



Supporting a Mentally Healthy Classroom: Structure and Instruction

Introduction

All students, particularly students with learning disabilities (LDs) and co-occurring conditions such as ADHD or anxiety, need classroom environments that intentionally support learning, equity, and mental wellness. Mental health and academic achievement are deeply connected: when educators strengthen mental health in the classroom, they also support students' readiness to learn, sense of belonging, and academic growth. Caring relationships, respect for students' identities, and opportunities for student voice are central to this work. Together with supportive classroom practices, these contribute to what School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) calls Tier 1 mental health promotion, offered at the school and classroom level, where educators can strengthen wellness through everyday practice while also noticing and supporting students who show signs of a mental health concern.

Universal Tier 1 mental health support forms the base for more targeted Tier 2 and intensive Tier 3 supports when students need them. In practice, this means embedding skill development into daily classroom routines while also providing accommodations and modifications that address students' learning, emotional, and behavioural needs. Understanding students' strengths, needs, and experiences, as well as how learning happens and how executive functions affect classroom participation, helps educators make responsive decisions about classroom practice.

This article focuses on three connected areas: the learning environment; expectations, routines, and trust; and instruction. These are contributions to a broader approach to classroom well-being. Across all three, the aim is to provide predictability and support while remaining flexible enough to respond to individual students, honour their perspectives, and build confidence and independence.

Designing the Learning Environment

When designing the learning environment, it is critical for a teacher to consider how to create psychologically safe and inclusive learning spaces. Students spend a great deal of time in the classroom, so it is essential that they feel comfortable within this space. As a result, teachers need practical ideas to foster belonging, connection, and student participation.

Considerations for Designing the Classroom Space

To support students with learning disabilities and other co-occurring conditions such as ADHD and anxiety, educators may want to consider how they are organizing their spaces and the visual supports they are using in the classroom.

Displaying relevant materials connected to learning can help students focus on and access the learning. When students are distracted by unnecessary visual clutter, it can lead to missed instructions, transitions, and dialogue with classmates, which can create barriers to participation and learning for students. Reducing unnecessary distractions can make it easier for students to follow instruction and participate with confidence. Relevant displays can include visual schedules, learning prompts, and student work that reflects students' identities and interests.

Constructing Learning Environments to Maximize Student Engagement and Learning

Desk arrangements are an important aspect of effective classroom design and should be intentionally selected to support the specific learning outcomes and interactions the educator wants to produce (Gremmen et al., 2016). For example, one study of Grade 4 students found that they asked more questions when seated in a semicircle than in rows and columns (Marx et al., 1999).

Some students with learning disabilities and co-occurring conditions such as ADHD or anxiety may benefit from having their own individual desk as a stable, predictable home base. This matters because attention is central to how learning happens. Student feedback can help educators identify which arrangements support their comfort and participation.

If a student has difficulty seeing instructional materials or hearing directions, or is worried about a peer's belongings encroaching on a shared table space, these demands can compete for their attention and for cognitive space. This can pull attention away from instruction and reduce the capacity to focus on learning.

If the goal is to increase student interaction, the use of tables and clustering students can create opportunities for collaboration and discussion. As a reminder, overcrowding tables with items that are not connected to the learning task can impede movement, increase visual clutter, and create distractions that detract from student engagement.

For students with LDs, an intentionally chosen classroom arrangement can reduce unnecessary cognitive load and contribute to a supportive, inclusive learning environment as part of a broader approach to Tier 1 support.

Establishing Expectations, Routines, and Trust

Clear expectations, routines, and boundaries can support student mental health, as they create predictability and consistency that students need to feel safe, settled, and ready to learn. These structures work best when paired with caring relationships and an understanding of students' strengths, needs, and experiences. Together, expectations, routines, and trust help students understand both what is expected and how they will be supported.

Expectations

Expectations are an essential part of classroom functioning and work alongside routines to create a predictable, supportive learning environment. They clarify how students and educators can contribute to a respectful classroom community. Clear expectations allow educators to maintain a pulse on the health of the classroom environment.

Expectations need to be proactive, consistent, and fair during each period, hour, and day of the school year. Students benefit when expectations are clearly modelled and reinforced so that students understand what is expected and why it matters.

An example of a classroom expectation is "Be respectful when others are speaking." This expectation simply communicates the expected student behaviour. When a student is speaking, classmates pause their conversations and listen, allowing the speaker time to finish. The educator can model respectful listening while allowing for individual communication and sensory needs, rather than requiring every student to face the speaker.

The educator must carefully plan the learning environment they want to create and consider how they will respond when expectations are not met. Implementing expectations and routines in a consistent way helps students to learn routines and participate fully in class. A breakdown may occur when expectations are implemented inconsistently, and students may feel anxious and question fairness. This can lead to more challenging behaviours in the classroom. It is important to note that expectations and routines can take weeks to months for some classes or individual students to master. The key is the educator's consistent messaging and expectations, paired with

checking students' understanding and identifying barriers that may make an expectation difficult to meet.

Expectations clarify how students are expected to participate, engage, and respond throughout the school day while routines help students understand what to do and when to do it. Together, they support a positive learning environment and student independence.

Routines

Routines in the classroom provide a predictable framework for how students are going to show up, navigate, and take part in the classroom setting. Routines must be taught explicitly and reinforced and adjusted as needed throughout the school year. Examples of routines might include entering the classroom, lining up for changing classes or taking out and putting away classroom resources.

Questions to consider when implementing routines:

- What purpose does this routine serve?
- How many times a day will the routine be implemented?
- What routines are most important to establish to support learning, independence, and a positive classroom environment?
- When will you explicitly teach the routine?
- How will you track the consistency of the routine?
- How will you know if the routine is effective or needs adjustment?
- How do you want students to implement the routine?
- What supports might individual students need to learn and follow the routine?
- How often do you plan on reviewing routines with students?

Consistent classroom routines can help create an organized and supportive learning environment. When routines are clear and predictable, students can direct their efforts toward learning and participation rather than determining the next steps. This structure supports independence, confidence, and successful engagement in classroom activities.

Creating a Foundation of Trust

Expectations and routines work best when they are built on a foundation of knowing who your students are: their identities, strengths, and lived experiences. School Mental Health Ontario emphasizes collaborating with students and using authentic student voices to honour the strengths and identities of every student (SMHO, 2024). When

students see themselves as successful within classroom structures, the expectations feel less like rules imposed on them and more like a structure built with them in mind.

One way of honouring identity within the classroom structure is offering students voice and choice. Providing flexible ways for students to engage with learning can help create a more inclusive and responsive classroom environment (Loreto-Lee & Kyriakou, 2026). Voice and choice give students a sense of ownership over their day without compromising the predictability they need. Another critical piece is honouring risk-taking: students need to feel safe enough to try, get things wrong, and try again without fear of judgment or failure. School Mental Health Ontario recommends encouraging healthy risk-taking and reinforcing students for solid effort and a growth mindset among its anxiety-management strategies for all students (SMHO, 2024). These Tier 1 universal practices can contribute to a mentally healthy classroom.

It is the educator's responsibility to reinforce expectations by addressing situations calmly, using consistent language, reinforcing positive behaviour, modelling, and explicitly teaching why an expectation is in place. Communicating expectations clearly and supporting students to meet them helps keep the boundaries clear for how students navigate the classroom. When students know the expectations and have the support they need, they are more likely to be able to work within them and feel psychologically safe. Through consistent, caring responses, students also come to understand how the educator will respond when expectations and routines are not followed, which builds trust and predictability over time.

Every student will have a different timeline for understanding and following expectations and routines, so it is important to provide similar, predictable cueing while adjusting support to individual needs. For students with learning disabilities or other co-occurring conditions who struggle with executive functions, positive reinforcement, daily reminders, and practice may be necessary.

Designing Instruction for Success

When designing instruction for students with LDs and other co-occurring conditions, it is important to look at evidence-based instructional practices that support learning more efficiently. Using direct, explicit, and systematic instruction is one effective approach to teaching academic skills to students with special education needs (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Using direct instruction that is explicit and systematic requires teacher knowledge and planning. Direct instruction is clear, highly interactive, and briskly paced, while allowing sufficient time for students to think, process information, and respond. It requires the educator to break down tasks into small parts and directly teach how to complete each step, phasing out guidance as mastery is shown by each student. Direct,

explicit and systematic instruction can reduce guesswork for students, allowing for immediate feedback and positive reinforcement. When matched to students' needs, this support can help them experience success and build confidence in their learning.

How Direct, Explicit, and Systematic Instruction Works

Direct instruction means the teacher explicitly models the learning process, guides students through a gradual sequence of “I do, we do, you do,” and closely monitors student understanding and success at each step. Instruction is adjusted in real time based on ongoing assessment of student responses and needs.

I Do (Teacher Demonstration)

In their work on explicit instruction, Archer and Hughes (2011) describe how the teacher explicitly walks through and demonstrates the skill or concept while verbalizing their thinking, so students can see the reasoning process rather than just the result. This front-loading of clear explanations and worked examples is meant to lighten the cognitive load students carry before they are asked to solve problems independently. This support can reduce demands on working memory and help students see how to organize their approach and get started.

We Do (Guided Practice)

Next comes collaborative practice, where responsibility starts shifting from teacher to student. In this stage, the teacher and students practice together, with the teacher offering support, scaffolding, and feedback, gradually pulling back that support as students take on more ownership of the learning. Archer and Hughes (2011) emphasize building in frequent opportunities for students to respond during this phase, using techniques like choral responses to keep engagement high and check understanding in real time. This gives students opportunities to practice responses and hear correct answers, while allowing the teacher to provide immediate feedback. Individual checks of understanding help identify students who need further support. The key part is ensuring students have a high rate of success prior to moving to the You Do stage within the explicit teaching model.

You Do (Independent Practice)

The final phase gradually transfers responsibility to students, providing opportunities for independent practice while the teacher monitors understanding and offers feedback. Independent practice and review help students consolidate and remember what they have learned over time.

Embedding Executive Functions within Explicit Instruction

When designing explicit instruction, educators need to consider what is happening in a student's mind, including working memory, self-control, and the ability to shift between

tasks, rather than assuming those skills are already in place (Siregar, 2023). A student may understand what is being taught and still need help holding the steps in mind or moving from one part of a task to the next.

Researchers have explored different ways of embedding executive function support into classroom learning. In a pilot study with preschool dual language learners, adding EF strategies to early literacy instruction did not produce significant additional benefits compared with literacy instruction alone (Goodrich et al., 2023). In a small study with Grade 2 students, children described positive experiences using strategies after lessons about executive functions (Raymond-Tolan et al., 2026).

Instead of treating executive function like something students should just show up with, educators can build support into the “I do, we do, you do” model. This can include modelling how to plan, helping students check their own work, and giving them practice shifting between tasks.

In Summary

Creating a mentally healthy classroom is not about implementing a single strategy, but about intentionally designing every aspect of the learning environment with students' cognitive, emotional, and academic needs in mind. By reducing unnecessary cognitive load, establishing consistent routines and expectations, building trusting relationships, and delivering explicit instruction, educators can help remove barriers that prevent students from fully participating in learning.

These practices are especially important for students with learning disabilities and co-occurring conditions such as ADHD, but they can benefit a wide range of learners in the classroom. They contribute to a broader approach to classroom well-being that includes listening to students, honouring their identities, and adjusting support to individual needs. When educators understand how learning happens and intentionally support executive functioning within their daily practice, classrooms can become places where students feel psychologically safe. Students can also experience greater success, develop confidence, and be empowered to reach their full potential. A mentally healthy classroom is not created by chance. It is built through thoughtful planning, consistency, flexibility, and evidence-informed teaching practices that place student well-being and learning at the centre of every decision.

About the Author

Lara Shkilnyk is a dedicated educator with a passion for literacy and mathematics instruction. Her current role is as a Resource Consultant. Lara loves learning about and using research and evidence-based instructional practices. She feels strongly about implementing learning science in her daily classroom routines and practices.

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Additional Resources

[Understanding and Supporting Executive Function](#) — LD@school

An overview of executive functions and their role in classroom learning and participation. Includes practical approaches to instructional design, planning, organization, and supporting student independence.

[A Teacher's Guide: The Power of Routines in the Classroom](#) — Makayla DaSilva

A practical guide hosted by Western University that connects classroom routines with executive function demands. Includes suggestions for teaching routines, using visual cues and prompts, and adjusting support as students learn.