PMEA Research
Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) had drawn much attention in educational circles. Researchers have increasingly clarified intersections between SEL and arts education, and emerging data from music and arts settings continues to sharpen our understandings about SEL and next steps regarding policy, pedagogy, and implementation.

Setting the stage in 2020, Arts Education Policy Review published a special-focus issue “Social Emotional Learning and the Arts: Policies, Practices, and Interpretations” (Edgar, 2020). In that issue, researchers attended to the alignment between SEL and national-level arts policy addressing the National Core Arts Standards (Omasta et al., 2020), Federal education title funding and the Obama-era education policy Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Kapalka Richerme, 2020), and integration into arts teacher education (Hellman & Milling, 2020).

Broadly, their findings suggested that (a) the potential for SEL integration into music education policy, practice, and research is profound, but still needs further exploration; and (b) although implicit and tangential, SEL tenets are present in the National Core Arts Standards, ESSA, and music teacher accreditation standards. Those suggestions are supported by the strong presence of SEL in the broad educational research discourse and the prevalence of SEL in PK-12 school districts. Contributors to that Arts Education Policy Review special-focus issue have provided a bedrock for researchers to frame additional studies exploring the deep potential for SEL in music education.

This year in the United States, the pandemic and persistent racial inequalities have combined with already-present challenges related to access, inclusion, and equity; and have accelerated researchers’ and practitioners’ interests in implementing and increasing access to SEL for broad populations across the country, both in and out of music education. The profound trauma many students are experiencing has necessitated school-based support for students’ social and emotional challenges as they attempt to engage in educational activities mid-COVID 19 (Edgar & Elias, 2020).

National organizations, including the National Association for Music Education (NAfME), National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), and National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) have been responsive to the increase in SEL visibility and SEL needs. State music education associations also have been responsive, increasing resources available for their music teachers. They are assuring that the resources align with state standards and are contextual for the needs of their constituents.

Districts have begun to include SEL as a central component of professional development for their teachers, in and out of music. Those efforts to increase implementation of SEL melded with a realization that students’ (and teachers’) social emotional challenges must be addressed before learning can occur is encouraging. The continued efforts of policy makers, researchers, and practi-
toners to translate SEL authentically and responsively into music education, followed by systematic research to identify promising practices and their effects is critical. What we continue to learn from this traumatic time will inform our work as we transition toward our future living.

Researchers have asserted that, for SEL to be optimally effective, practitioners must embed it into their curriculum rather than relegate it to a stand-alone course or advisory session (Farrington et al., 2019). For SEL to be effective in music education, music educators need SEL to be musical (MSEL). Otherwise—when SEL is not contextualized within subject matter—students often struggle to see the relevance of SEL instruction and view it as forced learning (Eddy et al., 2020).

The pandemic and interest in Musical SEL (MSEL) also resulted in a deluge of resources coming from practitioners, researchers, and policy/advocacy groups. With the increased need for music education advocacy, SEL emerged as a tangible strategy to strengthen the argument for music educations’ place in schools (Edgar & Morrison, 2020). For music teachers seeking resources, note that NAfME vocally supported the inclusion of SEL into the music curriculum (https://nafme.org/music-education-social-emotional-learning/).

Music for All developed an initiative and strand devoted to SEL in the music classroom, hallmarked by a video podcast dedicated to connecting the research to practice perspectives by interviewing prominent members of the music education community about their knowledge, perspectives, and beliefs surrounding MSEL (https://education.musicforall.org/sel/). The Music Education and Social Emotional Learning Facebook page (@music socialemotionallearning) and SEL in the General Music Classroom both have thousands of followers and members.

Music teachers likely already realize the power of music to be socially connecting and emotionally engaging (Edgar & Morrison, 2020); however, they often find themselves looking to dig deeper to find additional tools to reach their students. My work translating SEL for music education, in an effort to offer additional tools for music teachers, emerged in 2017 and built upon a wealth of SEL research in general education (Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis in which they analyzed research to identify and support the benefits of SEL in general education.

Results of their meta-analysis highlighted the benefits and challenges of engaging students in SEL. They broadly concluded that students strongly gain social emotional competence and perform better academically when engaged in sequenced and intentional SEL instruction. My current work, in progress, preliminarily supports those previous findings and also suggests that music teachers can improve ways that music education classrooms function, and tighten the cohesion among processes, products, and students’ lives relative to music objectives. The preliminary findings also suggest that when cohesion increases, often, the musical quality of students’ engagement improves.

To help music teachers integrate SEL into their classrooms, I (Edgar, 2017) authored a translation of SEL into music

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<tr>
<th>SEL GOALS</th>
<th>SKILLS</th>
<th>STRATEGIES</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self:</strong> Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.</td>
<td>• Identify and recognize emotions • Persist • Cope • Manage stress • De-escalate emotions</td>
<td>• Utilize emoji worksheets for reflection, listening exercises, and current mood assessment. • Give students opportunities to self-evaluate their current emotional state and the time and space to recenter (e.g., “I need a break” pass; calm corners; anxiety meters).</td>
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<td><strong>Others:</strong> Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.</td>
<td>• Cooperate • Be empathetic • Build relationships • Have concern and compassion for others • Seek and provide help</td>
<td>• Collectively develop a soundtrack of meaningful music that can be played as students enter class. • Develop teams of students willing to help with reasonable tasks to keep music classrooms safe (following all school, district, and health professional guidance and only allow students to do what is possible and safe).</td>
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<td><strong>Decisions:</strong> Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.</td>
<td>• Promote one’s own health • Avoid risky behaviors • Anticipate consequences • Analyze situations • Plan realistic and adaptive response strategies</td>
<td>• Have students inventory and rank music classroom activities in terms of risk, their comfort performing them, and protocols that could make them feel safer.</td>
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education that emerged prominently as a set of resources in his Music Education and Social Emotional Learning: The Heart of Teaching Music. My work built upon the Collaborative for Academic Social Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) competencies for SEL and melding them with sequential musical instruction.

Music teachers built upon his research-supported activities and suggestions and began to integrate social emotional competence-building into their musical activities across the country (Eddy et al., 2020). They increased intentionality to develop skills associated with self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as integral to their music objectives. Simplified to the main developmental goals of SELF-OTHERS-DECISIONS (Edgar, 2017), the musical results alone supported exciting future applications (Eddy et al., 2020).

As additional research on this topic, prior to the pandemic, I began conducting case study research of teachers intentionally doing SEL work. The purpose of the inquiry was to explore teachers’ and student’s perceptions of a SEL curriculum adapted for high school ensemble music classrooms. Two research questions guided this inquiry: (a) what are perceptions of students and teachers regarding the implementation of a structured SEL plan into their existing music education curriculum? and (b) how does a musically and socially-emotionally-rich music education affect musical (academic) and non-musical elements of the classroom?

The primary study involved a year-long, ethnographic professional development project (2019 - 2020). I worked alongside two high school music programs helping the teachers (n = 6) and students (n = 322) implement SEL into their classrooms (Eddy et al., 2020). My project involved introducing the teachers and students to the construct, curriculum development, activity integration, being a participant/observer/researcher, and my serving as a resource for the teachers integrating this work. Derived from over 300 hours spent in participants’ classrooms, data I collected included extensive observation notes, student and teacher interviews, and artifacts derived from the SEL activities.

The in-person component of this study was cut short due to the COVID-19 disruption; however, the preliminary results suggest strong support for integrating SEL into the music programs. Through their feedback, students and teachers supported the need for the work to be organic and related to the music, often driven by and integrated into the repertoire selection, rehearsal process, and performance through reflection in myriad modalities. The teachers suggested that selecting repertoire with SEL in mind as a portal to connect to students should be part of that essential curricular decision-making process.

Another key interim finding was that activities and reflection needed to be organic to the existing classroom environment. Reflection served as a critical element for their SEL goals; however, they pointed out that if writing was not a typical activity in the classroom (for example), doing excessive writing for SEL could lead to it feeling unnatural and resented. The teachers engaged on a journey to figure out how SEL could look in their classrooms. The answers the teachers concluded were varied and advised against a “one-size-fits-all” approach to SEL. Instead, they advised adapting SEL approaches to account for varied teacher, student, and school needs.

Finally, as the educational pivot occurred, all teachers involved in the project sought ways to integrate SEL into their remote instruction and found that doing so enhanced the educational and musical experience. It also resulted in greater participation and engagement compared to other less-connected experiences and exercises.

In closing, SEL has become an educational buzzword, reaching a very high level of integration into educational policy and practice. Due to its deep-seated role, I predict it likely will remain part of the educational dialogue and system. As our country navigates profound racial discrimination, divisiveness, and questioning of basic human dignity, SEL has been cited as both a portal forward to serve as a lever for anti-racism and a construct that could be misused as another means of control, especially for students of color (Kaler-Jones, 2020).

For SEL to further our goal of equity, we must apply it with cultural relevance and responsiveness to achieve what the CASEL refers to as Transformative SEL.
MSEL, supported by Transformative SEL, should serve as a conduit for diversity utilizing the wealth of music from different demographics and backgrounds. By integrating Transformative SEL into the music classroom, teachers and students have the opportunity to empathize and broaden their awareness of the strengths and values of varied cultures and people.

I encourage everyone in music education to continue to explore the Transformative and Musical SEL research, extrapolations, and practices which many have found benefit students’ self-awareness, social-awareness, and abilities to make responsible decisions through music. Through our concerted efforts, we have opportunities to help students succeed in the tests of life rather than a life of tests (Edgar & Elias, 2020). As each teacher plans music engagement during these challenging times, know that your contributions to students’ SEL matter. Please reach out to me if I can be of assistance (edgar@lakeforest.edu).

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[For more on this topic and some examples, see the following. Ed]

This article in TMEA starts to look at some of the connections: https://www.tmea.org/southwestern-musician/issues/August-2020/

This webinar unpacks many of the activities during COVID: https://vimeo.com/401331149

This webinar is co-presented with Bob Morrison and further explores these activities: https://vimeo.com/428530989/05fbbafa3b

Resources for SEL and Specific Strategies for Implementing SEL in the Music Classroom

➤ Music Education and Social Emotional Learning: The Heart of Teaching Music (and student workbook), by Scott Edgar, GIA Publications.


➤ Music Education and Social Emotional Learning, by Scott Edgar, NAfME blog: https://nafme.org/music-education-social-emotional-learning/

➤ Music Education and Social Emotional Learning, by Scott Edgar and Bob Morrison, NAfME webinar: https://nafme.org/advocacy/quarterly-advocacy-webinars/social-emotional-learning/


➤ Advocating for Music Education Utilizing SEL, by Scott Edgar and Bob Morrison, NAfME webinar: https://nafme.org/my-classroom/nafme-online-professional-learning-community/#Webinar%20Recordings

➤ Music Education and Social Emotional Learning Facebook Page: @MusicSocialEmotionalLearning

➤ New Jersey Arts Education and SEL Learning Framework: www.selarts.org

➤ Collaborative for Academic Social Emotional Learning (CASEL): www.casel.org
REFERENCES


