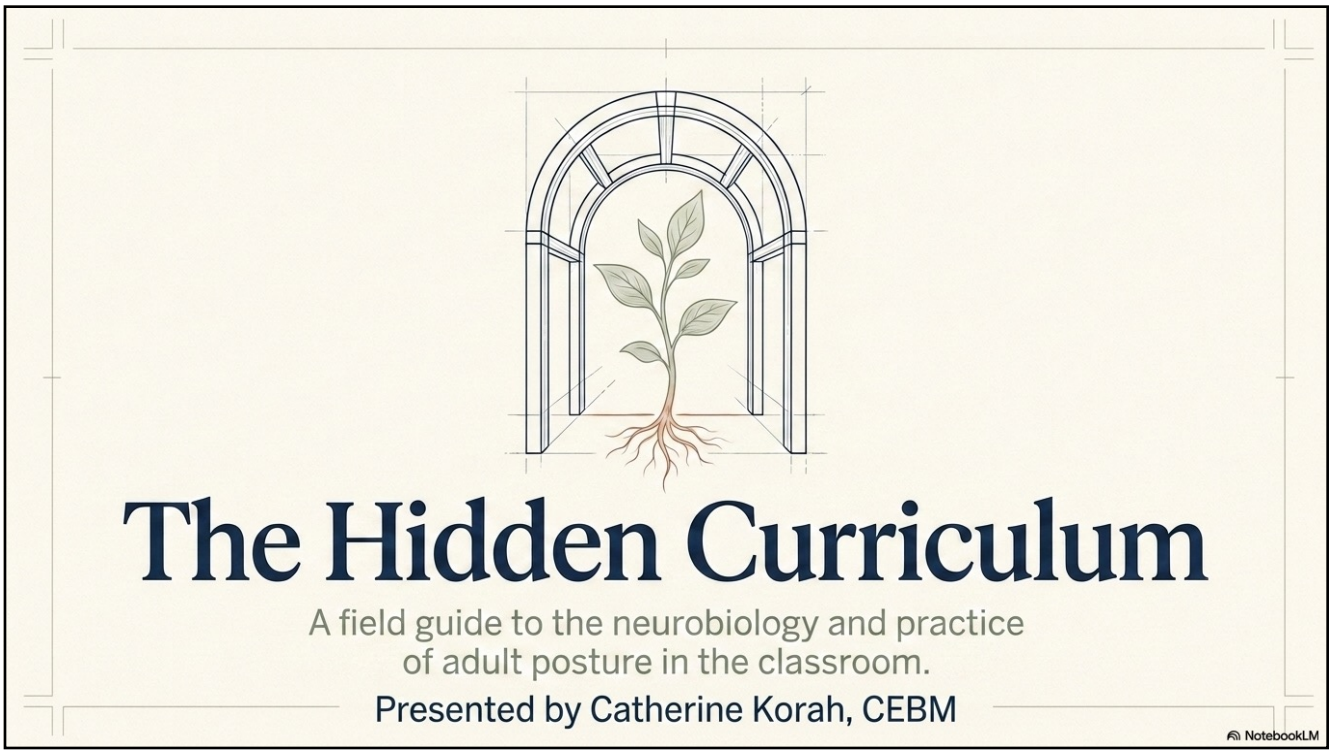
The Hidden Curriculum
A field guide to the neurobiology and practice of adult posture in the classroom.
Presented by Catherine Korah, CEBM
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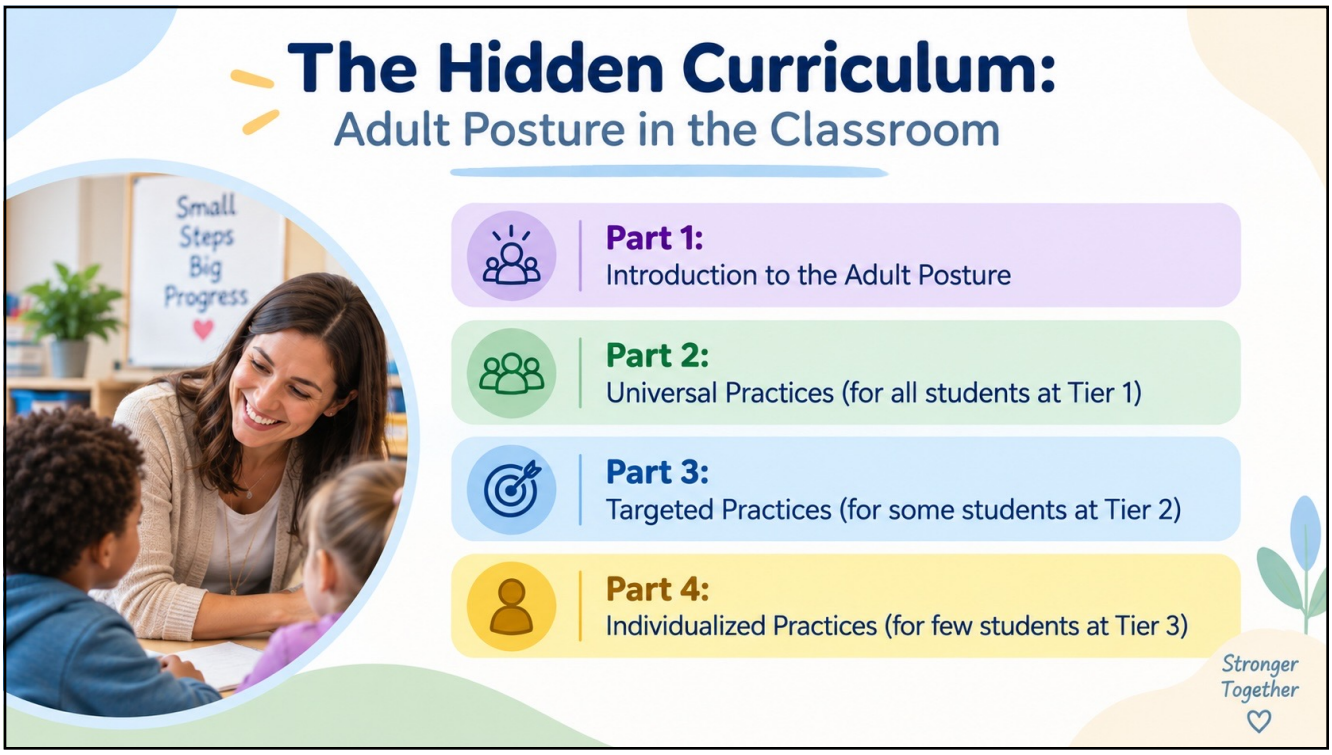
The Hidden Curriculum:
Adult Posture in the Classroom
Small Steps Big Progress
Part 1:
Introduction to the Adult Posture
Part 2:
Universal Practices (for all students at Tier 1)
Part 3:
Targeted Practices (for some students at Tier 2)
Part 4:
Individualized Practices (for few students at Tier 3)
Stronger Together

2

Long after children forget specific lessons or activities, they remember how adults made them feel.

The Unspoken Syllabus

Adult posture is the true hidden curriculum of the classroom. It is one of the most influential factors affecting children's well-being, behavior, and learning.

Children do not learn best when they feel threatened; they learn best when they feel safe.

3

How Students Experience Adults

Educators often evaluate themselves based on their intentions.

Students evaluate adults based on their experiences.

An adult may intend to be:
- **firm**

but be experienced as **frightening.**

An adult may intend to be:
- **efficient**

but be experienced as **dismissive.**

An adult may intend to be:
- **consistent**

but be experienced as **rigid.**

Reflective practice therefore requires asking:

- How might my behavior feel to this student?
- What message is my body communicating?
- Does my presence increase safety or threat?
- Would I feel regulated if I were interacting with me?

This perspective encourages humility and continuous growth.

4

THE ARCHITECTURE OF POSTURE: PARADIGM SHIFT

Shifting the Posture: Control vs. Connection

	CONTROL PARADIGM *Traditional Control*	CURIOSITY PARADIGM *Relational Connection*
THE CORE QUESTION	How do I make this child behave?	How do I help this child succeed?
THE FOCUS	Reacting to the visible disruption (The tip of the iceberg).	Uncovering the unmet need driving the action.
PRIMARY GOAL	Gaining compliance, stopping disruptions, enforcing rules	Understanding the child and addressing the root need
THE ADULT'S ROLE	Enforcer of rules and authority	Guide and supporter
CHILD'S EXPERIENCE	Feels managed, judged, or threatened.	Feels understood, connected, and safe to cooperate.
THE LIKELY OUTCOME	Power struggles, resistance, or shame	Maintained expectations combined with the support needed to meet them

When we shift our posture, we shift outcomes.

From controlling behavior to connecting with the child.
From managing moments to building trust that lasts.

5

Elements That Influence Children's Emotional Maturity

Factors in today's world that can impact social-emotional development

1. **Loss of 'true' play,** and reduction of time spent outdoors.
2. **Loss of family time** (meals around a table, board game night).
3. **Not enough respite** (downtime, rest without stimulation).
4. **Over exposure** to screens and digital devices.
5. **Society's tendency** to avoid discomfort and place value on 'being calm'.
6. **Society's pressure** to push for independence and self-control prematurely (kids don't feel safe and taken care of).
7. **Culture's lack of understanding** of the need for emotions to be expressed (kids interpret that emotional expression has having repercussions for relationships).
8. **Lack of opportunities** to face common 'childhood futilities' (e.g. not winning all the time).

Emotional maturity develops through relationships, play, emotional expression, and supportive experiences—
not simply with age.

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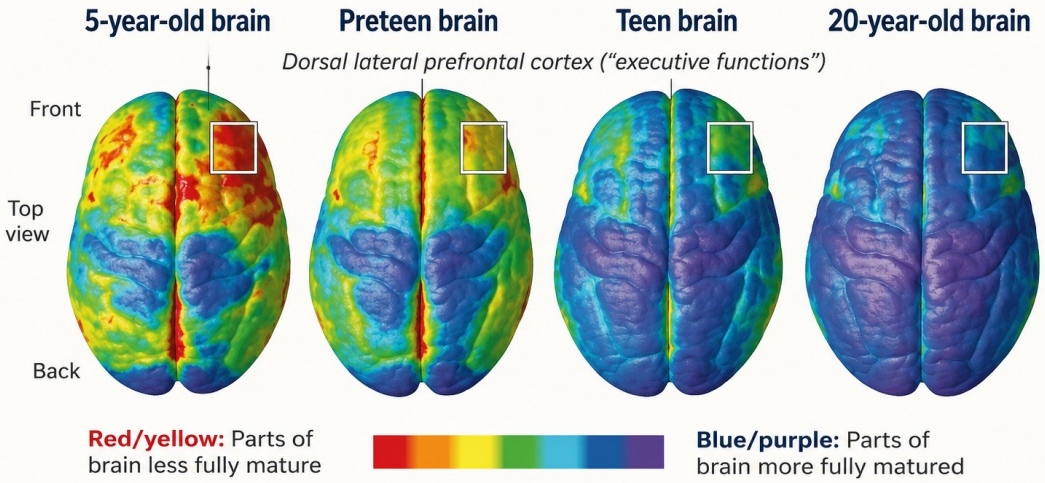
Judgment last to develop

The area of the brain that controls "executive functions" — including weighing long-term consequences and controlling impulses — is among the last to fully mature.

Brain development from childhood to adulthood:



Red/yellow: Parts of brain less fully mature

Blue/purple: Parts of brain more fully matured

Image from the National Institute of Mental Health; Paul Thompson, Ph.D., UCLA Laboratory of Neuro Imaging

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The 8 Key Executive Functions

The brain's essential command center: core cognitive processes that allow school-age children to organize behavior, manage emotions, and achieve self-regulation.

Planning & Organizing

Setting practical goals, creating sequential steps, and managing active materials.

Working Memory

Holding, updating, and processing multi-step guidelines actively in mind.

Emotional Control

Calmly modulating emotional responses during daily transitions and moments of stress.

Shifting

Transitioning flexibly between mental tasks, unexpected priorities, or rules.

Task Monitoring

Checking ongoing performance during a goal and correcting errors along the way.

Self-Monitoring

Assessing own behaviors dynamically to evaluate the real-time social impact.

Inhibition

Resisting sudden impulses, managing reactions, and thinking before action.

Initiation

Independently starting classwork, chores, or physical tasks without delay.

8

Maturation is Not Inevitable

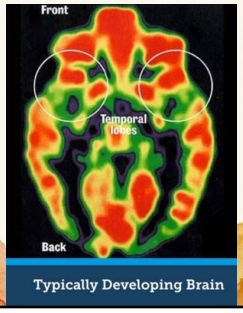
Only in ideal conditions is a child disposed to maturation. Trauma can stunt brain development.

Ideal Conditions

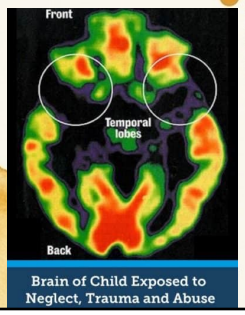
The prefrontal cortex debuts its growth between 5-7 years old, continuing into the 20s and 30s.

Hypersensitive Profile

For hypersensitive children or those with trauma, this foundational 5-7 year year developmental gap is delayed to 7-9 years old.



Typically Developing Brain



Brain of Child Exposed to Neglect, Trauma and Abuse

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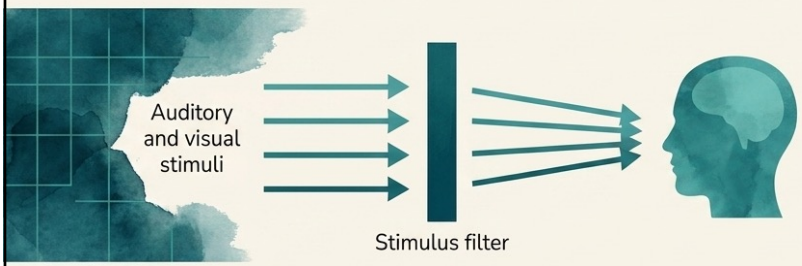
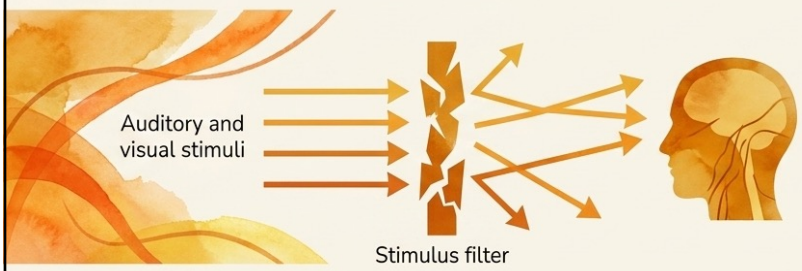
The Filter: Sensory Gating



Healthy System

Auditory and visual stimuli are efficiently filtered, preventing sensory overload.



Compromised System

The stimulus filter is impaired. Sensory input floods the lower brain (Brainstem/Diencephalon), overwhelming the system before it can reach the thinking Cortex.

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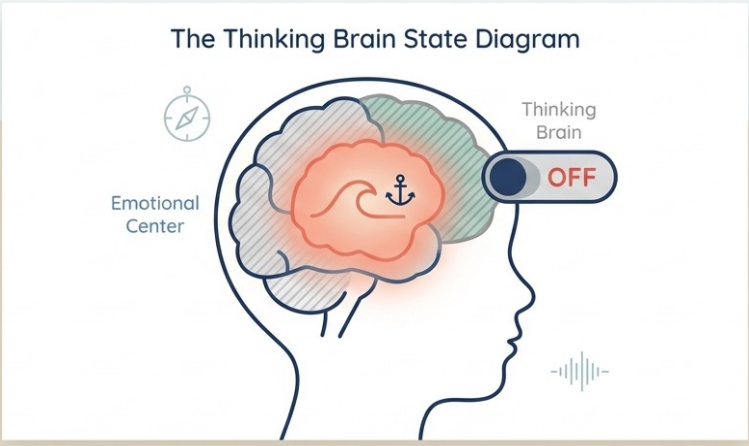
The thinking brain shuts down during emotional distress

When a child is overwhelmed, their thinking brain is not fully working.
They cannot process logic, learn lessons, or answer questions.



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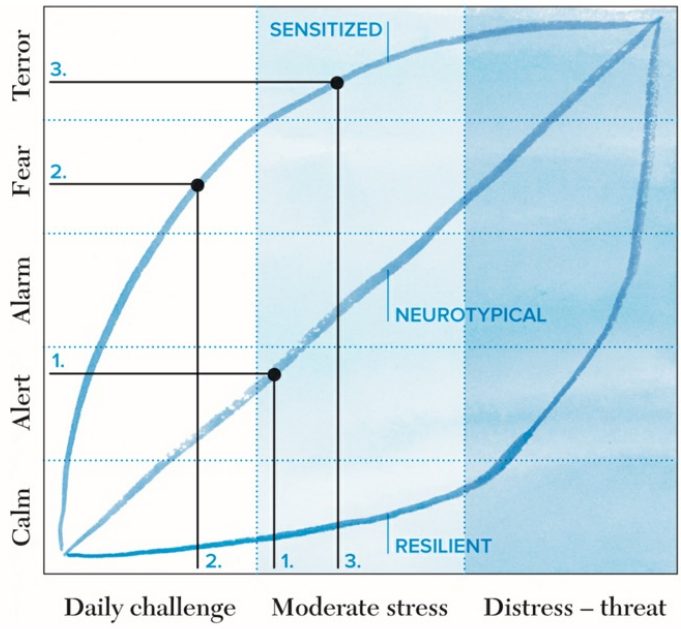

Dr. Bruce Perry (2021) *What Happened to You?*

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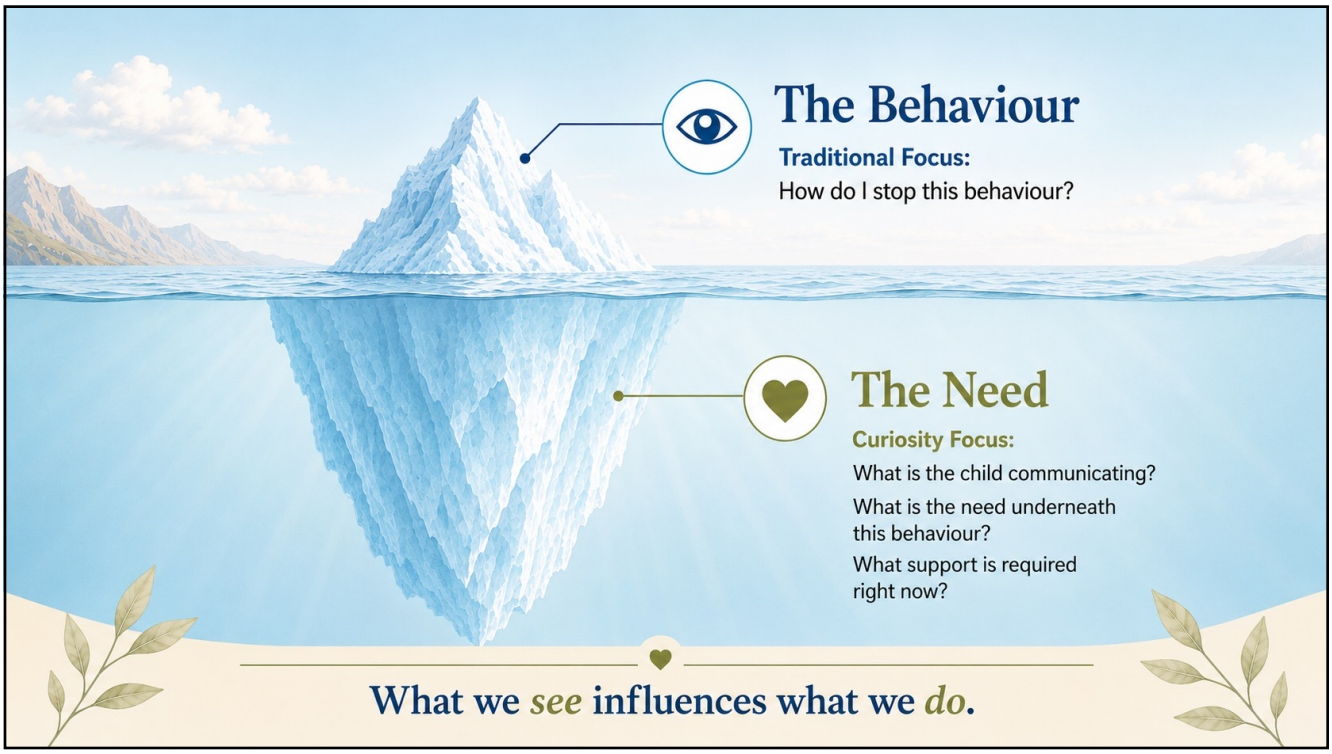

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Individual
Reflection Question

REFRAMING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR:

Think of a recent challenging student behavior. Deconstruct it through a curiosity lens:

- **Visible Student Behaviour** (What did you see/hear?) [Describe the raw physical indicators...]
- **Possible Unmet Needs** (What might they be communicating?) [Physiological, relational, safety, or sensory needs...]
- **My Initial Response** (What did you do or feel tempted to do?) [Triggers, frustration, impulse to control...]
- **Alternative Curious Response** (What could you say with a relational posture?) [Validating emotions, open-ended question, slowing down...]

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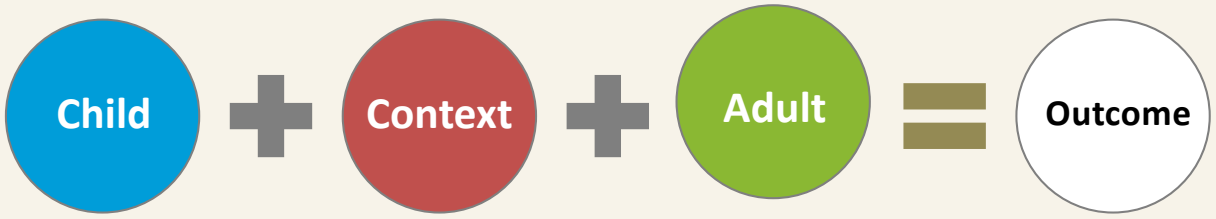
Considering all the elements involved



- Chronological age
- Brain maturation
- Neurodiversity/ Sensitivity
- Level of emotional and social development
- Family history (trauma)
- Stuck or guarded emotionally
- Etc.

- Physical impact of the space
- Sensory input
- Level of structure/ predictability
- Social impact (makeup of the group, dynamics with peers)
- Support measures in place
- Support from other staff

- Relationship with the child (engaged the child's attachment)
- **Adult posture**
- Level of stress
- Level of insight
- Capacity to be reflective
- Preventive vs. reactive
- Aim at co-regulation vs. behaviour management
- Type of response (posture, tone, etc.)

- Shift in child/adult dynamic
- Possibly an escalation or a de-escalation in the child's behaviour
- Outcome becomes problematic or is resolved
- Debrief/follow-up?

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