Representation
in the Classroom and the Curriculum

To successfully teach social and emotional skills, cultural context—both for the student and the educator—must be considered respectfully. An effective curriculum for teaching SEL skills should be designed to create teaching conditions and practices that embrace the diversity of experience and perspective of students. When educators recognize their own cultural context and that of students and their families, they are better able to understand and respond to students. Seeing that students belong and are significant in the classroom is an important step toward educational equity.

The U.S. Department of Education describes advancing equity in education as ensuring "access to a world-class education can help to ensure that all children in this country with dreams and determination can reach their potential and succeed" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). At Center for Responsive Schools, our mission is to "influence and inspire a world-class education for every student in every school, every day"

(Center for Responsive Schools, n.d.) by making social-emotional learning (SEL) accessible to all educators and students. SEL can support equity by making children feel safe, strengthening their relationships with peers and teachers, and helping children manage and express their emotions. When students feel seen and significant in their classrooms, they are more likely to succeed in, out of, and beyond school.

Those feelings of being seen and significant in their school are the beginning of "Transformative SEL," a process of social and emotional growth where students and teachers have respectful relationships, appreciate each others' similarities and differences, explore the causes of inequity together, and cooperate to make the world around them better (Jagers et al., 2018). Fly Five was built around core competencies of cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy, and self-control (C.A.R.E.S.) that support transformative social-emotional learning for students, teachers, and families.

Culture and Child Development

We know that child and adolescent development is "deeply influenced by culture, personality, and environment" (Wood, 2017, p. 7). As children and adults alike develop social and emotional competence, they often recognize the need to adapt or change a behavior, belief, action, tendency, attitude, or emotional response that has been informed and reinforced by their cultural context. It's important for educators to be aware of their own cultural context and that of their students, as sometimes cultural context can clash with a certain social and emotional skill. For instance, a skill that is often taught in American schools is making eye contact when greeting or speaking with someone. Eye contact is seen as a sign of focus, respect, and honesty. Teachers often ask students to look at them, particularly in a disciplinary setting. However, in many Asian cultures, avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect (Akechi et al. 2013). It's easy to imagine how a new student trying to rationalize these two conflicting norms might seem to be disrespectful when in fact that was the opposite of their intent.

Culture and Behavior

Cultural context also shapes how we assess others' behavior. It drives assumptions about the things we value and forms our judgments of others.

Educators in particular need to be aware of these tendencies, as they very often do not share the same culture as their students. The Washington Post reviewed school district data from 46 states and the District of Columbia in 2019 to compare student diversity with educator diversity.

The data revealed that only 0.1% of Latino students are enrolled in a school system where the percentage of Latino teachers is the same as, or more than, the percentage of Latino students. For Asian students, 4.5% are in school systems with a percentage of Asian teachers that matches or exceeds the percentage of Asian students. Seven percent of Black students are in a school system where the percentage of Black teachers matches or exceeds the percentage of Black students. For white students, it's 99.7% (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019). While white students almost always have educators in their schools who share their cultural context, it's rare for that to be true for our Asian, Black, and Latino students.

A lack of cultural awareness has a significant impact in schools, particularly around discipline. Study after study has shown that disciplinary systems in American schools and in the American legal system unduly target Black students, who are "seen as more culpable for their actions…than their peers of other races" (Goff et al. 2014, 540). Educators who develop their own social and emotional competence

are better able to reserve judgment in interpreting student behavior, to respond to misbehavior in non-punitive ways, to maintain student dignity while setting clear limits, and to understand and connect with students in authentic, meaningful ways.

Educators must make a concerted and consistent effort to build their own cultural awareness to best support their students. That might seem easier said than done, but resources like Fly Five's "Cultural Awareness" support educators in thinking critically about their own experience and fostering cultural awareness in their classrooms and communities.

Representation Matters

Another area where representation is important for students is in books, media, and curricular resources. All too often in schools, curriculum materials do not reflect the diversity of the students using them. While no one curriculum could capture the vast diversities that exist among the students in schools everywhere, Fly Five was specifically and intentionally designed to address inadequate representation by introducing a cast of nine characters who, along with their families, represent a wide range of differences in race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical and/or mental capabilities, and religious beliefs.

This diverse cast of characters supports a positive sense of self-perception and high levels of cognitive empathy among students. As students learn about and identify with these characters by reading their stories, reflecting and writing about their choices, and learning about their lives and community, they are building cognitive empathy for those who are different. When this learning is coupled with explicit instruction in social and emotional skills, students and teachers can play an important part in creating classrooms where racism and intolerance are reduced and even ended.

Culture and SEL Skills

Fly Five is based on a set of social and emotional standards for cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy, and self-control (C.A.R.E.S.). The C.A.R.E.S. SEL standards were specifically designed to be relevant for a range of socio-cultural and educational contexts. Through explicit skill-building, students and adults can grow together in their cultural awareness and their understanding of each other.

For instance, one of the standards for the competency of empathy is respecting differing cultural norms. From kindergarten to eighth grade, students explore this standard in age-appropriate ways. A second grade student focuses on becoming "aware that there are celebrations or cultural events that happen among people who are different from oneself that are as significant in meaning as one's own" (Turner et al., 2019, p. 21). By fourth grade, a student who "recognizes that differences in culture can create differences in verbal and nonverbal communication" (Turner et al., 2019, p. 22) is well on their way to understanding the fifth grade skill of understanding "how belonging to more than one cultural group can cause internal conflict and tension" (Turner et al., 2019, p. 22). An eighth grader is "able to maintain a positive personal identity despite potentially negative stereotypes of culture or group identity" (Turner et al., 2019, p. 23).

These age- and developmentally-appropriate skills form the framework for the Fly Five social and emotional learning curriculum. With research-based approaches for skill-building that include interactive learning structures, individual reflection, real-life scenarios, and more, elementary and middle school students are supported in all stages of skill development. You can read more about how SEL skills are developed in Fly Five here.

SEL and the Community

In order for all students to benefit from the SEL skills that predict success in, out of, and beyond school, certain conditions must exist in classrooms, schools, and communities. Educators need access to a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, standards-aligned, and reflects the diversity of their students. The SEL skills within the curriculum need to be taught explicitly, using research-based strategies that are relevant for a range of socio-cultural and educational contexts. Educators also need support to understand their students' unique cultural contexts. To achieve this goal, schools must forge connections with families and communities as true partners in students' social and emotional development. When positive relationships exist between educators, students, families, and communities,

then social and emotional learning can be a transformative influence.

Through weekly Home-to-School Connection newsletters, Fly Five supports educators in creating these connections between home and school. Through developmentally-appropriate and engaging activities, students practice their SEL with their families and in their community. For students, these Home-to-School Connection send the message that social and emotional learning does not stop when the school day is done. For parents and teachers, these connections offer opportunities to learn more about each other, to authentically partner to support student success, and to extend and deepen the learning that happens during the school day.

Social and emotional learning is most effective and meaningful when cultural context is considered and respected. Authentic partnerships between teachers and families bridge the gap between school and home, allowing students to feel seen and significant wherever they are learning.

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