

Masterclass Educator Guide

Valencia Abbott

About the Video

Social studies leads students through learning about, analyzing, and reflecting on past and present events in order to make sense of the world around them. In this video, educator Valencia Abbott discusses how she uses Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills to reinforce important themes and practices within her content area. She explains that when a classroom provides a safe space for students using some of the strategies explored below, students have the opportunity to develop identity, empathy, a sense of belonging, *and* agency.

How to Use this Guide

This guide is designed to help you incorporate the ideas presented by the educator in this video into your own teaching. Included here you will find reflection questions and activities to help you integrate SEL skills into your classroom. You may present all of the content or you may pick and choose the questions and activities that best meet the needs of you and your students.

Objectives

- Illustrate how educators can incorporate SEL concepts into the classroom in order to build students' self-identity, practice empathy, create a sense of belonging, and develop student agency
- Demonstrate how educators can use SEL concepts to increase engagement in the classroom
- Equip educators with the background, knowledge, and tools needed to engage students in conversations and learning experiences in social studies and beyond

Featured Educator: Valencia Abbott

Valencia Abbott is a social studies teacher at Rockingham Early College High School in Wentworth, NC. Her high school is special in that it allows students to obtain an associate's degree alongside their high school diploma. Valencia became a teacher at 40 years old, and truly believes it is what she is meant to do.



Themes:

Theme #1: Identity

An Overview: Simply put, identity is *who* someone is as a human being. It consists of both one's social identity and personal identity. While social identity helps individuals understand how they are like others, personal identities are based on how individuals define themselves and/or how they are different from those around them. Both identities work together to contribute to a person's sense of self.

"I'm thinking about how do these stories of history impact where they are now? How is it going to help them be the person that they want to be?"

—Valencia Abbott

In the Classroom: A classroom environment that gives frequent opportunities to explore diverse topics can help students better understand how they think and what they believe. Student's sense of identity is nurtured when educators encourage students to speak for themselves and be open about who they are. As Valencia explains, "What I get to do with history is that I bring in all of these different perspectives of these identities, and sometimes they [my students] will be surprised with what they connect with."

SEL Connections: Identity plays an important role in the skill of self-awareness, which is defined as the ability to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.¹ Students with a strong understanding of who they are have a greater sense of self-worth and a better understanding of how they can contribute to the world around them.

¹ <https://case.l.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-case-l-framework/#self-awareness>

Reflection Questions:

- Do you intentionally select content that will resonate with, connect to, or challenge students' identities?
- How do you provide opportunities for students to connect with your curriculum? Where/when could you do this more?
- How can you give students a chance to reflect about their own identity?
- Is your classroom an inclusive and safe place where students can discuss their strengths, weaknesses, values, and experiences? What can you do to foster this type of environment?

Sample Activity: Encourage students to create identity charts. Designed like word webs, each chart should have the students' name in the middle surrounded by words to describe who they are (including their roles in their families and communities, their backgrounds, their interests, their beliefs, their physical characteristics, etc.). Instruct students to use two different colors to create their chart: one color for their own thoughts (i.e., their personal identities) and one color for the thoughts of others (i.e., their social identities).

Then wrap up with a discussion around their identity charts. Discussion questions can include: Which parts of your identity will likely remain consistent over your life? Which parts may change? Are some parts of your identity more central to who you are than others? Why?

As the year progresses and students grow and evolve, encourage them to continue adding to their chart!

Theme #2: Empathy

An Overview: Empathy is one's ability to sense the emotions of others and imagine what the other person may be thinking or feeling. Empathy is commonly described as being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes.

Empathy is a way to
“...share stories... and have
a shared understanding”

—Valencia Abbott

In the Classroom: Educators can promote empathy in their classroom by encouraging active listening. When students shares their worries, opinions, or thoughts, those around them should be taught to pay attention, show that they’re listening, ask questions, and respond appropriately. Little by little, active listening can help students more clearly see the world from others’ perspectives.

Educators can also use empathy as a tool to increase student engagement. Valencia explains that she uses empathy to help her students connect to her classroom content. For instance, when teaching about the Negro Baseball League, she also makes a point to introduce the history of Hispanic players, which in turn helps many of her students “connect with a world they didn’t know existed.”

SEL Connections: Empathy plays an important role in building social awareness, which is defined as the ability to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts.² Students who are able to understand the perspectives of others are able to feel more compassion for others, show more concern for others’ feelings, and better recognize others’ strengths.

Reflection Questions:

- Empathy can help educators connect with their students. How can teachers better encourage empathy between themselves and their students? How about among their students?
- Empathy can be created through active listening. How do you teach and encourage active listening in your classroom? In what areas can you better integrate the practice of active listening?

- What do you think it means to “teach with empathy”? How can you practice this in every classroom?

Sample Activity: When talking about people (real or fictional—no matter the subject area), use the prompt: “How do you think this person/these people felt?” Consistently encouraging students to synthesize their knowledge about others and consider their emotions is excellent empathy practice. When practiced regularly, it may even result in students who begin asking themselves this question before you have the chance to!

Theme #3: Belonging

An Overview: A sense of belonging can be defined as feeling accepted, included, and valued by others. When students have a sense of belonging, they tend to be more engaged, more motivated, have higher levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem, and ultimately be more successful.

“When I think of belonging, I think of the fact that most of my students that walk through my door never felt that they belonged in a history class because it didn’t serve their needs.”

—Valencia Abbott

In the Classroom: Belonging occurs in a classroom where deep and caring relationships exist. Promoting collaboration and building a culture where students help and respect each other is important. Taking the time to connect with your students so they feel supported and understood by you is also a big indicator of classroom belonging. During these times of connection, students should have the chance to be themselves.

² <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/#social-awareness>

In addition, curricular content can be leveraged to foster a sense of belonging. As Valencia said: "...when I'm teaching history, I'm trying to find these narratives, these stories, this content that they're going to find a connection to." Educators can drive this connection to content in a variety of ways. They can bring in community members or find local news stories to reinforce curricular concepts. They can purposely tie in topics that they know students are passionate about. They can also give students the chance to consider how the content connects to their outside lives.

SEL Connections: Teachers can work on developing their own understanding of SEL competencies like self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills in order to deepen the sense of belonging in their classrooms. Educators who can model and teach these competencies will be better able to create inclusive, compassionate, and empathetic classroom environments.

Reflection Questions:

- Can you think of a time when you personally did not feel like you belonged? What could have been changed so that you felt a sense of belonging?
- Are there students with whom you do not feel you have a connection? What can you do to strengthen these relationships?
- How can you leverage your curricular content to foster a sense of belonging in your students?

Sample Activity: Start a lunch bunch, breakfast club, or snack crew with a small group of students (or create various groups for different days of the week!). Small group meetings in a non-academic environment will give students the chance to bond with both you and each other. You could use your time together for informal catch-ups or you could focus the sessions around specific books, SEL-based discussion questions, or timely "in-the-news" topics.

Theme #4: Agency

An Overview: Students with agency know how to set goals, overcome obstacles, and solve problems. They take an active role in their learning by voicing their opinions and making choices.

"I totally agree that we should let students make a lot of their decisions on how they're going to do "it," who they're going to collaborate with, and how they're going to choose to spend their time. But I think it has to come with knowing that the teacher is going to be there."

—Valencia Abbott

Putting It All Together: Creating a safe, nurturing, and challenging environment where students play an active role in their own learning takes work. However, when students have an understanding of their identity, an awareness of empathy, and a sense of belonging, they are better equipped to be agents of their own learning. From there, educators can encourage agency by giving students power to make choices in their learning within the boundaries of clear guidelines and expectations. As Valencia states, "Balancing students' choice with teachers' parameters makes for a safe environment. Students' agency is important because it gives them power and it gives them a buy-in to their own learning."

Reflection Questions:

- How can you better help your students understand why the content or lesson is important?
- What opportunities do you give your students to explore and learn what they are truly interested in?
- How can you teach your students learning strategies that will work even as they seek to learn outside of the classroom?
- How can you give your students more freedom and guided choice when it comes to their learning?

Sample Activity: Give students the opportunity to make decisions about their learning during an upcoming assignment. Prepare by deciding what you ultimately want your students to learn or achieve. Then give students an opportunity to have input on **one** of the following parts:

- The "*What*" (i.e., the topic): What does the student want to focus on? Is there a stance or specific angle that interests them most?
- The "*How*" (i.e., the process): How will students complete the assignment? What tools will they use?
- The "*Why*" (i.e., the purpose): What is the purpose of the project? How will students demonstrate their learning?