Five Tenets to Create a Strong Social and Emotional Base for Your Classroom

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At the beginning of the 2017–18 school year, my superintendent asked me to share my coming out story with the entire district staff as part of a TED-talk-inspired PD day. I had done so a few months earlier on a smaller scale, but this was going to be in front of about four hundred adults. The goal was to highlight how making students feel safe and accepted in our classrooms allows them to discover who they are and focus on the learning that they are there to do. So I thought about my experiences as both a teacher and student who happens to be gay. I wondered, what did I wish my teachers had done when I was in school? From this thinking I created a list of five major tenets for educators to follow. I quickly realized that these did not solely apply to the English classroom but to the whole building.

During the preparation for the speech I was lucky to receive help from Alex Emr, the Student Assistance Counselor at my school. As she reviewed my draft, she explained that the tenets I was going to present aligned with the core competencies of Social and Emotional Learning or SEL (Core SEL Competencies, n.d.). When I talked to teachers about SEL, often the impression was that students are the ones who need to review and practice within this framework, but it is equally important for adults to use and model it, too. In this article, we present five guidelines for teachers, and we show how even though these tenets stem from my experiences as an LGBTQ teacher and student, they have a universal application in the English classroom and beyond.

**Tenet One**

We will be open and honest about who we are and celebrate the things that make people different (including ourselves.) Before we can proactively help others, there’s a level of self-awareness that needs to be reached. Admittedly, this first tenet comes from a place of fear. Queer teachers have a lot to be afraid of. The stories of LGBTQ teachers being embraced by a community are rare compared to those about firings done under the guise of low performance, false accusations made by vindictive parents and students, and vandalism of classrooms and personal property. Beyond that, up until recent years it was rare to see LGBTQ representation anywhere, let alone get access to it. In many schools, the teacher in the room may be the only person who represents a certain demographic that a student will encounter, let alone relate to.

We need to help create a space where students feel comfortable being themselves. We all feel more confident when we see ourselves in others. More than ever, there is a push for diverse content from all walks of life, and kids need access to it in order to see themselves represented in successful adults. We need to remove the stigma around our differences and summon the courage to celebrate them despite the potential risks. It is just so valuable for everyone.

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Tenet Two

We will be authentic and genuine in our interactions with students. Transparency and vulnerability are key to building trust and relationships. It may be that you are still on your journey to self-awareness and self-management. This does not mean you are behind; it means you are moving forward for yourself and for your students. Find support in your personal life and in colleagues who are open and honest about themselves. Start these conversations. Start initiatives for educator wellness. Start with yourselves, and it will impact your students. If you are not comfortable sharing (or unable to share) the facets of yourself that make you unique,
you can always look to the texts you present to students.

“Tough” topics are becoming more common in middle grade and YA lit, which gives you plenty of options to introduce them easily to students. Use book talks to show these texts off like any other, focusing on what makes the book great, not what makes the topic difficult. For example, *Ruby on the Outside* by Nora Raleigh Baskin is not a “prison book,” but a story about a middle school girl navigating new friendships and a stellar mentor text for crafting internal conflict. Look to texts from Tony Abbott, Alex Gino, Gae Polisner, Jordan Sonnenblick, and Jandy Nelson for other strong selections. These novels give teachers a chance to celebrate differences in a subtle way.

**Tenet Two**

We will recognize our privileges and acknowledge them. Please take a moment to answer the following questions: When you are at work, do you think twice before mentioning your significant other in some way? Do you worry about answering the “what did you do this weekend” question? If your answers were no, please understand that there are people out there, maybe even people you work with, whose lives can be upturned in an instant if they are not vigilant when answering those questions. Please be cognizant of the advantages of your role in the social hierarchy, as this helps enact positive change and directly impacts the children in your classroom.

Social awareness is the third competency. Once we are aware of and can manage ourselves, SEL asks us to assess the world around us. To achieve this, we must be able to take others’ perspectives, empathize, appreciate our diverse selves, and respect each other (*Core SEL Competencies*, n.d.).

When asking what students did, for example, over vacation, do you ever react more strongly to one student’s story than another—such as a trip to Paris versus babysitting a younger sibling? Do you ever address the class with “Go home and talk to Mom and Dad” assuming they have both? Do we unintentionally place value in certain areas and send a subconscious message that some students’ stories are somehow lesser? Our reactions are typically a result of our own experiences. When we have a social awareness of our own worldview and privilege and also that there are many other worthy perspectives, we are more likely to empathize with others and thus respond to students more compassionately. We can appreciate their experiences without a hint of judgment, broadening the inclusive environment we are striving to create.

**Tenet Three**

Be perceptive but not assumptive. Be sensitive to students, but do not ask unless invited to do so.

This is a really tough line to walk, but we can all learn to walk it. One of the big keys is to watch your words. Learn what is and is not ok to say. Don’t be afraid to say that you don’t know something; but then be sure to find the answer and share it. Acknowledge times you catch yourself saying something that may have hurt someone. Otherwise, you risk running into situations where you can do some real damage.

During my senior year of high school, I was beginning to discover who I really was as a person, including the fact that I am gay. I had compiled a list of schools that I thought might be a good place for me after I graduated, including Emerson College, which is known for being LGBTQ friendly. One of the supports my high school guidance department had in place was to create a list of schools they felt you would fit at in terms of your academic and career goals. Emerson was not on my list, and in a moment of bravery I asked my counselor what she thought of adding it, specifically if she felt the theatre education program was a worthwhile endeavor. Her response was, “Emerson is great! It’s the perfect place, especially for people who are different like you.” Needless to say I did not apply to or attend Emerson. Not only did my counselor attach a negative connotation to the word different (see Tenet One), she assumed something about me. True, she was correct, but I did not invite her to make this suggestion.

Some may argue that the logic behind my reaction does not make sense. While we understand those arguments, we do not agree. Keep in mind that students grappling with their identity may not be the most rational thinkers all the time. We think it is entirely within the scope of a teacher’s responsibility to think before speaking and anticipate student responses, especially when talking to a student you suspect is going through some of these issues.

We make a lot of assumptions about people, but we need to be careful. We assume the female teacher wearing a ring on her left fourth finger is married to a male. We assume the students in our class with two parents have a mom and a dad. Once we have a social awareness of perspective (our own and that of others), we can begin to interact in a more thoughtful way.

The fourth competency of SEL is relationship skills, which include communication, social engagement, relationship-building, and teamwork (*Core SEL Competencies*, n.d.). Our approach with students, beginning with communication and word choice, lays the foundation for their level...
of engagement in the classroom material. Students who feel embraced are more likely to develop these strong relationship skills, work better with others, and find more academic success. Had my high school counselor used the *interested in theater* rather than *different*, Emerson may have received an additional application.

**Tenet Four**

We will speak up when we hear or see anything that does not belong in our hallways, LGBTQ-related or otherwise. We hear a lot of teachers say it’s not worth it to deal with it when something happens. Nobody wants to handle parent backlash or whatever else may come from speaking up. However, we need to make it worthwhile, or we become part of the problem. Think of all the times we tell students not to be bystanders, but upstanders. This only works if we have the courage to model this behavior.

The fifth competency of SEL is responsible decision-making. It is not enough to have an awareness of ourselves, manage ourselves appropriately, have an awareness of the perspectives around us, and interact with others in a thoughtful way. We must identify and solve problems, analyze and evaluate situations, and reflect back. We have a responsibility as people, and especially educators, to follow through ethically, not only for ourselves but for the students in our classrooms (*Core SEL Competencies*, n.d.). We cannot stand by and allow problems to exist. If we, as the teachers in the controlled microcosm of school, do not respond, we cannot expect our students to stand up for their morals and values out in the world. Students have a hard time being that upstander, and if teachers are not willing to put themselves in this role, students surely will not either.

**Tenet Five**

We will put in the hard work to make our classrooms places where each student feels safe regardless of our personal opinions/beliefs because that is our duty. On the first day of school this year, I had a student, Max, quietly approach me to express that they preferred they/their as their pronouns when addressing them. I have friends who use these gender neutral pronouns, so that wasn’t news to me. But when I first heard about this in college, my question was, *Well what about grammar? How does that work?* As a future English teacher, I couldn’t imagine further complicating an insanely difficult language. In fact, this is what I hear most from other teachers when they are first introduced to these pronouns. Then I thought about the words of Dr. sj Miller (2015), who said, “When one is misrecognized, it is altogether impossible to hold a positive self-image.” So, I ask you this: What is more important—a student’s comfort in your classroom or a grammar rule?*

For so many students, especially LGBTQ ones, the focus at school becomes survival, not success. So we feel that this tenet requires a bit more planning than just speaking up. It asks you to truly consider the space and procedures of your classroom through the social and emotional lens, rather than through your own opinions. By doing so, you ensure that students come into your room ready to learn. One example of this would be working with students to establish classroom rules at the start of the year. This keep students accountable, as it has them set their own expectations of how their community is going to function on a daily basis. The result is a positive culture of acceptance.

While this can seem daunting, there are ways to support your own growth and understanding as an educator. Seek out professional development opportunities, not just on SEL in the classroom, but also those that broaden your foundation of knowledge on the emerging facets of student lives—sexuality, mental health, trauma, and suicide prevention, for example—to help you create an inclusive and culturally aware classroom. The best thing we can do for our students is not necessarily to just learn more about our subject matter. We also need to learn more about the young people sitting in front of us each day, for it is these individuals that we hope to reach.

**Conclusion**

The question then becomes, *How do I know it is working?* It won’t hit you in the face, but to the careful senses of an educator, it will be clear. Social and emotional learning strategies are successful when you are connecting with students whom you had not before or when students seem more engaged in your classes. They create group work that is more effortless, and they foster an environment when students are taking risks and asking more questions. They celebrate not only their own successes but each other’s achievements as well.

*After I gave my speech last October, my coworkers reached out to tell me I am “brave and inspirational,” which just felt silly. All I did was get on the stage and talk about myself for twenty minutes. However, being given the opportunity to use my voice reminded me that it is often easy to lose sight of what teaching truly is at its core: a human endeavor. Social and emotional learning practices focus on being a person with an open heart and mind. They ask teachers to take a look at themselves and their practices and make meaningful choices that extend beyond just teaching their content. They allow educators to learn more about their students, coworkers, and communities, and they create an environment where every single student is able to come to school*
focused on learning. Every teacher can implement them. All it takes is some courage.

Join the conversation!
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References