



ArtsEdSEL

The Center for Arts Education
and Social Emotional Learning



THE HEART OF THE ARTS ARTICLE SERIES

Identity, Belonging, and Agency: Reframing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in Arts Education

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The COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism

have exposed inequity at an extreme level. For those who have been looking, we always acknowledged it was there; now, it is impossible to miss. Remote learning has exposed, and in some cases exacerbated, systemic inequities in our society and schooling structure. Every student does not have the resources needed to succeed, and stable internet is the tip of the iceberg. There are two narratives surrounding SEL as it relates to equity: (a) SEL can be a powerful tool to serve as a catalyst for anti-racism ; and (b) SEL can serve as another form of silencing students, especially those of color .

Equity

Dr. Lorenzo Moore, superintendent of Aldine Public Schools, profoundly said: "If you are talking about social emotional learning but not talking about equity, you are not talking about SEL." However, we need to make an intentional choice to mobilize SEL and arts education for equity. Dr. Maurice Elias suggests this connection does not happen automatically.

"SEL is no more aligned to equity, inherently, than art is to goodness."

Collaboration

The work of SEL, broadly, must be positioned as a collaborative effort *with* our students so that our classrooms do not become assumptive spaces where students' and societal needs and challenges are dictated instead of explored. Similarly, without this level of co-learning and co-creation of our academic spaces, students and teachers will never fully realize the innate skills they bring with them to our schools. The academic arrow must cease to be one direction *from* teacher to student; instead, the arrows must be multi-directional where we learn just as much from the students as they do from us, and students (and their families) share their gifts and abilities with each other.

Competency Building

The hallmark SEL competency-building of SELF (self-awareness

& self-management), OTHERS (social awareness & relationship skills), and DECISIONS is more important now than ever. While we see the results of many poor decisions being made in our world, explicitly targeting decision-making skills, initially, is missing foundational steps to build SEL work. Decision-making is an advanced skill and should follow reflection based upon to who we are and how we engage with our community.

Grace & Empathy

Sheryl Crowell, a music teacher from Rockford, Illinois said: "I will try not to confuse their cry for help as a bad choice." When we approach our students, colleagues, and ourselves with this grace and empathy, we position our classrooms as a place for growth and learning, both artistically and holistically. The challenges we are facing necessitate positioning SELF-OTHERS-DECISIONS within a new context.

Dr. Robert Jagers, of the Collaborative for Academic Social Emotional Learning (CASEL), has spoken extensively about how SEL needs to be adapted for all students during these times³. The result is a reconceptualization built upon collaboration across our communities.



SELF becomes more focused on our identity. Who are we, what have been our experiences, and how do those inform our beliefs, mindsets, and biases?



OTHERS becomes centralized on creating spaces for belonging. Are our arts classrooms safe spaces for all of our students to be vulnerable and to take risks as they pursue their artistic dreams?



DECISIONS expands to ensure that our students' voices are heard, amplified, and can affect change in school and community contexts.

SELF → IDENTITY

OTHERS → BELONGING

DECISIONS → AGENCY

I used to say that SEL can give our students a voice.

*This is not accurate; our students *have* voices; however, we typically do a very good job of silencing them. It is our job to amplify their voice. This often necessitates taking a less directed role in our arts⁴ classrooms and assuming the role of facilitator where students can tinker and envision their own artistic journey. Intentional, embedded artistic SEL can lift up **every student's voice.***



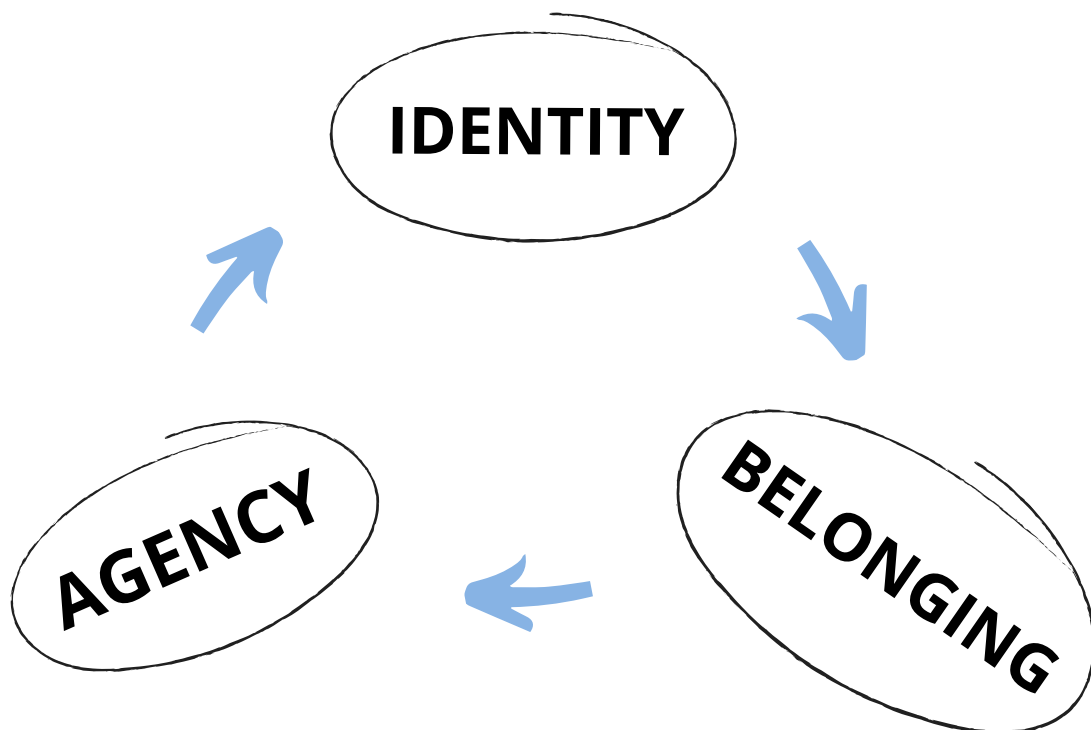
Interpreting Students' Changed Needs for Arts Education

The pandemic has affected arts education profoundly⁵. The typical manifestations of concerts, plays, musicals, recitals, and gallery openings have had to be re-envisioned in a way that no one had experienced before. These adaptations have pushed arts educators and students to recreate what excellence can look like in our classrooms. The artistic process has emerged as equally as important as the artistic product^{6 & 7}. This is a dramatic shift for many of us who have defined our work as outcome-based. As students and teachers are reimagining arts education through the process, student voice and empowering choice is emerging in meaningful and creative ways. When democratic and collaborative, the artistic process is capable of reminding students how much they love the arts.

Former First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, stated: "Arts education is not a luxury, it's a necessity. It's really the air many of these kids breathe. It's how we get kids excited about getting up and going to school in the morning." This academic home for our students provides a fertile ground to acknowledge our students' and teachers' challenges, facilitate a trusting safe space to grow, and further the artistic processes (and products, where appropriate).

Translating

identity, belonging, agency for arts education builds on the following points highlighting beliefs that have always unified us around the cultural necessity that is the arts.





IDENTITY

The perseverance needed to dedicate oneself to artistic excellence fosters resilience both in and out of the arts classroom.

Artistic creation fosters self-awareness and allows for students to develop a greater sense of identity, autonomy, and emotional vocabulary.

Artists learn the necessity of personal goal-setting, self-assessment, and accountability as they develop high standards for artmaking and themselves.



BELONGING

The relationship built between arts teachers and students over multiple years of instruction fosters the caring environment necessary to help build school connectedness, foster empathy, and provide a sense of belonging.

Collaborative arts classrooms build connections between students, facilitate community engagement, and uplifts and celebrates the cultural assets of students.

Arts classrooms necessitate vulnerability and facilitate a space where students can explore, tinker, envision, and grow.



AGENCY

The collaborative community developed in the arts classroom welcomes discussions and an awareness of acceptance and embracing diversity, resulting in a greater sense of agency and affecting meaningful change.

Student voice is amplified through the artistic process facilitating an experience to develop efficacy.

The artistic process necessitates editing of the artistic product. This process builds student capacity to hone their beliefs and become flexible to represent themselves in true, concise, and meaningful ways.



The arts can provide a portal to build back the trust and social emotional competence needed to confront the recent unparalleled challenges, meeting an essential need for all students. Beyond these skills, some of the most memorable art throughout history has spawned from trial and tribulation.

Funneling our challenges into the artistic process and products is our answer to building a road forward through arts education and social emotional learning. In the words of the first National Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman, in her inaugural poem *The Hill We Climb*,⁸ art gives us insight, and art gives us strength.

***We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover,
In every known nook of our nation,
In every corner called our country,
Our people, diverse and dutiful.
We'll emerge, battered but beautiful.
When day comes, we step out of the
shade,
Aflame and unafraid.
The new dawn blooms as we free it,
For there is always light,
If only we're brave enough to see it,
If only we're brave enough to be it.***

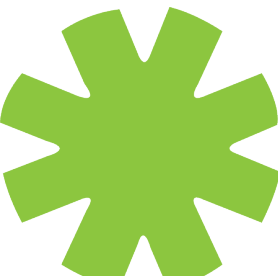
Note: Special thanks to Dr. Pamela Randall-Gardner from CASEL for her insight during the preparation of this article.





Mission Statement

The Center for Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning (ArtsEdSEL) is dedicated to illuminating the intersection between arts education and social emotional learning to facilitate the embedded, intentional, and sustained application of SEL-informed arts education.



References



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- 8 Gorman, A. (2021). *The Hill We Climb*. Viking Books.



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