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ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Student-Led SEL


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When students have input in their social-emotional learning, the results can be school- and student-transforming.

In their work with schools, researchers Lyn Brown, Catharine Biddle, and Mark Tappan began to feel that many universal SEL programs were too teacher-directed, leaving little room for student input. They piloted a program with several rural schools to change that—incorporating what they call student empowered social-emotional learning (SESEL) into the school culture and curriculum to allow students more control and voice over their learning and experiences.

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PREMIUM RESOURCE

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES ENGAGEMENT CURRICULUM

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Abstract

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Simone sits with two of her classmates behind a long metal table at her school's entryway, a pile of neatly stacked questionnaires and a mason jar filled with freshly sharpened pencils in front of them. It's parent-teacher conference night at rural northeastern Maine's K-6 West Elementary, and the 5th graders are asking students, teachers, and the wider school community to complete a school climate survey to help them better understand the school culture and climate. As the evening wears on, Simone, normally a shy student, walks through the hallways with her classmates, chatting with adults she knows and introducing herself to those she doesn't, and encouraging everyone to take part in the project.

This effort, which was part of the **Rural Vitality Lab's** Trauma-Responsive Equitable Education (TREE) pilot project in two rural elementary schools in Maine, focused on giving students voice and agency to improve their school and learning experience. Our team of researchers and practitioners developed this project in 2018 after realizing that many schools do not involve students in their improvement efforts. Young people know things we cannot about the experience of learning in the schools we create. Our team considers

them experts on educational practices designed to engage and motivate them and knowledgeable about the ways their school is and isn't safe and relationally supportive. We wanted to create opportunities for students to participate in developing relationally rich and equitable educational contexts and to work with teachers to observe, catch, and affirm social and emotional growth and development as it occurs.

Research shows that creating the conditions for students to express their thoughts and feelings and to have some measure of control and agency over the circumstances of their lives reduces stress and enhances school engagement by increasing students' sense of belonging, competency, and efficacy in school (Brasof, 2015; Cook-Sather, 2002). Schools often position students as passive learners, both academically and social-emotionally. But when students are treated as agents of their own learning—when their fundamental humanity is affirmed by their school—they benefit as people and as learners (Mitra, 2004).

From SEL to SESEL

As our work with West Elementary and other schools continued, we began to see the relationship between what we call *student empowered social-emotional learning* (SESEL) and the creation of a safer, more supportive, and more respectful school climate. SESEL is different from standard SEL in both its approach and design. In our experience, many universal SEL programs don't do enough to empower students in

their own learning. These programs are pre-designed, teacher-initiated and controlled, and implemented with the assumption that such lessons apply to all students in the same way (Simmons, 2021; Venet, 2021). This is, of course, also the way standardized curricula in subject matter areas are often implemented, so the approach is very familiar to both teachers and students—the path of least resistance, if you will.

Such universal approaches can wash out or miss altogether important dimensions of difference (such as race, culture, social class, gender, or sexual orientation). SESEL, by contrast, is enacted in relationship with students and initiated in response to students' questions, concerns, and experiences. It is not pre-constructed. It's a way of being. Teachers meet students where they are; take into consideration their expressed needs, concerns, and struggles; and stay attuned to differences in understanding and experience.

Simone and her classmates, for example, all took part in the survey effort; every one of them participated in the 5th grade "leadership team" designed to involve them in the process of school change. Students who might not otherwise be selected or volunteer for such a team—shy students, like Simone; students struggling to speak English, like Javier; academically challenged students, like Ben—became visible school leaders. All had the opportunity to engage in meaningful work and partner with teachers, integrating their interests, skills, emotions, ideas, and stories into the curriculum and the school day.

After reviewing the student responses to the climate survey, and informed by their own experiences, the leadership team chose three goals for the school. When the time came for the team to present their ideas to the teaching staff, three students, including shy Simone, volunteered to serve as spokespersons, articulating these goals:

1. To make the school feel safer by finding people to turn to for support, both fellow students and caring adults.

2. To connect learning to students' own interests, talents, and strengths.

3. To create for students more active and meaningful roles in the school, more voice in school decision making, and more opportunities to work with, talk with, and learn from other students and teachers.

We were struck by the children's focus on creating schoolwide change that would center their voices and bodies—their desire to create conditions for their engagement, agency, and involvement in the process of school reform—and their wish to put into practice a more inclusive, horizontal partnership with teachers. Their hearts were fully in. We were also surprised by the response of teachers to the team's presentation. The students' energy was infectious, certainly, but in the words of one teacher, they were "blown away" by the team's hard work and capabilities, their fresh take on school change, and their desire to be fully included in the TREE project. With the teachers on

board, the students' goals became the center of our work moving forward.

Student-Initiated, Student-Approved

SESEL is not a universal set of skills taught by adults and mastered by students. It is a series of novel, student-initiated opportunities that unfold through collaboration with both peers and adults, deepen relationships with teachers, and engage children's emerging interests and curiosity. At the current moment, when both SEL and racial discussions in schools are under fire from political conservatives (Meckler, 2022), SESEL directs our attention to children and what *they* say they need in their relational lives, ensuring their ways of being and talking and choosing are relevant and meaningful.

At West Elementary, in response to the students' list of goals, we initiated a series of schoolwide, student-centered practices (Brown, Biddle, & Tappan, 2022). We began with an activity called "**Somedays**," an opportunity for every student and teacher to express a wish and to experience school as a place where adults not only heard their wish but partnered with them to make that wish come true (Biddle, Brown, & Tappan, 2022). Using design theory, we worked with students and teachers to develop and infuse learning projects called "microadventures" into the curriculum in response to their desire for more movement and outdoor activities (Brown & Flaumenhaft, 2019). We integrated these practices into the curriculum and the student

leadership team's ongoing efforts to bring student-initiated change into the school.

As students with different interests, backgrounds, and cultural experiences brought their strengths, passions, and knowledge to school, self-awareness and relationships deepened.

These activities offered a range of opportunities for students to work across differences, develop social-emotional responses in relation to lived experience, and problem solve in novel situations. Inviting and scaffolding student-initiated and student-driven practices increased a sense of safety, belonging, and engagement. As students with different interests, backgrounds, and cultural experiences brought their strengths, passions, and knowledge to school and experienced what it felt like to create change in their community through the curriculum,

self-awareness and relationships deepened. A more positive sociocultural school ecology unfolded. That such schoolwide opportunities would coincide with a positive shift in school climate is not surprising (Osher & Berg, 2017). Our work suggests that student voice and empowerment is a central link between the two.

SESEL arises from deep listening to children, a willingness to revisit our assumptions about their capabilities, and a commitment to partnering with them (Taft, 2019). Educators who engage in such ground-level work are aware that it is time consuming, often messy, and requires a faith in process. Successful schoolwide implementation requires a shift in resources and a conscious refusal to succumb to habits that focus on custody and control of young people, such as falling back into more familiar, vertical teacher-student instructional and behavioral approaches (Quinn & Owen, 2016).

Enabling SESEL allowed students and teachers at our pilot schools to create meaningful, authentic projects together. The results were remarkable. As students became more invested in school, absentee rates dropped. As the curriculum integrated more movement and as teachers invited in student expertise and interests, test scores went up. As students brought their whole selves to school, relationships deepened with teachers and other students, and school climate improved. As students felt safer to share their family stories and cultures, new teaching and learning opportunities emerged. Beginning with students' relational desires, their interests, capabilities, and

expertise opened teachers up to the complexity of children's lives and, as a result, to the possibility of more genuine, often difficult, conversations (Dutro, 2019).

There is justified concern that "universal" in SEL curricula terms means "neutral," and "neutral" means, by default, "white" (Simmons, 2021; Venet, 2021). Unexamined, such programs can unwittingly heighten social stresses that arise from unconscious bias or systemic inequities (Garner et al., 2014). Helping teachers develop equity literacy (Gorski, 2017) and hone their skills to listen, observe, and catch social-emotional growth and learning when it happens naturally allows students to co-construct their educational environments. This, then, creates the possibility that all students' creative, joyful, positive emotional expression will be seen and valued (Kaler-Jones, 2020). Our program allowed teachers to shift from an emphasis on the mastery of skills handed down to their students to a student-owned and initiated environment where learning is a partnership.

Novel Experiences

As they graduated from West Elementary and went off to middle school, Simone and her friends handed the leadership team off to the next class. This team, too, had a profound effect on the school. No longer simply repositories of adult expertise, students continued to generate and initiate opportunities for social-emotional learning and to support one another.

SESEL emerges in novel experiences, discovery, in those moments when students have the power and opportunity to choose and to work out how to be in relationship with one another. Teachers may experience it as messy, in much the same way that other student-directed opportunities—like project-based learning or experiential learning—feel chaotic at times. Creating such opportunities, however, invites surprise for both students and teachers–*I didn't know how funny he is, how much she knows about that, how she can lead in that kind of situation, how passionate he is about such things, how much this mattered to them*–and builds the kind of school ecology that supports all learners.

SESEL reminds us that students should be at the center of teaching and learning. To do this requires a shift in thinking, to see young people as human beings with agency, valid perspectives, and desires for their learning right now. Such paradigm shifts require that we be patient with ourselves, courageous in our choices, and ready to learn from our mistakes. Moreover, our work suggests that when students are given opportunities to have input and direct their own social-emotional learning in school, the whole school will benefit from their creativity, generosity, and growth.

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