


Chapter 2

Benefits of Social– Emotional Learning (SEL) in Social Studies Instruction

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) within social studies instruction as a means of strengthening students' academic understanding, emotional development, and civic capacity. The discussion situates SEL and Emotional Intelligence (EI) within the goals of social studies education and explores how competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, responsible decision-making, and reflective communication enhance historical inquiry and civic learning. Drawing on recent meta-analyses, program evaluations, and policy reports, the chapter highlights the importance of systemic implementation, teacher preparation, and culturally responsive practice. It also considers practical classroom strategies, implementation challenges, and broader implications for democratic participation. By treating social studies as both an intellectual and human-centered discipline, the chapter argues that SEL integration supports more rigorous analysis, more thoughtful engagement with complex issues, and a stronger foundation for ethical and informed citizenship.

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INTRODUCTION

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), often discussed alongside Emotional Intelligence (EI), has emerged as an important component of contemporary educational practice because of its potential to support both academic achievement and personal development. SEL instruction emphasizes the cultivation of emotional awareness, interpersonal competence, self-awareness, decision-making, and ethical reasoning in ways that strengthen students' capacity to navigate an increasingly complex world (CASEL, 2020a). These competencies align closely with the aims of social studies education, a discipline fundamentally concerned with human behavior, values, institutions, and decision-making across historical and contemporary contexts.

Social studies encompasses history, civics, geography, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Taken together, these fields examine how individuals and groups interact with one another and with their environments. For this reason, social studies is inherently social and emotional in orientation. It asks students to interpret human motives, evaluate competing perspectives, examine moral dilemmas, and consider the consequences of individual and collective action. Embedding SEL within social studies instruction therefore provides a meaningful framework through which students can engage complex content with greater depth and relevance.

Recent scholarship further supports the educational significance of SEL. A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions found that students who participated in such programs demonstrated stronger social-emotional skills, more positive attitudes, improved behaviors, better perceptions of school climate and safety, and higher academic achievement than comparison groups (Cipriano et al., 2023). A second meta-analysis concluded that SEL programs were more effective when teachers themselves were supported in building social-emotional competencies and when programs were implemented with sufficient dosage and coherent design (Shi & Cheung, 2024). Internationally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024) has similarly emphasized the importance of cultivating empathy, collaboration, responsibility, and related skills through school climates, teaching practices, and cross-curricular opportunities. Together, these findings reinforce the view that SEL is not an ancillary initiative but a meaningful contributor to how students learn, engage, and participate in school life.

The relationship between SEL and social studies is especially significant at a time when educators are increasingly concerned with preparing students not only for academic performance, but also for thoughtful participation in democratic life. Social studies classrooms often ask students to confront contested histories, public controversies, social inequities, and the enduring effects of policy decisions. These topics require more than factual recall. They call for perspective-taking, self-regulation, respectful dialogue, and the ability to weigh evidence while acknowledging the

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