



The Atlantis Room

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How do we make schools emotionally safe places for kids, while still getting our academic work done?

The challenge goes like this: As a teacher, I daily must attempt a near-impossible balance between the needs of individual children and the needs of the class. If a student is having a meltdown, whether because of something happening in class or from outside, I will address it as best I can, but at some point I can't stop the learning of the entire class to attend to one student. Or perhaps the issues the student is raising are not even appropriate to discuss in class, and so I have to allow her to struggle and learn nothing (or possibly disrupt others) until this passes or time appears to address it one-on-one. It's deeply frustrating, not only because it slows the class down, but it goes against the teacher's impulse to help a student with an acute need.

Educators have cooked up various solutions to this dilemma, but one of my favorites is the *Atlantis Room*. The idea was developed at the **Integral School in Winterthur**, Switzerland, a stand-out place in many ways, pursuing a student-centered design based on [integral theory](#) since the mid-1990s. An important caveat is that the Integral School is a small school, and this approach may work better (or at least be easier to administer) in schools of a few hundred or fewer students.

Named in honor of the mythical sunken city, the Atlantis Room is a warmly decorated small room, invitingly set up with easy chairs, lamps, and earth-tone colors. At any point, a student who is having a major challenge that day, whether self-identified or because a teacher has asked them to step out of class, can go to the Atlantis Room. It's staffed all day by a rotation of adults, who during a quiet time can do their own work, but they're ready - "on call" - for a student to walk in the door. That adult is not there to mete out consequences, but rather to hold space and coach, as appropriate. It's a safe space for students, and a kind of shock absorber for the school.

Without a space like this, there are few if any places within schools to send a student who is having difficulty. Perhaps there's an office to send them to, but that can feel punitive, and a busy adult-centered office is usually not a place for a student to pause and reset. Or send them into the hall where passers-by will continually ask them what happened or "why they're in trouble." An "Atlantis Room" on the other hand provides a non-punitive, quiet space to reset, away from the shame or distraction of peers watching in class, and with an adult who can quietly hold space or talk, as needed. (And with this kind of resource on offer, wouldn't you want an Atlantis Room for yourself at home or work?). It offers teachers a way to respond to students who need more attention or space than can be provided in the middle of a class.

Of course, this is not an easy solution to apply as a school - you need the physical space and a rotation of adults who can cover the room and who are ready to respond to kids in different scenarios. It's not possible in every school. But when a school has the means to do it, an "Atlantis Room" or similar could be a powerful commitment to the mental health of each student, to a culture that makes space for kids to reflect and reset, and to more effective teaching.

[Chris Balme/](#)

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