

Social Emotional Learning and Music Education: Now More Than Ever

By Scott N. Edgar

“I believe everyone will soon come to realize that our arts educators are the secret weapon to implementation of Social Emotional Learning in our schools.” - Dr. Maurice Elias

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) was around before the COVID-19 pandemic and will be around long after; however, the common trauma we are all experiencing has put a magnifying glass on the necessity for schools to help students survive and thrive when confronted with profound challenges. The singular priority of schools as they seek strategies to navigate the pandemic is student and staff safety—physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally. SEL is a skill-based approach that can help achieve that safety by building students’ self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making skills (simplified to the three goals of: *self, others, decisions*). Rather than react, SEL enables us to *respond* to challenges.

Music is inherently emotional: it makes us feel; music is social: it has been a rallying call for humans, always. It is essential that music teachers capitalize on the connections between SEL and music because our students need it and music education now more than ever!

For SEL to be effective in teaching students the life skills needed to navigate their world after they leave our music classroom, it must be embedded into curricular content—for us, it must be musical. We must make SEL intentional and meaningful—it does not *just happen*, and we cannot rely on the inherent fertile ground and potential that music education provides to teach our students these skills. If we are relying on music education to make this happen instead of music educators doing it intentionally, we will miss a great opportunity. SEL is not another box we need to check or another item we need to squeeze into our time with students. When done well, Musical SEL (MSEL) should feel like great music teaching! If it feels like SEL is distracting from teaching music, then we are not doing it optimally, nor maximizing the true power of music.

Intentional MSEL can begin with four broad ideas:

- **Connection:** Every opportunity needs to be made for students to connect with us, the music, and each other. Relationships are essential for any meaningful teaching and learning to occur. This has become exponentially more difficult as we navigate challenges of remote learning and distancing. Two of the best ways to build relationships between music educators and student musicians are to honor students’ voices and give them choices. Allow students to take ownership and have active roles in the educational process. This often means we, the teachers, need to give up control and allow students to make musical and classroom decisions. Choice is critical for students to feel their voice is being valued. The choice could be as simple as asking “Would you like to sing this song

first or last today?” to repertoire selection and making musical decisions that affect performance or self-assessment of a musical activity.

- **Repertoire:** One of the most important elements of quality repertoire is that it can connect with students. Every music teacher remembers *that* performance and the piece that sparked our interest in becoming a music teacher. As we consider music selection (elementary general to high school band, choir, and orchestra) one consideration should always be how we can make it personal for our students. MSEL is only as good as the repertoire it is connected to—*music first!*
- **Experiences:** Students must be given the opportunity to *do* MSEL. This is the culmination of connection, repertoire, and reflection in a musical experience that allows students to explore, create, contribute, choose, and encounter music with other students. To maximize the effect these experiences can have on students, exploring music that interests students must be melded with the music we see value in teaching. These experiences must be intentional, thoughtful, and put on the same level as we have traditionally placed performance.
- **Reflection:** To achieve voice, choice, and to connect students with the music, every performance, activity, or objective should have a student reflection component. The process is just as important as the product and can help unpack creativity, self-awareness, self-assessment, and support students setting their own goals. These reflections often result in the best responses online as some students struggle to engage in remote learning. It will also give valuable information as we continue to design both in-person and remote music education. Reflection typically occurs following an activity; however, consider peppering reflection throughout the process so students can connect and consider the *why* as they complete the *what*.

For pure safety reasons, performance as we’ve known it won’t have the role it had prior to the pandemic disruption. We will need to adapt our pedagogical approaches to capitalize on other elements of music education including creating, responding, and connecting. Some music educators might view this as *lowering the bar*. While I am confident we will return to focusing on musical excellence through performance, for this time, we must reconceptualize our standards. We cannot lower the bar; we need to change the bar and keep it high.

This adaptation (adjusting the *how* we teach music) will allow us to continue to teach music at a high level and still reach our students—but it will be different. When we give ourselves space to prioritize other elements (non-performance) it makes room for essential components of music education including creativity, personal connection, and MSEL.

Reentry into the Music Classroom and How MSEL Can Help

The trauma that everyone is feeling as a result of COVID-19 is real. Individual situations greatly impact our ability to respond to these profound challenges, including resources, family support, and existing SEL competencies; however, many of these are out of students’ control. In the fall of 2020 students will have been away from school and their friends for at least six months. Issues of reentry, trust, and mental health will be paramount (along with the obvious need for physical health precautions).

Students often rely on music teachers and the music classroom for security, school connectedness, and support. They will need us now more than ever. This does not mean that we disregard music and have discussions solely about what students need from a mental health standpoint. (These conversations can be valuable; however, we must remember we are music teachers and not counselors and not confuse our goals and limitations with regards to this fine line.) Students gravitate to us because of music, we must not forget that. This fall students will need opportunities to regain trust interacting with people, reconnect and rebuild relationships, but they will be starved for music. It will be our job to meet all those needs for our students.

SEL skill-building can help with these challenging tasks. Here are the three broad goals of SEL (derived from the CASEL, Illinois SEL Standards), relevant skill sets, and musical strategies.

| GOAL | SKILLS | STRATEGIES |
|--|---|---|
| Goal 1: SELF (Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify and recognize emotions Persist Cope Manage stress De-escalate emotions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize emoji worksheets for reflection, listening exercises, and current mood assessment. Give students ample opportunities to self-evaluate their current emotional state and the time and space to re-center (ex. “I need a break pass”; calm corners; anxiety meters). |
| Goal 2: OTHERS (Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooperate Be empathetic Build relationships Have concern and compassion for others Seek and provide help | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collectively develop a soundtrack of meaningful music that can be played as students enter class. Develop teams of students who are willing to help with reasonable tasks associated with keeping music classrooms safe (follow all school, district, and health professional guidance and only allow students to do what is possible and safe). |
| Goal 3: DECISIONS (Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote one’s own health Avoid risky behaviors Anticipate consequences Analyze situations Plan realistic and adaptive response strategies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have students inventory and rank music classroom activities in terms of risk, their comfort performing these, and protocols that could make them feel safer. Create a new mission statement accounting for musical, social, and emotional objectives accounting for a decreased emphasis on performance. |

While the music classroom will look, feel, and sound different than it did pre-pandemic, purposeful, thoughtful, and realistic instruction focused on the students and MSEL can facilitate an environment where students can reconnect with the space and people who have meant so much to them.

Advocating Utilizing SEL

SEL represents a widely accepted construct that policy makers at all levels value. Music teachers need to have a plan to capitalize on MSEL. While SEL is inherently possible in music classrooms, intentional implementation is necessary to: maximize social and emotional benefits for students, and effectively advocate to policy makers for the value of music education utilizing SEL. To effectively make an argument, all elements of SEL are needed. Realizing the personal/collective value of music education (self-awareness), understanding how this value will be perceived by decision-makers (social-awareness), and promoting music education through advocacy (responsible decision-making) culminate in a cohesive MSEL process and thoughtful argument. Engaging students in this process not only lends relevance to music education's value, but also models/teaches students these important skills while forwarding the cause for music education.

Compelling arguments for music education utilizing SEL are:

- Purposeful integration of SEL into music education will enrich the students' **personal connection** to music.
- The relationship built between teacher and students over multiple years of instruction fosters the caring environment necessary to help build **school connectedness** and foster **empathy**.
- The perseverance needed to dedicate oneself to musical excellence fosters **resiliency** both in and out of the music classroom.
- Musical creation fosters **self-awareness** and allows students to develop a greater sense of autonomy and emotional vocabulary.
- The collaborative community developed in the music classroom around music-making welcomes discussions and an awareness of acceptance and embracing **diversity**.
- Musicians learn the necessity of personal goal setting, self-assessment, and accountability as they develop **high standards** for musicianship and themselves.
- Music education provides **developmental experiences** that actively allow students to practice and hone social emotional competencies.

SEL will be front and center for administrators and MSEL can provide one solution to help our students cope, heal, and move forward through music.

Onward

We have often been told *the only way out is through*. This is true as we prepare for musical performances, struggle to teach a musical concept, persist through personal musical roadblocks, *and* navigate the profound social and emotional challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of our students are mourning the loss of music education as they know it and are craving the support and security they have relied on. Rough, uncomfortable waters lie ahead; however, music is a **cultural necessity** and is **fundamental** to being human. Music education and SEL exposes and deepens this for our students. Through our intentional integration of SEL, our students will build the social emotional skills to thrive in our classrooms and beyond.

Key Takeaways

- In our classrooms, music comes first. SEL will *enhance* our musical instruction.
- Our students need help building their social emotional competencies and MSEL instruction can achieve this.
- MSEL instruction must be intentionally planned and implemented in the music classroom.
- MSEL is a powerful argument for music and its rightful place in a well-rounded K-12 education.

Scott Edgar is Associate Professor of Music, Department of Music chair, and Director of Bands at Lake Forest College. Edgar is the author of *Music Education and Social Emotional Learning: The Heart of Teaching Music*, and he delivers clinics internationally on the topic. He is a Conn-Selmer Educational Clinician and VH1 Save the Music Foundation Educational Consultant. He can be reached at edgar@lakeforest.edu.

Resources for SEL and specific strategies implementing SEL in the music classroom:

- *Music Education and Social Emotional Learning: The Heart of Teaching Music* (and student workbook), by Scott Edgar, GIA Publications.
- Optimism Through the COVID-19 Disruption: Utilizing Social Emotional Learning for Reflection and Growth, by Scott Edgar, Andrew Morrison, & Bob Morrison: <https://sbomagazine.com/6934-optimism-through-the-covid-19-disruption-utilizing-social-emotional-learning-for-reflection-and-growth.html>
- Music Education and Social Emotional Learning, by Scott Edgar, NAFME blog: <https://nafme.org/music-education-social-emotional-learning/>
- Music Education and Social Emotional Learning, by Scott Edgar and Bob Morrison, NAFME webinar: <https://nafme.org/advocacy/quarterly-advocacy-webinars/social-emotional-learning/>
- Music Education and SEL During COVID-19: Resiliency and Empathy Now More Than Ever, by Scott Edgar, NAFME webinar: <https://nafme.org/my-classroom/nafme-online-professional-learning-community/#Webinar%20Recordings>
- Advocating for Music Education Utilizing SEL, by Scott Edgar and Bob Morrison,

NAfME webinar: <https://nafme.org/my-classroom/nafme-online-professional-learning-community/#Webinar%20Recordings>

- Music Education and Social Emotional Learning Facebook Page:
[@MusicSocialEmotionalLearning](#)
- New Jersey Arts Education and SEL Learning Framework: www.selarts.org
- Collaborative for Academic Social Emotional Learning (CASEL): www.casel.org