**Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
Creating Developmentally Appropriate Learning Environments for**

**Young Children, Preschool to Grade 3**

July 2021

# Brief 3: Supporting Social and Emotional Learning and Well-Being in Culturally Responsive Ways

The following early childhood brief was created as companion document for the [Elements of High Quality Kindergarten](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/hq-kindergarten.docx), [Elements of High Quality Elementary Classrooms](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/hq-elementary.docx) and the [joint position statement on play as an instructional strategy](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/play-statement.docx). The brief contains a summary of this topic along with strategies and approaches that reflect high quality early childhood practices. Each brief is followed by a list of related resources and references that were used to develop the brief.

The full set of briefs can be found on the [Department’s Early Learning webpage](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/).

* **Brief 1: Collaboration with Community Based Partners**
* [**Brief 2**](#_Section_2:_Culturally)**: Culturally Responsive Family Engagement**
* [**Brief 3**](#_Section_3:_Supporting)**: Supporting Social-Emotional Learning and Well-Being in Culturally Responsive Ways**
* [**Brief 4**](#_Section_4:_Creating)**: Creating Antiracist Environments for Young Children**
* [**Brief 5: Planning for Developmentally Appropriate Practices**](#_Section_5:_Planning)

While the topics of these briefs are relevant to all grades, Preschool to 12th Grade, they are written with a particular focus on our youngest students, Preschool to 3rd grade.

**Supporting Social and Emotional Learning and Well-Being in Culturally Responsive Ways**

In the early years, social-emotional development is a core domain, since ages three to eight are a time when young students are actively developing competencies related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making[[1]](#endnote-2) ([MA Preschool and Kindergarten Social-Emotional Learning Standards](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/earlylearning/resources/SEL-APL-Standards.docx)). Additionally, it is a time when young students are building their skills for play and for learning - including initiative, curiosity, engagement/persistence, creativity, cooperative play and learning, problem solving, organizational skills, and memory. These are critical areas of development for younger students and serve as the foundation for future learning. The development of social-emotional competencies is important to robustly support through intentional and playful learning opportunities. Inequities in opportunities for students to build these skills exist, and they can be exacerbated when trauma is experienced; and traumas can cause regression for some.

Culturally responsive social-emotional supports for young children, including a focus on equity, are frequently supported by a shift from deficit thinking to a more positive strengths-based mindset on the part of educators and administrators. As young students (Preschool-3rd grade) engage in in high quality learning opportunities, school administrators and educators are urged to consider the potential for strengths/resiliencies as well as challenges related to young students‘ social-emotional development, for children from all backgrounds, histories, and identities. This document will share a number of ideas of how educators can plan to address social and emotional learning (SEL) in culturally responsive ways.

**Supportive SEL strategies**. In general, increased focus on [social and emotional learning supportive practices and competency areas](https://casel.org/what-is-SEL/)[[2]](#endnote-3) is especially relevant as students engage in schools/classrooms and in other social learning environments (e.g., community-based early childhood and out-of-school time programs). There may also be some *specific* aspects of SEL that are particularly important.

It is important to ***focus on building strong and trusting relationships*[[3]](#endnote-4)** between educators and students, educators and families, and between students. As Zaretta Hammond (2015) puts it, teachers are encouraged to “*establish a* *partnership or alliance”* with students by seeking points of connection and providing affirmation and validation for each child.

Trust is more likely to develop when students feel secure in school. Working to establish feelings of safety and security requires a ***focus on classroom and school climate***. Among other things, strategies may include emphasizing consistent daily routines to build a stable and predictable classroom environment. When possible, ***focus on skills related to conflict resolution, decision-making, and relationship building****.* In lesson and reading content, when possible, ***emphasize SEL themes such as compassion, courage, resilience and connection***.

Additionally, given the diversity in student experiences, it is appropriate to ***amplify and support student voice****.* Strategies to support student voice could include giving students more discussion time to explore and develop their ideas; making lessons more personally relevant; encouraging debate; and allowing for creative expression. Additional resources on student voice can be found in the Appendix A: Resources section on Supporting Student Voice.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “supportive learning environments that center on SEL and equity can help young people and adults to process, heal, and work together to promote collective well-being.” CASEL outlines [***three steps to create a supportive environment***](https://casel.org/supportive-environments/)**:**

1. ***Prepare the space for SEL*:** Ensure the learning environment is one where all people feel safe, connected, and accepted;
2. ***Open space for sharing and listening*:** Provide opportunities to share and listen to how members of the group are feeling and experiencing what’s happening; and
3. ***Expand the space to promote collective well-being*:** Help people channel their energy and ideas productively and make their voices heard beyond the classroom [or workplace]**.**

SEL and cultural responsiveness are intricately linked. In order to amplify student voice and ***support students’ self-awareness and efficacy***, educators need to make the effort to understand major cultural concepts, diverse experiences and how they influence the lives of their students. Students will feel more safe and secure and able to build trusting relationships with educators when they are responsive to their diverse experiences such that they feel both seen and heard as individuals who live in a cultural context.

Educators who ***work to understand the impact of cultural differences on students*** are also those who seek to understand and practice culturally responsive teaching (CRT), defined by Geneva Gay as “the use of students’ cultural knowledge, experience, and perspectives in instruction to increase relevance and efficacy of student learning.” [[4]](#endnote-5) When teachers practice CRT, they validate and affirm their students’ identities, self-awareness, and cultural experience by incorporating a variety of instructional styles and multicultural information in teaching. Effective CRT acknowledges and incorporates students’ cultures, and has the power to improve academic successes and positively affect critical thinking, sense of community, and many aspects of SEL, including interpersonal skills.[[5]](#endnote-6)

According to Ezra Hyland, a teacher of Multicultural Literature and Thinking Through Art at the University of Minnesota:

“When you have children in school and the literature doesn’t look like them, it doesn’t sound like them, it does not deal with their issues, you’re pushing them out rather than inviting them in.”

Many ***teaching strategies*** have been identified as supportive of CRT to establish culturally inclusive classrooms. Educators:

* model respectful, inclusive classroom culture by making sure to pronounce each student’s names correctly;
* become conscious of local courtesies and cultural norms: for example, using “thumbs up” as a routine signal in class is known to be offensive to some cultures (e.g., some in Latin America, West Africa, Iran[[6]](#endnote-7));
* ensure curriculum content and classroom representations routinely include a significant portion of faces, achievements, and lives of people of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious identities, abilities, genders and family structures;
* highlight a variety of perspectives, supporting students in thinking critically about history and learning how to understand multiple perspectives when a unit of study focuses on a particular historical era or event; and
* acknowledge, validate and discuss student’s emotions as they occur (e.g., be careful not to automatically punish students for expressing negative feelings such as anger without noting that anger can be a valid feeling) and create safe spaces for students and adults to learn from their emotions and make changes as needed.

In summary, SEL is a critical area of development that research has documented impacts academic achievement[[7]](#endnote-8), and positive outcomes in the SEL domain are strongly associated with culturally responsive teaching. Educators are encouraged to use both culturally responsive and antiracist practices (see resources on this topic below and in Brief 4 on Creating Anti-racist Environments for Young Children) to support students in these critical areas of growth and for learning to progress across the content areas.

For any questions, more information, or to speak with a member of DESE’s Early Learning team about this document or the work in your community, please email [achievement@doe.mass.edu](mailto:achievement@doe.mass.edu).

Appendix A: **Resources for Supporting Social Emotional Learning in Culturally Responsive Ways**

* DESE – [Culturally Responsive Social and Emotional Learning Competency Development](https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/sel/sel-all.docx)
* DESE - [Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms](https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/crdw/)

*Resources for understanding and responding to effects of the pandemic*

* Partnership for Resilience, [Rebuilding for a New Normal: A Study of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Trauma-Responsive Schools and Key Recommendations for Communitie](https://edredesign.org/files/edredesign/files/rebuilding-new-normal-report?m=1599760440)s (Lombard, IL: Partnership for Resilience, 2020 and President and Fellows of Harvard College)
* [18 Books to Help Grieving Children and Teens Heal](https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/57600/18-books-to-help-grieving-children-and-teens-heal)

*Resources for supporting student voice:*

* [Simple ways to promote student voice in the classroom](https://www.edutopia.org/article/simple-ways-promote-student-voice-classroom#:~:text=%20Simple%20Ways%20to%20Promote%20Student%20Voice%20in,Classroom.%20We%20need%20to%20show%20our...%20More%20), Edutopia
* [[Motivation, engagement and student voice](https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/resource/motivation-engagement-and-student-voice/)](https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/resource/motivation-engagement-and-student-voice/), Students at the Center, Knowledge Works
* [Giving students a voice in the classroom](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept96/vol54/num01/Giving-Students-a-Voice-in-the-Classroom.aspx): Educational Leadership

*Resources for building trust with student*s:

* Cox, Janelle. “How to Build Trust with Students”. Western Governor’s University <https://www.wgu.edu/heyteach/article/how-build-trust-students1808.html>
* Johnson, Ben. (2014) “Developing Student’s Trust: the Key to a Learning Partnership”. George Lucas Educational Foundation. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/student-trust-ben-johnson>
* Meador, Derrick. (2019). “Strategies for Teachers to Develop Positive Relationships with Students”. Thought.co.com [<https://www.thoughtco.com/develop-positive-relationships-with-students-3194339>](https://www.thoughtco.com/develop-positive-relationships-with-students-3194339)

*Resources for Understanding Racial Justice and SEL*

* [Teaching to Thrive: A Conversation with SEL Expert Rosalynne Duff About Racial Justice & SEL](https://open.spotify.com/episode/04FydURix5GX6Pf1hLoIdY?si=kw1pstHKSkmckEN6gIM3BQ&nd=1)
* [When SEL is Used as Another Form of Policing](https://medium.com/@justschools/when-sel-is-used-as-another-form-of-policing-fa53cf85dce4) (Cierra Kaler-Jones)
* [The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice: Black Lives, Healing and US Social Transformation (Fania E. Davis)](https://www.salon.com/2019/04/21/these-schools-use-restorative-justice-to-remedy-racial-disparities-in-discipline/)
* [Why We Can’t Afford to Whitewash Social Emotional Learning](http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education_update/apr19/vol61/num04/Why_We_Can't_Afford_Whitewashed_Social-Emotional_Learning.aspx) (Dena Simmons; ACSD Education Update)
* [Teaching For Black Lives Book](https://www.teachingforblacklives.org/) (edited By Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, & Wayne Au)
* [How to Be an AntiRacist Educator](http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education-update/oct19/vol61/num10/How-to-Be-an-Antiracist-Educator.aspx?fbclid=IwAR1tsIowEXRl-D6K64ZU3ej8bBcGT0OuRJFr4yENJu8A0kwbAMwGhsbtJec) (by Dena Simmons, ACSD, Education Update)
* [Dear White Teachers: You Can't Love Your Black Students If You Don't Know Them](https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-dear-white-teachers-you-cant-love-your-black-students-if-you-dont-know-them/2019/03) (Bettina Love in Education Week)
* [Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lPHiG_ZW3KDMn3iBtsGg4sf-g1nZGN82/view) (Shawn Ginwright)
* [Black Lives Matter at School](https://www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/the-demands.html) (Black Lives Matter at School)

**Appendix B: References for Supporting Social Emotional Learning in Culturally Responsive Ways**

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ENDNOTES

1. See definitions of five SEL competency areas by [the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL),](https://casel.org/what-is-sel/) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See definitions of five SEL competency areas by [the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL),](https://casel.org/what-is-sel/) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. See section in both Resources and References Appendices focused on Building Trust with Students. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. See Gay, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. See Gay, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. See [Anderson, Stuart, Abadi, & Gal, 2019.](https://www.businessinsider.com/hand-gestures-offensive-different-countries-2018-6) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. See metanalysis by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger (2011) and the CASEL list of research on SEL impact. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)