



## Cultivating Student Empowerment Through Artistic SEL

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### \* What is SEL for Student Empowerment?

Social and emotional learning (SEL) means equipping ourselves to be whole people who have a healthy, functional awareness of ourselves (Identity) and meaningful connections to others that allow us to make positive contributions to our communities (Belonging), as well as have power over our lives (Agency). Positive self-identity facilitates building and maintaining healthy relationships and necessary connections to others which, in turn, form solid foundations that propel students to serve themselves and their communities through decisions and action.

Thus, the final goal for educators is supporting students to achieve this sense of empowerment that leads to agency and action. So how do we get there through the arts? We embrace and build our classrooms and arts learning processes to be opportunities and safe spaces for students to practice SEL as well as develop and apply agency and critical thinking. Arts educators deeply know the value and nuances of processed-focused work because our disciplines require developing skills, awarenesses, sensibilities, practice habits, routines, personal goals, reflection, honest self-assessment and joy over time. We know that young artists need this focus on process over products,

and that honoring this purpose requires time and consistent care. This means asserting that embedded, intentional and sustained practices, routines and development opportunities is not just one way, but the only way forward.

### \* Embedded Student Empowerment Teaching

Just as with all teaching, aligning content, priorities and pedagogical decisions in service of student empowerment starts with deep thinking on both the outcomes we want for students as experiences and skills, and the opportunities your skills and content area provide.

### \* Start with a few key questions and let them guide your curriculum and routine development:

What are the decisions and leadership roles that cannot be fulfilled by students? We most often start with asking the opposite question: "where students can take the lead?" which builds in the assumption that that will be the exception rather than the rule. If we work from assuming more student leadership than teacher leadership we are more likely to create that environment.

What are the key choices and

tasks required in the subject I teach? Can students make these choices and execute these tasks?

And what are the SEL competencies needed to thrive and grow in the art form we are learning and exploring? What community, cultural and experiential knowledge do students bring with them about these ideas and how can I create a comfortable safe space to lift up that knowledge?

How will these SEL competencies live in our routines and how will students direct that work? How can students define and pursue their own learning goals through the art form you are teaching? How can you engage students as co-creators and co-teachers?

What role will students have in regularly teaching one another and YOU?

How will you create or co-create regular daily and weekly routines with students where they can engage in exercises and conversations that direct lesson planning and implementation?



An excellent example of fully embedded student empowerment is the [Kid Nation Education](#) program created by Iris Patterson, Teacher Leader in the Madison Metropolitan School District in Wisconsin. Patterson has empowered her students to teach all the core curricula to one another by adapting the content and instructional materials to be led and delivered by students. Students form districts of learners which function as pods or learning families and they elect fellow students to lead each district. They hold one another accountable while sharing responsibility for encouraging and bringing one another along as learners. Patterson's curricular approach is featured in the student empowerment module of the [Building the SEL Classroom](#) course viewable at this [link](#).

## ✿ Intentional Student Empowerment

It is also essential that teachers be explicit and intentional in forecasting, practicing and reinforcing SEL skill development in and through the arts, and all learning. Students learn when to use SEL skills when they experience and are aware of their positive impact on their lives--what psychologists have termed metacognition. Since teachers prepare students for life, the lessons learned need to be understood beyond the specific contexts and examples we teach so that students make broader connections that will facilitate applying them later in different situations.

To illustrate what intentional SEL looks like I offer the case of [Drum Power](#), a youth program I founded in 2001, in New York City, that I taught in public schools and community centers all over the city. The program teaches West African,



Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian drumming to practice what we termed life skills then, but now know as SEL. To date, more than 3900 students have come through Drum Power in NYC, Madison, Wisconsin and Denver Colorado. For me, centering the whole child meant providing a space to practice and learn life skills through developing drumming skills.

To be intentional we always help students set goals for themselves to elevate the work toward student empowerment. We challenge students to be the architects of their own plans to address the following guiding questions:

### ✿ Who do you want to be?

- What kind of person do you want to be for yourself and for those you care about?

### ✿ What are you doing to get there?

- What are you doing now and more importantly, what are you going to do from this day forward?





We often have open discussions and regular check-ins on these questions where students can depend on receiving supportive, non-judgmental feedback from the class community. Students also get to belong to a community around music skill development, personal growth and creative


collaboration. However, intentionally building and maintaining a space of student empowerment begins with addressing important questions that must lead to systems, consistent routines and regular student opportunities.

## Sustained Student Empowerment

As presented above, being intentional about embedding SEL in arts skill development and learning community practices is done most effectively with consistency students can both count on and lead. This means the work is most effective when it is sustained, ever-present and grounded in the learning culture. However, since the culture of each classroom consists of contributions and experiences from all its members, sustained youth empowerment requires honoring the identities and cultural realities and riches all the students bring with them.

Culture is what students bring with them as who they are; and every student has culture: youth culture (hip hop for example), ethnic backgrounds, communities, histories, and experiences. In building an SEL-based learning environment we make spaces for culture(s) to live--which means spaces that nurture and sustain it like a plant with consistency through our routines, not through show and tell activities once or twice. Learning is relevant when it is applicable and learning is applicable when students can see, experience and determine how it facilitates the goals they have for themselves--and that leads to engagement and ultimately, vitality.

Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings offered that "Culturally relevant teaching uses student culture in order to maintain it and to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture," (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p.19). If we apply that definition to implementing SEL, selecting and translating broader SEL




### The following questions are starting points for making student empowerment intentional:

- What are your intentions for your students? What power do you want them to have access to? What should the ideas they explore and the skills they develop in your class enable them to do both as artists and as people?
- What does it mean to be powerful in this classroom/activity space?
- How can students influence shaping it? Ask them what it means to be powerful in this space and let them lead.
  - When and how will reflection be student-led?
  - What teacher behaviors will allow students to remain empowered and which will not?
- What guiding questions might you ask students to inspire and develop their own goals for personal growth?
- How will you make SEL goals, growth and skills explicit through arts activities/learning?

This [PBS feature](#) on Drum Power provides more detail on the program.





competencies must include connecting them to student life experiences, interests, values and personal goals, as well as language and meanings they understand. This is when we translate selected skills, competencies or pursuits (Muhammad, 2020) into language and experience that is owned by students, which means engaging them as the knowledge experts. Or further, we make space and get out the way so that students exercise power over how learning happens, what is deemed valuable knowledge and finally, what is actually learned.



## **The following questions are ways to begin grounding sustained student empowerment:**

What class activities will regularly allow students to incorporate their cultural identities into individual OR group content learning?

What routines will you use for students to regularly introduce and explore their own thoughts, interests and topics for group discussion in deeper ways?

How will the individual cultural identities and shared experiences be used to forge a shared community identity? How will art be used to do that? How will students lead that work?


In summary, when I observe classrooms to support educators I don't look for compliance nor assume that just because a class is quiet and orderly that students are engaged and empowered. I look for vitality which can be present as a range of behaviors from quiet intense focus, to the laughter and smiles of joyful work with a purpose. Supporting such an arts environment requires structure and commitment to protecting everyone's safety, learning and joy through shared agreements, collaboration and student leadership. Working to intentionally embed and sustain student ownership is not just the path to student empowerment, it is also the only way to prepare students to be the stewards of their own futures as well as our own.





## 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.



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