

# Strategies to Help Your Students Feel Heard

One way to cultivate a classroom culture in which students feel valued and respected is to focus on listening to them.

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## Social and Emotional Learning



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One of the many wonders of being a teacher is that we affect children's lives both in ways we understand and in ways we can't begin to comprehend. But many of the demands of being a teacher can eclipse the

fact that students are the center of our profession. We can easily become fixated on adhering to state standards, district initiatives, and departmental guidelines while we busily attend meetings, pore over lesson plans, and grade piles of student papers.

Yet we must remain focused on the needs of our students and remember a [John Hattie](#) phrase: "A positive, caring, respectful environment is a prior condition to learning." Regardless of how busy we are, we cannot underestimate the importance of cultivating a classroom culture in which students feel valued and respected because if our students aren't learning, the other tasks are meaningless. And one way we can build this solid foundation for learning is to listen to our students.

## **Eliciting Students' Thoughts**

**What are you thinking?** When I want to elicit responses from my students, I give them time to clarify their thoughts through writing. This time to reflect prepares them for class discussion. As hands go up, I say each student's name and ask, "What are you thinking?" After I listen to the response, I follow up with questions such as, "Can you tell me more about that?" or "What led you to that conclusion?" Sometimes I'll add my own thoughts, but often it's enough just to hear theirs.

My students know that I care about what they think because their insights lead us all to deeper understanding. Fostering real conversations ensures that our classrooms become places of academic inquiry and collaboration founded on a sense of fairness and mutual respect.

**Do you remember when \_\_\_\_?** I often circle back to students' contributions to show them that their thoughts and efforts matter to me. I'll remind Sam how I loved his frequent and enthusiastic reading of *Romeo* this year, and I can always get a rise out of Hope if I compare a character to *Odysseus*—she'll cringe and groan, "Ugh! He's infuriating! I can't stand

him!"

Sometimes, I'll repeat memorable lines from student presentations: "Katie, that reminds me of when you recited, 'Too old to cry, too young to work full time,' and Tom, when you read aloud, 'I don't know what I want to be or who I want to be.'" Students follow my lead in recounting favorite moments from the year, which builds community and strengthens relationships.

**Can you give me some feedback?** In an attempt to improve students' experience in my class, I ask for their feedback during the year using exit tickets or questions in Google Classroom or Google Forms (here's [my end-of-year survey](#)). I've learned that many students appreciate that I don't give pop quizzes, and that they think my reading quizzes are too hard. I've learned that it helps if I use the due date option in Google Classroom because it sends them reminders, and that they wish we would spend more time reviewing common mistakes on essays because the feedback really helps.

## **Listening as a Way to Create a Positive Class Culture**

**Be responsive to students' needs:** The week prior to the school musical, many students stay at school every night until 11, and sometimes our football team plays away games on weeknights and doesn't return to school until almost midnight. My students know I don't want them staying up until 2 a.m. to complete their homework, so they're not afraid to ask for an extension.

When we're responsive to our students' needs and they know they'll be treated with kindness and respect, we're teaching them to advocate for themselves.

**Seek out the students you haven't connected with:** It's important to try to forge a connection with each of our students, so when I realize there are some to whom I haven't spoken, I know it's time to reach out.

Sometimes I'll greet the student when they enter the classroom and ask a question tailored to something I know about them to encourage a brief exchange. At other times, I may ask if they can help me with a task or ask their opinion about something we're doing in class. Or if I'm doing conferences, I'll spend a little more time with my more reticent students. It doesn't have to be much—I simply try to create a moment when they're speaking and I'm listening.

A tacit agreement must exist between teachers and students: Teachers will accept students for who they are, so students can feel safe to make mistakes—because mistakes are how we learn. Our students need to understand that we don't measure their worth by the sum total of their grades or their behavior because we know them as individuals. And if we want our students to listen to us, the way to begin is to listen to them.