happened? What sort of questions are you now asking about how and why the people involved behaved in the way that they did? What other questions could you ask? What types of answers are your questions geared towards? How might these questions affect your attitudes towards the event? Write your answers down.
4. This time, describe the event while sitting in the blue, “dolphin”, detect chair. Here, ask how you reacted in the situation you are describing. Become self-aware, ask what your boundaries are, and what it was that caused you to react in the way that you did. What other observations can you make about yourself from this chair? With this self-awareness, how might you react differently, were the situation to arise again? Write your answers down.

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5. Finally, move to the purple, “giraffe”, connect chair. Now describe the event again, but this time, try to describe it from the perspectives of the other people involved. What was important for him or her in the situation? What might they have wanted to get out of the situation, even if you didn’t understand their actions at the time? With that in mind, how might you have reacted differently, in order to generate the happiest outcome? Write your answers down.

Reflect now on “the chair you most often sit in”, and whether you are occupying the right emotional and psychological space by sitting in this chair. When we are “sitting in the right chairs”, we are able to act more generously, more rationally, more thoughtfully, and with more openness. In the wrong chairs, we are more likely to react aggressively, selfishly, irrationally, or from a position of unwitting weakness. When you reflect on difficult situations from the past, can you observe which chair you have tended to occupy most often?

As a “meta exercise”, you can keep your answer to this question in mind and analyse it from each of the five chairs.

The more you practise sitting in the blue, the purple, or even the green chair, the more you will ingrain open, rational, self-reflective, and empathic communication into your daily life. The next time you find yourself becoming impatient with others or being overly self-critical, try to imagine how you could reassess the situation from a different chair.

Best teacher ever

Introduction

You have probably sometimes asked yourself if you are a good teacher or how do you become a better teacher. What makes a good teacher? These questions and others are common questions which teachers often ask themselves. The aim of this activity is to reflect on the qualities and characteristics of teachers we have had in the past and whom we consider to be our best teacher.

Best Teacher Ever

This is an activity that can be used with peers or in teacher meetings and will encourage:

- getting to know each other better
- reflection
- understanding the qualities of a good teacher
- group discussion to share ideas

How to use it

Just ask the questions below and give the teachers time to think, remember and answer. Ask them to write down their responses.

The activity can be done in 3 parts:

- 1 - Describing their best teacher ever and analyzing their characteristics.
- 2 - Gaining awareness of their perception of themselves and how they see themselves as a teacher.
- 3 - Discussing what they need to do to change/improve to be more like "their best teacher ever" from part 1.

Conclusion

Trying to discover what makes a good teacher isn't easy, but this exercise will help you to do so. Think about and answer these questions honestly and you will see what a good teacher can be.

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Best Teacher Ever

PART 1 - Describe your best teacher ever/Analyse their characteristics.

1.1 Who inspired you when you were at school?

1.2 What was it about them that you liked so much?

1.3 Give 5 adjectives to describe this teacher.

1.4 Give an example of something they did that impressed you.

Part 2 – What is your perception of yourself and how you see yourself as a teacher.

2.1 Are you confident with the subject you teach? Why?/Why not?

2.2 Do you know your students? Their names, background, interests, type of learner?

2.3 Are you passionate about what you teach? Give an example.

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2.4 Do you motivate your students? How?

2.5 Do you develop rapport with your students? Can they connect with you?

2.6 Do you like to try out new activities and methods? Give a recent example.

2.7 Are you aware of your students' strengths and weaknesses?

2.8 Do you ask for feedback from your students?

2.9 Do you share ideas with colleagues and collaborate?

2.10 Do you continue improving yourself? Attend conferences, workshops and the like? When was the last time you did so?

2.11 Do you personalize learning? How?

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Part 3 - What do you need to do to change/improve, i.e. to be more like "your best teacher" ever?

3.1 When looking at the 5 adjectives you choose to describe your best teacher ever, how do you think your students see you?

3.2 Think about ways in which you can achieve being their best teacher ever. Then work in pairs/groups and share your ideas.

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Wheel of the learner

Introduction

In the vast majority of cases, the sole reason for students to be in your classroom is because they have to be there. Many of them (as well as their parents) see it as their “job”. It’s something you do as a child.

But, is the absence of any goal, apart from that of “passing through the year” powerful enough for your students to achieve well? Is that the reason for the educational system? Or do we want our students to thrive, to learn, to evolve, to grow and to enjoy it while doing so?

What is the effect of the absence of any goal on those students that struggle, like those with SEN? When passing exams is barely the only goal of a student, and that student has difficulties in learning and studying, left alone passing an exam, their life at school becomes hell.

Nevertheless, if that same student could have learning goals that are achievable and relevant for them, they would have something else to go to school for. They would be focussing on something different, something that could even motivate them.

SMART Goals

The best goals are SMART Goals:

- **Specific:** it’s important to be very specific about what you want to achieve. “Improving my English” is not the same as “Learning 50 new words on travelling and being able to hold a 10 minute conversation on that subject”
- **Measurable:** your student (and yourself) have to be able to recognize when the goal has been achieved.
- **Achievable:** students need to feel confident that they will be able to achieve their goal. If not, the result might be them losing their motivation.
- **Relevant:** The goal has to be relevant for your student. Without that, it’s difficult for them to keep focused.

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- Timely: There has to be a deadline on your student's goal. If not, they might be tempted to postpone it over and over again.

Wheel of the learner

The wheel of the learner is a powerful tool to use with your students. Since it is a very visual tool, it will work well with your SEN students.

This tool permits your students to:

1. analyze all possible learning goals
2. determine their own learning goals
3. reflect on their current knowledge
4. reflect on their progress
5. analyze their achievements

How to use it

1. Explain the concept of SMART goals to your students
Make sure they understand all the parts. With SEN students it's important to give them a real life example and not leave it with the "abstract" explanation.

A SMART goal for students in an English course could be: "In 9 months time, I want to be able to have a 10 minute conversation about my favourite youtuber in English with my German friend."

This is specific (conversation about your favourite youtuber), measurable (10 minutes), achievable (you have 9 months to reach the goal), relevant (being able to communicate with a friend about something you like) and timely (in 9 months time)

2. Ask your student to set a maximum of 6 (small) SMART goals for themselves.
With regards to the previous example, this could be the 10 minutes conversation, completely understand a 5 minute video from your youtuber, being able to understand a blog or article in English, learn 20 idioms, etc.

It's not necessary to have 6 goals. It could also be less (as few as just 1). You can also do this exercise on a periodical basis (monthly, bi-monthly each term) and add new goals to the wheel.

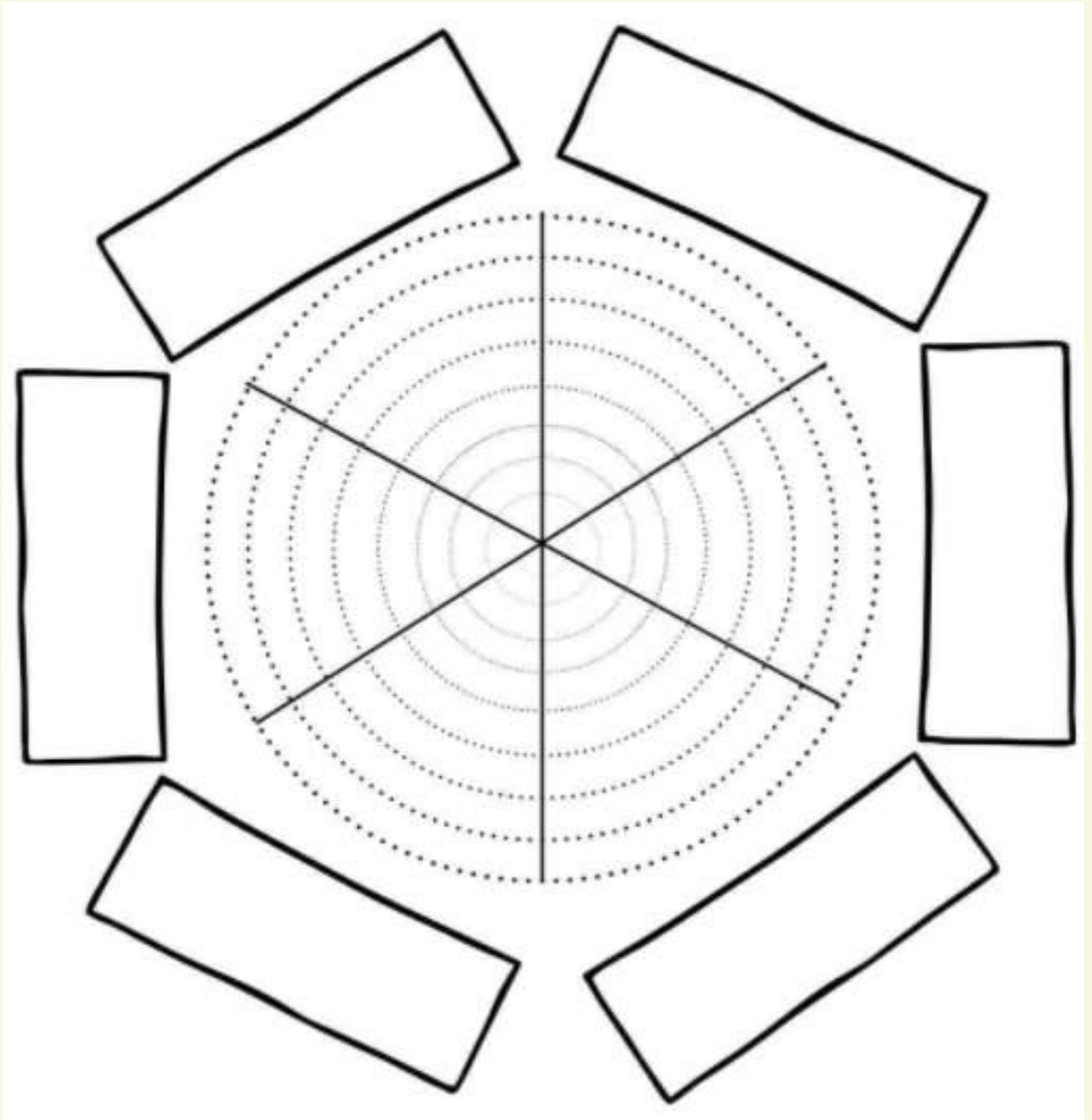
3. Write each of the goals in one of the boxes on the wheel of the learner.
4. Ask the student to analyze, on a 0 to 8 scale, their current “level of completion” of each goal. If the goal would be a 10 minute conversation, but the student thinks they would not go past 3 minutes, their current level would be 2 or 3. If they could not even start the conversation, their current level would be 0.
5. On the 8 circles of the wheel of the learner, ask your student to mark their current “level of completion”. They can put a dot, a line, colour their “completed” part of the pie-chart , etc. (whatever works for them visually).
6. You can either collect the wheel and keep it for future reference or ask your student to do so. If the latter is the case, it’s important that you are aware of your student’s goals, so either take a picture of their wheel or scan it and save it on your computer. This information will help you adapt your classes as well as homework to your student’s goals.
7. During the academic year, every now and then, ask your student to take a look at the wheel and analyze how they’re doing and where they are on the “level of completion”. This will keep them focussed on their goal.
8. At the end of the year, or at the deadline of their goal, analyze with your student how far they have come. Have they achieved their goal? Have they achieved even more? If they haven’t; what is still remaining? What happened? What could they have done differently?

Conclusion

This activity will help your students (and/or yourself) to focus on relevant and specific learning goals that are motivating enough to make the daily effort of learning, studying and practising.

Learning and studying, especially when based on abstract concepts and/or written language, does not come easy to many SEN students. A SMART goal that motivates will prove to be a powerful tool.

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Secrets in a basket

Introduction

SEN students often feel as outsiders in class and are easy subjects for bullies. This will only accelerate their already existing difficulties in learning.

An important and very powerful antidote for that is a good rapport in the classroom. Not only between you, as a teacher, and your students, but also between the students in your class.

Rapport

Rapport in class refers to the relationship between a teacher and the learners as well as amongst the learners themselves. Teachers try to build a good rapport with the learners in order to produce an environment that will help learning.

Classroom management tools such as eye contact, body language and learning and using names can help to build a rapport.

Building good rapport is often a matter of personalities, and many teachers will have an excellent rapport with one class and bad rapport with another, for no clear reason.

Personalisation can help build a rapport, as learners and teachers find out more about each other.

Creating rapport is on a continuum, with learnable or observable elements on one end and innate or personality elements on the other. Toward the learnable/teachable side of the learning progression, we can include the teaching methods and techniques teachers employ, strategies teachers can learn or be taught, and data drawn from classroom research. The innate/personality side of the continuum includes more nebulous factors like, for instance how teacher personality influences rapport, how reflective practices affect teacher-student

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relationships, and how the interpersonal nature of the classroom influences learning. It is clear, however, that some teachers are better able to create rapport than others.

There are many ways to build rapport, but there's just one secret behind all of them: you have to care. If students can see that you genuinely care about them, they'll respond. If you try and follow any step-by-step 'how to build rapport' system, it'll come across as exactly that – mechanical and fake. Some people use humour in the classroom. Some show students photos of their families, their hometowns. Some arrive to class early just for a chat. Others do none of that, yet are still able to show they care through their actions and words during the lesson. If you genuinely care, students will notice it and appreciate it.

It's not only vital to create a good rapport with your students. It's also important that your students develop good rapport with each other. But it doesn't end there. A good rapport with your students' parents and with your fellow teachers is also very important if you want to create a good learning environment for your SEN students where all stakeholders involved understand each other.

Secrets in a Basket

This is an activity that can be used in class or in teacher meetings and will encourage:

- getting to know each other better
- opening up to each other
- analyze things that you share with others
- communication
- respect

How to use it

There's various ways in which you can play this game, but we will explain here how to use it in class.

1. Ask all your students to fill in the questions from the template. Make sure they use real answers and not fake/made up ones. Students can write their name on the answer sheet, but it is not really necessary. If they don't, you become a player as well. You should also include an answer sheet with your own responses.

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2. Collect all answer sheets and put them in a Basket (this can also be a box, a bag, a drawer, etc.). You can either put the whole sheets in the Basket or cut them up, so you have all the individual answers on separate pieces of paper.
3. Take a piece of paper or an answer sheet from the Basket and read the answer (or one of them) out loud to the group. If the name of the student is on the paper, DO NOT say it. Eg. you would say: "I'm absurdly good at making pancakes"
4. Ask one of the students in the class to guess who is the classmate that is "absurdly good at making pancakes". They only get one guess. If they are right, this part of the game is over and you can move to the next answer (if you want to). If they are wrong, the person they thought to be "absurdly good at making pancakes" now has to choose another classmate. And so on, and so on.
5. Once you all know who the classmate is that is "absurdly good at making pancakes", take some time to ask them several questions, like; "since when do you make pancakes?" or "how do you make them?" or (of course), "when are you going to make us pancakes?" By asking these questions, you allow your students to get to know each other better and create better rapport.
6. You can take various rounds in one class or use this activity as an in-between-activity and do it maybe two or three times per class. That way, the amount of answers that are in your basket will last for weeks.

IMPORTANT: It is very important that students treat each other with respect. This activity is about getting to know each other and not about laughing at each other.

Conclusion

This game can be played in many different situations. With students, with peers, in face-to-face classes, in online classes, etc.. It's a very powerful and easy tool to help the members of any group to create rapport and find similarities. Maybe it turns out that both the class bully as well as their victim are obsessed with Harry Potter. Finding that out would be a good start for a better and more respectful relationship between both.

Secrets in a Basket

I'm absurdly good at...

Okay well, I play...

I don't like...

I'm totally lazy when it comes to...

I love eating...

I have a collection of...

When people say stuff to me...

I am obsessed with...

I hate...

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Motivation game & questionnaire

Introduction

Motivation is what gets us moving. One could say that it is the combination of the words MOTIVE and ACTION. Without the proper motivation, it is very difficult for anyone to reach their goals.

It's very important to know what motivates your students. You can use that information to their benefit and enhance their learning experience.

Many SEN students need to be able to put abstract concepts into understandable and relevant contexts to really understand them. The more relevant the context is, the more motivated the student will be and the more information they will retain. One thing is explaining the (abstract) grammatical rules of past perfect. Something else is the structure of past perfect to explain what happened in last night's football match (if your student loves football). Being able to use "past perfect" to talk about something relevant (and motivational) will enhance your student's learning outcomes.

It's also important that teachers understand the power of motivation and how a strong motivation can help students to learn more effectively. Without understanding that power, they will never be able to help their students in finding their motivation.

Activity: Can you learn Chinese in 3 months?

This activity will help teachers to reflect on the power of motivation.

You can either do this in a group session or individually.

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STEP 1: Ask the participants if they speak any Chinese (if so, ask if they speak Swahili, Dutch, Icelandic or any other language the participants might find difficult – maybe this will be a non-alphabetic language if the participants' L1 is an alphabetic language, or vice versa)

STEP 2: Ask the participants if they would be able to reach a low B2 conversational level in Chinese (or any of the other languages) in only 3 months' time.

It's very likely that they will say something like "of course not" or "are you crazy?". If you have one person saying "yes" (there's often a "smart" person in the group), ask them how they would do that. They would probably have to stop working or studying and dedicate 100% of their time to learning Chinese. Would they really?

STEP 3: Now, ask them to think of the most important person in their life (a parent, sibling, partner, child, grandparent, etc.)

STEP 4: Ask them to imagine coming home today and realizing that that person (the most important person in their life) is not home and has been kidnapped by an evil genius. There's a ransom note on the kitchen table saying that only if they will be able to hold a 20 minutes B2 level conversation in Chinese in 3 months from now will their beloved person be released. If not, they will never see them again.

Let that sink in for a moment....

STEP 5: Ask them again if they think they would be able to learn Chinese up to B2 level in only 3 months time.

Now, the answers are most likely to be "of course" or "when do I start?"

STEP 6: Reflect for one moment on what has changed between step 2 and step 5. The goal of learning B2 Chinese is the same. What has changed is the motivation of the student. In step 2, they hardly had any reason to go out of their comfort zone to study Chinese. There was no "motive for action". In step 5, they probably had the most powerful "motive for action" that could have.

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Activity 2 : Motivation Questionnaire

You can give this questionnaire to your students at the beginning of the school year (or do it yourself as well).

- your students: will reflect on their strengths, their goals, their accomplishments, their emotions and their motivation
- you (the teacher): will gain valuable insights into what motivates your students and how they value their own efforts. You can use this information to adapt some of your classes and/or to relate to this throughout the year. This information will also help you to create better rapport with your students.

1. What am I very good at?
2. What do I like to do most?
3. What have I done recently that makes me most proud?
4. What have I done recently that makes my parents most proud of me?
5. What is one important skill that I learned last year?
6. How did that make me feel?
7. What is one skill that I want to learn this year?
8. What do I need to do to gain that skill?
9. What is the worst thing that someone might say when I try but fail?
10. What is the worst thing that someone might say if I don't try at all?
11. When I acquire that skill, how will that make me feel?
12. What's the one thing I'd like others to remember about me at the end of this school year?

The CAT exercise

Introduction

When we speak to somebody else, we assume that we understand the majority of whatever they say. Nevertheless, this assumption might be very dangerous and it isn't uncommon for it to be the beginning of misunderstandings and conflicts.

When someone tells us that they love Mediterranean food, maybe this encourages us to make paella the next time they come over for dinner. But what if they hate paella, but love Stuffat tal-Qarnita, a typical Maltese dish. In the end, both Spain and Malta are Mediterranean countries. We will feel frustrated as we've spent a long time in the kitchen preparing something nice for our guests, but our guests will likely feel misunderstood, and that we don't care about their taste.

What happened is that the meaning that we give to "Mediterranean food" is different from that of our guests.

Rapport

Understanding what the other person exactly means when they say something is an integral part of a rapport. We need to put our assumptions aside and understand that the other person's world and how they see and experience things is likely to be different from ours.

The CAT exercise helps you, and a group of people (teachers, parents, students) understand that one should never assume that you understand what the other person means and that you should ask to make sure that you do.

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The CAT exercise

1. Write the word CAT on the whiteboard in big letters
2. Explain to the people in the room that this is simply a combination of 3 letters and that you would like them to form a picture in their head that goes with those 3 letters. They should think of a shape, size, colour, texture, maybe legs (how many), eyes, sound, etc.. Ask them to also think of a feeling or emotion that comes to their mind with the word CAT.
3. Choose 1 person in the room and ask them to describe the image in their head with the word CAT. Ask them about the size, the colour, texture, shape, if it has legs and eyes (how many?), if it makes a sound (can they reproduce it?) and, finally, how this "CAT" makes them feel.
4. After you get the full description of that person's CAT, describe it again in your own words. You can say something like: "So, your CAT is black, has green eyes, 4 legs, is about this big, makes a funny sound, is furry, and makes you feel happy?" If the person says "no", ask them what mistake you made and describe it again.
5. Now you have established the "full picture" of that person's representation of the letter combination CAT, ask a random other person in the room if "their CAT" looks exactly the same. It's most likely that it doesn't. It might also be black, but maybe smaller, different eyes, shorter (or longer) hair and produces different emotions. If you want, ask a third person as well.
6. Ask the whole class if anyone's "CAT" is exactly the same as the first CAT that got described. You might have siblings in the group that physically describe the exact same cat, but still, they could have different emotions linked to it.
7. Now, ask the participants to analyze for one moment that "your cat is not my cat" and that, with such a simple concept as the word CAT, you have many different understandings in a group of people.
8. Finally ask the participants if a simple concept such as "CAT" has different interpretations, what would happen if you talked about a concept such as "GREEN SCHOOL". What is meant by it? Is it just the colour of the building? Is it an attitude? What attitude? Does it involve certain actions? What actions? By whom? How? Who controls it? Etc. etc.

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Conclusion

Before you “assume”, try this crazy method called “asking”.

We've seen that “your cat is not my cat” and that we should never assume knowing what the other person is talking about. This awareness is very important when working with other people, either as team members (in the teacher room) or as team leader (in class).

Your peers and students will appreciate you trying to really understand them and your relationships will change positively.

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