

# **“Not Too Formal”: Social-Emotional Learning Strategies to Support Grade 6 English Students to Strengthen Collaboration and Relationship Skills**

Liz Joyce, LICSW

Nashoba Brooks School, Concord, Massachusetts, United States

## **Abstract**

There is a commonly held belief that girls avoid confrontation and engagement in “hard” conversations with peers. In this action research project, I set out to challenge this assumption, while also looking to understand what communication strategies and relationship skills the students already had and regularly employed. This research was conducted over the course of approximately eight weeks in late Fall 2021, with 10 Grade 6 students in their English class of which I was not the assigned teacher. By focusing on how teaching specific strategies impacts the abilities to strengthen collaboration and relationship skills, lessons were designed and implemented to target self-awareness and interpersonal communication skills. Students were taught strategies that enabled them to communicate more directly with peers as well as challenge their own thoughts and perceptions. Student feedback was regularly solicited in the form of surveys, writing prompts, class discussions, and a focus group midway through the project. The students’ feedback was critical to the process as it guided and molded the presentation of lessons as well as the format of the last classes. Findings from this project reinforce the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment for girls to share their thoughts and feelings. Overall, girls need to feel a connection with materials and security in their relationships to give meaningful feedback, engage in deeper discussions, and access their problem-solving prowess.

## **Glossary**

**Collaboration skills:** Different abilities that aid in collaboration with peers, such as flexibility, direct communication, active listening, and receptivity to feedback.

**Communication skills:** Strategies and tools to approach conversation(s) that society deems “hard” and/or “uncomfortable” (e.g., interpersonal conflict, topics related to diversity, equity, inclusion, justice).

**Distress tolerance (aka tolerate discomfort):** A person’s ability to sit with feelings of uneasiness, awkwardness, anxiety, embarrassment, and shame from an actual or perceived unpleasant experience.

**Engage meaningfully:** The ability to interact with lessons, materials, and peers in an authentic and thoughtful way which includes speaking openly and honestly with classmates.

**Mitigate conflict:** By teaching active listening and direct communication skills, interpersonal conflict becomes less negative and more of an opportunity to gain fresh perspective.

**Middle School:** At Nashoba Brooks School the Middle School includes Grades 4-8 and the student body is made up of individuals who identify as girls.

**Relationship skills:** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups, including communicating clearly, listening actively, and working collaboratively to problem-solve and negotiating conflict constructively (CASEL, n.d.).

**Self-advocacy:** The ability to speak up for oneself, defend one's beliefs and actions, and make requests that result in one's needs being met.

**Students/girls:** Middle School students at Nashoba Brooks School are individuals who currently identify as girls. The term "girls" is used purposefully in the literature review to provide the underlying context for the gendered implications of this research. The term "students" is used more broadly as it is gender neutral and thus more inclusive, appreciating that gender identity is fluid and ever evolving.

## **“Not Too Formal”: Social-Emotional Learning Strategies to Support Grade 6 English Students to Strengthen Collaboration and Relationship Skills**

Throughout history there have been many characteristics, assumptions, and beliefs ascribed to girls, women, femmes, and any individual that is female presenting—and this is not saying anything about women or femmes of color, trans women, or other marginalized people. As time and society have evolved, we have seen the harmful effects of said assumptions on quality of life and lived potential. We have also seen the empowerment that comes with challenging these faulty assumptions. In fact, by challenging these broadly held often unquestioned beliefs, people have found ways to solve problems, both big and small.

I set out to challenge one such belief by asking the question, “How does teaching Grade 6 English students social-emotional learning strategies impact their ability to strengthen collaboration and relationship skills?” Throughout the course of history, girls and women have been seen as the “weaker sex” and conditioned to be seen but not heard. This social conditioning has led to societal expectations of being a “nice” girl and has left little room for much else. In this action research project, I aimed to dig deeper into what gets in the way of girls speaking their minds and to teach strategies that could support them to do so. As a methodology, action research was a good fit with my objective, in that it is collaborative, reflective, and interactive, allowing the student participants to experience agency and empowerment within the inherent hierarchy present in the classroom.

It is important to note that while the terms “girls,” “femmes,” “females,” “women” etc. have all been used, they require qualifiers. Like all aspects of identity, gender identity is fluid and constantly evolving. Hence, the term “girls” is used broadly though not definitively.

### **Background**

As a clinical social worker, I find interpersonal dynamics fascinating. Adolescents encounter frequent challenges related to communication and relationships, which they are often ill-equipped to handle. Adolescence is also a time when identity development takes priority. Early adolescents are beginning to make the massive shift from looking to their family to explain who they are, to looking to their friends to explain who they are, which contributes to the significant emphasis on peer relationships. I believe that people are served best when they learn healthy, prosocial ways of navigating conflict and interpersonal relationships as early as possible. I was interested, therefore, to see the outcomes of teaching social-emotional strategies to students at a time when peer relationships hold great importance. Similarly, I was interested in looking at the connection between these interpersonal

skills and capacity for problem-solving; building confidence and competence in relationship skills leads to greater confidence and competence in approaching and solving problems.

### **Research Question**

How does teaching Grade 6 English students social-emotional strategies impact their ability to strengthen collaboration and relationship skills?

### **Action Research Methodology**

An action research approach was well-aligned with identifying students' collaboration and relationship skills as it is an interactive, reflective, and iterative approach. Children and adolescents benefit from being asked to provide feedback in an educational setting as it fosters, among other factors, a sense of agency and interest in the material, moving forward. The topic of my research was deeply personal and required students to engage in insight-oriented work. In order to engage students to the best of their ability, there were several ways in which students were asked to provide feedback and direction. Because of their input, I was able to try different approaches to lessons and readjust them based on continuing to solicit their feedback. Such ability to be responsive and flexible with my research action is characteristic of an action research approach

### **Literature Review**

Due to societal expectations and constraints, girls require more guided practice engaging in conversations deemed difficult, such as those related to interpersonal conflict as well as diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. Caldwell (2012) cites Gilligan and Brown (1998) who write that "rather than expressing the truth of their inner experiences, many girls pretend to be what they believe will win them social acceptance" (p. 10). The challenge for educators becomes how to provide a safe space, while acknowledging their developmental age and stage, in which early adolescent girls feel comfortable engaging meaningfully in conversations with peers and teachers.

Related to creating an environment in which students will share freely, a theme that emerged through the literature is the importance of setting norms or guidelines with a group of students from the outset. Students are more likely to lean into discomfort and engage in conversations when they feel supported by their teacher and classmates. One could argue this is even more important for young adolescent girls who experience the "cultural pressure to conform to the dominant conventional image of the ideal, perfect girl—who is always nice and good, who never hurts other people's feelings ... and who contains her feelings, especially anger" (Taylor et al., 1995, as cited in Bell and Golombisky, 2004, p. 296). Classroom culture and school culture provide opportunities for adolescent girls to experiment with pushing back against the Western societal expectations that have been thrust upon them. Given this, it

is ever more important to state clear guidelines for engagement at the beginning of the class or work together.

There are many ways to approach guideline setting within a classroom. *Let's Talk! Discussing Race, Racism and Other Difficult Topics with Students* (Teaching Tolerance, 2020), a manual created by Learning for Justice, formerly known as Teaching Tolerance, suggests that in order to establish classroom norms, facilitators or teachers should lead a discussion that, as an end product, develops a class contract. The authors write, "pre-established norms or a contract can help students support a healthy classroom environment and reduce the likelihood that you will have to intervene" (p. 5). An exercise such as establishing a class contract or conversation guidelines creates the foundation upon which rich conversations can be built. In continuing with the construction metaphor, "first we must commit to *building* conversational safe spaces, not merely *declaring* them. The foundation of such spaces is listening" (Kay, 2019, p. 31).

It should be noted that there is great importance to recognizing who is in the classroom and which culture is setting the "norms." In a school where the composition is predominantly white students from affluent backgrounds, it is even more important to keep this consideration in mind. In fact, there are several different biases of which to remain cognizant, not the least of which, considering the subjects of this research, are gendered biases. Citing Bianco et al. (2011), Morrisette et al. (2017) write, "Gender bias continues to be a factor contributing to inequity in the classroom because students, especially girls, are expected to follow stereotypical gender roles" (pp. 296-297). Often, we are operating with implicit biases, those beliefs or opinions of which we are not consciously aware, and that is something to bring to consciousness as we facilitate conversations between groups of adolescent girls. We must question why certain students, or a particular student, do not speak up in any given conversation and we must deconstruct our assumptions as to why this is occurring.

In addition to considering our students' identities, whether they be gender, cultural, or otherwise, it is also critical to take into account the developmental stage of young adolescent girls. A throughline in the reviewed research revealed heightened awareness of adolescent girls' social experience:

Social networks begin to expand and become more important during adolescence when they increasingly seek independence from their parents. Social status and acceptance in peer groups become critical at this time and the developmental task to navigate through peer relationships and resolve conflicts becomes important. (Page & Charteris, 2017, p. 82)

Middle school students benefit from structure, consistency, and accountability despite not always appreciating or embracing these supports. When considering adolescent students' needs, identities, and their pull for agency and autonomy both in and outside of the classroom, educators need to strike a delicate balance of respecting their developmental tasks while also directly teaching skills and facilitating conversations:

Gender bias in primary education was a critical issue to draw our attention to, primarily because the victims of this bias (mostly girls) grow up to be passive citizens who are not equipped or encouraged to compete in school or future jobs. These authors went on to suggest that the responsibility to change this situation lies with the instructors and the institution. (Osad'an & Burrage, 2013, as cited in Morrissette et al., 2017, p. 298)

The reviewed research emphasizes the importance of building listening and reflecting skills. By developing active listening skills, students can hear one another's stories rather than just listen. As Caldwell (2012) argues, "Through sharing personal experiences and listening to one another respectfully, students form a learning community in which deep, critical thinking naturally emerges" (p. 6). Just as educators must facilitate conversations amongst adolescents in order to support problem-solving potential, educators also need to target skills related to active listening, empathy, and reflection.

### **Research Context**

Nashoba Brooks School, formally established in 1980, is an independent school located outside of Boston in Concord, Massachusetts that serves students in Preschool through Grade 8. Our Lower School student body, Preschool through Grade 3, is comprised of all genders while our Middle School, Grades 4 through 8, is comprised of students who identify as girls. We are a school that is designed to build community, character, and confidence in our students. Students are truly known at Nashoba Brooks both for who they are as individuals and their impact on our community as a whole by appreciating the unique strengths they each contribute. Our mission is "to educate children for a life of continuous learning, accomplishment, and leadership in a diverse and changing world. Nashoba Brooks nurtures students' growth and character, while fostering the development of each child's personal excellence in academics, athletics, and the arts" (Nashoba Brooks School, n.d.).

Classes at Nashoba Brooks are relatively small; the current Grade 6 class is 20 students. The class is composed of students who have attended Nashoba Brooks since the Lower School as well as students who joined our community in Middle School. There is a range of learners and thinkers in the class, which is divided into two sections that typically change three times each year. In the Fall section of

Grade 6, there were students who were quite outspoken and forthcoming with their thoughts and feelings and others who were less so.

### **The Action**

The objective of this study was to challenge the commonly held societal belief that girls avoid confrontation and engaging in “hard” conversations while identifying which skills the students already had and teaching strategies to build communication and relationship skills. The selected group of research participants were 10 Grade 6 English students at Nashoba Brooks School. This group of students was selected due to their developmental age and stage as well as the potential for meaningful integration into the pre-existing English curriculum. The action spanned approximately eight weeks in the fall of 2021.

This research sought to answer the question: How does teaching Grade 6 English students social-emotional learning strategies impact their ability to strengthen collaboration and relationship skills? Broadly, this action research was purposefully designed with flexibility and student agency in mind. Lessons were multimodal and included didactic presentations, in-class worksheets, small group activities, and weekly writing prompts to support students’ self-reflection. The curriculum was designed to allow students exposure to a concept before engaging in self-reflection. Skills taught and discussed included topics such as, active listening, tolerating discomfort, flexible thinking, and self-talk. For example, in the introductory lesson on flexible thinking we started with a warmup, pair share activity where pairs of students discussed the differences between rigid and flexible thinking. This was followed by a full class discussion around the question, “What does it mean to be a black and white thinker?” We then moved into the more self-reflective question, “Can you think of a time you were caught in black and white thinking?” Students were able to engage in the prompted self-reflection because they had previously become comfortable with the material in a depersonalized manner.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected in a myriad of ways throughout the research project. There were 10 students in the targeted section of Grade 6 English and all 10 students, along with their parents, granted consent to participate in the project and have their data analyzed. Prior to any intervention instruction, students responded to a pre-survey. The pre-survey yielded data that informed the lessons and strategies taught by asking what communication strategies they currently use and whether or not they were successful. This approach aligned well with Mertler’s (2020) description of action research as an iterative process, where data collected inform the action itself. Additionally, this approach allowed for personalization to the students’ greatest needs as related to communication strategies.

Students participated in the research project for roughly eight weeks. Throughout that time, there was at least one writing prompt per week directly related to the focus of this research. Data collected via the writing prompts were included in the analysis. Although I taught two classes each week, when appropriate, I also observed one class per week for any carryover of transferable skills. During observations of the class, I took detailed field notes in a running Google document. Halfway through the targeted lessons, there were two focus groups each with five of the 10 students. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed, the data gathered were included in the analysis and also informed the subsequent lessons. Following the conclusion of the lessons, students filled out a post-survey that mirrored the pre-survey.

### **Data Analysis**

As the data collection progressed, there was ongoing review and coding of the data. In order to organize the various data sets, there were broad categories first applied including data gathered from pre-and post -surveys, writing prompts, the focus groups, and field notes taken during class observations. I utilized a Google document to organize my data. As noted above, I implemented a coding scheme that was built as the data were reviewed and as codes emerged. I took care to acknowledge and describe not just the data that supported my research question but also highlighted any contradictory or conflicting information.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The objective of my action was multifaceted, as is always the case when dealing with adolescents. Through an intentional design that allowed for fluidity and flexibility, I aimed to: challenge the commonly held assumption that girls avoid confrontation and engaging in “hard” conversations with peers, identify what strategies and skills the students already employed regularly, and allow the research to be guided and iterated by student feedback. The following themes emerged over the course of teaching and observing this section of Grade 6 English.

#### **Perspective Taking, Empathy, and Engagement in Discussion Increased When Students had Experienced a Similar Situation**

Engagement with the material increased when students felt resonance with a contrived situation that was presented to them. While, on the whole, verbal engagement through discussions and focus groups yielded richer data than writing prompts, there was still evidence of increased perspective taking, empathy, and engagement through written data.

One student who inconsistently engaged in a meaningful manner with writing prompts shared her thoughts and feelings when she identified with the contrived situation presented in a writing

prompt. She wrote: “This happened yesterday one of the members in my group just started writing stuff without talking to me and the other person. It made me feel excluded and sad especially when I looked over to see my best friend laughing away with another classmate and I wanted to be laughing too but no I was stuck not knowing what is (sic) happening and feeling excluded” (Participant 1). When asked what she would want to do about the contrived situation with which she connected, her answers displayed empathy and perspective taking. Participant 1 considered the motivations for her peer’s actions as well as how her feelings might lead to an emotional reaction, rather than a thoughtful response. Participant 1 also wrote, “I do not think the person was doing it on purpose so I didn’t want to hurt there (sic) feelings and when I tried to ask nicely for them to more talk (sic) with the group it didn’t work and it was not fun I did not like it.” Additionally, these quotes illuminate this student’s internalization of the idea of exploring multiple perspectives while still acknowledging and honoring her experience and resulting feelings.

Students at Nashoba Brooks School work together in small groups from a young age, practicing and embodying collaboration, one of our school’s five core values. In the last class, students discussed a group project that went awry, during which they were better able to say what they wanted to have happen and how they would approach a future scenario based on their prior group work experience. The classmates who were not in the aforementioned group shared their input and reflections based on what they were hearing from their classmates. Participant 5 shared that in her group they had specific roles and that seemed to help. Participant 3 said, “I’m not even in this group but sometimes one person has to like go in charge (sic), not to like boss everyone around, but to like help.”

The last question in the post-survey was, “When thinking about the different conversations we had, which did you like and why? Which did you dislike and why?” Participant 6 wrote, “I liked all the ones where we talked about times things (sic) have happened to us that we can all relate to and hear what’s on everybody else’s mind.” This serves as further evidence that when students related to the situations they discussed, there was deeper engagement in the material and with each other. There were many lively and interesting full-class conversations during the research period. Students were eager to participate in conversations, evidenced by the majority of students raising their hands multiple times per class to contribute related anecdotes and to ask clarifying questions that further enriched the discussion. I believe, given the level of engagement, thoughtful contributions and active listening displayed by students, and the general high level of respect shown by, and to, all in the class, that the students found value in the validation and normalization offered by these discussions.

### **Self-Advocacy and Feedback Skills Increased When There was Familiarity in Relationships**

Throughout the course of my research, especially after the focus groups, students became increasingly comfortable sharing their critical feedback about the scripted language of the presented strategies. Being brought together in proximity and with clear ground rules for the discussion lead to students feeling safe and comfortable to share their feedback. In listening to, and building off, one another's thoughts, students found validation in their own experiences. For example, in the focus group Participant 3 stated, referring to a strategy's suggested language, "It's a little bit unrealistic ... I still feel like I wouldn't do that. It's still a little unrealistic." When asked if they had tried any of the strategies outside of class, Participant 4 shared, "I probably did in a different way but like same concept ... not as formal."

Just as using language that was too "formal" drew comment, the Grade 6 students experienced discomfort often and, at times, as a result of unexpected antecedents. The students shared, in different ways, that asking for help was hard. In response to a pre-survey question about barriers to speaking directly or honestly, Participant 9 reflected:

Sometimes (sic), during field hockey, I feel that I cannot ask the coach where I should be or what I should be doing. I think what's holding me back is that I think people will think I am uneducated on the sport.

In response to the same pre-survey question, Participant 2 wrote, "Sometimes it's hard to ask questions in school" and Participant 6 shared, "when (sic) I'm scared to ask for help, scared to get things wrong and have to keep retrying."

Students made distinctions about what they would say or do around their friends versus in other environments, such as in the classroom and on athletic teams. Responding to a pre-survey question about being brave, Participant 5 reflected, "I like being talkative around my friends but around other people I think they will criticize all of my ideas or I will let them down." Feeling comfortable with their peers was a contributing factor to students sharing more openly and honestly.

An interesting and related theme, and an area for future research, emerged in analyzing students' answers to writing prompts and in-class worksheets: barriers to speaking up for self and others. Typically, the goal of the writing prompts was to engage deeper thinking and reflection on the concept explored during class. When provided a prompt that included a fabricated group project scenario, students were asked three questions: How does this make you feel? What would you want to do about it? What would you actually do about it?

Some students answered that they would say or respond in exactly the way they would want to: “I would try to say my opinion and that would make the other people feel like they can too” (Participant 5). Others would feel more reluctant: Participant 8 shared, “I’d probably want to tell them that we all think they should slow down and ask what we think first. And if they don’t listen I probably (sic) talk to a teacher about it.” Others identified a discrepancy between what they would want to do and what they would actually do. This discrepancy led me to identify barriers to speaking up which students encounter, oftentimes this was related to fears of negative impact on a friendship or interpersonal communication with a peer. For example, on a writing prompt in response to a contrived scenario, Participant 4 wrote, “I would actually not speak up because I don’t want to hurt their feelings.”

### **Learning, Processing, and Talking About New Strategies Allowed Students to Internalize and Make Them Their Own**

While the students were forthcoming about what would not work for them in the taught strategies, they were also forthcoming with personal anecdotes and examples that demonstrated they were connecting with the presented concepts. The lessons were designed to help students build self-awareness by focusing on their internal experience, including engaging in self-talk, tolerating discomfort, and understanding the difference between black and white thinking (i.e., rigid) versus seeing the gray (i.e., flexible). Illustrating this point, during the focus group, Participant 9 reflected, “I feel like I’m learning a lot about like myself.”

Through the multiple modalities included in the lessons, presentations, reflection worksheets, turn and talk pair shares, and class discussions, students seemed to fully digest the material. Participant 7 shared during the focus group, “I acknowledge that I have emotional mind and I try to fix it by saying, ‘No, you’re going to be okay, you’re just thinking irrationally’” and, in doing so, demonstrated internalization of the concept of self-talk and the impromptu lesson on emotional mind, rational mind, wise mind, informed by Marsha Linehan’s (1993) work on Dialectical Behavior Therapy.

The curriculum was designed to allow students exposure to a concept before engaging in self-reflection. For example, in the lessons on discomfort, we started by defining discomfort, identifying how we physically feel when uncomfortable, and comparing and contrasting what makes us feel most comfortable, before moving into discussing situations that cause discomfort. Once students demonstrated a working understanding of discomfort, I introduced the concept of distress tolerance before moving into strategies to mitigate discomfort. During the focus group, when asked which lessons were most memorable, students brought up these lessons, “Discomfort one because we talked about it for multiple weeks” (Participant 4). This demonstrates that even material that is repeated can have a

positive impact on learning, and that spending more time on certain core concepts can improve internalization.

### **Conclusion**

Adolescence provides a rich landscape upon which to explore collaboration and relationship skills. Students at this age deeply desire meaningful relationships with peers and are often unsure of how to acquire them. The students involved in this research study became noticeably more comfortable and engaged over the time I spent with them. This was evidenced by their ability to provide feedback to one another and to me, a sense of cohesion within the class which led to less effortful collaboration on assignments, and an increase in sharing personal anecdotes with the class.

A limitation to this research was that I was not a classroom teacher to the research participants. This meant that I did not have the privilege of spending the first two months of school with this group of students setting classroom expectations and building rapport. Also, because I am a social worker and not a teacher, by training, I do not have the benefit of having been taught and trained on curriculum design. Lastly, due to the timing of the research period, all students and employees were still masked at all times inside the building. Interpersonal communication, which is enhanced when individuals can see and interpret nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, was therefore hindered.

The emerging theme of barriers to speaking up for self and others, is an area that deserves time and attention so that we can continue to provide our students with the tools necessary to navigate a diverse and changing world.

### **Reflection**

I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the classroom with these 10 students, it was invigorating. It was exciting to see them connect with the content and make it their own. I am certain that I learned as much, if not more, from them as they did from me. I am filled with gratitude to their parents for granting permission to allow them to participate in this study. I would not have been able to complete the GARC program and project without the wisdom, guidance, and empathic support of my research advisor, Carolyn Mak, along with the rest of our research advisory. Similarly, this project could not have happened had it not been for my colleague, Kayleigh Wanzer, who generously opened the doors to her classroom along with the pages to her planning book. Many thanks to Kaitlyn McHugh, Assistant Head of Middle School, for her thoughtful approach to supporting me and all aspects of this project. Lastly, I am

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