

Response: Equity & Social-Emotional Learning

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) on October 30, 2017 11:58 AM (From Classroom Q and A Ed Week Teacher Blog)

The new "question-of-the-week" is:

What is the role of racial and economic equity in Social Emotional Learning?

Who Has the Right of Way? The 4-Way Stop Between Equity, Equality, Social-Emotional Learning, and Culturally Responsive Practices

Social Emotional Learning seems to be on everybody's educational agenda these days. Similarly, districts are clamoring to craft culturally responsive practices and 'fix' the awkward ills that may be brewing underneath the surface. While we agree, of course, that these disciplines are both necessary and important, we ask educators and administrators to pause, take a breath, and examine their WHY behind the work, so that they find the language and practices to move forward with intentionality.

Research shows that students who have both social-emotional and cultural competence perform better academically (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor and Schellinger, 9). That's really no surprise; when we feel safe, confident and 'seen,' we're willing to take the risks that lead to growth. There is space for equity of student voice and experience, and so both students and teachers move from a space of the marginalized 'other' to the contributing and valued collaborator.

We define Social Emotional Competence, or SEC, first coined by Jennings & Greenberg, as possessing the competencies of self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness and finding a balance between self-efficacy and social harmony. In other words, SEC is knowing one's self and one's contribution to the larger community. Or, in plain terms, knowing the energy that you bring into the room and how it impacts others.

Teachers who possess this social emotional competence may already be using techniques that recognize and honor the cultural backgrounds of their students; then again, maybe not. Frequently, educational leaders assume that all teachers have SEC, but social-emotional learning is rarely included in teacher preparation programs. Likewise, can we assume that because teachers are grown adults, they have social-emotional or cultural competence? Sadly, we cannot.

"The burning question then becomes, how are we defining equity for our school communities and is this definition both culturally responsive and respectful of students and teachers' social-emotional learning needs?"

- DeEtta Jones, Carla Tantillo
Philibert & Peggy Collings in Ed
Week Teacher

How do we message these disciplines, and their importance, to our school communities?

The burning question then becomes, how are we defining equity for our school communities and is this definition both culturally responsive and respectful of students and teachers' social-emotional learning needs? Our first step is to address the gap in learning. The second step is to create the space for teachers and school stakeholders to address that learning gap and engage in difficult conversations shame-free. The third step is to provide a variety of resources on social-emotional learning and culturally responsive teaching practices and learning opportunities to meet the styles and comfort levels of the participants.

According to Zaretta Hammond, author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, Culturally Responsive Practice "begins when a teacher recognizes the cultural capital and tools students of color bring into the classroom. She is then able to respond to students' use of these cultural learning tools positively by noticing, naming and affirming when students use them in the service of learning."

From the social-emotional learning perspective, it is in the balance between self-efficacy and social harmony that space—equity—is created for one's voice to be heard, being able to speak up for beliefs, while still respecting the beliefs and expectations of others.

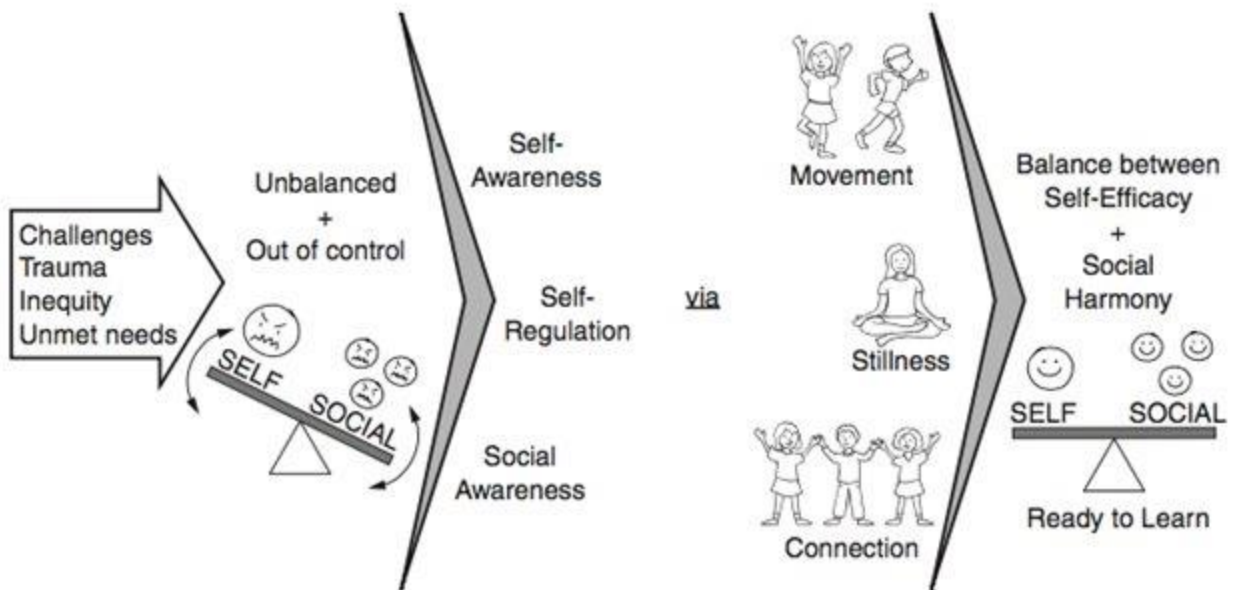


Image Source: Everyday SEL, Philibert 2016

This, in turn, creates space for equity where practitioners and school leaders have a north star to guide their decision making around appropriate accommodations for people from underserved or historically marginalized groups to allow them full access to the rights and privileges enjoyed by the majority. Every voice on the school staff, every voice in the classroom, is worthy and valued. To accept less in any school is to devalue the human capital inherent in each person making up the school community.

Equity is part of the fabric of the United States and represented in many of its most prominent institutions. Equity in the public school system, according to Center for Public Education, "is achieved when all students receive the resources they need so they graduate prepared for success after high school." The key issue is that the focus is almost wholly on the individual, and, in the case of equity, making special accommodations or provisions per individual or group (with finite resources). This means that the allocation of resources is appropriated according to the priorities of the person with the power to make those choices. In public school systems, where the loudest, often most privileged, parents and families have the most influence on school administrators, the pursuit of equity becomes a year-after-year dance for resources. One thing to bear in mind is the difference between equity (defined above) and equality,

which we are defining as treating everyone the same and relying on fair systems and individual effort and merit to distinguish the access, privileges and rewards each person receives.

Love this. A clear illustration of the difference between equality, equity and removal of systemic barriers. pic.twitter.com/8Gaw7xWc3J

—Lee Constable (@Constababble) [May 12, 2016](#)

(Editor's Note: Read more about this graphic, and its origins, [here](#))

A more contemporary definition of equity, represented by the image on the far right, focuses less on the individual to be accommodated and more on the systems within which people need to operate to their fullest potential. In this model, the individual or group is not seen as having deficits, which are defined as characteristics inconsistent with the norm—white, male, straight, cis-gender, able-bodied, child, special learning needs, etc. The limitation of this view is that bias is built into it. The assumption that the norm is "right" and everyone else must be helped to be "more like us" is called unearned (often unrecognized) privilege. Focusing on the fence, however, means that a system can be examined for its ability to meet the needs of the community and students it is designed to serve, and for places where bias is having a negative impact on its usefulness. This work is called "de-biasing systems," and building culturally responsive practices into the repertoire of all educators and administrators is an essential part of this work.

Moving forward, how can we connect these disciplines and systems to practices?

Mindful Practices has been bringing social emotional learning, yoga and mindfulness to classrooms since 2006. In the ensuing years, we have learned that SEL works best when practiced constantly: in every classroom interaction, in every hallway, lunch room and bus ride. When all of the adults in the school use common language to bring students to an awareness that their words and actions are a constant reflection of themselves and a constant representation to the larger community, SEL becomes the operating system of the school, constantly running in the background, making

everything else work more efficiently. This consistency is a worthy goal, but its helper is the practice of Mindfulness, a conscious awareness in the present.

As Jon Kabat-Zinn wrote, "Our point of view stems inevitably from our point of viewing." And so, through yoga and Mindfulness, we can open the body and mind to compatibility with one another, to having the space to let down walls and tackle questions of equality and equity, with compassion for one's self and others, operating from that balance between self-efficacy and social-harmony. Too frequently, students' (and teachers'!) emotions control their bodies, so the antidote is to put their minds and bodies in better connection so they can find that space between stimulus and response. Simple breathwork, inhaling and exhaling deeply, concentrating only on the breath and blocking out all other distractions, facilitates this mind-body connection. And the best news is that teachers can facilitate a breath for and with their students any time they feel that mind-body connection lacking. Administrators can lead a communal breath to start and end a staff meeting, too! Students are not the only ones who need to feel a mind-body connection or a connection of themselves to a larger whole.

The end goal of this work, is for practitioners to safely enter into difficult conversations about why these practices are needed without assuming students' stories or generalizing students' needs based on race, socio-economic status, sexual orientation or simply ignoring difficult conversations out of fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. Practitioners have the chance and challenge every day to inquire, to listen more deeply, open to the possibility that cultural exchanges are happening even when not named, and without always being part of the practitioner's first-person experience. In order to engage in culturally responsive and responsible decision-making, we must have the space to be mindfully present and reflect on WHAT the responsible, culturally and socially responsible action is. CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, names Responsible Decision-Making as one of its five pillars for SEL.

We acknowledge that all of us in learning mode, discovering and co-creating, particularly in classrooms and school buildings, share cultural dynamics. At an individual level, the opportunities are to: 1) invest in the personal and on-going work of becoming curious about culture, your own and others', and 2) be courageous. Here's the tricky

thing: Most of us are well-intentioned, yet fallible humans. We realize that we don't know everything there is to know about cultural competence, let alone all of the individual cultures represented in the students and families with whom we interact. Time after time we hear practitioners letting the fear of not doing or saying something perfectly, or of being misunderstood or potentially offensive, get in the way of taking action, even action that is a reflection of our own good intentions. Here's our tip: Let's your intentions shine through. Humans can read intentions, thanks to our emotional hard wiring. Remember that you are modeling—for your students, colleagues, and community—that being vulnerable is necessary for learning, and it doesn't have to be scary or punishing.

Create the space for students to share with you, and make connections between concepts and experiences. This space allows for a safe harbor within the culture of your classroom and school building. This safe harbor environment, coupled with pedagogical structures that support teacher's attention to equity, normalizes behaviors and practices within the group. Yoga and mindfulness are tools to increase social-emotional competence. As school staff and students gain SEC, they are more willing to stand up for themselves, their rights and their beliefs. No one voice is more powerful than another, despite existing power structures. Providing an equitable, reflective and intentional learning environment gives all teachers and students the space to be present.

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DeEtta Jones, Carla Tantillo Philibert &
Peggy Collings in Ed Week Teacher

You're ready to give yoga and mindfulness a try in your school setting, but where do you start? What are everyday practices that can be embedded into your school community to create a safe, equitable space that also honors students' and teachers' needs for personal space, body awareness and agency?

We suggest starting with shared agreements. Work collectively to generate a short list of what people in a respectful and safe environment do to keep it respectful and safe. Carla's *Everyday SEL in Middle School* offers this list to get you started.

1. Be fully present! Check in every morning so you are Ready to Learn. Learning Posture = sitting up, eyes and bodies toward the speaker. (No earbuds or phones.)
2. Use our communication tools. Find your voice.
3. Be the Solution. Do your actions help our class be focused and centered? Does your attitude help you think creatively about solutions?

4. Honor our classroom. Keep it creative, compassionate, kind, equitable, communicative, safe (physically and emotionally), and inclusive!

5. *Snaps* and Table Taps. Positively witness your peers with two snaps in the air, and hold each other accountable with two-finger taps on the table in front of you when you feel someone is breaking with the agreements.

Once the agreements are truly shared, then you and the students are ready to move, breathe and be still together, with respect for each person's abilities and a limited amount of silliness. Breathing together is usually the first step in the progression toward feelings of interpersonal connectedness. Stretching and moving in community are less comfortable for most of us, so work up to those practices. Likewise, stillness and silence are uncomfortable for some, especially if the individual has little or no experience with being still. Take your time.

An activity from *Everyday SEL in Elementary School* called *Equal Breath* is a great place to start. With spines straight and feet firmly on the floor, call attention to the breath. Notice inhalations and exhalations. Sometimes one is longer than the other. Next, all the participants attempt to make inhalations and exhalations equal: Inhale together while the instructor counts aloud, 4, 3, 2, 1. Shoulders may rise toward ears during the inhale. Then, exhaling together, the instructor counts 1, 2, 3, 4, and shoulders slowly drop away from the ears. Repeat several times. With practice, a classroom community can build to Equal Breaths of six or eight counts.

When you're ready to build upon the success of breathing together, we'd also suggest an activity like *Holding Who I Am*, from *Cooling Down Your Classroom*. Each participant is asked to trace his or her hand. In each finger's outline, students create words, sentences or drawings to show what they would like their teachers and classmates to understand about him or her. These creations decorate the classroom walls as testament to how much we all have to offer the community, and they serve as a tool to learn about one another and what makes us all special.

We offer these introductory activities to help you begin to build an equitable and respectful classroom and school environment. Working together, honoring the

differences that make us all contributors to a greater whole, we can achieve what one individual, one subgroup cannot. And therein lies the synergy of diversity, a wonderful, if sometimes uncomfortable, complexity.

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Response From Carla Tantillo Philibert, DeEtta Jones, & Peggy Collings

Carla Tantillo Philibert founded Mindful Practices in 2006. Mindful Practices empowers teachers and students across the world through mindfulness, yoga and SEL to create an equitable educational environment. Carla is the author of Cooling Down Your Classroom (2012), Everyday SEL in Early Childhood (Routledge, 2017), Everyday SEL

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Making Connections: Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain by Elena
Aguilar