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## Why We Can't Have Social and Emotional Learning Without Equity

By Learning Is Social & Emotional Contributor on July 6, 2018 9:10 AM | [No comments](#)

*By Robert Jagers*

As the head of research for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), I was encouraged to see a [recent brief](#) from the Aspen Institute Education and Society Program that articulates the ways in which social, emotional, and academic development can (and must) address racial inequities in education.

Racial/ethnic, class, and gender inequities are vexing problems that hamper individual student learning as well as our collective efforts to achieve the democratic ideals of U.S. society.

While CASEL has a long-standing commitment to issues of equity, we recognize that there is significant work to be done if social and emotional learning is going to realize its potential to promote the optimal development of all students, including diverse groups of students.

Like other big and amorphous terms that become popular--such as social and emotional learning--"equity" can take on multiple meanings. I look at it mainly as a fundamental concern with fairness and justice. What is right and appropriate in any context for any

particular group of people? How are valued goods and resources distributed and utilized? In the context of education, how are high-quality educational experiences provided to all students as they need it and when they need it, regardless of demographics, location, or circumstance?



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Robert Jagers  
Vice President of Research, CASEL

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Social and emotional learning and equity both address how to provide high-quality instruction for all students, regardless of background. Through the CASEL Equity Work Group--which brings together equity and social and emotional learning experts within our 25-state Collaborating States Initiative and the 20-district [Collaborating Districts Initiative](#)--we're looking at what I call "equity elaborations."

Among our priorities, we are examining CASEL's [five core SEL competencies](#) and highlighting where and how issues of and implications for equity could be made more evident. For example, self-awareness, one of the five competencies, applies to all students regardless of racial, ethnic, class, regional, or gender differences. It includes finding and affirming one's identity, helping students answer the question "Who am I?"

Equity elaborations help make the conversations more nuanced, so that teachers base their instruction on who's standing in front of them. For example, it may be meaningful for rural students and their families to have a social studies unit that explores alternative industries that can replace disappearing farm or manufacturing jobs. Urban students

and families might benefit from and be more interested in instruction that examines how to develop urban farming projects.

On social awareness, another core competency, an equity focus means being more aware of cultural demands in particular settings. Superficially, it could be teaching multicultural education through fun, festivals, and food. But on a deeper structural level, it is understanding that American culture tends to put a premium on independence and acquiring things. "The more I have--whether it's grades, knowledge, or money--the more worthy I am." It's a zero-sum game.

But Native American, African-American, and Latino cultures tend to place value on being more communal, where social interdependence is more important. Teachers can build that understanding into their teaching. Cooperative learning and restorative justice approaches are possible ways to leverage this cultural orientation into an asset.

We are especially encouraged by the promise of project-based learning, which provides fertile ground for further developing social and emotional competencies with an equity frame. Projects are guided by youth, based on their own experiences, with the teacher as a facilitator and co-learner. As a result, students are more engaged and collaborative. And issues of identity, justice, and fairness inevitably come up.

To further explore educational opportunities such as these, the Equity Work Group is conducting a landscape scan that will allow us to critically examine and leverage advances in SEL research and practice to revise our framework and various tools to ensure that equity is central to everything we do. We will work with interested partners to examine the influences and impacts of our revisions on learning contexts and outcomes for all students and the adults who support them.

We look forward to continued work with current partners and forging new collaborations in support of social, emotional and academic development of all children, youth, and adults, especially those from historically under-served groups and communities.

*Robert Jagers is Vice President of Research at CASEL and a member of the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development's Council of Distinguished Scientists.*