

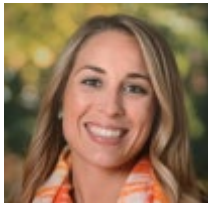
# education post

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<https://educationpost.org/storytelling-and-restorative-practices-are-key-to-social-emotional-learning/>

## Storytelling and Restorative Practices Are Key to Social-Emotional Learning

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When COVID-19 closed our schools almost a year ago, teachers—regardless of how many years we’d been in a classroom—suddenly became new teachers again. Distance learning was as unfamiliar to us as it was to our students and we had to find creative ways, quickly, to adapt our lessons to virtual platforms and keep our students engaged.

My colleagues at Boston Renaissance Charter Public School (K-6) and I have spent the past year reimagining our curriculum, finding out what worked for our students and what didn’t. But it was clear from the very beginning that social and emotional learning (SEL) had to be made a priority. While SEL is an essential part of the curriculum every year, it’s become more important than ever in these uncertain times and must be prioritized at every level in our schools going forward.

There are so many ways to engage children in SEL, but one of our more successful strategies for our K-2 cohort involved pairing read-aloud literature with our SEL curriculum. We were able to support our students’ reading skills and connect on a personal level by incorporating meaningful books at each grade level. We pulled our reading list from [Lee and Low](#)’s selected fiction and nonfiction books organized by broad categories related to SEL—all of which help children learn valuable skills about themselves, others, and the world around them.

These skills include understanding ourselves and our abilities, using self-control, setting goals, maintaining positive relationships, having empathy for others, making positive decisions and others. Perhaps most important for our diverse student body, though, was the fact that all of the books on the SEL reading list featured protagonists from diverse backgrounds. Our students could see themselves in the characters and relate to their circumstances.

## DIVERSE STORIES THAT ENGAGE STUDENTS

Stories have an inherent power to teach when they have engaged listeners. When we read the text together as a class, we pause along the way to highlight the critical skills as they come up. For example,

- For teaching and discussing empathy, we read “**The Can Man**,” which tells the story of a young boy who wanted to earn money by collecting and redeeming empty cans but ends up giving his money away to a homeless man.
- We read “**Love Twelve Miles Long**” as an example of a positive relationship. The story is set on a Maryland plantation in the 1820s and is based on the life of young Frederick Douglass and the power of his mother’s love.
- In “**Sparkle Boy**,” young Casey loves sparkly things, but his older sister Jessie does not approve of his interest until an encounter with bullies helps her learn to accept and respect Casey for who he is.

Such stories increase students’ ability to understand the feelings of another person and how to interact with others in respectful and kind ways.

We set aside time after reading stories to consciously reflect on each topic, which not only deepens a story’s impact, but also leads to better comprehension and improved critical-thinking skills. Literature can teach students to recognize and manage their emotions, how to solve problems in a complicated situation, and how to practice self-care.

In order to practice self-care, students need a safe space, one where they feel comfortable talking about their personal experiences or difficult emotions with people they trust. In our grade 3-6 cohort, we use **Restorative Justice Circles** to open a dialogue among students and teachers and build relationships. These circles offer all students an opportunity to participate in a dialogue, share personal experiences or make connections, without pressure to feel “right” or make a decision.

It looks a little different when we’re remote but it’s really met the moment over the past year. We have a set protocol for taking turns sharing your voice, or passing if you choose to. We also make time for mindfulness, meditation and deep breathing.

Teachers and staff aren't immune from the stress and upheaval of the moment either. Our connection, empathy and support of one another is just as important as what we do for our students in this crisis. According to the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#), *it's imperative that we also remember to practice self-care* and connect in meaningful ways whether it's a virtual coffee break or lunch hour where we can check in with each other on how we're feeling or even just talk about books we're reading or shows we're streaming. At Renaissance, we host a monthly game night for staff where we can unplug and have some fun. It's necessary.

### **LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

Finally, as educators and adults, we can lead by example. Our students are watching and listening to us, so when we practice self-care, we're showing them how they can take care of themselves as well. Going forward, relationships will be essential in keeping kids engaged and connected. If we neglect to prioritize SEL in our curriculum today, we will be unequipped to meet the varied needs of all of our students in our post-pandemic future.