


Whose SEL Is It?

Toward Social-Emotional Learning
that Empowers Students

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Solution Tree



The term social-emotional learning, or SEL, is a relatively recent addition to the educational lexicon, but social and emotional learning themselves are as old as human existence.

All students (and educators) have a social experience of school, in that we interact with other people, and we all have an emotional experience of school, because being human means constantly having feelings.

We can build any SEL program or none at all, and students will still have social interactions and emotional experiences—and they'll learn to do *something* in response. The question for us to consider isn't whether students should do SEL; they're already doing it. Our questions become:

- ▶ What purposes should SEL serve?
- ▶ What program or approach will serve those purposes?

Interrogating Accepted Purposes of SEL

In a recent report, psychology researchers Joseph Mahoney, Joseph Durlak, and Roger Weissberg (2018) compared results from four SEL meta-analyses to determine whether SEL works. Workability always implies a purpose—what the thing works *for*. When schools say SEL works, what is it working for?

The 356 studies in the four meta-analyses deem SEL to be *working* when students (1) acquire social and emotional skills, such as self-awareness and self-management; (2) develop positive attitudes about themselves, others, and school; (3) increase positive social behaviors; (4) reduce conduct problems, such as disruptive classroom behavior and discipline referrals; (5) reduce emotional distress; and (6) increase academic performance, as measured by grades, test scores, and teacher ratings (Mahoney, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2018).

Determining workability criteria is not a neutral process. *Someone* defines SEL's purpose, according to some set of cultural values. Race scholar and activist Tema Okun (2010, p. 4-5) explains, "One of culture's most important characteristics is how embodied it tends to become in those of us living inside it. A metaphor would be the water in which fish swim; this trope communicates both the pervasiveness and invisibility of culture...[and when] we do notice culture, we tend to assume its inevitability; we see it as 'natural' rather than constructed."

When we talk about "the" purposes of SEL, or "the" competencies it fosters, we obscure *whose* purposes we mean, and *which* cultural ideology it reflects. Let's interrogate "the" six purposes of SEL.

Positive According to Whom?

Claiming that the ultimate point of a social-emotional learning program is for students to learn social and emotional skills seems circular. The point of any skills program is for students to learn those skills. The question becomes, *which* skills are most important for students to learn, and according to whom?

Similarly, developing “positive” attitudes about oneself, others, and school, and increasing “positive” social behaviors begs the question, who decides what it means for an attitude or a behavior to be positive, and according to whose standards? Similarly, who decides what types of

behaviors count as “conduct problems,” and for whom are these behaviors a problem?

When a student engages in behavior adults deem problematic, that behavior is often a *solution* to a different problem. For example, when a student calls out in class, she might be trying to connect with her peers, contribute an idea, gain respect, or receive sensory stimulation. This student needs help solving her problem, or even better, her teacher needs training in how to use pedagogies that foster connection, appreciation, and engagement.





Extricating SEL from White Supremacy Culture

Systems that attempt to increase good behavior and decrease bad behavior, but do not explicitly state where their definitions of *good* and *bad* come from, can be oppressive. If we make SEL's purpose to increase "positive behaviors" and decrease "conduct problems" without stating our definitions, we might impose historically dominant cultural ideologies, offering what amounts to "white supremacy with a hug" (Simmons, 2021).

When the presumptive outcome of SEL is to increase positive behavior and reduce negative behavior, not only might we be using definitions of *positive* and *negative*

based on white ideology; we might apply that ideology such that it unjustly impacts BIPOC students.

Educator and activist Cierra Kaler-Jones (Communities for Just Schools Fund, 2020) critiques SEL that teaches students to "manage and regulate themselves and their emotions, conform and constrict their identities, and not express their fullest, most authentic selves." When SEL polices student behaviors that make white adults uncomfortable, "we are not asking students to feel, we are asking them to accommodate white supremacy" (Communities for Just Schools Fund, 2020).

Untangling SEL and Discipline

To be clear: we're not arguing that there should be *no* system to address behaviors that harm members of the school community. When students (or adults, for that matter) cause harm, we must stop the behavior, ensure the person or group takes responsibility for what they've done, create a plan of care for those who have been adversely impacted, and heal the community. Dismantling racism means examining *all* systems—including discipline *and* SEL—for hidden bias and harmful impacts on BIPOC students.

But disciplinary systems should be entirely separate from SEL. Otherwise, we risk subjugating students' social and emotional development beneath the school's need for an environment conducive to learning.

Instead of organizing students' external behaviors around whatever is comfortable and convenient for others, SEL can help students organize their own behaviors around what matters to them. If a student misunderstands a situation or makes an unworkable choice, teachers can always share their own observations and suggestions, but SEL doesn't need to start there. Instead, teachers can:

- ▶ evoke students' awareness of their own values
- ▶ create contexts in which students can choose behaviors consistent with those values
- ▶ prompt students to reflect on how well their choices served their values





Is It Truly OK to Not Be OK?

Students who can regulate their own distress response can participate in learning without distracting their peers. From the student's perspective, being able to self-regulate means they can return to their schoolwork, friends, or other meaningful activities.

However, when our goal is emotional distress reduction itself, rather than helping students resume activities they find meaningful, we send the message that certain emotions are bad, to be felt as rarely as possible and moved through as quickly as possible. Imagine, for example, a student who feels angry about her parents' divorce and sad about her family's dissolution, and afraid of how her life might change. If we teach her coping strategies so she can get back to class, we send the message that certain emotions are problems to be solved rather than normal, healthy, helpful, and expected responses to the student's circumstances.

Focusing on emotional distress reduction also locates the problem within the individual, as opposed to within the system that prompted the distress in the first place, as if to say, "We're all fine here. Something's wrong with *you*." Not only does this amount to ostracism for any distressed student; it becomes an equity issue when BIPOC, transgender, neurodivergent, and disabled students experience the impacts of systemic bias, feel appropriately angry or sad or afraid, and are told *they* need to regulate their emotions.

Finally, teaching students to distract themselves from emotional distress misses opportunities for them to learn from their emotions. We feel angry when something important is taken from us, sad when something important is gone, and afraid when something important is being threatened. Learning to notice, name, and stay inside uncomfortable emotions empowers students to discover the values their emotions reveal and to live those values more fully.



The Backwards Logic of Doing SEL for Academic Achievement

Framing SEL as a way to boost academic achievement creates the assumption that lower-achieving students must have social and emotional deficits, and that high-achieving students who struggle socially and emotionally don't matter. Stakeholders who want to increase achievement should focus on addressing systemic inequities, not fixing kids.

Besides, we don't see academic achievement as the ultimate purpose of school. Yes, we want to ensure students meet certain learner objectives, develop

certain skills, and maybe even do certain projects so they leave school prepared for college or a career. *Then what?* What kind of lives will college and career be part of?

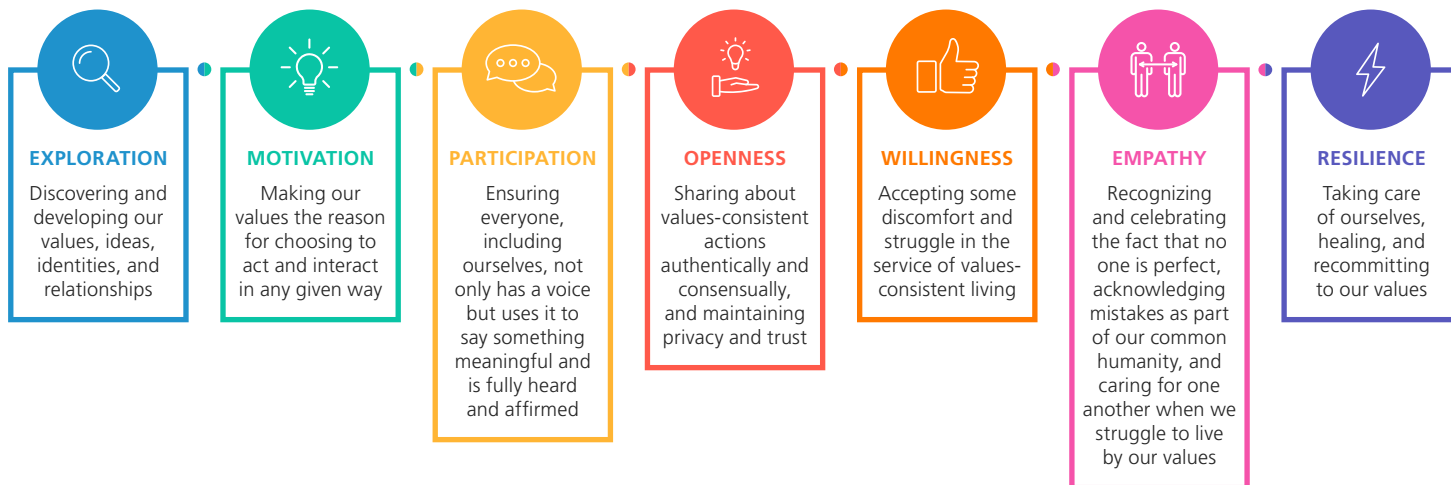
Academic achievement helps set students up to do meaningful work, build meaningful relationships, and contribute meaningfully to communities in which everyone can thrive. What if SEL empowered students to make their lives meaningful in all these ways, not only in the future, but right now?

Social-Emotional Learning As Empowerment

The ultimate outcome of social-emotional learning—and really, all learning—should be to empower students to make every action and interaction in their lives a source of meaning, vitality, community, and liberation. Core to that work is the concept of values, because *how* do we

turn our actions and interactions into sources of meaning, vitality, community, and liberation? We bring our values to them.

Our EMPOWER model, which is derived from contextual behavioral science, includes the following components.



EMPOWER Your Students contains 21 activities, aligned with these components of EMPOWER, that help students discover and do what matters to them, and face the inevitable challenges that come along with living a values-consistent life. ***Two-for-One Teaching*** contains 30 protocols that embed EMPOWER work into every stage of instruction, simultaneously fostering academic and social-emotional growth.



Process-Oriented SEL

Contextual behavioral science (CBS) seeks to “alleviate human suffering and advance human flourishing by developing basic scientific accounts of complex behaviors” (Villatte, Villatte, & Hayes, 2016, p. 4). CBS-trained psychologists help people become aware of their own values and choose to act in accordance with those values—as opposed to choosing what’s easy, convenient, comfortable, or fun—so they can live more fulfilling lives (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2012).

An often-repeated line from a foundational CBS text is that in contextual psychotherapy, the “outcome is the process through which process becomes the outcome” (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999, p. 219). When people seek therapy, they often see *feeling better* as the desired outcome, but in CBS, the outcome becomes the ongoing process of living a meaningful life.

At school, we focus on outcomes: *students will be able to*. Of course it matters what students will be able to do *next*, as a result of engaging in a lesson, unit, or course. But surely it also matters what students experience *now*—their psychological experience of school in the present moment.

SEL can become the process through which *students’* process of moving through school—doing assignments, engaging in lessons, making friends, walking down the hallway, putting on a face mask—becomes a series of opportunities for them to explore and enact their values. Living a values-guided life becomes the outcome of school itself.

So let’s teach students how to notice, name, affirm, honor, and learn from their own emotions, so that instead of teaching them that only calm and happiness are “good” emotional states while all others need to be changed or managed, we honor the full range of emotions as expressions of our common humanity, and we use emotional experiences as opportunities to discover the values underneath.



Let’s dedicate time to values exploration and committed action, and let’s *also* embed values work into all aspects of learning. Let’s turn everything students do at school—including their lessons, assignments, and projects—into opportunities for them to live meaningful lives.

And let’s not pretend that SEL, all by itself, can end human suffering and oppression, or guarantee human flourishing and liberation. In addition to social-emotional learning, students also need sociopolitical learning, cultural learning, civic learning, artistic learning, physiological learning, and learning in every domain of their lives.

So let’s build values-based programs, policies, and practices that enable everyone to contribute meaningfully to the community and benefit from it, so that schools become empowering spaces that truly belong to everyone, and where everyone truly belongs.

Works Cited

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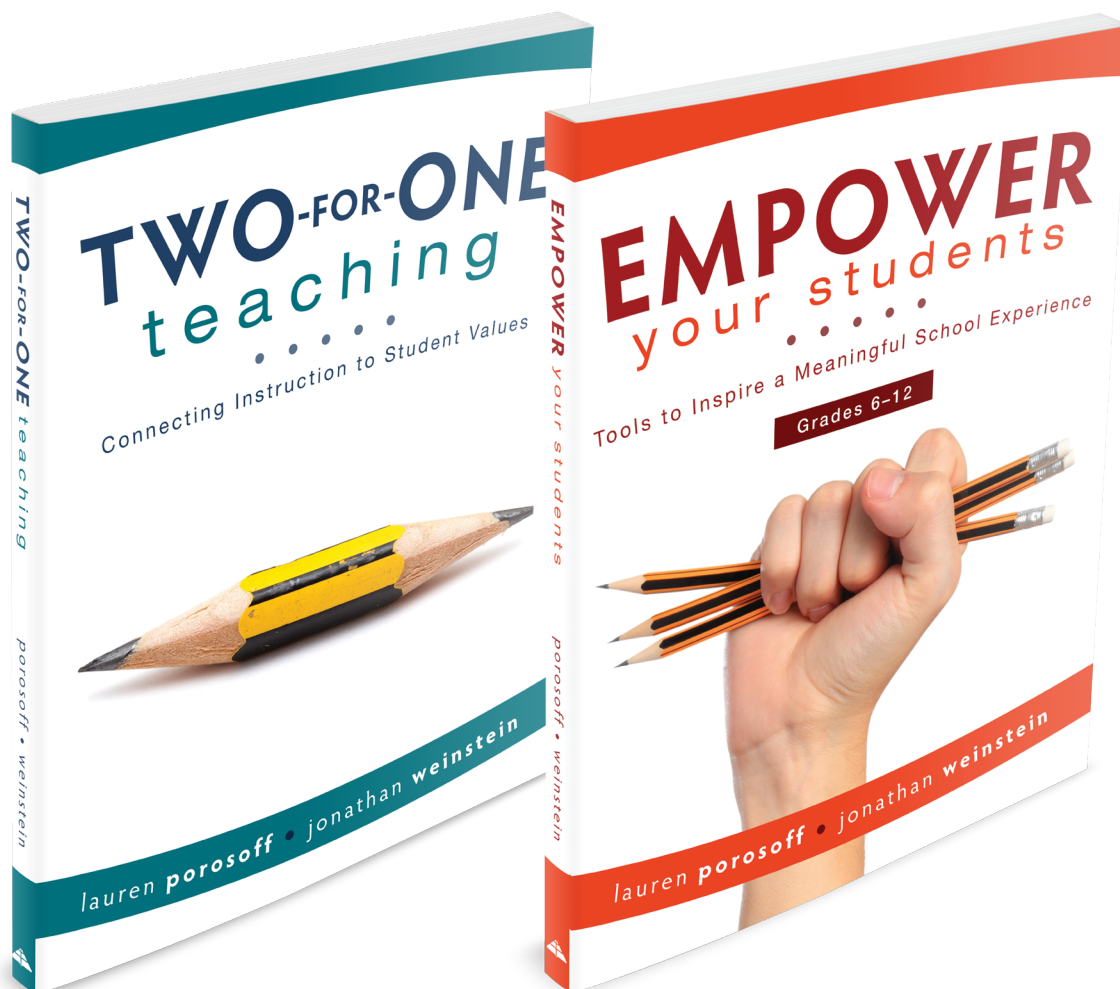
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Lauren Porosoff (she/her) is the founder of EMPOWER Forwards, a collaborative consultancy practice that empowers students and teachers to make school a source of meaning, vitality, and community through values-based action. Informed by 18 years of classroom experience and evidence-based psychological science, Lauren develops tools and protocols for instructional design, social-emotional learning, and professional development. Learn more about her work at empowerforwards.com.

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Resources for Further Study



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Connecting Instruction to Student Values

By: Lauren Porosoff, Jonathan Weinstein

Use the academic tasks students already do for social-emotional learning. Integrate student values into academic instruction and make learning meaningful for students. This book will guide teachers in helping students connect their work to their values, empowering them to redefine success.



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By: Lauren Porosoff, Jonathan Weinstein

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