

## **Student Well-being: A Collective Responsibility**

**John Almarode**

### **Barriers to Teaching and Learning**

JOHN ALMARODE: Barriers in teaching and learning. We could spend a day coming up with a list of things that we believe to be barriers to teaching and learning in each of our classrooms and each of our schools. The trick is, is that some of those items on the list we have control over. Other items on those lists, on that list, we have no control over. And the trick in this is, focus on what we have control over on the list, and the other stuff we have to let go. But there are things that are in our control that we can change tomorrow, and that remove some of those barriers. One of the first barriers that we need to throw out immediately is treating students as a label. So, when we treat students as a label, that's a major barrier to learning. Because all of a sudden, we make assumptions, and we bring in stereotypes about learners that actually change our behavior with that student. So, when we talk about, well, that student has a learning disability, and they're not going to be able to do that, then it actually changes our behavior towards that student, and lo and behold, they actually fall into that self-fulfilling prophecy. So, one of the things we can do is focus on the learner as a thinker, not as a label. And when we treat learners as thinkers, the barriers that are often thrown up in front of us that are artificial because of our assumptions and stereotype, they disappear. All of a sudden, a student that you might have made assumptions about because of their background or characteristics is achieving in mathematics at a rate that you never anticipated. Why? Because you treated him as a thinker, not a label, and your expectations went way up. The second barrier we have to eliminate is how we allocate our time. So, one of the benefits of the research on what works, and what works best, is it actually allows me to make some decisions about how I spend my time. Maybe I'm spending my time on something that the research has continued to show has minimal impact on learners. It either is a small earthquake, or it actually may be a zero effect. And I'm devoting all of this time to it. Maybe my time would be better spent elsewhere. And so, figuring out what works best, and doing a quick evaluation of your time, may actually remove a lot of barriers because things will open up for us. In some classrooms, diversity is viewed as a barrier. And I think we want to be careful with this, because it's really not a barrier. It's an asset. So, changing our thinking, changing how we look at diversity removes a barrier that shouldn't have been there in the first place. The diversity in our classrooms is an asset. The diversity in our classrooms allows learners to learn from each other. It allows us as teachers to see learning from a different perspective. It allows us to create a variety of tasks and activities for learners to approach content in a way that is of interest, and is of passion to them. It allows learners to watch their colleagues or their peers do something and say, "Wait, I like the way so-and-so's doing it." That diversity adds richness to any classroom and ups the engagement. So, the third barrier, even though I've linked it to the word diversity, is actually a false

barrier. It has to do more with the mindsets, or the mind frames of us as the teachers, which is actually the final barrier I want to talk about. One of the biggest barriers we have to teaching and learning is our own thinking. How do we view students? How do we look at content? How do we look at students' interaction with that content? If I view students as a test score, or an achievement score, my mindset and mind frame is not going to be as effective or beneficial in student growth as if I view learners as individuals that can grow beyond measure. If I view feedback and tests as just a way to show the student how things are going to go, that's a mind frame that's very different from tests and feedback are actually pieces of information for me. If I taught something on Tuesday, and the learners in their assessment indicated they didn't learn it, then there's something wrong with the way I taught that, and I need to adjust my thinking. Do I believe that all students are capable? Do I believe that every student is there in my classroom for a reason, and that it is my responsibility to help them succeed, or do I punt the responsibility to a seven-year-old? And so, our mind frames and our mindset about students and student learning is the biggest barrier, I think, in our classrooms. John Hattie calls them his mind frames. Carol Dweck calls it mindset. It doesn't matter what you call it. The question is, do you believe that what happens in your classroom is really up to you? Do you believe that every student is capable of learning and accept the challenge of getting them there? Do you believe that feedback is actually information that we can use to change our behavior in how we taught something, or how we created a learning environment? Do we believe that we're all in this together? Am I by myself, or am I part of a collaborative team that aims at changing the growth and achievement of students? Those are the kind of things that improve our learning outcomes, and then there are mindsets that actually block it. The way I phrase it is this. As a parent, research on teaching and learning takes on a different flavor. Before my daughter was born six years ago, I had a very different outlook on what happens in classrooms. But now, with a six-year-old, who's in kindergarten, and a three-year-old in preschool, how I view research and teaching and learning is very different. And so, I ask three big questions. If you were a student, would you want to be in your classroom? Number two, would you want your own children to be in your classroom? And number three, if the answer to any of those questions was no, what do you need to do to change it?