

Prioritizing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Social Studies

By Meena Srinivasan, MA

What Is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has increasingly become prioritized in the field of education. But what is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)? It's a term that is now widely used but often without defining what it really means. The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development at the Aspen Institute offers the following comprehensive definition:

“Social and emotional development comprises specific skills and competencies that people need in order to set goals, manage behavior, build relationships, and process and remember information. These skills and competencies develop in a complex system of contexts, interactions, and relationships, suggesting that organizations must take a comprehensive approach to promoting social and emotional development—addressing adult skills and beliefs; organizational culture, climate, and norms; and routines and structures that guide basic interactions and instruction—and that such approaches are most effective when designed to match the needs and contexts of specific organizations and communities. Put simply, social and emotional development is not just about the skills that students and adults possess and deploy; it is also about the features of the educational setting itself, including culture and climate.” (Aspen Institute, 2018)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Meena Srinivasan, MA, National Board Certified Teacher, is a South Asian-American edupreneur with deep expertise in the fields of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mindfulness in Education. She is the Founding Executive Director of Transformative Educational Leadership (TEL), an empowering, racially and culturally diverse, compassion-centered, innovative program for educational leaders who are called to integrate mindfulness-based, social, emotional, academic, and ethical learning into schools and school systems. Prior to this role she spent five and a half years working in partnership with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to implement SEL system-wide in the Oakland Unified School District.

This definition takes into account the importance of context when engaging in SEL and positions SEL as more than just a set of skills and competencies developed irrespective of culture and community—or as something only for young people. One of the most important aspects of this definition is the emphasis on addressing adult skills and beliefs. Central to the success of SEL is an examination of adult beliefs. SEL is not about fixing students but rather about seeing the whole picture of who we are, especially our strengths and assets.



Why Does SEL Matter?

SEL competencies are what we all need for life success, and they are central to the discipline of social studies. When students cultivate empathy in connection to historical subjects and events, their capacity for truly seeing history from multiple perspectives is strengthened. Understanding historical events from multiple perspectives deepens their understanding of history and strengthens their ability to grapple with the complexity of our times. Through integrating SEL with social studies, we support students in:

Self-Awareness—Understanding who they are and the many facets of their identity (race, culture, gender, etc.) along with the emotions they may experience at any given time.

Self-Management—Focusing, managing stress, and reaching their academic goals.

Social Awareness—Fostering empathy, compassion, and an appreciation for differences and various socio-political, historical, and cultural contexts.

Relationship Skills—Cultivating the skills needed for collaboration and teamwork including communicating effectively and resolving conflict.

Responsible Decision-Making—Analyzing evidence, looking for bias, and reflecting on the values and beliefs present in certain historical periods and how we can learn from the past to create a more compassionate and equitable world today.

A powerful way social studies can integrate SEL in service of equity is to prioritize having students learn about the often untold stories of those underrepresented in traditional narratives, so they have a more accurate understanding of events. When students see themselves or those who are different in these narratives, it supports their development into more aware global citizens.

Finally, truly democratic decision-making cannot be possible without the social and emotional skills of self-reflection, social awareness, and responsible decision-making. There is a kinship between SEL and social studies: they are not just complementary but necessary and interdependent with student learning and powerful instruction.

Equity and SEL

An understanding of Equity is key when trying to integrate SEL into your curriculum and instruction. Educational equity means that every student receives what they need in order to develop their full academic, social, and emotional potential despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income.

Transformative SEL encourages us to be mindful of when SEL is reduced solely to an “intervention to address the perceived deficits of students of color or students living in poverty while ignoring the impact of inequities in our systems” and really utilize SEL as a force for developing “student agency to lead positive change in their own communities” (Chatmon & Osta, 2018). Transformative SEL is informed by interconnectedness and awareness of structural inequities while also including practices that are culturally responsive, incorporate student voice, and promote social justice.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the nation’s leading organization for advancing the field of SEL through research, policy, and practice, developed equity elaborations to their SEL framework of interdependent SEL competencies. These equity elaborations explore how SEL can be truly culturally responsive and deepen our understanding of racial stress, systemic oppression, and implicit bias.

CASEL defines Transformative SEL as “a process whereby young people and adults build strong, respectful, and lasting relationships that facilitate co-learning to critically examine root causes of inequity and develop collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community and societal well-being.” When we employ the

following equity-elaborated SEL competencies into our curriculum and instruction, we create a more inclusive classroom.

Equity Elaborated SEL Competencies

Self-Awareness involves understanding one’s emotions, personal identity, goals, and values. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations, having positive mindsets, and possessing a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy and optimism. High levels of self-awareness require the ability to understand the links between one’s personal and sociocultural identities and to recognize how thoughts, feelings, and actions are interconnected.

Self-Management requires skills and attitudes that facilitate the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors. This includes the ability to delay gratification, manage stress, control impulses, and persevere through personal and group-level challenges in order to achieve personal and educational goals.

Social Awareness involves the ability to empathize with and feel compassion for those with the same and different backgrounds and cultures. It also involves understanding social norms for behavior in diverse settings and recognizing family, school, and community resources and supports.

Relationship Skills includes the tools needed to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships and effectively navigate settings with differing social norms and demands. It involves communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking help when needed.

Responsible Decision-Making requires the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to make caring, constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse settings. It requires the ability to critically examine ethical standards, safety concerns, and behavioral norms for risky behavior; to make realistic evaluations of consequences of various interpersonal and institutional actions; and to take the health and well-being of oneself and others into consideration.

Integrating SEL

Think back to your favorite classes when you were an adolescent. What factors made the class your favorite? Chances are, your teacher was able to connect emotionally with your class; there may have been a certain degree of risk taking and engagement, and in order to take risks and stay engaged you had to feel safe, seen, and connected—all of which are attributes of effective SEL.

Integrating SEL with academic learning happens through what students learn (the curriculum/content) and how they learn it (the process).

To integrate SEL you must make lesson plans with SEL in mind, right from the start. Teachers are, at their core, designers, and we design one of the most important things in the world—learning experiences. The number-one factor influencing success is the time and care put into designing the lesson. It's vital to plan with SEL in mind and to integrate it explicitly into lessons. There are many ways to do this, but here are a few tips:

1. Use SEL signature practices in your lesson plans.

There are three practices developed by CASEL professional development consultant Ann McKay Bryson that are widely used among classroom teachers to enhance community while also promoting academic engagement.

Welcoming rituals like morning meetings or an interactive “do-now” build community and set the stage for the learning that’s about to happen. This practice also brings all the voices into the room and draws the attention of students who may be talking at the start of class.

Engaging strategies like “turn to your partner,” “Socratic Seminar,” and “Jigsaw” are infused with SEL, vary in complexity, and consist of sequential steps facilitated by the teacher to support learning individually and collectively.

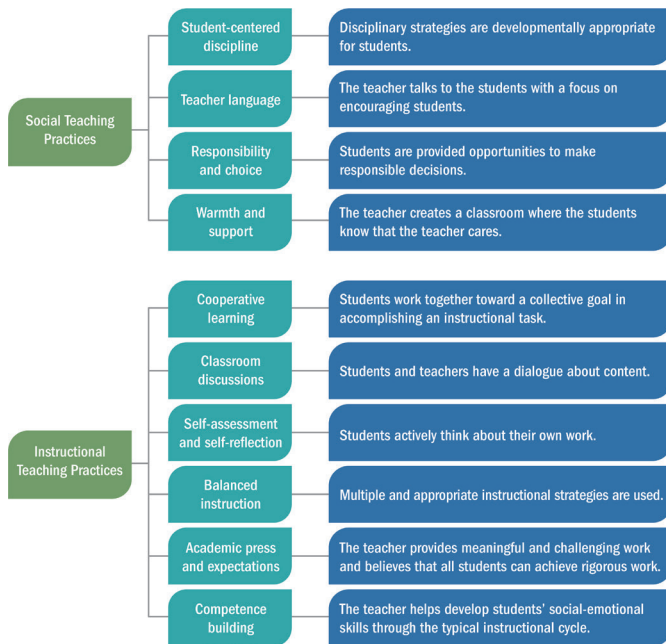
Optimistic closures like an “Appreciation, Apology, or Aha” aren’t meant to be sanguine ways to end class. Rather, they provide an opportunity to reflect on what happened in class, share a next step, express gratitude, or lift up new understanding.

2. Create shared SEL learning targets.

It’s crucial to have shared learning targets in student-friendly language, using “I can” statements so students are clear on what they will learn. Take your teaching to the next level by co-constructing those learning targets with your students, shifting the language from “I” to “we.” By co-creating goals with—rather than imposing goals on—our students, we give them a sense of how we as a class will support each other’s learning and be responsible for contributing to each other’s success.

3. Incorporate both social and instructional teaching practices that promote SEL.

Researcher Nick Yoder has identified 10 teaching practices that promote SEL, including practices like showing “warmth and support” (which lets students know their teacher cares) and teaching students to work effectively together toward a collective instructional goal.



(Yoder, 2014)

4. Develop your own SEL practice.

We teachers can't expect our students to practice SEL if we don't, too. We need to be aware of ourselves—our emotions, thoughts, reactions, values, and beliefs—and use that knowledge to improve teaching and create powerful learning environments. Having a strong adult SEL practice where we welcome diverse perspectives, manage strong emotions, and practice compassion towards ourselves and others can help us make better decisions in service of our students, and can strengthen our relationships with them, too.

We can grow and deepen our own SEL practice by reflecting on guiding questions as we develop our curriculum. Some examples include:

- Self Awareness—What beliefs do I have about my students that may be impacting my instruction or lesson design? How do these beliefs help or hinder my students and myself?
- Social Awareness—How can this lesson affirm the identities of the students in my class? How am I incorporating a counter-narrative?
- Relationship Skills—How will I strengthen my relationship skills with my students, or their relationships with one another, through this lesson? What specific actions can I take?
- Self-Management—How will I practice self-management and be transparent about how I'm practicing it during this lesson?

By answering these for ourselves, we deepen our understanding of how our own SEL can benefit students and strengthen our lessons.

5. Start small, build consistency, and evaluate outcomes.

At first glance, teaching with SEL in mind may seem like a daunting task. But you can begin by taking small steps, choosing just one idea to incorporate into your teaching practice.

The key is to make sure that whatever you choose to do—whether it's using an optimistic closure or giving students “brain breaks”—is done consistently.

Teacher reflection and student feedback are essential to evaluating the outcomes of your lessons and can improve learning. Be sure to build in opportunities for students to offer feedback. Utilize the following reflection questions and build in time for reflection when you lesson plan. Try to begin each class by naming how today's lesson will lift up student input and learning from the class before.

- How and what did my students learn?
What's my evidence?
- How did my students feel? What's my evidence?
- What student feedback did I receive, and how do I plan to incorporate it in upcoming lessons?
- How did I do with my SEL teacher focus?
How do I know?
- What changes do I want to make for my next lesson? Why?

The effort it takes to be more intentional about teaching with SEL in mind is worth it. When teachers prioritize SEL, their classes are better managed and they experience less stress and burnout. That's why focusing on SEL is a win-win for students and teachers. The key here is integrating SEL into what you are already doing. That way, it won't feel like an extra burden, but a lift to your teaching day.

Integrate SEL into your social studies classroom.

To learn more, explore our programs at:

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