Teaching Social Emotional Learning in a Waldorf School

Megan Sullivan

I have been immersed in Waldorf education since 1993. My career has developed from Class Teaching to specializing in Social Emotional Learning, which I have been teaching as a standalone class in a Waldorf middle school and high school for fourteen years. Social Emotional Learning has become, in recent years, a term that is used frequently. As a term it is new; it started being used in the United States about the same time I started teaching. It took a while to catch on, but now it is well settled. It is not random that Social Emotional Learning has entered education at this time. Students have changed since I started teaching. The world has changed since I started teaching. Social Emotional Learning was developed as a resource to support and address these changes. In this article, I will define Social Emotional Learning and outline the capacities that it aims to develop in students. I will also address its place in Waldorf education and why I believe it is important for our young people growing up today, especially now. Finally, I will suggest how all teachers can incorporate components of Social Emotional Learning in their classrooms.

Social Emotional Learning Defined

Social Emotional Learning, which I will henceforth refer to by its acronym SEL, is defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a national leader in SEL, as

> an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.[1]

CASEL's core competency framework for SEL includes: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills.

In essence, SEL addresses the dynamics of both knowing yourself and of creating a healthy community. The self-knowledge component of an SEL framework refers to identity, meaning, values, agency, and emotional literacy. It is about learning to understand what is yours, what belongs to someone else, and what is pressing in from society. It is learning to understand what you feel and, hopefully, *why* you feel that. And then, in understanding one's feelings, learning to respond deliberately rather than react. It is about developing self-knowledge so that your relationship with yourself and with others can be healthy. The component of creating healthy community cultivates practices of belonging, connecting, and turning towards others with interest and care. It is where love lives, but not in some sentimental way that denies the truth of uncomfortable emotions. The social component of SEL can build capacities for cultural humility and cultural responsiveness and develop skills to engage in courageous conversations.

Why SEL Now

Waldorf veterans might argue that the Waldorf curriculum by itself develops self-knowledge and meaningful social connections and that SEL is redundant, at best, or harmful, at worst. Indeed, one big motif of my early work in sex education and SEL in Waldorf schools in America was the resistance to this work. The message was: 'Don't talk about it! Don't wake them up to something they are not ready for! It is too astral. The curriculum is the antidote.' These were all things I heard in response to my teaching of sex education. In the early days of SEL, as it was picking up steam in education, I experienced dismissiveness with a hint of superiority that can sometimes run amok in Waldorf education. It went more or less like this: 'Students in a Waldorf school do not need Social Emotional Learning because it is in everything we do, and the Waldorf curriculum addresses all needs.' I don't hear this anymore. Now there is an appreciation for how SEL can support the development of young people, with a special focus on the complexities of growing up in these times.

Social Emotional Learning as a subject area is a response to a need. I think, many generations ago, in Steiner's Europe, educators did not need to explicitly teach SEL. I think SEL permeated culture differently. I think the teaching was modeled differently. And I think that the previous generations were constitutionally different. I believe that different cultures, during different times and in various places, have taught Social and Emotional Learning in their own ways and held it in the center of their culture. Right now, in 2022, in the not so United States of America, SEL is well-positioned to help

1 https://casel.org/about-us/

our students process their experiences and meet the challenges we are all facing today.

Here is a review of some of the challenges that I have been observing: The world seems faster than I can keep up with. It often feels chaotic. I am easily overwhelmed by all that I desire to pay attention to, care about, and fight for. Across the world, we are experiencing first-hand the impact of the environmental crisis. We are only now beginning to emerge from a global pandemic. Politically, socially, and morally we are reckoning with the impact and trauma of the many ways people have been and continue to be oppressed here in the United States.

Compounding the stress and uncertainty of the past few years has been a layering of ongoing stressors and traumas.

Dena Simmons, a leader in the intersection of SEL and equity, wrote at the end of the previous school year, "It goes without saying that 2022 has been fraught with frustration, anxiety, and heartbreak. Although the school year may be over, the pain around us still lingers. In this year alone, we experienced numerous instances of gun violence, racial injustice, and the stripping away of our rights and liberties. We are not made for this prolonged collective grief."[2] In naming these experiences as causes of collective grief, Simmons allows us to pause and sit with an acknowledgment that life has been hard and that we have been and continue to be impacted by events we experience in the world. Our children have been impacted and continue to be impacted. In addition to their own grief and uncertainty, they are also impacted by witnessing the adults in their lives struggle. We are seeing the toll of this. Mental health crises are on the rise in children and teens.[3] Never before did I encounter as many parents reach out to me for mental health referrals for their children as in the past year. Consider how you have been experiencing the past two years. Think about how many children you know who are struggling with depression and/or anxiety. Waldorf schools are not exempt from the complexities and intensities that we have been experiencing.

My work in SEL is built on a conviction that it is supportive to talk with young people about what they are experiencing. A glimpse into my biography below illustrates not only my own personal connection to the importance of learning to talk about what young people are experiencing but also the dawning of SEL as a subject area in education.

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The Personal Path

I started teaching twenty-eight years ago. Back then, Social Emotional Learning was not a term in use or a subject area. My first job was at a small Steiner school on the north coast of New South Wales, Australia. As a class teacher, I quickly gravitated to all things social and emotional, without knowing that Social Emotional Learning would receive its name in the years to come. Pastoral care from my Catholic school days and the learning area in Australian schools, called 'Personal Development, Health, and Physical Education', were the closest I had to describing the thing that, as a budding class teacher, made me stay up at night reading and researching. It was the place in my teaching where I quickened. It was what I could not stop thinking about. In 1997, I taught sex education for the first time to my 7th grade class. Now, from the vantage point of mid-life, I can recognize this as the beginning of my life's work. Sitting with those thirteen-year-olds decades ago, I was bowled over by both how much they needed the information and by the realization that no one had spoken to me about any of this when I was their age.

I am Pākehā, a white New Zealander of British descent. When I was eight years old, I moved from New Zealand to Australia, from one English colonized land to another. While the lands of New Zealand and Australia could not be more different, the white culture has the same origin. The ethos of the British stiff upper lip permeated my upbringing. Not talking about things—emotions, that is—was the air I breathed, both in my family culture and the white culture at large. "Have a cup of tea" was the only acknowledgment allowed when things were hard. Toxic positivity simmered in all figures of speech that sought to neutralize struggle and pain, the foremost examples being "she'll be right" and "it happens in all families"—empty platitudes that seek to sweep that thing that is happening under the carpet as quickly as possible. And god forbid if the pain is psychological or emotional! In my home, there was serious psychological distress that was sometimes treated with medication and sometimes with alcohol. It was there, and it was felt by all for years, and it was never, ever

2 Dena Simmons, LiberatED Newsletter, July 2022. https://mailchi.mp/liberatedsel/july-2022-newsletter-14138913?e=1122933a64

3 American Psychological Association. "Children's Mental Health is in Crisis." 2022. https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-childrens-mental-health

talked about. The statement, "You teach what you need to learn," could not be more true for me. What became my vocation of teaching Social Emotional Learning was a response to my biography, to my culture, and to my generational trauma.

How Emotional Literacy Supports Content in a Classroom

Before I share ways in which we can all support our young folks in developing Social Emotional Learning capacities, aimed at meeting those complexities and intensities mentioned above, I want to illustrate how my health curriculum has shifted from being primarily focused on delivering content to being primarily focused on SEL capacity development, with the essential content woven in. In my high school classes, Health and Wellness is the content of my teaching; this means focusing on subjects like habits, stress, sex education, and drug and alcohol education. SEL is the capacity-building part of my work with students. To understand what I mean by 'content' and 'capacity building', let me tell you about my evolution in teaching sex education.

As earlier stated, I first taught sex education in 1997. I am an advocate for comprehensive sex education. If we can't talk with our young people about sex now, they will have a hard time talking about sex when they get older. In the past decade, and more urgently in the past five years, the dialogue around consent has broadened. Consent, as something to be taught, has found its footing and became more clear as it progressed through the "no means no'' phase to its current distilled definition represented by the following language, which I display on a poster in my classroom:

> Consent is *permission* that is: *verbal, sober, conscious, willingly given, enthusiastic, continuous, and revocable. Consent is absolutely mandatory.*

This is the content area of what I might be talking with students about. But, the fact that this definition is taught and students can recite it does not mean they have the skills to make this ideal of consent into a reality or to make a sexual experience a good experience.

Christine Emba's book, *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation,* sincerely addresses why consent alone does not necessarily make a sexual experience a good experience. Emba asks how do we move past the "laser focus of consent"[4] and start to consider what makes sex a fulfilling experience for the people involved. She is asking where the aim is *beyond* consent, where it is to see the humanity and beauty in the person one is with and to "will the good of the other."[5] With this provocation in mind, let's consider sex for a moment.

Sex is complex. We have sex for many reasons, and it can lead to different kinds of experience. It can leave a person with painful trauma, and it can be a bridge to another human being. It can be the worst, and it can be the best. Peggy J. Kleinplatz and A. Dana Ménard, in their book, *Magnificent Sex: Lessons from Extraordinary Lovers,* share from their research that "Optimal sexual experiences involve being totally absorbed and immersed in the moment, an intense connection, being erotically intimate with another person, communicating empathetically, taking risks, surrendering to another, being authentic and accepting the very real possibility of transcendence and transformation."[6] With this as a possibility, and with the idea of broadening the conversation about consent, let's look at sex education again. The content stream of comprehensive sex education addresses the issues of bodies, consent, contraception, STIs, and healthy and unhealthy relationships. Young people need this information. They especially need this information in a post-Roe world. At the same time, I have come to learn that this is not enough. In my upper high school classes, I have had students asking how they might know what they really want, how they might establish healthy boundaries for themselves and with a partner, and how best to deal with sexual coercion. This is where SEL and the capacity-building component of this work supports students.

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The SEL component of sex education develops skills of emotional literacy and communication. The current gold standard for teaching consent in sexual relationships is that consent is verbal and enthusiastic. This means that individuals know that they want to be there with their partner, they know what they want and what they don't want, and they can talk about it with their

4 Christine Emba, *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation* (New York: Sentinel, 2022), xiii.

5 *Rethinking Sex*, 161.

6 Peggy J. Kleinplatz and A. Dana Ménard, *Magnificent Sex: Lessons from Extraordinary Lovers* (New York & London: Routledge, 2020), 184.

partner. This takes emotional literacy. To recognize what their body is telling them, to decipher any feelings and sensations they might be having, and to be able to talk about bodies, about touch, about pleasure, and about being comfortable and uncomfortable takes emotional literacy and maturity. Sex education without an emotional literacy component does not give young people the capacities they need to determine and express their boundaries and negotiate the complexities of relationships. Individuals have to know *how* they are feeling and *what* they are feeling. They have to have practiced talking about how they feel to be able to enthusiastically offer verbal consent. My experience teaching sex education with and without an SEL framework has taught me that we have to explicitly teach emotional literacy and not just assume young people will develop the skills needed for self-knowledge and relationships. In addition, just as reading literacy develops over time and becomes more sophisticated, so does emotional literacy. Emotional literacy is important in all areas of human life, from inner lived experience and self-knowledge to the outer lived experience of engaging meaningfully with the world and with others. It is something that develops throughout childhood and adolescence, and we can all take a part in supporting its development.

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What SEL Looks Like in My Classroom

I start every class with what I call "Our Quiet Time." This is a combination of mindfulness techniques, grounding techniques, and body practices that regulate the nervous system. A regulated nervous system means students are not stuck in a stress response; they are working towards a state of being centered, engaged, and calm. When students have ways to regulate themselves, they are better able to learn and participate in the classroom. "Our quiet time" is a reflective, centering time where students are developing capacities for noticing their inner world and learning techniques to regulate themselves. We practice many different techniques, and it is the students' task to determine which of these supports them to feel regulated and which do not work for them. They keep an ongoing list in The Journal, a book I provide for their reflections during SEL class. I highly recommend the book, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing,* by David A. Treleaven.[7] This book can guide teachers in recognizing trauma symptoms and offers techniques that will mitigate the discomfort and pain that can arise when students who have experienced trauma are asked to close their eyes and come to quiet. Before I understood how trauma can present in a classroom, I would become irritated at students who could not settle and who were "disrupting" my class. A trauma sensitive mindfulness approach allows all students to listen to their bodies and find their own ways to experience safety in the classroom. A trauma sensitive mindfulness approach gives permission to students to notice what is happening inside themselves and take care of themselves; it teaches them that they have agency to do what is right for them. What a vital skill!

In my SEL classes, I explicitly teach emotional literacy, and I build capacities for noticing, naming, and then regulating emotions over many sessions throughout the years that I have with my students. We build feeling lists together. We talk about what different emotions feel like in the body. The students learn to identify sensations that they experience with different feelings. I use an emotional literacy framework for thinking about feelings by asking: What am I feeling? Where am I feeling it in my body? What sensations am I feeling? How strong is the feeling? What is the feeling telling me? What do I need? And just like in any other subject, I use many teacher tricks to help students engage with the material. Some days it might be reflective journaling, sometimes I pass out feeling cards and the students discuss feelings drawn from the set with a partner. Sometimes we play feelings charades. Sometimes we do a sharing circle on a time they felt worried or grateful. All the time the students are building their vocabulary, strengthening their capacity to identify sensations in the body, and developing skills to regulate themselves. In this capacity-building, which is woven throughout my classes, there is an added bonus of normalizing feelings. Students often express obvious relief when they realize they were not the only ones experiencing a certain feeling.

Every class I teach has a component of inner reflection for developing self-knowledge, and it includes social building for fostering a healthy class community. The inner reflection can be as simple as journaling after "Our

7 David A. Treleaven, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2018).

Quiet Time," with the journal prompt asking: "How was that activity for you? Did it make you feel comfortable or uncomfortable in your body? How do you know?" The social building also happens consciously in every class. We do a lot of partner work, group work, and circle work, on which I will elaborate in the section on Social Building in the Classroom.

With these foundational SEL components in place, aimed at developing self-knowledge and providing multiple and varied ways for community building, I then bring age appropriate topics to each class depending on specific arising needs. Topics that are built upon over the years include identity, media literacy, social media use, friendships, bullying, personal goals and values, mental health, healthy relationships, sex education, drug and alcohol education, and transitions such as entering and eventually leaving high school. These topics are supported with the SEL capacities that are being reinforced alongside them. We are always noticing and naming feelings, learning to listen, to communicate, and hopefully to connect.

We Can All Teach Emotional Literacy

Teaching emotional literacy can happen in any class; you don't have to have a standalone SEL course to teach it. First, as with everything child related, we, teachers, need to start with ourselves and consider what we are modeling. How many emotions can you identify when you are experiencing them? Are boys and men allowed the same range of emotions or are emotions policed? Are you comfortable expressing varying emotions? How do you demonstrate self-regulation to young people around you? Where is your growth area in emotional literacy? What do you want to explore more?[8]

With an emotional literacy audit under way, we can begin to consider how we talk about and teach emotional literacy to our young people. When you spend time with a child or teen, you are given many opportunities to help them notice and name their feelings. Emotions are messengers. They are giving us information about our relation to our environment: what we are experiencing, whether we are safe or unsafe, and whether our needs are being met or not. They give us information. So, when a child or teen is having a big feeling that we can observe in their behavior, we can acknowledge it with them: "I see that you are frustrated, let's work out why." Or: "Can I help you find a word that matches how you are feeling?" Or: "Where are you feeling that in your body?"

Teachers can build emotional learning into so many moments in a classroom. After having your class settle and find quiet, you can ask the students to think about a few feelings they have experienced during their day or week. If a teacher conducts class meetings, emotional learning can be a feature in check-ins or in partner work, wherein students share when they feel joy, stress, or gratitude. Writing assignments and journal prompts can serve as a reflective way to consider feelings. Feelings Charades can be a fun game. And all teachers can acknowledge feelings before tests or presentations, as well as teach self-regulation resources to settle the nervous system for students who are especially anxious about certain tasks. Teachers can further help students build a vocabulary of emotions; help students learn to recognize where the feelings live in their bodies through sensations; teach students resources for regulation; and normalize feelings. Adolescents are often overwhelmed in their feelings. Don't leave them to work it out by themselves!

One advantage of building emotional literacy into a regular day in the classroom is that you have a shared vocabulary and framework for when big things happen and for which students need our help understanding or processing. I teach in middle school and high school; living in these times provides plenty of opportunities to acknowledge the hard and confusing parts of life. In class, we have talked about and shared grief over the death of community members. We have shared our shock and fear with school shootings. We have discussed how the pandemic is impacting us. And every time an immediate event or very present topic that is pressing in from the outside world is held with the students in the classroom, there is relief. Young people need an adult ego presence to help them process what they are experiencing in the world; otherwise, we leave them to do it by themselves. As a child, I have been in the latter position, and it is scary and confusing. Being willing to talk with students about hard topics, even if you are not really sure how to, helps them build the skills to talk

> A trauma sensitive mindfulness approach gives permission to students to notice what is happening inside themselves and take care of themselves; it teaches them that they have agency to do what is right for them.

8 You can find more resources for emotional literacy on my website: https://www.megansullivan.net/resources

about hard topics; they will be needing these skills as they make their way through life.

Social Building in a Classroom

One of the first groups I had in the early days of teaching SEL as a stand-alone class was a 12th grade class. I assumed that because many of these students have been together for years, they would know each other really well. They did not. To be more precise, some knew a few classmates very well, while there were some classmates they had hardly ever spoken with. During our closing circle, when the students shared something they were taking away from our time together, the most common response was that they enjoyed getting to know classmates better. I was not expecting this; that realization still informs a lot of the social building work that makes up my classes. Just as we often assume that children will develop emotional literacy passively, we also assume that children will develop social skills just by being social. Some will, others will not. Many of us, children included, struggle socially; in effect, we could end up feeling lonely and isolated.

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Conscious SEL supports meaningful connections and promotes social skills. Consciously making meaningful connections a goal for an activity in the classroom, rather than assuming kids have social skills to navigate their social worlds, is an important support. The fundamental human need to belong and connect is at the root of thriving as well as of hurting. This need shows up in all literature on psychological health as well as in literature on addiction. It is a central aspect of this beautiful life. And there are so many ways we can all help our young people connect with each other. What if, as well as teaching content material, schools also made it a goal to help students connect meaningfully and made time for this in the classrooms? Building a healthy social environment belongs in every class.

Here are some things every teacher can do for social building in the classroom:

First, do your own audit: What are your social values? What do respect, dignity, and belonging look like to you? What do you allow and what do you not allow? Who do you notice? How are you working with inclusion, equity, and justice? How culturally literate are you? Have you considered whether your classroom is a safe place for all of your students?

Explicitly teach your social values. I do this by often saying in class: "There are many different ways to be a human being." "Everyone here deserves respect and care." Then, as a class, we define what respect and care look like. We go through an agreement process where we build classroom social norms together that name what we need to feel to ensure that there is respect and care in our space together. I have done this in a lot of different ways. If the class is able to, we brainstorm a list together. For classes that are more reserved, I have students write down what they need from each other and from me. Here are some responses that are common: be respectful; be patient and listen to others; no side conversations, especially when a classmate is talking; no hurtful words; encourage each other; don't gossip; be open to other people; do not exclude; accept people's opinions.

Once we build a list, we turn to discuss it. I always break apart what 'respect' means because it is such a big word. What does respect feel like and look like? How do you notice its presence or absence? We always talk about accepting people's opinions, since there is a lot that needs to be unpacked with this one. We talk about the difference between debate and healthy dialogue and ways to listen and communicate. I introduce them to James Baldwin's quote: "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist." I also let the students know what I will not allow in my classroom and that it is my job to facilitate discussions so everyone's belonging and dignity is held with care.

Next, we examine the list we created together and see if everyone can agree with this list. Is there anything on this list—I ask for a show of hands—that you can't try to uphold? We talk about how we will work with our agreements, and I remind my students that they are not expected to be perfect and never make mistakes. It is my job to keep our agreements present. We will keep naming them and coming back to them to see if they are still working for us. It is important to be aware that we should initiate classroom agreements only if we are also going to do the ongoing work of calibrating them. These agreements are just like the rules we make for the appropriate time and way to ask permission to leave the class to go to the bathroom. With such agreements, we are paying attention to what is socially allowed and what is not allowed in our space. If a student interrupts another, what will you do? Will you do it consistently?

Agreements are a social naming; I always do them early in our time together. Once they are in place, the social building has a foundation you can keep coming back to.

Social building is making space for connections in class. Every teacher can do this. I partner students up a lot. A lot. And I always remind them of our agreements. I tell them that I expect that they could be partnered with anyone in the room, with a caveat that they should talk to me privately if they are experiencing a difficulty with another student that is causing them distress. I will make sure not to pair them up again until they feel ready. Behind this is a lesson: that they have agency, that they are allowed to say what is OK for them and what is not OK, and that I will listen to them. I often assign partner work at the beginning of class as a warming activity. These activities are simple and easy, consisting of safe discussion prompts taken from resources like Table Topics,[9] or simple conversational tasks such as finding three things they have in common. I make it quick and light. Sometimes I send students on a walk with their partners, which is a wonderful transitioning or otherwise regulating activity.

When I put students into groups, I do so intentionally and teach them how to work together. Don't assume that students can work well in groups. Group work can be very frustrating and cause anxiety if it is not held consciously. Give members of each group a role. Make their first task to assign a timekeeper, a facilitator, and a note-taker. Ask them to decide on their group norms, for example: will they all take turns speaking? Look into Jigsaw Classrooms[10] as a great group technique for teaching content. Sometimes students can choose their own partner or group, but mostly it is I, the teacher, who provides them with opportunities to work with and get to know people outside of their chosen friendship group. I tell them why I am doing this and I acknowledge that it is normal to feel shy or awkward. I name feelings they might have, reminding them that it is okay to have different feelings. Then I get to watch the warming-up that (mostly) happens between them, and it always makes me smile.

If you are a class teacher or high school sponsor/advisor, one of your best resources for class meetings is circle work. Get trained in how to facilitate circles. Circles are the foundation of Restorative Justice and they have their root in indigenous cultures. When you sit together in a circle as a class, the experience is very different. Now you have a decentered classroom. The students are not all facing the front and expected to be listening to a single voice. All voices are equal in a circle. You go around, so that everyone gets to say something. This format sets up the goal of hearing from everyone. You, the teacher, become a facilitator, while the students get to hear and learn from each other. Sharing circles can be simple with a range of getting-to-know-each-other topics, such as 'What do you like to do to relax?' to more reflective topics such as 'How are you changing?' Once a class has experience with circles, these circles can become the container for serious and pressing topics.

Circles are also invaluable for parent meetings. They allow parents to get to know each other, connect to each other, find support, and normalize their joys and struggles in parenting. Again, circles allow the group to hear from all voices, which is an essential aspect of community building. Circle work is one of my most valuable SEL tools. I highly recommend getting trained in circle work. It will give you the resources you need for healthy social work with your class, colleagues, and community.

Closing Thoughts

We are living in a fast world that often feels full of crises. However, I do believe that we are also provided with support and resources to meet the times. A spiritual orientation such as anthroposophy, the work coming out of trauma literacy, the mind-body work of Somatics, and SEL are resources that can fortify us to be present and engaged in this messy and beautiful life.

> SEL is not new. It is the current language for an age-old truth – that meaningful connections are fundamental to our well-being.

Bernd Ruf, in his book, *Educating Traumatized Children: Waldorf Education in Crisis Intervention*, outlines why we must expect more trauma and why trauma literacy has become so necessary today. Ruf explains:

At the beginning of the last century, Steiner revealed that there would be evolutionary changes in the inner human organization as humanity was collectively crossing the threshold, and he described the consequence of this development. The close ties between the physical and life body would grow looser and, as a result, we would experience new soul faculties and forms of consciousness as well as higher degrees of sensitivity.[11]

9 https://www.tabletopics.com/

10 https://www.jigsaw.org/

11 Bernd Ruf, *Educating Traumatized Children: Waldorf Education in Crisis Intervention,* translated by Margot Saar (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2013), 171.

Trauma literacy and Somatics are fields that have arisen in response to our crossing the threshold and they deal with the intense challenges that this entails. The field of trauma literacy focuses on the understanding of the dynamics of trauma and how it affects psycho-spiritual health. Somatic psychology is a study of the way memory and emotion live in the body, both positively and problematically. And, of course, Waldorf education, as a healing education, can be very supportive in this time. Ruf, in unpacking trauma, states that "Waldorf education, an anthroposophically extended medicine, and anthroposophic therapies are practical tools for meeting the changing conditions in the human constitution."[12] This claim is reinforced by trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk, who, in his foundational book on trauma, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body, in the Healing of Trauma*,[13] outlines body-based modalities that can soothe and heal trauma. Many of these are utilized in Waldorf Education. Both Ruf and van der Kolk discuss the healing benefits of play, rhythm, music, dance, theater, games, and warm relationships in bringing relief to suffering.

If you are teaching today, you are teaching children with high degrees of the sensitivities mentioned above. If you are teaching today, you are teaching children who have experienced trauma, you are teaching children who will experience psychological distress. This is true statistically. This has also been my experience. It sure feels like we are in a transitional or threshold experience. I have been teaching for over twenty-five years and can testify that young people feel different today. There is also this: they are totally up for the challenges we are facing. They are beautifully sensitive and often flooded with big feelings like anxiety or depression. And yet, they are very much here for it. They are way ahead of me. They are inclusive in ways that I am still trying to catch up with. They are extremely quick to come to the table and show up for each other. They are naming what they won't stand for. They are able to talk about things that I did not even know at their age. They are up for the challenges of these times—of this I have no doubt.

SEL is not new. It is the current language for an age-old truth – that meaningful connections are fundamental to our well-being. We need each other, especially when things are changing or unstable. If we are crossing the threshold, as Steiner foretold, what will aid us in this time? Social Emotional Learning, trauma literacy, all of the body-mind work that focuses on regulating the nervous system, including polyvagal theory, are all coming at a time when we need them. The psychoeducation in these practices supports developing cultures of transition. The naming and regulating in emotional literacy allows me to respond instead of react. I learn healthy ways to stay present and be in discomfort and uncertainty. I find strength in relationships that bolster me. Leaning into the arts, into rhythm, and into the reverence embedded in Waldorf education supports the strengthening of the I. SEL also strengthens the emerging I of our students, and it centers the coming together that they yearn for and need.

Megan Sullivan *has been teaching in Waldorf schools for 25 years. Currently, Megan teaches Social Emotional Learning and Health to middle school and high school students at the Sacramento Waldorf School, where she co-founded the Social Emotional Learning program in 2008. You can connect with Megan through her website: megansullivan.net*

12 *Educating Traumatized Children*, 172.

13 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).