



## Teaching How We Were Taught:

### Student Perspectives of SEL in Arts Teacher Preparation Programs

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### \* Choosing To Be An Arts Educator

Arts classrooms can be places of safety, refuge, and joy for students of all ages. These truths have remained constant for many years, and will often be mentioned when young preservice teachers are asked the question: “Why choose to major in arts education?” Aspiring arts educators will spend their undergraduate careers learning content necessary to teach their subject most effectively, and many find the notion of their future arts classroom to be a motivating factor throughout their education. But what happens when the world is shaken by a pandemic, social unrest, or the general unknowns that come along with “unprecedented times?” While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, an effective place to start preparing preservice arts teachers to adapt to the day-to-day “unknowns” of teaching is to start steeping them in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)-informed experiences early in programs. By modeling SEL-framed instruction and behavior in an organic manner,

instructors of preservice teachers can effectively prepare future educators to understand and meet the social and emotional needs of their students – as well as their own.

### \* Modeling: We Teach How We Were Taught

Modeling in the classroom is the act of teaching through observable practice. This method was widely researched and discussed by psychologist Albert Bandura, who points to “exposure to social models” as the primary method through which human behavior is learned (Bandura, 1975, p.4). In education, students watch as their teachers handle a new situation, and this observation guides the student in their future engagement with similar situations.

In a music classroom, this can look like a choral director leading their students through a new vocal warm-up. The teacher demonstrates all the correct pitches and techniques, then the students echo this behavior and perform the warm-up on their own. In a dance class, modeling might look like an instructor’s

physical demonstration of the plié. In future classes, they can replicate this same process by remembering the initial model that was presented to them by their instructor.

Modeling can be used to effectively teach “curricular” content, and it can also be used as a good method to introduce SEL to undergraduates in arts teacher preparation programs.

As many teachers **teach how they were taught**, it is imperative that preservice teachers are taught early on with methods that incorporate SEL, so that they themselves will model their teaching based on these methods. The pedagogical practices and teaching philosophies framed by SEL will feed into their instructional techniques for the entirety of their careers. Modeling SEL in education courses gives future educators the tools they will need to teach their students about emotional growth and the SEL core competencies of Identity, Belonging, and Agency (CASEL, 2020). SEL not only benefits those who learn with it, but also those who teach with it.

**Figure 1: Multi-Layered Benefits of SEL Instruction: “The SEL Waterfall”**

	Identity		Belonging		Agency
	Self-Awareness	Self-Management	Social Awareness	Relationship Skills	Responsible Decision-Making
<b>Professors</b>	<p><i>While introducing an important educational theory, Professor Hedges notices that a few students are struggling. Professor Hedges invites them to his office hours, and explains that not all concepts are easy to grasp – they will get it in time!</i></p> <p>(Professor Hedges seamlessly demonstrates how having a “growth mindset” is important, and that struggling with new concepts is nothing to be ashamed of.)</p>	<p><i>Stacy auditions for a solo in her college’s symphonic choir, but she begins to experience stage fright as she prepares for the concert. Noticing this, Dr. Reid speaks with Stacy after rehearsal, and asks her what makes her nervous.</i></p> <p>(Dr. Reid teaches Stacy to practice good self-management by acknowledging her emotions when she’s having a hard time doing so.)</p>	<p><i>A debate breaks out in a theatre education class between Janice and Lina about the best method to structure a rehearsal. Rather than side with either party, Professor Hall asks each student to make a “pros and cons” list about their methods, and facilitates a discussion which results in the students both seeing the merits to <u>both</u> methods.</i></p> <p>(Professor Hall not only resolves the debate, but shows the students how to truly take in other perspectives, and understand why their counterpart thinks the way they do.)</p>	<p><i>Dr. Lance makes an effort to facilitate opportunities for members of her contemporary dance class to get to know each other before the group even starts working on routines, because she believes that a group that cares about each other will create more meaningful art.</i></p> <p>(Dr. Lance creates the space for students to communicate and form positive relationships.)</p>	<p><i>Dave and his friends don’t practice for their sectional in band, and now they don’t know their music. Rather than reprimand the students, Dr. Jameson asks them to think about their actions’ impacts on the rest of their section and ensemble.</i></p> <p>(By discussing the consequences of actions, Dr. Jameson helps Dave and his friends develop agency.)</p>
<b>Undergraduates</b>	<p><i>One of the students, Marco, goes on to teach a high school visual art class. He notices that Larry is struggling to accomplish a specific brush stroke. Marco tells Larry that he will get it eventually, and assures him that new skills take time.</i></p> <p>(Professor Hedges’ “growth mindset” approach made an impression on Marco, and now he uses the same mindset to teach artistic concepts to his students.)</p>	<p><i>Stacy becomes a middle school choir teacher and notices her student, Michelle, is very nervous about her solo in the concert. Stacy speaks to Michelle beforehand.</i></p> <p>(Stacy helps Michelle to acknowledge her emotions surrounding singing alone.)</p>	<p><i>Lina is directing her high school’s play and the two student stage managers get into a disagreement about backstage protocol during rehearsal. Lina, remembering how Professor Hall handled the debate in her class, has the students discuss the pros and cons of each method and helps them reach a compromise that honors both viewpoints.</i></p> <p>(Lina helps the students learn how to see and value both viewpoints, making them more socially aware in the process.)</p>	<p><i>Miles, one of the dancers in the class, goes on to direct a middle school dance club. Just like Dr. Lance did, Miles provides ample group bonding opportunities, which helps build a healthy community and good relationships in the class.</i></p> <p>(Miles was inspired by the behaviors of his teacher, and incorporated positive relationship building into his dance program.)</p>	<p><i>Dave walks into his elementary general music classroom to find his students throwing the Orff instrument mallets at each other. Rather than taking away instrument privileges for the day, he asks the students why this behavior is not responsible.</i></p> <p>(Dave helped the students to uncover the reasons why throwing mallets is not responsible, giving them agency and ownership over the importance of safety.)</p>
<b>Future Students (K-12)</b>	<p><i>In the future, when Larry finds himself struggling with difficult tasks, he will realize that he cannot be too hard on himself – new skills take time!</i></p>	<p><i>Now, whenever Michelle starts to feel nervous about singing, she remembers that her teacher knows she gets nervous, and she can talk to Stacy about her fears whenever she needs to.</i></p>	<p><i>When the student stage managers run into difficulties outside of the theatre, they now know how to handle debates in a calm manner that gives both parties space to be heard.</i></p>	<p><i>The students in Miles’ dance club have now experienced a healthy community and have formed lasting positive relationships, and will know the traits of these things for the future.</i></p>	<p><i>Now that the students have gained ownership over the importance of safety, they are able to apply this to scenarios outside of the music classroom.</i></p>



As depicted in Figure 1, **SEL-informed instruction is effective if it is implemented in a natural and organic manner.**

These valuable lessons can be taught through actions that are as simple as asking a student what makes them nervous, as Dr. Reid did for Stacy, and in turn, Stacy did for Michelle.

The framework can be used to guide educator thought processes and behaviors, so they might help students learn the same skill set. And **if woven into instruction early on, thinking in this manner can become reflexive — not contrived.** In their article about districtwide SEL implementation, Kendziora and Yoder (2016) found that **systemic implementation of the framework led to “positive trends in the academic and behavioral growth of students”** (p. 11).

As many districts nationwide are now adapting and implementing SEL in their schools, it is deeply important to begin preparing young arts educators to teach these skills to students in a meaningful and natural manner. This is especially important given the challenges of the past two years, and the mental health crisis we are experiencing.

## **The Post-Pandemic Vitality of SEL in Arts Classrooms**

With the transition back to in-person learning, it is evident that many students are struggling with academic and social setbacks due to the pandemic. Besides the challenges associated with school disruptions, students may also be dealing with traumas and other setbacks that occurred during remote learning and the pandemic. Now more than ever, students need more support in school to ensure a positive and conducive learning environment for all. To be effective, adults must be willing to embrace and facilitate these SEL skills in the school setting. When teachers engage with students in an empathetic matter, the students feel safer and more supported in that setting (Newman et al., 2018). Incorporating SEL skills in the classroom can help to triage any challenges that may arise by allowing students to use those skills in a positive manner.

While SEL may not be the answer to all the challenges in education, it can help to create a positive environment. Undergraduate programs benefit from teaching SEL skills in the sense that it would allow future teachers to bring more than just content knowledge to the classroom. As per the case studies in Figure 1, we can see how these embedded skills can benefit students in scenarios both in and out of the classroom. Arts educators have the ability to organically integrate SEL into instruction by being intentional about the manners in which they approach the tenets of identity, belonging, and agency.

## **SEL: Structure for Implicit Truths in Art**

The arts are naturally deeply social and emotional, often dealing with themes of humanitarian struggle, triumph, and joy. As arts educators, we face these topics daily — both through the art we teach, and through the eyes of our young students who are learning to navigate the world. As such, it is pragmatic and efficient to teach this subject through the lens of the SEL framework — a framework designed to provide structure and support for lessons centered around these topics.

Often, the real-world topics we encounter through art deal with emotions and experiences that transcend the curricular content normally conveyed in traditional teacher preparation programs. This is where the SEL framework becomes invaluable — the structure it provides for teachers to begin navigating these waters. If naturally embedded into the instruction preservice arts teachers receive as they learn how to be educators, not only





will the skills highlighted in the framework aid the teachers in their own lives, but they will set them up for success in the day-to-day happenings in the classroom.

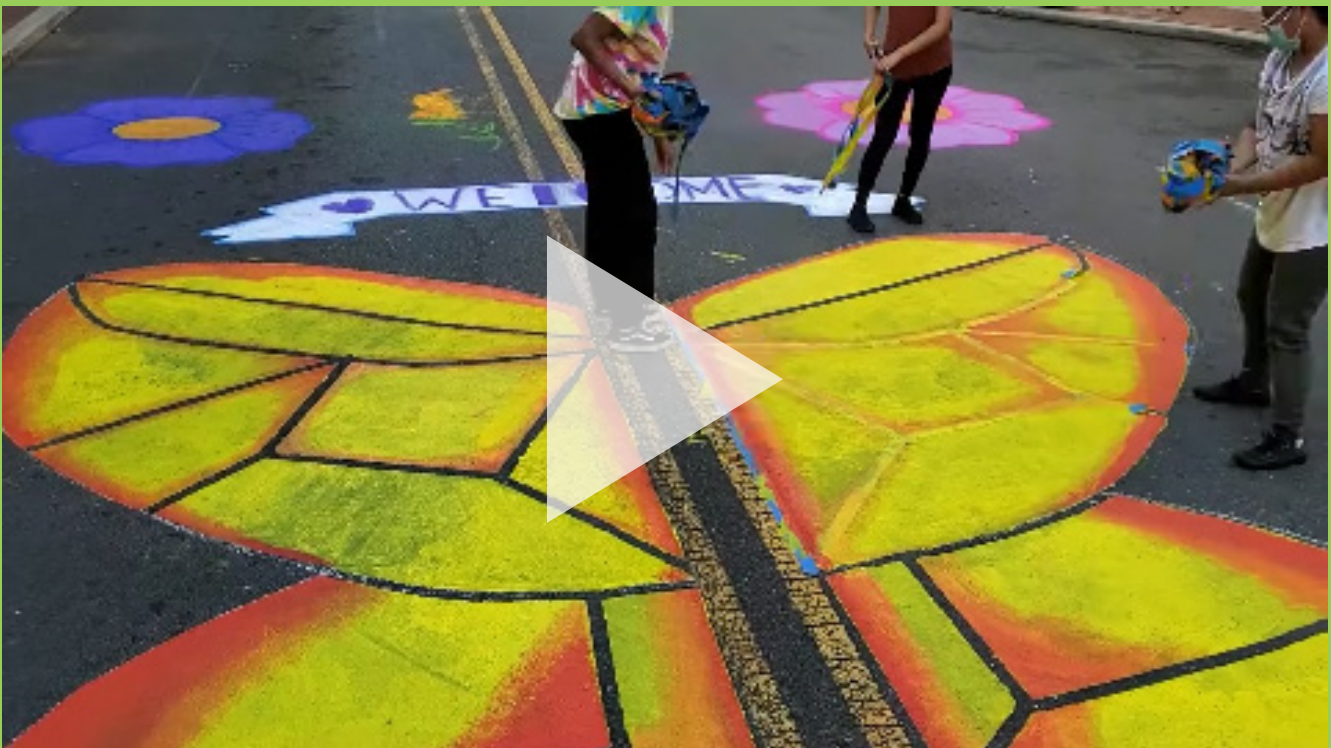
While there is no perfect approach to teaching in a post-2020 education-scape, framing one's approach in an SEL-informed manner can hold great benefits for students and future teachers. Teaching young arts educators about the SEL

framework will provide support as they traverse the unknowns of teaching. These SEL foundations aid in curriculum design and delivery, and provide students with healthy behaviors and thought patterns that will prevail beyond their school years.

As art has always possessed the power to move hearts and minds in a natural and organic manner, arts educators have likely unknowingly been embedding these skills for many

years. If professors provide new arts teachers with the words and framework to describe the humanitarian lessons they have implicitly gained in their arts education, they will be able to embed these values more effectively in their lessons for generations to come. And, if truly embraced, their future students will experience deep social and emotional engagement in the arts — setting them up for a lifetime of artistic profundity.

## ✿ How Has SEL Aided Students Through COVID-19?





## 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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