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ASSESSING
Through the Lens of
SOCIAL and
EMOTIONAL
LEARNING

TOOLS AND STRATEGIES

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CHAPTER 3

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Developing a Culture of SEL Assessment

*In order to create a culture of excellence in assessment we will need to address the assessment culture—**the social** and educational environment—within which we will carry out new reconsidered assessment strategies and tactics. In other words, **we must assess well within the context of our social and educational aspirations, values, and beliefs** so as to promote a **universal opportunity for learner success, regardless of the learner's social or economic background**.*

—Rick Stiggins, *The Perfect Assessment System* (2017)

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Colleagues on the assessing journey will be able to

- Understand the connection between assessment beliefs and the need for developing a positive SEL assessment culture

- Explain the concept of an SEL learning environment where assessment feedback informs teacher planning and student growth

- Develop a cohesive plan for assessing SEL competencies that is inclusive of student feedback

- Develop goals about how to change the assessment culture beginning in their own learning environment—using their newfound knowledge, skills, and motivation

YOUR ROLE—KNOWING WHAT YOU KNOW AND WHAT YOU NEED TO LEARN

Words have great power. It was a challenge to choose the right words for the title of this chapter. While "cultivating" was selected, other words considered were "creating," "developing," and "nurturing." All are what this chapter is about—embracing the idea that how you assess (*not* test!) through the lens of social emotional learning will determine whether social emotional learning flourishes or not in your learning environment.

The quote from Stiggins, one of the preeminent leaders in formative assessment, was also a thoughtful choice. Go back and reread it, especially the part that notes, "we must assess well within the context of our social and educational aspirations, values, and beliefs" for the purpose of learner success. That is a total change from the culture of testing our public schools have been shrouded in throughout the No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds federal legislation years.

We have lived in a *culture of testing* now for decades. As James Popham states in the foreword of Dr. Stiggins's book *The Perfect Assessment System* (2017), "The many misuses of educational tests are now suffocating us to such a degree that it's time to start over" (p. ix). Despite the research and the seminal leaders in formative assessment telling us that formative assessment *for learning* has the potential to transform teaching and learning, we continue to implement harmful testing practices in our schools and classrooms (Stiggins, 2017, p. ix). This chapter is about changing that mindset. Proliferating classroom environments that embrace and integrate the formative ongoing assessing of social emotional competencies is foundational to the success of social emotional learning in our schools. Where do we start to create this culture? With you.

Testing is done *to* learners. They have absolutely no choice or control about testing. It is a federal and state mandate. Both teachers and learners are subjected to the emotional chaos created by this culture. Assessing, however, is done *with* the learner. Assessing—done right—provides the teacher and the learner with information about progress toward the acquisition of the learning target or outcome. Assessing gently leads the learner in the growth process. Assessing allows the learner agency over learning. Assessing gives the learner a voice in their own learning. Assessing empowers student learning. Once again we ask, how do we create and nurture this learning ecology that fosters student voice and empowers well-being and positive learning?

Let's start with a visioning activity. Take time and deliberation with this. It is important. Gather your materials—drawing

or sketch paper, a variety of colored pencils or pens, glue stick, stickers, magazines, your tablet, or whatever you need to create a portrait. No, not that kind of portrait. You are creating a portrait of a highly effective SEL learning environment.

Jot down a few words or phrases that describe your ideal highly effective SEL environment, the teacher, and the students. Find some photos, pictures, and visuals that help you to create this portrait of SEL in action. What does the classroom feel like? What does it look like? What kinds of visuals do you see on the walls? What is the teacher doing? What are the students doing? What knowledge, performance, and dispositions do the teacher and the students have? How are they different from other teachers and students who may not possess their SEL knowledge? Why? Keep adding elements until you have a very clear portrait of this SEL environment.

Here is a think-aloud (well, without the sound). Focus on the second paragraph from the CASEL explanation of what SEL is. The bolded italics are ours.

MY IDEAL SEL INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. *SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.*

SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL can help address various forms of inequity and empower young people and adults to co-create thriving schools and contribute to safe, healthy, and just communities. (www.CASEL.org)

Essential Questions

What does the teacher know and do?

What do the students know and do?

What do the parents/guardians/families know and do?

What does the community know and do?

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER

This vision of an ideal SEL learning environment answers the questions posed earlier as it is represented by a bullseye target (see Figure 3.1). The student is at the center of an ideal SEL learning environment. Everything we think, say, or do aligns back to what, how, and when we are integrating SEL competencies in order to increase student voice and enable "empowerment" for students. Student empowered (SE SEL) growth and development is an ongoing process of learning the essential SEL knowledge, performances, and dispositions (described in detail in the SEL Student Learning Progressions). SE SEL is a process and, as such, each person enters with a variety of competencies and a need for developing and increasing them. This even applies to adults—especially the adults supporting the acquisition of SEL competencies.

> The term *SE SEL* is introduced by Brown and colleagues (2022b) in *Letting Student Voice Lead the Way*. In the ASCD article/blog (see QR code), they present the concepts of "Some Days" and "Micro Adventures" that promote student empowered social emotional learning. Some Days are ideas elicited from students about what activity they would like to see implemented in the school day. For example, Some Day I would like to have reading class outside. Micro Adventures are mini field trips that are conceptualized by the students. As explained in the article, SE SEL "encompasses practices that affirm what students bring to the classroom by encouraging students to identify and choose activities they love or value, to experience what it feels like to positively engage with and positively influence others, and in many cases, to share their expertise with classmates and teachers."
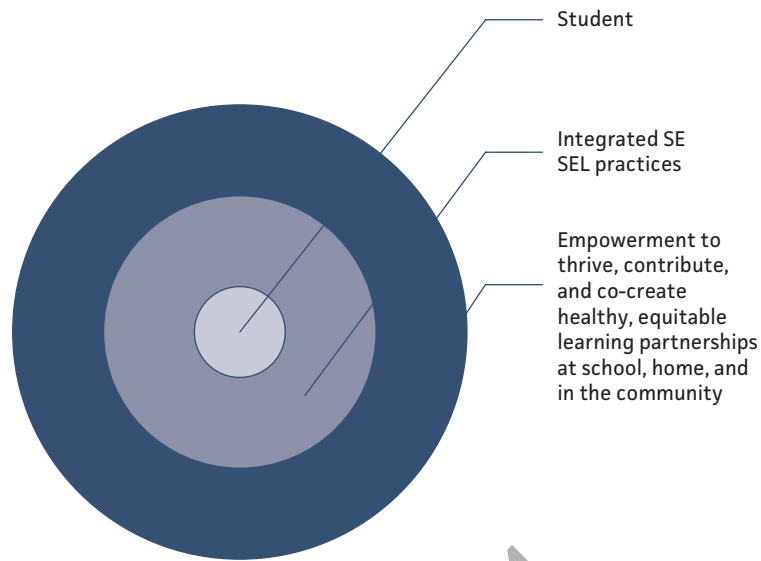
bit.ly/3OlbFck

In the ideal SEL learning environment, that developmental process is recognized and respected. The teacher, who is the facilitator in guiding learners in the acquisition of SEL competencies, knows the SEL competencies and learning progressions; has self-assessed and has an action plan for increasing personal SEL competencies; and knows how to integrate SEL learning throughout the period, day, week, and year across all subject disciplines and extracurricular activities—always with the student at the center. The teacher is assessment (not testing!) literate and knows that SEL assessing is an ongoing process that provides formative assessment via feed up (answers the question What am I expected to learn?), feedback (How am I progressing?) and feed forward (What do I need to do next to keep increasing my SEL competencies?).

The teacher knows how to create an SEL learning environment that invites and supports the acquisition of SEL competencies. It is visually engaging. The SEL framework wheel is the first thing anyone entering the classroom sees. The students have created

FIGURE 3.1 ● Ideal SEL Learning Environment

Student

Integrated SE
SEL practices

Empowerment to
thrive, contribute,
and co-create
healthy, equitable
learning partnerships
at school, home, and
in the community

this stunning representation of the five core SEL competencies using a mixed media approach. The entire wall is filled with evidence of their SEL activities and growth. It also has resources that are student centric and that the students have selected. The teacher is at the door each period welcoming each student. As the students get settled, the morning/beginning of class circle starts the day. This ritual sends a clear message—I am so glad you are here. What do we need to focus on learning today? Let's effectively engage in our growth work, both academic and SEL.

What are the students doing in this ideal SEL classroom? They are engaged in learning. They are empowered because they feel competent, connected, and heard. They are effectively working on today's academic and SEL learning outcomes, which are clearly explained in the morning/beginning of class routine. Both the academic and SEL learning expectations guide the student work of learning.

Because they know the SEL competencies and the expectations of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, they work toward increasing those competencies. Whether they are pursuing the learning outcomes individually, in teams, or as a whole class, they collaborate to ensure the SEL and academic learning environment is safe and engaging for all learners. When expectations are not met, there is a clear process and pathway for dealing with issues.

Student self-assessment and reflection is a part of the positive assessing culture for the class. Students' journals/agendas help them to think about what they accomplished, what they need to do next, and what challenged them. They freely let the teacher

know what kind of help they need to move forward—whether SEL or academically. They own their progress.

Parents, guardians, families, and the community are partners in understanding, knowing, and supporting the SEL learning environment. They know they play essential roles in the continuing SE SEL growth of all family and community members. They help plan, lead, attend, and participate in developing community-based SEL events—seminars, workshops, and learning opportunities. The family integrates many of the SEL routines and rituals at home. The family knows they have allies to support their children. The family participates in ongoing feedback and feed forward, via surveys and informal and formal meetings for a continuous improvement cycle.

In the ideal SEL learning environment, all roles—student, teacher, family, community—are interconnected. The educators do not "give" voice to anyone; they honor the many voices in their community. When all members of the community feel their voices are heard and honored, it has a significant impact on the cultivation of the SEL culture. For example, first responders are known and visit the school for various activities and events. Social services support is readily available inside the school and in the community. And all aspects of SEL growth are known, respected, and supported—whether it is at the grocery store, the gas station, the doctor's office, or the community library. Learning, then, does not just take place within the walls of the school; the entire community embraces helping youth to learn and grow.

Your role in cultivating an SEL culture of assessing is to first and foremost become assessment literate. You must know the SEL standards and competencies—the knowledge, skills, and performances—that guide learners toward growth. Second, you need to be well-versed on how to effectively assess SEL competencies. You need to know the difference between student self-reports, observations, and the variety of assessment tools available—whether commercially prepared and purchased or teacher made. You need to be cautious in how commercially prepared and purchased SEL programs are implemented and how that data is used. Making the same mistakes we have made in implementing standardized testing and in the use of standardized data is a cautionary tale. Using SEL data for punitive purposes—for ranking, for placement, for decision-making—destroys the efficacy of all SEL implementations. Knowing how to effectively create or select (if beneficial) an SEL program, implement it with fidelity to the principles of SEL growth, and use the data for formative ongoing growth are keys to the success of social emotional learning.

WHAT EXACTLY DOES SEL ASSESSING LOOK LIKE?

It is time to transition from our visions to the "how." How do we move from a culture of testing to cultivating a culture of assessing? Fortunately, we have a deep understanding and a wealth of resources from the seminal leaders in formative assessment. Unfortunately, the majority of teachers in the classroom today have not been introduced to the power of formative assessment to inform and transform both teaching and learning. If you are one of those educators, take heart. Now is the time to change your classroom, grade level, or school from a culture of testing to a culture of assessing *for* learning. Assessing *for* learning is essential for both cultivating a culture of assessing and cultivating an SEL learning environment.

The content experts in assessing *for* learning recognize that assessing is a moving picture. The assessing information (a snapshot) provided to you about a student's progress last week is out of date this week. Effective formative assessing is ongoing. It is continuous. It is a collaboration between you—the teacher—and the learner. It is a process of setting clear expectations for what is being learned (feed up), receiving feedback about what was done well, and having a conversation about what needs to be done next (feed forward) (Frey & Fisher, 2011). Stiggins (2017) describes a game-changing vision of assessment. In his description of re-creating assessment values and beliefs, he states the keys to changing our assessment culture.

Here is an abbreviated selection from his list that is highly aligned to our discussion:

1. "We must move beyond the long-standing belief that standardized achievement tests can pave the way to better schools" (p. 96). We know they do not, have not, and will not.

2. "We must shift the spotlight, resources, and locus of assessment control from federal and state departments of education to local school districts" (p. 96). This is where your knowledge of the characteristics of an assessment literate educator impacts the change from testing to assessing. Student learning success can be aggregated from the systemic ongoing formative assessing practices in your classroom.

3. "We must embrace a new role for students" (p. 97). Testing is something adults do *to* students. Assessing is done *with* students. We already know that students self-evaluate constantly. Unfortunately, the feedback they receive from high-stakes testing sends them the wrong information. Testing feedback stops learning. Formative assessment supports learning.

As Stiggins (2017) states, "Grades and test scores may serve summative accountability purposes, but they fail us in formative contexts, where instructional decision makers need detail about student strengths and weaknesses to inform decisions about what comes next in the student's learning" (p. 7). Formative assessment, unlike high-stakes testing or benchmark assessments, has been proven to impact student achievement. In the realm of SEL skill acquisition, formative assessment is essential for students to understand what is expected and how they are progressing.

So, hopefully you are getting the message: To assess the SEL way, the teacher is assessment (not testing!) literate and knows that SEL assessing is an ongoing process. This process, a partnership between the teacher and the learner, provides information that supports learning.

Back to the essential questions of this section:

1. How do I do SEL assessing?
2. How do I cultivate a culture of SE SEL assessing in my environment?

"DOING" SE SEL ASSESSING

To do SE SEL assessing right and well, you begin with a series of questions:

1. WHY AM I ASSESSING SEL COMPETENCIES?

This sounds pretty straightforward. You are assessing SEL competencies to determine where each learner is on the progression of acquiring specific SEL knowledge, skills, and performances. If you are assessing for any other reason, you need to ask why. Who is requiring this assessment (or testing)? How will the data be used? If it is for any reason other than to get feedback on where students are in their progression of SEL learning, then you really need to question it.

2. WHAT DO I DO WITH THE ASSESSMENT INFORMATION?

You use it to have a conversation *with* the learner about their progress. Feedback given in language that students will understand provides them with the answer to the questions *What did I do well?* and *What do I need to do next?*

3. WHAT'S NEXT?

The learner states what they have learned in alignment with the competency and, based on the learning progression, what their next step is. You, of course, facilitate this conversation using a variety of tools. You both agree on strategies to use to support the ongoing practice of implementing SEL competencies. It is vitally important that you carefully listen to the learner. Craft questions that will elicit responses to inform you. "Am I right when I say while you really did well on the portrait of the main character assignment, you struggled with the part where you compared Pony Boy to yourself? OK, let's talk about that."
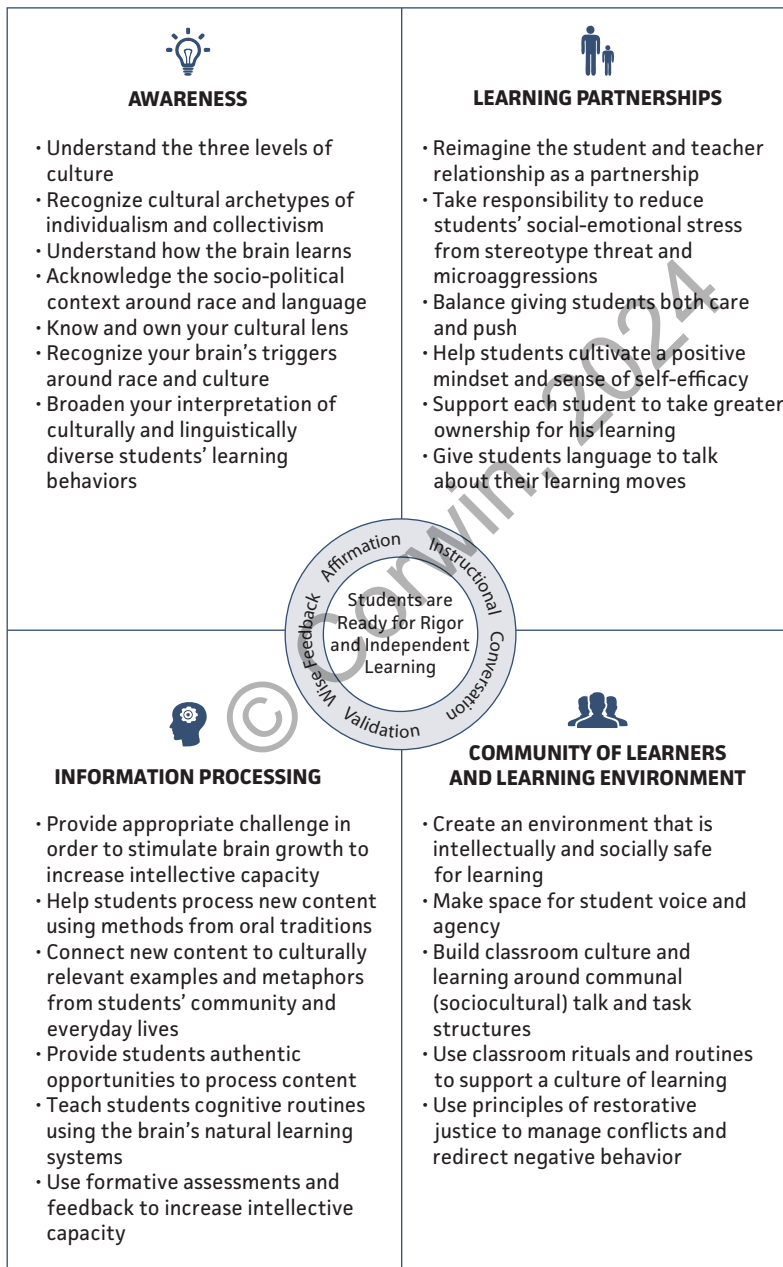
You may be asking, so, this is it? Yes and no. You will need to create a systemic process for implementing effective SEL practices to create your ideal SEL learning environment. This includes a system for developing your feed forward, feedback, and feed up loop. Feed forward means that you set clear expectations via learning outcomes. Feedback is the information you provide about how the learner is progressing in acquiring the SEL competency presented in the outcome, and feed up is what the student needs to do next to continue growing. This looping system requires knowledge on how to embed SEL practices in your teaching and learning environment throughout the day. We believe that all teaching is SEL teaching. We already "do" SEL. It is not a separate "curriculum." It is a belief and value system that is integrated in the most effective practices of teaching and learning.

An important aspect in creating this culture includes allowing for community building and inclusion of student voices. Culturally responsive teaching is a framework for creating awareness for this kind of inclusivity. Culturally responsive teaching encompasses not only content and instruction but also assessing. Zaretta Hammond's (2013) model, *Ready for Rigor*, provides us with knowledge, skills, and dispositions for integrating culturally responsive teaching in SEL assessing.

The Ready for Rigor Framework includes four areas of instruction that promote a culturally responsive classroom: Awareness, Learning Partnerships, Information Processing, and Community of Learners and Learning Environments (see Figure 3.2). All indicate that the students are engaged in being part of this dynamic classroom experience, and they are ready for rigor and for independent learning. Hammond frames these actions and behaviors as giving learners feedback and affirmations, along with validation to develop rich and culturally inclusive conversations in a learning environment. Examine the Ready for Rigor Framework. Depending on the type of assessment practice applied, assessing through the lens of SEL can be used to help learners:

1. Gain a greater level of self-awareness
2. Process (and apply) information
3. Develop a variety of learning partnerships in the classroom
4. Create a community of learners and learning environment

FIGURE 3.2 ● Ready for Rigor Framework

AWARENESS

- Understand the three levels of culture
- Recognize cultural archetypes of individualism and collectivism
- Understand how the brain learns
- Acknowledge the socio-political context around race and language
- Know and own your cultural lens
- Recognize your brain's triggers around race and culture
- Broaden your interpretation of culturally and linguistically diverse students' learning behaviors

LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

- Reimagine the student and teacher relationship as a partnership
- Take responsibility to reduce students' social-emotional stress from stereotype threat and microaggressions
- Balance giving students both care and push
- Help students cultivate a positive mindset and sense of self-efficacy
- Support each student to take greater ownership for his learning
- Give students language to talk about their learning moves

Students are Ready for Rigor and Independent Learning

Affirmation · Instructional · Conversation · Validation · Wise Feedback

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INFORMATION PROCESSING

- Provide appropriate challenge in order to stimulate brain growth to increase intellective capacity
- Help students process new content using methods from oral traditions
- Connect new content to culturally relevant examples and metaphors from students' community and everyday lives
- Provide students authentic opportunities to process content
- Teach students cognitive routines using the brain's natural learning systems
- Use formative assessments and feedback to increase intellective capacity

COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- Create an environment that is intellectually and socially safe for learning
- Make space for student voice and agency
- Build classroom culture and learning around communal (sociocultural) talk and task structures
- Use classroom rituals and routines to support a culture of learning
- Use principles of restorative justice to manage conflicts and redirect negative behavior

Source: Reprinted from Hammond (2014).

CULTIVATING A CULTURE
OF SE SEL ASSESSING

Cultivating a culture of SE SEL assessing is a mindset, as well as an art and science. It requires that you have an open and curious mind about how SEL can change the learning and teaching environment. It requires that you gain new knowledge, skills, and dispositions about both SEL and assessing. It requires that you question all of the assumptions you know about testing. It means you need to move from the culture of testing to seeing and knowing the value of ongoing formative assessment *for* learning. It means you allow yourself to experiment. It provides for nurturing the spirit of your learners. It allows for listening to and hearing what your students want and need in order to learn.

Students need autonomy, flexibility, and control, just as adults do. Your SEL culture of assessing has the potential for honoring student efficacy. Give student real choices rather than asking them to select from two forced options, such as show your learning by making a poster or giving a three-minute speech. We frequently think we are giving students choices, when in reality we are controlling their learning. Think about learning with them and explore what is possible. Ask them, "What do you think is the best way for you to show what you learned?" One innovative way to do this is via the Some Day strategy. What is a student's Some Day wish in relationship to assessing?

Some Days are a practice developed by the team at the Rural Vitality Lab. They invite all students and teachers to share their wish for a special activity to promote student voices and empower schools to promote mental health, well-being, and emotional healing. We suggest you apply this concept to assessing. What are your students' wishes about how they are assessed? You may be pleasantly informed by their input.

Students are truly in the bullseye of the culture of SEL assessing. In this culture you value the feedback from your learners, and you honor their voices. On the other hand, students will feel they do not matter when data is used punitively. Students know that they do not matter when a concept is taught and they do not get it the first time, but the teacher just keeps on going. They know that they do not matter when a pacing guide dictates learning. They know that they do not matter when they are scared what will happen when they fail again.

In the culture of SEL assessing, the student is the center of all learning. All students feel valued and appreciated. They feel a sense of belonging. Students know their voices are respected because their input about their own learning is seen in the

"what's next for me" conversations. Students know they are valued because their untapped potential is explored and allowed to blossom. Assessment needs to be owned by the students as a developmental aspect of the process of learning progressions.

Practitioner "Wondering" Reflection

Time for Your SEL Reflection Journal

In your SEL journal, reflect on what you have learned in this chapter. Consider these prompts:

- How might reframing your understanding of what excellence in assessing could be impact your teaching? And your students' learning?

- Why is student voice in the assessing process vital to positive SE SEL growth? How will you develop this concept in your own practice?

- What questions do you have about assessing SEL learning?

Takeaway to Practice

What is the one takeaway from this chapter you want to put into action? **Name it. Add it to your action plan.**