

# Embodying Your Curriculum

**Trauma-informed Pedagogy in a  
Time of Political Polarization**

**What We'll  
Explore in  
this *Workshop***

**1**

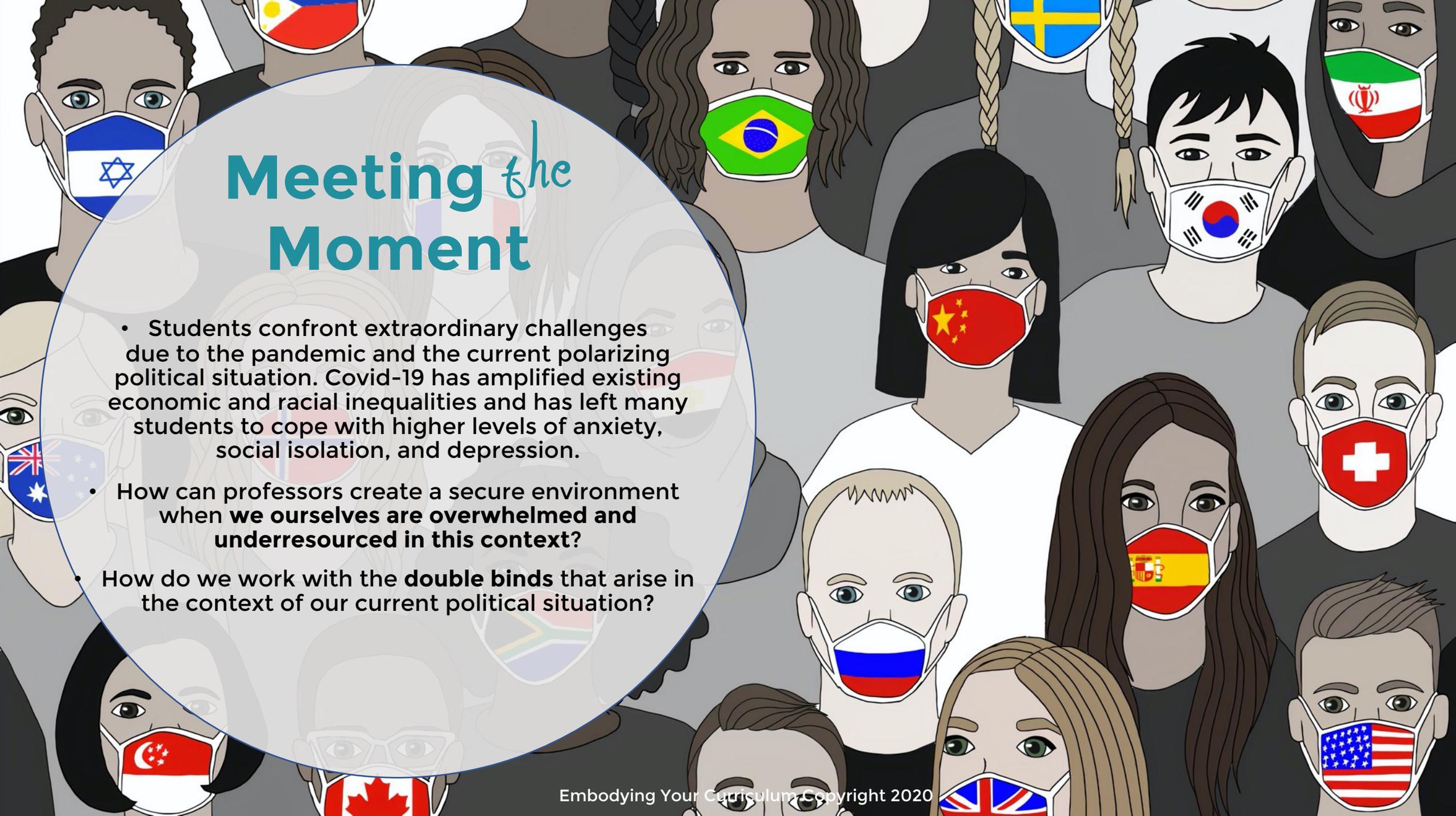
**Foundation: What is Trauma-informed pedagogy, why do we need it now?**

**2**

**Skills: Understanding the nervous system, self-regulation and inquiry skills**

**3**

**Implementation: Working with the skills in your classroom**



# Meeting *the* Moment

- Students confront extraordinary challenges due to the pandemic and the current polarizing political situation. Covid-19 has amplified existing economic and racial inequalities and has left many students to cope with higher levels of anxiety, social isolation, and depression.
- How can professors create a secure environment when **we ourselves are overwhelmed and underresourced in this context?**
- How do we work with the **double binds** that arise in the context of our current political situation?

# Naming the *Double-Binds*

- Faculty are expected to support students in a context where we ourselves are not being supported. And the support that we are asked to provide students with, for example total flexibility in modalities, can come at the expense of what we consider to be good pedagogical practice.
- We want to hold a secure space for all of our students, yet this commitment becomes challenging when we are confronted with violent speech in our classrooms or expressions of opinion based on false evidence that is circulating in the political sphere.
- In order to confront racism in the classroom, we need to name and create accountability for white fragility and the denial of white privilege. Yet, in this process POC are often left having to hold for the fallout of deconstructing racial privilege through the re-centering of white affect and experience.

# What is Trauma-Informed Pedagogy?

1

It proceeds from the recognition that the effects of historical, social, racial, and personal trauma and overwhelm are held in the nervous system as patterns.

2

Bodily awareness and social engagement are the doorways to access and transform these patterns.

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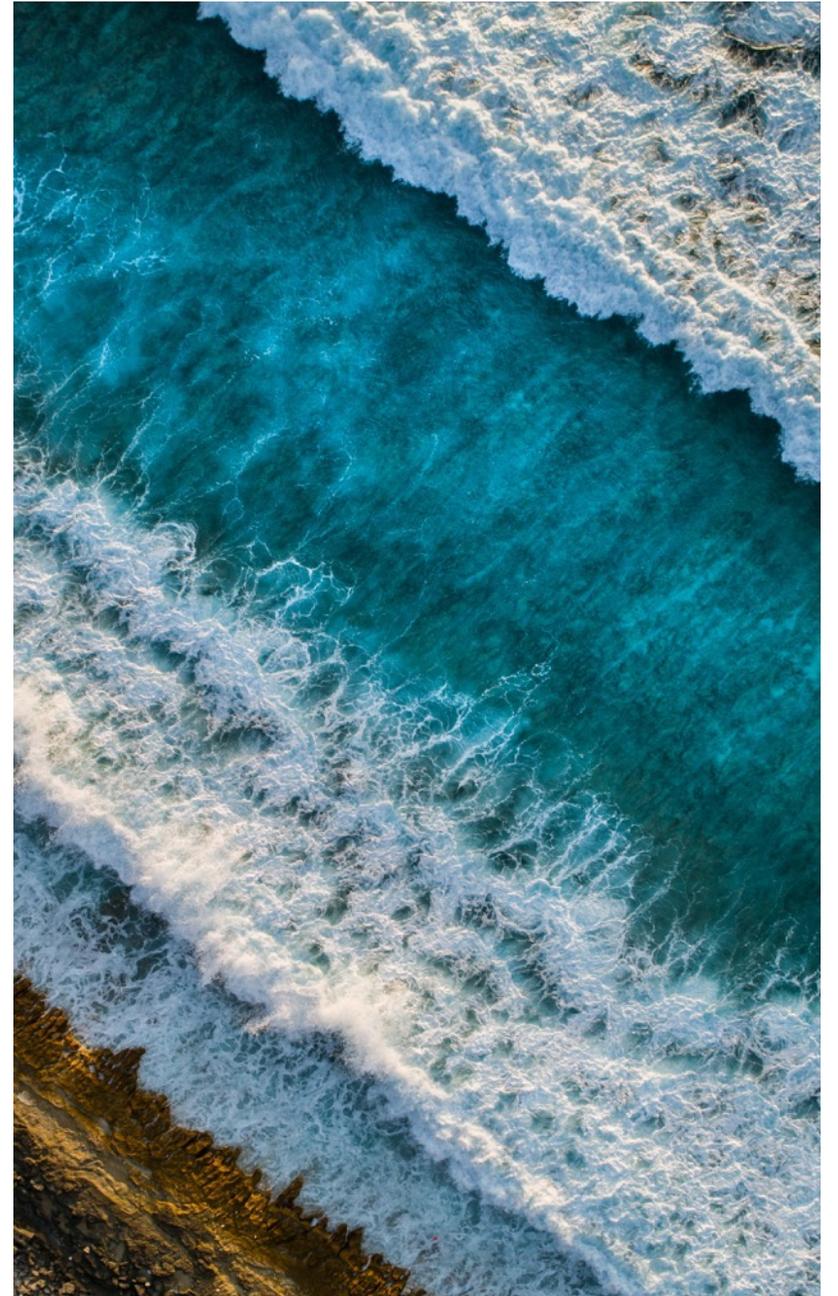
These patterns can impact our ability to take in new information, empathize, and to relate creatively with one another and to the material we study.

# Definition of Trauma

- A simple working definition is anything that is too much, too soon, or too fast for our nervous system to handle.
- The absence of a witness, of being seen and heard after an overwhelming experience, compounds the overwhelm and congeals it into the nervous system.
- The nervous system holds the energy of the traumatic experience in order to survive.
- Symptoms and limitations arise as trauma and are compounded by multiple events affecting perception and overall health.

# Slowing *Down*

- This is the direction and the pace we are moving towards in our bodies.
- You are learning how to be in your body by slowing the pace and gently easing yourself towards the ground and neutral awareness.
- This is the ‘how’ of self-regulation. We do this through feeling the ground and slowing the pace of our awareness by noticing the particulars.
- We sense lower down in our bodies to settle the nervous system.





# The Skill of Grounding

- The skill of grounding is the practice of sensing ourselves, engaging our awareness, and connecting to our nervous system.
- The ground is the anchor. It is orienting and lends itself to finding our center.

# The Skill of Orienting

**Definition:** Orienting is a skill that brings us to the here and now, the present moment. We orient to the present by feeling our contact to the ground, and then by looking around the room and naming our experience. All of this is settling to the nervous system and brings us into the moment, the place where we can stay connected to ourselves and be present.

**Purpose:** This skill bring us to the present moment, connects us to ourselves in time and space, and helps the ANS slow to a pace of regulation. It is also a resource that helps us begin to downregulate from activation of any kind. It brings one to a state of presence that is a precursor for learning.

**Results:** When we feel secure at a basic, embodied level, we create the conditions for something new to happen in our experience, relationships, and conversations.



# Understanding Activation

Activation refers to a state in which the nervous system is moving out of a regulated state. When this happens, we may experience a “rev” in our system, or dissociation from bodily sensation. Emotionally, activation can manifest in the form of strong emotions, such as anger, or even just excitement. In common parlance, we sometimes refer to activation as “getting triggered.” In this work, we prefer the more neutral language of activation, which refers to a state of the nervous system. Activation in the nervous system may signal a recapitulation of traumatic experience.

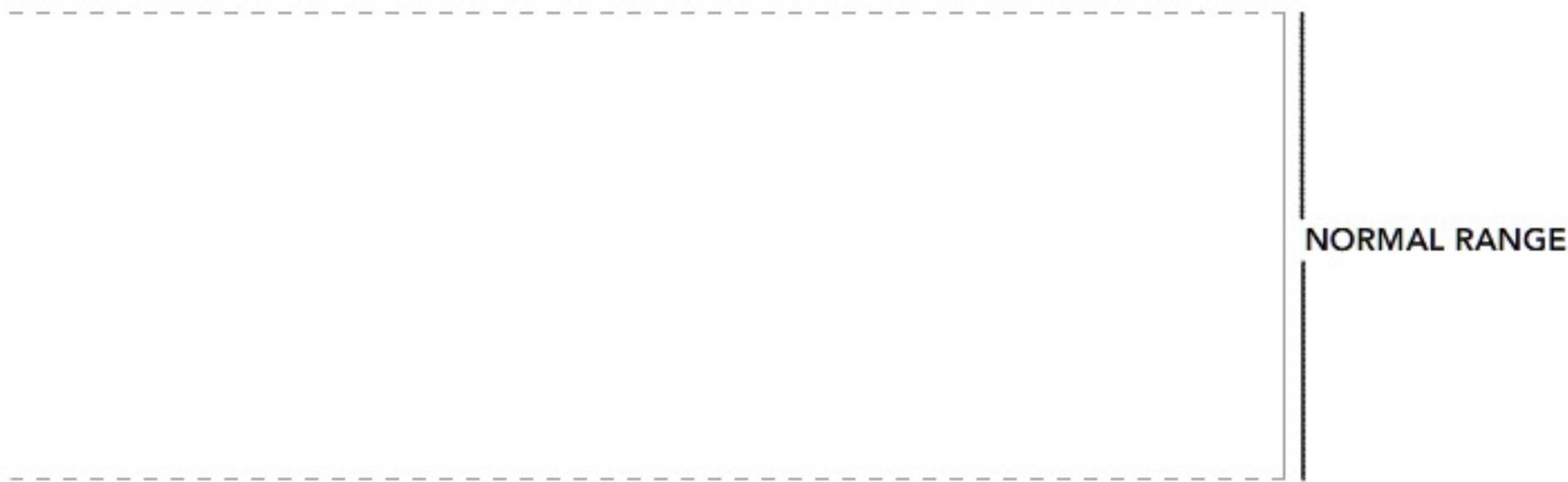
**HEALTHY REGULATING NERVOUS SYSTEM**

**arousal-activation**



**NORMAL RANGE**

## SYMPTOMS OF UN-DISCHARGED TRAUMATIC STRESS



# A Health Paradigm

## **Orienting to the Health**



The Health is all that is going right. It is a felt sense of wellbeing that can be accessed by slowing down, tuning in to ourselves and appreciating the intelligence of our nervous systems, our survival strategies, and even of our activation.

# Imprints:

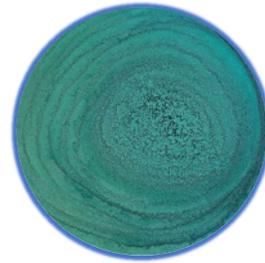
systemically held stress,  
compression, and trauma  
in the body



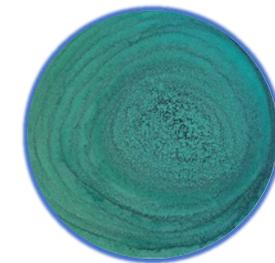
# Self-Regulation and the Metabolic Process



Self-regulation is the ability to attune to the whole of our being, sensations, emotions, thoughts.



It is the ability to be with, accept and allow the metabolic process of our presence to function naturally and with neutrality.



From this level of presence and awareness, we can “digest” our experience, develop resiliency, increase our window of tolerance for challenges, make repairs and course-corrections within ourselves and in relationships.

# Working *with* Resistance

Resistance is a part of the process of turning inward and coming into relationship with yourself. Resistance to the process of connecting with your body, sensations, thoughts, and emotions is often associated with the fear of giving up control.

In academia, we tend to use our intellect as a way of maintaining control. The institutions that we work in do not leave us much space to be in a place of not knowing or vulnerability.

Our resistance can show up in the form of intellectualizing and analyzing, rather than allowing ourselves to stay in an experiential place of not knowing. Notice if these kinds of resistance are arising for you.



# Exercising our Window of Tolerance

The “**window of tolerance**” (Siegel, 1999) refers to a zone of autonomic and emotional arousal that is optimal for well-being and effective functioning. This is a zone within which “various intensities of emotional and physiological arousal can be processed without disrupting the functioning of the system” (Siegel, 1999, p. 253). When arousal falls within this window, information received from both internal and external environments can be integrated (Ogden, et al. 2006).

# Bringing the Tools into Your Classroom

**Always give students a choice to opt out.** If they choose not to participate, they could just sit quietly until you've finished the practice. Make sure to explicitly say to them that however they choose to participate in the process, **they are included.** You could also direct them to journal quietly for the duration of the activity.

## Options:

- Begin a meeting or class with the **grounding practice** or **slowing down practice**.
- Do the **slowing down practice** *before* your next class, then notice how the meeting unfolds afterward.
- Begin your next zoom class by doing the **orienting practice** yourself, giving yourself a few moments to orient to your physical space; and/or lead students through the orienting practice.
- Give your students an **inquiry practice**, asking them to write down the **resources** that are helping them right now. This will give them the opportunity to orient to *the Health*. The Health is all that is going right. It is everything that is resourcing us in this moment.



# Reflecting Upon the Practice You Worked With

- Choose a practice that we explored in the workshop to implement in your own classroom.
- After you've had a chance to implement it, describe how you used the skill that you chose. What was challenging for you about the practice? Where did you feel successful (or a sense of grounding or ease) in using the practice?
- What did you appreciate and acknowledge in the skill. How did things shift for you in the classroom or meeting?