

Walling Off or Welcoming In? The Challenge of Creating Inclusive Spaces in Diverse Contexts

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“Thank you all for being here, considering the weather,” Rob Lewis announced. “We’ll end on time so everyone can get home safely.” It was the monthly meeting of the School Culture Committee (SCC) at The Jersey City K-8 School.¹ As Social-Emotional Learning Coordinator for the school, Rob had pulled together a team of teachers, parents, and the principal to address a recent surge in divisive language among students. While committee members settled themselves around a table in the library, the first flakes of snow outside hinted at the coming blizzard. Everyone was eager to finish drafting the SCC’s proposed guidelines for strengthening and evaluating school culture at JC K-8.

“Rob, before we dive in, can we hear a bit about how it’s been going with Danielle and her friends?” Principal Winters asked. “I’m curious if Danielle’s friends are still ostracizing her because of her family’s support for Trump. At the last SCC meeting, we agreed that incidents like this highlighted the importance of teaching inclusivity and how to get past our differences. How has it been going in your meetings with the girls at recess?”

“I’ve been inspired by their willingness to be honest with each other,” Rob replied, “but it is going to take a lot more time and work for their friendships to be repaired. Danielle’s friends—especially but not only her friends of color—just aren’t able to reconcile the fact that she says positive things about Trump. Teresa, in particular, still can’t forgive Danielle for making that comment about ‘criminal illegals’ given what she knows about Teresa’s cousin. And Danielle is just so hurt that her friends are holding her political views against her. They are all taking these statements very personally.”

“It’s hard not to take it personally!” Gregory Timms, a 7th grade father, jumped in. “White students are the minority at this school, but they are treated like they are the unjustly privileged majority. Colin told me at dinner last night that there are kids in his class who won’t work with him just because they know our family voted for Trump. He wants to switch schools, but we can’t afford to move to a whiter district or send him to a private school.”

“Well, we love Colin and hope he won’t switch schools!” exclaimed Suzy, Colin’s humanities teacher. “I think the problem is that many of Trump’s statements are emotionally damaging to many of our students. They lack coping strategies.”

“Right! How are they supposed to react when they hear their classmates insinuating that they don’t even belong in this country?” added Madison, mother of a first grade student. “I believe in zero tolerance for bullying. That’s the point of this committee, to make sure that JC K-8 has a culture we can be proud of, where no child is bullied or harassed. But in these instances, I feel like our kids are having to set boundaries because the school isn’t doing it for them.”

“I agree our committee needs to set those boundaries more clearly, but I worry about characterizing these disputes automatically as bullying or harassment,” Principal Winters intervened. “You know that by state law, we are mandated reporters for all incidents of bullying or harassment.² I don’t think that we should be reporting and punishing Danielle, Teresa, or Colin’s classmates; we should be teaching them how to work together and get along. Do we really want to criminalize what should be teachable moments?”

"But we have anti-bullying laws for a reason, and we can't overlook the harm that treating bullying or harassment as teachable moments could have on kids being bullied, especially those from marginalized groups," Madison responded. "That would do everything but create a safe space for students to learn."

"Let's dive into this," said Rob. "Both Madison and Principal Winters make valid points here. We do have harassment and bullying laws for a very good reason, and yet we risk alienating our students if we fail to instruct them in the social-emotional skills they need to navigate what has become a nearly impossible political atmosphere, even for adults. I'd love to hear from Elena on this... I believe she had a provocative experience with her first graders this week."

"Yes!" Elena Morales, a veteran first grade teacher at JC K-8, eagerly began her story. "We were in the block room, and a small group of boys began building a wall that spanned the width of the classroom."

"Oh boy," muttered Suzy.

"Right," continued Elena. "At first, I thought nothing of it, but then they started chanting, 'Build the wall! Build the wall!'"

"No, they did not—" said Madison. Gregory shifted slightly in his chair.

"I could see that some of my students were feeling uncomfortable, and I immediately called a *timeout*. Normally, I don't interfere with the children's play. They need the freedom to explore, problem-solve, and negotiate differences on their own. If I step in, they lose opportunities that are important for their cognitive and social development. But this time.... something felt... different. I just couldn't sit back and *watch*! I asked them, *What are you boys working on, hmmm?* They said, *We're building the wall to keep the Mexicans out!* They were so excited and proud of their work."

"What did you do?!" Suzy could barely contain herself. Everyone was listening intently.

"Elena, tell them how you reflected on your reaction before proceeding. I think this is an important part of the story," suggested Rob.

Elena took a deep breath, and continued. "I checked myself first. I noticed what I was feeling, which was a little bit of anger that these kids had already been indoctrinated to hate and exclude based on national origin! But then I felt like, you know what? They're in *my class* now! I'm their teacher. It is MY RESPONSIBILITY to educate them. I mean, especially at the primary level, our students are innocently repeating the things they hear at home and on the news, without really understanding the consequences of their words!"

"Right on!" Madison chimed in, and Suzy applauded. Elena continued.

"So, in front of the whole class, I posed the question: *Why do some people want to keep other people out?* And the kids had so many interesting comments. One child said, *because sometimes you just want to be alone or with your best friends, and so you have to say no to some people.* Another child said, *because you have to stay safe, and you don't know if strangers could be dangerous.* One of the boys building the wall said, *because the Mexicans will take our jobs!*

I turned to that boy and I asked him, *What is your job?* He looked at me with wide eyes and shrugged his shoulders.

"I quietly said to my class, *Your job, boys and girls, is to come to school to learn. And while you are at school, your job is to be kind, to be caring, and to be respectful so that everyone has a safe learning space. Do you think anyone can stop you from being kind, caring, and respectful?* And they all said,

Nooooooooooooo! So I said, *Then nobody can take your job!*” Elena finished with a low chuckle and shook her head.

After a long moment of silence as people processed Elena’s story, Madison spoke. “Thank you, Ms. Morales. You are teaching our children what really counts in life. To be kind to each other and to think about their actions. You didn’t shame the boys, or talk about politics. You just guided them toward their better selves. I know I speak for the families of all of the marginalized children in your classroom when I say, thank you.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Suzy. “You handled that amazingly! I would have gotten much more political, but you didn’t even need to talk about the issue to correct the thought process behind the behavior. I can learn a lot from your example.”

Rob interjected, “I think it is important to note that first graders have different developmental needs than 7th graders, Suzy. While Elena’s response may have been just right for her students, a more nuanced and critical response would be appropriate for older children and young adults. Our policies should attend to the developmental levels of all of our students.”

“Don’t any of you see what is wrong here?” Gregory’s voice was quiet but tense. “Those boys were playing the policies of the President of the United States, and their public school teacher (a state employee, no less) leveraged her personal, moral and political reasoning to stop them. That was a partisan move, through and through. The boys were creatively engineering a wall, and they were drawing on their knowledge of current events in the process! That should have been celebrated by the teacher, but instead their entire innovation was discouraged. If you wanted to make it a teachable moment, Ms. Morales, you could have taken the time to explain to them the difference between legal and illegal immigration. That would have been a good lesson!”

“Gregory has a point, everyone,” said Principal Winters. “We can’t censor student play or creativity just because it happens to disagree with our politics. Elena, I’m glad you checked yourself enough to not get angry with the boys, but perhaps there is a double-check required in an instance like this.”

“Whoa,” Suzy interjected, “are you saying that Elena should have allowed the boys to role-play being immigration officers at the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico? And that perhaps some children in the class, say the Hispanic students, should have role-played trying to cross the border, and that Elena should have let that all play out?”

The room was quiet.

“I don’t think that’s exactly what I mean, Suzy, but I do think school needs to be a politics-free zone.”

“With all due respect,” Rob offered, “how can school be a politics-free zone? What happened in Elena’s classroom—and with Danielle last week—shows us that politics will enter the school whether we plan for it or not. That’s why we set up this committee, right?”

“Agreed,” said Suzy. “The purpose of school is to prepare students to be citizens in a democracy. How can we prepare future citizens if we cannot talk about politics? We need to lean into these conversations, not back away.”

“If we’re going to ‘lean in’ to politics, let’s have our kids study the First Amendment!” quipped Gregory. “In this country, offensive speech is protected. If you don’t like what someone is saying, you have the right to ignore it! You can’t censor something just because it doesn’t agree with you. That’s a freedom we fight for all around the world.”

"But these are kids in school," Madison protested. "Adults can walk away from offensive statements, or people, but our children can't go anywhere. You said yourself that Colin wanted to switch schools but can't. I volunteered for this committee for a similar reason; I want Marquis to have a more positive experience here than I did as a student, when I had to endure all sorts of racist nonsense."

"We appreciate your commitment, Madison," Principal Winters affirmed, "and yours, too, Gregory. Madison is right, we have to be mindful of our state and federal bullying laws. We can't ignore statements and incidents that create a hostile learning environment and inhibit students' learning, especially since attendance is mandatory."

"Exactly," Elena interjected. "Free speech doesn't mean that schools shouldn't teach children how to be kind to one another! Maybe it's my 'liberal bias,' but I'm not going to stop teaching inclusion and social-emotional skills just because our national political discourse has lowered the bar below civility."

"I'm all for teaching kindness. Just don't confuse kindness with political ideology. Democrats don't have a monopoly on good character," Gregory responded. "But I understand why you might think otherwise, given the liberal bias of teachers in this school. Your friend Suzy over there has liberal propaganda all over her white board. Colin tells me about it daily."

Suzy stared at Gregory in disbelief.

"That poster?" Gregory continued. "*Dear undocumented students, in this classroom, there are no walls. You are loved. Dear Black students, in this classroom, YOUR life matters. You are loved. Dear Muslim students, we know you aren't terrorists. You are loved.* And it goes on and on about how everyone under the sun is loved except for white people and boys. And let me tell you, Colin notices that he's the only one who's left out."

"Mr. Timms, I apologize," started Suzy, "that message was never meant to leave anyone out. It was meant to counter the verbal attacks on specific populations of people by Donald Trump and some of his supporters, while also emphasizing our classroom and school values of inclusion. I hope you can see where I am coming from."

Principal Winters interjected. "In this case, I can see both sides. I really like the message, Suzy, but I also see Gregory's point. Without knowing all the context and history that is behind a message like that, I can see how a white, male child could have a hard time understanding why he is the only one who is not represented in the message of love on his teacher's wall."

Outside, the streetlights illuminated a steady snowfall against a twilight sky.

"So how do we think we can resolve these tensions?" Rob inquired. "Are there any non-negotiables that we can agree on as recommendations to the Jersey City K-8 community? We're almost out of time for today."

"I don't think we should be posting anything on the walls that singles students out based on race or other defining features," said Gregory.

"We need to ensure a safe environment where everyone is loved and cared for," said Suzy.

"We also need to stay politically neutral--or at least cultivate respect for different perspectives," added Principal Winters.

"And call out bullying when we see it," Madison added.

"How can we do all of that at once?" asked Elena. "How can we ensure that everyone feels safe, that no one is singled out, while also honoring contradictory perspectives—some of which actually serve to

further marginalize people or intentionally leave them out? We can't start normalizing perspectives that fundamentally attack others' identities and beliefs, and still stand up against bullying."

"Fair point, Elena," said Rob, "we cannot synthesize these goals without acknowledging the asymmetry of power between groups which is historical, structural, and institutional. We can only bring these complex issues to light by offering a rigorous, well-rounded education that takes into account students' identities. Such an education must be respectful toward various political viewpoints while also setting appropriate boundaries."

"Lovely sentiments... but what's our policy?" Principal Winters asked.

What values, principles, and practices should the School Culture Committee prioritize in their recommendations for Jersey City K-8 faculty and staff? What boundaries should the school set on student speech, if any, in order to foster social-emotional learning, civil discourse, and friendship among students? How might they hold themselves and their students accountable for upholding school values, even when they are not reflected on the national political landscape?

¹ This case is a work of fiction, inspired by our own experiences in classrooms, discussions with current classroom teachers, and survey data collected by *Teaching Tolerance*. See Maureen B. Costello, "The Trump Effect: The Impact of the Presidential Campaign on our Nation's Schools," *Teaching the 2016 Election* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016), <https://www.splcenter.org/20160413/trump-effect-impact-presidential-campaign-our-nations-schools>.

² See <http://www.njea.org/issues-and-political-action/anti-bullying>. New Jersey's Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying law defines these terms as "any gesture, any written, verbal or physical act, or any electronic communication, whether it be a single incident or series of incidents, that is reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic... that takes place on school property, at any school-sponsored function, on a school bus, or off school grounds ... that substantially disrupts or interferes with the orderly operation of the school or the rights of other students, and that a reasonable person should know, under the circumstances, will have the effect of physically or emotionally harming a student or damaging a student's property, or placing a student in reasonable fear of physical or emotional harm to his person or damage his property." The law creates an extensive accountability framework that requires, for example, all school employees or those under contract to report qualifying incidents to the principal the day of, and the New Jersey Department of Education to assign a grade to each school based on reported incidents of harassment, intimidation, and bullying.