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**BELONGING**

# CONNECTIONS

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## What Does It Mean to Truly Matter?

By Nat Damon  
*Reach Academics*

Relational pedagogy centers on the idea that relationships exist everywhere in the optimal classroom. The teacher-student relationship. The student-student relationship. The teacher-administrator relationship. The teacher-teacher relationship. The teacher-parent relationship. The relationship one has with the classroom space. Most important, the relationship one has with oneself venturing into the classroom each day.

I love asking students about the teacher who matters most to them. So often, they initially consider the “nice” or “funny” or “entertaining” one. These teachers are popular and clearly effective. Yet upon further reflection, students consider the teachers whom they respect. This respect develops once a sense of belief is conveyed from the teacher to the student. The student then works hard for that teacher, motivated by this sense of belief.

Yet we all know that respect is earned, not given. One of the key elements of respect is trust. How we build trust with our students involves authenticity. How do we authentically present as the only adult in the classroom? Kids are expert at sniffing out disingenuousness. As teachers, we must always remember that our students constantly look to us as living examples of the adults they will soon become. They will connect with us more readily when we present ourselves as authentically human.

By accepting our humanness in the classroom, we establish a culture of belonging. The relational classroom is an inclusive classroom. As a result, the spirit of learning permeates every square inch. Belonging is critical toward the relational, inclusive classroom because when a stu-

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dent feels like he, she, or they belong, they are more apt to express their thinking with confidence and without fear of being wrong or, worse, mocked.

In our work on relational classroom practices, we help teachers notice their role as being like orchestral conductors. Whether physically teaching from the front of the room, or pacing amongst the desks, a teacher is most effective in a harmonious classroom. When a piece of music is harmonious, each instrument is different, and each note belongs exactly where it is. The result is smooth and placid, rooted in a shared space where ideas can grow.

Yet what happens when the note doesn't belong where it is? What results when that discordant note is played by the only adult in the room—the teacher? The answer to this question is a nuanced one, because in the case of

***“...when a student feels like he, she, or they belong, they are more apt to express their thinking with confidence and without fear of being wrong or, worse, mocked.”***

the LGBTQ teacher, that deficit of belonging might not be visible to anyone, perhaps even to the teacher.

Belonging is defined as “an affinity for a place or a situation.” The term, affinity, connotes likeability. Do we like our school? Do we feel liked in our school? Is there a feeling of positive regard toward our school’s meaning and mission? It can also mean “close or intimate relationship.” Does our relationship within the school community feel strong?

In a small group session amongst teachers at the 2023 CSEE Middle School Summit, our discussion took an unexpected turn. One teacher shared, “I always viewed belonging as a power dynamic. You “belong” to us. We have “accepted you” as a member of our (school/organization/family).” Upon returning to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, I noticed a definition of belonging is “possession.”

Until this summit, I hadn’t considered using a lens of power to define the term “belonging.” I’d viewed the term as universally positive and impossible to view skeptically. After all, isn’t the need to belong a fundamental, primal desire?

The power to conform to one’s peers becomes greater the older a child gets. With boys, it tends to occur around age 5 or 6. Stanford professor Judy Chu marks that age as “the moment boys become boys” (also the title of her 2014 book). This is the time when





being included by peers requires repressing non-masculine characteristics. The dancing, sensitive, singing-from-volume-11 boy receives clear signals not to continue such self-expression for fear of giving up a sense of belonging amongst his peer group. This heartbreaking experience occurs across cultures around the globe.

From this example, it becomes imperative for male teachers to demonstrate an authentic male persona. Boys and girls need to view their teachers from the lens of adult modeling. They may not wish to be teachers, yet they constantly formulate opinions about who they want to be like, ethically and morally. “The students are always watching,” wrote Ted and Nancy Sizer.

Armed with this knowledge, elementary school teacher Eric Wlasak was compelled to come out to his head of school after over a decade of being a beloved, and closeted, teacher. In a 2019 *Reach Teach Talk* podcast episode, Eric says this about coming out at his school: “The funny thing is, I didn’t think it (being an LGBTQ male elementary school teacher) really mattered... until it did.”

After coming out to his head of school, Eric’s perspective shifted in the way a parent’s does upon having their first child: *I can’t imagine my life without this child in it.* For Eric: *I can’t imagine my teaching life without being out at my school.*

***“When a teacher belongs at school, their anxieties are mitigated, and their power emerges from their core.”***

Yet even today, many LGBTQ teachers are not comfortable being out in their school. They want to be known, they yearn to be authentic, and they know their teaching is deeply impacted by being whole. Parker Palmer references the “Undivided Self” in his book, *The Courage to Teach*. It is impossible to be an expert teacher while presenting a divided self in the classroom.

Palmer states, “A good teacher must stand where personal and public meet. As we try to connect ourselves and our subjects with our students, we make ourselves, as well as our subjects, vulnerable to indifference, judgment, ridicule. To reduce our vulnerability, we disconnect from students, from subjects, and even from ourselves. This self-protective split of personhood from practice is encouraged by an academic culture that distrusts personal truth.”

When a teacher belongs at school, their anxieties are mitigated, and their power emerges from their core. When a teacher belongs,

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***“A sense of belonging and mattering create the conditions where teachers can truly flourish outwards from the center of their undivided selves.”***

having a framed photo of their partner on their desk. Or being viewed as sensitive as a strength, not a weakness.

I wish I had Eric’s integrity back when I worked in schools and faced examples when I was nudged back into the closet. The numerous times I witnessed “sensitive” as code for gay. The exhaustive double-checking for the right pronoun when asked what my wife and I did over the weekend. The warning that the board is not ready for a gay head of school. The unsolicited advice to, yes, keep the framed photo of my husband and me off my desk “in case it causes unnecessary friction.”

Eric’s desire to matter was indeed a desire to no longer shoulder bridging two selves. He admirably made the transition from being someone who belonged in his school culture to being someone who mattered as a self-assured, confident LGBTQ male. From this advantage, Eric was able to model a broader form of masculinity toward his students, their

parents, and his colleagues without fear, and his school community benefitted.

From the moment he came out to his head of school, Eric became more powerful in his role, and his school benefitted by his unhidden wholeness. If all schools could recognize the positive gains made when each and every teacher approaches their role with the confidence that comes with being true and authentic, they will assuredly become communities where original thinking is truly embraced—in a community of trust. A sense of belonging and mattering create the conditions where teachers can truly flourish outwards from the center of their undivided selves. Isn’t flourishing what we continuously strive for in our schools? ●

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