

Lean On Us

Arts, Social-Emotional, and Life Education for Students Now

Written before the COVID-19 pandemic, "Lean on Me" truly is a song for our time.

April 30, 2020 is Worldwide Day of Gratitude, to honor the first responders, frontline healthcare workers, and all those who are putting their lives on the line to keep us safe by unifying around the Bill Withers' song "Lean on Me," which has emerged as a rallying cry during the pandemic.

Throughout history music has been a unifying force in the world during times of great challenges. From hurricanes, to earthquakes, to famines, to social issues, to the ravages of disease music always finds a way to bring people together.

So "Lean on Me" is an amazingly timely song. It also serves as an excellent example of how the visual and performing arts provide a unique outlet for expressing concern, coping, and hopefulness.

Here's how:

- Share the music for Lean on Me with your students (the music may be viewed [here](#).)
- Have the students listen to "[Lean on Me](#)"
- Ask your students to reflect on what they heard. What moved them? What was the message of the song?
- After listening to the song have them learn the melody on an instrument or with their voice

Dissect the song – How was the mode created musically? What type of rhythm is used? What do the lyrics mean to them? What type of song form is it?

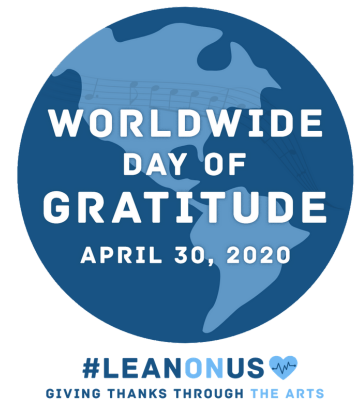
How was the mood created, musically? What was the structure of the song? How does the melody move? What feelings do the lyrics evoke? How does this song relate to what is happening today? What other songs have a similar message? What other songs have been used to unite people during times of great challenge?

How would you rewrite the lyrics for today?

Bring SEL Into The Process Explicitly

If you have been working with social-emotional learning (SEL) with your students, you can particularly encourage them to describe the range of emotions they felt at listening to the song: where they felt empathy most strongly, and to think about the issue the writer was trying to solve in writing this song.

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Have Students Create Their Own Artistic Contributions

That brings us to perhaps the most important part. Encourage your students to create their own version of a song. What would they want to communicate about the pandemic? What might they want to say about how to best spend their time at home during this difficult period of time? (This will also give them a chance to exercise their SEL skills, especially if they work in pairs or small groups, which I recommend.) They can modify the lyrics of Lean on Me, they can use the same lyrics and create new melodies, they can re-score the performance, they can create a graphic accompaniment (painting, drawing, sketch), or dance movement to the song. Or, they can create their own song, expressing their own feelings about the current pandemic and how it is affecting them, their friends, their families, their grandparents, their communities, and any aspect of the wider world.

They can share their products with one-another, their grade-level, families, school, and community. They can then make a video and post their work on YouTube for sharing on social media using the hashtags #LeanOnUs and #DayOfGratitude on April 30th!

Counseling, School Psychology, and Social Work Applications

Finally, those working with young people experiencing difficulties, particularly as related to the pandemic and its impact on their loved ones, may find that having students listen to, comment, and work to create their own versions of this song can be highly therapeutic. You may even want to couch the task in asking students to be “music critics.” Say that you are screening a video in two versions to get their opinions about their usefulness, the feelings they evoke, etc. Then, ask how they would make the videos better, in either or both versions. The act of creating art can be tremendously helpful to students who may be less comfortable with direct verbal/talking therapy modalities.

This article is adapted from a post by Dr. Maurice J. Elias, professor in the Psychology Department at Rutgers University, director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab (www.secdlab.org), and Co-Director of the Academy for SEL in Schools (SELinSchools.org). He is past president of the Society for Community Research and Action/Division of Community Psychology (27) of the APA and has received the SCRA Distinguished Contribution to Practice and Ethnic Minority Mentoring Awards, as well as the Sanford McDonnell Lifetime Achievement Award for Character Education.