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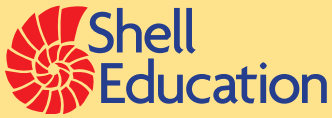
Effective Strategies for Integrating

Social-Emotional Learning

in Your

Classroom

SELF-MANAGEMENT

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

SELF-AWARENESS

SOCIAL AWARENESS

RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING
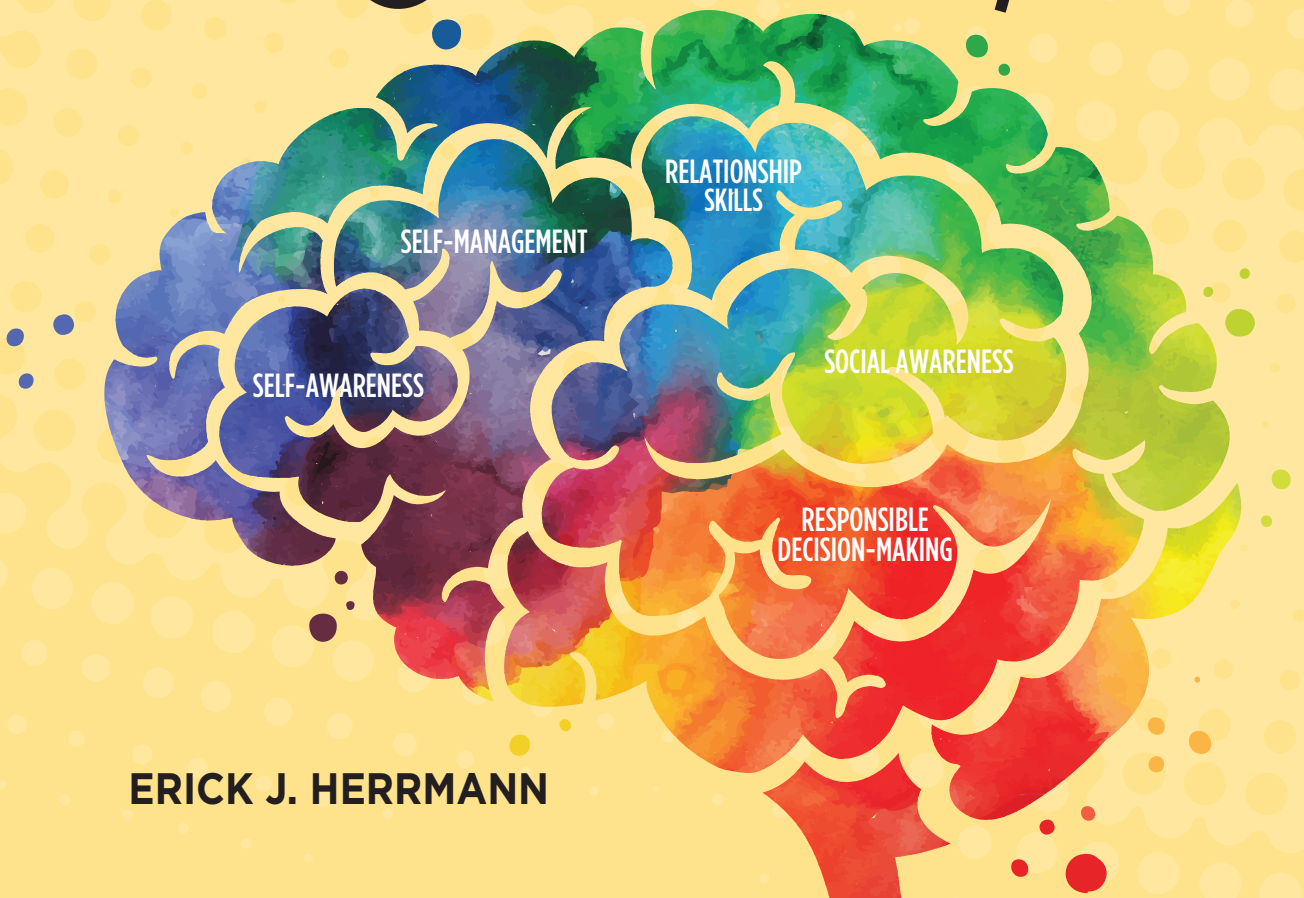
ERICK J. HERRMANN

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Preface

When I was growing up, my family did not discuss feelings in great depth. Don't get me wrong; I come from a loving family where we care deeply about one another. We just did not, and for the most part still do not, have a family culture where we discuss our feelings in great depth. My wife Natalie's family, on the other hand, discusses just about everything openly. Very few, if any, topics are off limits, and it is quite normal to have family discussions around feelings and emotions. Natalie and I met in college. In workshops, I often (sort of) joke that Natalie taught me it's OK to have feelings. The reality is that she taught me to express how I am feeling and to check in with her and other people I care about to be healthier mentally.

Professionally, my journey into learning about and focusing on social-emotional learning began early in my career as a student teacher. My first assignment was at a middle school, and my mentor teacher was also the school counselor. One morning as we were discussing the lesson ahead, she mentioned that I should be especially gentle with two particular students, a brother and a sister, as the night before, they were kicked out of the house by their parent who had come home drunk. While I was not so naïve to think that this type of thing never happened, it was upsetting that it had happened to students who I worked with on a daily basis.

As my career progressed, teaching at the high school and then the elementary level, I had many, many more experiences that brought to light not only the sometimes challenging situations students live in but also some students' lack of social-emotional skills. Some had difficulty self-managing or developing relationships with peers. Others had developed a variety of skills throughout their lives, including resilience, flexibility, kindness, and empathy.

My wife has worked in the field of mental health throughout her career, including working with foster youth and as a counselor in schools and a therapist in private practice. When our son was six, we decided that we were ready to foster children ourselves. Over the course of several years, my wife and I fostered more than 70 children, usually for short-term respite care. We had several children and young people who returned to stay with us multiple times and a few who stayed for several weeks or months at a time. Because the agency we worked with focused on therapeutic foster care, we fostered youth who had experienced extreme trauma or abuse, had been incarcerated and were transitioning back into the community, or otherwise had behavioral or mental health issues that were fairly extreme.

The children we worked with in foster care were often also in local schools. This experience, and my wife's professional knowledge and expertise in working with youth in crisis, deepened my knowledge about the skills students both have and need to develop to be successful in school and in their lives. Our experience as foster parents and my continued experience in schools helped me better understand how having an asset-based perspective benefits me as well as the children and youth I work with. I learned not to focus on the trauma, abuse, or negative experiences these youth endured. Rather, while acknowledging and taking into account those experiences, I learned to focus on the strengths of the people I work with and help them build the knowledge and skills they need to address their mental health and well-being. Natalie enlightened me to the perspective that healing-focused schools, as opposed to "trauma-informed" schools, switch the paradigm and perspective from one of deficit thinking (trauma informed) to asset thinking (healing focused). Similarly, focusing on people's strengths validates their knowledge and experiences while also acknowledging that it is a normal part of being a human to need support sometimes.

Over time, I began to integrate social-emotional skills into my instruction, including focusing on connecting with each student with whom I worked. I began to incorporate ways to learn more about my students, to have them learn more about me, and to integrate strategies for teaching students self-awareness and self-management. I looked for opportunities for students to collaborate more deeply and to build relationships with others, including those whom they were not necessarily friends with outside of school.

Through my experience working in schools and with teachers, it became increasingly clear that both students and teachers could benefit from learning more about social-emotional learning (SEL) and integrating it more deeply into

instruction. I began to dig into the research on SEL and started thinking about additional strategies that educators could integrate easily and consistently into instruction. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, the need to integrate social-emotional learning grew exponentially, which is what led me to write this book. As I continue to focus on my own social-emotional development and consider how I integrate and demonstrate social-emotional skills on a daily basis, my goal is to share useful, easy-to-use strategies that will benefit us all and give every person the opportunity to learn skills for being a happy and healthy individual.

The goal of this book is to help you and your students become people who are self-aware, are aware of others and their feelings and emotions, are able to self-regulate and manage emotions in good times and bad, can build and maintain positive relationships with others, and make the best possible decisions.

The focus of **Chapter 1** is building **self-awareness**. In this chapter, we will explore the concept of identity and how it relates to social-emotional learning, as well as learn a variety of strategies for integrating self-awareness into instruction.

The focus of **Chapter 2** is **self-management**. In this chapter, we will look at how to provide opportunities for students to manage their emotions and feelings and self-regulate.

Chapter 3 focuses on **social awareness**. We will learn strategies for building perspective-taking, empathy, and collaboration.

In **Chapter 4**, we will explore how to build **relationship skills** with students, strengthen our relationship with each student, and build and foster relationships among students.

The focus of **Chapter 5** is **responsible decision-making**, in which we will review the decision-making process and discover strategies for explicitly teaching these critical skills to students.

Chapter 6 provides suggestions and strategies for **integrating social-emotional learning** into your regular instruction to promote authentic development of students' SEL skills.

Introduction

What is the goal of education today? Often, people say that the purpose of our education system is to create productive members of society—that students grow into adults who contribute positively to our society in a variety of ways, support themselves financially, pursue interests that make them happy, and follow their civic duties. After all, the United States was founded on the principle of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet for students to become productive members of society, they need to have a set of social and emotional skills to help them navigate challenges in a safe and productive way. Inherent in this is that students learn to work with others, to persevere through challenges, to care and have empathy for others, to be respectful yet assertive when needed, and more. Thus, we must include social-emotional learning in instruction.

Why Social-Emotional Learning?

People face many challenges: mental health issues, including fear, stress, anxiety, and depression; negative childhood experiences and trauma, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; the death of loved ones; neglect; and domestic violence. Around the country, communities are seeing higher levels of poverty, family discord and dysfunction, drug/opioid addiction, parents working long hours to make ends meet, insufficient food and poor nutrition, poor school attendance, and high mobility rates. These issues often affect students, and that effect carries over into the school day because students cannot simply leave those issues behind them when they walk through the school doors. Students need skills to learn how to deal with these challenges and overcome the negative effect they can bring.

The National Mental Health Association has found that children and adolescents are facing mental health issues in increasing numbers. Issues of mental health affect approximately one in five youths, and of those children, approximately two thirds are not getting the help they need (Perou et al. 2013). This includes students who may be affected by depression: as many as 1 in 33 children and as many as 1 in 8 adolescents. Children who experience depression are more likely to commit suicide. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.) and the National Institute of Mental Health (n.d.), in 2018, suicide was the second leading cause of death for people ages 10 through 34. Children affected by depression are also more likely to experience depression as adults, are more likely to experience anxiety, and may also experience aches and pains, stomachaches, and headaches.

These data support the idea that people need more mental health support and lead us to wonder what we can do to help young people thrive and build social-emotional skills to make good decisions, deal with adversity, and get additional mental health support when needed.

School + SEL = Success

Many teachers feel that the reason to incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL) into instruction is obvious; they may have seen a rise in bullying, student anxiety, and depression or a general lack of social skills in their students over the past several years or decades. They may point to a lack of respectful discourse in our society regarding important issues. The need for social-emotional learning is evident in many aspects of society.

However, some people feel that parents should be the ones teaching SEL at home. While this argument is valid in that a parent is a child's first teacher, parents and families are already under a lot of pressure today. Many parents are working hard just to make ends meet and are unable to focus deeply on these skills when they are with their children. Some parents lack these skills, as they have never had the opportunity to learn or foster

> Given the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation and anxiety about health and safety have had a massive effect on students, especially as they may have been unable to visit with friends and family; have faced a major shift in behavior, including wearing masks in public and maintaining social distancing; and have grappled with uncertainty over school openings. These changes have increased stress, fear, and anxiety in students and teachers alike.

them throughout their lives. Other parents may not have the research base and teaching skills needed to make these skills explicit to their children.

So what does the research have to say about it? The impact of social-emotional learning has been studied fairly extensively over the years. In general, integrating SEL into instruction has been shown to increase academic achievement by an average of 11 percent. These results are consistent across all grade levels, rural and urban schools, and all school types, including schools with ethnically and racially diverse student populations (Durlak et al. 2011; Taylor et al. 2017). Here are some additional, compelling findings:

A 2011 meta-analysis of 213 studies involving 270,000 students showed that the integration of SEL increased social-emotional skills among students, improved social attitudes and behaviors, increased positive classroom behavior, and decreased emotional distress and conduct problems. This led to an 11 percent gain in academic achievement on standardized tests (Durlak et al. 2011).

A 2017 study involving over 97,000 students in kindergarten through middle school showed increases in academic performance, positive attitudes and behavior, and social-emotional skills and decreases in behavior issues, emotional distress, and drug use. The effects were studied from 6 months to 18 years after SEL programs were instituted. The benefits were the same across socioeconomic and racial groups and geographical boundaries (Taylor et al. 2017).

A 2015 study that controlled for demographics such as socioeconomic status and race and ethnicity found that students with strong SEL skills in kindergarten were more likely to graduate from high school and earn a college degree, and were more likely to have stable employment in young adulthood. In addition, they were less likely to live in public housing, receive public assistance, or be involved with police or be in a detention facility (Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley 2015).

Teachers who possess social-emotional skills are more likely to stay in the classroom and in the field of education, as they are better able to develop and maintain relationships with their students, possess better classroom-management skills, serve as behavioral role models for their students, and can better regulate their emotions (Jennings and Greenberg 2009).

Data released in Illinois showed that approximately 75 percent of students entering kindergarten do not have the necessary skills to be successful, including social-emotional skills, literacy skills, and mathematics skills (Burke 2018). The data show that social-emotional skills were the strongest of the three areas surveyed, with approximately 50 percent of students showing readiness in social-emotional skills based on the Kindergarten Individual Development Survey, developed by WestEd (Burke 2018). While these data are specific to Illinois, and 50 percent is promising, if we consider this as potentially representative of students across the country, it also means that approximately half of your classroom will *not* have the SEL skills needed to be successful.

So when you consider what the research shows about the positive impact of social-emotional learning, it is no wonder that School + SEL = Success!

Defining Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning, or SEL, can be defined as a process in which people learn to identify, understand, monitor and regulate emotions, develop a positive and healthy identity, develop and maintain strong and healthy relationships, and make good decisions that benefit themselves and the greater good. Teaching social-emotional learning, then, entails helping students attain the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that people need to make successful choices. When students have developed social-emotional skills, they are better able to manage their emotions, seek help when needed, develop positive relationships, and problem-solve in difficult situations.

The Five Core Competencies

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has been the leading organization for the advancement of SEL education for more than 25 years. It has identified five core competencies related to SEL that are widely recognized and used in the field of social-emotional learning (CASEL 2021):

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to recognize your own feelings, interests, and strengths. When people are self-aware, they know who they are and can recognize, define, and describe their personal and social identities and cultural and linguistic assets, and they can identify and define their emotions accurately. They can identify what triggers their emotions and analyze how their emotions affect others.

Self-Management

Self-management is the ability to manage and control emotions. People with self-management can control and regulate their emotions during both very exciting and difficult situations and handle and respond well to daily stresses. Self-management helps us set plans and work toward goals, overcome obstacles, and monitor progress toward personal and academic goals. Self-management also includes regulating emotions, such as impulses and aggression, and managing personal and interpersonal stress, as well as the ability to control attention. Students who display self-management also show resilience, perseverance, and determination, and they seek help when needed.

Social Awareness

Social awareness is the ability to recognize the perspectives, feelings, and emotions of others. People with social awareness observe, notice, and respond to the emotions and perspectives of others, including people with different cultural backgrounds and contexts. They empathize with others. Social awareness includes considering other people's perspectives and strengths and identifying cues to

determine how others feel, predict and evaluate others' emotions and reactions, and respect and empathize with others.

Relationship Skills

Strong relationship skills involve the ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships and resist negative social pressures, resolve interpersonal conflict, and seek help when needed. People with strong relationship skills demonstrate the capacity to work with others in diverse settings, make friends, and engage in collaboration. Respecting diverse viewpoints, communicating effectively, demonstrating cultural responsiveness, providing help to others, and demonstrating leadership are also indicators of effective relationship management.

Responsible Decision-Making

Having responsible decision-making skills means exhibiting ethics and respect when making decisions and keeping physical and mental health and safety in mind. Responsible decision-making involves using critical thinking to identify problems and develop appropriate solutions to those problems. Resisting peer pressure, reflecting on how choices affect others and society, making responsible decisions, and reflecting on and evaluating decision-making processes are all indicators of effective and responsible decision-making skills.

Embedded SEL Skills

Embedded within these competencies are other important skills, and students need a variety of them to be successful in their educational, professional, and personal lives. These include skills such as empathy, compassion, kindness, resilience, perseverance, gratitude, and many others. These key social-emotional concepts will be embedded into our discussions of the five core SEL competencies. It would be remiss, however, to not define these topics and explicitly state their importance to social-emotional learning.

Empathy

Empathy encompasses multiple skills and competencies and is a critical skill in the twenty-first century. Empathy, from the prefix *em–*, meaning "in," and the root *pathos*, meaning "feeling," is the ability to understand and relate to another person's thoughts, emotions, or conditions from that person's perspective. Empathy

differs from sympathy. From the prefix *syn–*, meaning "together," *sympathy* relates more to feelings of pity or sorrow for someone else's trouble or grief.

While the definition of empathy seems simple, demonstrating it encompasses several skills. These skills are also embedded in the five core competencies of social-emotional learning. For one, to be empathetic, one needs to be self-aware. Self-awareness encompasses the ability to distinguish your own feelings from the feelings of others. Additionally, social awareness is needed to take others' perspectives into account, including identifying cues to determine how others feel. Empathy is also at the heart of relationship management, as showing empathy helps develop strong relationships. Finally, to demonstrate empathy in a healthy way, we must also demonstrate self-management by regulating our own emotional responses.

Kindness

Kindness is consistently ranked as a key skill for children and adults. Kindness can be defined as having the qualities of and demonstrating friendliness, consideration, and concern for others. People who demonstrate kindness generally do not expect anything in return, such as praise or rewards. Words associated with kindness include *warmth*, *affection*, *gentleness*, *encouragement*, and *caring*.

Research shows that parents and teachers overwhelmingly believe that kindness is an important skill, perhaps even more important than good grades, for students' future success. In a Sesame Workshop survey, 78 percent of teachers and 73 percent of parents surveyed stated that it is more important for their children to be kind than it is for them to be academically successful. Yet 86 percent of teachers and 70 percent of parents surveyed worry that the world is an unkind place for children (Sesame Workshop 2016).

Research suggests that teaching and practicing kindness has many benefits, including reducing bullying in schools. Other benefits include increased meaningful relationships and connections among peers and increased feelings of joy and happiness among students (Layous et al. 2012). Research also shows improved mental health, as being kind increases the release of oxytocin and endorphins in the brain, which can reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and build feelings of optimism and self-worth. The increase of oxytocin, endorphins, and serotonin levels is also related to increased memory and learning, as well as healthy mood, sleep, and digestion (Hamilton 2011).

Resilience

Resilience can be defined as the ability and capacity to cope with, adapt to, and recover from hardship, stressors, crises, or trauma. Resilience in children and adolescents starts with healthy relationships with important adults in their lives. As students build positive experiences over time, their resilience grows. Similarly, when students are allowed and able to cope with more manageable stressors and threats, they build skills and experiences in seeing other stressors as manageable, both physically and mentally. The positive relationships they have with others facilitate learning to cope with the stressors they will encounter in their lives.

Gratitude

The term *gratitude* stems from the Latin word *gratus*, meaning "pleasing or thankful." Many of us think of gratitude as thankfulness or appreciation for someone or something in our lives. This gratitude may be for someone showing us kindness or generosity, for a feeling of stability or good health, for the people who love us and care for and about us, or simply for the beauty we see around us every day. Research indicates that gratitude has a direct and positive correlation to life satisfaction and builds a sense of connection to others (Allen 2018). In addition, noticing, feeling, and expressing gratitude increases satisfaction in many areas of our lives, including school, work, family, community, friends, and ourselves. It also decreases depression and feelings of unhappiness.

Competency Connections

Many years ago, Dr. Hollis Scarborough developed the reading rope infographic, demonstrating how learning to read is composed of several "strands" that are interconnected and interdependent (International Dyslexia Association 2018). As I think about that image, it strikes me that social-emotional learning is similar; the five competencies discussed in this book are intertwined, interconnected, and interdependent. However, rather than a rope that is braided together, the competencies are more like a DNA helix. We cannot completely separate the competencies and isolate them; they rely on one another. The competencies are also interwoven into our being. They make up the social fabric of who we are and how we engage with one another. While it is important to look at individual competencies, we should also look at the whole. The five competencies, as well as related skills and attitudes, such as compassion, empathy, kindness, gratitude, and resilience, all work together to foster well-being.

Self-Awareness

Think back to a time when you went to the doctor for a checkup. The doctor likely began with a question such as "How are you?" or "How are things going?" Your response played a critical role in the doctor's reply. As you shared specific areas of concern, the doctor could consider if any treatments were needed or if any follow-up questions were required to pinpoint the exact issue. However, if you were unaware of any specific health issues you were experiencing, it would have been difficult for the doctor to provide the care or treatment you needed. Your self-awareness allowed you to describe what you were feeling and helped the doctor resolve your health concerns.

Similarly, as school professionals, we sometimes need to determine what is happening with a student and understand their feelings and emotional state. A student's emotional state affects their learning and their willingness and ability to engage in educational activities. When students are unaware of their emotional states and are unable to communicate how they feel, it is more difficult to provide engaging and exciting instruction or to be responsive to students' needs.

Defining Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to recognize one's own feelings and emotions, interests, strengths, values, beliefs, and personal and social identities. People are

self-aware when they can identify and recognize specific emotions, express what triggers those emotions, and analyze and understand how their emotions affect others. When people are self-aware, they recognize their strengths in terms of their personalities, characters, and personal and social identities and use those strengths to navigate the world.

Being self-aware has many benefits. As we learn to recognize who we are and how we feel at any given time—in both our physical and emotional states—we are better able to navigate the complexities of life. For example, when we are able to recognize that we feel frustrated, we can take actions to de-escalate those feelings so that we don't make a situation worse. Additionally, if we recognize what actions make us happy and content, we can look for opportunities to engage in those actions more often. Self-awareness is the precursor to what many students must be explicitly taught: self-management. We will delve more deeply into self-management in the next chapter, but we begin here to see the interwoven nature of SEL.

Self-awareness may be easy for students from environments where discussing feelings is common. Some people discuss their feelings on a regular basis, checking in with others about how they feel in any given moment. Through simple check-ins such as "How are you feeling?" people share their emotional state, which helps the person being asked to be more self-aware and creates awareness for the person asking the question. Other people rarely consider their own feelings in a deep or meaningful way, living their lives by reacting to the feelings that arise but not thinking about how they feel or why. This can create a level of chaos in people's lives, as they do not realize what their emotional states are in any given moment.

Identity: A Key Aspect of Self-Awareness

Being self-aware includes knowing the various aspects of our identity. Identity can be defined as who we are as individuals; it includes such things as ethnicity, gender, race, national origin, sexual orientation, age group, ability or disability, religion, and socioeconomic status. These aspects of identity influence our values and norms to some degree and may affect our behavior. The topic of identity, then, is critical as we consider the five competencies. We will begin by considering both our own identities and how we can validate students' identities and support them in being themselves completely and authentically.

It may be more appropriate to discuss our *identities* as opposed to our *identity*, as no one is singular in identity. Sometimes, our different identities may appear to

be in conflict. A person might be devoutly religious while also LGBTQIA+. Or a person might identify as Jewish but celebrate both Hanukkah and Christmas with family and friends. Other identities, such as national origin, may be complicated, as in a case where someone was born in one country but lives in another country.

Consider each of the following aspects of identity from your own perspective and from students' perspectives. Note that not all aspects of identity are listed; however, these are some of the more commonly discussed identities.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to cultural background or traditions that are shared among a group. Aspects of ethnicity include language, food, dress, stories, art, and music. Ethnicity also affects behaviors and ideas such as how to demonstrate respect, gender expectations, concept of time, and ideals such as fairness and justice. It is important to note that ethnicity and race are not the same and that race should not be used to refer to ethnicity.

Gender

Historically, gender identity has referred to traditional roles and behaviors of females and males in a society. However, many gender identities are recognized today, including but not limited to male, female, transgender, nonbinary, pangender, agender, and cisgender. People may identify with any of these gender identities, regardless of the gender they were assigned at birth.

Race

Race often is an important part of our identity. Yet race is an arbitrary label that has no scientific basis. The idea of race has been imposed based on observable physical traits and can be defined as a socially constructed story of human geography and denotable phenotypes.

Nationality

Our national identity is usually based on where we were born or where we live. As mentioned previously, people can also identify with more than one country, especially if they were born in one country and live in another, or if they were born in one country but their family or ancestors are from another country.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation is an important aspect of our identities. People may identify as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or asexual.

Age

Age also influences our identity. One may identify as a child, a teenager, a 20-something, middle-aged, an older adult, and so on. The way people dress and communicate, what they talk about, and the activities they enjoy often relate to their age or life stage.

Ability/Disability

A person's abilities and disabilities affect identity. The idea of "disability identity" refers to people with a disability having a positive outlook toward themselves and a positive connection to the disability community. A disability identity can help people develop a positive self-concept, help affirm their disabilities, and build self-worth and pride.

Religion

Religion or spirituality often plays a very strong role in a person's identity. People's religious beliefs may influence a variety of aspects of their lives, including their daily choices and how they communicate with and treat others.

Socioeconomic Status

Our identities can also be tied to our socioeconomic status, which has to do with our societal class and may be tied to our careers or earning power. Socioeconomic status can also influence our values and behavior (Manstead 2018). For example, it may affect attitudes about how success is achieved.

Building a Sense of Self

When we are self-aware and value our own identities, we are more likely to be open to and validate the identities of others. We must first begin by considering our own identities and deepening our own self-awareness as adults who work with children and young adults. When we do this, we also develop empathy for others, as we are better able to walk in their shoes. This may be the first time you have

deeply considered all the aspects of your identity, or you may be very self-aware in terms of your identity.

As teachers, building self-awareness around students' identities is crucial. When we do, we demonstrate to students that they are important and valued for who they are. We also help develop empathy in students—a critical skill in our diverse world. Young people are often still formulating and developing their identities, and we can support them in developing a positive sense of self through self-awareness.

Teaching self-awareness relies heavily on reflection, language, dialogue, and vocabulary instruction. For students to develop deep self-awareness of their identities, emotions, and feelings, they need to learn to productively express themselves—either visually or through words and phrases that provide precision and nuance—describing who they are and how they feel. Therefore, language is a critical aspect of the work that has to be done. Just as young students name their emotions using words such as *happy*, *sad*, or *mad*, they describe their identities in relatively simplistic ways as well, using words such as *boy*, *girl*, *kid*, and so on. In upper elementary school, students begin to use more sophisticated language to describe their feelings, using words such as *frustrated*, *upset*, and *excited*. They begin to explore their identities and describe them more accurately. As students reach the secondary level, they consider how emotions and feelings affect their actions and learn vocabulary to help them identify and more deeply understand what is happening, which will ultimately lead them to deeper levels of self-management and self-regulation.

Who Am I?

The Who Am I activity has students share information about themselves, including descriptions of their families, foods and activities they like/dislike, music or books they enjoy, and significant events in their lives. This get-to-know-you activity is an important aspect of building a community of learners that is founded on respect, diversity, and self-awareness.

These sample questions provide a surface-level understanding of students—who they are and the roles they play as individuals within their various communities. To deepen self-awareness, we can have students consider additional aspects of themselves, such as their personalities and character traits and the various aspects of their identities discussed previously.

Sample Questions, Statements, and Topics for a *Who Am I?* Project

- My name is _____.
- My name means _____.
- I want to be called _____.
- I use the pronouns _____.
- My family members include _____.
- Some of my friends are _____.
- I live in _____.
- I have also lived in _____.
- My birthday is _____.

- My favorite food is _____.
- My favorite color is _____.
- My favorite movie/TV show is _____.
- My favorite book is _____.
- My favorite song is _____.
- My favorite sport/game is _____.
- My favorite quote is _____.
- My favorite animal is _____.
- For fun, I like to _____.

Have students use graphic organizers or create posters to share the information about themselves. Other creative formats that link to content areas such as music, art, and graphic design are shown below. For an added challenge, have students choose from the list, or have them suggest their own creative ideas for expressing who they are. Most of the ideas can be adapted for any grade level.

Sample *Who Am I?* Project Ideas

| Grades K–2	Grades 3–5	Grades 6–12
time capsule	riddle	time line
comic strip	video	biography
scrapbook	song	sitcom script
collage	presentation	newspaper article
rhyming book	brochure	short story
illustrated book	commercial	play script
sculpture	letter	flowchart

"I Am" Poems

Creating "I Am" poems allows students to focus both on social-emotional skills and language arts skills. For example, students can be taught about figurative language and embed it into their poems. Personification, alliteration, imagery, mood, simile, and metaphor are all examples of language tools that students can

incorporate into their "I Am" poems. For an added interesting element, consider having bilingual students write their poems in their home languages. Many poetry styles lend themselves well to "I Am" poems, including acrostic, alphabet poem, quatrain or cinquain, diamante, concrete, haiku, limerick, or a poem for two voices.

My Heart Map

In this activity, students fill in a heart shape with words, colors, and/or pictures that celebrate their identities. Using the aspects of identity shared previously, students can divide the heart into larger and smaller sections and fill in those sections based on how strongly they feel a connection to each aspect of their identities.
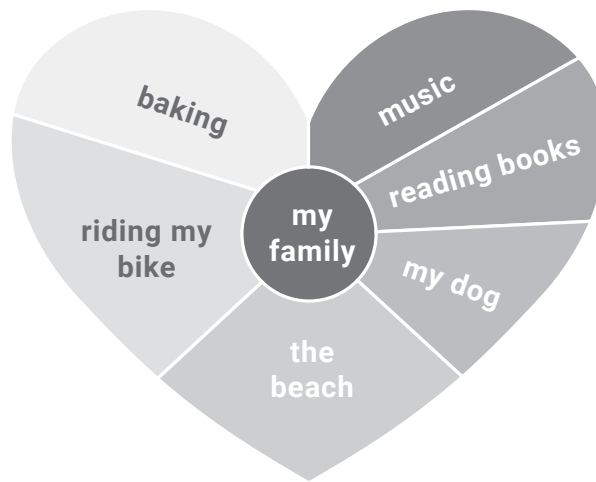
The Identity Pyramid

In this activity, students describe aspects of their identities and show how those aspects manifest more dominantly or more subtly. Begin by teaching students about the various aspects of identity described previously. Which specific aspects you choose may depend on the grade level you teach. Students rank the aspects of their identities and stack them in a pyramid based on their importance in their lives. More than one aspect of a person's identity can be placed on each level of the pyramid.

Other shapes and design elements can be used as well. For example, students can make bubbles, circles, or diamonds and use colors and words to show the various aspects of their identities.

Identifying Personality Traits and Character Strengths

Researchers have found that five major personality traits influence the way people feel, behave, and think. These five traits are openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Figure 1.1 shows each of these traits, as well as their indicators. The indicators are represented on a scale that demonstrates the range of feelings, behaviors, and thoughts associated with the personality trait.

Figure 1.1. The Five Major Personality Traits and Their Indicators

Openness

$\longleftrightarrow$

adventure, curiosity, imagination, novelty, creativity

conventional thinking, following regular routines, pronounced sense of right and wrong

Conscientiousness

$\longleftrightarrow$

organization, motivation, discipline, a sense of duty, planning, trustworthiness

being easily distracted, spontaneity, freewheeling

Extroversion

$\longleftrightarrow$

cheerfulness, communicativeness, sociability

introversion, being reserved

Agreeableness

$\longleftrightarrow$

friendliness, empathy, warmth, trustworthiness, compassion, helpfulness

suspicion, uncooperativeness, egocentrism

Neuroticism

$\longleftrightarrow$

anxiety, worry, inhibition, obsession, moodiness

calm, confidence, emotional stability, being even-keel, contentment

Character traits fit within these personality traits and provide us with insights into people's behaviors. Figure 1.2 shows a variety of character traits that represent students' potential strengths. Depending on students' grade level, less desirable or more negative traits can be included. For example, students might consider how they can improve on traits such as being absent-minded, stingy, suspicious, or quick-tempered.

Figure 1.2. Positive Character Traits

accessible	dynamic	organized
adaptable	efficient	passionate
affable	energetic	perceptive
affectionate	enthusiastic	persuasive
amusing	focused	polite
articulate	gracious	quiet
clever	honest	rational
confident	humorous	reliable
courageous	idealistic	resourceful
creative	independent	responsible
daring	innovative	sensible
decisive	intuitive	sensitive
dependable	inventive	sincere
determined	meticulous	spontaneous
diligent	optimistic	tolerant

All people have specific strengths that they bring with them to every situation. When people know their character strengths, they can apply them to help them improve relationships, solve problems, and enhance their well-being. This is true for students and teachers alike. With students, we can help them deepen their own self-awareness by having them consider their personality traits and character strengths. When we understand students' strengths, we can use this information to improve engagement in learning; help them navigate the complexities of their lives in the classroom, on the playground, and in their communities; and more deeply understand their own actions and motivations. As teachers, when we know our character strengths, we can analyze those strengths and use them to improve instruction, as well as our relationships with students.

Teaching about character traits involves defining the words and helping students understand the sometimes subtle differences between them. Student-friendly definitions, pictures and sketches, or synonyms and antonyms are useful tools. Analyzing characters in books and novels or people from history, for example, can point out how a person's repeated actions reveal a particular character trait.

Character Trait Bingo

Begin with sets of character trait cards. Each card should list a character trait, a student-friendly definition, and an image that represents the character trait. Each student playing needs a set of cards. Students sort the trait cards into four categories: a lot like me, somewhat like me, not much like me, and not at all like me. Alternatively, students can color a list of character traits using the stoplight highlight or coloring technique, where they color each trait with a color: green—a lot like me, yellow—somewhat like me, orange—not much like me, and red—not at all like me (or any color variation of your choosing).

Once students have the traits sorted, they take the "a lot like me" and "somewhat like me" categories and fill in a blank bingo grid with the specific character traits. Students should randomly place the traits in the bingo grid. If they don't have enough traits from the two categories listed, they can add traits from the other categories.

Then play bingo. The caller—either the teacher or another student—says the name of the trait and the definition, or for an added challenge, reads only the definition. When students mark horizontal, vertical, or diagonal lines, they call out "Bingo!" and win the game. Blackout bingo, in which all the spaces must be marked to win, is a fun alternative.

Demonstrating Character

During this activity, students consider how character traits are demonstrated by people's actions and words.

To begin, have students choose a character trait that they feel comes easily to them. Over the course of a day or a week (or a month for older students), have students record the actions they take and the words they say that they feel show that character trait.

Students then choose a character trait that they would like to exemplify or demonstrate more often. Have students brainstorm actions that would show that specific character trait. Each day or week, students choose from the list of actions and work to demonstrate the trait.

As an alternative, students can record their actions over the course of a day or week (or a month for older students) and analyze them to infer the character traits they demonstrated.

See the Digital Resources for graphic organizers students can use to determine the relationship between character traits and actions.

Demonstrating Character Graphic Organizers
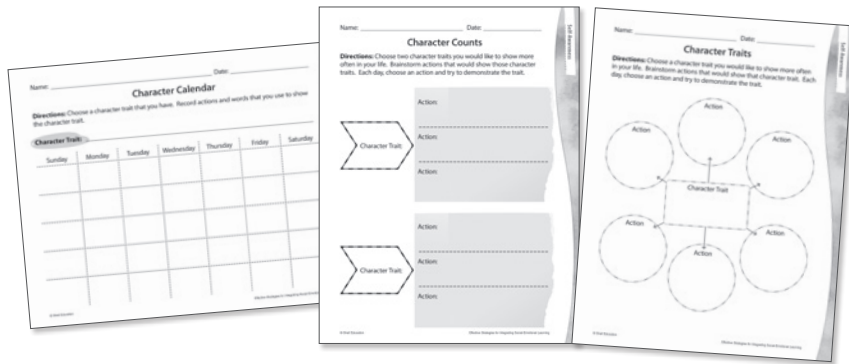
Identifying and Naming Feelings

A key step in building self-awareness is being able to identify and name how we feel. Naming feelings and understanding the gradations that the names of feelings represent will help students understand their own feelings. Consider the following adjectives and the feelings they represent:

- ▸ happy, content, gleeful, ecstatic, joyful, amused
- ▸ angry, enraged, upset, frustrated, aggressive, irritated, resentful
- ▸ sad, lonely, vulnerable, depressed, isolated, remorseful
- ▸ scared, anxious, insecure, humiliated, frightened, terrified
- ▸ surprised, excited, startled, perplexed, astonished

Name: _____ Date: _____

Character Calendar

Directions: Choose a character trait that you have. Record actions and words that you use to show the character trait.

Character Trait: _____

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday

Name: _____ Date: _____

Character Counts

Directions: Choose two character traits you would like to show more often in your life. Brainstorm actions that would show those character traits. Each day, choose an action and try to demonstrate the trait.

Action:

Action:

Character Trait:

Action:

Action:

Action:

Character Trait:

Action:

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Name: _____ Date: _____

Character Traits

Directions: Choose a character trait you would like to show more often in your life. Brainstorm actions that would show that character trait. Each day, choose an action and try to demonstrate the trait.

Action

Action

Action

Character Trait

Action

Action

Action

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