



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

AWE-INSPIRING AFFIRMATIONS

"The epiphany of awe is that its experience connects our individual selves with the vast forces of life. In awe we understand we are part of many things that are much larger than the self."

—Dacher Keltner

OVERVIEW

Students watch an awe-inspiring video, then build on the positive emotions they experience by writing a personal affirmation.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To establish classroom values and to build a culture of inclusiveness and community
- At the beginning of class to help prepare students for a successful day
- At the beginning of the school year, to help students with self-mastery and academic success
- During difficult times in the school or greater community due to social unrest or natural disasters
- Before teaching complicated subjects where you think students may struggle

TIME REQUIRED

- 30 minutes

LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- A video of vast landscapes to share as an activity warm-up and for inspiration, such as:
 - [Our Planet in 4K](#)
 - [Wonders of the World 4K](#)
 - [Uganda 4K](#)
 - [Awe-Inspiring Landscapes of Dominica](#)
- Equipment to show videos with sound
- [Examples of affirmations](#) to share with students

- Writing materials
- Craft material for making affirmation cards (optional)

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Understand what awe is and how it can transform our daily lives
- Explore what affirmations are and how they can benefit us
- Practice writing a personalized affirmation

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Awe
- Optimism

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused attention
- Non-judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to think of a time you experienced [awe](#)—the feeling we get in the presence of something vast that challenges our understanding of the world at that moment.
- What emotions or thoughts come to mind as you relive this experience? Did this help to lessen your stress level or foster a sense of well-being or connectedness to others or the larger world—all research-based outcomes that can result from awe.

- Building on this positive experience, take a moment to write a short, personal affirmation for yourself to inspire hope, joy, or some other aspect of well-being.

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

Affirmations are written or spoken positive phrases that help to affirm our self-worth. When we frequently engage in this form of positive self-talk, we open up a new way of believing in ourselves and what we're able to accomplish. In this practice, awe-inspiring natural landscapes inspire students to write personal affirmations that bring out the best of human capability and goodness.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- The images or video that introduce this practice are meant to elicit an awe-type reaction, which includes two key features:
 - A sense of vastness that puts into perspective your own relatively small place in the world. This vastness could be either physical (e.g., a panoramic view of the ocean) or psychological (e.g., an exceptionally courageous or heroic act of conscience, such as tackling a challenging climate issue).
 - A shift in the way you understand the world. For instance, your everyday concerns might seem less important, or you might expand your beliefs about the reaches of human potential.
- Please note that [not everyone feels awe](#), and that's okay. Some people may feel wonder or amazement or even fear, or something else entirely. It is important to let students know that every response is valid.
- One final note: [research](#) has found that cultures respond differently to awe-inducing stimuli. Please be sensitive to your students' cultural backgrounds prior to showing the images or video. You might discuss with parents/caregivers how they think their children would respond.

EXPERIENCING AWE

- Invite students to begin by taking a few deep breaths to calm themselves and bring them into the present moment.
- Ask students to notice what emotions or thoughts come up for them as they view the images or video.
- Set aside four minutes or so to have students watch the video. Put the video in full screen mode and ask students to give it their full attention.
- After watching the video, give students a few minutes to write down, draw, and/or discuss with a partner what they felt while watching the video.
 - You might ask them whether their response was physical (e.g., goosebumps—a common awe reaction), mental (e.g., they felt small in comparison to the size of the world), or emotional (e.g., tears, a warm feeling in the chest).

- Did they notice a shift in their belief in human potential?
- Did everyday concerns seem less problematic?
- *Be sure to validate the experience of students who didn't have any kind of reaction.*
- Invite students to share their responses with the whole class, including those who didn't feel anything. To accommodate those who didn't have a response, you might ask them to share a time when they felt amazement or wonder or surprise.
- Share with students that some of them might have experienced awe—that feeling of vastness that transforms how we view the world and our place in it. If you like, you may use these [slides](#) to explain awe.

CREATING AFFIRMATIONS

- Building on the emotions and thoughts elicited by the video, tell students that awe (and other uplifting emotions) can inspire us to make positive changes in how we think.
- One way to do this is to write a personal affirmation that gives us hope or joy, or reminds us of positive goals we've set for ourselves. We can return to these affirmations again and again when we face challenges in life.
- Share with students the affirmation you wrote for yourself in the "Reflection Before the Practice" section, or this list of [sample affirmations](#) that other students have written.
- To begin the writing exercise, ensure students that this is not a graded assignment. Instead, it's an opportunity to think about what areas in their lives they would like to be better at or sometimes need encouragement.
- Next, individually or with a partner, invite students to write a short affirmation for themselves.

CLOSURE

- When students have finished their affirmation, invite several to share their affirmation with the class and what it means to them, reminding the rest of the class to be respectful of each other.
- Tell students that their affirmations should be saved or spoken aloud frequently to affirm their personal value and to help them feel empowered.
- If you have the time, invite students to write a few thoughts in a journal about this experience. How did it feel? Do they think they will use their affirmation? If so, when might they use it? How will they know that using their affirmation on a regular basis is helping or not helping?

POSSIBLE EXTENSIONS

- Invite the class to choose one affirmation—either their own or from this [list](#)—to read aloud as a whole class.
- Invite students to create their own cards or videos of their personal affirmation.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did students respond to this practice? Did you notice any shift in their mood or interactions with each other? Were they open to writing affirmations? How might you encourage students to regularly practice their affirmation?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In the first part of a [two-part study](#) of 183 Latino and white college students, Latino students who wrote a short statement affirming why certain values were important to them (intervention) versus those who wrote why their values might be important to someone else (control) showed higher GPAs, even after two years.

In the 2nd part of the study which took place two years after the values-affirmation exercise, the same students were instructed to list their academic tasks that were coming due along with a short essay that could be about anything they wanted. Researchers found that the students who were part of the intervention group two years earlier were more likely to write in a positive and optimistic manner—or spontaneously affirm themselves—than those who were in the control group.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

By giving students opportunities to ground themselves in positive affirmations, educators can help them find purpose and achieve their goals. Reflecting on what matters most may also help students slow down and find comfort during times of uncertainty. It can remind them of the other resources they have in their lives: how strong and capable they are, or how much support they receive from others. They start to realize that there's something they care about that matters more to them than whatever difficulty they're experiencing in the moment.

Indeed, researchers suggest that students who "affirm" themselves early in their school careers experience the positive academic and psychological benefits of increasing success, leading them to realize that they have the "psychological resources" to handle challenges. They are able to take a wiser and more long-term perspective instead of getting bogged down in momentary negative feelings.

SOURCE

[Sandra M. Turner](#) is a National Geographic Explorer and Educator who uses daily affirmations to stay connected to her life's purpose and to show reverence for life on Earth.