***(This is the first post in a two-part series.)***

The new question-of-the-week is:

***What are the best ways you are incorporating social-emotional learning in your classroom and what are you doing to ensure that it is culturally responsive?***

Many teachers will say that social-emotional learning is a key part of their practice, though not all look at it through a culturally responsive lens.

In fact, there are educators and noneducators alike who are using the idea of SEL to actually subvert many of the goals of cultural responsiveness (see [The Manipulation of Social Emotional Learning](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/03/08/the-manipulation-of-social-emotional-learning/)).

Previous posts appearing here have also tackled this challenge:

***[\* ‘The Problem With Kindness': SEL & the Death of George Floyd](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2020/06/the_problem_with_kindness_sel_the_death_of_george_floyd.html)***

***[\* Using Social-Emotional Learning to Challenge ‘Systems of Oppression’](https://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2017/10/response_using_sel_to_challenge_systems_of_oppression.html)***

* ***[Equity & Social-Emotional Learning](https://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2017/10/response_equity_social_emotional_learning.html)***

You might also be interested in all of the many SEL-related posts that have been published here over the past 11 years: [Student Motivation & Social-Emotional Learning](https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-q-a-collections-student-motivation-social-emotional-learning/2021/07)

Today, Tairen McCollister, Mike Kaechele, and Libby Woodfin share their responses to the question.

**Using ‘Activation Activities’**

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Social-emotional learning is a critical component to effectively teaching, pr-pandemic and even more so, as we navigate the current waters of education. For some educators, it is just an inherent piece of their curriculum, disposition, personality, etc. For others, particularly those fearing they must *change* in order to incorporate SEL, the opportunity to tap into that side of your teaching can be easier than you might think.

CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, defines

social-emotional learning as “how children and adults learn to understand and manage emotions, set goals, show empathy for others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2021). There are five competencies to focus on when utilizing SEL practices: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decisionmaking.

The easiest way to implement SEL is to first choose a competency(ies) and determine how it can be most effectively, and purposefully, used in your classroom and content. In my experience, teaching literature and writing to high school students, I aim to not just hit SEL but culturally responsive practices; culturally responsive pedagogy focuses on the idea of the cultural connection educators can make between their content and classroom and students’ experiences and culture.

The way that I tend to get a two-for-one, if you will, is through any necessary activation activities prior to the start of a unit, lesson plan, or text. For example, self-awareness and social-awareness can easily become a culturally responsive strategy by having students free-write their thoughts on a topic about to be discussed: They can make a personal connection, reflect on their own experiences, or even open it up to any societal beliefs. This ensures that not only are they having a chance to become more aware of their own beliefs, thoughts, etc., they are also connecting prior experiences specific to their culture or even our collective American culture. In an American literature class, or even a world literature class, that is beginning a novel focused on gender issues, this strategy would work well.

In a social studies or biology class, or any other content, the choice of competency can be aligned to your overall objective; incorporating a chance for personal experience, connection, and cultural relevance not only helps with student connection but also comprehension and retention. Neuroscience tells us that the connection component can provide the activation the brain needs to receive and process information. SEL and culturally responsive pedagogy are important to overall learning for our students; we simply have to be mindful of what we want them to accomplish and how we can go about it.

**Project-Based Learning**

*[Mike Kaechele](http://www.michaelkaechele.com/) is a teacher, author, and consultant of SEL and PBL. He believes in student-centered learning by giving kids authentic opportunities to do real work with local community partners. His upcoming book,* The Pulse of PBL: Seamlessly Integrating Social and Emotional Learning, *explores how to fuse SEL into the daily practices of the PBL classroom:*

In order for social and emotional learning to deliver maximum impact, it needs to be integrated into daily classroom routines and practices, not taught separately. SEL is not a district initiative for learning loss but is all about the culture. Daily conversations and practice around the [CASEL competencies](https://casel.org/sel-framework/) makes them a priority. If we truly believe that SEL is important, then the skills must be taught, practiced, and assessed. Teachers should include SEL focuses and goals in their unit and lesson plans to assure that they don’t get neglected in the busyness of teaching.

Pedagogy matters. To cultivate SEL skills, students need to be actively involved in their learning, not passively listening to a teacher. Students cannot practice most of the SEL competencies in a traditional, “sit and git” class. A constructivist framework to partner with SEL is project-based learning. Throughout the project cycle, students are practicing all of the SEL competencies by solving problems related to content standards.

Zarretta Hammond states that “competence leads to confidence.” Through PBL, all students produce quality work in meaningful contexts. False praise for completing a worksheet does not build self-awareness like the pride of displaying your project work to a public audience. The project work itself motivates students and offers endless opportunities to cultivate SEL skills as students interact with each other in teams.

[Transformative SEL](https://casel.org/research/transformative-sel/) moves beyond improving students’ behavior or developing competencies out of context to students addressing complex questions about equity and justice. It is not enough, especially for Black and brown students, to be taught how to “cope” with systemic injustice. Rather, student voices should be amplified using SEL skills to bring about substantive change. For example, responsible decisionmaking should not focus on good personal behavior to minimize class disruptions, but it must be applied to legal, social, and ethical decisions in the local community. Social awareness cannot be limited to understanding different cultures but to advocating liberation for oppressed groups.

PBL topics should embrace, not avoid culturally relevant topics such as systemic racism, climate change, immigration, genocide, prison reform, social inequality, modern-day slavery, economic policy, and rights of BIPOC or other oppressed groups. The next generation inherits many challenging problems from us. It is not our job to prepare them for the future but to navigate these issues with students today. If teachers give up some control, students can develop transformative SEL skills by addressing the pressing needs in their local communities and our country at large, improving our shared world, right now!

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**SEL for a ‘Better World’**

*Libby Woodfin is the director of publications for EL Education, an author of several books about education, and a former teacher and school counselor:*

Learning is fundamentally social and emotional. Recent [research](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/%20publications/evidence-base-learn/) from the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development makes it overwhelmingly clear that learning academic skills does not occur outside of learning social and emotional skills. Strengths or weaknesses in one area—either academic or social-emotional—foster or impede development in the other area (e.g., fear impedes our ability to process information). This report states that “the quality and depth of student learning is enhanced when students have opportunities to interact with others and make meaningful connections to subject material” (p. 5) and “that classroom instruction and academic activities that connect rigorous cognitive challenges with social interaction or that spark students’ emotions result in deeper, longer-term learning” (p. 7).

These findings suggest that not only should social-emotional learning be integrated with students’ academic work but that the principles of [culturally responsive education](https://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/teaching-diverse-learners/strategies-0/culturally-responsive-teaching-0) (CRE) can be applied to curriculum and instruction to enhance learning for students. In line with the Aspen Institute research, curriculum that is designed with the principles of CRE helps students “make meaningful connections to subject material” and may “spark students’ emotions,” which promote learning.

Research is one thing, but what does this mean in practice?

**Lillian and Esperanza’s Story**

Lillian’s face has popped up on the Zoom screen, and hundreds of educators are welcoming her in the chat. They are there to learn about the [new curriculum](https://curriculum.eleducation.org/?_ga=2.24869560.363960155.1625773656-2132649149.1612377401) adopted in their district, and Lillian is there to tell them what she likes best about the curriculum, which has been in use in her school for several years already. Lillian is in 5th grade and is the guest expert in this meeting full of teachers. Her long brown hair and broad smile light up the screen.

After introducing herself, Lillian jumps right in: “My favorite module was definitely the human-rights module.” Her grin somehow grows wider as she says this, and she twists left to right in her desk chair. “In this module, we deeply looked into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and read the book *Esperanza Rising*. I really loved this book because all of the details and events were very engaging, and it actually made me think of my own family’s experiences escaping for safety.”

Lillian goes on to tell her online audience the story of how her family escaped torture and death in their home country. Lillian makes the connection between her family and Esperanza’s family in the book—and to the specific human rights that were violated in her family and in Esperanza’s. “I’m grateful that I’m getting to learn this,” Lillian says, “because it’s helping me know my own rights. This kind of learning means a lot to me because I don’t want to come to school and learn about random things that don’t matter to this world.” Lillian’s identity is affirmed and celebrated by the curriculum—a key tenet of culturally responsive education—and it is clear to everyone witnessing her reflect on the experience that it has been a deeply meaningful and engaging experience for her.

Obviously, not every student will have the same kind of personal connection to Esperanza’s story that Lillian does. However, curriculum and instruction can be designed so that opportunities for social-emotional learning integrated with culturally responsive content are woven into the daily rhythms of any classroom in order to challenge, engage, and empower all students.

Lori, a teacher at Lillian’s school, reflects on how the culturally responsive design of the curriculum allows students to bring their own individual funds of knowledge to school with them: “A lot of the work we do in the curriculum is highly collaborative and allows students to bring their own personal strengths—their ‘home strengths’—into their learning, to really leverage that to get that deeper learning.”

One way to ensure that students have opportunities to collaborate within lessons (and learn and practice social-emotional skills), just as students at Lori and Lillian’s school did, is through discussion protocols. A protocol consists of agreed-upon, detailed guidelines for reading, recording, discussing, or reporting that ensures equal participation and accountability in learning. Protocols invite students to value different perspectives and new insights and make room for listening as well as contributing to discussion. A protocol can be an entire lesson or just a few minutes within a lesson. [The School Reform Initiative](https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocols/) and the [National School Reform Faculty](https://nsrfharmony.org/protocols/) have excellent banks of free protocols on their websites.

Across the country from Lillian’s school in California, in teacher Erin Daly’s classroom in New York City, students in [this video](https://eleducation.org/resources/engaging-students-in-collaborative-academic-discussions) are studying the same module as Lillian. The video features the 5th graders engaging in collaborative academic discussions using a jigsaw protocol. As students dissect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and *Esperanza Rising* in triads, their social-emotional skills are *in use.* They listen actively, they build off of each other’s thinking, they show one another respect, and it is all so fluid and natural in the context of a meaty discussion about human rights. Reflecting on the protocol, Daly says, “It creates a great dynamic for the kids to play off each other. You can create groups where they can really model for each other and help each other become better learners.” A student reflected on the power of group work as well: “I like working in groups with other kids because you get to see things from different perspectives.”

**Social-Emotional Learning for a Better World**

In a [2021 article](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13613324.2020.1798374?journalCode=cree20), authors Patrick Camangian and Stephanie Cariaga pose an essential question: “Are we teaching individual students to manage their emotions and behaviors simply for the sake of upward mobility, and therefore continuing to alienate dispossessed and historically subjugated peoples through an erasure of social resistance? Or are we teaching students to recognize and re-claim their emotions and relationships as fuel for political inquiry, radical healing, and social transformation?”

This question is an important one for educators to grapple with before engaging with any social-emotional learning program. Is the point of “doing” social-emotional learning to help students gain the skills they need to succeed within an unjust and inequitable world or is the point to help them transform it?

Following their deep study of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and *Esperanza Rising*, Lillian and her classmates chose transformation. The students demonstrated their critical consciousness—another key tenet of culturally responsive education—about the issue of human rights by taking action in their community. They conducted a Human Rights March in which they informed the public about specific Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; they created a human-rights mural; and they created multiple keynote presentations to educate their peers about sacrifices people have made to protect human rights around the world.

Culturally responsive educators use the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. CRE is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly. Particularly when teachers take time to debrief learning experiences with students and highlight their skill-building as they learn, students like Lillian can build their social and emotional skills *through* these culturally relevant learning experiences.