

**EQUITY: AT THE HEART OF
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

By Sheldon Berman



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School and classroom environments exert a powerful influence on learning. School is where students develop a sense of their own identity and agency and learn to navigate challenges inside and outside the classroom.

Social-emotional learning supports equity and access because belonging to a caring, inclusive community of learners encourages all students to grow socially, emotionally and academically. This sense of community and inclusiveness motivates and empowers students to be fully engaged and enables schools to build on the assets that each student possesses.

However, social-emotional learning is not about "fixing" students or promoting dominant culture values. And it entails more than simply developing the social skills to work with others and the emotional skills to manage one's emotions and self-regulate behavior. Rather, at its heart, social-emotional learning is about nurturing empathy, taking another person's perspective, appreciating the richness of diversity, and entering constructive dialogue to resolve differences.

Its goal is to provide culturally inclusive, identity-safe classroom communities that enable students to experience and understand the impact of their actions—or their failure to act—on others. In its fullest context, social-emotional learning is about developing a social consciousness and sense of social responsibility, guided by a moral compass that empowers one to make ethically-grounded decisions.

In addition, through professional development in social-emotional learning, educators can become aware of their implicit bias and are supported in creating conditions where families feel safe and respected. In affirming and valuing human connectedness, culturally inclusive and identity-safe classroom communities promote a sense of belonging and eliminating barriers to build quality education, particularly for traditionally underserved students. Thus, equity is both the lifeblood and the outcome of social-emotional learning.



Social-emotional learning will not address all equity disparities, many of which arise from inequitable funding, inequitable distribution of talent and other resources, and historic institutional bias. However, social-emotional learning helps build an asset-based approach that affirms students' strengths and cultural identities and appreciates the lived experiences they bring to the classroom.

It creates fair and just environments where all students are valued and where students who learn differently or who have experienced trauma or the stress of growing up in poverty are fully included and supported.

Through the relationships that students develop, the competencies they acquire, and the support they experience within caring classroom environments, social-emotional learning not only serves these students but models how an inclusive and respectful community can bring compassion, responsibility and equity to life in the world around them.