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Why We Can't Afford Whitewashed Social-Emotional Learning



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Students need the skills to navigate unjust realities.

Abstract ▾



PREMIUM RESOURCE

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

EQUITY



Abstract

Calling on Courageous
Educators

The Ultimate Life Skills

Our young people are growing up in an increasingly complex world—one where our own citizens commit terrorist acts against their fellow countrymen and women. Hate-fueled violence against black and Jewish Americans this past fall was a particularly terrifying reminder of our new reality.

Last year, the FBI released 2017 data showing [hate crimes in the United States increased for the third year in a row](#). Of the 7,106 hate crimes involving about 8,500 victims in 2017, 60 percent were targeted based on race, and about 20 percent were motivated by religious identity. 2019 began with reports of [a white man attacking a black motorist](#), repeatedly striking him in the head with a U-lock, because of his hatred for black people. American youth are consuming these narratives of hate with too few opportunities to digest what is happening or to recognize their agency in creating meaningful change.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) skills can help us build communities that foster courageous conversations across difference so that our students can confront injustice, hate, and inequity. SEL refers to the life skills that support people in experiencing, managing, and expressing emotions, making sound decisions, and fostering interpersonal relationships. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines [five core SEL competencies](#), including self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. These competencies seamlessly lend themselves to preventing violence and to building a more peaceful world.

Calling on Courageous Educators

However, educators often teach SEL absent of the larger sociopolitical context, which is fraught with injustice and inequity and affects our students' lives. As an SEL practitioner-researcher who speaks nationally about the intersection of emotional intelligence, equity, and culturally responsive practices, I hear that educators shy away from such discussions for fear that they will be accused of politicization or that they will lose their jobs.

This fear is not unfounded. In Arizona, state representative Mark Finchem wants to introduce an [education bill that will threaten teachers' jobs](#) if they engage in any dialogue or activity that appears to advocate political, ideological, or religious positions. Other teachers feel ill-equipped and uncomfortable in addressing topics like poverty, gun violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of injustice that many students, particularly our most marginalized, experience daily.

In addition, many popular SEL approaches do not explicitly confront these forms of violence or other social inequities. Recoiling from topics that divide us—when SEL skills could help us get along better—diminishes SEL's promise. Why teach relationship skills if the lessons do not reflect on the interpersonal conflicts that result from racism? Why discuss self- and social awareness without considering power and privilege, even if that means examining controversial topics like white supremacy?

Maintaining a safe space that prevents triggering students is crucially important when infusing SEL opportunities with the sociopolitical context.

The Ultimate Life Skills

We can no longer avoid discussing topics that make us uncomfortable. Our students, incessantly inundated with divisive rhetoric and reports of premeditated acts of violence (or even themselves targets of violence), don't have that luxury. SEL has tremendous potential to create the conditions for youth agency and civic engagement and, ultimately, social change. We owe our students an education that centers on their lives and explicitly addresses the sociopolitical context. This will not only prepare our students to engage civically and peacefully across difference, but also to become the changemakers and leaders we need.



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Strategies for Teaching Fearless SEL

Provide students opportunities to reflect on identity and equity to build self-awareness.

Aristotle said, "Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom." Self-awareness—the ability to recognize one's emotions, thoughts, and values—is a crucial skill for understanding others and the world. Teachers can teach a unit on the relationship between identity and equity, including activities that push students to reflect on how their identity hinders or enhances their life opportunities. Students can interrogate their power and privilege, as well as racism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of violence, to consider what changes they can make within themselves and their world to achieve more equity. To begin, the New York Times has a collection of videos ("[25 Mini-Films for Exploring Race, Bias and Identity With Students](#)"), and the Learning for Justice website features many [K–12 curricular resources](#) on these topics.

Enhance relationship skills through debate.

Relationship skills include making and maintaining rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups and being able to communicate, cooperate, and negotiate conflict constructively. Have students debate an issue in their school or community that matters to them as a way to develop their abilities to build relationships with diverse team members, resolve disagreements, and work collaboratively to debate in effective ways.

Develop responsible decision-making skills through community-based projects.

Responsible decision making means constructive choices about how we behave and interact based on safety, social norms, and ethical standards. Ask students to identify a community problem they want to solve and then, in groups, decide how best to solve it, keeping in mind safety, resources, social norms, and ethics. Students might start a community garden or organize a farmer's market to address access to fresh food in food deserts, protest a community-identified injustice, or partner with an organization to provide a service lacking in the community. The goal is for students to use their responsible decision-making skills while creating change in their communities.

Use current topics to foster social awareness.

Social awareness involves appreciating diversity, building empathy, and respecting others. To develop these skills and use them to create social change, students can study a current event or social issue that is important to them. For example, teachers could lead students on a unit about restroom accessibility. Students can research recent court cases, read and discuss narratives from transgender and gender-expansive students, and interview classmates. A culminating project could include a campaign or a letter to a government official to advocate for a cause or a creative writing piece from the perspective of a marginalized group.

Explore different expectations for self-management.

A key component of self-management is regulating one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. Students can investigate the relationship between emotion regulation and race, gender, or other aspect of a person's identity to explore the different expectations for marginalized groups' self-management. For instance, police-related killings of people from marginalized backgrounds as well as the spate of "concerned citizen" calls on black people napping, celebrating in the park, or entering their own homes make clear that certain groups of

people are expected to regulate their behavior and emotions more strictly in public. Research has confirmed this [racial bias](#). Students can also study how [implicit bias influences teachers' behavioral and academic expectations](#) for students as it relates to the school-to-prison pipeline. At the end of the unit, students can write an opinion piece, produce a YouTube minidocumentary, or present their learning to the school board.



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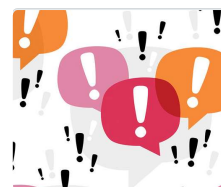



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