

Developing mindful citizens: a commentary on social emotional learning, mindfulness and citizenship education

Within the social studies, students are taught (formally and informally) what it means to be a good or effective citizen. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2001) states that “the primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.” With this purpose in mind, social studies teachers are charged with teaching citizenship-related topics that can be considered taboo, insensitive and/or controversial (e.g. LBGTQ rights, abortion, gun control, etc.). However, in an era of political divisiveness, how should educators teach controversial topics related to citizenship education? Based on our experiences, we suggest teachers utilize mindfulness meditation (MM) and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) tools to help students understand and process controversial topics and possible discomfort in the classroom when exploring such material. We suggest teachers construct a safe space and embrace controversial instruction by implementing “non-judgmental awareness, a sense of contentment and emotional balance, coupled with a sense of kindness and compassion” into the classroom (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2016). The following commentary explores the use of SEL and MM as possible self-regulation strategies to utilize when exploring lessons in citizenship.

A call to action

When schools fail to teach students how to engage with controversial political and constitutional issues – or worse, suppress, ignore, or exclude such issues from the curriculum – they send a host of destructive and misguided messages. One is that it’s not important for young people to examine and analyze the contemporary political realm, especially in comparison to other content on which schools have traditionally focused. Another is that controversial issues – ranging from access to health care, to voting rights to gun control to abortion and the death penalty – are simply too hot to handle in schools, and may even be harmful for students. (Hess, 2018)

The severity of the above quote demonstrates the need to teach controversial issues through a trauma informed lens via SEL and MM. Moving students beyond a “triggered” state requires self-regulation of the human emotion and permits humans of all ages to let go of internally created stories, complete with lies and opinions each being tells themselves, and instead allows each person to make connection with their own authenticity once the stories are dropped (Plumb *et al.*, 2016; Roeser and Pinela, 2014). Essentially, SEL and mindfulness strategies allow students to explore what they value, and what choices would benefit the greater good, rather than being distracted by emotional triggers when not self-regulated (Raths *et al.*, 1973).

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SEL and MM are tools of self-regulation that provide students the choice to calm their emotional responses, and move deeper into understanding their own attitudes and beliefs. The purpose of using SEL and MM in the classroom is for the student to become more aware of their emotional responses to variables introduced in the classroom, inclusive of the content taught.

Teaching citizenship-related topics requires more awareness of the safe space teachers create in the classroom, as the divisive subject matter can potentially lead to disagreement and triggering conversations. SEL and MM may deepen the understanding of what a student's personal virtue and values are, while at the same time developing empathy for another classmate's understanding and interpretation of civic principles (Brensilver, 2016). Instead of analyzing content from a triggered state, students can come to a fuller understanding about what they believe once they are able to analyze with a clear mind. Self-regulation encourages a student's participation in their own learning and allows them to critically analyze any type of content from a safe and un-triggered state.

With this, informed citizens must look at all parts of a democratic society, including the controversial. NCSS (2010) suggested the pedagogy for civic competency should entail "the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life." These controversial lessons are intended to create a political classroom that is inclusive of all democratic dispositions, but need to be handled with care. Using MM and SEL for the foundation of the classroom allows students to authentically question "How should we live together?" (Hess and McAvoy, 2015).

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Further reading

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