

## **Social-emotional learning can build a more-inclusive school community—but only if done well**

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In order for social-emotional learning to advance educational equity, we must be prepared to talk about race.

Recent incidents of racially motivated violence and discrimination have prompted widespread media attention. Last year's attacks by white supremacists in Charlottesville, Va., the ongoing detainment and separation of children and families immigrating from Mexico and Central America, police shootings of unarmed African-American people, and the recent examples of white people calling the police on African-Americans for unfounded suspicions all serve as a backdrop for the racial inequities students experience and observe in their schools every day. If we don't acknowledge this context, students are left to assume that we think these conditions are acceptable, that we are unaware of the impact of these harmful policies and practices on students and their families, or, worse, that we don't care. To support our students' social and emotional well-being authentically, we must acknowledge and confront the legacy of racism and exclusion in our schools and communities—and its continued impact on all our students.

### **"Students of color often must attempt to learn in an atmosphere that feels unwelcoming and sometimes hostile to them and their families."**

Research confirms that the **context of learning and how students feel about that context matter**. In the United States, that context has always been racialized. Although race is a socially constructed category, our race affects our access to opportunities, how we experience the world, and whether our identity is accepted or derided. From the beginning, schools in the United States were designed to benefit and affirm the values and culture of the white people in power. Over time, this white dominant culture shaped the educational structures and policies that articulate how children are expected to behave, communicate, and interact.

Today, how learning is organized and evaluated is still rooted in an acceptance of whiteness as "natural" and "normal." The presumption that students from a culture outside this "norm" come to school with deficits—in their intelligence, families, culture, or communities—is built into the DNA of public education.

Most educators value fairness and equality and want the best for all their students. However, we cannot underestimate the power of the unconscious to lead us to take actions, both at the individual and institutional levels, that undermine students' sense of belonging and unintentionally contribute to educational inequities. Research has shown that **belonging in schools has a direct impact on academic performance**; belonging defines who benefits from caring relationships and who has access to rigorous content and engaging instruction.

Students of color often must attempt to learn in an atmosphere that feels unwelcoming and sometimes hostile to them and their families. This experience of hostility undermines their sense of belonging and can interfere with their cognitive performance. As educators committed to equity, we must be aware of the impact of social threats on our students of color and other stigmatized groups, and actively work to mitigate the effects of institutionalized bias in our schools.

We also need to avoid framing social-emotional learning either tacitly or explicitly as an intervention to address the perceived deficits of students of color or students living in poverty. Doing so can reinforce harmful stereotypes and lead to an overemphasis on developing individual self-management and self-regulation skills

while ignoring the impact of inequities in our systems. Instead, we can use social-emotional practices to build on students' strengths and develop student agency to lead positive change in their own communities.

Through the **National Equity Project's more than 20 years of work partnering with schools and districts**, we've seen how educators committed to equity have used social-emotional learning to help students and adults heal from the effects of systemic oppression, build empathy, strengthen cross-race relationships, and create inclusive learning environments. Our recommendations for educators seeking to advance educational equity include:

- **Invest time in professional learning.** Educators need regular opportunities to increase their self-awareness about how their various social identities, including their race, have shaped their own education experiences and inform their interpretations of student behavior.
- **Identify and eliminate biases in student placement and discipline.** School leaders and teachers should re-examine the policies and practices that determine who gets access to honors and Advanced Placement classes, as well as student-leadership roles and extracurricular activities. They also need to take a hard look at who gets disciplined and how.
- **Elevate narratives that promote the intellectual achievements of students of color.** Research has shown that teachers can mitigate the effects of "stereotype threat" by implementing well-timed reflection activities in which students write about values that are important to them and their families. This practice counters the effects of pervasive racial stereotypes and reduces stress in students of color. The reflections reassure students about who they are and protect their sense of academic belonging, which ultimately leads to greater engagement and higher grades.

- **Develop a repertoire of approaches for building trust, especially across race, class, and culture.** Trusting relationships between students and teachers prepare the brain for learning by reducing stress and releasing oxytocin, a hormone that promotes social interaction. Educators should work to learn about the passions and interests of individual students of color and apply what they learn to inform instructional strategies.

- **Utilize social-emotional-learning practices to engage in productive dialogue about race.** Building "racial literacy" is a critical dimension of both self- and social-awareness for all students. Teachers should engage all students in deep listening and reflection on complex issues and current events surrounding race, racism, and exclusion. This provides students the opportunity to develop SEL competencies, including communication and relationship skills, self-management, and responsible decision making.

- **Access the Aspen Institute's recent Call to Action. These examples of evidence-based practices and policies** will help educators learn how to apply a racial equity lens to ensure that equity and SEL are mutually reinforcing. Ultimately, all learning is social and emotional. Learning is mediated by relationships that sit in a sociopolitical, racialized context—for all children, not just those who are black, brown, or poor. We must be willing to locate the problem we are trying to solve not in our students, but also in our collective response to the current context and conditions of their learning. Together, we can create learning environments in our schools that are rigorous, liberating, and joyful for all our students.

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