

The Power of Content & Context To Support ASEL

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The push to power social emotional learning (SEL) in our classrooms has finally gained traction for teaching the whole child. A National Research Council (NRC) identified competencies that contribute to cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies that contribute to successful experiences in school, the workplace and life. In addition, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) developed a framework with five core competencies:

- Self-awareness to recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values.
- Self-management to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations.
- Self-awareness to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures.
- Relationship skills to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups.
- Responsible decision-making to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms.

Also, at the federal level Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) supports evidenced-based learning related to SEL; and, to top it off, many states drafted SEL benchmarks to support implementation. This is all great news! However, SEL cannot and must not be an "add on" imperative. It will have to support academic achievement and be integrated within local curricula to not only survive, but thrive.

Therefore, the intent of this article is to examine how SEL may thrive and become a part of an educational system. It all begins with the acronym ASEL which is: Academic, Social and Emotional Learning. ASEL conveys a different message than SEL which may signal a single program approach. This may also be said of connecting SEL with Character development. Teachers' plates are loaded and one more item to digest could contribute to gastric nightmares. Also, the SEL fit within a curriculum should be implemented without the need for whole-scaled disruption to a current curriculum. It should be developmental, flexible, and expansive by empowering teachers to build SEL skills into instruction that makes sense in various content selections and contexts.

Nonetheless, a learning community must acquire an understanding of SEL to make it part of its vision, mission, and core beliefs. It is here that SEL benchmarks are helpful in guiding implementation at each level of learning in much the same way Next Generation State Learning Standards have done. The fit between SEL and academics should be natural because a forced fit will be awkward and perceived as not genuine. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach; rather, teachers will acquire new and exciting ways to embed SEL skills and competencies into instruction through regular practice. In fact, many teachers will acknowledge how much of what they already do with their students addresses SEL. However, what we know about educational change tells us that working a new dimension into an existing system will take from three to five years. Then, there is the challenge of sustainability.

To assist teachers and administrators, it may be insightful to explore an approach to teaching and learning in an ASEL environment. And, it begins with an understanding of the power of content and context. From this researcher's perspective, the success of Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (ASEL) is tied to the quality of selected content and related context that powers it. As a trained

instructor for Teaching Reading Across Content Areas (TRICA), the following reading principle prevails in determining content selection:

Content determine process.

Content for learning may encompass a myriad number of options which vary from a story to a discovery, or an event in real-time or historical. The selection of content serves the process as to how the teacher chooses to use it to meet specific learning objectives. Ideally, the choice of content should support the teaching and learning of particular standards addressing both SEL and academic learning. Context is essential if meaningful learning is to result. In particular, learning should be related to the students’ context, their lives and experience, when possible. This is because cognitive psychology supports the notion that there is no such thing as “new” knowledge. To acquire new knowledge, the brain must place it in the context of what the student already knows for it to be meaningful.

An ASEL Unit Framework

The illustration below represents a unit design based on a fable to teach a moral. The fable was selected because it would support why self-control is an important attribute. Learning standards and SEL benchmarks serve as the basis for what students would know and do in this instructional unit. While the illustration is purposely simplified, it does provide an example of what an instructional unit construct might look like.

Next Generation State Learning Standards

- 4R1: Explain what a text says.
- 4R2: Determine a theme.
- 4R3: Describe a character.
- 4R4: Determine the meaning of phrases.
- 4R5: Analyze characters.
- 4R6: Compare the point of view..
- 4R7: Explain information presented visually.
- 4W2: Write to explore a topic.
- 4W3: Write narratives.
- 4SL1: Engage in collaborative discussions.
- 4SL4: Recount an experience.

Essential Question: *What do I need to know about myself and others?*

Concepts: *Control, Conflict, and Consequences*

Theme: *Listen to the wisdom of others.*

Content: Story about self-control/

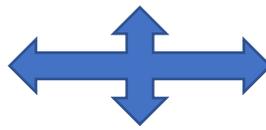
Context: Artwork depicting characters

Guiding Questions:

- _What is the setting?
- _What is the meaning of *stuck in the mud*?
- _Why do characters behave the way they do?
- _What is the situation? Conflict?
- _Why the consequences?
- _What is the moral? How might it affect me?

Social Emotional Learning Benchmarks

- 1A.2a. Describe a range of emotions/cause.
- 1B.2a. Describe personal strengths/skills.
- 1C.2a. Describe the steps: goal achievement.
- 2D.2a. Describe causes and consequences.
- 3C.2a. Identify and perform roles.



Student Unit Performances

1. Present essential question for review.
 2. Review guiding questions through class discussion.
 3. Listen to story for content understanding.
 4. Write key words needing definitions/meanings.
 5. View/interpret orally in teams pictures in text.
 6. Present possible themes and orally support them.
 7. Infer emotions associated with themes with details.
 8. Analyze main character’s emotions and consequences in teams.
 9. Role play emotions from personal experiences/class discussions.
 10. Complete a student behavior rating scale.
 11. Complete standards-based assessment with *SRs and ER items.
 12. Analyze assessment results with students
- *SR=Short Response and ER=Extended Response Items

Measuring SEL

Unit performances item 10 makes reference to a student behavior rating scale of which there are a number available. The student behavior scale is an SEL measurement tool that should be used at strategic times during the school year. Data from this tool would be one gauge of a student’s growth based on awareness of one’s personal behavior. Typically, items would be fitted to behavior scales which relate to these areas such as the example below:

Self-Control: Item	Responses				
• I can wait in line patiently.	Almost never <input type="radio"/>	Once in a while <input type="radio"/>	Sometimes <input type="radio"/>	Frequently <input type="radio"/>	Almost always <input type="radio"/>
• I sit still when I’m supposed to.	Almost never <input type="radio"/>	Once in a while <input type="radio"/>	Sometimes <input type="radio"/>	Frequently <input type="radio"/>	Almost always <input type="radio"/>
• I listen attentively.	Almost never <input type="radio"/>	Once in a while <input type="radio"/>	Sometimes <input type="radio"/>	Frequently <input type="radio"/>	Almost always <input type="radio"/>
• I know when to speak.	Almost never <input type="radio"/>	Once in a while <input type="radio"/>	Sometimes <input type="radio"/>	Frequently <input type="radio"/>	Almost always <input type="radio"/>

Not only would students complete a behavior scale, but also students’ teachers and possibly parents would do the same. The SEL measurement is a way for students to reflect on their behavior to identify where behavioral change is warranted, as well as to make their teachers and parents aware of their status in this vital area. It may be used to create student profiles for progress monitoring and inform prevention or intervention strategies. To facilitate the measurement aspect of SEL, technology would relieve the burden by scanning measurement devices, uploading into a computerized system for ongoing reporting.

Broadening Content & Context

The possible content and contexts to support ASEL at all grade levels is virtually endless. Start by examining current curriculum to see where there may be natural alignment of SEL benchmarks with topics being studied and adjust student performances to include both SEL and academic learning. Across all academic disciplines the possibility for expansive implementation of ASEL are endless.

For example: Art: purpose, lives of artists, techniques, symbols, periods, cultural contributions, etc.

- English language arts: fables, folktales, myths, legends, speeches, novels, film, etc.
- Math: mathematicians/Pythagoras, applications, devices/enigma, games, problems, etc.
- Music: purpose, musicians/composers, great works, influences, cultural contributions, etc.
- Science: scientists, theories, inventions, discoveries, applications, impacts, contributions, etc.
- Social studies: social issues/movements, events, historical figures, decisions, inventions, etc.

Student learning experiences expand with ASEL to allow student to answer questions about themselves and what they know about the world.

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