

Getting Started with Teaching Social and Emotional Learning

Megan Sullivan

I am writing this article for any current teacher who is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curious or leaning. I taught an introduction to teaching SEL class this past summer at the Sacramento Waldorf School. The class was an hour-and-a-half long and it gave an overview of the basic shape of the SEL classes that I teach in middle school and high school. I did my best to highlight the capacities I aim to develop in my students and to introduce some entry-level activities that all teachers can incorporate in their classrooms in support of their students' social and emotional learning needs. Preparing for and then teaching teachers this material over the summer has prompted me to consider what is important and how does a teacher step more into this work. This article is a road map or a traveler's guide to the journey I have been on. I will be including below a list of books, chapters, articles, and other resources that have been important for me on my journey and development as a social and emotional learning teacher.

I want you to know that I am a teacher first. I know how to teach and how to hold a classroom full of students. I am not writing about this general practice here. I am going to assume you know how to teach or you will find that support somewhere else. The current article is about teaching social and emotional learning if your aim is to support your students in this way.

For more about what I mean by social and emotional learning, or my own journey in teaching it, I refer you back to an earlier article I've published in the *Research Bulletin*: "Teaching Social Emotional Learning in a Waldorf School".¹

Preconditions

I think there are preconditions for teaching. You should like children, that's an important one. You should like learning, even if it is hard won through your own struggles. You should have an engaged and enthusiastic relationship with the material you are teaching.

I think there are preconditions for being a Waldorf teacher, too. You should have an interest, even if it is an emerging interest, in the deeper underpinnings of

Waldorf education. These should resonate with you, even if you can't quite articulate why yet. You know you are on a path. There is something deep inside of you that has committed to something that maybe you can't quite name.

I want to share with you what I consider to be essential preconditions to social and emotional learning teaching. It does not mean that one has them all sorted, all neatly tied up, accomplished, or checked off on a list. These are preconditions for a commitment to a path, to a way of showing up, to a way of knowing that you are a work in progress, but you are doing the work bravely and honestly.

The first thing I want to highlight has to do with you as a human being and how you stand in front of young people. Are you developing, growing, and reflecting? Are you self-aware? Are you doing your work to become the person you want to be? Children, especially teens, will feel the dissonance if you are not. To be more exact: if you are teaching about social and emotional capacities and values that you yourself are not inwardly focusing on in your own development and growth, it does not work. Again, this does not mean that you are expected to be finished, polished, and done. It means you are actively working on the same capacities you are teaching your students. Do you have a daily practice of slowing down and of inner reflection? This, dear teacher, needs to be part of the preparation work you do for each class.

How are you self-attentive? From this primary foundation of inner work, you can stand in front of your students knowing you are not asking them to do anything that you yourself are not doing. Who you are and how you are is as important as what you directly teach in a lesson. Orland Bishop, author of *The Seventh Shrine: Meditations on the African Spiritual Journey*, is someone I am turning to right now for inner work, inspiration, and guidance. In his book, Bishop explains that inner work as an initiation path "brings the human being constantly towards the threshold of asking: How must I be so that you can be free? How do I host the freedom of the other, the development of the other,

¹ *Research Bulletin*, Fall/Winter 2022, Volume 27-1, 42-49.
https://www.waldorflibrary.org/images/RB27_1sullivan.pdf

and the greater truth of the other?"² I can think of no greater task of a teacher than this.

Questions for precondition #1:

- What is your inner work practice?
- How are you slowing down and turning inward?
- What is your daily practice for stress relief and grounding?

The second precondition is a commitment to creating a safe classroom for all of your students. Such a classroom takes into account the students' lived experiences, their stories – both what you know and don't know, their culture, their identities, and their need as human beings to be seen, treated with care, and to belong. At its best, a classroom that centers SEL this way becomes a place of support and growth. Without an emphasis on these things, SEL can become a class where we erase or hurt our students.

Dena Simmons, a leader in equity and liberatory-centered SEL, states, "What's the point of teaching children about conflict resolution skills if we're not talking about the conflicts that exist because of racism or white supremacy?" Without this nuance, she says, SEL risks turning into "white supremacy with a hug."³ If this quote stirs a charge in you, if you've become reactive or had some feelings, then this section is for you for two reasons.

The first is that unless you can enter conversations, which currently are very divisive in the U.S., with openness and a commitment to engage with discomfort and your edge of learning, including accountability, you will not be able to support your students to do so themselves – and they need to learn how to do this. We are doing our children a disservice if we are not modeling and teaching how to enter and engage in conversations about diversity, equity, and justice.

The second is that there is a potential for harm when you are not doing the work of understanding social injustices while there are children in your classroom who have a different background than yours in any way—race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, first language, ability, neurotype, gender, sex, sexual identity,

and socioeconomic status. And I know that you, dear teacher, hate the idea of unintentionally harming your students. Because I do, too. I hate it; it makes me sick to my stomach and fills me with anxiety. And yet, I have done it. The privilege I hold through my different identities has allowed me to maintain ignorance. This privilege and ignorance has resulted in my teaching from my own lived experience, without taking into account who else was in the room. This has led to making some of my students feel isolated, lonely, and like they do not belong. Ouch. I hate that. And so, I work hard every day to see beyond my own borders. I read, I watch, I follow, and I face myself. And I grow. For my students, I grow.

To understand the importance of teaching SEL from an equity and culturally responsive framework, I recommend reading this study: "'Not Try to Save Them or Ask Them to Breathe through Their Oppression': Educator Perceptions and the Need for a Human-Centered, Liberatory Approach to Social and Emotional Learning." The following excerpt demonstrates what is meant by culturally responsive:

For example, a white, straight, cisgender, female teacher, who lacks self-awareness about her positionality and who has no exposure to culturally responsive pedagogy, may teach SEL through her worldview without consideration of how her lens does not reflect the reality of her students, especially those who have been systemically marginalized. She might include content relevant to her lived experiences but fail to add content that is relevant to her students'

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lives, contributing to students' feeling like they do not belong. She might even teach a particular skill that is inconsistent with students' cultures such as demanding eye contact as a sign of respect when, in many Asian, Latinx, and African cultures, eye contact could be regarded as a sign of defiance and disrespect (Wages, 2015). That is, culture plays a role in how SEL competencies are developed and expressed (Hecht and Shin, 2015) and thus needs specific attention. In contrast, that same teacher can build awareness of how to implement SEL in ways that honors students for their identities and experiences rather than restricting them to a narrow view of what is "acceptable" or "appropriate." She would welcome and teach multiple expressions of respect (and other emotions) instead of ostracizing students, who lower and avert their eyes as a sign of respect. Through practicing

² Orland Bishop, *The Seventh Shrine: Meditations on the African Spiritual Journey: From the Middle Passage to the Mountaintop* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2017), 167.

³ Mary Jo Mada, "Dena Simmons: Without Context, Social-Emotional Learning Can Backfire," EdSurge News, May 15, 2019, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-05-15-dena-simmons-without-context-social-emotional-learning-can-backfire>.

self-reflection and self-awareness, developing cultural humility, and gaining exposure to culturally responsive pedagogy, educators can expand their knowledge of how to use SEL to humanize and honor all students.⁴

The first part of this excerpt is me! Before I knew better, I

- told biographies that were mostly white European;
- always said ‘mum’ and ‘dad’ or other expressions that reflected my families’ constellation;
- taught sex education referring to one type of sex leaving out my queer and gay students;
- celebrated my own religious holidays while not even knowing some of my students;

This is not an exhaustive list! I wish that while writing this I could report I am on the other side of my learning edge, but I am not. I am still learning to see what I don’t know yet, and I find it painful. Recently I had a middle school class point out to me another one of my blind spots, and I went into my usual spin—the spin where there is shame and a tendency to defend, hide, run, or blame. I am proud that this past spin only lasted a couple of days and then I had a frank talk with myself, rolled up my sleeves, and faced my shortcomings with love for my courageous students who trusted me enough to let me know where I still needed to work to support them. This work is not comfortable for me, but growth rarely is.

The following resources have helped me grow:

I appreciate the questions below taken from Abolitionist Teaching Network’s “Guide for Racial Justice and Abolitionist Social and Emotional Learning”:⁵

Questions Abolitionist Teachers Can Ask to Build Relationships with Students:

1. What can you tell me that helps me better understand you as a person?
2. How can I be the best teacher for you?
3. How can your school be a place where you feel seen, valued, and excited to learn?
4. What matters most to you (i.e., in life, at school, in your community)?
5. How can I support you mentally, emotionally, and in your community?

In my development as a culturally responsive teacher, I have worked with chapter 4 from *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*, by Zaretta Hammond (Corwin, 2015).

In understanding culture rules of emotional expression, I have turned to *Between Us: How Cultures Create Emotions*, by Batja Mesquita (W. W. Norton, 2022).

I follow Dena Simmons from LiberatED⁶ on Instagram and then I follow people she follows. In other words, I find people who are leaders in equity and justice work for ongoing recalibration and thought seeds, so that daily I am seeing beyond my own small world. And I do this for the many ways that we are as human beings. I try to broaden the scope of what I grew up with, what stories I know, who I surround myself with, and what I think I know.

The California Department of Education has developed a framework for social and emotional capacities for students K-12 that highlights the importance of a transformative approach to SEL that features all students’ belonging and dignity. The California T-SEL Competencies is a great place to turn to outline the capacities, which you are supporting your students to develop.⁷

Part of my work in unpacking who I am in the world and what I know and don’t know has led me to understand that I have had a limited and narrow understanding of human beings and their experiences in the world, and that this limited understanding does not align with my values. I hold as an intrinsic value that there are so many ways to be a human being. There is no right way. We are all ok. As part of my values and my work of unpacking what I know and don’t know, I have shifted away from pathologizing language that is deficit-based, that tells a human being that they are broken and disordered. You can recognize a pathology-based view by terms such as “disorder,” “symptoms,” “condition,” “treatment,” and “epidemic.” A pathology lens is based on the idea that there is one “normal” way to be. Language matters. To understand more about pathologizing language watch Jonathan Mooney’s talk on embracing difference that he gave to educators in 2013.⁸ Mooney advocates for a paradigm shift from a deficit model to an asset model. This is the neurodiversity paradigm.

4 Meiko Lin et al., “‘Not Try to Save Them or Ask Them to Breathe through Their Oppression’: Educator Perceptions and the Need for a Human-Centered, Liberatory Approach to Social and Emotional Learning,” *Frontiers in Education* 7 (2023), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/educ.2022.1044730>.

5 <https://abolitionistteachingnetwork.org/guide>

6 “LiberatED (@liberated_sel) https://www.instagram.com/liberated_sel/

7 <https://www.cde.ca.gov/se/tsselcompetencies.asp>

8 Jonathan Mooney Inspires New Perspectives And Laughter At The 2013 YAI International Conference, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLBGyNPHnys>.

I had the great fortune of studying with Dr. Nick Walker⁹ and I highly recommend her work if you want to understand more about the neurodiversity movement. Walker writes with authority about the pathology paradigm when she challenges the deficit and disordered language that dominates discourse around autism. Walker advocates for a neurodivergence paradigm and welcomes and celebrates diversity of human minds and neurocognitive functioning.

What this means to me as a teacher: I am neurotypical (NT). My sensory and cognitive functions are considered typical. I am rarely overwhelmed by my sensory experiences. I can process quickly. I can respond in ways that are deemed appropriate by the norms of our society. But not all of my students have my experience. I teach students who have a different sensory experience and cognitive function than me. This is not wrong, or something that needs to be fixed. It is just a different experience. Here is an example from Nick Walker of a sensory experience that is different to what I experience:

It's a bright cool Sunday in Berkeley, and when I step into my aikido dojo the sun is singing through the skylights, suffusing the big airy space and making shiny hot pools of white on the rich vibrant blue of the mat. That vibrant expanse of blue makes a low soft thrumming and gives me a feeling of warm wide open spaces behind me and in the lower part of my lungs. The sunlight sounds like a choir of angels, and together with the pleasantly humming mint-flavored whiteness of walls makes my skin tingle and opens luminous sky in my chest and all around my head. I inhale into that space and the cool air fills my head with exhilarating white blue and brings new, higher harmonies into the choir.¹⁰

My sensory experiences, in contrast to what Walker shares here, are so bland. I wish I knew what it was to experience sunlight in this way. It is vital for me, as a teacher, to know that my students might be seeing, hearing, feeling, perceiving the world around them, and in particular, in my classroom, in a more complex way than I do. Autistic people, for example, take in more than me, and while it may be overwhelming or chaotic, it is not wrong. As a teacher, I have until

recently set up my classroom and my presentations and lessons with my sensory lens. Having an understanding for sensory experiences that are different than mine can make my classroom more accessible and inclusive. Because autistic people have historically been (and still are) treated in a pathology paradigm as having deficits, some autistic activists have turned the table by suggesting that it is the neurotypicals (NTs) who have deficits. What if NTs were the ones who are lacking? Steve Silberman, in a TedTalk called *The Forgotten History of Autism*, says, “by autistic standards, the normal brain is easily distractible, obsessively social, and suffers from deficit of attention to detail.”¹¹ This is a good reversal and it helped me begin to see my blind-spots and assumptions. Just as being white has shielded me from whiteness and from being fully awake to racial injustice, my NT has protected me from seeing the world from a neurodivergent experience.

A part of equity and justice based SEL that resonates strongly with me is the directive to look beyond the quick and surface level tendency of locating a problem or issue with the individual and instead looking at broader contexts for understanding. For example, if we are teaching emotional regulation without pointing out that sometimes stress, worry, grief, hardship, and trauma, are impacted by systemic issues, we are then placing the burden on the individual rather than on where the problem really lives: the environment and

the conditions and systems that created such issues. This is an important distinction and orientation when it comes to psychological distress. In *The Myth of Normal*, Gabor Maté asks “Why are we diagnosing children with disorder, instead of “diagnosing” – and treating – their families, communities, schools,

and society?”¹² Because mental health is an important component of SEL we need to investigate the stories we know about mental health and mental illness.

I have deeply felt a calling to address a fundamental question that I have seen so many of my students hold—“Am I OK?” It started for me in 1997, when a seventh grade student cried in front of his classmates: “I thought something was wrong with me!” This statement, blurted in my classroom, heralded in my work. Now, my gesture to the students who find their way to my classroom is: You are not broken. There is nothing

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⁹ Nick Walker, “NEUROQUEER,” July 31, 2021, <https://neuroqueer.com/academia/>

¹⁰ Nick Walker, *The Real Experts: Readings for Parents of Autistic Children*, ed. Michelle Sutton (Fort Worth, TX: Autonomous Press, 2011).

¹¹ Steve Silberman, “Steve Silberman: The Forgotten History of Autism | TED Talk,” accessed August 27, 2023, https://www.ted.com/talks/steve_silberman_the_forgotten_history_of_autism?language=en

¹² Gabor Maté MD and Daniel Maté, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture* (New York: Avery, 2022).

wrong with you. You might be feeling appropriate feelings for the situation. It is ok to feel those feelings. You are not always going to be comfortable or happy. You are OK. You are not broken. It is not you. I believe that it is vital to consider where our ideas of mental health and mental illness come from in a time when anxiety and depression are a fixture in our classrooms and homes. Just as the antiracist movement is agitating, fighting, and advocating for equity and justice, a non-pathologizing view of mental health and psychological distress is centered on human dignity and looking to a larger context that holds human suffering beyond the responsibility of an individual.

The following two quotes capture this paradigm: “Maybe there is nothing wrong with you. Maybe it’s just really difficult to exist within a system that was not designed to support a spirit like yours,”¹³ and “It is no measure of good health to be well adjusted to a sick society.”¹⁴ Can you feel the difference between the thought that your anxiety is a disorder that originates in you and the one that suggests that your anxiety is a symptom of something bigger than you? Just starting to hold this difference creates a space where you will hold your students differently. For my students, my inward holding is: ‘You, beautiful child, are not broken, you are beautifully, exquisitely awake and alive in a time that is vibrating with change and crisis.’ Of this time, Orland Bishop writes:

The cultural time in which we find ourselves is a time of radical transition. Major changes are occurring in every system – cultural, economic, ecological, and spiritual. We humans are being brought to a threshold not just to fix the systems but also to create a sustainable future.¹⁵

This is the larger context for considering mental health and psychological distress. There are many good reasons to be distressed right now. Let’s stop calling distress a disorder of the individual and consider them a disorder of the place. Rather than fix the disorder in the child, let us bolster the child with resources to meet the threshold of this time. That is the larger context of SEL capacity building. Our task as educators is not to fix the child but to build capacities to meet this time.

¹³ @conscious conversations

¹⁴ <https://kfoundation.org/it-is-no-measure-of-health-to-be-well-adjusted-to-a-profoundly-sick-society/>

¹⁵ Orland Bishop, *The Seventh Shrine: Meditations on the African Spiritual Journey: From the Middle Passage to the Mountaintop* (Hudson, NY: SteinerBooks/Lindisfarne Books, 2017).

Healing Centered Engagement

In the developing field of trauma literacy, there has been a movement in questions aimed at understanding behavior. “What is wrong with you?” has been replaced with “What happened to you?” Shawn Ginwright, in his article, “The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement”, introduces a further development by adding, “What is right with you?” Ginwright highlights the importance of

what we see in our children and what we focus on. He advocates for an approach that combines the many parts I have discussed so far. Ginwright writes:

Healing centered engagement is akin to the South African term “Ubuntu,” meaning that humanness is found through our inter-

dependence, collective engagement and service to others. Additionally, healing centered engagement offers an asset driven approach aimed at the holistic restoration of young peoples’ well-being. The healing centered approach comes from the idea that people are not harmed in a vacuum, and well-being comes from participating in transforming the root causes of the harm within institutions. Healing centered engagement also advances the move to “strengths-based” care and away from the deficit-based mental health models that drives therapeutic interventions.¹⁶

In my perfect world, when I am teaching SEL from a conscious and striving place, this means that I am slowing down and trying to see my students. It means that I am broadening my lens to see my students beyond my own lived experience, and I am building my and my students’ capacities for a transformative approach to SEL. And it means I am trauma informed but not trauma focused. In my work to be more trauma informed, I have turned to Peter Levine’s work. If you want to know more about trauma, start with *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids: A Parents’ Guide for Instilling Confidence, Joy, and Resilience*, by Peter A. Levine and Maggie Kline (North Atlantic Books, 2008). If you want an Anthroposophical understanding of trauma read *Educating Traumatized Children: Waldorf Education in Crisis Intervention* by Bernd Ruf (SteinerBooks/Lindisfarne Books, 2012). If you are going to do any mindfulness or grounding type activities with students read *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing* by David A. Treleaven (W. W. Norton, 2018).

¹⁶ Shawn Ginwright, “The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement,” Medium, March 28, 2019, <https://medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>.

Take a training with Trauma Literacy¹⁷ who do an outstanding job of addressing trauma in a larger context of social injustice and give educators resources to enter this work thoughtfully.

Resources for Teaching Social and Emotional Learning

Perhaps the most simplified description of what I aim to do in an SEL class would state that I try to help students learn to connect meaningfully to other people. A recent book that I think is an important read for folks in private Waldorf schools in North America is called *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic and What We Can Do About It*, by Jennifer Breheny Wallace (Portfolio, 2023). The author investigates the pressure our young people are experiencing and, through extensive research, comes away with a clear message: *mat-tering*—that is feeling like you belong, are valued, and feel connected to others—is the remedy and the secret sauce to wellness and thriving. In *The Myth of Normal*, Gabor Maté quotes Dr. Bruce Perry saying: “Adverse childhood experiences—of the big-ticket kind that merit the official ACE designation—are of consequence, but not as determinative as your history in relationships... The most powerful predictor of your functioning in the present is your current relational connectedness, and then the second most powerful component that we see is your history of connectedness.”¹⁸ Dr. Perry, in *What Happened to You?*, outlines that all successful models and programs (including in schools) that support healing “have one thing in common: they emphasize regulation and connection.”¹⁹

In my classes I see my main task as providing time and space for children to regulate themselves and to connect meaningfully. I explicitly teach these things.

Regulation means emotional literacy. It means being able to notice and name how you are feeling and then using resources to regulate yourself. The noticing work consists of learning to pay attention to how feelings show up in the body. It is learning to pay attention to sensations in the body and then naming what that is for you. For the language of sensations used in noticing work, I refer you back to Peter Levine’s work and in particular *Trauma Proofing*

Your Kids.²⁰ For learning to name feelings and develop emotional literacy, Karla McLaren’s²¹ work provides a helpful framework.

The very best advice I can give for finding ways for your students to connect meaningfully is for teachers to get trained in circle work. “Restorative Practices” is a framework and process that centers dignity, belonging, care, and responsibility. Take a look at the resources listed below. They will walk you through how to build a classroom culture that supports mattering and connectedness.

- Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles²²
- Justice Leaders Collaborative: The Relationships Initiative K-12²³
- *Race Dialogues: A Facilitator’s Guide to Tackling the Elephant in the Classroom*, by Donna Rich Kaplowitz, Shayla Reese Griffin, and Sheri Seyka (New York: Teachers College Press, 2019)

Real Talk

It is so easy to write an article (actually it is painful and hard – writing is not easy for me!), to outline what is important, and to give direction to teachers. However, what you need to know is that I am still working out this stuff. If you want to teach SEL in your classroom, either as a stand-alone topic or by weaving SEL content into your subject area, just start. Don’t be overwhelmed by all of the preconditions I write about above. I am sharing resources with you that have supported me, but it has taken me years to get there! I feel competent now, but please know that I still fumble, have bad classes, make mistakes, and many times I just don’t know what to do. Be brave! Take up one thing that stands out to you and start there. If you start

with love, bravery, and an openness to growth, you are in your place. In *The Myth of Normal*, Gabor Maté states, “When I speak of healing, I am referring to nothing more or less than a natural movement towards wholeness.” And that “Healing is a direction not a destination.”²⁴ Likewise, teaching SEL is a direction, not

Steve Silberman: “By autistic standards, the normal brain is easily distractible, obsessively social, and suffers from deficit of attention to detail.”

¹⁷ <https://traumaliteracy.com/>

¹⁸ Maté and Maté, *The Myth of Normal*, 249.

¹⁹ Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey, *What Happened to You: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2021), 227.

²⁰ Peter A. Levine and Maggie Kline, *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids: A Parents’ Guide for Instilling Confidence, Joy, and Resilience* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2008).

²¹ <https://karlamclaren.com>

²² https://dignityinschools.org/toolkit_resources/center-for-restorative-practices-teaching-restorative-practices-with-classroom-circles/

²³ <https://www.justiceleaderscollaborative.com/the-relationships-initiative>

²⁴ Maté and Maté, *The Myth of Normal*, 361.

a destination. Take one step, one thing that resonates with you, and follow it for a bit. Read about it, sleep on it, take it for a walk, play with it, digest it, and bring this process to those lovely little people under your care. They will notice your bravery, authenticity, and care, and they will honor it for you.

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