



Culturally Sustaining SEL:
**BEYOND THE TEXTBOOK
AND INTO STUDENTS' LIVES**

SCENARIO

A Tale of Two Teachers

Mr. Bishop – a high school history teacher in Yonkers, New York – is a committed and experienced teacher. Mr. Bishop diligently uses his 10th-grade advisory period to integrate into his lessons the SEL curriculum adopted by his school. When schools went remote during COVID-19, Mr. Bishop was ready to dive into his remote advisory period, but something was different. Many students were not participating in the scenario-based lessons. Frustrated by this change, Mr. Bishop finally asked if he was wasting his time. One student’s response? “No offense, Mr. Bishop. Could we talk about what’s happening in the world right now instead?”



Ms. Marchetti is in her second year teaching 5th-grade students near Syracuse. While her school does not implement a whole-school SEL program, each teacher submits an evidence-based SEL plan to the principal at the beginning of the year. As do most of the teachers in her school, Ms. Marchetti refers to the New York State SEL Benchmarks and the New York State Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework for guidance. She knows from her own experience of living with anxiety and ADHD the value of attending to emotional well-being and wants to build that awareness for her students.

Her goal is to integrate SEL into a culturally responsive classroom, finding she is drawn to restorative practices, academic parent-teacher teams, dialogue journals, and student interest inventories. A new teacher navigating a sea of choices, Ms. Marchetti confides to a colleague, “I know what I want to do and what I should do, but I don’t know how to sift through all of the material and make it all come together.”

Mr. Bishop and Ms. Marchetti share a growing understanding that SEL is not a stand-alone program.

We may recognize, as Mr. Bishop did, the following truths:

- SEL can’t be pigeon-holed into one lesson a week.
- SEL has to be relevant to all learners.
- SEL has to be responsive to the students, families, and communities we serve.

We may recognize, as Ms. Marchetti did, the following truths:

- SEL is an essential part of education and human development.
- We have to prioritize and attend to many responsibilities to holistically serve our students.
- We need to integrate best practices into a cohesive whole.

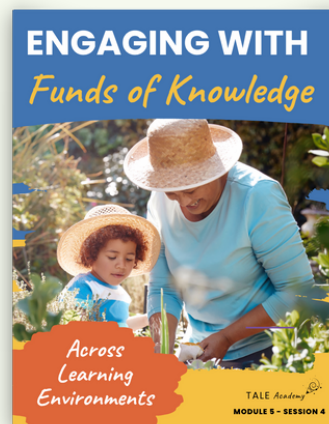
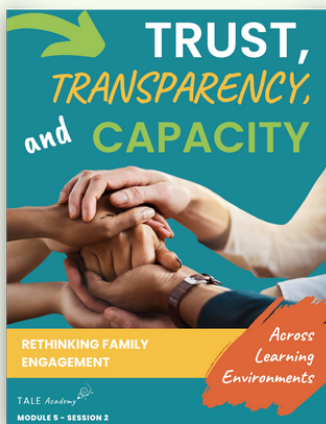
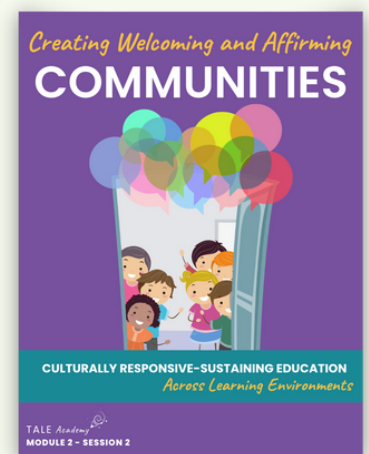
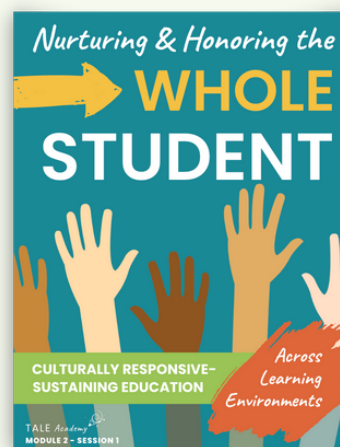
In This Session

In this session, we'll look at ways we can integrate the principles of culturally responsive-sustaining education to design SEL experiences that are embedded in academics and portable across learning environments.

Where have we come across this before?

Social emotional learning, culturally responsive-sustaining education, and family engagement are intertwined systems of supporting the whole learner.

In Module 2 of the TALE Academy, we explored New York State's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CRSE) Framework. We considered the importance of creating a welcoming classroom that affirms the racial, linguistic, and cultural identities of students, developing empowered learners and elevating the students' voices.



In Module 5, we explored family and community engagement. We considered the importance of building trust, transparency, and capacity to develop partnerships between family and school when teaching across learning environments – partnerships that affirm the funds of knowledge, identities, and cultural assets each learner bears.

Throughout the TALE Academy, we are re-examining areas of education such as SEL, family engagement, and CRSE for the potential to go beyond the binary of in-person or remote and simply focus on best practices across all learning environments.

Part 1: CRSE Considerations for SEL Design

In March 2021, activist and scholar Dena Simmons published the article "[Why SEL Alone Isn't Enough](#)", unequivocally stating that when SEL is not grounded in culturally responsive-sustaining education, it runs the risk of becoming "white supremacy with a hug." Simmons points to the need to embed culturally responsive and sustaining educational principles into SEL design so that learners see themselves and the systems that impact them.

To be culturally sustaining, SEL must move beyond improving students' behaviors or working on decontextualized skills. It must give learners the opportunity to reflect upon and make connections *through their personal experiences*. Speaking to students' personal experiences requires us to create student-centered learning environments that affirm our students' cultural identities and develop students' abilities to connect across differences.

Three Strategies to Make SEL More Culturally Responsive and Sustaining



Elevate Student Voice

Building on students' funds of knowledge and personal experiences during SEL instruction ensures that SEL is relevant to students' lives. Tailor your SEL instructional approach to start where students are. For example, when teaching about self-direction, start the lesson by asking learners to share what they know about self-motivation, what self-motivation means to them, and what strategies work well for them. Or, when teaching responsible decision-making, use scenarios that resemble low-stakes problems you've witnessed in your students' lives. Use [digital polls](#) to gather student opinions, challenges, experiences, interests, and cultural touchstones.

Celebrate Classroom Cultural Assets

Building self-awareness requires students to be skilled in identifying their personal, cultural, and linguistic assets. Celebrating the diversity in your classroom and the cultural assets of your students is a tool to help your students along their path of integrating their personal and social identities toward greater self-awareness. It also provides an opportunity for students to examine their biases, a key capacity of self-awareness. When celebrating students' cultures, it's important to avoid comparing students to a dominant culture's norms. Help students see that social emotional skills can look different across individuals and contexts, and there are many pathways to developing our individual SEL capacity!



Provide "Mirrors and Windows"

Mirrors, in an [analogy from Emily Style](#), are examples that reflect a student's culture; windows are examples that give us a new view into someone else's world. During SEL instruction, offer your students both windows and mirrors. Mirrors are culturally sustaining, providing an opportunity for the social emotional content to feel and look like their life, whereas windows help us empathize with others from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts (i.e., social awareness). "By showing [more than one illustration of what social-emotional skills can look like](#), teachers can acknowledge and honor that learners inhabit varied experiences, identities, contexts, and cultures."



Part 1: CRSE Considerations for SEL Design (Cont)

“Through my work with school districts nationally, I have learned that some educators share distinct reasons for implementing SEL depending on who their students are. In mostly Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) school districts, SEL is often about compliance and control...On the other hand, for white, privileged students, SEL is about supporting college and career readiness. These opposing mindsets lead to different practices and outcomes, which ultimately perpetuate a racial hierarchy that positions white students on top.”

–DENA SIMMONS, “WHY SEL ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH”

Part 2: Embedding CRSE SEL in Instruction

To be effective, culturally responsive SEL must be integrated into the academic curriculum and delivered through explicit instruction with opportunities to practice SEL skills. Furthermore, New York State's CRSE Framework charges us with embedding the topics of equity and inclusion in our SEL instruction. Let's explore project-based learning and civic learning as two strategies for the authentic integration of SEL and academic instruction in ways that engage and empower students.

Project-Based Learning

One way to integrate cultural relevance, social emotional learning, and academics is to lean into project-based learning (PBL). **Project-based learning is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects over an extended period of time.**

At the heart of a PBL unit is an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge.

Collaborative learning projects such as PBL can leverage the power of collectivism, a cultural asset that is central to the lives of many students. Project tie-ins may include inviting students to incorporate personal identity, family identity, and community values. A well-constructed guiding question can help learners practice cognitive flexibility and perspective-taking – skills that can support critical thinking through the evaluation of different opinions, perspectives, and points of view.

The success of PBL as a learning experience depends on students' abilities to work and solve problems together. With modeling and practice, PBL provides embedded skill development in the New York State SEL goals related to self-awareness, social awareness, interpersonal skills, and intentional decision-making while providing opportunities to offer students cultural learning tools.

PBL became the vehicle for Ms. Marchetti to bridge the gap she was experiencing of having so many CRSE and SEL materials but struggling to connect the dots for herself and her students. PBL allows her students to put their own "spin" on their work, informed by their own identities and perspectives, yet in collaboration with others in the classroom.

Students can freely express themselves and their feelings through the planning process, integrate their strengths in their activity, and celebrate the achievement of their goals when displaying their final product. Much can be learned when PBL reflects the strengths and perspectives of the learners in the room and gives them the opportunity to learn from their peers.



Ms. Marchetti

Civic Learning

While Ms. Marchetti's 5th graders are learning together through PBL, Mr. Bishop responds to his high school students by integrating culturally responsive, social emotional learning, and civic learning. In civic learning, as defined by NYSED's Civic Learning Initiative, "students learn how to identify and address problems in their community or school community. Students also learn how to demonstrate respect for the rights of others, respectfully disagree with other viewpoints, and provide evidence for a counterargument." In this approach to SEL, students develop the skills and relationships needed to participate as engaged community members.



Remember Mr. Bishop's challenge of implementing an SEL program that feels like the real world to students? After asking his students about the topics that matter the most in their lives right now, Mr. Bishop designed his first civic learning unit to answer the guiding question: What does it mean to police a community?

His students will use digital tools to reflect, conduct oral histories of family and community members, analyze crime-mapping data, compare media coverage, and develop a public presentation.

The goal of civic learning is to help young people connect with their own voice, agency, and self-efficacy and learn how to work with others to create solutions. Mr. Bishop will be asking his students to use SEL to support their priorities: They will build self-direction and social awareness by analyzing and reflecting on issues they care about in their schools and communities and develop relationship skills and responsible decision-making to work with others to take action to improve their world.



Project-based Learning and Civic Learning are Portable!



Both of the strategies for embedding CRSE SEL in instruction that we describe above are highly portable across learning environments. PBL takes place over an extended period of time and requires students to engage in “real-world” research and activities. Leveraging remote learning tools such as video conferencing and vlogging allows students to document and share individual “real-world experiences” with peers.

Organizing research, documentation, and artifacts related to PBL work can be accomplished via shared drives, documents, and presentations. This organization supports both the processes and products of PBL: students can access shared resources asynchronously to work independently on projects over time, and they can leverage the resources in a culminating presentation to their community (a typical component of PBL) that is accessible across modalities as well!

In civic learning, the tools of remote learning open up the walls of traditional classrooms to allow students to engage in civic activities that may be inaccessible otherwise. For example, they can participate in video conference-based public meetings, request video conference interviews with civic leaders, and engage in ongoing community discussions through public blogs, discussion boards, and social media. As with PBL, students can also document and present their work digitally, which allows students to participate in civic engagement in ways that are portable across multiple learning environments.

*Now It's
Your Turn!*

In what ways does the SEL program in your school or classroom speak to students' personal experiences and cultural identities? Let's explore additional resources and activities to help you consider this question!

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About Us

The TALE Academy

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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