



STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING FEARLESS SEL FOR SOCIETAL CHANGE

"You must be the change you want to see in the world."

-Mahatma Gandhi

OVERVIEW

Ideas for using CASEL's five SEL competencies to help cultivate youth agency, civic engagement, and social change

LEVELS

- Middle School
- High School
- College

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To make students' social and emotional skill development relevant to their lives
- To increase students' awareness of societal issues
- To encourage students' civic engagement
- To cultivate students' sense of agency for making a difference in their communities and the world
- To increase students' knowledge of issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion

TIME REQUIRED

- Varies

MATERIALS

- Varies depending on activity

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Brainstorm ways they can contribute to their communities leveraging their SEL skills
Use SEL skills for social change

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Take a moment to reflect on a problem in your school or home community that you would like to change or are already working to change. What [SEL skills](#) do you think would be most helpful to you in affecting this change?

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has tremendous potential to create the conditions for youth agency and civic engagement and, ultimately, social change. We owe our students an education relevant to their lives and that 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.

Below are some ways to cultivate students' SEL skills while developing their sense of agency for social change:

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.
 - 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.
 - Have students 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.

- You might try the New York Times' collection of videos, "[25 Mini-Films for Exploring Race, Bias, and Identity with Students.](#)"

SELF-MANAGEMENT

- A key component of self-management is regulating one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations.
 - Ask students to 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 example, 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.
- Have students 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 a unit such as the ones suggested above, have students write an opinion piece, produce a YouTube minidocumentary, or present their learning to the school board.

SOCIAL AWARENESS

- Social awareness involves appreciating diversity, building empathy, and respecting others.
 - Have students study a current event or social issue that is important to them.
 - For example, restroom accessibility: Have students research recent court cases, read and discuss narratives from transgender and gender -expansive students, and interview classmates.
- A social awareness 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.

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

- 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.

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

- 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.
 - Have students 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.

CLOSURE

- Have students reflect verbally or through writing on their experience weaving together SEL and social justice:
 - *What did you learn about yourself through this experience? Have you changed in any way? If so, how?* [Self-awareness]
 - *What did you do if and when uncomfortable emotions or thoughts arose during this experience? What might you do next time?* [Self-management]
 - *What did you learn about others through this experience?* [Social Awareness]
 - *How did you address conflict when it came up? Would you do anything differently next time to handle disagreements?* [Relationship Skills]
 - *How effective were your choices? Would you make the same ones, or would you have done something differently?* [Responsible Decision-Making]
- Finally, ask students to make an action plan for the future:
 - How will they continue to practice their SEL and social justice in their lives so that the work transcends the classroom?

SOURCE

Adapted from [Dena Simmons'](#) ASCD article entitled "[Why We Can't Afford White-Washed Social-Emotional Learning](#)," with permission from the author.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

How did students respond to these activities? Do you notice whether students are practicing SEL skills more often? Are they more interested and/or engaged in social change?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

When teaching SEL, Researcher [David Yeager](#) and his colleagues argue that it's important to address teens' needs for status ("How do others treat me?") and respect ("Am I granted the rights I expect to be granted as a student?"). If teens feel competent, autonomous, and valued in their community—if they have a sense of high status and respect, in other words—they're likely to be more motivated and

engaged to learn SEL skills

In addition, while research on the effectiveness of culturally-responsive teaching (CRT) is limited, a [study](#) of 244 grades 3-5 Latino students and their teachers found that certain components of CRT were positively related to student reading outcomes: teachers' positive beliefs about CRT, their reaching out to parents to better understand students' prior knowledge, and their critical awareness of how the traditional classroom in the U.S. is set up to support the dominant culture.

Finally, a [study](#) of four high schools serving low-income students of color found that student-centered learning increased academic achievement, graduation rates, and college entrance eligibility, and lowered the attrition rate once students were in college. Examples of student-centered learning included "supportive relationships between students and teachers in academic environments that are challenging, relevant, collaborative, student-directed, and connected to real-life situations."

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Teaching SEL skills within the larger socio-political context is one of the most effective and developmentally-appropriate ways for teaching these skills to middle and high schoolers. Indeed, [Yeager](#) argues that stand-alone SEL lessons, such as the ones found in K-5 SEL curricula, do not work for teens because they do not meet teens' developmental needs.

In addition, many of our students face significant obstacles in their lives due to factors beyond their control, like health challenges, poverty, and institutionalized racism. Using culturally-responsive teaching that is student-centered—prompting students to connect with their strengths, identify what matters most to them, and envision ways they might contribute to the world—may ultimately help them to feel more respected and empowered. And, they are more likely to develop into adults who not only can identify societal issues that need to be changed, but also have the agency to do so.

TERMS OF USE

Thank you for downloading this resource! Please feel free to share it with friends, teachers, colleagues, and anyone else who might benefit from it.

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With gratitude,
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