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Balancing Brain and Body

CHAPTER 6

(Linda Y. is a former chemistry teacher and current human resources administrator in California.)

Pleasing people has always been a priority for me. The quickest way for me to do this was to follow the rules to which most people subscribed. Interestingly, if these rules conflicted with what that little voice in the back of my mind wanted, I just turned that volume down lower so I could ignore it. School has been my best haven because not only were you told the rules for each aspect but they were helpfully posted and published everywhere. There is no question of knowing how and what to teach in addition to how you should respond to others within that environment. One of the reasons I chose teaching was the control, because it was clear how all aspects of this job should be. I look back and laugh at this, because it wasn't until I began my journey to educate others that I learned sharing that control (or the illusion of control) makes your students your partners, which leads to greater fulfillment professionally and develops students who are better prepared to live their best lives.

The brain is responsible for self-protection, and the body is responsible for our needs. Through this lifetime push and pull, every aspect of our personhood influences this balancing act, shaping our emerging and unique identity. When brain and body are better balanced, working in concert, we feel harmonious with greater ease in decision-making. When imbalanced, we tend to become overly cautious or self-consumed.

We have all met people described as “heady” or “free spirits,” which can be satisfying for the person even if they are not fully balanced. A skew in one direction doesn't doom us to a life of unhappiness; rather, it's about finding an intentional balance with known limitations we are accepting or working to improve.

We can live comfortably with our skew in one direction, right up until the point we have to relate with others. The more valuable the relationship, the more important these skews become in our ability to create depth and intimacy. As we will explore later, negotiating to get our needs met and engaging in constructive differencing requires an appreciation of our balance (or lack thereof) as we bump up against the imbalance of others.

Two STEM teachers may get along famously, as they stereotypically use logic and reason to navigate their overlapping work worlds. But when that STEM teacher meets a creative writing teacher—perhaps planning a school event—they may approach decision-making differently. With one using reason and other intuition, they may be challenged to negotiate differences if they are to work closely together. How will each of these teachers be influenced by the other, and how much do others shape our style if not our entire method for achieving homeostasis?

I started my job by listening to the (really) veteran teachers who knew how to teach. As a result, I had lesson plans for the entire year before the year started, eight sets of seating charts (rows, of course), three rules posters strategically placed where students in any row could view them, realia showing the steps for solving any type of problem, four copies of each test or quiz, and a sincere desire to have students come to love chemistry like I did. What I didn't have was any clue how to support and develop the emotional well-being of the 150+ different individuals I was to meet my first year. Nothing covered this in my teacher preparations, and if the veterans in my department knew, they weren't sharing. Obviously the social emotional well-being of my students couldn't matter nearly as much as the content associated with learning chemistry. I knew I must be an effective teacher that year because most of my students passed with reasonably good grades. Since I taught chemistry and everybody loves fires with explosions, I kidded myself into believing that by teaching the content students somehow translated this into becoming a better-developed person. Even though I covered the curriculum successfully—I had the evaluations to say so, after all—I didn't feel connected to my vocation or my students. I was bored with the mechanics of doing the job. I went on for a bit longer before the voice in my head couldn't be ignored. My head, heart, and body were all telling me that I was not doing the right thing with my life.

Sizable imbalances between brain and body make it difficult to engage fully with others, especially when we lean toward reason and outcomes. Those who emphasize brain over body will generally lean toward content versus process. Thinking orientations are likely to be content driven, using data to produce certain outcomes with less consideration for how people experience the task. Body-oriented individuals are going to use their experience, allowing for greater appreciation of how something is being done and not just what they are achieving. Through process, we appreciate how we are enjoying reaching our destination while content generally helps with efficiency.

Is the drive to the new home we are considering purchasing scenic, or is it the quickest? Are we trying to grade the exams so we can get home, or do we bring the work home and do it leisurely alongside other activities? The way in which we go about tasks is directly related to our brain-body balance, which is also the case with the children we teach.

Appreciating the differences between our own lean and that of our students can be helpful. Efficiency may be your mode of operations, but what if your student is a meanderer, needing to socialize and entertain themselves to stay invested? From computational process to writing style, the children we teach are going to lie near us on the brain-body continuum or be some distance from our comfort zone. Appreciating those differences and how it influences our enjoyment and their engagement can be transformative in the personal growth of an educator.

I was getting ready to quit, to go work in a lab, when I met the student who was to change my perspective about teaching. M was truly gifted and one of my top students planning great things for her future, including the study of chemistry in college—until she stopped by my room one day after school to talk. In tears, she shared that her whole world had collapsed because instead of college she was going to be a mother. M looked me straight in the eye as she asked me for help—not with chemistry but with her next steps in life. I opened my mouth to say I didn't know but was glad that it was not about how she could finish my class at home. Of course, I wanted to do my best for her and give the right answer, so I discussed this with colleagues because they knew what should be done in situations like this. The answer I got was that I should not get involved with students in these kinds of situations and to let her family take care of it. I suppose if I had been happy just teaching chemistry I could have done that. But M really was asking for help meeting needs that had nothing to do with subject matter.

From the very beginning of our journey to recognize, express, and negotiate to get our needs met, the brain-body balance will help create a foundation for our success. If we are skewed too far toward our brain, reason drives us; if we are too far toward our body, emotion may guide us. The general principle of managing our shoulds with our wants or needs is a hidden formula most people never attend to, unaware of the hundreds of choice points influenced each day.

Our shoulds, have tos, oughts, or musts are a function of our brain's effort to steer us toward safety. Safety may be a function of our *superego*, which is a term in psychology to describe our internalized parental voice—the one that says don't do that or be careful. Collectively this is referred to as our should, representing what has to get done. For an educator, this may be supervising cafeteria duty or doing anything that distracts from academics.

We will examine the external application of shoulds and how the internalization of these messages is how we form our moral development, very closely tied to a future psychosocial emotional learning (PSEL) of ownership and accountability. For now, consider how shoulds are either internal or external, involving our own expectations or somebody else's rule, having little to do with our needs.

Wants are a mixture of brain and body (and also shoulds and needs), influenced by imagination, fantasy, and preferences. An example is wanting to join a club at school because we believe it will help with our social standing—wishing for a better chance at college entry—but also feeling instinctively drawn to the activity of the club. The most powerful want we appreciate more toward adulthood is determining the type of person we wish to be.

I chose to be different. If I was going to continue teaching, I had to connect with students in a meaningful way that went beyond content and meet them where they were as a whole person. Asking M what she needed and really focusing on hearing her responses began my journey to being that kind of teacher. It was a tough journey, though, because if I was going to support students in this way, I was going to have to change my life as well. Nothing fails the “sniff test” with teens quicker than a fraud.

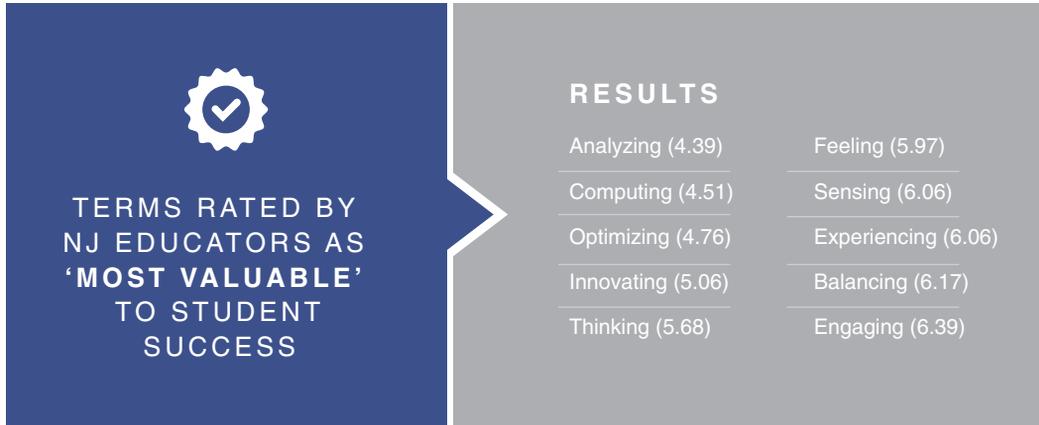
Authenticity is not so much a need but a method by which we get many of our needs met. Our needs represent the engine that powers our human vehicle. Needs have traditionally been described in a hierarchy, with physical needs at the base and fulfillment at the point of the triangle. As we will explore through a future PSEL, the traditional triangle-shaped needs hierarchy may be antiquated. A diamond shape conveys the importance of internalizing needs as opposed to continuous dependency on our environment. Safety and security for instance don't become less important, they are simply manufactured from within, allowing us to move onto higher order needs.

I started listening to my long-ignored inner voice and began my efforts to connect with the person and not just the student. This started with deliberate efforts to learn who each student was and to really see him or her. I took the risk to be truly empathetic with students and care about them as individuals. It is scary because if you truly care about someone you make yourself vulnerable to being hurt. (I am sure it is no surprise to anyone that a hurting teen can be awful to the very ones who support them the most because they trust those people know this is an attempt to get help in a safe environment.) It was during this time that I began to allow myself the grace to make mistakes and view them not as a failure to meet someone else's expectations but as my opportunity for personal growth.

Most people in Western society become skewed toward their brain and away from their bodies, pursuing perfection as opposed to peace. We become so accustomed to listening to thoughts, which take over the mantle of decision-making, that we forget our bodies determine what makes us happy. By putting too much emphasis on our brain, we contribute to stress and burnout. A continuous flood of information to synthesize helps adults and children believe that thinking is the most important part of being a human.

In a small study of New Jersey teachers, the value placed on analyzing, computing, optimizing, innovating, and thinking all rated higher than feeling, sensing, experiencing, balancing, and engaging. All tasks related to cognition were higher than the highest of the tasks related to the body, reinforcing the commonly held belief of what we emphasize in school (see Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1



NOTE: Lower numbers represent higher value.

Schools are naturally skewed toward cognitive development, so it’s less surprising that thinking rated higher than feeling. The extent to which we prioritize the soft skills is where we might further explore. If schools may fail to realize how psychological readiness may dilute a child’s ability to perform brain activities, we may be less efficient and productive in teaching. The results may also mean that introducing wellness and social emotional learning (SEL) may evoke resistance from some who are fearful of diluting education. With the world-changing event of COVID-19, this may be less of a concern as we raise our collective awareness for the value of whole child education. With the stress and fear for the adults who have lived through a life-changing crisis, we may also see greater receptivity to whole school health.

My teaching philosophy was changing. I had been taught how to deliver the curriculum in such a manner that learning content was a destination and assessment was a referendum on student success. A student either made the grade or did not. Effort and growth did not factor into this nor did I use this as data to inform instruction the way I could have. As I got to know my students, this approach no longer made sense. I think about C and his inability to complete a homework assignment while managing to set the curve on every single exam. Don’t misunderstand. C is brilliant, but that wasn’t quite enough to produce these results. I asked him about it. His simple answer was to question me about why he should write it down again on paper to

hand in when he worked the few problems he needed in his notes (he did keep a notebook) and then spent his time helping others. Before decreeing that he had to do homework because it was a percentage of his grade, I watched his interactions a little more closely for several weeks. Left on his own, C was not social and kept to himself. As others figured out how smart he was, they sought him out. While C was helping them with assignments, I saw him learning the communication skills he needed to grow as a person. For him, my letting go of how I thought a classroom should run had created an environment in which content mastery was increasing and a student who desperately needed to learn interpersonal skills had the confidence and safe environment to do so. No amount of writing out problems on a piece of paper was going to address his needs as effectively. His peer coaching became his homework grade. One of my greatest rewards as an educator is having the flexibility to extend learning beyond content. As a teacher, my journey involved challenging myself to help students find ways such as this to work on their needs that may or may not have anything to do with subject matter.

Through the global pandemic with people trapped in their homes, stretching us to the very limit of solitude, we may be valuing psychological fortitude and physical health more than ever before. Prior to this extended sensory deprivation experience, a sizable portion of educators recognized how their own health translated to improved productivity at work while a small group were still not convinced.

Nine out of ten educators surveyed agreed that “more diverse/timely wellness should be offered by my district” (Scherz, 2019).

While a small percentage (6 percent) strongly disagreed, perhaps wanting greater separation between home and work, the vast majority of educators are in need of more support from their district.

Thus, brain-body balance, the very first PSEL, will influence our receptivity to whole school health. If we continue to emphasize outcomes with a greater need for tests and measurement, we may attract more educators who are skewed toward their brain. If we believe in expanding the role of the school to prepare children for life beyond professional success, we will embrace the integration of academic, psychological, and moral learning in our schools.

C taught me that grades were not good enough to be finite labels for student performance. Instead data became my reflection of my own teaching. Blame and failure did not have a part in this. This is not to say that my students were not held to high standards. When the majority of students tanked on a test or missed a problem, for example, my thoughts changed from “Boy they blew that, time to move on or I won’t be able to cover everything” to “How do I change what I do in my classroom to make this make sense?” Students were responsible during class discussions and tutoring sessions for identifying the missing

pieces they needed to make sense of the concept. It was fascinating to watch their growth in efficacy as they determined what they knew and how to build on that to master concepts. In this way, I hoped I modeled true problem-solving and perseverance as life skills that went beyond chemistry.

Educators who are excited about whole child education will work to embody the very principles of PSEL as opposed to teaching them through a curriculum of skill building. PSEL as a way to grow our personhood may be a scary proposition for those districts struggling to implement expectations and exceed standards; however, brain-based learning may not be enough to traverse the complex challenges of recovering from this new and ongoing challenge.

If you really need it... The rule-following people pleaser in me had to have some structure just in case my principal or a parent questioned me. My guilty pleasure was assigning C some advanced problems tangentially related to the topic in class to provide him with a challenge. (I might have forgotten to tell him this.) In addition to this, C agreed that for any unit assessment he did not score at least 95 percent or higher he would go back to complete every assignment and retest (which never happened). Of course, other students squawked about C getting a special "deal," and I happily extended each their own opportunity as well. Most opted for the traditional structured experience after a few days. Teaching, for me, had become figuring out what the person who was my student needed to learn to move to their next step just as much as teaching content.

Perhaps the least traditional educational system when it comes to structure are the private Montessori schools. Their philosophy attended to the delicate balance to brain-body operations, helping students learn how to listen to other parts of themselves to become a more integrated organism. Autonomy and creativity were also espoused, generating more self-reflective students who are prepared to navigate the complexities of relationships.

Montessori appreciates the idea that children who learn how to listen and interpret messages from their bodies will more easily understand how to regulate emotions and inhibit impulses and also that children thrive in self-directed learning, taking pressure off the teacher to properly advise in every academic and emotional situation. Creating processes to guide students through conflict and problem-solving help create communities of shared responsibility.

Getting to know students and supporting their social emotional growth to the extent I did with both C and M is not sustainable with every student. While I knew this would be how I was going to approach teaching for the remainder of my career, connecting with students at

this level can be as exhausting as it is rewarding. After nearly fifteen years, I needed a bit of a change that I hoped would impact more than the 150 plus students I worked with each year. Hopping out of my comfort zone, I involved myself with the teachers' union by becoming the president of one of the largest in my state. I wanted the opportunity to advocate for students at a different level and thought this would offer me that chance. Hindsight being what it is, I'm not sure I made it better for students as I hoped, but I did see many instances firsthand in which the failure to prioritize students' emotional well-being negatively impacted their success.

Our decision-making process through adulthood will be influenced by the early work of balancing brain and body, though we may never recognize these early influences. Nor do we appreciate how the PSELs, which are ordered sequentially, generally correspond to our developmental stages. The work of PSEL continues throughout our lifetime, revisited with each developmental stage, shaped by the conditions of our society. So while balancing brain and body is most notably an early-stage concentration, it will remain an important skill through middle school, high school, and college. Even as adults we will be working to find balance, especially when we are faced with new problems we have no history of overcoming.

As a union president, I spent my days problem-solving, which excited me, but it was working on the problems of adults engaged in the institution and not really about the students. On some levels, I knew bettering the conditions for teaching improved the conditions for learning, but I was no longer in a position to engage with students on the personal level necessary to effect change. Interestingly enough, I used my same philosophy with the adults I was supporting that I used with students. I cannot stress enough that patience and kindness while truly learning who the person is and what he or she needs is never the wrong approach. You can make no bigger misstep than by assuming the same circumstances with two different people will have the same outcomes. This, too, was a great job to learn the lesson that if all you do for someone wanting your help is to give them your answer instead of investing your time to help them to find their answer, you will forever be answering the same questions for the same person. These were interesting years—not to mention power can be kind of cool.

As the complexity of our problem-solving increases, the value of pulling from both our intellect and intuition grows. When working with large groups or systems as most educators do, we need to be aware of the processes that help and hinder personal growth. Tremendous responsibility lies with those who are leading others, and the ability to see oneself clearly in relation to that group will help determine our success. If we can appreciate our own sphere of influence and how we wield it

to make decisions, we will have an easier time using another PSEL of self-reflection to improve our leadership.

At this point in time, chemistry teachers were becoming scarce and I was leaving a position in which I had quite a bit of “power,” so I returned knowing that I was going to teach on my students’ terms. This meant I committed to learning about and from students to figure out what to teach them. It was upon my return to the classroom that I realized a sense of urgency for the importance of our work as educators. Think about it: Each of us in our classrooms may be the one opportunity a student sees to change their lives or make different choices. My goal as an educator was to develop the whole student by using chemistry as my means to do so. For example, many of my students claimed to dislike or struggle with math word problems. My answer became to teach my students math disguised with chemistry problems. I even talked several math teachers with whom I shared students into using chemistry problems as examples with their classes. Many of my students were not native English speakers, so every day I had opportunities built in class to practice speaking in a safe environment. As confidence grew with the class, students opened up about their dreams and hopes for their futures as well as what they needed to reach them. I watched efficacy bloom both academically and socially.

Classroom, school, and district leaders who are well balanced in their own use of brain and body will be more confident, even more likely to create welcoming environments to a wide range of diverse learners requiring a safe space to move between reasoning and emotion.

I would like to say after learning about how to educate people from diverse perspectives for the past thirty years that I have all of life figured out. Ha! What I’ve actually learned is that as an educator if you accept people where they are (students or adults) and use education as a vehicle to support them along their journey, you can’t go wrong. You can only do this with people and not for them. While pleasing people still remains a priority for me to this day, my journey has taught me to make the conscious decision not to exclude myself from those I seek to please.

Key Points

- ▶ The brain is responsible for self-protection, and the body is responsible for our needs.
- ▶ Emphasizing the brain (thinking) generally correlates with content while the body correlates with process.
- ▶ Appreciating our own lean toward brain-body helps improve student success.

- ▶ Our shoulds, have tos, oughts, or musts are a function of our brain's effort to steer us toward safety.
- ▶ Wants are a mixture of brain and body, influenced by imagination, fantasy, and preferences.
- ▶ Our needs represent the engine that powers our human vehicle.
- ▶ Technology is a new threat to brain-body balance in children, requiring educators to provide opportunities for daily calibration.
- ▶ Modeling is the most important tool for teaching brain-body balance.

Discussion Questions

Whether using the book for professional development (PD) or within a book group, please consider the following questions to stimulate your own ideas for exploration.

1. How do I recognize how imbalanced I may be?
2. How do I become imbalanced? Am I more like one parent in this regard?
3. What are the benefits and limitations of my imbalance?
4. Am I typically attracted to a romantic partner imbalanced toward one polarity?
5. Which students most or least appreciate my imbalance, and why?