

Ellen Douglas  
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# Moving Beyond Classroom Management

## **Teaching Philosophy**

My passion in life has always revolved around music. As a young child, I loved to sing and dance, though I was absolutely terrible I might add. I essentially forced my parents to attend every concert, and every dance program imaginable under the sun. Every now and then I run into my father singing nursery rhymes to himself in the kitchen, knowing it's because I sang them to him at all hours of the day as a small child. As I got older, I found myself in the string orchestra at the local high school with a new, strange instrument that made me look like a chicken while holding it. Again, I must have given my parents, friends and teachers several ear infections from the ghastly noises of my violin.

What always remained with me though was my love and passion for music. I rushed home every single day to excitedly practice my violin much to the dismay of my neighbours. Even though I was far from playing like an angel, I had a wonderful music teacher that saw the fire and passion that music ignited in me. He encouraged me to practice, gave me access to wonderful resources, gave me extra help when I needed it and provided me with feedback so that I could improve. Turns out I went on to complete a violin performance degree at UBC.

When I think about what made that particular classroom a positive and welcoming learning environment, so many things come to mind. My teacher, no matter what mood he was in, always made sure to stand at the door to greet each and every one of his students. Just by doing that simple act, the

atmosphere of the classroom changed and it always felt like we belonged there and we always welcome. At the very back of his classroom, he had these horrid orange coloured couches that he had set up for students to collaborate on projects, relax with friends and on the occasion, sleep on when waiting to perform. The bottom line was that we all knew exactly what he expected from us; no jokes, no frills, just competence and a heart for music. We always knew what the schedule for the day would be, what jobs or tasks we had been assigned and how we could contribute to the classroom in a positive, effective manner.

As a teacher, I believe that it is essential to provide students with a safe, welcoming and nurturing environment in which they can learn and actively engage with the material. By ensuring that each student feels like they are valued and an important part of the classroom, students will be more likely to contribute to the classroom and communicate with one another to create sonorous, beautiful music. Much like my former teacher, I want to create a classroom in which the students are comfortable with one another, where they push each other to succeed and achieve their goals. I want students to be able to develop their own personal relationship with music and help foster their own growth and self-development. Music is an amazing resource to expose students to the concepts of motivation, cooperation and teamwork, especially in today's "I and Me" driven world. As a future educator, my goal is to provide my students with positive and meaningful musical experiences inside and outside the classroom. I want to provide my students with an environment that inspires musical risk taking, and encourages an open mind to constructive criticism. I want to instil an appetite for life long learning, foster the ideals of craftsmanship and achievement, while providing freedom for the students to explore their interests, delve into their imaginations and nurture their passion and zeal for music.

## **B. Research-Based Findings**

While I believe that music education is crucial in schools, I also believe that building and creating a positive, safe learning environment in which students have significant relationships to learn in is the

key to success. The Schonert-Reichl article does a fantastic job of summarizing important key factors in SEL education for students. For starters, if we simply focus on teaching the curriculum, students will have academic skills, but possess no real ability for empathy or compassion.<sup>1</sup> If we don't care about one another, what's the point of co-existing with one another? Now that's a scary thought. Any workplace environment would be a disaster to work in simply because we wouldn't know or care to know how to treat each other with respect and dignity. In addition, SEL education has been shown to foster positive attitudes, behaviours and thinking processes.<sup>2</sup> If our students are well-developed, concerned, responsible human beings, that helps to build a stronger society and by extension, a stronger nation. Furthermore, students in SEL programmes have better attendance records, exhibit less disruptive behaviour, like school more, have better GPA's and are less likely to be suspended from school.<sup>3</sup> All of these benefit the student, the school and the community. Lastly, SEL not only improves student attitudes, motivation, belonging to the school, it promotes positive behaviour which leads to lower bullying rates and risky behaviours.<sup>4</sup> In other words, we can give our students a sense of purpose, boost self-confidence and self-awareness while keeping them safe. And of course, SEL has also been shown to improve student overall academic achievement.<sup>5</sup>

## **Part 2:**

### **How I Plan to Create a Positive Classroom Environment**

#### **A. Create Supportive and Safe Environments:**

As an educator, I want nothing more than to provide my students with a supportive and safe

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<sup>1</sup> Schonert-Reichl, K.A. & Hymel, S. (2007). Educating the heart as well as the mind social and emotional learning for school and life success. *Education Canada*, 47(2), 20-25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

environment in which they can express themselves without fear of ridicule, challenge and foster their own learning in addition to engaging with the material in a meaningful way. In order to even begin, it's extremely important to get to know your students. Unless you know what they are going through, what expectations they have at home, whether they're working or not, how they interact with their peers, their learning style, their interests and hobbies, it's almost impossible to reach out to them and make their learning experience valuable. In addition, as stated in the Behavioural Prevention Guide, by providing students with clear expectations, rules, structured and predictable schedule and involving them in the process will help to create a classroom in which they feel safe and valued.<sup>6</sup> This can be implemented in the classroom by providing students with immediate positive feedback, having clear established rules in the classroom, challenging them to try new things and encouraging them in times of failure or success.

## **B. Build Relationships**

In the article by C. Bergin and D. Bergin, fostering the teacher-student relationship is vital. They suggest that simply greeting students individually in a warm and positive manner will help to build a sense of trust and value between the teacher and student.<sup>7</sup> As the teacher, it is crucial to be prepared for class in order to devote time to teaching the students, helping them with the material while also holding the student accountable for their learning, rather than worrying about setting up the necessary materials.<sup>8</sup> Another crucial way to build relationships with your students is to be responsive and receptive to what they have to say (i.e. validating their voice and opinions) which can be done in in-class discussions or even commenting on journal entries they submit.<sup>9</sup> In regards to dealing with difficult students and establishing a relationship with them, I would like to use reasoning to get to the heart of

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<sup>6</sup> Behavioural Intervention Guide

<sup>7</sup> Bergin, C. & Bergin, D. (2009). Attachment in the classroom. *Educational Psychology Review*, 21, 141-170.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

the problems or challenges they're facing.<sup>10</sup> I firmly believe it is not the student that is "bad" or "difficult;" that is merely the consequence of the root of the problem. By delving under the surface of the action, it proves to the student that you care about their well-being and academic success, thus establishing a positive and nurturing relationship with the student. Feinberg also suggests that doing simple things such as celebrating students birthdays, posting and covering the classroom with student work will also help to build a sense of community, responsibility, teamwork and ownership.<sup>11</sup> One final quote that I really appreciate and hope to implement in my own classroom is "helping, sharing, participating, planning and working together. These are the heart of a co-operative classroom."<sup>12</sup> I firmly believe that including the students in this process and making it a community-based learning environment rather than a teacher-taught environment will help achieve these goals and qualities of a supportive classroom and foster relationships with the students.

### **C. Foster SEL**

In order to foster SEL in the classroom, it's imperative to understand what the purpose of schooling is. It's about teaching students to become responsible, concerned and contributing members of society. In order to be part of society, the student has to possess a certain level of social competence in order to actively participate in that particular environment.<sup>13</sup> In some cases, school may be the only place in which students learn and acquire these social and emotional skills. I plan to encourage my students to collaborate on ideas, their feelings and thoughts as often as possible whether it be through in-class discussions, journals, diaries, debates, think-pair-share activities or presentations.<sup>14</sup> It is not

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Freiberg, J. H. (2001). From tourists to citizens in the classroom. *Education Leadership*, 54, pg. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pg 34

<sup>13</sup> Schonert-Reichl, K.A. & Hymel, S. (2007). Educating the heart as well as the mind social and emotional learning for school and life success. *Education Canada*, 47(2), 20-25.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

possible to learning the social and emotional skills on their own, but encouraging collaboration with their peers, teachers and families will help develop and hone these skills, in addition to building important relationships. It is also important to deal with problems in the classroom in peaceful ways in which their views and arguments are presented in a respectful manner.<sup>15</sup> Through these activities, the student will be able to determine what their emotions are, how their emotions are affected, what their values, strengths and weaknesses may be depending on various situations.<sup>16</sup> Most importantly, Freiberg points out that one of the most important factors in SEL is showing the students that you genuinely care about them, their well-being, success and achievement.<sup>17</sup> This can be done by listening to what they have to say, trusting and respecting them as a learner and an individual.<sup>18</sup>

#### **D. Prevent Problems**

The Behavioural Intervention Guide has some great tips for preventing problems in the classroom. For starters, it's imperative to have clear and transparent expectations and rules for the students to follow.<sup>19</sup> This give a structured, and predictable schedule for the students to follow and addition to providing them with specific requests and criteria they are required to meet.<sup>20</sup> In addition, I plan to involve the students in the planning process and allow them to contribute to the classroom etiquette rules. This helps to foster ownership, involvement, and self-regulation while also providing a positive classroom atmosphere.<sup>21</sup> What I have done in the past is also come in to the classroom early in order to set up the day's activities for the class, which prevents wasting class time, and preventing

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Freiberg, *Tourists to Citizens*

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *The Behavioural Guide*

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

students from losing focus.<sup>22</sup> Freiberg also made a great point of stating that the classroom is about mutual responsibility which can be done by giving the students jobs or positions in the classroom, rotating them frequently so that all students have an opportunity to contribute.<sup>23</sup> Not only does this allow for up to thirty more minutes of instruction time per day, it aids in building ownership and accountability.<sup>24</sup> In my own class, I would like to see the students take ownership of sorting through music, stacking/clearing chairs at the end of the day, taking the attendance to the office, photocopying, leading sectionals or even tutoring.

### **Part 3:**

#### **The Situation**

While on practicum, my sponsor teacher had assigned his grade 9 strings class a chromatic scale on the violin for homework. He had told the students in advance that they would have to perform a playing test the next class. The next day, he asked each student to play the chromatic scale. One of the students had approached him before class that day and asked if she could play the test for me instead of doing it in front of the class but my sponsor teacher said no to her request. When her turn came around to play the test, she started to hyper-ventilate and cry. My sponsor teacher didn't know what to do, so I signalled to him to continue with the next student while I personally pulled her aside into his office at the back of the room.

#### **B. First Example of How to Address the Situation:**

This incident did occur during my second day on practicum and this is how I dealt with it. I was extremely concerned about her well-being and I knew that my sponsor teacher really didn't know what

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<sup>22</sup> Freiberg, *Tourists to Citizens*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

to do. I came over to her immediately and asked her if she would be alright coming with me and she said yes. My sponsor teacher has his own office at the back of the classroom that I was able to use to calm her down. I first got her breathing under control and asked if I could go and grab some kleenex from the washroom. When I came back, I asked her if she could tell me what was wrong and what I could do to help. She opened up to me saying that her parents had decided to get divorced the night before in addition to being cyber-bullied on an online website. She was understandably very upset and the pressure of having to play in front of everyone was just too much.

My first thought was "wow, what do I do?" I knew there wasn't much I could do in regards to her parents pending divorce, so I inquired a bit further and asked her why she was being bullied. Her response was that she had signed up to a website designed to help with homework and that the other students had taken to calling her "stupid", "dumb", "waste of space" and "useless." At this point, I knew I needed help and told her we needed to go and speak with the counsellor. She agreed and we both went down to the counselling suite together. I stayed with her during the entire meeting, and between the three of us, we were able to work out some strategies for dealing with the situation. Clearly, this was over and above what I should have been dealing with, but I'm thankful I was able to talk to the counsellor in order to get her the help she needed and the strategies I would need to deal with the situation.

At the end of the meeting, she came back with me to the classroom and we talked in the office for a while. I assured her that she was being a great student seeking the help she needed both academically and emotionally and that her work ethic is to be commended especially under the circumstances. I wanted her to know that the classroom is a safe environment and that she was welcome to talk to me at any time. I also asked about what hobbies she had to take her mind off things and give her something positive to look forward to. "Well," she said, "I really love to play my violin and I'm really good at playing guitar!" "Ok then!" I said, "how about this: you can come and practice in the room whenever you like and I'll leave a guitar out for you to use." Low and behold, she was in the classroom before and



after school for hours just about every day while I was there. My sponsor teacher agreed to let her continue with the arrangement as long as she needed it.

In essence, it was important to me as both the adult and teacher in this situation that the student was aware that I was there to help her and listen. I knew it was extremely important that she understand that I genuinely care about her well-being and that I was dedicated to solving the problem. I also wanted to ensure that she had something positive to look forward to and left my classroom door open for her to practice and play to her heart's content, which is something she really enjoys doing. I also felt that it was important to make sure that my classroom was a safe space in which she could talk to me if she needed, knowing that I would respect her and listen to the best of my own abilities.

### **C. Second Example of How to Address the Situation**

First and foremost, I want my classroom to be a safe, welcoming, nurturing environment in which students can be themselves free from persecution and judgement. I would pull the student aside in private and calm them down. What I would have done differently was to inform the student that depending on the nature of the content, I may have to inform a counsellor or school administration in order to obtain the necessary help the student will need. That is something that didn't cross my mind at the time of practicum and I was very fortunate the situation turned out the way it did. What I wanted to do after this situation had happened was address classroom rules and respect policies. While the bullying hadn't occurred in that class, I really wanted to re-establish with all of the students that the classroom is a safe environment, and that all members of the class feel welcome and belong there. I would have asked the class what kinds of behaviour and rules they wanted to see in the classroom, hoping for answers such as listen to one another speak, criticize ideas not people, no name calling, yelling, swearing, and no negative criticism. I also would have liked the opportunity to run through some strategies for this particular student with my sponsor teacher after this situation occurred, but I ended up setting up all of the arrangements on my own because he didn't know what to do or how to

handle the situation either. And while I would have liked to talk to the parents about the situation myself, I really couldn't because of how delicate their own situation was, and the lack of support from my sponsor teacher. In the end, I decided it was better left in the hands of the trained professional counsellor. And I have to say that during this whole process, I was panicking myself. It was literally my second day as a teacher and I was already in and over my head. I did a fairly good job of keeping the appearance of calmness on the outside, but I can assure you I was terrified on the inside. All I knew was that this student was really upset and scared; I simply had to find a way to make the situation better. I would like to see myself in the future handling these types of situations with an inner sense of calmness and poise, but I'm still really happy with how I dealt with this situation at the time.

All in all, I think as a teacher it's important to ensure and reassure the students that they matter, they have a voice and they are part of a classroom society. Making sure that they know what's expected, what behaviour is and isn't appropriate, setting out clear rules to follow while allowing for creativity and exploration is also crucial to making the classroom a safe environment. What I always appreciated about my teacher was that no matter what happened, he always had positive feedback to give to not only make us feel valued and important while also making us better students and life long learners.