

5 Ways to Build Social Emotional Learning through Literacy

By Claudia Rodriguez, Education Consultant

Claudia Rodriguez is an education consultant with extensive experience training on best educational practices, ESL/bilingual instructional practices, biliteracy instruction, and classroom management. Claudia was previously an administrator, adjunct professor, dual language strategist, a bilingual literacy strategist, and a bilingual elementary teacher.

The last 18 months have been unprecedented. Throughout the pandemic, some students have been in survival mode. Some have experienced school in person or online, and others have had hybrid learning environments. Unfortunately, the learning environments have not been optimal for developing social-emotional learning (SEL) skills.

With the return to face-to-face instruction this school year, students desperately need in-class support to develop their SEL skills and thrive. To promote social-emotional development for all students in our classrooms, we must teach and model social-emotional skills, allow time for practice, fine-tune the SEL skills, and give students a chance to apply these skills in various situations.

Understanding the concerns and consequences of students' learning during COVID, I appreciate that there may be reservations about providing in-class support for SEL and citing lack of time as the issue. In my experience as an educator, time is always a concern. Because of that, social-emotional learning often gets put on the back burner to other vital skills like reading, writing, math, history, and science. While these skills are certainly necessary, I would argue that it's even more important for kids to develop their emotional intelligence. Students must learn the skills necessary to manage their emotions, show empathy and love for others, make new friends, manage decision-making, and achieve personal goals.

We have to remember that mentally and emotionally healthy kids are equipped to face the challenges life brings. We have to take the time to educate, converse, and apply SEL skills! The silver lining is there are many ways to integrate social-emotional learning into what you are already teaching in the classroom.

Below I share five strategies for integrating SEL instruction and activities into your literacy block.

1. Encourage Positive Affirmations

Many of our students hear many negative comments and not enough positive. In time, the negative self-talk takes over, and students' focus moves from positive thinking to limited thinking and feelings of depression. The effects of negative self-talk can be toxic.



Aim to shift the narrative to positive self-talk. Positive self-talk is a voice that resides in the brain. That voice reassures and encourages. It also helps control emotions which help to deal with problems appropriately. The goal is to teach the power of positive affirmations and self-talk explicitly. Model positive self-talk and build a positive classroom community by teaching students about positive self-talk through classroom affirmations.

Begin by teaching students what an affirmation looks like and sounds like when spoken. Such as a statement that may begin with, "I am...." or "I can....". A positive affirmation activity that worked in the classroom for me is displaying an affirmation. First, the students practiced reading the affirmation as bell work. Then after announcements, we read it aloud together. An example of a classroom affirmation that I used is:

Today is a new day. I am ready to make good choices. I am ready to be a friend. I am ready to learn new things.

Today, I will make myself proud. I am smart! I am confident. I am capable. Today will be a great day!

This classroom affirmation was one of many that I used, and it was a great way to practice fluency, foster a community environment, and engage students.



2. Read Alouds

This is an all-time favorite strategy for integrating SEL into everyday learning because it is already an essential part of classroom routines and instruction. If it's not, it should be.

Stories have been used to teach core values explicitly. Choose culturally relevant stories, and let the story be engaging by not focusing on the lesson from the very beginning. Instead, take the time to discuss and learn about people from diverse cultures, backgrounds, and ability levels during the read-aloud. Students need to hear, see, discuss, and understand that we are part of a larger community within our countries and world.

Using read-aloud in the classroom to teach social-emotional skills will spark rich discussion. As you read, use questions to start conversations about characters' emotional reactions.

- How do you think the characters feel?
- How might they be understood or misunderstood by others in the story?
- How can characters handle the situations they face?

Reading aloud to the students offers the opportunity to discuss important topics while still addressing essential reading comprehension skills.



3. Write

Writing in the classroom is a powerful tool for literacy instruction and SEL. Teachers can and do use writing to build connections, foster a community environment, and provide peer support to meet the emotional needs of their students.

My favorite way for students to share their feelings and frustrations and celebrate the good in their lives is through writing. Journals are a great addition to any grade-level classroom—the younger the student, the better. Offer students the opportunity to respond to reading diverse texts and build on character education by writing. If the students feel comfortable and confident enough to share their writing with the class, they can do so. Journals offer a bit of differentiation as well. Not all students will want to share out loud to the whole class, those that don't still have the opportunity to reflect and write about life without the pressure of sharing.

Many types of writing address academic needs but also support SEL instruction. Feel free to incorporate:

- Responding to text

- Reflection Writing
- Journal Writing
- Quick Prompts
- Writing Letters

4. Build Community with Teamwork

To further build community and trust, have students work together. Students can work in pairs, groups, or even in larger teams during class projects and assignments, depending on the project's complexity. The key to group work in the classroom is to ensure each student is assigned a vital responsibility or task. As part of your classroom routines and procedures, work on building a classroom community that is positive and accepting of others. Students should feel like the classroom is a safe haven. Feeling emotional safety will allow students to trust and share emotions and feelings. In turn, this trust will foster good working partnerships and groups.

One way to develop a positive classroom community is to have an area where students can share and compliment others. It builds self-confidence when others are recognizing and showing empathy and concern for their classmates.



5. Teach Active Listening Skills

Active listening is when a student pays attention to a speaker and listens to understand. In the classroom, it also includes a complete focus on the speaker with few distractions. The complete focus shows respect to the speaker as well as an intent to learn. Listening is a skill that all students need to know. Strong, active listening skills are essential for success at school, with friends, and even for their future careers. It is an art form modeled and implemented during a lesson, when students are working in groups, or just having a conversation with friends.

Students with solid listening skills don't just retain more information; they are also less likely to feel unprepared and frustrated in class. In addition, improved listening skills can lead to students' belief that they can succeed in class. In turn, they are likely to feel confident, comfortable, and prepared to succeed in school.

In the classroom, teachers can provide active listening conversation opportunities within the context of a lesson.

- The first step is to assign students a pair to work with for this assignment.
- Ask questions within the context and have pair 1 answer the questions to pair 2
- Allow for pair 2 to add to the answer that pair 1 provided. Pair 2 can ask a question, add a comment, or voice a concern.

Teaching SEL doesn't have to be another thing teachers have to accomplish during the day. Integrate SEL with literacy instruction at the beginning, then try to integrate SEL all day long. The rewards and benefits will help students with reading and writing, as well as, manage their emotions, show empathy and love for others, make new friends, manage decision-making, and achieve personal goals.