



An antiracist SEL pushes adults to see our loved ones in the faces of the students we have no connection with.

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EQUITY IN FOCUS

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ANTIRACIST SEL CENTERS THE COMFORT AND NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS

As educators responsible for the academic development of the students in our care, we must meet the needs of every young person, whether we personally identify with them or not. The first step is to frame social and emotional learning (SEL) from an antiracist lens that prioritizes community building, belongingness, and identity safety.

Antiracist SEL centers the personal identity of *each* student in *each* teacher's care. It is not a tool to deny white students identity safety but rather to offer that safety to everyone, including the children of color to whom it has long been denied.

Centering the personal identity of each student does not mean the teacher creates a separate lesson plan for every student. It means the teacher uses differentiation, accommodations, and modifications of expectations to understand how to coexist with and support a student who has not yet reached a developmental stage to be in community with their peers.

I liken this differentiated method of SEL to the differentiation a reading teacher leverages to move all students to grade level by the end of the year or the differentiation a math teacher engages to teach new concepts and hold space for knowledge gaps that might prevent a student from succeeding.

SEL through an antiracist lens uses welcoming and closing practices that invite students to co-create the classroom community serving them. Antiracist SEL embeds engaging strategies in the academic day that create windows into the lived experiences of students and mirrors that reflect those same experiences back as important to the overall learning of the students.

When reviewed over the decades across the United States, academic and discipline data show that educators go above and beyond for the students who remind us of ourselves or our loved ones. An antiracist SEL pushes adults to see our loved ones in the faces of the students we have no connection with. This approach to belonging and community in schools and classrooms pushes adults to center the comfort and needs of the student.

For far too long, many educators have been indifferent or hostile to students of color when those students do not comply with what the educators expect of them. When teachers are indifferent or hostile, when they refuse to find a way to connect with students, black boys and girls, in particular, are pushed to the margins, often out of the learning environment altogether by way of suspension or expulsion.

Antiracist SEL requires that educators get curious about why a student causes them enough discomfort to push that student out of the learning environment and deny them opportunities

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to learn. It forces adults to recognize that they often use the concept of “self-management” to rationalize their desire for student compliance instead of engaging in dialogue and navigating conflict that occurs when compliance is demanded of the student.

An adult on an antiracist SEL journey gets curious about (and critical of) traditional approaches to discipline. They might ask: What does “behave” mean to me? Who defines “behave”? Who determines when behavior is out of compliance with our classroom community expectations? Who are the members of this community and would they agree? How might members of this community exist in this space versus spaces outside this community, and how does that impact their ability to be successful in school and life outside school?

When I was a public school administrator with a desire to nurture

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a humanizing culture in schools, I was given the charge to develop a restorative practices focus across the district. SEL became the foundation my colleagues and I used. We took on this charge with the belief that restorative practices and social and emotional learning are not programs, but ways of being.

Both ways of being fit nicely into the structure of a strong Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), so we set out to create an MTSS that responded to the cultural needs of students of all races, backgrounds, and personal needs. SEL can be a strong foundation to any program or intervention, but it must center practices to nurture school environments that are identity-safe for

everyone.

To make SEL truly antiracist, adults must engage in critical self-reflection, individually and in professional learning communities. Learning in community offers teachers multiple perspectives and windows into the ways of being of people who have different backgrounds. It is the critical self-reflection that allows adults to uncover ways to meet students where they are in a learning partnership.

SEL traditionally was seen as a program that would make students feel like they belong and that it would feel good to go to school daily. Critical self-reflection invites teachers, instructional coaches, and school leaders to get curious and ask, “Do all children in our care feel like they belong, and does going to school daily feel good?” The answer will not always be yes. When it isn’t, an antiracist approach to SEL can give educators the ability to make needed change for student success. ■

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on you (by yourself and others) and responsibilities you assume in your role.

Now compare that list to your official job description. If you are taking on more than intended, unrealistic goals or workload could be hurting your self-efficacy. “Job creep” is a real thing, and it can rob us of our sense of fulfillment and belief in our ability to succeed (Wolverton, 2019).

Note which responsibilities are not stated in your job description and ask yourself where they have come from. Are they self-imposed? If not, do they come from administrators or teachers? Once you have determined those answers, have conversations with stakeholders (and with yourself!) to reset reasonable expectations that

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will increase your well-being and your impact.

Finally, identify where you will you go and what you will do when feelings of frustration, doubt, or overwhelm surface. Who is in your support network? Is it other coaches, professional learning leaders, a national organization like Learning Forward? Whoever you identify, talk with them *before* you run into challenges and make a plan for how they can support you by helping you shift your perspective

(Suttie, 2021).

With these strategies and others, you can build your resilience and stay in touch with the meaning and fulfillment of your work as a coach. Just as flight attendants tell us, only by putting on your own oxygen mask first can you help others.

REFERENCES

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