



THE SYNERGY OF ARTS EDUCATION AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Arts education and SEL can prepare students to address trauma and inequity

It is known that students derive deep, multidisciplinary benefits when curricular instruction is infused with social-emotional learning (SEL) and character development (CD) activities.

Research shows that multiyear SEL interventions produce significant student gains in attitudes, positive social behaviors, and decreases in emotional and behavioral challenges, improved teacher satisfaction, and an 11% increase in academic performance, say researchers Scott Edgar, associate professor of music at Lake Forest College in Illinois, and Maurice Elias, director of [Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab in New Jersey](#).

The gains can be especially significant when SEL is infused in visual and performing arts (VPA) instruction. For this approach to be effective it must be intentional, embedded and sustained.

[Yorel Lashley](#), director of arts for the University of Wisconsin–Madison Office of Professional Learning and Community Education, explains: “It’s important to equip ourselves to be whole people with healthy self-awareness and personal identity.” Lashley adds, “It’s also important to nurture relationships and connections to others that help us contribute to our communities, and give us power over our own lives. The arts are especially powerful for SEL because creative art-making has SEL competencies like identity

and collaboration, for example, embedded in creative processes. When students create a piece of art, their identity informs what's expressed; similarly, when a music class creates or plays music together, collaboration (relating to others) is a foundational building block."

It's not as if arts educators need to become SEL instructors — they don't. However, it's time to recognize that SEL skills always have been essential elements of artistic success, so explicitly emphasizing SEL in arts education and doing so in a sustained and systematic way is imperative ... especially in these times.

SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

One high-priority area is how VPA and SEL/CD are important tools for easing the emotional burdens students experience from current events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, protests, racism, gender bias and police brutality.

"Both students and adults are dealing with emotions that they may never have experienced before," observes Margie Thomas, a certified Social-Emotional and Character Development music educator.

"Intentional infusion of SEL gives students and teachers an outlet to express these feelings in an honest and open manner. Strategies for coping can be developed individually or as a group."

While all learning must be trauma-informed, as well as emotionally and culturally sensitive, arts educators have a unique opportunity because many students build a relationship with them over multiple years, and they are more likely to express feelings and concerns in their art than verbally — cries for help that other teachers might not see.

[Shawna Longo](#), general music and music technology teacher and arts integration specialist at Durban Avenue School in Hopatcong, N.J., a consultant for music education, arts integration and STEAM, recommends getting to know your school's guidance counselors, psychologists and social workers.

"How you react is important — you want the student to know you're there for them without prodding too much. But there are definitely times when you may need to go to the school counselor to fill them in and get advice. You can tag-team to make sure the students get the support they need."

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Classroom procedures are critical, too, Thomas adds. “Prior to any conversation of difficult material, have established norms for discussion in place. Be sure students understand the protocols. Incorporation of SEL/CD into arts instruction creates a climate of trust and inclusion. When feelings are acknowledged and discussed, and accompanied behaviors are discussed as fact and not as judgments — students can be taught how to assess and manage both the feeling and the behavior.” From this, it follows that students will be freer to express their perspectives on the artistic forms they are learning, as well as the challenges they face when creating their own art.

Lashley reminds educators to always tread carefully, especially where trauma is involved. “Whatever resources or processes we use on and around trauma, and particularly during the pandemic, focus on strategies that help students manage the situations and feelings. Acknowledge that we all have stuff to manage, which normalizes hard situations and complex feelings.”

MOTIVATING SOCIAL ACTION

VPA instruction also inspires and enables social action to address school and community issues such as use of force, hate speech and racism. Through interpretation and evaluation of artistic works, the thoughts, feelings, perspectives and cultural differences among individuals and groups are recognized and acknowledged.

“The arts have typically been an arena where new ideas or dissenting ideas are first heard or seen or gained traction,” explains Thomas, who also is director of the chorus and orchestra at [Campbell Elementary School](#) in Metuchen, N.J. “Throughout history, artists have led the rallying cry to shed light on inequity and injustice. Artists shedding light on these injustices have been jailed or brutally punished for speaking up verbally or through their art.”

“We can point to specific songs that unify people in a common cause,” Thomas notes. “Think about the grassroots movement that led Yankee Doodle to be a slap in the face to Great Britain or Finlandia unifying the Finnish people against the Russian government.

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Integrating SEL with VPA Standards

“There are so many natural connections between SEL competencies and authentic arts education that it occurs naturally,” Longo notes. “Arts educators can intentionally identify those connections and capitalize on them in the classroom.”

Here are the artistic processes defining the [National Core Arts Standards](#).

- Creating
- Performing, Presenting, Producing
- Responding
- Connecting

Scott Edgar, associate professor of music at Lake Forest College, and Maurice Elias, director of Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, affirm that creative concepts and ideas can come from various places — and the creative process is influenced by personalized things, such as thoughts, feelings, strengths and limitations. A task force led by [Arts Ed NJ](#) and [SEL4NJ](#) undertook careful

consideration of the synergistic connections between the five SEL competencies and the 11 anchor standards in the visual and performing arts to develop a [framework](#) for best practices and lessons.

Some example lessons include:

- Having students interpret their feelings while listening to music through an exercise called “[Turn Off the News](#),” created by Elias. Using a YouTube video of artist Lukas Nelson performing the song of the same name, students are prompted to answer questions with an SEL focus, such as “What feelings did you experience while listening?” and “What was the message of the song?” Then students are shown a second version of the song and asked similar questions to compare and delve into how each viewing affected them. They then create their own song on the same theme.
- Having students listen to, watch or look at a work of art, then write down or find other ways to express the feelings they have toward the work or how it makes them feel. Begin a conversation sharing those feelings and what led to them. How did the person creating the art generate those emotions? ■

ADVOCATING FOR SEL AND VPA

SEL/CD emerged as a priority for educators before 2020 brought a flood of social and emotional challenges around the globe.

In “A vision for Social-Emotional Learning and arts education policy,” Edgar and co-author Bob Morrison, director of Arts Ed NJ, conclude that, “[T]his [is] made more urgent by the increases in school shootings, student stress over academic pressure, and the very tragic increase in youth suicide rates. With the trauma created for our students ... the sense of urgency for school administrators has only increased. As we further come to understand the connection between the arts and SEL, it is clear that SEL-centered arts education advocacy is imperative during this period of rapid education transformation and into the future.”

Arts Ed NJ works to create the proper conditions for arts learning to take place and is the unified voice on the educational benefits of learning in and through the arts. The organization supports educators within five arts disciplines (dance, music, media arts, theatre, visual art) to identify natural connections between SEL and arts learning through its research, webinars and professional learning workshops. Arts educators who wish to develop expertise in SEL instruction can seek an online certificate at the [Academy for SEL in Schools](#). ■

Lift Every Voice and Sing was not meant to create a movement but was written to sing at a single event, but the meaning was so deep for a community that it spread throughout the South and is still a rallying cry. The Shostakovich Cello Concerto is all about rising up against communism.” For arts educators, this means that the context in which artistic works are produced — including the artist’s identity, their situation in life and the purpose for which the art was created — is essential for deepening students’ retention and appreciation. Considering context regarding artistic works roots the arts in relationships, which SEL holds as the key to lasting learning.

The perspective is helpful. “When students understand the voices and feelings of others, they can start to reflect on and find their own voices,” Longo says. “This can increase their comfort and confidence in putting their thoughts and feelings out there.

Thanks to the recent launch of [SEL/Arts](#) in June, the Arts Education & Social and Emotional Learning Framework is an invaluable resource any arts educator can use to embed SEL with greater intention when designing meaningful student learning experiences in any of the visual and performing arts. We are witnessing the start of an era in which arts education and SEL are seen as synergistic partners that give students voice to their feelings, creativity and social contributions. ■

ABOUT THE ACADEMY FOR SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

[The Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools](#) is a collaboration between Rutgers University and Saint Elizabeth University. Our mission is to offer online [Certificate Programs](#) to educators and administrators to foster effective implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL), character development, and school culture and climate initiatives in schools and out-of-school programs, supported by an ongoing virtual professional learning community.

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