



Experiential learning for SEL and culturally relevant schools

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Social Emotional Intelligence is a key aspect of intercultural learning and competence, and has held space as the center of much of the Steiner-Waldorf pedagogy. Intercultural skills are now increasingly needed in order for young people to act with empathy in relation to cultural diversity. These competencies have historically been developed through experiential learning, such as role play, study abroad, service learning, and other immersion techniques. Drawing on scholars from a broad range of cultures, the connections between mental health, curative education, intercultural appreciation, and social justice will be outlined. My own research in Waldorf education in South Africa¹ explores the ways that Steiner education reflects a continuum from child-centered practices of traditional village life and therefore meets a need in the South African context for centering the majority culture that has potential for a broader application.

Megan Sullivan outlined her argument for the powerful impact of SEL in Waldorf schools as a supplement to the foundations laid within the classroom environment², while Rosa M. Rodríguez-Izquierdo³ makes the case for integrating intercultural education best practices with SEL to make learning more culturally relevant. While the need to broaden and deepen school experiences is apparent, Rodríguez-Izquierdo also makes the case that due to the dominance of the Western model and perspective in education, (multi-cultural initiatives are designed for accommodating and assimilating new immigrants or taking steps towards including marginalized and/or indigenous minorities) these changes are not sensitive to cultural differences in communities. Children coming into the world bringing wisdom from their ancestors deserve an education that enhances their cultural gifts. Bernd Ruf⁵(2013) and van der Kolk⁶ (2015), as well as the American child psychologist Bruce Perry⁷ (2021), point to repetitive combinations of play, rhythm, music, dance, and warm relationships as the ingredients for healing trauma and for building the foundations for healthy communities. All of these processes involve bodily expression, empathy, and creativity. As such, they are experiential and indebted to indigenous healing practices in Africa and other parts of the world.



Given the disrespect paid to indigenous and immigrant communities in modern societies, and under colonial systems, the call for an SEL approach for intercultural learning and competencies can also be recognized as a move toward both cognitive and social justice⁴.

This presentation will include a short powerpoint on key themes and their historic connections with an intercultural exercise and questions, time permitting.

References:

1. Nelson, Erika (unpublished) The Waldorf Classroom as Traditional Village: Acknowledging indigenous knowledge. Final paper submitted to Antioch University New England (USA) for course Education for Social Renewal (EDT 6140) May 2024.
2. Sullivan, Megan. Teaching Social Emotional Learning in a Waldorf School. Research Bulletin, Fall/Winter 2022, Volume 27, #1.
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4. Sankobe, Yolanda (2020) Mental Health in South Africa: A Journey of Self-Healing, blog post from the Samuel Center for Social Connectedness, accessed 8/24/2024. <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/mental-health-in-south-africa-a-journey-of-self-healing/#:~:text=In%20South%20Africa%2C%20in%20addition,%2C%20weak%2C%20or%20simply%20misunderstood.>
5. Ruf, Bernd. (2013) Educating Traumatized Children: Waldorf Education in Crisis Intervention. Lindisfarne Books, London UK.
6. Van der Kolk, Bessel (2015) The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma, Penguin Books: New York
7. Perry, Bruce and Oprah Winfrey (2021) What Happened to You? Flatiron Books, New York.