

Megan Lyons
North Carolina Central University

Freda Hicks
North Carolina Central University

Kia Eason
North Carolina Central University

Social Emotional Learning During COVID-19

The Student

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically shifted the way we live and significantly impacted educational delivery in the United States. Students have been thrust into a world of uncertainty and meeting their social-emotional needs is as equally important as academic achievement. To navigate and survive this “new reality”, students need to hone the following: perseverance, patience, and empathy. Although, some students have adjusted to the unforeseen circumstances, the reality is that the pandemic has come with several challenges. Educators are still seeking answers regarding how to handle this “new normal.” In March, students were uprooted from the traditional classroom to a remote environment. The physical classroom, symbolic of structure, provided students with a psychological and emotional safe haven. With very little time for transition, students began to navigate the virtual norms – new and uncomfortable norms. Not only was their physical security altered, students also had to grapple with the social disconnect from their teachers and peers. COVID-19 stripped students of their physical and social emotional securities.

The Teacher

Teachers were not exempt from the impact of COVID-19. With the abrupt shift to online environment, they too experienced a steep learning curve. Their transition encompassed the unfamiliarity of new platforms and the balance of rigor with engagement. Another challenge for teachers was being empathetic without sacrificing academic excellence. The timing of these COVID-19 transitions added an additional layer of complexity. The pandemic occurred near the fourth quarter of the school term. At that point in the academic year, it is not uncommon for students to become restless, and teachers to focus on reinforcing classroom expectations. In the midst of the pandemic, teachers

established a new classroom culture, but did it adequately account for students' diverse social emotional needs?

Via remote learning, teachers were able to gain a different perspective on students' home lives. In many instances, teachers had a greater attunement to their students' needs in the virtual environment. Depending on what they witnessed, this could have brought about a sense of clarity, or it could have caused angst regarding the amount of social emotional support required during the pandemic. The new pressures and environmental demands could have also caused some teachers to feel ill-equipped to meet their students' needs. COVID-19 highlighted the disparities within our society, and teachers were much more conscious of how the microaggressions and exclusion could translate to the remote environment. Additionally, in some cases, the pandemic might have caused students' traumas to resurface, bringing more strain into the virtual environment.

Teachers also had to contend with feedback from parents regarding the quality of instruction; this may have contributed to occasional moments of self-doubt. While teachers deserve just as much grace as their students, they also require self-care strategies after attending to learners' intensive social emotional needs. Many teachers may have neglected their own needs for the sake of their students. However, teachers must reflect and attend to their individual social emotional needs in order to provide students with the appropriate non-academic supports.

Social Emotional Learning

Emotional Intelligence, also referred to as Social Emotional Learning (SEL), is a large focus of whole child education. At the national level, policy makers understand the need for students' diverse social and emotional needs to be addressed in classrooms. Prior to SEL being implemented at the school level, counselors worked with small groups of students who experienced trauma or exhibited chronic behaviors. The small groups excluded the average student in a traditional classroom setting who also needed assistance in specific areas of SEL (Nicholson et al., 2019). There became a greater need to address social emotional needs of all students regardless of their backgrounds. Consequently, schools have shifted from character education to collectively addressing the academic, physical, and social emotional needs of students (ASCD, 2007).

The purpose of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is to “effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2013, p. 6). The Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework includes five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, relationship, responsible decision-making, and social awareness. Effective social interactions, which encompass the five CASEL competencies, also involve perspective taking, being considerate of others’ thoughts and feelings, and exchanging ideas reciprocally. Although, many SEL programs are centered around the CASEL framework, they also encompass aspects of character education. One challenge of SEL implementation is incorporating it in tandem with the academic curricula. Due to the demands of accountability, teachers must focus more heavily on the academic curriculum rather than placing emphasis on non-academic skills. Teachers spend the first few weeks of school building relationships and establishing routines, but other SEL skills are taught in isolation. Furthermore, there is often no consistent schedule to practice and record specific SEL skills. While these skills are not often implemented with intentionality, they are inadvertently reinforced in most classroom lessons and non-academic activities.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally Responsive Teaching recognizes the importance of embedding students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning (Gay, 2000). Environmental and political factors that can impact education should also be considered. Culturally Responsive Teaching is an equitable approach to addressing the diverse needs of historically marginalized groups. It also emphasizes incorporating students’ unique experiences, thereby creating an inclusive space for all learners. Culturally Responsive Teaching empowers students to thrive in academically rich environments with the appropriate social emotional supports.

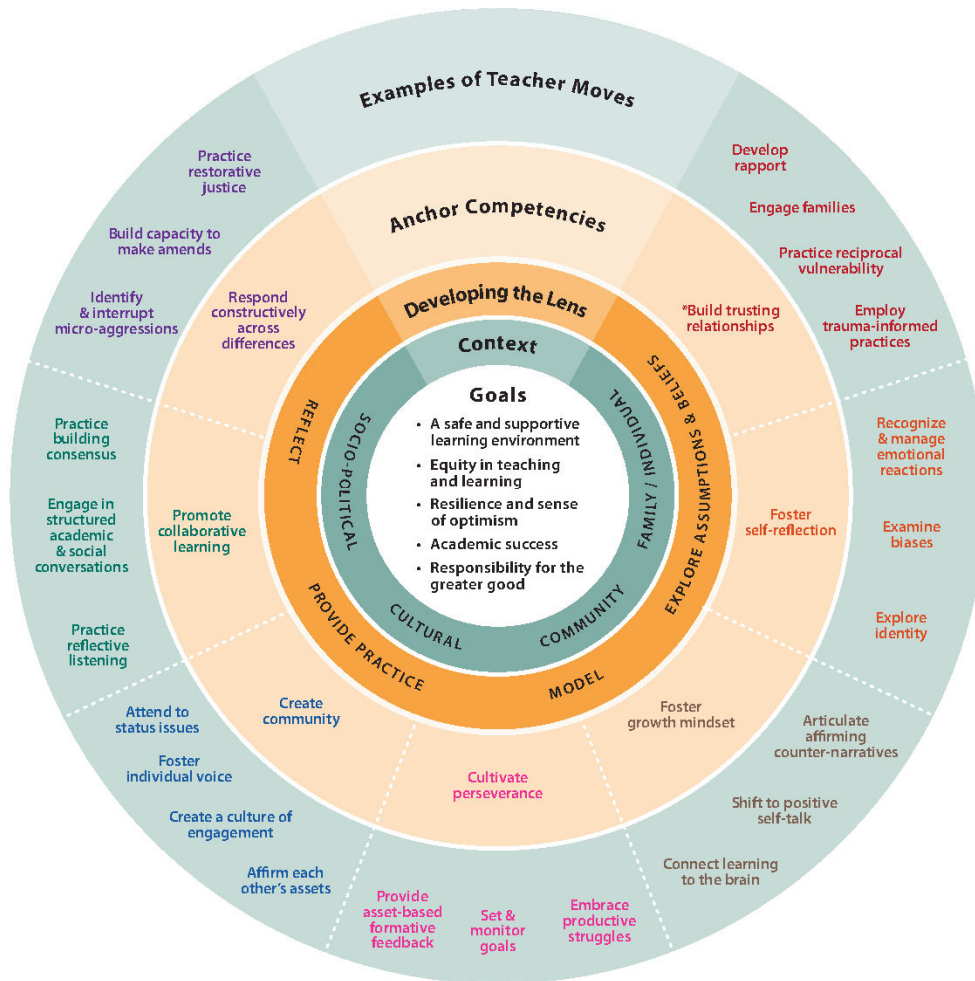
Culturally responsive classrooms enable students to make connections between the classroom and the real world. Students’ individual interests, strengths, family, and community contexts are incorporated to maximize learning experiences. Instructional activities address different paths to learning, and students are encouraged to demonstrate

proficiency in multiple ways. Students can take more ownership in learning and this increases their level of engagement (Willis-Darpo, 2013). Classroom management improves due to students' meaningful connections to the academic content. In culturally responsive classrooms, learners have a positive perception of the classroom environment, and high-quality learning is attributed to addressing students' unique learning needs. (Villegos & Lucas, 2002). Culturally responsive classrooms foster a sense of community and inclusivity. This is useful as students begin to collaborate because they understand that each person adds value to the classroom. Culturally responsive teaching provides a space to implement social emotional learning.

The Social Emotional Learning/Culturally Responsive Teaching Anchor Competencies Schema.

Developed by The Center for Teaching and Reaching the Whole Child (Markowitz & Bouffard, 2019), this SEL framework expands upon the CASEL (2013) framework and embeds culturally responsive teaching (Hammond, 2015). At the core, this framework (See Figure 1) supports the concept of the Whole Child, and it considers the various social and political factors which impact a child's experiences. As you move from the inner circle to each outer layer, the focus shifts from general best practices to very specific teacher practices. The framework also promotes teacher cultural lens attunement through examining their assumptions, modeling, providing practice and self-reflection. The outermost layers include seven anchor competencies and teacher moves; teacher moves provide practice for the following competencies: (a) building trusting relationships, (b) foster self-reflection, (c) foster growth mindset, (d) cultivate perseverance, (e) create classroom community, (f) practice cooperative learning skills, and (g) respond collectively to conflict across differences.

Social, Emotional, and Cultural Anchor Competencies Framework



*Building trusting relationships is essential to the development of all anchor competencies.

Figure 1. Social Emotional, and Cultural Anchor Competencies Framework

The aim of this paper is to focus on teacher moves that can be utilized in the virtual environment. Specific attention will be given to best practices teachers can implement in the remote environment which enhance the following Anchor Competencies: building trusting relationships, foster self-reflection and respond constructively across differences. Building trusting relationships is at the core of SEL and good teaching. As trust develops

between both parties, students become more comfortable and feel a sense of acceptance. Students begin to share more information about their experiences, and teachers can incorporate this information into class activities. Learning is optimized and students feel more confident in taking academic risks. Teachers constantly analyze how their instruction impacts student outcomes. Critical reflection informs instruction to ensure individual student needs are considered. From a more personal level, teachers must carefully examine how their experiences and interactions improve or impede the learning environment. When negative interactions do occur in the classroom, it is imperative that students are provided explicit instruction in conflict-resolution. It is equally important that students learn how to value experiences and ideas that differ from the norm.

Each of these competencies are critical in aiding teachers and students better navigate COVID-19. Hammond (2015) found teachers with well-developed social emotional skills are poised to build strong relationships with students. Markowitz and Bouffard (2019) noted attrition levels are lower in teachers with higher levels of social emotional competence. Teachers with higher levels of social emotional competence are more likely to manage stress in productive ways. They can effectively address classroom behaviors and model skills needed to be socially competent.

Building Trusting Relationships

During COVID-19, teachers developed creative ways to establish and maintain a rapport with students in the virtual environment. A brief class check-in before class begins or a check-out at the end of class are simple ways to stay connected with students. It also serves as a means of assessing and adjusting the classroom climate. Participating in individual or group virtual lunches with students affords teachers an opportunity to strengthen relationships. Creating a classroom Google Doc journal for the entire class provides a platform for students and the teacher to engage in lighter non-academic dialogue. Topics can be constructed from a student interest inventory disseminated earlier in the school year. Sending home weekly emails to parents is a means of celebrating and reinforcing positive behavior. Further, this communication can aid in strengthening the rapport with students and families.

It would be quite presumptuous to conclude the majority of families viewed the quarantine as an enjoyable experience. For many, the additional time at home during

COVID-19 caused a drastic shift in family dynamics. Several families had the misfortune of unemployment or at the very least, a decreased income. For some families, siblings incurred added responsibilities due to parents' work schedules. As a result of family challenges, teachers reported excessive absenteeism and high levels of disengagement. When appropriate, providing extra time for assignments, alternate formats for assignments or allowing students opportunities to redo assignments could be beneficial. It is important to reinforce to students that all families are navigating the pandemic differently. Students should be reassured that punitive measure will not be taken against them as a consequence of unforeseen family or cultural circumstances (Sue et al., 2007). Additionally, this message should be explicitly communicated to parents, and concessions should be made to foster collaboration with them. Providing a Google Voice number or extending hours of communication with parents working late hours demonstrates sensitivity and inclusivity, thereby creating opportunities to build and strengthen relationships with them.

It is important for teachers to validate and acknowledge student concerns. Not only does this reaffirm they have a safe space to express themselves, but it also provides opportunities for reciprocal vulnerability. Fisher and Fray (2015) emphasized when teachers share with students in regard to overcoming obstacles, it provides them with a sense of empowerment, and it also reinforces everyone experiences challenges. Teachers can be intentional with this practice by fostering an environment of praise and encouragement when students share their experiences or goals for areas of improvement. This exercise is an avenue for students to practice empathy and active listening skills. Peers may feel inclined to share their similar experiences and this can further strengthen the classroom community.

The pandemic has been traumatic for many, and for those with previous traumatic experiences, painful memories have likely resurfaced. Often students of trauma have difficulty with academics and have limited social emotional skills (Carrion, Weems, & Reiss, 2007). A study by Briggs et al. (2010) concluded that one out of every five children has been impacted by some form of trauma by the age of four. When trauma occurs during the formative years, children often do not have the skills to communicate their frustrations when compared to their older peers. If a child's trauma is not appropriately addressed it can manifest into unproductive and harmful behaviors. The common reasons for

misbehaviors are attention, escape, and control, and in stressful situations, students of trauma become overwhelmed and exhibit fight, fright or flight behaviors (Jensen 2009). Misbehaviors can be mistaken for blatant defiance, but in actuality, they are coping mechanisms. It is important that teachers allow students a chance to cool down or remove themselves from stressful environments. In the virtual environment, teachers can establish a signal that students can use when they are feeling distressed. It is imperative that students of trauma are encouraged to communicate their emotions in productive ways. Journaling is an effective way for students to communicate their feelings in a non-judgmental space, and it can provide teachers a way to better understand their students' needs. Students of trauma thrive and develop healthy relationships in spaces where they feel understood.

Foster Self-Reflection

Students who can identify and manage their emotions perform better academically and socially (Wang & Eccels, 2011; CASEL 2013)). For learning to be optimized, students must use processes that occur in the pre-frontal cortex of the brain. In this part of the brain, the following executive functions occur: prioritizing, organizing, working memory, emotional control, flexible thinking, self-monitoring, task initiation and emotional control (Briggs et al 2010). As individuals experience heightened emotions, the amygdala, also known as the middle part of the brain, is activated in response to fear or danger (Jensen 2009). When this occurs, it is difficult for students to think critically (Carrion et al., 2007). Teachers should encourage students to be mindful of how their body reacts in various situations, and emotional regulation strategies can be incorporated into classroom activities (i.e. deep breathing and positive self-talk). As students are presented with more opportunities for productive struggle, they will acquire more strategies in their repertoire. To equip students with these strategies, teachers must provide explicit instruction, model, and create opportunities to hone the practices in various environments. Metacognitive strategies can also afford students opportunities for deeper reflection regarding what best supports their learning needs. The aim should be to implement metacognitive strategies that can also be useful to students in non-academic environments.

Each of us has a unique set of experiences that we bring to the classroom. Unfortunately, we also have biases that can negatively impact the learning environment. Through careful self-reflection, teachers must first acknowledge personal

biases and determine how to address them. Biases can be triggered by stressful or traumatic events, and it is very possible the negative impact of COVID-19 challenged teachers' assumptions regarding educational inequities. Teachers have found it more difficult to meet students' diverse learning needs due to various cultural, environmental and societal demands. Subconsciously, teachers could make unfair judgements concerning students' families and communities. It is only natural that students may become resentful if peers are provided certain allowances when it appears they are not equally invested in learning. It is important teachers emphasize there is no "one size fits all" approach to surviving the pandemic. It is also important empathy and compassion are demonstrated rather than pity or deficit thinking. Students can still meet the academic demands, but the appropriate supports must be provided. As teachers reinforce individual student strengths, peers will be able to focus on the value their peers provide in the learning community.

Affirmation provides students with a positive sense of self, and it can help combat negative emotions (Hammonds 2015; Terrill 2018). During COVID-19, daily affirmations can assist students with shifting focus from negative emotions to those actions within their control. More specifically, affirmations promote self-efficacy, and as students become intrinsically motivated, they will independently reframe thoughts of self-doubt. This skill can be generalized to non-academic environments and will be useful throughout life. Teachers can incorporate affirmations into virtual environments at the beginning and end of each day. Affirmations can also be designed for specific academic subjects and individual student assets. Students should receive equal praise for sincere effort and mastery. It is important teachers reiterate that a strong work ethic leads to success, and small successes should be celebrated. When teachers encourage a growth mindset, students are more inclined to set and independently monitor personal goals.

Respond Constructively Across Differences

With the political division, it is inevitable students have been exposed to various messages that portray marginalized groups in a less than favorable manner. Students' views, which stem from home and the community experiences, are often transferred to the learning environment. Teachers must interrupt microaggressions in order to provide an inclusive space for all. Microaggressions are subtle, verbal and non-verbal slights, snubs or slights communicated to marginalized groups that convey inferiority (Sue et al., 2007).

Microaggressions are often covert messages with the purpose of exclusion. It is important that marginalized groups are affirmed and included as valuable members of the community (Hammond, 2015). Activities should be chosen that incorporate all cultures in the learning community, and expectations should be high for all. It is especially important that teachers are mindful of students' home environments when planning virtual activities during COVID-19. Jensen (2009) asserted activities should be avoided that might inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes or bring attention to their socioeconomic status. Further, teachers must reinforce to students that stereotypes are harmful and the negative action(s) of one person in a particular ethnic group is by no means indicative of the entire group. Rules and expectations should be established regarding sensitive or controversial topics. Encourage dialogue rather than debates; the former can place more emphasis on who is correct vs. incorrect, and the latter can foster understanding the other's perspective.

Many conflicts are the result of a simple misunderstanding or poor communication. Within the confines of the classroom, conflict is inevitable. Teachers must model for students how to exchange ideas with individuals whom they disagree in a civil manner. Students must also be taught how to assert their authority in a manner that is non-threatening. Since the term "assertive" is subjective, teachers should provide opportunities for students to give and receive constructive feedback pertaining to how their messages are received. This will also enable students to develop a keen sense of self-awareness and hone self-management skills. Classroom norms must be established in such a manner that not only are students comfortable addressing concerns, but their opinions are valued (Wang & Eccles, 2011). When individuals are offended in the classroom, conflict-resolution strategies can often rectify the problem. Conversely, conflict resolution does not ensure the offense will not occur in the future, nor does it ensure both parties are willing and able to move past the incident. Both parties in the conflict should be allowed to voice their concerns, and each individual should be encouraged to view the situation from the other's perspective. Empathetic listening can provide a deeper level of understanding. If students are not able to verbally express their concerns, written communication can be effective. All these strategies can be tailored to the virtual learning environment, and teachers can use breakout rooms to attend to small group conflict-resolution issues.

The goal of restorative practices is to build and maintain communities that emphasize healthy relationships. These practices aim to strengthen communities by incorporating the five guiding principles: relationships, respect, responsibility, restoration, and reintegration (Fisher & Fray 2015). When a classroom environment fosters inclusivity and a sense of community, students are more likely to trust one another. It also increases the likelihood that students will be respectful and welcome each other's unique abilities. Gratitude check-ins provide students an opportunity to share positive exchanges regarding their peer's attributes and contributions to the classroom community. Circle sharing is an efficient way for students to address a concern with the class in a structured manner and receive peer feedback. Although circle sharing might not be feasible during COVID-19, teachers can still develop unique and alternative activities that mirror this concept. Restorative practices are proactive due to the fact consideration is given to how the victim and offender can coexist in the community after the offense has occurred. While an apology does acknowledge an offense, it does not always include restoration. Similarly, it does not ensure the offender will make an earnest attempt to rectify the behavior. With restorative justice, the offender is held accountable for their behavior and takes specific measures to ensure the actions do not reoccur (Terrill 2018). If the offender must be removed from the environment, the teacher should explain the rationale and how the undesired behavior impacted the community. However, emphasis must include how to treat others after they have been reintegrated into the community. Restorative practices allow a space of empathy for the victim and the offender. These practices are an extension of SEL strategies and can be adjusted for the virtual environment.

COVID-19 has impacted each of us in some way, and several of our relationships have shifted over the past nine months. In all honesty, most have experienced some form of isolation. Relationships are fundamental to social emotional learning. The last nine months have afforded opportunities for teachers and students to hone the five CASEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness and responsible decision making. The pandemic has also challenged teachers as they put in extra time to provide a virtual environment with some semblance of the face to face classroom. To achieve optimal academic learning, it is essential that social emotional learning is embedded in instruction –with intentionality and consistency. Moreover, it is

important teachers carefully examine their own social emotional practices and assess whether specific skills are modeled effectively. This will require teachers to constantly reflect on how their experiences impact the learning environment. If appropriate, teachers must sharpen their cultural lens to ensure the unique and diverse needs of all students are addressed. Most importantly, teachers must create a classroom community that fosters strong relationships and inclusivity. Students, like all of us, yearn for a connection. The classroom is the place outside of home where they can build meaningful connections and strengthen relationships. While it is very much different in the virtual world, teachers can still find creative ways to create emotionally safe spaces for students.

Megan Lyons is an Assistant Professor at North Carolina Central University and a former high school special education teacher. She earned a Bachelor's of Science in Communications Disorders and a Master's of Education in Special Education from Auburn University. She later earned a Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership from Columbus State University and holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership from Valdosta State University. Her research interests include social emotional learning and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Freda Hicks is the School Partnerships and Induction Counselor at North Carolina Central University and a former elementary principal. She earned a Bachelor's in Elementary Education from Shaw University and a Master's of Education in School Leadership from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research interests include teacher leadership and school induction.

Kia Eason, a former elementary teacher and school principal, holds a Bachelor's of Art Degree in Elementary Education from North Carolina Central University and a Master's Degree in School Administration from Cambridge College. Currently, she is a Title III Supplemental Instruction Coordinator at North Carolina Central University. Her research interests include standardized testing for teachers, teaching in rural communities and social and emotional learning.

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