

A 9-Step Social Emotional Approach to Secondary English Language Arts Curriculum Writing

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Abstract

In this practitioner piece, the author defines social emotional learning (SEL) and outlines an approach to integrating SEL activities into secondary English language arts curriculum by identifying priorities; developing thematic questions; designing reading, writing, and speaking and listening experiences; determining a culminating assessment; aligning with standards; designing lessons; and integrating class policies.

Keywords

social emotional learning, curriculum design, secondary English language arts, standards

Now that Social Emotional Learning is a measured outcome in Kansas, improved professional development opportunities around the state show that schools have acknowledged the increased value of integrating SEL into the school culture. Convincing evidence suggests that in order for SEL to truly expand student cognitive and emotional growth, SEL must be embedded into the school curriculum and classroom norms (Jones et al., 2017). Interesting research out of the University of Kansas's Research Collaboration identified the top two factors in determining success in college or in a career: self-regulation and self-efficacy (Noonan & Erickson, 2018). The authors outline the importance of other skills like organization, time management, and content-specific skills, which are included in the College and Career Competency Framework. Where our students continue to need our help is in providing them opportunities to help themselves and to promote experiences where they feel their effort matters. Our schools, and arguably English Language Arts teachers, are on the frontlines of fostering healthy minds. While effective supplemental programs in character education might help, the curriculum must serve as the centerpiece for educating our children in the most responsible way. A curriculum designed to address the whole child will give us the most gains in achievement and social-emotional health.

Understanding Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

It is important to understand what social emotional learning (SEL) is and is not. Often referred to as "soft skills," SEL teaches students intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities, such as self-awareness, problem solving, and team building so that they have the social and emotional skills necessary to succeed in life (Fisher & Frey, 2014). What is it not? High-fives, fist bumps, fake positivity, and any other inauthentic behaviors. This might be controversial, yes. I have sat in on interviews for teacher candidates and have heard those teachers say that those fist bumps and high-fives are the most important elements of school culture. More than likely, their sentiments are rooted in good intentions. We know that having positive relationships with students is important. We know the importance of making sure students feel valued. Where we have gone off the rails is in how to accomplish that.

First and foremost, we must eliminate the mentality that we are here to rescue kids. We are not. Instead of "You are hurt, and I need to save you," we must be of the mind that "You are hurt, and let me get you started on the path to save yourself" (Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2013). One of the foundations of trauma-informed care is to avoid rescuing students. If we are concerned about them

the day after their graduation and not just while they are in our system, then we must provide them the tools and conditions to help themselves.

Start with Curriculum

Schools that stop or de-emphasize curriculum in order to incorporate social-emotional learning activities are missing the point. All of these additional SEL activities must be built and based around a content-rich curriculum. In the past, I have been part of discussions with leadership teams where we ask, “What activities can we implement to get kids to care about teamwork?” Or “What product can we purchase that will address these SEL issues?” Instead, leadership teams should ask, “To what extent does our curriculum promote a content-rich learning environment that allows for a thriving SEL experience?” Conversely, we should avoid the trap of focusing more on SEL than academic standards. The two are important together and not mutually exclusive. A thriving SEL experience will emerge from a content-rich curriculum. In fact, it is more important now than ever before to teach our students “to suspend judgment, weigh evidence, consider multiple perspectives and speak up with wisdom and grace on behalf of themselves” (Ehrenworth, 2017).

And what better core content area to tackle this than English Language Arts, a content area immersed in the lessons learned from stories and our own writings? It is important to note that the emphasis should be on the curriculum — not imitating someone’s teaching behaviors or style. Not everyone needs to teach like they had 15 cups of coffee. Teachers are not circus performers. We are practitioners trying to do something life-changing, which is to provide the most important literacy skills necessary for students to navigate this world, seek truth, and communicate that truth. If the curriculum is going to be any good, it cannot be canned, and it cannot be handcuffed by the standards. “Standards-based instruction” and a complete reliance on skill mastery usurps the purpose of an ELA classroom, which should provide authentic literacy activities that produce a generation of “voracious readers” who are able to think critically and respond thoughtfully to the world around them (Gallagher, 2009). Worry not; the standards will show up later in the process. In order for students to reap the benefits of this type of curricular approach, we must operate off the assumption that “large amounts of nonfiction reading will occur in science, social studies, arts, and electives” (Schmoker, 2018). Assuming, this foundational and necessary truth, the following nine-step process is one workable option our ELA teams have used for developing curriculum from the ground up in a way that promotes a rich and SEL-mindful experience for all students.

Step One: Identify Your Priorities

Many of us call these our “power standards.” Looking at the Kansas ELA standards right at the beginning of this process (46 of them at the secondary level), helps to at least offer teachers the perspective necessary to begin the curriculum writing process. But keep in mind we are mapping curriculum—not mapping standards. Identifying the priority or “power” standards helps teams of teachers determine what they believe to be most important for students. These could be narrowed down to 10 or fewer. In fact, I recommend rewriting these as a team to more accurately align with your local philosophy. For example, here are my basic priorities:

- 1) Read texts closely in order to identify author’s strategies and purpose and in order to respond accordingly.
- 2) Articulate your own original ideas clearly and effectively using a variety of methods.
- 3) Understand your role as a citizen and individual among these texts.

If I think of what I want an 18-year-old graduate to be able to do, it boils down to those skills. Looking closely at priority one, this alone encompasses nearly all of the state reading standards. Priorities two and three address many, if not most, of the writing and speaking and listening

standards. If the content is rich and plentiful with these three priorities in mind, the standards will work themselves out.

When we look at these three priority or “power” standards, these address areas that will help students in every aspect of their lives. I do not get caught in the weeds of root words, grammar terms, etc. If students are not reading and writing every day and extensively, it does little good to emphasize the importance of the semicolon (standard W11.a for 9th and 10th grade). This is not to say these standards should be neglected. Instead, they will find their way into lessons organically (during a writing workshop, for example, while conferencing individually with students). Curriculum writing, which is typically done in departments or grade-level teams, can quickly derail if we argue over where “colons” will be taught. This bickering over minutiae paves the way for a curriculum evident of collegial compromises that leave a student’s SEL in the dust. That debate can be waged another day. For now, think bigger and focus on the power standards that will offer students the greatest gains. The importance of identifying basic priorities cannot be overstated. It can take some time for teams to come to a mutual understanding on their guiding philosophies. If the entire team cannot agree on the underlying goals for student learning, then coming to basic understandings on how to meet students’ SEL needs becomes murky. We must understand that we are not building a skills-based, test-prep curriculum but a “comprehensive education” that incorporates those necessary literacy skills in a way that prepares students for their vital role in passionate and active citizenship.

Step Two: Develop Thematic Questions to Guide the Year

I rarely hear students say, “Yes! It’s the poetry unit!” Or insert any word before “unit.” English Language Arts is cyclical in that we ELA teachers do not teach one skill at a time. We teach numerous skills all the time and at gradually increased levels of rigor. Instead of letting the standards dictate units, allow SEL-focused themes to do so. An effective thematic question links all student learning experiences together, whether they are reading poetry, short essays, composing their own writing, or speaking and listening in a Socratic seminar. These questions also should help students understand and grapple with their own understanding of the world and how they might approach life going forward, an SEL hallmark. For freshman English this year, I have one thematic question per quarter (roughly 8 or 9 weeks). They are as follows: What is my responsibility to those around me? How much control do I have over my own life and my own actions? What is the value of a literate society? What is the value of memory and storytelling? Notice these are themes that are grounded in rich SEL experiences. Other practitioners have called this a “literacy-based” approach rather than a standards-based approach (Phillips and Wong, 2010; Schmoker, 2018). This allows for the natural integration of standards into lessons and units that approach the student’s learning with the understanding that this is a humanities course and not simply an ELA skills course. I do not, for example, have a question like “What is the structure of an argument?” That skill is embedded into the curriculum, units, and lessons. My department does indeed teach methods like the Toulmin or Sermon concepts of argumentation but not as the precepts to designing an authentic literacy-based unit. Here are examples of other less effective questions: What role should the government play in preventing man-made climate change? What is Shakespeare’s influence over modern day English? Thematic questions should be designed to lack a definitive answer so as to introduce a variety of viewpoints from authors (and students) throughout the unit. Other themes that would work include: Under what conditions should I rebel or disobey? To what extent should I defend my morals and ethics? What is worth valuing in America? How can I determine what is true? How can goodness overcome humanity’s propensity for evil? These themes have three principles in common:

- 1) **They are not standards-based.** ELA is not math. We do not need to sequence our courses around standards. Most of our standards can and should be taught all year every year. As we are beginning to see and will understand more in a later step, the standards will show up and, arguably, more effectively than if a curriculum were designed around the standards.
- 2) **They are not text-specific.** I am as guilty as any ELA teacher when it comes to teaching certain books. I will do almost anything to teach *The Great Gatsby* every year. So I typically have a thematic question into which Fitzgerald’s novel fits. We want to avoid, however, marrying ourselves to texts simply because we feel they must be taught. Consider this, though. Would our students be less prepared for life (or college) if they did not read *The Great Gatsby*? While it seems sacrilege to even consider, I have had too many conversations with teachers over the years that often contain phrases like this: “But we *have* to teach <insert text here>. Where else are they going to get this?” If the state standards do one thing right, it is that they don’t dictate the vehicles we use to drive instruction. Methods, tools, programs, websites, and all other strategies are left up to local folks to determine — preferably individual teachers. To that end, texts are merely tools to help us teach authentic literacy-based units that ultimately address the standards. By handcuffing our curriculum to certain texts, we eliminate the creative autonomy our teachers deserve to achieve the greatest gains with students.
- 3) **They help students learn something about themselves and their own value or worth.** At the core of English language arts is the story. Whether this is fiction, poetry, drama, or a student creation, the story teaches us one more chapter in the story of humanity. Thomas Foster in *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* asserts that all texts, individually, are chapters in one great book that tells the story of what it means to be human. A thematic unit, rich with reading, writing, and speaking experiences invites students to grapple not only with the definition of a sonnet but with what that sonnet teaches them about themselves, which students would communicate through writing and speaking opportunities.

Now consider the unfortunate alternative to these three qualities: 1) the ELA classroom is standards-based, 2) it is built around the same texts, teacher to teacher, and 3) it emphasizes mastery of skill rather than mastery of literacy. How does this address the whole student? A scripted curriculum that is overly standardized produces an impractical and unsustainable model for student growth. Conversely, a focus on thematic literacy units produces the essential SEL competency result: students who are ready to take on the real-world challenges that await them (Noonan & Erickson, 2018).

Step Three: Design a Year of Reading Experiences

With thematic questions in place, fill those units with texts that inform different answers to the question.

Start with an anchor text

I like the value that a whole-class text brings to the curriculum. It invites extensive study of an issue and a variety of author structures and methods. It also promotes reading stamina, something our students desperately need (Conley 2005). In my freshman English class, *Of Mice and Men* fits nicely with the thematic question of “What is my responsibility to those around me?” A reading of that book alone would offer rich opportunities for students to discuss informed answers to that question. This also begs the question: Is it truly necessary for teachers to teach the same

book? What if one teacher feels *The Book Thief* addresses the theme while another likes *Brown Girl Dreaming*? The answer should always come down to this: How can we provide the biggest gains for our students while ensuring our students are mastering the same skills? If this means that teachers diverge on their text choices so that their students make the biggest gains, then we should embrace that divergence. After all, ELA teachers must understand that these thematic questions ask students to practice a crucial skill: argumentation. Conley (2005) emphasizes that nearly everything students read should be vehicles to sharpen their own arguments. Nearly any text serves this purpose. To squabble over which four books should be taught every year in 10th grade is a futile argument we English teachers must extinguish.

Fill in the gaps with supplemental texts

After determining the whole-class text, insert a variety of texts into the rest of the quarter. I plan for eight pieces of poetry, short stories, short essays, and other forms of media. The guiding question throughout the planning stage should be “How can I give a 360-degree view of this thematic issue from a variety of voices and styles?” It is important to avoid pushing an agenda (particularly a political one) when choosing these pieces. Do not “steer” students toward a particular answer. Provide them the gift of that self-discovery. A unit that truly addresses SEL allows for self-regulation and self-discovery—contributing ultimately to self-efficacy. We ignore all of this if we design the outcome for them.

Identify the skills to be assessed

These can be specific state standards, or they can be branches of the state standards. For example, in an AP Language & Composition class, analyzing for rhetorical appeals might be the primary skill focus. That skill addresses more than half of the state standards for reading informational texts. For my freshman English class, understanding the power of story and narration is a large focus in the first quarter. This, too, addresses a large chunk of the state standards for reading literature. The point here is to allow teachers’ skills as professional practitioners of teaching and learning to dictate the direction of the curriculum. If the judgments teachers make are good ones, the standards will all fit. This is where the collegial discussions that emerge through professional learning communities can help provide the necessary perspectives to foster this type of curriculum design.

Determine the reading assessments

The final step is to determine how to show proof of learning. I personally find this part difficult for reading assignments and find that many assessments are mired in comprehension checks. Because of that, my reading assessments tend to all be formative in nature—dialectical journals, creative writing responses, visuals. I wait for the writing projects and Socratic seminars to assess what students were able to accomplish with a text. The reason is grounded in paying attention to what I want most: students with the ability to self-regulate, communicate effectively, and find value in their work and life, all through the vehicle of reading and writing extensively over long periods of time. If a reading assessment does not lead to this type of experience, I certainly do not grade it as a summative assessment.

Step Four: Design a Year of Writing Experiences

It is not enough for ELA to offer rich and extensive reading opportunities. We must provide plenty of experiences that allow students to write every day. This should include writing essays that go through the entire writing process, perhaps even using the workshop model. An SEL-minded question to keep in mind when designing these: What will the students discover about themselves

through writing this? For example, after reading *Beowulf*, my colleague and I wanted students to understand the archetype of a hero, which included the hero's journey. But was a *Beowulf* literary analysis essay, which would take at least two weeks, the proper way to assess that? We determined it was not. After a variety of short creative writing assignments and class discussions, students had a keen understanding of a hero and hero's journey. To follow this up, students then wrote an essay that incorporated both expository and narrative techniques to define their own archetype. To determine this, they took the 16 Personalities quiz and studied their results. They read psychological profiles written by Jung. They then planned and wrote an essay that incorporated narration and explanation to reveal their own individual archetype. Instead of an essay that analyzed the character Beowulf, they wrote an essay that analyzed themselves. It was not "Who was he" but rather "Who am I?" It is a transformative difference. Did we also analyze Beowulf? Certainly. But not through a summative assessment that would require so much of their time and energy.

Teacher preferences, individual skills, and local norms will determine how much writing you will do. Each semester, my department plans for a minimum of two process essays. Prompts, which usually contain choices for students, fit with the thematic question. This means students will write a minimum of eight essays each year, although in recent years I have opted for a multi-voiced argumentative research project for fourth quarter instead of traditional essays. Writing in a variety of voices goes right to the heart of SEL curriculum design—it helps students to put themselves into someone else's shoes, promoting empathy and sympathy and a more informed and well-rounded argument.

This all may seem like too much writing or an impossible grading load for a teacher. That is understandable. Keep in mind that this type of curriculum design requires a shift in philosophy—the de-emphasis on skill-drill and standards, and the emphasis on a humanities-focused, thematic, literacy-based learning environment. The latter addresses the whole student. On a basic level, ELA teachers should agree on a minimum number of writing experiences and assessments for students so that we do not have more of what we have had throughout the last half century in our schools: few writing assessments and varying degrees of teacher expectations for writing (Conley, 2005; Schmoker, 2018).

Step Five: Design a Year of Speaking and Listening Experiences

Consider this question when mapping a year of speaking and listening (S&L): How can we provide students the opportunities to discover truth through speaking and listening? Many teachers arrange desks in cooperative learning groups of four, which allows for brief collaborative structures on a daily basis. In addition to cooperative learning structures every day, which could be a simple think-pair-share or gallery walk activity, I build in two Socratic seminars each quarter. The first is a formative assessment in which, at the end of our reading, the students discuss the themes and larger implications of our whole class text. The second is a summative assessment the last day of the quarter in which the students synthesize evidence from our readings and their own writings to help them debate the thematic question they have studied for eight weeks. It has proven over the years to be an effective and engaging way to conclude our study, and the students look forward to this discussion. Evidence of critical thinking is on full display this day. I hesitate to prescribe any particular strategies here, as teachers should choose those that have achieved the greatest gains for their students. Regardless of a teacher's method for assessing S&L, the point is this: Are students learning something about themselves and the world so that they might grow into stronger individuals? Teachers presumably would like the answer to be yes. It is a far more powerful discussion that promotes students' own reflection and metacognition than, say, a discussion on the plot structure or literary devices in *Lord of the Flies*. Plot structure and literary devices will come up

and possibly even be assessed formatively throughout the year. But if we are building an SEL-focused curriculum, plot and devices do not serve as foundations for that curriculum.

Step Six: Determine the Culminating Assessment

In a 16-week semester, what are teachers aiming toward? The answer to that should show itself through the final assessment—typically a common assessment in many schools. One such assessment, which I have utilized for years, is the writing portfolio. Students revise their essays from the entire quarter or semester and write a metacognitive letter to me that addresses similar components of Conley’s (2010) four domains of college and career readiness, only 25 percent of which is based on the specific standards-based skills they learned. The other domains address academic behaviors that include self-efficacy and self-regulation. Students complete the portfolio in class through a writer’s workshop model that allows me to teach essential skills and conference with them one-on-one, further fostering those deeper relationships our students need with us. Throughout this revision process, which typically takes four class periods, students experience varying levels of success, ultimately building confidence and the insight that they can, indeed experience achievement in ELA. There are other components to our final, such as a vocabulary test and a final Socratic seminar. Those, however, are weighted less than the writing portfolio, which more accurately measures their growth from beginning to end. It provides students the healthy opportunity to see that they can improve. I allow my students great flexibility in their revisions, although I provide them plenty of concrete strategies. I avoid telling them what to revise but foster an environment that invites them to implement changes they think are best. I coach them, not direct them. What is arguably a daunting task for them becomes an experience in perseverance and grit. Many students feel that if they can conquer the portfolio, they have achieved something great.

Step Seven: Plug in the State Standards

This might seem counterintuitive to do this close to the end, and undoubtedly there are bureaucrats offended by this approach. Even the early advocates of Common Core acknowledged that standards do not dictate curriculum and that “it is important to celebrate that [any] standards acknowledge that teachers need to draw upon the knowledge of our field in order to bring students to these ambitious levels” (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). Look how much we now know about our field since the latest iteration of standards emerged. Consider, too, what this SEL-minded curriculum has produced up to this point: extensive reading opportunities in nearly every genre; daily and prolonged writing experiences; and daily speaking and listening opportunities. All in one quarter. At the very least, nearly all state standards are addressed through formative assessment and a great number of them are addressed through summative assessment. The secret? A curriculum that is not lazy but is rich and filled with topical, relevant reading and writing experiences on a daily basis that treats the course as a humanities-based, literacy rich learning environment. So teachers should go through the curriculum and attach the standards where those standards organically show up. If any standards are not addressed, teams can then determine how to deal with that, such as through writing workshop, individual conferencing, or other methods.

Step Eight: Design Lessons

Ideally, this is where the “common” curriculum becomes individualized based on teacher creativity and strengths. Steps one through seven are collaborative and should be made available to the community and new teachers. If students are writing, reading, speaking, and listening as much as we outlined in steps one through seven, then we should trust our colleagues to create experiences for their own students in ways those teachers feel would garner the most gains from their students. Standardization kills this and usually is only implemented because a parent demands it or out of fear

that a parent might demand it. Yet, keeping SEL in mind, teachers connect with students in different ways. The lesson planning (and the texts teachers choose) largely determine the experiences students will have with that teacher and with their peers. We should trust ourselves and our colleagues enough to do what they think is most effective in their classrooms.

For the sake of providing a model, I essentially ask myself this each time I plan a lesson: “Are my students reading, writing, speaking, and listening in a meaningful way today?” I also ask “How does today help inform an answer to our thematic question.” This keeps me grounded in providing those meaningful SEL experiences for students. I typically build in journal writing, sharing in small groups, closely reading a text or studying a whole-class novel, participating in a cooperative learning activity that analyzes the text, and allowing for time to work on original, extensive writing. I also build in time for reflection and mindfulness at the end of each class.

Step Nine: Insert Your Class Policies

Often overlooked as part of curriculum implementation, class policies help to shape the classroom climate and sustained culture. My department, for example, most recently developed common ground on late work policies—a feat that could only have been accomplished at the end of our curriculum development process. What good is a late work policy if we do not even know how we weight certain types of assignments or what we value in our curriculum? Other items to consider: If our goal is to help students self-regulate, should class policies include never-ending due dates? If time management is an important college and career competency, according to the College and Career Competency Framework, should teachers give far-reaching extensions to students when they do not turn in work? These are all determinations teachers must make for themselves, or in teams. But we all should ask ourselves, “What do we want for our students, and how will my policies help them achieve that?” Shouldn’t we expect basic expectations (alert, head up, ready to learn, devices put away)? Am I their favorite teacher because I am funny and loose? Or am I their favorite teacher because I helped them become better learners and better equipped for their next steps? Recall that a strong SEL environment is not one that rescues kids and ensures they will always have an adult to rescue them but rather an environment that equips students with the tools to persevere and see success as an option even after failure. An engaging and viable curriculum is nearly wiped out when the class policies fail to protect the integrity of that curriculum.

How to Ruin This

A school or district determined to standardize everything will ruin this. Common assessments based on compromise rather than consensus will ruin this. Teaching texts because *we just have to* will ruin this. Ultimately, as Simon Sinek says, it comes down to understanding our “why.” Why would we structure an ELA curriculum in the way I have prescribed? I have argued that it provides a rich, rigorous, and engaging curriculum that addresses the entire student. I have further argued that it allows ELA to thrive in the way it was intended: as a humanities course, not an ELA skills course. The design and implementation of such a curriculum unavoidably addresses all state standards. The “why,” however, does not include mastery of those state standards. The “why” includes helping students understand the power of literacy to improve their lives and discover truth. And when that happens, proficiency in the standards works itself out.

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