

How to Help Them Through This: Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) For Music Teachers

by Becky O'Brien



It is understood, especially in the present Covid-19 educationally altered environment, that the social emotional wellbeing of students is critical to their overall health and ability to engage in learning. With the varied challenges presented to society, communities, families, and students, it is important to understand ways in which the current pedagogy is considered and shaped. (Edgar, 2021) It is crucial educators meet student needs in order to help them move beyond the present and to develop skill sets which will serve them well into the unknown of the future. How do we begin? I would like to suggest two concepts which I believe can help myself as well as other educators to better serve their students and better help students meet future challenges.

The first initiative is Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). Dr Sharroky Hollie, the founder of CRT, is a national educator who provides professional development to thousands of educators in the area of cultural responsiveness. His CRT follows a simple formula: VABB. Do you VABB at your school? 'V' stands for validate, 'A' stands for Affirm, and 'B' and 'B' are for build and bridge or some say, build a bridge. Validate means to recognize and care about students' cultures and experiences. Affirm means to appreciate students for who they are. Affirm their identities. Build means to integrate and amplify diverse contexts and approaches to the learning classroom. Finally, bridge is to provide learning activities to build academic and social skills students need to have success beyond the classroom. Their success is evident when they can navigate school and mainstream culture successfully (Monte, 2019; Niccolls, 2020; VABB, 2021). See below.

VABB

V = Validate

A = Affirm

B = Build

B = Bridge

(Monte, 2019, Niccolls, 2020, VABB, 2021)

The graphic features a blue background with a white box containing a bridge diagram. The bridge has a blue top rail and a red bottom rail. The word 'WE' is on the left side of the bridge, and 'HERE!' is on the right side. The acronym 'V.A.B.B.' is written across the bridge in large, colorful letters: V (red), A (orange), B (purple), and B (green). A blue arrow points from 'WE' to 'HERE!' above the bridge, and a red arrow points from 'HERE!' to 'WE' below the bridge.

The second is Social Emotional Learning (SEL). The history of the SEL movement is simple: What if education fully supported the social, emotional, and academic development of all children? The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was formed in 1994 (CASEL, 2021; Kupana 2015). The five SEL competencies defined by CASEL are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Music instruction aligned with SEL can, if implemented with fidelity and purpose, help promote the development of self and social awareness with equity. (Varner, 2021). SEL goes hand in hand with music learning. Music is a sensory stimulator. Music can be an aesthetic experience. Music can be used for relaxing and imaging and music making can be, and often is, a group experience (CASEL 2021; Kapana 2015). See the five competencies below.

CASEL - 5 Competencies

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social-Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making



(CASEL 2021)

Having an understanding of social emotional attributes is crucial in determining how students will adapt in schools, how they will form peer relationships, develop self-confidence, self management, and emotional competencies for successful participation in group learning. (Link 2018). How do we gain these understandings about our students? We build relationships. The teacher must spend their priority on relationship building with their students so students feel valued and included in every aspect of their classroom. This lays an interesting thought for the foundation for SEL. At times, the educator must prioritize teaching the skill or understanding that the student needs at the present time, rather than teaching the curricular content intended (Bates, 2012).

SEL can help develop the mindset that students are learners who strive and persevere through challenges. It provides habits of self-reflection and of mind in a safe and supportive learning environment. Activities such as improvisation, ensemble playing, group singing, and defining emotions within music listening examples, are easy connections and natural links between general music learning and SEL (Varner, 2020).

SEL is the culmination of connection, repertoire, experience and reflection in a musical experience that allows students to explore, create, contribute, choose and encounter music with other students. How can we best have students reflect on choices and experiences? Edgar suggests reflective planning is the essence of SEL pedagogy. Once students are motivated and inspired with SEL, 'voice and choice' is suggested to help students connect and reflect on their experiences, thus making learning personal and equitable for every student. (Edgar, 2021).

Biography

Becky O'Brien received a bachelor's degree in General Music Education, Choral Education and Music with a Piano Performance Emphasis from UW-LaCrosse in 1993. She is currently pursuing her master's degree in Music Education from UW-Stevens Point. Upon graduation from UW-LaCrosse, she taught Elementary General Music, Choir and Band in the Arcadia School District and then K-5 General and HS choral music in the LaCrosse Public School District from 1994-2002. After moving to northeastern Wisconsin, Becky taught Elementary General Music in the Kaukauna Public School District, Middle School Band at St. John Sacred Heart, and Early Childhood Music at the Lawrence Community Music School from 2003-2011. From 2011-2013 Becky taught Choral and General Music at Clintonville Middle School. And then returned in 2011-2018 to teach HS Choir at Kaukauna High School. This is Becky's fourth year teaching Elementary General Music in the Appleton Area School District.