Chapter 9
Utilizing Culturally Responsive Teaching in an SEL Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Schools are increasing the use of social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, especially at the elementary level. As this trend continues, it's important to examine the SEL curriculum and the competencies that define it. While there are similar definitions for explaining what's involved in SEL, most educators agree that it's basically the process through which students acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, in order to help them make more responsible decisions. In this chapter, the detailed elements of SEL will be reviewed first, followed by an overview of the basic tenets of culturally responsive teaching. Additional cultural needs that today's elementary, middle, and high school students face will also be addressed in this chapter. The last part of the chapter will discuss the importance of merging SEL and culturally responsive teaching in co-existence in order to develop a stronger curriculum for creating equitable outcomes for diverse groups of students.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter was developed and written to explore culturally responsive teaching practices in a Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum, in hopes of furthering the work to enhance learning for students of all backgrounds. A review of the literature revolving around SEL, reveals an increase in the number of teachers and schools in general who are utilizing an SEL curriculum, especially at the elementary level.

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Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum

There are a number of basic elements in a SEL curriculum, but most have a foundational model similar to Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). In this model there are five core competencies that support the basic tenets of SEL (http://casel.org/what-is-sel/, 2019). These core competencies are: 1) Self-awareness, 2) Self-management, 3) Social awareness, 4) Relationship skills, and 5) Responsible decision-making. What is not part of these five competencies, nor part of many schools SEL programs, is the concept of cultural responsiveness. Hence, the focus of this chapter will be on how culturally responsive teaching can and should be an integral part of any SEL curriculum. How can these practices be imbedded in an existing SEL curriculum? In the following pages, when implementing a curriculum such as SEL, it's important to first step back and contemplate how this can be done most effectively. Is it typically up to the classroom teacher to implement it or is it a more collaborative approach? Teachers often feel programs like SEL are mandated by site leaders or district administrators and they as teachers have no say so in whether to implement the programs or not. By using a more collaborative approach that involves other stakeholders in addition to teachers can help everyone have more buy-in into new programs. This will certainly be the case with adding cultural responsiveness to the SEL curriculum.

Before moving further into the implementation of SEL, it's important to look at the impact SEL has had on students. Many researchers have examined the impact of SEL on learners but a Meta-Analysis by Durlak, Weissburg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger (2011) explored enhancing student's SEL through universal interventions. Many of the interventions reported in this study are being utilized by teachers across schools in the United States as well as other countries. Another study more recently conducted found a "growing movement dedicated to the social, emotional, and academic well-being of children in reshaping learning and changing lives across America (http://nationathope.org/report-from-the-nation, 2019). This study reiterated that students learn best when they are treated like human beings with a focus on their social and emotional needs as well as their academic needs.

Many experts (Hensley & Burmeister, 2009) agree that there are multiple approaches to helping students learn in a SEL curriculum but the three most common are: 1) Utilizing an evidenced-based SEL curriculum, 2) integrating actual SEL instruction directly into the academic curriculum and 3) The school or district creating actual SEL centered policies, which include culturally responsive teaching practices. This requires educators at a school site to be willing to be change agents, in order to implement culturally effective programs and/or curriculum.

Fullan (2001) believed an effective change agent possesses skills in three main capacities: developing relationships of trust, communicating the change vision effectively, and empowering others to take action

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