Making Universal Social Emotional Learning Accessible for All:

A Spotlight on Autism, Executive Functions, and RULER

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What is Autism? Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that emerges in childhood and significantly impacts how a person processes and experiences the world. Autistic youth are likely to experience differences from their neurotypical peers in social communication, managing unexpected changes and transitions, and processing their sensory environment. To create inclusive and welcoming schools, researchers and educators must work to understand the perspectives of autistic youth and honor that experience. We acknowledge autism as one kind of diversity within classrooms where all learners have strengths to develop and challenges to support.

Social Emotional Learning and Autism. Autistic youth can struggle with recognizing, managing, and expressing their emotions, and understanding, relating to, and responding to others' emotions. These are social and emotional skills that Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs address. SEL supports the development of skills promoting the physical and psychological health students need to thrive in learning. While SEL has the potential to benefit all students, SEL programs are often designed and implemented in inaccessible ways to youth with learning differences, like autistic students.

Working to Implement Accessible SEL. Within the context of SEL, students need flexible options, supports, and scaffolds to ensure accessibility, equity, and inclusion. We can identify critical supports by analyzing the learner-learning environment. To do so, we ask: what are learners' strengths and needs? What are the resources available in the learning environment? Consider the materials, activities, assessments, scaffolds, and supports available and implemented. Identify if there is a mismatch between the learners' needs and strengths and the priorities and potential access barriers in the classroom environment and curriculum that may affect engagement and learning. In this analysis, we intentionally move from thinking about students' deficiencies to barriers in environments. In working to understand how SEL can fall short for students with learning differences and disabilities, we can create supportive solutions that meet student needs for a more inclusive, accessible SEL for all.

Supporting a Critical Gap: Executive Functions. In considering autistic students' common strengths and needs against typical USB SEL, there is a gap between autistic students' need for executive functioning support and SEL's implementation. Executive functions refer to skills that involve managing oneself towards a desired outcome, goal setting, strategizing, progress monitoring, and responding to feedback. Learners vary substantially in their executive functioning skills, and most need explicit instruction, support, and scaffolding therein. The research literature indicates that when autistic youth do not receive appropriate executive functioning support, they are especially likely to struggle with skills like organizing, regulating emotions, and remembering multiple complex ideas within tasks. And autistic youth, who vary widely in their verbal, cognitive, and physical abilities and needs, are often not the students considered in SEL design and implementation.

Because SEL is often implemented without explicit instruction or support for executive functions, autistic students can be left behind, with their strengths underutilized. When learners struggle with executive function, peers and educators may see them as unmotivated or incapable; these are unfair characterizations representing the mismatches between diverse learners and inaccessible learning environments. To maximize the benefits of SEL, we must integrate support for executive functions within SEL.

Implementing RULER with Support for Executive Functioning. RULER is a systemic SEL approach that encourages flexible implementation, allowing teachers and schools to develop and align the learning environment's support to learner strengths and needs. For all students, and particularly for students who learn and think differently, supporting executive functioning in SEL implementation is critical.

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1. To respect the majority of autistic individuals' preference for identity-first language (Bury et. al, 2020), we use "autistic" (not "person with autism"). See this article for more.

What can educators do to support executive functions in RULER implementation?

1. Support students to set, define, and monitor authentic, individually-relevant SEL goals.

Working with students to identify which SEL skills they want to work on provides meaningful access to SEL. Teachers and students can co-create activities and resources that support students' goal setting while building agency and investment. Choice, independence, and autonomy in setting authentic and personally relevant SEL goals promotes engagement and increases SEL relevance for every student.

To strengthen the connection between SEL and academics, teachers can work on goal setting with students once a month for SEL and academics combined. Mini-conferencing with students at frequent intervals supports learners to set goals, identify strengths, determine areas to strategically support, and plan specific strategies for those areas. For non-verbal autistic youth who may also experience physical challenges, setting community goals for the classroom ensures that goals are inclusive of and accessible, and relevant to all students. All students need to be able to see themselves in classroom and community goals.

2. Customize strategies and resources for executive functioning support based on learner needs and strengths. Support students to select the strategies they want to use to support their individual progress.

Teachers can work with students to co-create resources and strategies, such as a designated calming area in the classroom, integrating sensory objects that provide soothing or stimulating input, or a personalized three-ring book with tools and skills for easy access in moments of high distress.

We suggest:

- Asking students to use their interests within their resources and thinking about what they need from peers and teachers to meet their SEL and academic goals.
- Providing concrete examples that students can use to create customized resources. For non-verbal autistic youth, recognizing and validating student-initiated direction, preferences, and stimulation.
- Explicitly teaching the use of strategies and resources, and providing many opportunities for practice and reflection.

Co-creation of resources supports accessibility by increasing engagement. This kind of "project-based learning" approach supports students and teachers in creating cultural-, age-, and ability-appropriate strategies based on the student's interests, strengths, and needs. After introducing an executive functioning strategy or support, it is essential to work explicitly with students to define how and when they will use that strategy.

Voices From the Classroom

"We had a student use a tool where there was a column of Mood Meter, a column of daily schedule, and column for notes. As the student moved through the day, he would track how he was feeling and what work he would get done. This helped with looking at executive functioning, work completion, and Mood Meter emotions in response to their work."

- 3rd grade special education teacher and ICT teacher

Having ways to see progress over time empowers learners to build on existing skills and take on new challenges. For example, a daily exit ticket survey supports students' self-monitoring skills and encourages progress toward goals. Students can reflect on how they feel, what emotional regulation skills they used, and, if difficulties came up, ideas for what to do next time to feel more empowered, safe, valued, and successful about their day.

We suggest:

- Using accessible Jamboards, Google Drawings, audio or e-journals, or online formats to track how students feel across the day and how they would like to feel.
- Utilizing interactive digital and multi-sensory inputs when available. It is important to note that autistic youth with limiting verbal communications may need alternative ways of tracking progress.
- Using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, sign language, gestures, charts, and pictures to support goal setting and tracking.
- Tuning into emotional and nonverbal communication to make goals salient for students with diverse ways of communicating.
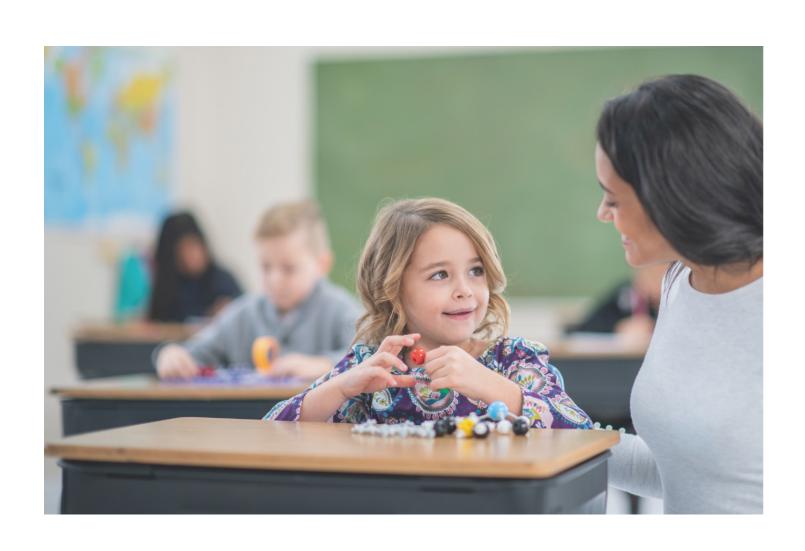
A compilation of mini-conferences, or check-ins with students on their progress and process, can provide a rich map of a learner's journey toward their goals over time.

Voices From the Classroom

"I do a general exit ticket or have students do an SEL check-in and reflect on where they are and where they want to be the following day."

-6th grade teacher

Autistic Diversity and Variability

To engage in inclusive SEL, we must recognize the rich and diverse nature of autistic youth. The experience of autism is incredibly varied, though one aspect of this experience that educators can support across students is executive function skills. Through supporting goal-setting, customizing strategies and supporting the use of SEL skills, and motoring SEL progress with students, educators can support autistic youth who may otherwise feel lost in SEL programming.

Autism and its associated strengths and support needs are on a diverse spectrum. Every autistic person is unique, just like non-autistic individuals. And just like non-autistic children, autistic students have unique strengths and interests to build on and needs to support. Recognition and celebration of learner variability is essential for inclusive curriculum development and implementation. We can celebrate autistic's youths' variability, uniqueness, and differences by ensuring Social Emotional Learning programs are equitable, diverse in representation, and inclusive of all learners.

Conclusion

The SEL for ALL team recognizes barriers in curricula as opportunities and a call to action for increased inclusion and accessibility in the service of all students. Towards this end, we are developing a library of research- and practice-informed solutions to increase accessibility and inclusivity within Universal Social Emotional Learning research, policy, and practice. Accessibility for students with disabilities improves Social Emotional Learning for all learners.

About the SEL for All Briefs. This series of briefs shares recent findings from an ongoing study of barriers students with learning differences face when accessing universal school-based (USB) Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programming. Through a systematic evaluation of RULER SEL, content experts, educators of students with learning differences, and their students identified barriers within RULER using the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines and Culturally Responsive Teaching frameworks. These briefs are intended to support school personnel, parents, practitioners, and researchers in understanding and overcoming the barriers to implementing SEL in the service of a truly universal school-based SEL for all learners.

The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence Division of Research: The Division of Research at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence is a self-supporting unit in the Child Study Center at the Yale School of Medicine. Directed by Dr. Christina Cipriano, our team is at the forefront of translational emotion science, building and evaluating SEL tools and interventions with youth and educators to support whole-school community thriving. Our research advances SEL science, practice, and policy. Through innovative tools, methodologies, and lines of inquiry, improve emotion regulation skill-building, advance SEL measurement, and evaluation, and evolve the field's SEL definition. Learn more at www.ycei.org/research-overview.

EdTogether: EdTogether is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to research and development activities that create solutions to broaden the participation of youth with disabilities in formal and informal learning settings. Led by Dr. Gabrielle Rappolt-Schlichtmann, EdTogether has three primary areas of work focused on universal design for social and emotional learning: (1) research and evaluation to better understand the role of emotion in learning and the emotional experiences of youth with disabilities, (2) evidence-based innovation to harness the power of emotion in learning and transform education, and (3) co-design with youth to personalize learning, foster empathy, and strengthen relationships between students and educators. Learn more at http://edtogether.org.

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For more information about this project and additional learning supports, please contact Dr. Christina Cipriano, Principle Investigator, at christina.cipriano@yale.edu. To stay up to date on the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence's work, including SEL for All Team updates, follow @YaleEmotion on Twitter. To stay up to date on RULER-specific content, follow @rulerapproach on Twitter.

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